

Empowered or Oppressed?

Female Combatants in the Colombian Guerrilla: The Case of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia - FARC

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Abstract

As is traditional in leftist Latin American rebel organizations, the main Colombian guerrilla movements – the National Liberation Army (ELN) and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) – have important rates of female members. Estimated to between thirty and forty percent of the membership of these armed non-state actors (ANSAs), women have reached the level of commanders, but failed to reach the top. In spite of this important participation, women and gender issues are often excluded from the analysis of armed conflict and ANSAs. Existing studies that do include women combatants often portray the issue in a dichotomous way, suggesting that they are either more 'empowered' than women in Colombian society in general, or that they are as oppressed – or more – than the average Colombian woman. Using a combination of field research and literature review, this paper outlines a way out of this binary understanding, by illustrating the complex and contradictory realities of women combatants in Colombia. Through a gender analysis of their roles and the reasons for women and girls to join the FARC, as well as of sexuality and relations in the group, we undertake a mapping of the complex gendered power relations this ANSAs. This analysis could contribute to a basis for gender-sensitive policy-making in the area of conflict resolution and post-conflict reconstruction.

1. Introduction

“Where there women in the guerrilla? Many! They were carrying big weapons (different types of rifles), wearing FARC uniforms and, at the same time, earrings, rings or painted nails. They were carrying the same loads as the men and everyone was working equally.”¹

As described by the historian Ezequiel Rodríguez Labriego after a visit to a FARC camp, October 2008

“In the FARC the men were the ones who were commanding, and the women were obeying. They were submissive, they were not arguing a lot. They were put to cook and to stand guard. They were considered as their property [of the men].”²

Former female combatant from a group that was fighting with a FARC front in the late 1980s

Despite the notorious resistance of the conflict and security literature to calls for the integration of gender into the analysis of armed conflicts and security issues, there is now a small but growing literature on female combatants in armed non-state actors (ANSAs).³ Within this literature, there is a tendency to portray the association of women with ANSAs either in terms of empowerment or oppression. This can be illustrated, for example, with an article by Ekiyor (2002), entitled “Female Combatants in West Africa: Progress or Recess?”.⁴ This tendency towards painting an either-or black and white picture of the situation of female combatants is mirrored in accounts of female combatants in the Colombian armed conflict (see above quotes).

On the one hand, female combatants in the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) are represented as empowered women, for example by journalists, some ex-FARC members or people who have visited FARC camps. Indeed, the FARC itself portrays its female members as liberated. On the other hand, testimonies by international human rights organizations such as Human Rights Watch or Amnesty International, local NGO reports and some testimonies of ex-FARC members or ex-hostages paint a rather bleak picture of women’s situation within the FARC and accuse the organization of being very machist.⁵

The key underlying question that most accounts of female combatants (in the Colombian conflict) address is whether women’s association with armed groups is empowering or oppressive. Looking at feminist literature on the issue of empowerment, we find two similar debates: the debate about whether entering the armed forces is empowering for women, and the debate about the empowerment potential of *maquila* employment.

Women have always been associated with the armed forces, to various degrees and in various functions. Feminists are divided over the question whether women should enter the

¹ Pro-FARC description of female combatants in the FARC, as described by Ezequiel Rodríguez Labriego in Néstor Kohan, 'Entrevista al historiador Ezequiel Rodríguez Labriego. La vida en los campamentos de las FARC', *Rebelión* (updated 28 November) <<http://www.rebelion.org/noticia.php?id=76663>>, accessed 14 January 2009

² The narrator was a M-19 fighter and had previously belonged to the ELN. At the time the M-19 and herself were fighting jointly with a FARC front. Patricia Lara, *Las mujeres en la guerra* (Bogota: Planeta, 2000) at 65.

³ See for example: Alison, Miranda (forthcoming 2009), *Women and Political Violence: Female Combatants in Ethno-National Conflict*. Routledge, or Lyons, Tanya (2004) *Guns and Guerilla Girls: Women in the Zimbabwean Liberation Struggle*. Trenton: Africa World Press.

⁴ Ekiyor, Thelma (December 2002) “Female Combatants in West Africa: Progress or Recess?”, *From the Field* 5, at: <http://www.wanep.org/publications/Female%20Combatant%20in%20W.%20Africa.pdf>

⁵ See for example the study by Potes (Francina Potes, 'Women's Participation, Roles and Gender Inequality in Latin America's Largest Guerrilla Group Left Standing: The FARC', (Graduate Institute of International Studies, 2007).), or the book by Patricia Lara who reported that the idea of the book came to her in Caguán (areas under FARC-control 1998-2000 during peace negotiations with the government), when she, as she framed it, saw the faces of the FARC women – they were armed but their eyes were those of young girls, but with the pain of women suffering from the absence of their children due to the conflict. Lara, *Las mujeres en la guerra*.

armed forces as a way to empowerment and to challenge the gendered division of violence and the masculinist institution of the armed forces.⁶ Women entering the armed forces may challenge gender roles and stereotypes.

However, given that only few women have full combat roles and most women perform support roles, they may also reinforce traditional gender regimes. Some feminists have been rather skeptical and have argued that women's increased participation in the armed forces is a reflection of the militarization of society, rather than an achievement for women's equality. Hence, their increased presence not only does not contribute to their empowerment, but also reproduces gendered social institutions like the military. As argued by D'Amico:

"Women's increasing presence in the military does not change the fundamental gendered construction of the institution, which at its core is coercive, hierarchical, and patriarchal. In fact, the increasing presence of women serves to legitimize the institution by giving it a façade of egalitarianism."⁷

Similarly, in the literature on the emergence and proliferation of *maquilas*,⁸ the debate has also centered on the question whether women entering such factories are empowered or oppressed.⁹ The emergence of *maquilas* in many developing countries (e.g. Mexico, Morocco, etc.) has to be situated against the backdrop of the creation of free-trade zones as an instrument of promoting an export-oriented development model, and within broader processes of global restructuring and the liberalization of global trade. Many *maquilas* employ mostly women, although in recent years, the percentage of women employed in *maquilas* has declined in many places.¹⁰ Research has shown how most *maquila* factories have deplorable working conditions, including very low wages, non-compliance with health and safety standards, and often violate human rights of their employees in terms of sexual harassment, pregnancy testing, and the prohibition of trade union activities.¹¹

There is an ongoing debate among feminists whether the move into formal employment within the *maquila* sector is a sign of liberation or oppression for women. On the one hand, linked to broader liberal feminist arguments about the integration of women into employment, they have argued that the access to employment for women is empowering, whereby women's financial independence is supposed to trigger resistance and empowerment in other domains, such as political. However, critics have emphasized the inhumane working conditions in many *maquilas*, arguing that women are experiencing many forms of discrimination and oppression, both within the factories as well as outside (many women live in shantytowns or sites specifically created for factory workers). Forms of oppression include the control of women's fertility through compulsory pregnancy tests and firing in the case of a pregnancy, serious health risks, sexual violence by superiors, health risks at work, but also the risk of violence on their way to work, as in the infamous case of the female homicides of

⁶ See: Peterson, Spike & Runyan, Anne (1993) *Global Gender Issues: Dilemmas in World Politics*. Westview, 84-87; D'Amico, Francine & Weinstein, Laurie [eds] (1999) *Gender Camouflage: Women and the U.S. Military*. NYU Press; Yuval-Davis, Nira (1985) "Front and Rear: The Sexual Division of Labor in the Israeli Army", *Feminist Studies* 11:3.

⁷ D'Amico, Francine quoted in: Peterson, Spike & Runyan, Anne (1993) *Global Gender Issues: Dilemmas in World Politics*. Westview, at 86.

⁸ *Maquilas*, also called twin-plants, i.e. factories that import materials and equipment on a duty-free basis to be assembled or manufactured and then re-exported For more information see: <http://www.twiplantnews.com/whatls.htm>

⁹ See for example: Fernández-Kelly, María Patricia (1983) *For We are Sold, I Amand my People: Weomna dn Industry in Mexico's Frontier*. Albany: State University of New York.

¹⁰ Bayes, Jane & Mae Kelly, Rita (2001) "Political Spaces, Gender, and NAFTA, in: ibid et al. [eds] *Gender, Globalization and Democratization*. Rowman & Littlefields, at 164.

¹¹ Afshar, Haleh [ed] (1985) *Women, Work and Ideology in the Third World*. London: Tavistock Publications; Bayes, Jane & Mae Kelly, Rita (2001:165); Dick Emanuelsson, 'Retratos de guerrilleras en Colombia (II)', *Sodepaz* <<http://www.sodepaz.net/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=3059>>, accessed 24 January 2009., Caroline & Vivian, Jessica [eds] (2002) *Women's Employment in the Textile Manufacturing Sectors of Bangladesh and Morocco*. Geneva: UNRISD.

women in Ciudad Juárez.¹² Thus, according to these critics, their insertion into employment within the *maquila* sector does not empower women, but rather oppresses them.

In this paper, we argue that the representation of female combatants as either oppressed or empowered needs revising. Based on existing arguments within both of the above-mentioned debates that suggest moving beyond the simplistic empowerment-oppression dichotomy, we propose to start asking new questions, and to contribute to complexifying the analysis of female combatants, and listening to different voices. Thus, rather than painting a black and white picture, we shift the focus towards the changing forms of gender discrimination and ask: what forms of gender discrimination do women in the FARC experience? As Yuval-Davis has stated in the case of the Israeli army:

"The Israeli case suggests that the incorporation of women into the military may change the nature of, rather than eliminate, the subordination of women. Women's formal inclusion in the military does not guarantee their equality, either in terms of the actual tasks that they fulfil or in terms of the power they exercise. On the contrary, as the Israeli case illustrates, the extremely hierarchical and bureaucratic nature of the modern army can contribute to a gender differentiation and gender inequality even more institutionalized and extreme than in the civilian labour market."¹³

Thus, in this paper we sketch a more differentiated analysis of female combatant's lives in the FARC, asking questions, such as: what roles do women in the FARC play; what forms of gendered oppression do they experience; which factors influence the experience of female combatants; oppression in relation to what: how does women's lives within the FARC differ from women's lives outside the FARC?

Hence, we aim to contribute to a more differentiated, context-specific analysis, situating guerilla groups within the broader society and not just focus on the FARC as an organization as if in a vacuum,¹⁴ and taking into account different accounts of women's situation in the guerilla. This does obviously not mean that the gender discrimination of the Colombian society justifies gender abuses by and within the FARC: on the contrary.

Data about female combatants is obviously a huge problem. The representation of female combatant's lives in ANSAs is a highly political and sensitive issue, and it is thus pivotal to take into account the position and context from which different statements about female combatants are articulated. Thus, for example, many NGOs choose to emphasize the negative aspects of these women's lives for pragmatic reasons, i.e. raising awareness and money. Ex-combatants in return might choose to highlight the positive aspects of being a female combatant. Moreover, it seems that the conditions for female combatants are not homogenous within the FARC itself; they seem to depend on a number of factors, such as geography, the attitude of the camp commander, etc. Thus, it is not possible to answer the question related to the empowerment of female combatants with a simple yes or no.

While a more differentiated analysis of the different forms of empowerment and oppression that female combatants experience in the FARC is an important contribution to the literature on female combatants, it might also have policy relevance in terms of conflict resolution and peace-building activities and the design of DDR programs in Colombia.¹⁵ Nevertheless, this is beyond the immediate scope of this paper.

¹² According to a local grassroot organisation, the Juárez Project, "a significant number [of the over 400 femicides in Juárez and Chihuahua] work in the maquiladora sector", see: <http://thejuarezproject.com/2007/03/28/help-the-young-women-of-ciudad-juarez-by-writing-to-these-corporations.aspx>

¹³ Yuval-Davis, Nira (1985) "Front and Rear: The Sexual Division of Labor in the Israeli Army", *Feminist Studies* 11:3, at 649.

¹⁴ See Potes, 'Women's Participation, Roles and Gender Inequality in Latin America's Largest Guerrilla Group Left Standing: The FARC', for example.

¹⁵ See: Gunhild Schmid and Luisa Maria Dietrich, 'Demobilization of Female Ex-Combatants in Colombia', <[http://www.re liefweb.int/rw/RWFiles2007.nsf/FilesByRWDocUnidFilename/YAOI-6XT9AA-Full_Report.pdf\\$File/Full_Report.pdf](http://www.re liefweb.int/rw/RWFiles2007.nsf/FilesByRWDocUnidFilename/YAOI-6XT9AA-Full_Report.pdf$File/Full_Report.pdf)>

The next section of this paper briefly discusses the gaps in the literature on female combatants, before moving to the main part with the FARC case study. The main part first gives some general information about the FARC as an organization in order to understand its functioning, and then explores acts of gender-based violence committed by the FARC against civilians, based on the argument that these are linked to gender discrimination within the guerilla. Finally, the situation of female combatants within the FARC is analyzed, before concluding.

The data analyzed in this paper includes a number of different sources, both pro- and contra-FARC: testimonies by FARC commanders and combatants, information from the FARC website, testimonies of former hostages, studies and surveys of ex-combatants (including girl soldiers), government sources, and reports by human rights organizations, etc. The testimonies that were originally in Spanish have been translated into English.

2. Literature on Female Combatants

2.1. General

The literature on conflict and security issues has traditionally been conceptualized in masculinised terms and dominated by gender-blindness, which meant that women and gender issues have often been excluded.¹⁶

Existing accounts that take into account gender and women's roles in armed conflict tend to victimize women, focusing on their roles as victims of conflict violence (both civilians and members of ANSAs), in particular sexual violence. Consequently, women are often portrayed as victims or passive agents. Thus, for example, in his account of four ANSAs from Uganda, Mozambique and Peru, Weinstein mentions female combatants only in their function as male combatant's 'wives'.¹⁷ Even if authors recognize that women and children can in fact be both victims and perpetrators, this is often not reflected in their analysis.¹⁸

Yet, female combatants are a feature of most modern conflicts. In contrast to women's presence in armed forces, women and girls often constitute up to thirty percent of the membership of ANSAs in areas of conflict.¹⁹ Women's liberation might also be among the reasons behind the armed struggle, such as in the case of the Communist Party of Nepal-

¹⁶ For example, in their study of civil war, all Collier and Sambanis' indicators linked to "potential rebel supply" focus on men, such as male secondary schooling and unemployment, "especially among young men." Paul Collier and Nicholas Sambanis (eds.), *Understanding Civil War: Evidence and Analysis* (Washington: The World Bank, 2005) at 7 and 301. Specifically in relation to the FARC, some observers maintain the 'myth' of a male movement. For example, referring to the Caguán peace negotiations between the FARC and the Colombian government (1998-2002), the American think-tank Center for Defense Information stated that: "Rather than promoting peace, this Switzerland-size zone in southern Colombia was used to stage kidnappings, run drug operations, and recruit young men and boys into the FARC ranks." (Our emphasis). At this point in time the FARC already had an important female membership, estimated by an eye-witness to some 40% within the territory they are referring to. 'Terrorism Project: In the Spotlight: Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia', <<http://www.cdi.org/terrorism/farc.cfm>>, accessed 13 January 2009

¹⁷ Jeremy M. Weinstein, *Inside Rebellion: The Politics of Insurgent Violence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) at 79.

¹⁸ This is for example the case with Kalyvas, in an otherwise brilliant contribution (Stathis N. Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006) at 21.). A good example of a nuanced analysis of agency of violence in terms of gender and age is Slim (Hugo Slim, *Killing Civilians: Method, Madness, and Morality in War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).)

¹⁹ On women's participation in armed forces see: <http://www.cbc.ca/news/background/military-international/> or <http://www.iss.co.za/ASR/6No3/HSRC.html>.

Maoists (CPN-M).²⁰ Often, female combatants are quite young, many are still girls. Women and girls might be forcefully recruited, or join the armed group by choice and have a number of different motives for joining. In many ANSAs, women mainly have support roles – such as cooking, cleaning, carrying ammunition, providing sexual services, etc. – or are dependents of male combatants. However, in many ANSAs, women also have active combatant roles. Some ANSAs have separated female and male combat units, such as the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), others are mixed. However, most often, women do not attain high-level positions within ANSAs.²¹

The fact that women take up arms to struggle contradicts the stereotypes that women are naturally more peaceful than men and breaks with the victimization discourse, which might explain why despite the international community's growing awareness of the prevalence of women and girls associated with ANSAs, they are often ignored in conflict analyses. This victimization discourse has been critically evaluated by gender analyses, demonstrating that representing women as victims is not only analytically problematic, but can also have adverse policy implications, for example in conflict resolution and DDR, which mainly aim at men, constructed as the actors of war.

What is sure is that female combatants present a challenge to traditionalist ideas about war, peace and gender roles.²² They disrupt traditional gender roles and gender stereotypes, such as the one that portrays women as by nature more peaceful than men. Yet, at the same time, women's participation in ANSAs also reinforces traditional gender roles. Thus, it has been shown by a number of researchers that women take on similar roles within armed groups as they would in civilian life, such as cooking, cleaning, providing sexual services, etc.

However, as has been demonstrated in the literature, "the expanded space some women attain in the context of war does not necessarily translate into postwar social changes beneficial to women".²³ Indeed, in the post-war setting, female ex-combatants often get re-marginalized, because they have transgressed traditional gender roles and are assumed to present a threat to peace and post-conflict reconstruction. Hence, whereas men and women are encouraged to act out similar roles as fellow soldiers in an army or guerrilla movement, post-conflict society encourages difference between the genders. This has important consequences for former soldier women. Female ex-combatants, who have broken rules of traditional behavior and gender roles, risk being marginalized during the rebuilding process. In many cases, female ex-soldiers prefer to conceal their military past rather than face social disapproval.

2.2. *Female Combatants in the Colombian Conflict*

Among the Colombian armed groups that demobilized in the late 1980s-early 1990s women are known to have participated in the Popular Liberation Army (EPL, from Spanish *Ejército Popular de Liberación*),²⁴ the 19th of April Movement (M-19), the Camilista Union of the

²⁰ Veronique Dudouet, 'Understanding Armed Groups and Their Transformations from War to Politics: A Collection of Insider Perspectives', *Sixth Pan-European Conference on International Relations "Making Sense of a Pluralist World"* (Turin, Italy: Berghof Research Center for Constructive Conflict Management, 2007) at 17.

²¹ One of the few exceptions to this is the female rebel leader: Northern Uganda, the Holy Spirit Movement Forces of Alice Lakwena, mentioned in Paul Richards (ed.), *No Peace, No War: An Anthropology of Contemporary Armed Conflict* (Athens and Oxford: Ohio University Press and James Currey, 2005) at 15.

²² Alison, Miranda (2004) "Women as Agents of Political Violence: Gendering Security", *Security Dialogue*, 35:4, at 447. See:

http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/pais/staff/alison/research/women_as_agents_womenasagents.pdf

²³ Alison (2004:448). See also: Ekiyor (December 2002:)

²⁴ A study in an EPL camp during demobilization showed that a third of the combatants were women (33%), most of which were from the rural areas. As explained in Arturo Alape, 'La reincisión del epl: ¿esperanza o

National Liberation Army,²⁵ the Revolutionary Workers Party, and the Armed Indigenous Movement of Quintín Lame.²⁶ Some of the stories of these women have been told in their auto-biographies²⁷ and in books like Patricia Lara's *Las mujeres en la guerra*²⁸ and Luz María Londoño and Yoana Fernanda Nieto's *Mujeres no contadas*.²⁹ However, their collective experiences and roles remain mostly unexplored.

All of the current actors in the Colombian conflict also have women participating in the war-making efforts: armed forces, paramilitaries, and guerrillas. Their participation – like in other Latin American countries – has been especially noticeable among the leftist guerrillas.

Nevertheless, in spite of the significant participation of women in the Colombian ANSAs they are poorly represented in the official demobilization statistics. This paradox will not be treated in this paper, but deserves further investigation – and intervention.³⁰

Women in the Colombian ANSAs have played multiple roles within their organizations. On the contrary to many other ANSAs in other countries the female combatants in Colombia have formed integral part of their movements and often served as fighters alongside the men, and not in separate female battalions³¹ or executing mainly support roles.³² However, the different Colombian ANSAs have diverse characteristics and the role of women within them is also known to vary. This paper focuses exclusively on the FARC and will only touch very briefly on these differences here, which would need a more in-depth analysis.

The influence of women is generally estimated have been particularly strong in the M-19, a mainly urban guerilla, where women were co-founders. Two women formed part of the group's 'High Command' (*Comando Superior*), the highest decision-making organ. Nevertheless, this did still not reflect the increasing participation of women in the organization as a whole. When demobilizing, only 22% of those who integrated into the program were women.³³

frustración? *Revista* (Edición especial: Seminario sobre procesos de negociación y Paz, October - December, 1996), 16-27.

²⁵ A breakaway faction from the National Liberation Army, also called *Corriente de Renovación Socialista*.

²⁶ In 2000 a meeting of female ex combatants in Colombia gathered some 130 members mainly from these organizations. 'Entrevista // Alix María Salazar, miembro del colectivo de mujeres ex combatientes, 'El M-19 hizo de la lucha por las libertades democráticas algo revolucionario", (Diagonal Periódico, 2008).

²⁷ Eugenia Escrito para no morir: Bitácora de una militancia, María Eugenia Vásquez, *Escrito para no morir* (Second edn.; Colombia: ILSA, Ediciones Antropos and Ministerio de Cultura, 2001). and Vera Grabe, *Razones de vida* (Bogotá: Planeta, 2000).

²⁸ In this book the life stories of female combatants from the ELN, M-19, the FARC, and the paramilitaries are told, including women who formed part of different armed movements. Lara, *Las mujeres en la guerra*.

²⁹ Luz María Londoño and Yoana Fernanda Nieto, *Mujeres no contadas: Proceso de desmovilización y retorno a la vida civil de mujeres excombatientes en Colombia. 1990-2003* (La Carreta Editores Instituto de Estudios Regionales and Universidad de Antioquia, 2006).

³⁰ In there study on demobilized combatants in Colombia Stathis Kalyvas and Ana M. Arjona found that although Ministry of Defense data indicated that 13% of the demobilized were women, their own data had only 7% women. (Ana M. Arjona and Stathis Kalyvas, 'Preliminary Results of Demobilized Combatants in Colombia', *Annual Convention of the International Studies Association* (2006 (draft) at 8-9.) Gunhild Schwitalla and Luisa Maria Dietrich report that of the 31,000 'collectively' demobilized men, women and children (in the paramilitary process) some 6% were female, and that of the additional ten thousand that were demobilized under the individual scheme, 14% were women. Totally, girls comprise about a quarter of demobilized children. Dietrich, 'Demobilization of Female Ex-Combatants in Colombia', at 58-59. Except for the case of the paramilitaries neither of these figures are representative for the actual membership of the ANSAs.

³¹ The norm in many Asian and Middle Eastern groups appears to be separate female battalions, as for example in the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the Free Aceh Movement (GAM), the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), the Popular Front for the Liberation of Saguia el Hamra and Rio de Oro, (Polisario Front), etc.

³² Compare Esther Water's paper on women associated to the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) in South Sudan, where it paradoxically turned out that the women trained for fighting in the 'Girls' Battalion' were not allowed to do so, while the women who actually ended up fighting had not received military training. Esther Waters, 'No Standing, Few Prospects: How Peace Is Failing South Sudanese Female Combatants and WAAFG', (Geneva: Human Security Baseline Assessment, Small Arms Survey, 2008).

³³ 'Entrevista // Alix María Salazar, miembro del colectivo de mujeres ex combatientes, 'El M-19 hizo de la lucha por las libertades democráticas algo revolucionario". Given that the number of women who actually commit to

The paramilitaries are not known to have many female members and not much is known about women paramilitaries. Several aspects that characterize this group, such as the extremely tough military training, the culture of violence, and, especially, machism, makes it unlikely that the number of women and girls who would voluntarily join is high.³⁴ According to recent data, of about 30,000 demobilized individuals from this group, only 1,960 were women.³⁵

On the other hand, the ELN has an important rate of female members, estimated to between 30 and 50%.³⁶ Nevertheless, women have not reached the top, but the organization has been organized and managed by men.³⁷ The gender composition of the organization has important regional variations. In some regions, notably in the South-West there are many women and also many women commanders. In addition, in order to pay tribute to fallen female fighters, there are four military fronts named after women.³⁸ There have been indications of internal gender abuses,³⁹ though these would appear less severe than within the FARC.⁴⁰ The gender relations within the ELN are topic of an ongoing PhD dissertation.⁴¹

Though the figures vary, it is generally estimated that women and girls form around 30-40% of the FARC membership, with most estimations tending towards the latter. Generally, observers agree that the FARC, as a more military and hierarchical organization, is more machist than the other leftist guerrilla groups, such as the M-19 and the ELN.⁴² In spite of this, especially rural women and girls are increasingly joining its ranks (see section 3).

3. Case Study: Female Combatants in the FARC

This case study looks at the situation of female combatants within the FARC as an example of gender relations within an ANSA. To do this it first provides a short overview of the

official programs always seem to be much lower than those who participate in the armed groups this actually seem to be a pretty high number.

³⁴ Women have been known to do 'political work' within the paramilitaries (Lara, *Las mujeres en la guerra*. Paramilitaries are also known to have forcefully recruiting both girls and boys. As described for example in 'Niños paramilitares en Colombia: bienvenidos a la guerra', *Vanguardia.com* <http://www.vanguardia.com.mx/diario/noticia/americalatina/internacional/ninos_paramilitares_en_colombia_bienvenidos_a_la_guerra/243822>, accessed 21 October 2008

³⁵ Data quoted in Patricia Linares, in Taula Catalana Per La Pau I Els Drets Humans a Colòmbia (ed.), *VI Jornadas sobre Colombia: Mujeres y conflicto en Colombia*, 17-19 April 2008 (Barcelona, 2008) at 100.
³⁶ Commander Antonio Garcia once stated that the ELN has close to 50% female members (Geneva Call meeting with Commander Antonio Garcia, La Havana, December 2005.) Please note that this could also be understood as a reference to the members of the organization, not only to the actual combatants.

³⁷ The ELN hierarchy is and has always been dominated by men. There has never been a woman in the highest decision-making organ, though there has been at least one case of a women participating as a member of the 21 member National Direction. This was highlighted in different meetings of the NGO Geneva Call with the ELN (2006-2007) and in a meeting with an ELN expert, 10 November 2007.

³⁸ Meeting with ELN expert, 10 November 2007.
³⁹ There have been allegations of forced abortion of a young girl since she and her partner within the ELN had not yet been together for three years. 'ELN está reclutando a menores en sólo un bloque, afirma desmovilizada', *Canal Caracol* <http://www.canalcaracol.com/nota_interna.aspx?hid_id=46489>, accessed 11 October 2008

⁴⁰ For example, the girlfriend of a commander in Barbosa, Santander, deserted with her 18 month-old son that she seemingly had been allowed to keep with her 'En Barbosa se desmoviliza mujer integrante del Eln', *Vanguardia.com* (updated 22 January 2009) <<http://www.vanguardia.com/judicial/69/18677>>, accessed 24 January 2009

⁴¹ Since, in a contrast to many other studies, this dissertation is using the testimonies of current female ELN members we prefer not to disclose the author's identity without previous consultation.

⁴² As stated for example in Lara, *Las mujeres en la guerra* at 65. The narrator was a M-19 fighter and had previously belonged to the ELN. At the time the M-19 and herself were fighting jointly with a FARC front. In more general terms this has been confirmed in private conversations with a woman's rights activist (Barcelona December 2008) and another former female M-19 combatant (Bogotá, 2007).

emergence, structure and functioning of the FARC in order to prepare the grounds for the analysis. It then explores acts of gender-based violence committed by the FARC against civilians. Finally, it moves on to exploring the situation of female combatants within the FARC.

3.1. The FARC

3.1.1. Foundation

The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC, from Spanish *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia*) were founded in 1964 in Marquetalia, Tolima department of Colombia, when a group of 46 male and two female peasants defended themselves from a powerful army attack. The FARC hence started up as a peasant self-defense force,⁴³ whose formation had been triggered by '*la violencia*'.⁴⁴ Two years later the FARC was converted from self-defense forces to 'guerrilla,' officially taking on the name FARC and starting to expand into territories outside the traditional self-defense areas. In 1982 it proclaimed itself as a 'people's army,' making its abbreviation 'FARC-EP' (from Spanish *Ejército de Pueblo*).⁴⁵

During a period of peace negotiations with the Colombian government 1998-2002 the FARC was temporarily granted to control of a territory the size of Switzerland. This period is usually referred to as the 'Cagúan period,' after San Vicente del Cagúan, which was the 'capital' of this area under FARC-control and where negotiations took place. Some of the examples in the gender-analysis are taken from this area and during this period.

3.1.2. Structure and Leadership

The FARC is led by its 'Secretariat,' the governing body composed by seven members. The Secretariat is elected by the *Estado Mayor Central* or the Central National Command. So far, there has never been a female Secretariat member.

The organization has over 60 military fronts,⁴⁶ organized in seven blocks, plus urban structures. It has a clear command structure, with commanders reporting to the different levels in the military hierarchy and its activities are allegedly ruled by its statute, disciplinary rules and internal command norms. According to the FARC these line out the fundamental ideological grounds, organic structure and command, obligations and rights of fighters and other basic principles, with the disciplinary regime relating to 'military questions' and the internal command norms more to the day-to-day operations of the units.⁴⁷

Like most regular and irregular armed actors the FARC is an extremely hierarchical organization. Nevertheless, it has been alleged that since the end of the last peace process in 2002 FARC has been forced to increased decentralization.⁴⁸ In addition, as a

⁴³ The Communist Party ordered the creation of self-defense forces in November 1949. One of these was based in Marquetalia. Diego Otero Prada, *Las cifras del conflicto Colombiano* (second edn.; Bogotá: Indepaz, 2007) at 59.

⁴⁴ Fighting (1948-1958) between conservatory forces and liberal and communist guerrillas, frequently including violent attacks on civilian populations.

⁴⁵ For simplicity we will just refer to 'FARC' throughout the paper.

⁴⁶ Estimations of the number of fronts vary between 60 and 71, depending on the source and the time period. See for example 'Colombia: Making Military Progress Pay Off', (Bogotá/Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2008) at 8., 'Beligerencia (documento de las FARC-EP)', in Otty Patiño (ed.), *Las verdaderas intenciones de las FARC* (Bogotá: Corporación Observatorio para la Paz, Intermedio, 1999) at 222. and. Prada, *Las cifras del conflicto Colombiano* at 78.

⁴⁷ 'Beligerencia (documento de las FARC-EP)', at 222-223.

⁴⁸ Pascal Drouhaud, *FARC: confessions d'un guérillero* (Paris: Choiseul Éditions, 2008) at 112-113.

consequence of some of the 2007-2008 blows to the FARC, some analysts argue that the boosted capacity of the state security forces to intercept FARC communication⁴⁹ has made some FARC units loose touch with their commands, which reportedly have led to a decreased capacity of command and control, increased relaxation, indiscipline, and demotivation among troops, as well as corruption and escape of resources to mid-level commanders.⁵⁰ For instance, the female commander Nelly Ávila Moreno, alias 'Karina,' who deserted from the FARC in May 2008, stated that she had not been in direct contact with the Secretariat for the last two years, although her immediate superiors had contact.⁵¹

The FARC is a mainly military organization and the 'political wing' is subordinate to the military leadership (although supposedly it has its own political and social organizations). It has been indicated that after the (natural) death of its historical leader, alias 'Manuel Marulanda Vélez' in March 2008 and the rising of 'Adolfo Cano' as new leader, the FARC is taking a more political (instead of military) and urban (instead of rural) turn.

3.1.3. Ideology and Orientation

The FARC follows a Marxist-Leninist ideology, with special adaptation to rural Colombia,⁵² which some observers have denominated a mix of agrarianism, Marxism and 'Bolivarism.'⁵³ While the group's traditional goal is to overthrow the Colombian government and replace it with a Communist system,⁵⁴ its aims have been modified during its over 40 years of existence. The FARC currently claims to fight for a democratic regime with social justice and human rights⁵⁵ in a society that includes the marginalized sectors of the political process, and provides for land reform.

Current observers of the Colombian conflict may be tempted to state that the conflict is all about the coca trade and that its actors (and mainly the FARC) have lost their ideological principles. Others have convincingly argued against this.⁵⁶ Ideology is still an important organizing principle of the movement, though this does obviously not mean that it is the main or even one of the principles that motivates the individual fighters.

It can be observed that an important part of the movement's activities is still discussions of the news and current events, and putting these issues within the political framework of the internal documents and principles. In many camps there is a cultural hour at the end of every day and the FARC organizes regular party meetings and other political events. The FARC even has its own radio channel, 'the voice of resistance,' which plays FARC 'revolutionary music' (whose content is controlled) and reads out statements.⁵⁷

In addition to its political ideology, the FARC also claims to be somewhat of a 'feminist' ANSA. According to alias 'Olga Lucía Marín,' a female FARC commander, the 8th National

⁴⁹ As for example argued in the media and by the ICG. M. Rico, 'Muere en combate uno de los principales jefes de las FARC', *El País*, 31 October 2008. and 'Colombia: Making Military Progress Pay Off', at 7-8.

⁵⁰ Alfredo Rangel, 'Qué y cómo negociar con las Farc', in Alfredo Rangel et al. (eds.), *Qué, cómo y cuándo negociar con las Farc* (Bogotá: Intermedio, 2008) at 24-25.

⁵¹ For example in the video "Palabras de Karina," Colombia Part 1."

⁵² 'Humanitarian Engagement with Armed Groups: The Colombian Paramilitaries', (Geneva: Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, 2003) at 5.

⁵³ Otty Patiño (ed.), *Las verdaderas intenciones de las FARC* (Bogotá: Corporación Observatorio para la Paz, Intermedio, 1999) at 166.

⁵⁴ Though it originally developed through contacts with the Communist Party, the FARC broke its linkages with the party in the 1990s and set up its own clandestine Communist Party.

⁵⁵ Patiño (ed.), *Las verdaderas intenciones de las FARC* at 27.

⁵⁶ Francisco Gutiérrez Sanín, 'Criminal Rebels? A Discussion of Civil War and Criminality from the Colombian Experience', *Politics and Society*, 32/2 (June 2004), 257-280., and Alexandra Guáqueta, 'The Colombian Conflict: Political and Economic Dimensions', in Karen Ballentine and Jake Sherman (eds.), *The Political Economy of Armed Conflict: Beyond Greed and Grievance* (Boulder and London: Lynne Rienner, 2003).

⁵⁷ José Armando Cádenas Sarrias, *Los parias de la guerra: Análisis del proceso de desmovilización individual* (Bogotá: Ediciones Aurora, 2005) at 136 and 174-175.

Conference of the FARC established that women in the guerrilla are free and cannot be discriminated against. The official policy is hence that women have the same rights and duties as men⁵⁸ and that “women’s rights are also those of men and humanity.”⁵⁹ The FARC sees women’s fight for equality as embedded in its own ‘revolutionary’ struggle. It argues that since the wellbeing and equality of the Colombian women are not guaranteed by the state; hence the state should be replaced by someone who would do so (i.e. the FARC). Not only does the state have a responsibility, but also the women themselves:

“The way we see it women have the social engagement to fight not only to obtain benefits as a gender, but also to, jointly with the men, achieve a transformation of this society so that we can all live in better circumstances.”⁶⁰

In the FARC discourse both the *guerrilleros* (male) and *guerrilleras* (female) invite women to join the FARC⁶¹ and they say that they would do so on equal terms with the male recruits. It has for example been stated by the deceased commander and Secretariat member Raúl Reyes that women receive the same political, military and cultural training as men, and are asked to fulfill command and representational functions “according to their capacities,” and “those who discriminate will be sanctioned in line with the internal norms that rule us.”⁶² The non-discrimination on the basis of gender is a policy frequently repeated in FARC documents.⁶³ Yet, as is often the case, the policy might not reflect the practice and situation of female combatants within the FARC, which will be analyzed below in section 3.3.

3.1.4. Membership and Recruitment

Current government estimates indicate that the FARC has between 9,000 and 11,000 combatants.⁶⁴ In addition to these combatants there are armed FARC militia members who live with the civilian population and support the guerrilla’s activities.⁶⁵ The number of these militia members is not specified, but at the strength of around 13,000 combatants it was estimated to be around 15,000.

The FARC was growing quickly especially in the 1980s and 1990s.⁶⁶ Recently the group has suffered a weakening of its membership, which is allegedly due to an increased number in desertions,⁶⁷ battle deaths, and a decreased recruitment, as well as a drop in organizational income.⁶⁸

⁵⁸ Lara, *Las mujeres en la guerra* at 114-115.

⁵⁹ 'Las FARC saludan a las mujeres', *Organización Socialista Camino de la Libertad* [Reproduced from the FARC’s website: www.farcep.org, Comisión Internacional de las FARC], (updated 8 March 2005) <<http://www.frsd.org/espanol/docs/2005/farcmujer.htm>> 28 January 2009.

⁶⁰ 'Mujeres de las FARC Ejército del Pueblo. Compañía Pedro Martínez, 8 de marzo Día Internacional de la Mujer', *Euskal Herria Sozialista* [Reproduction from FARC-EP], <<http://euskalherriasozialista.blogspot.com/2006/03/8-de-marzo-da-internacional-de-la.html>>, accessed 28 January 2009. Also Olga highlights that the struggle for equality is in the hands of the women themselves, they have to ‘dare,’ though it is also up to the men to ‘let’ them. In Lara, *Las mujeres en la guerra* at 114-115.

⁶¹ For example in 'Las mujeres y sus luchas: Situación en desventaja', *FARC-EP, Comisión Internacional* (updated 9 May 2004) <<http://www.farc-ejercitodelpueblo.org/?node=2,821,1>>, accessed 28 January 2009.

⁶² 'Saludo Día Internacional de la Mujer', *FARC-EP, Comisión Internacional* (updated 8 May 2007) <<http://www.farc-ejercitodelpueblo.org/?node=2,2688,1,1>>, accessed 28 January 2009.

⁶³ For example in 'Las FARC saludan a las mujeres',

⁶⁴ Quoted by the ICG, referring to 2007 in 'Colombia: Making Military Progress Pay Off', at 8. Government figures quoted for 2008 indicate around 10,000 combatants and representation in some 26 countries. As mentioned for example in 'Farc tienen células de apoyo en 26 países', *El País* (updated 9 October) <<http://www.elpais.com.co/paisonline/notas/Octubre092008/inter5.html>>, accessed 12 November 2008. Some give even lower figures: around 8,000 (Rico, 'Muere en combate uno de los principales jefes de las FARC').

⁶⁵ Sarrias, *Los parias de la guerra* at 135 and 178-179.

⁶⁶ Prada, *Las cifras del conflicto Colombiano* at 67.

⁶⁷ Rico, 'Muere en combate uno de los principales jefes de las FARC', Sarrias, *Los parias de la guerra* at 126., etc.

⁶⁸ Rangel, 'Qué y cómo negociar con las Farc', at 22-24.

Membership in the FARC is for life. There is little possibility to get a temporary 'leave' (unlike in the ELN) or to be granted to leave the organization for good.⁶⁹ According to the FARC statute, desertion is 'high treason' and, depending on the circumstances, the punishment may be death.⁷⁰ In addition, as noted by one observer, the FARC is something of a 'family business,' where several members of a family have joined the movement. For this reason many would choose to stay with the group.⁷¹ FARC also keeps records of their members and their families (including where they live), which makes it more difficult for members to return home in case of desertion.⁷² However, as we shall see below, in rare cases, women have been allowed to leave the FARC for a few months in order to give birth.

A very high number, possible up to 90% of FARC recruits are from rural origin.⁷³ In fact, initially it was an almost exclusively rural movement, which decided to allow recruits from the cities at a later stage.⁷⁴ Before the split with the Communist Party in 1990 the urban recruits were drawn mainly from the Communist Youth.⁷⁵

The high level of female participation is a key characteristic of guerrilla groups in Colombia and generally in Latin America. Though the figures vary, it is generally estimated that women and girls form around 40% of the FARC membership.⁷⁶ Though it is difficult to estimate the exact numbers, it is clear that the number of female members has increased sharply since the 1980s. For example, when Commander Olga joined the FARC in November 1981, she describes arriving at the camp during an ongoing course, where there were some 60 men and only two women. Since she arrived with another two women, the female participation more than doubled in the company.⁷⁷ Nevertheless, an eyewitness that had the possibility to travel around the FARC-controlled areas during the Caguán period (1998-2002) confirms current high levels of female combatants, which in some locations reached even up to 50%.⁷⁸

Recruitment of both women and men mostly happens through personal contacts, and there are no specialized recruitment commissions.⁷⁹ Generally there are many varied reasons for why individuals join the FARC, but often these are related to having links to the movement;

⁶⁹ There is a possibility to ask for a leave or to leave the organization for good, but very few manage to do this: you have to fulfill the criteria, which normally includes having served many years as *guerrillero/a*, having accomplished good work, or because you are sick. Sarrias, *Los parias de la guerra* at 125 and 158. However, many ex-combatants have reported that there is something like a trial period, after which the new recruits could still decide to leave the organisation (see example by Olga) Lara, *Las mujeres en la guerra* at 105. However, some girl soldiers reported that they were promised a 'trial,' but were not allowed to leave as promised. Yvonne E. Kairns, 'The Voices of Girl Child Soldiers: Colombia', (New York and Geneva: Quaker United Nations Office, 2003) at 11.

⁷⁰ Sarrias, *Los parias de la guerra* at 125. The internal sanction regime is briefly discussed in section 3.2.1 'The FARC Policy and Internal Sanctions.'

⁷¹ Ibid. at 126. Nevertheless, testimonies also show how families are challenged when their members join different guerrillas, the army, or the paramilitaries. Lara, *Las mujeres en la guerra*., and 'Desplazados: la otra cara de la violación de derechos humanos en Colombia', *Eco diario.es* <<http://ecodiario.eleconomista.es/mundo/noticias/90928112/08/Desplazados-la-otra-cara-de-la-violacion-de-derechos-humanos-en-Colombia.html>>, accessed 17 December 2008

⁷² The documentation on members (and in this specific case on girl soldiers) is exemplified for example in 'Infamia: Documentos y fotos encontrados en un computador de las Farc revelen hasta dónde llegan en el abuse de las niñas colombianas ', *Semana*, 3-10 July/1261 (2006): 30-35. The fact that the FARC keeps track of the families is especially important since many (55%) of ex-FARC members have stated wanting to be close to their family as the main reason for deserting. Data from survey by Arjona and Kalyvas, 'Preliminary Results of Demobilized Combatants in Colombia', at 47.

⁷³ This estimation was made in general for guerrilla and paramilitary members, but should be applicable to the FARC as well. Sarrias, *Los parias de la guerra* at 160.

⁷⁴ Drouhaud, *FARC: confessions d'un guérillero* at 48.

⁷⁵ As we will see below under section 3.3.2, for example Commander 'Olga' was recruited through this channel.

⁷⁶ Estimations generally range between 30-35 and 40 %. See for example Jeremy McDermott, 'Colombia's Female Fighting Force', *BBC News*, 4 January 2002. (30%); 'Las FARC saludan a las mujeres', (35%); Lara, *Las mujeres en la guerra* at 115. ("close to 40%"); or Potes, 'Women's Participation, Roles and Gender Inequality in Latin America's Largest Guerrilla Group Left Standing: The FARC', at 23. (40%).

⁷⁷ Lara, *Las mujeres en la guerra* at 95.

⁷⁸ Personal communication with a person who visited the areas under FARC control. Barcelona, December 2008.

⁷⁹ Sarrias, *Los parias de la guerra* at 166.

living in an area if its influence; poverty or simply the fact of lacking other attractive alternatives; or a way to escape violent family situation including sexual abuse. Some are also attracted by being able to wear a uniform and carrying a gun: attributes that may provide them with some authority and recognition.⁸⁰ The reasons for women and girls to join the FARC are more specifically discussed below in section 3.3.2.

3.2. Gender-Based Violence by the FARC against Civilians

According to numerous sources, all parties involved in the Colombian conflict have committed grave human rights violations against the civilian population, including gender-based violence.⁸¹ Gender-based violence (GBV) is generally defined as:

“an umbrella term for any harm that is perpetrated against a person’s will, and that results from power inequities that are based on gender roles.”⁸²

This includes, but is broader than the term violence against women, given that men are also targets of violence based on their gender.⁸³ Thus, for example, in the Colombian conflict, as in most conflicts globally, men are the major part of the victims of massacres, political homicides, forced disappearances, arbitrary detentions, etc.⁸⁴

One form of gender-based violence that is often committed within conflict situations is sexual violence, which includes:

“any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments, or advances, or acts to traffic a person’s sexuality, using coercion, threats of harm or physical force, by any person regardless of relationship to the victim, in any setting, including but not limited to home and work”.⁸⁵

The use of GBV in conflict situations is varied and includes forced displacement and the use of sexual violence by government and paramilitary forces as a form of punishment of communities allegedly supporting the rebels; forced recruitment and sexual abuse of child soldiers, and sexual slavery committed by rebel forces, etc.⁸⁶ This section examines the FARC policy on such abuses and highlights the specific abuses committed by FARC members against civilians. We argue that it is important to understand the broader context of gender-based violence in this conflict, in order to better understand the situation of female combatants within the FARC.

3.2.1. The FARC ‘Policy’ and Internal Sanctions

The FARC’ internal rules include “norms that seek the protection of the civilian population from the conflict...,” for example by making the distinction between combatants and non-

⁸⁰ Yezid Arteta, ‘Escenarios de confrontación y negociación con las Farc’, in Alfredo Rangel et al. (eds.), *Qué, cómo y cuándo negociar con las Farc* (Bogotá: Intermedio, 2008) at 71. Also Sarrias, *Los parias de la guerra* at 159.

⁸¹ ‘Sexual Violence in Armed Conflict: Global Overview and Implications for the Security Sector’, (Geneva: DCAF, 2007) at 73., UN Commission on Human Rights (quoted in DCAF).

⁸² Reproductive Health Response in Conflict Consortium (RHRC) (2003) *Gender-based violence Tools Manual*, at 9.

⁸³ E.g. in the conflict in Bosnia, men were specifically targeted with violence.

⁸⁴ Comité permanente por la defensa de los derechos humanos: *Colombia: Informe estadístico de Derechos Humanos – 2003*. at 27

⁸⁵ IASC Task Force on Gender and Humanitarian Assistance (2005) *Guidelines for Gender-based Violence Intervention in Humanitarian Settings: Focusing on Prevention of and Response to Sexual Violence in Emergencies*, at 7.

⁸⁶ ‘Sexual Violence in Armed Conflict: Global Overview and Implications for the Security Sector’, at 73.

combatants and respecting the immunity of the civilian population.⁸⁷ It also includes the prohibition of forced recruitment and recruitment of children under 15.⁸⁸

According to the FARC norms, it is the duty of its fighters to defend not only the interests and property of the movement, but also of the people, the 'masses.' They should also respect the 'prisoners of war' in their physical integrity and their convictions. However, here it is important to note that for the FARC civilians can also be 'prisoners of war,' on the contrary to international humanitarian law (IHL), which prohibits hostage-taking of civilians.⁸⁹

The official policy of the FARC in terms of offenses against the civilian population explicitly prohibits: the use of threats against individuals; the killing of men and women from the civilian population; stealing from the civilian population; activities that aim to hinder the religious civilian population from practicing its religion; and rape.⁹⁰

Other offences that relate to the civilian population, but that are more directly linked to the reputation of the FARC, are the prohibitions of the consumption of drugs; and "Whatever activity that goes against revolutionary morals, against the healthy habits of the population, or that tends to reduce the prestige of the FARC-EP in the eyes of the people."⁹¹

It does not appear that the FARC makes a formal difference between sanctions for offenses committed against civilians and within the organization. Nevertheless, among the offenses that are mentioned as having been sanctioned, internal offenses seem to appear more frequently. In fact, in one of the sources all examples of 'grave' offences that may lead to execution are internal, such as: desertion, theft of material, espionage, 'disobedience,' or the loss of weapons, having a relationship with a hostage, or simply failing one's mission.⁹² Another source also mentions mainly internal offenses, notably 'talking badly about a commander' (especially if superior), murder of fellow combatants, robbery against the organization, or desertion.⁹³

In terms of GBV, the FARC policy mentions 'murder of civilians'⁹⁴ and rape as grave offences.⁹⁵ No examples have currently been found of a FARC member being punished for sexual violence against civilians. Nevertheless, one testimony from a girl soldier mentions how a commander that abused her was disarmed and executed.⁹⁶

Grave offences against the organization or the civilian population are tried in the 'war council' or the martial court and can be punished by death. After execution, one of the toughest punishments for a FARC combatant is to be disarmed.⁹⁷ Other *de facto* sanctions include: uncertainty if one will be tried in the martial court or not; and social exclusion or rejection. For smaller offences fighters are assigned task such as cooking, cleaning/digging toilets, preparing garbage, or bringing wood, all more than would have been their usual assigned share of these tasks. One of the mildest 'punishments' is when a commander gives a *charla*,

⁸⁷ There are recommendations aimed at the civilian population, encouraging it to avoid traveling in or close to military vehicles, to live close to military bases, etc. After 8 July 1998: press release by the International Commission providing recommendations. Refered to in 'Reglamento, Recomendaciones y normas con la población civil de las FARC-EP (documento de las FARC-EP)', in Otty Patiño (ed.), *Las verdaderas intenciones de las FARC* (Bogotá: Corporación Observatorio para la Paz, Intermedio, 1999) at 171.

⁸⁸ "Entry in FARC-EP is personal, voluntary and informed, between 15 and 30 years." Ibid. at 167-168. However, various accounts, including that of ex-hostages show that kids as young as eight-nine years are allowed to enter the FARC. Though forced recruitment exist most reports indicate that many of them would enter 'voluntarily' because of poverty and lack of other choices (see section 3.3.2 below).

⁸⁹ Hostage-taking is prohibited under Common Article 3 to the 1949 Geneva Conventions.

⁹⁰ 'Reglamento de las FARC-EP', at 167-169.

⁹¹ Ibid. at 169.

⁹² Drouhaud, *FARC: confessions d'un guérillero* at 90-91.

⁹³ Sarrias, *Los parias de la guerra* at 188.

⁹⁴ Ibid. at 169. However, there is no definition of when this is applicable, but it is possible that it would only count as such if there was no backing from the hierarchy for the act.

⁹⁵ Ibid. at 188.

⁹⁶ Guillermo González, *Los niños de la guerra* (Bogotá: Planeta, 2002) at 165.

⁹⁷ Sarrias, *Los parias de la guerra* at 129.

a lecture on the (necessary) sacrifices of a combatant's life and the morality of this.⁹⁸ The Colombian magazine *Semana* has published some examples of sanctions imposed on girl soldiers for internal offenses, of which some seem disproportionate.⁹⁹

As to specific sanctions for IHL violations, the FARC has announced that sanctions will be taken in cases of 'mistakes,' which generally refer to atrocities that have created public outrage. Actions that create national and international indignation, such as massive indiscriminate killings of civilians,¹⁰⁰ or the targeting of health and NGO workers,¹⁰¹ seem to be more likely to be challenged by the FARC leadership. However, without access to internal communication about the issue it is currently difficult to prove or dismiss this assumption. Yet, what seems clear is that the FARC does have an explicit policy that prohibits (gender-based) violence against the civilian population, even though the sanctions might not always be consistently applied.

3.2.2. Sexual Violence against Civilians

In conflict situations sexual violence is committed by conflict actors for a number of motives, such as for torture, humiliation or punishment, to instill terror in the civilian population, to reaffirm aggression among combatants, or as a result of a lack of discipline within the armed group, or linked to the general breakdown of law and order.¹⁰²

According to various sources, different forms of sexual violence have been used by all actors in the Colombian conflict, both for torture and as a terror tactic. It has also been used as a means of intimidation and punishment for civilian women that do not follow the rules imposed by the different armed actors.¹⁰³

In spite of the explicit prohibition in its internal norms (see above), FARC members have reportedly committed rapes or other acts of sexual violence. The victims have notably been women and girls that were declared 'military targets' as a punishment for associating or 'fraternizing' with soldiers, police or paramilitary members.¹⁰⁴ Breaches of the 'non-fraternizing' ban have sometimes resulted in rape and killings.¹⁰⁵

Sexual violence has hence been used by the FARC also as a means of control and punishment: the punishment is supposed to deter women and girls¹⁰⁶ from engaging in

⁹⁸ Ibid. at 169-170.

⁹⁹ With one girl for example being sanctioned with two hundred trips of carrying firewood. 'Infamia: Documentos y fotos encontrados en un computador de las Farc revelen hasta dónde llegan en el abuso de las niñas colombianas'. Yet, we have to keep in mind that this magazine is close to the government and generally biased against the FARC.

¹⁰⁰ As for example the killing of almost 120 persons in May 2002 in Bojayá, Chocó which allegedly created a general public indignation towards both the FARC and the paramilitaries. See 'Vida, dignidad y territorio: comunidades de paz y zonas humanitarias en Urabá y Atrato. Una experiencia de resistencia civil a la guerra', (Bogota: Fundación Cultura Democrática, Ministerio del Interior, PNUD/UNDP, 2003).

¹⁰¹ This was for example the case of the killing of three North-American NGO workers in 1999. The FARC first denied responsibility for the death of the three Americans who had been working with the U'wa tribe. It later on admitted that the killing had been the consequence of a unilateral action by one of its commanders.

¹⁰² See: 'Sexual Violence in Armed Conflict: Global Overview and Implications for the Security Sector'.

¹⁰³ See for example: Amnesty International ('Colombia: "Scarred Bodies, Hidden Crimes": Sexual Violence against Women in the Armed Conflict', (Amnesty International, 2004) at 8.) or 'Sexual Violence in Armed Conflict: Global Overview and Implications for the Security Sector', at 73-74.). In 'Los derechos civiles y políticos de las mujeres colombianas a la luz de la observación general. N° 28 Informe sobre la situación de los derechos humanos de las mujeres en Colombia: Presentado al Comité de Derechos Humanos en su sesión N° 80, de marzo 2004', in Observatorio De Los Derechos Humanos De Las Mujeres En Colombia (ed.), *Las mujeres y derechos humanos en Colombia: Documentos de incidencia internacional*. (Valencia: Atelier, 2005) at 33.

¹⁰⁴ 'Colombia: "Scarred Bodies, Hidden Crimes"', at 8.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Girl children are 'sexualized' in a very early age in Colombia. See below section 3.3.1 'Women in Rural Colombia.'

relationships with members of the security and paramilitary forces. At least one 'punitive' rape by alleged FARC fighters took place in 2002.¹⁰⁷

In some cases the actual 'motive' for the use of sexual violence is unknown, but could be both an act of punishment against a family member or partner of the women who suffer the act, or simply that individual FARC members take advantage of a situation of power or the breakdown of law and order.¹⁰⁸

Against the generally held view, women can also be perpetrators of sexual violence. There is at least one example of sexual violence committed by a female commander against men in the Colombian conflict: alias 'Karina' has been accused of castrating several men on one occasion.¹⁰⁹

There have also been reports of rapes committed by the FARC against female hostages (civilians taken by the FARC to obtain a ransom to finance their activities or to assert their authority in a particular area). One case reported by Amnesty International that deserves some more in-depth analysis is that of Rina Bolaño, a bacteriologist working with indigenous peoples who was kidnapped in August 2003 by FARC's front 19. She was allegedly repeatedly raped by the local FARC commander, 'Beltrán,' while being held captive.¹¹⁰

"While I was in captivity, Beltrán harassed me. If anyone spoke to me, they would be punished. All that harassment made me cry. In the end I talked to a female guerrilla and she told me that he was just like that, that he always behaved like that. He asked women to masturbate him. Four nights later, tired of my refusal to do so, he grabbed my breasts and savagely manhandled them and raped me. There was a lot of noise because I struggled. The next night it happened again. One of the women guerrillas asked me, "What happened? I heard you complaining". Beltrán punished her for 'gossiping'.

He intimidated everyone. I was terrified of him. Because he was abusive, everyone was against him. Beltrán was confronted and the troops turned against him. [...] He blew up saying it was all lies. That they wanted to mess up the CV of someone who had been a guerrilla for 14 years. I held his gaze and said that I would rather die. The other guerrillas were not going to let him kill me. They told me to denounce him so that the commanders would believe them. ... Beltrán wanted money to release me. The indigenous people said they couldn't give money and so Beltrán didn't want to release me but at the same time he couldn't stand the sight of me anymore because he had lost control of his troops. [...] When they released me, I wanted to pour water all over myself to get rid of all that filth but I was determined to report it. Many women who are kidnapped in Cesar are raped but they say nothing."¹¹¹

This testimony is important because of several aspects, notably that the FARC's internal norms on how they treat hostages (with respect, no relationships allowed, etc.) and the general prohibition of rape were disrespected by one commander. This and his generally abusive behavior made the troops (and especially the female combatants) uncomfortable and willing to act against their commander.

¹⁰⁷ 'Colombia: "Scarred Bodies, Hidden Crimes"', at 24.

¹⁰⁸ For example when two FARC members in Chocó were looking for a man at his home. When the husband was not found, they raped his wife. As explained in 'Violencia sexual hizo huir a 2 de cada 10 desplazadas, revela studio de la Defensoría del Pueblo', *El Tiempo* <http://www.eltiempo.com/colombia/justicia/2008-07-30/violencia-sexual-hizo-huir-a-2-de-cada-10-desplazadas-revela-estudio-de-la-defensoria-del-pueblo_4416664-1>, accessed 30 July 2008.

¹⁰⁹ 'Víctimas de alias "Karina", la acusan de castración', *Caracol* (updated 4 October 2008) <<http://www.caracol.com.co/nota.aspx?id=683627>>, accessed 29 January 2009. and 'Acusan a guerrillera de las FARC por castración', *Hispano.com* (updated 6 October 2008) <<http://sитio.com/hispano/2008/10/06/acusan-a-guerrillera-de-las-farc-por-castracion/>>, accessed 29 January 2009.

¹¹⁰ In addition to the Amnesty International report, this case is also denounced in 'La situación de los derechos humanos de las mujeres en Colombia: Entre el conflicto armado y la política de seguridad democrática: Informe de los Derechos Humanos de mujeres – 2004', in Observatorio De Los Derechos Humanos De Las Mujeres En Colombia (ed.), *Las mujeres y derechos humanos en Colombia: Documentos de incidencia internacional*. (Valencia: Atelier, 2005) at 11.

¹¹¹ 'Colombia: "Scarred Bodies, Hidden Crimes"', at 22-23.

It is unclear how frequent acts of sexual violence against female hostages actually are. We have found no other specific case, but given that sexual violence against women and girls in Colombia generally goes largely unpunished (as we will see below) it is possible that there are many unreported cases.

3.2.3. Other Forms of Gender-Based Violence against Civilians

Both the paramilitaries and the guerillas have established so-called ‘rules of co-existence’ in the territories they control. Especially the paramilitaries do this in order to demonstrate that they are the “guardians of a traditional form of sexual morality associated with the idea of order.”¹¹² These codes for conduct impose on the civilian population a number of norms for dressing and behaving, and indicate how acts of transgression are punished. Thus, for example, clothes that are considered provocative are prohibited, and unaccompanied women are seen as transgressing gender roles.¹¹³ This acts to control social life and women’s sexuality.

In the context of these ‘rules of co-existence,’ the different armed actors have engaged in acts of so-called ‘social cleansing’ targeting socially marginalized individuals, such as prostitutes, homosexuals, and individuals with HIV.¹¹⁴ These forms of GBV are not widely discussed in the literature – maybe because they target small and often marginalized and stigmatized segments of the population – and they often go unpunished.

The main actors committing such acts in Colombia have undoubtedly been the paramilitaries, but guerilla groups have also been alleged to commit such acts.¹¹⁵ In their efforts to obtain social control when entering a new area, the ANSAs allegedly “first move to control the commercial and nightlife of the area, in hopes of transforming military control of a region into complete moral and behavioral control,” and next “seek to eliminate unmanageable or intractable individuals and groups.”¹¹⁶ In addition, according to Amnesty International, both guerrilla and paramilitary groups have targeted homosexual (both gays and lesbians) and prostitutes. Such acts of GBV are couched in terms of establishing law and order in an attempt to win ‘legitimacy’¹¹⁷ within the broader society.

The FARC has reportedly killed both homosexuals and persons infected with HIV/AIDS living in territories under their control.¹¹⁸ For example, in Meta, the FARC is known to have submitted residents to forced HIV and AIDS tests. There are examples of how local activists that opposed such practices received death threats.¹¹⁹ Moreover, also FARC members with HIV have been executed. According to testimonies and reports provided by former *guerrilleras*, female guerrilla fighters who are HIV-positive were blamed for transmitting the virus and were more likely to be killed than male ones.¹²⁰

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Ibid. at 23-26.

¹¹⁴ According to the US Office on Colombia, the stereotypes and aversions in traditional Colombian society (heavily informed by Catholic Church teaching on homosexuality and by macho and patriarchal ideals of sexual identity and gender) against homo-, bi- and transgender-sexuality have been exacerbated by the armed conflict. Neil Jeffery and Tara Carr, 'The Impact of Conflict and Community Organizing on Colombian Lesbians, Gays, Bisexuals, Transvestites and Transgender Individuals', (US Office on Colombia, 2004) at 1.

¹¹⁵ Carlos Castaño, commander of the Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC – an umbrella organization for the Colombian paramilitary groups), said in an interview in late 2000 that homosexuals were a malformation of nature. He used this conviction to justify the violence inflicted by the AUC on homosexuals and transvestites. Ibid. at 2.

¹¹⁶ Ibid. at 1-2.

¹¹⁷ 'Colombia: "Scarred Bodies, Hidden Crimes"', at 11 and 39.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Jeffery and Carr, 'The Impact of Conflict and Community Organizing on Colombian Lesbians, Gays, Bisexuals, Transvestites and Transgender Individuals', at 2.

¹²⁰ 'Colombia: "Scarred Bodies, Hidden Crimes"'.

Persecution of homosexuals and prostitutes was allegedly particularly visible during the Caguán process in the areas under their control.¹²¹ However, the deceased FARC leader Manuel Marulanda has denied this.¹²² For example, in Meta, human rights groups have found the FARC was forcing homosexual teachers to abandon their posts, by sending them death threats.¹²³ Amnesty International has also reported that the 27 Front of the FARC persecuted lesbians and gays in the municipality of Mesetas of Meta, then under FARC-control.¹²⁴

As mentioned above in section 3.1.2 ‘Structure and Leadership,’ recent events and developments have indicated that the FARC’s once rigid command and control structure may be facing serious challenges. This is partly due to the security forces’ interception in its communication system, and partly to the geographic dispersal caused by the army pressure and the use of smaller teams to avoid detection. It is hence possible that this affects the incidence of GBV on the ground.

Especially as relates to rape and other forms of sexual violence, it appears that abuses may have been unrelated to current orders and interests of the FARC. Particularly one instance: the kidnapping of sex workers held by a FARC front for forced sexual services has the sign of unrestrained abuses, not controlled by the FARC leadership.¹²⁵ However, examples of abuses by commanders and troops as the ones mentioned above do not necessarily mean that the FARC leadership lacks the possibility to stop and sanction such acts. It could also be the case that issues of sexual abuse and similar – given that they are never widely publicized by the victims – are just not a priority for the FARC. Yet, these acts of GBV against the civilian population obviously stand in stark contradiction to the official FARC policy, as shown above.

3.3. Female Combatants in the FARC

In order to understand the situation of female combatants within the FARC, it is essential to first situate it within the broader context of the life of women in (rural) Colombian society more generally. This context helps to explain why women might join the FARC, what types of oppression and discrimination civilian women face, and how they perceive ‘empowerment.’

In the 8th Conference of the FARC it was established that women in the guerrilla are free and cannot be discriminated against and women and men have the same rights and duties. This official policy was confirmed in interviews with FARC commanders, such as with Liliana López, alias Olga Lucía Marín, who stated that “it is important to achieve that both in the guerrilla, like in the country, the role of women is strengthened, that it is more appreciated.”¹²⁶ Another female commander, Mariana Paez, 38 who spend more than 11

¹²¹ Ibid. at 26.

¹²² In Carlos A. Lozano, *Reportajes desde el Caguán: proceso de paz con las FARC-EP* (Bogotá: Colección Izquierda Viva, 2001) at 30.

¹²³ Jeffery and Carr, ‘The Impact of Conflict and Community Organizing on Colombian Lesbians, Gays, Bisexuals, Transvestites and Transgender Individuals’, at 2.

¹²⁴ For example, as described by Amnesty International: “Two lesbians were living there. The guerrillas told them they had to leave the municipality. Within a month they had ‘disappeared’. People say they were killed. Their relationship was public knowledge, they lived together. They had become more or less accepted in the town.” ‘Colombia: “Scarred Bodies, Hidden Crimes”’, at 26.

¹²⁵ In an interview from 2002 a 21-year old woman who was kidnapped by the FARC said she was working at a bar when a militia member offered her and some other girls to go and ‘work with’ (i.e. have sex with) ‘the boys.’ She would receive a lot of money for this. When she got there she changed her mind but was not allowed to leave. She was forced to have sex with ‘all of them.’ Then she was forced to stay there and work (cook, clean, collect coca leaves, etc.). She got released when she got sick, then she got to return to Medellín. ‘Los derechos civiles y políticos de las mujeres colombianas a la luz de la observación general. N° 28 Informe sobre la situación de los derechos humanos de las mujeres en Colombia: Presentado al Comité de Derechos Humanos en su sesión N° 80, de marzo 2004’, at 34.

¹²⁶ Lara, *Las mujeres en la guerra* at 114-115.

years in the rebel ranks and was on the FARC team involved in the peace process reported in an interview to Jeremy McDermott in Caguán that the FARC had a women-friendly policy:

“In the FARC, there is no machismo, as a policy. [...] Yes there are macho men in the FARC, because let's face it, this is a macho culture. But such is the discipline in the FARC, that we are erasing these tendencies.”¹²⁷

This section will hence explore how the non-discrimination policy is put into practice by performing a gender analysis of the reasons for women to join the FARC, their roles once in the movement and how sexuality and relationships are dealt with within the FARC.

3.3.1. Women in Rural Colombia

Rural women and girls, just like their male counterparts, are exposed to poor living conditions in underdeveloped areas, in which they have limited access to education and very restricted life choices. In addition, women and girls suffer from gender-specific abuses, within and outside the conflict context.¹²⁸

The Colombian society manifests high levels of abuses against women and girls, and especially in the rural areas. Observers have argued that this – like in other Latin American countries, is due largely to an alliance between the Catholic Church and conservative forces that oppose for example the use of contraceptives and the legality of abortion.¹²⁹

The levels of intra-family violence are significant. For example, between 1998 and 2001 it was estimated that every hour six women are victims of intra-family violence. 53% of the children victims of abuses at home are girls.¹³⁰

Girl children are ‘sexualized’ at a very early age in Colombia, and not only in conflict areas. The levels of teenage pregnancies, young mothers, as well as child abuse, especially of young girls, are comparatively high. The testimonies from girl soldiers often show high levels of intra-family abuse, including sexual abuse, before joining the armed groups. Others show early (voluntary) initiation to sex and child pregnancies.¹³¹

Sexual abuses in the homes are tragically high. For example, in some areas sexual crimes as well as incestuous practices are very frequent (like the municipalities Santander de Quilichao and Popayán in Cauca, Montería in Córdoba, Sincelejo in Sucre, and Kennedy in Bogotá). For example, in Montería there is a frequent practice that the father “inaugurates his own daughter.”¹³² In South Bolívar there are practices such as the payment of debts by granting the person one owes money one or more ‘nights’ with the own daughter.¹³³

The levels of child prostitution are not completely known. But in 1999 it was estimated to some 25'000 girls and boys, of which 75% was estimated to be girls.¹³⁴

Abortion is penalized in Colombia. It is only allowed in cases of rape or if there are medical problems with the fetus or a risk to the life of the mother. In practice, however, women and girls have been denied abortions even if one of the conditions has been fulfilled: a judge, who

¹²⁷ McDermott, 'Colombia's Female Fighting Force'.

¹²⁸ Similar limited options are available for youth in the shantytowns surrounding Bogotá and Medellín.

¹²⁹ Norma Enriquez Riascos, in Taula Catalana Per La Pau I Els Drets Humans a Colòmbia (ed.), *VI Jornadas sobre Colombia: Mujeres y conflicto en Colombia, 17-19 April 2008* (Barcelona, 2008) at 54.

¹³⁰ 'Los derechos civiles y políticos de las mujeres colombianas a la luz de la observación general. N° 28 Informe sobre la situación de los derechos humanos de las mujeres en Colombia: Presentado al Comité de Derechos Humanos en su sesión N° 80, de marzo 2004', at 32.

¹³¹ For example in González, *Los niños de la guerra* at 27-33 and 159-161.

¹³² 'El conflicto, callejón con salida: Informe nacional de desarrollo humano', (Bogotá: United Nations Development Programme, 2003) at 268.

¹³³ As reported by a Colombian NGO worker, formerly working in the area, Geneva, January 2009.

¹³⁴ 'Los derechos civiles y políticos de las mujeres colombianas a la luz de la observación general. N° 28 Informe sobre la situación de los derechos humanos de las mujeres en Colombia: Presentado al Comité de Derechos Humanos en su sesión N° 80, de marzo 2004', at 34.

may be against abortions, takes the final decision.¹³⁵ In spite of it being illegal, some 450,000 abortions are carried out yearly. Of the girls between 15 and 19, no less than 44.5% have had an abortion in the early 2000s.¹³⁶

In spite of the high number of abortions, NGOs have recorded an increase in the number of 'young mothers' (less than 20 years old) in Colombia. This figure is higher among the displaced: for 2000 it was 30%, as compared to the general female population: 19% (though the latter had increased from 17% in 1995).¹³⁷

Decades of armed conflict have prompted large-scale displacement and created a climate of violence in Colombia. As seen above, civilians generally suffer violence committed by all actors in the conflict. Civilian women and children are particularly affected by this in a number of ways. A study on the human rights situation of women in Colombia found that between January and September 2003: more than one woman died on a daily basis due to extrajudicial executions and political murder; more than one woman was victim of 'forced disappearance' every two weeks; and one woman died every month as victim of murder against the 'socially marginalized'.¹³⁸

Figures show that in the period from 1997-2003, 79.5% of displaced were women and girls.¹³⁹ Forced displacement has left women and children in particularly vulnerable situations and there is evidence that the large-scale displacements have not only resulted in increased violence against the displaced,¹⁴⁰ but have also exacerbated intra-family violence.¹⁴¹ Yet, in a context where GBV is associated with stigma, the majority of victims do not report abuses because of fear or shame, particularly in the case of sexual violence:

"Women do not easily consider sexual violence as a crime, since they many times do not feel like victims, but guilty, due to the behavior of their families, society and the very authorities: a situation that generates a re-victimization."¹⁴²

3.3.2. Reasons for Joining the FARC

There are a number of reasons why women and girls have decided to join the FARC (or other Colombian armed groups more generally). Some of these reasons are general for girls and boys, women and men alike, while others have gender or youth-specific aspects. It is

¹³⁵ Riascos, at 59-60.

¹³⁶ 'Los derechos civiles y políticos de las mujeres colombianas a la luz de la observación general. N° 28 Informe sobre la situación de los derechos humanos de las mujeres en Colombia: Presentado al Comité de Derechos Humanos en su sesión N° 80, de marzo 2004', at 30. It is not clear if this figure includes also abortions undertaken within the armed groups.

¹³⁷ 'La situación de los derechos humanos de las mujeres en Colombia: Entre el conflicto armado y la política de seguridad democrática: Informe de los Derechos Humanos de mujeres – 2004', at 17. Again, it is not mentioned if these figures include babies born by female guerrillas, who after having given birth return to their movements, leaving their babies to family or to unknown.

¹³⁸ Ibid. Note that the study does not specify whether the women victims of the conflict are female combatants or civilians.

¹³⁹ '60° Período de sesiones: Comisión de Derechos Humanos, Tema 14 c) éxodos masivos y desplazamiento de personas: Situación de las mujeres desplazadas en Colombia', in Observatorio De Los Derechos Humanos De Las Mujeres En Colombia (ed.), *Las mujeres y derechos humanos en Colombia: Documentos de incidencia internacional*. (Valencia: Atelier, 2005) at 25.

¹⁴⁰ For example, in a study on sexual violence against displaced women including 2200 women in Cali, Medellín, Cúcuta and Pasto it was reported that "14% of the women that fled due to this crime said that they had been direct victims of these types of practices on behalf of the different armed actors." As reported in 'Violencia sexual hizo huir a 2 de cada 10 desplazadas, revela estudio de la Defensoría del Pueblo'.

¹⁴¹ In one study concerning 771 women displaced by the political violence, for example, 50% had suffered violence by a partner and 28% by someone else, see: 'La situación de los derechos humanos de las mujeres en Colombia: Entre el conflicto armado y la política de seguridad democrática: Informe de los Derechos Humanos de mujeres – 2004', at 17.

¹⁴² 'Reparación desde lo femenino', *Hechos del Callejón*, UNDP, March/33 (2008) at 5-6).

important to understand the reasons and motives of female combatants, because that influences to some extent how they experience their life in the FARC.

Our analysis of why women and girls join the FARC mainly confirmed the results of other studies on recruitment of women and girls in Colombia to armed groups.¹⁴³ The same can be said for studies on recruitment of adults and children in Colombia¹⁴⁴ and of children in general.¹⁴⁵ Some of the main reasons detected in the analysis – stated by the women and girls themselves and in different analyses – include:

- escape from family abuses (including sexual abuse);¹⁴⁶
- hardship (hard domestic and other work, extreme poverty, etc.) and lack of other future options (education, work, etc.);¹⁴⁷
- socialization into the conflict and search for identity;¹⁴⁸ and search for adventure or to escape 'boredom';¹⁴⁹
- family background, socialization into the political struggle (and little means of doing it legally)¹⁵⁰ and dedication to the cause;¹⁵¹

¹⁴³ A general study on why women and girls have joined armed groups in Colombia has shown that some of the main reasons include 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 demobilized women revealed that many suffered from previous sexual abuse – from fathers, brothers and other relatives – from early childhood. (Dietrich, 'Demobilization of Female Ex-Combatants in Colombia', at 58-59.) Potes mentions some additional reasons for joining, notably: self-empowerment, gaining admiration or respect, affectionate and friendship ties, replace boredom and getting a meaning in life. (Potes, 'Women's Participation, Roles and Gender Inequality in Latin America's Largest Guerrilla Group Left Standing: The FARC', at 53.) Colombian women's rights organizations have highlighted the situation of abuses suffered at home and poverty. ('Los derechos civiles y políticos de las mujeres colombianas a la luz de la observación general. N° 28 Informe sobre la situación de los derechos humanos de las mujeres en Colombia: Presentado al Comité de Derechos Humanos en su sesión N° 80, de marzo 2004'.)

¹⁴⁴ In Sarrias, *Los parias de la guerra* at 159-160., the author outlines that in general some of the main reasons for people to join armed groups in Colombia are: because of violent family backgrounds including sexual abuse, links to a rebel or paramilitary organizations, the illusion of power or status (uniform, gun), the lack of other opportunities, the need for personal recognition, etc. He bases this on his own interviews with 30 former guerrilla and paramilitary members, as well as other literature. Only two of those interviewed were women, and both had belonged to the paramilitaries. For child recruitment in Colombia, see for example 'Niños y jóvenes: ¿por qué ingresan a los grupos ilegales?' *Hechos del Callejón*, UNDP, August/38 (2008)., and 'El conflicto, callejón con salida: Informe nacional de desarrollo humano', at 263. The latter highlights family mistreatment, sexual abuse, etc, other factors are romantic relationship with *guerrillero* or paramilitary, fear, illusion of power and status, the feeling of 'no future' or the need for personal recognition.

¹⁴⁵ In general (for children) 'Human Security Report 2005: War and Peace in the 21st Century', (New York and Oxford: Human Security Centre, The University of British Columbia, 2005) at 48. (quoting Isobel McConan and Sarah Uppard, *Children Not Soldiers: Guidelines for Working with Child Soldiers and Children Associated with Fighting Forces*, (London: Save the Children Fund, 2001))

¹⁴⁶ Highlighted in Keairns, 'The Voices of Girl Child Soldiers: Colombia', at 9., and in several other testimonies by girl soldiers.

¹⁴⁷ As mentioned in Rojas 1998 (quoted in Potes, 'Women's Participation, Roles and Gender Inequality in Latin America's Largest Guerrilla Group Left Standing: The FARC', at 69.) the women in the FARC are of mainly rural background. 90% joined before 18, the majority coming from big families where the girls were acting as mothers or similar. The majority never went to school. In 'Niños y jóvenes: ¿por qué ingresan a los grupos ilegales?' (at 6.), the authors highlight the lack of other attractive alternatives for general child recruitment to armed groups in Colombia and the fact that many of the children had stopped their studies early and were working inside or outside of their homes even before joining. This is also clear in the testimonies of several girl soldiers.

¹⁴⁸ This comes out clearly from one of the girls that appear in the movie *Guerrilla Girl* (IMDbPro, 2005), Frank Piasechi Poulsen (dir.). See also below.

¹⁴⁹ Lara, *Las mujeres en la guerra* at 93. and 'Adriana' in Mcdermott, 'Colombia's Female Fighting Force'. Also, as seen in the life story of a former girl soldier from Tumaco, Nariño. When she was 14 (and already a mother, but without possibility to see her daughter) she decided to join the guerrilla. She met a *guerrillero* she kind of liked and she was fed up with life and looking for a change. She was having a drinking problem at the time. González, *Los niños de la guerra* at 163-164.

¹⁵⁰ Catherine Miller in Emanuelsson, 'Retratos de guerrilleras en Colombia (II)'.

¹⁵¹ Lara, *Las mujeres en la guerra* at 80-93. and women interviewed in Terry Gibbs, 'FARC Women in Colombia and the Death of a Rebel Leader', Znet (updated 22 March)

<<http://www.zcommunications.org/znet/viewArticle/16941>>, accessed 1 February 2009., Emanuelsson, 'Retratos de guerrilleras en Colombia (II)', This was also the case for the 'main character in the movie *Guerrilla Girl* (Poulsen (dir.).

- escape from traditional gender roles and/or situations of powerlessness;¹⁵²
- search for vengeance;¹⁵³
- family or sentimental link to *guerrilleros*;¹⁵⁴
- protection;¹⁵⁵ and
- forced or 'deceived' recruitment.¹⁵⁶

However, given that recruitment and enrolling into an armed group is a complex issue, a process involving many interlinked factors rather than an event with one single triggering 'cause,' here we can only discuss these influencing factors in brief. One notable example of the inter-linkages of causes is the case of a former FARC girl soldier. She grew up in a poor family with nine sisters and brothers in the department of Putumayo. One of her sisters was with the FARC and one of her brothers was killed by the same group. Both her father and one of her brothers tried to abuse her when she was very young. Her father also mistreated her. When she told her mother about this, her mother threw her out of the house, and she had to support herself working in a disco. One evening a cousin of hers and his friends abused her sexually. She wanted vengeance, with everyone, for everything. In her words:

"They ended my dreams of getting married as a girl, in white. They broke my illusions, they took my biggest treasure because it is like saying: 'She is an untouched woman,' who hasn't been touched by anyone. [...] After having felt all this it was horrible. I arrived at the disco and I couldn't work, I got very sick. Then I got angry and I told another cousin: 'You know what? I am looking for the *guerrilleros*', and he responded: 'I know one'. I told him: 'Present me to him', and he did."¹⁵⁷

Some female combatants feel that by joining the FARC they gain a certain authority and recognition through wearing a uniform and carrying a gun, and being part of a group. As highlighted by a former male FARC commander, joining an armed group can provide "an ideal scenario for liberating oneself from poverty." This is a change especially for rural women, who by tradition have to do "hard domestic and other work," and are "obliged" to give birth, and to live in a machist culture.¹⁵⁸

Of the relatively fewer urban women and girls who state that they have 'joined for the cause,' many of them have often been socialized into the struggle within their families.¹⁵⁹ As shown in the interview with the FARC combatants Catherine Miller¹⁶⁰ or Mariana Paez. They were both formed politically in their families and both found out at an early age that being part of the Communist Party could imply a death penalty. As framed by the latter:

¹⁵² The girls interviewed in Keairns, 'The Voices of Girl Child Soldiers: Colombia', at 13., allegedly had expressed a feeling of powerlessness before: "Because they were children no one listened to them so they joined the guerrillas hoping to improve their situation."

¹⁵³ Mentioned, among other reasons, by a girl soldier in González, *Los niños de la guerra*

¹⁵⁴ Some girl soldiers, also as explained in Sarrias, *Los parias de la guerra*.

¹⁵⁵ Surprisingly we found only one example of a girl, 'Franselina,' who said she joined for protection. The paramilitaries had killed her family, and she says that was left alone and 'unprotected' by the age of 13. She got to know the FARC and asked to enter. Karen Marón, 'Mujeres guerrilleras', *Tiempos del Mundo* [Reproduced by the ICRC], (updated 3 March 2003) <<http://www.icrc.org/web/spa/sitespa0.nsf/htmlall/5TECQS?OpenDocument>>, accessed 29 January 2009.

¹⁵⁶ Although forced recruitment is often mentioned in media or government sources, independent sources estimate that most recruitment – though not all – is 'voluntary' (See for example 'La infancia en el límite', (Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, 2007).). 'Niños y jóvenes: ¿por qué ingresan a los grupos ilegales?' (at 4). 83% entered 'voluntarily,' according to figures from the Human Rights Ombudsman. We found no specific examples of testimonies from forcefully recruited women and girls, though two girls had been deceived, since they had been promised a trial period which they did not get. Keairns, 'The Voices of Girl Child Soldiers: Colombia', at 11. The concept of 'voluntary' recruitment is better applicable in the cases of women than for girls, given that the latter (due to their age and development) generally are not in the same condition to make informed decision that bind them for the rest of their lives.

¹⁵⁷ González, *Los niños de la guerra* at 27-35.

¹⁵⁸ Arteta, 'Escenarios de confrontación y negociación con las Farc', at 71-72.

¹⁵⁹ Lara, *Las mujeres en la guerra*., Emanuelsson, 'Retratos de guerrilleras en Colombia (II)',

¹⁶⁰ Catherine Miller in Emanuelsson, 'Retratos de guerrilleras en Colombia (II)',

"I don't remember a single moment in which I was not a communist. Today I am part of this revolutionary movement that is fighting to take over the power. We chose weapons because we already had the experience with the Patriotic Union where they killed 3,000 members and two political candidates..."¹⁶¹

Those who joined from the countryside may have suffered poverty and other hardship and then been introduced to the FARC discourse. They may also feel like they have little other choices, and the FARC becomes their new family. As explained by the life story of Julia, a former FARC female commander who joined – and deserted – as a girl. She was left alone after death of her grandmother at the age of eight and she was living on the street. When she was eleven she joined the guerrilla, where she knew some people. They told her that life in the guerrilla was difficult. After she had received a gun and a basic two-week course, she said to herself: "Julia, life is easier here than on the street; I am staying."¹⁶²

The Colombian government's human rights Ombudsman states that the majority of the children that have joined armed groups were living with their families, but that 86% of them had suffered cruel or degrading treatments within their family settings.¹⁶³ This is exemplified in the testimony given to Amnesty International by a former girl soldier, Isabel. She recounts that she was living in a town in the department of Norte de Santander when at 12 years old she joined the FARC:

"My father [sexually] abused me from the age of five. He didn't want me to study or talk to anyone. Just work milking the cows. My mother knew nothing. He gave the orders. My father came looking for me but I didn't go back. The FARC gave me an AK-47 with three ammunition magazines, clothes and boots. He [the father] couldn't hurt me any more. [...] Now that I am no longer fighting, I would like to go somewhere else to study and work. Because I am worth it. I've never told anyone about the abuse. Nobody has ever asked me about it before. And anyway you keep quiet about such things. All I knew was that I had to get away".¹⁶⁴

As we have seen in these testimonies, the girls who have suffered abuses or hardship within their family setting join the FARC is an 'escape' option also because they have been socialized into the conflict, or because they know somebody who is already there.¹⁶⁵ As highlighted by the UNDP, the process of socialization with the conflict sometimes makes that the children (including girls) do not realize the exact moment they became combatants.¹⁶⁶ Several testimonies from girls that joined (or did not join) the FARC shows how they have met guerrilla members as young girls. They *guerrilleros* show them their weapon and might flirt with them. This is shown in the testimony of 'Milenis' (a young girl who ended up not joining the FARC):

"I remember when the guerrilla came, they were showing my sister and me how to handle the guns, that my sister was crying because they didn't let her fire the guns. They said that when we were older, around 14, they would bring us with them"¹⁶⁷

Other women and girls join the FARC because they fall in love with a FARC member or because they have personal connections with some of them. It is important to note that the FARC appears to have a gender-specific recruitment technique of girls that is based on attraction. One example comes from a young girl, Viviana, from the village La Julia, in the Meta department:

"I was 11-years old when they sent me three *guerrilleros*. This yes, they were very nice. One was dressed in civilian, the others in uniform. Every eight days they would come to win me over,

¹⁶¹ Marón, 'Mujeres guerrilleras', The Patriotic Union was a legal political party set up by members of the FARC and the Communist Party. Some 3,000 members have indeed been estimated to have been killed by the paramilitary and government forces.

¹⁶² González, *Los niños de la guerra* at 171-172.

¹⁶³ 'Niños y jóvenes: ¿por qué ingresan a los grupos ilegales?' (at 5).

¹⁶⁴ 'Colombia: "Scarred Bodies, Hidden Crimes"', at 10.

¹⁶⁵ This is for example the case for some of the girls in González, *Los niños de la guerra*

¹⁶⁶ 'Niños y jóvenes: ¿por qué ingresan a los grupos ilegales?' (at 5).

¹⁶⁷ 'Para que se sepa: Hablan las personas desplazadas en Colombia', (Bogota: Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, Norwegian Refugee Council, 2007) at 23.

they invited me to dance and in the disco they would tell you the usual story: 'I like you very much, you are very pretty, I have been watching you, and if you want me, I want you.' They told me that they would take care of me, that I should come with them, that being in the guerrilla was cool, there you were well treated, well taken care of, and that you get everything you want."¹⁶⁸

Finally, sometimes it is not clear to the girls themselves why they join. It may simply be an act motivated by the wish to escape boredom, combined with lack of information as to what life in the FARC would actually mean, as registered in the interview with a former girl soldier:

"Adriana was asked why the FARC recruit girls and why do they recruit them so young? She looked puzzled and said she didn't know. But then she unwittingly answered the question as she rambled on about her experiences: 'There were not that many young boys left in our village, so they asked the girls. I went because I was bored at home and thought that life with the guerrillas would be an adventure. At 13 I did not know what I wanted to do, I did not realise that I could study like I am now.' "¹⁶⁹

In conclusion, the reasons that drive women and girls to join the FARC are both gender-specific and general, especially for rural children and adults. The gender-specific reasons include sexual abuses suffered at home and a work load that forces young girls to take on traditional gender-roles, such as taking care of their siblings and the home. Some women and girls have also joined the guerrilla to increase their own power over their lives and to escape traditional gender roles. Finally, the FARC (or individual members) appears to use seduction of young girls to motivate them to enroll.

3.3.3. Women's Roles in the FARC

As we have seen in section 3.1.3 'Ideology and Orientation,' the FARC policy puts men and women on an equal basis and its policy prohibits gender discrimination within the movement. This section investigates how this policy is reflected in the practice as relates to the actual roles that women play.

Analysing women's participation in the FARC it appears that they indeed perform the same roles as men: women die as frontline fighters and share support roles with men. The FARC and pro-FARC authors confirm this: for example the journalist Garry Leech described a conversation with a female combatant in a FARC camp:

" 'So everybody cooks?' I inquire. 'The men and the women?' 'Of course,' the female guerrilla answered. 'Everybody does everything in the camp. It doesn't matter if you are a man or a woman. You cook, you wash your own clothes, you stand guard, and you go out on patrol. It is the same for men and women.' "¹⁷⁰

Another FARC woman explained:

"Here we have rights and responsibilities to live up to. A woman can find herself leading 50 to 60 men, just as a man can. She can give classes in politics and military strategy, and she can lead a team into combat. It's great to see women commanders exercising their authority."

Yet, even though they perform the same roles, female combatants have mentioned that they face machism also within the FARC: In his meeting with the combatant 'Jenny,' Miguel Salgado quotes her describing the tasks awaiting both sexes:

"Even if all combatants have the same rights and responsibilities, she explains, being a *guerrillera* means to be ready to fulfill all everyday tasks: cutting wood, cook, wash and fix our belongings, pay guard, participate in harsh combats, maintain our weapons shiny, study,

¹⁶⁸ This girl ended up not joining after all, maybe partly because her father told her not to. She seems to have had good family conditions. 'Con y por los jóvenes del Meta', *Hechos del Callejón*, UNDP, August/38 (2008) at 7). One girl that did join through a *guerrillero* she met at a disco was anyways looking for a change in her life. González, *Los niños de la guerra* at 163-164.

¹⁶⁹ McDermott, 'Colombia's Female Fighting Force'.

¹⁷⁰ Garry Leech, 'Life in a FARC Camp', *Colombia Journal* (updated 27 August 2007) <<http://www.colombiajournal.org/colombia263.htm>>, accessed 29 January 2009.

maintain fraternal relations with the companions, which also means, sometimes, facing the machism of some, since the *guerrilla* is a mirror image of all the problem in our society.”¹⁷¹

In the literature and the testimonies for women and girl combatants a multitude of roles and tasks can be identified:

- fighters integrated in mixed battalions;
- commanders of mixed battalions;
- spies/intelligence roles;
- guards;
- bodyguards for commanders;
- performing camp duties: cook, clean, cut wood, do dishes and washes, etc.;
- bringing in food;
- service to high level leaders or civilians (during Caguán);
- political mobilization and representation, including contact with local communities;
- financial officers;
- educational tasks;
- communication tasks;
- taking care of hostages;
- nurses;
- partners and lovers: internally and externally - some women are associated but not members;¹⁷² and
- sex providers.

Most of these tasks are also carried out by men, yet there is one particular role that is mainly performed by women: sex providers. As we shall see below. This is not to say that all female combatants provide sexual services or that all sexual relationships within the FARC are ‘services’.

Some critics have argued that women within the FARC are discriminated against in terms of being assigned the worst duties, such as cooking and paying guard at worst hours.¹⁷³ Visitors to Caguán confirmed the overrepresentation of women as service providers:

“Visiting these camps the practice seemed to contradict the theory [of equal roles] as far as women are concerned. In the field kitchens it was the girls that were peeling the potatoes and preparing the lunch. It was the girls who served the meal and then cleared up after it.”¹⁷⁴

The FARC has indeed been using some women and girls for service and representative tasks, as well as for propaganda, especially during the Caguán period. As FARC Commander Andrés París bluntly recognized a visitor to the FARC-controlled areas, in relations to the pretty, very young *guerrillera* who was serving coffee to the participants in a meeting:

“We also have our marketing strategy,” [...] “Everyone expects to see ugly *guerrilleros* in the road blocks, however; they are received by the prettiest *guerrilleras*. This is an attraction so that they will enroll in our files.”¹⁷⁵

In her analysis of gender roles within the FARC, Potes Toro concludes that there is still a difference in the roles occupied by women and men in the FARC, as relates to support and

¹⁷¹ Manuel Salgado, 'Las muchachas de las FARC-EP', *FARC-EP* (updated 16 April 2006) <<http://www.farc-ejercitodelpueblo.org/?node=2,1966,1>>, accessed 28 January 2009

¹⁷² Male FARC members are allowed to have relationships with civilians, see below section 3.3.4 ‘Sexuality and Relationships.’

¹⁷³ Lara, *Las mujeres en la guerra* at 65. The narrator was a M-19 fighter and had previously belonged to the ELN. At the time the M-19 and herself were fighting jointly with a FARC front. In more general terms the ‘machist’ character of the FARC has been asserted in private conversations with a woman’s rights activist (Barcelona December 2008) and another former female M-19 combatant (Bogotá, Colombia 2007).

¹⁷⁴ McDermott, 'Colombia's Female Fighting Force'.

¹⁷⁵ Marón, 'Mujeres guerrilleras',

war-making tasks, though this difference is diminishing.¹⁷⁶ Gabriela Castellanos, Alba Nubia Rodríguez and Norma Lucía Bermúdez have also noted a change in the roles of women within the Colombian guerrilla groups in general, from their foundation in the 1960s to today, from purely being partners, lovers or wives that took care of the logistics, food and communication, to taking active part in combat.¹⁷⁷

Where differences remain is clearly in the top leadership, which makes the important decisions (internal and external) and represents the organization in negotiations. As mentioned in section 3.1.2, there has never been a female Secretariat member. During the Cagúan negotiations the FARC was represented almost exclusively by men.¹⁷⁸

Nevertheless, as compared to most ANSAs, FARC women are very active in combat. There are also female military commanders that have been leading both men and women, notably Commander 'Karina' and Column Commander 'Mayerly,' believed to be the most powerful FARC woman militarily after the demobilization of 'Karina'.¹⁷⁹ Like 'Karina' and 'Mayerly' some other women and girls have also made military carriers. This can happen through demonstrating their combat skills, as was the case of a FARC girl soldier, who joined as a low-rank soldier and ended up being column commander, responsible for 210 *guerrilleros*.¹⁸⁰

FARC women have allegedly participated in the most violent battles, such as the one over the 'Delicias' military base in 1996.¹⁸¹ News articles sporadically report on women and girls that are killed or injured in combat, carrying heavy weaponry.¹⁸² A study on the human rights situation of women in Colombia found that every five days a woman died in combat.¹⁸³ The experiences of girl soldiers included: tough military training, with physical and weapon-handling elements; the participation in combat, and training to avoid detection by the enemy, etc.¹⁸⁴

In terms of support functions, there is a wide variety of roles being played by women, as we have seen in the list above. Women and girls have for example often performed

¹⁷⁶ She find that there has been a decrease in what she calls the "annual, role-aggregated percentage of gender inequality, starting from 66% in 2001 to 47% in 2006." According to her figures, 65% of the FARC men are involved in war-making activities and only 40% of the women. Her conclusion is that "even though the FARC experiences decreasing measures of gender inequality within its operational structure, it still reflects the gendered division of labor found at the national level." Nevertheless, the data she uses comes from an anonymous source that is not discussed in her paper, hence we cannot judge the reliability of the finding. Potes, 'Women's Participation, Roles and Gender Inequality in Latin America's Largest Guerrilla Group Left Standing: The FARC', at 36 and 53-54.

¹⁷⁷ Gabriela Castellanos, Alba Nubia Rodríguez, and Norma Lucía Bermúdez, 'Informe: Mujeres y conflicto armado: prácticas sociales y propuestas de negociación', *Las Penelopes*

<http://www.penelopes.org/Espagnol/xarticle.php3?id_article=382>, accessed 3 February 2009.

¹⁷⁸ The FARC representation included Raúl Reyes, Iván Ríos, Felipe Rincón, Ricardo Bernardo, Marco León Calarca, Pedro Aldana, Alberto Martínez, among others. (Lozano, *Reportajes desde el Caguán* at 46-47.) The only women was Olga Marín, though Commander Mariana allegedly was "the guerrillera with most (mediatic) exposion during the peace process." She was responsible for the coordination of the so-called 'Public Hearings' organized by the FARC in the areas under their control. Marón, 'Mujeres guerrilleras',

¹⁷⁹ "Informes de inteligencia militar indican que 'Mayerly', jefe de las Farc, estaría cercada", *El Tiempo* <http://www.eltiempo.com/colombia/tolima/tras-la-huella-de-mayerly-jefe-de-las-farc_4774923-1>, accessed 27 January 2009.

¹⁸⁰ González, *Los niños de la guerra* at 173-174.

¹⁸¹ Dick Emanuelsson, 'Así fue la toma guerrillera de la base military de las delicias 'Dio inició a la guerra de movimiento", in Otty Patiño (ed.), *Las verdaderas intenciones de las FARC* (Bogotá: Corporación Observatorio para la Paz, Intermedio, 1999) at 138.

¹⁸² See for example 'Ejército auxilió a una guerrillera de las Farc herida en combate en Arauca', *El Tiempo* <http://www.eltiempo.com/colombia/oriente/ejercito-auxilio-a-guerrillera-de-las-farc-herida-en-combate-en-arauca_4760080-1>, accessed 20 January 2009., and Julio César Alvarado, 'Menor reclutada por las Farc resultó herida en combate', *Vanguardia.com* <<http://www.vanguardia.com/judicial/69-judicial/11347-menor-reclutada-por-las-farc-resulto-herida-en-combate->>, accessed 26 October 2008

¹⁸³ For the period January-September 2003. This would include women from different ANSAs, and potentially also the army. However, among the ANSAs the FARC is the group that is most involved in combat. 'La situación de los derechos humanos de las mujeres en Colombia: Entre el conflicto armado y la política de seguridad democrática: Informe de los Derechos Humanos de mujeres – 2004', at 17.

¹⁸⁴ Keairns, 'The Voices of Girl Child Soldiers: Colombia', at 8.

communicative tasks.¹⁸⁵ In addition to communications, finance seems to be an area where women played important roles, in both lower and higher rank positions.¹⁸⁶ Women also frequently serve as nurses¹⁸⁷ and as educators for the rank and file.¹⁸⁸ The role played by women in intelligence is less known, though it is allegedly increasing.¹⁸⁹ Women are also fulfilling the role as guardians of hostages held by the group.¹⁹⁰

In some cases, women and girls have also been reported to provide sexual services to high and low rank male FARC members. As we will see below, there have been allegations that female FARC combatants are being 'used' sexually by the men and that they have a 'revolutionary duty' to have sex with their comrades.

Hence, we find evidence that women and girls are involved in all three main 'grouping' of women's roles within armed groups: combat, support and sexual services. What we find, however, is that the borders between the three categories are frequently blurred. This may be partially due to the fact that camp and combat life is normally not separated in the FARC. Currently, all FARC camps appear to be mobile.¹⁹¹ Even when this was not the case (during the 1980s), Commander Olga explains how she received military training, but never had to confront combat.¹⁹² Hence, all FARC members (male or female) may risk combat, except for some of the urban militias or other 'helpers.'

One analyst has argued that the perceived equality in roles within the FARC is mutated when women enter into a relationship:

"In this respect it is worth noting that, even if women are treated like any other male militant (carry the same equipment, face the same everyday risks of the war), can abort without problems, plan periodically not to get pregnant and can have several sexual partners; that is, the entire spectrum of rights that feminism generally request. Yet, when women have a stable partner they tend to wash their cloths, take his food to the *caleta* [a type of bed that is used as the combatants' private space], repair his cloths, etc. which seems to imply that they take on a totally conservatory role, similar to that of a countryside woman when she gets married."¹⁹³

Hence, while it is crucial to analyse the roles women play within the FARC, their situation cannot be understood in isolation from the sentimental and sexual relationships to men, which is discussed in the following section.

¹⁸⁵ Alias 'Miriam,' who deserted from the FARC in January 2009, was working in communications: as radio operator of the FARC's highest ranking military commander, 'Mono Jojoy.' Ana María Valencia, 'Las Farc no tienen apoyo político para la toma del poder', *Vanguardia.com* <<http://www.vanguardia.com/politica/93-politica>>, accessed 25 January 2009. Also the *guerrillera* 'Jenny' was working in communications (Salgado, 'Las muchachas de las FARC-EP',) and Commander 'Gladys' was responsible for the communications center in Raúl Reyes camp when interviewed in Gibbs, 'FARC Women in Colombia and the Death of a Rebel Leader',

¹⁸⁶ A young girl, Martha, who was killed by the FARC after desertion, was for example 'secretary of finance' of a FARC front. 'Una mujer huyó de las FARC y murió en el país', *El Comercio* (updated 12 October 2008) <http://www.elcomercio.com/noticiaEC.asp?id_noticia=228518&id_seccion=4>, accessed 15 October 2008. One of the most know FARC women, Omaria Rojas, alias 'Sonia,' (currently in custody in the U.S. on drug charges) was the financial chief of front 14.

¹⁸⁷ As explained in 'Por amor, desertaron dos guerrilleras de las Farc y cuentan sus historias desde la libertad', *El Tiempo*, accessed 24 January 2009, Marón, 'Mujeres guerrilleras', and Lara, *Las mujeres en la guerra* at 109.

¹⁸⁸ Lara, *Las mujeres en la guerra* at 105.

¹⁸⁹ As argued in McDermott, 'Colombia's Female Fighting Force'.

¹⁹⁰ According to one former FARC member, taking care of hostages can be considered almost as a punishment. María Pérez-Pla, 'Una guerrillera de las FARC y un soldado descubren que son hermanos después de 18 años', *La Voz de Galicia* (updated 20 January 2009)

<http://www.lavozdegalicia.es/mundo/2009/01/20/0003_7472711.htm>, accessed 20 January 2009

¹⁹¹ Due to the loss of permanent territorial control and constant army attacks.

¹⁹² Olga was recruited from the Communist Youth to help the FARC with documents and education. Lara, *Las mujeres en la guerra* at 93.

¹⁹³ Sarrias, *Los parias de la guerra* at 176.

3.3.4. Sexuality and Relationships within the FARC

The FARC has a complex set of rules governing sexual relations. Unlike in other ANSAs, such as the PKK for example,¹⁹⁴ within the FARC, sexual relations are generally permitted, but only in a regulated manner. It seems that no emotional long-term relations are encouraged and pregnancy is forbidden in most cases. As Mariana Paez states:

"In the first place girls have to ask permission before they embark on a relationship. There can be no secrets and if discovered these are punished. [...] Secondly there is no contract of any kind and if the commander tells her to leave her boyfriend then so be it. While they are together they may bunk down in the same place, but at no time must the relationship interfere with work."¹⁹⁵

Hence, for example, testimonies reported that there are special days on which sexual relations are permitted (generally 2 days per week, but the specific days appear to vary from camp to camp),¹⁹⁶ and female and male combatants need to 'register' for sexual intercourse beforehand with the camp leadership, apparently in order for the camp commander to be informed where the combatants are sleeping in case of an attack. As a former FARC hostage reported:

"Officially, all sexual relationships between *guerrilleros* are allowed on Tuesdays and Sundays. Couples have to register and act as such [as couples]. Those who don't have a partner can choose. But the women are not allowed to say that they don't feel like it. Sex is considered as a social service; hence, they are obliged to collaborate."¹⁹⁷

This last part of the quote was challenged by other sources that affirm that female combatants have the choice and are not forced to sexual intercourse, see below. These measures act to control both men's and women's sexuality within the FARC. Yet, there are a number of elements that specifically discriminate against women. For example, while male guerrillas are allowed to form relationships outside the rebel ranks, women and girls may only date men within the organization.¹⁹⁸ Another important aspect of the control of women's sexuality is the policy of mandatory contraception¹⁹⁹ for women and girls, no matter how young they are. Hence, girls as young as 13 or 14 already are given contraception, which contributes to the early 'sexualization' of young girls both within the Colombian society in general, but also within the FARC. Mariana Paez confirms this:

"Well, it is not written anywhere that we cannot have kids, but there is an obligation to plan against such. [...] It is understood that we are professional revolutionaries. Now while that might not be stated when you join, slowly that is made clear to you, as it is very difficult to be a revolutionary and be a mother."²⁰⁰

If girls or women get pregnant, it is considered their 'fault' and they are often encouraged or forced to abort, Keirns reports in her study on girl combatants in the FARC.²⁰¹

"The injections were as much a part of the training as the weapons. All pregnancies were the fault of the girl. The girl was held responsible and forced to end the pregnancy by having an

¹⁹⁴ Discussion with former PKK member, Geneva, January 2009.

¹⁹⁵ In Mcdermott, 'Colombia's Female Fighting Force'.

¹⁹⁶ Sarrias, *Los parias de la guerra* at 176.

¹⁹⁷ María Isabel Rueda, '¿Por qué dicen los secuestrados que la sociedad les ha fallado? El recién liberado ex senador Luis Eladio Pérez le responde a María Isabel Rueda', *Semana.com*

<http://www.semana.com/wf_InfoArticulo.aspx?IdArt=110603>, accessed 8 February 2009.

¹⁹⁸ It is interesting to note that Commander 'Mayerly' is known to have multiple sexual relationships both within and outside the FARC. She hence appear to escape this organizational limitation put on women's sexuality.

'Informes de inteligencia militar indican que 'Mayerly', jefe de las Farc, estaría cercada',

¹⁹⁹ This includes mainly injections, but also pill and other methods. See: Keirns, 'The Voices of Girl Child Soldiers: Colombia', at 15.

²⁰⁰ In Mcdermott, 'Colombia's Female Fighting Force'.

²⁰¹ This was also reported in Keirns, 'The Voices of Girl Child Soldiers: Colombia', at 16., in a quote from an ex-combatant girl: "The men weren't given contraceptives. They'd say that it's the woman that has to deal with the contraception. It was just the women that were told because the commander said that it was the women that decided, the men asked to have sex and the women were the ones that decided."

abortion. There was some mention that some exceptions were made and that the girl was permitted to continue the pregnancy and return after the birth of the child.”²⁰² [authors’ emphasis]

The arguments by the FARC for this are that it is not considered safe to have children in the camps, and it is not seen as possible to be mother and fighter at the same time. Yet, there are also some reports of exceptions to this policy, where women were allowed to leave the camps for several months to give birth and then returned to the FARC.²⁰³ There are also reports of women and girls who have deserted, because they were forced to have an abortion.

The FARC has established policies to protect women against abuse. According to Mariana Paez:

“They can't abuse the women, because if they mistreat a women and she reports them to the commander, he has to go in front of a war council. [...] If the war council finds a man guilty of rape, for example, he is executed.”²⁰⁴

Indeed, we have one report of a girl who was abused by a commander. When the girl’s boyfriend (another commander) took this up to the war council (or martial court) the abusive commander was disarmed and executed.²⁰⁵

Thus, within the FARC sexuality and sexual practice are tightly regulated and controlled. Despite homogenous regulation, the situation of female combatants in the FARC seems to vary greatly from camp to camp and area to area, particularly in relation to issues of sexuality and relationships. Some female combatants report that sexual practices happened in an ‘orderly’ manner and non-compliance with FARC regulations were sanctioned:

“At night, the men almost never would approach women sexually. Only if they had a relationship with them. They could, of course, dare look for them [the women]. But if you didn’t want to be with them or they were violent, there would be a scandal and they would be sanctioned. If you accepted, that’s a different thing.”²⁰⁶

However, other women reported having been pressured or even forced to have sex. There are reports of women and girls coerced into sexual relations on the grounds due to their alleged ‘revolutionary duty’ to have sex with their male colleagues.²⁰⁷ In other cases, women and girls have been abused by male combatants, often their superiors who use their position of power in order to obtain sexual services, despite the strict regulations and sanction mechanisms within the FARC.²⁰⁸

‘Sexual services’ or being in a relationship with the commander also sometimes provide women and girls with a certain improvement of their status or make life easier, at the same time as protecting them from potential violence by other men in the group.²⁰⁹ As a study of girls soldiers revealed:

²⁰² Ibid. at 12.

²⁰³ This was the case, for example, for Liliana López, alias Olga Lucía Marín, who reported that when she and her husband Raúl Reyes decided to have a baby, she staid in the mountain until she was 5 months pregnant and then left to give birth. After giving birth, she stayed one year with her daughter before leaving her with friends, because she had decided to go back to the guerrilla. She is reportedly allowed to keep in touch with her daughter (e.g. sends pictures), but she hasn’t seen her daughter for a long time, and she misses her. This seems to be a privileged position of a guerillera, as not all female combatants are allowed to have children. See: Lara, *Las mujeres en la guerra* at 125-128.

²⁰⁴ In McDermott, ‘Colombia’s Female Fighting Force’.

²⁰⁵ González, *Los niños de la guerra* at 165.

²⁰⁶ Lara, *Las mujeres en la guerra* at 96.

²⁰⁷ Sarrias, *Los parias de la guerra* at 267.

²⁰⁸ One squad reported having a very machist commander, who was punishing a young girl (17) for not wanting to sleep with him, see: Lara, *Las mujeres en la guerra* at 65-68., Beltrán case in ‘Colombia: “Scarred Bodies, Hidden Crimes”’, at 22-23.

²⁰⁹ See for example ‘Infamia: Documentos y fotos encontrados en un computador de las Farc revelen hasta dónde llegan en el abuso de las niñas colombianas’. Girls have also told stories how they were harrassed because they did not have a partner, or while their partners were away (González, *Los niños de la guerra*).

"In all the armed groups [including the FARC] there were power differentials between the men and the young girls and many of the girls agreed to a sexually intimate relationship when they recognized it brought with it benefits such as more food, better living conditions, opportunities to ride rather than walk long distances and other privileges. None of the girls talked about receiving information to protect against sexually transmitted diseases."²¹⁰

'Emotional' relations are also regulated within the FARC. Though the FARC does not appear to mind sexual relations between members²¹¹ it does have a problem with 'love.' Relationships are "dangerous but allowed"²¹² and the fear is that long-term emotional relationships create a competing affiliation to the FARC – the family. When in a couple, members may start thinking of desertion and forming a family. Thus, 'emotional' relationships are always subordinated to the allegiance to the FARC and are under the control of the commander of each group.

In rare cases couples can be allowed to stay together, for example to be sent as militias in the cities, but more frequently it appears that they are separated.²¹³ In even rarer cases couples can be rewarded the possibility to have a baby. If a married couple wants a child they need permission from the FARC Secretariat, i.e. the highest decision-making body. The authorization to have a child is granted only to the most faithful rebels, like a reward, on the condition that the *guerrillero* or *guerrillera* have an important position in the FARC and that the babies are given away to external family members and that the *guerrillera* returns to the FARC after giving birth.²¹⁴ However, combatants may also be denied the right to establish a relationship.²¹⁵ If they try to have a child without authorization they risk punishment including forced abortion, but the level of punishment depends on the combatant's status. These practices seem to be transforming due to recent challenges to the FARC, notably the deterioration of the security situation due to army pressure, the increase in desertion, the loss of territorial control, etc. which makes it more difficult to allow women to leave the FARC to give birth, for example.

Hence, relationships within the FARC often imply a quite frequent change of partners. There is even a specific FARC 'vocabulary,' including specific words for sentimental relationships: for example, 'caleta' or 'cambuche' means bed, 'moza' or 'socia de caleta' is a partner with whom there is a serious sentimental link.²¹⁶ According to the imprisoned FARC member 'Policarpo' there is also a hierarchy between four different forms of relationships within the FARC: 'libres,' i.e. singles without an established attachment to another combatant; 'fiancés,' who have relatively temporary relationships, do not sleep together and can easily be separated by the hierarchy; 'associés,' a union where the couple is allowed to sleep together in the same 'cambuche' and that needs to be recognized by the hierarchy as a longer-term relationship, but can be ended by the hierarchy, for example by sending them to different fronts; and finally, the 'mariés,' combatants that live together and declare themselves as married, a union recognized by the hierarchy that cannot be separated, but the couple is

²¹⁰ Keairns, 'The Voices of Girl Child Soldiers: Colombia', at 3.

²¹¹ We would assume that this tolerance would be extended to opposite sex relation only, since I have found no indication that they would tolerate homosexuality. On the contrary, as mentioned above, Amnesty International has previously denounced killings and punishments of homosexuality in FARC-controlled areas. 'Colombia: "Scarred Bodies, Hidden Crimes"', at 39.

²¹² Drouhau, *FARC: confessions d'un guérillero* at 170.

²¹³ 'Las FARC proscriben el amor', *Deia* (updated 19 January 2009)

<<http://www.deia.com/es/impresa/2009/01/19/bizkaia/azkena/530118.php>>, accessed 20 January 2009 and 'El jefe militar de las FARC ordena separar a las parejas', *El País Vallenato* (updated 22 January 2009)

<<http://www.elpaisvallenato.com/html/noticias/2009/enero/22/5804497eljefemilitardelasfarc.html>>, accessed 24 January 2009.

²¹⁴ Sarrias, *Los parias de la guerra* at 176. In fact the source talks only about the case of the *guerrillera* being important, but knowing that many of the major male FARC members indeed have children, we would question that this would be a decision based on the 'importance' of the *guerrillera* only. See also Drouhau, *FARC: confessions d'un guérillero* at 170.

²¹⁵ Sarrias, *Los parias de la guerra* at 170.

²¹⁶ Ibid. at 172-173.

expected to be faithful and responsible.²¹⁷ This shows how the FARC reproduces a certain social order of relationships and exerts control over individuals through this hierarchy, despite breaking with a number of traditional gender roles and traditions.

4. Preliminary Conclusion: Empowered or Oppressed?

Our analysis of the situation of female combatants in the FARC reveals a complex and contradictory picture full of tensions between empowerment and oppression. A number of tension areas can be identified: sexuality, fertility and 'beauty'; skills and education; and emotional attachment.

On the one hand, some women and girls have reported feeling liberated in terms of their sexuality and fertility. As one female combatant reported: "I was afraid to fall in love, get married and have loads of kids."²¹⁸ Thus, joining the FARC allowed her to escape the traditional gender norms that expect women to get married and have children. Some find the access to fertility control an empowering experience: in the context of general reluctance of the use of contraception and the high levels of teenage pregnancies and illegal abortion in the Colombian society, and particularly in rural areas, entering the FARC might be experienced as empowering by women and girls. In addition, female combatants often emphasize that they are allowed to take care of themselves, wear make up, shave, have painted nails, etc. And it has also been mentioned by outside observers that *guerrilleras* generally take care of their appearance. Some women mention this as a form of liberty to be feminine:

"It's because I'm convinced of what we are doing and of the cause we are fighting for. I chose this path because it's the best. And here women have their liberty and are not prevented from being feminine, but can live their femininity. [...] A *guerrillera* likes to make up, to shave, and to keep her hair long and take care of it, and I like doing these women things."²¹⁹

Yet, on the other hand, female combatants have complained about the imposed fertility control and forced abortion, which controls their fertility, burdens women with the responsibility of contraception and often also endangers their health. Clearly, joining any clandestine organization implies some losses to the new recruits, men and women alike, especially in terms of personal freedom and choices. Nevertheless, as we have seen, joining the FARC often implies special losses for the women and girls in terms of relationships (within and outside the FARC) and sexuality (sexual abuse, forced contraception and abortion, the impossibility to have children or to keep in contact with those one has), etc. As mentioned above, some women have deserted because of this control of their fertility and sexuality, and to keep their unborn children. Thereby, women and women's sexuality is caught up in the clash of values and practices between the FARC and the Catholic Church prominent within the Colombian society.

A second area of tension relates to education and skills. Many female combatants report that entering the FARC provided them with an opportunity to acquire new skills, an opportunity they might not otherwise have. Thus, for many rural girls and women entering the guerilla is a way to receive education, such as reading and writing, communication or nursing skills, etc.:

²¹⁷ Drouhaud, *FARC: confessions d'un guérillero* at 170.

²¹⁸ Lara, *Las mujeres en la guerra* at 91.

²¹⁹ Marón, 'Mujeres guerrilleras',

"[F]or many rural women, entering the guerilla means progress, because it allows them to enter new spaces, see new places and to receive an education that they would not otherwise have got."²²⁰

As one female combatant reports:

"When I was 15, I learnt the art of the guerilla. Before that, they taught me how to read and write. It's like at university here, we cannot become professionals, but we have more practical skills than university students. Here, you have to study every day. After six months I already knew how to read."²²¹

Urban female recruits (and especially from mid- to high-educational level) may not experience the same educational empowerment. Nevertheless, within the FARC reportedly combatants do not only receive basic education, but also political and some professional training (notably in medical and communication skills), as well as how to work together in a group under difficult situations, etc.

Yet, given that FARC membership is for life, female combatants cannot generally use their education and skills outside the organization. Even for those who decide to desert, it appears that their skills and experiences are not valued by society. The potential gains and skills acquired by female combatants during their time in the FARC could be better mapped, explored, and valued to facilitate individual demobilization processes. This might help improve the inclusion of women in the official demobilization programs, which is currently disproportionately low. This would be necessary in order to avoid an almost total exclusion of women from a future mass-DDR of FARC members – should that day come.

Finally, female combatants also report that entering the FARC provided them with increased self-respect, and the respect of the others. Furthermore, they also found that being part of the FARC was like having a family where they found emotional attachment and support. As the study on girl soldiers in the Colombian conflict reports: "Sometimes they were better treated by the guerrillas than they had been by their families."²²² Within the FARC they were allowed time for leisure and social activities, such as playing football during weekends or parties.²²³ For some, the mere fact that their daily necessities were being provided for by the FARC was experienced as liberating.²²⁴ Yet, given the reports of gender-based abuses and sexual violence within the FARC, some women and girls might find themselves in worse oppression than before.

From our analysis we can identify a number of factors that influence the situation and gender discrimination against female combatants in the FARC. These factors might be valid beyond the FARC, but would have to be explored. Firstly, the reason for joining the organization. Secondly, the grade that a female combatant achieves. Thirdly, the age and educational level of the women and girls. Fourthly, the geographical location of the specific FARC group.

As we have seen, female combatants transgress a number of gender roles and norms, in the areas of contraception and abortion, sexuality, taking up arms, performing 'masculine tasks,' etc., and challenge gendered stereotypes, such as the 'women are peaceful' stereotype. These transgressions can be experienced both as empowering or oppressing by the women themselves. Beyond their personal experience, they contribute to challenge traditional forms of gender oppression within the Colombian society.

Yet, at the same time, they also reproduce gendered roles and the patriarchal hierarchy of armed groups. Thus, for example, statements that affirm that female combatants need to 'put on make up for their male colleagues,'²²⁵ or the fact that the organization controls women's

²²⁰ Ibid.

²²¹ Ibid.

²²² Keairns, 'The Voices of Girl Child Soldiers: Colombia', at 12-13.

²²³ Ibid. at 11.

²²⁴ Ibid.

²²⁵ For example, as stated by a guerrillera: " 'The fact that we are *guerrilleras* does not mean that we loose our feminine part. It is our colleagues that buy us the make-up, nail polish, the lotions, the bow ties. They like to see

fertility and sexuality, indicate that these are new forms of gender oppression that act to transform, but not challenge the patriarchal society.

Thus, it would indeed seem that female combatants in the FARC, similar to women entering armed forces or *maquila* factories, escape certain forms of gender discrimination within the Colombian society and experience various forms of empowerment, while at the same time being subjected to new forms of oppression. Hence, arguing an either-or outcome does not make sense and does not accurately represent female combatants' situations. On the contrary, it is crucial to examine the different factors that influence the situation of female combatants, such as the geographical location of the section, the commander's attitude, the section's communication with the FARC hierarchy, the reason for joining the organization, etc.

us like this. Both the commanders and the foot soldiers. We put on make-up so that we will look nice to them', she says, while cleaning a Jordanian Kalashnikov, part of the 33,000 strong weapon arsenals that the Colombian insurgency possesses." In Marón, 'Mujeres guerrilleras',