

WOMEN AND FARC: ANOTHER OPPRESSOR OR AN UNLIKELY
LIBERATOR?

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BA Thesis – GE3V18002

7,793 Words

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12/06/2020

Abstract:

This paper seeks to identify the motivating factors behind the mobilisation of women in the Colombian guerrilla organisation of the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (FARC), or Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, and subsequently analyse whether or not mobilising as part of the group empowered these women. Initially, FARC only recruited men, however, as it became more organised and structured, women began to be enlisted, until eventually almost half of its members were actually women. Yet, despite relatively huge numbers of female combatants, the reason why insurgency groups such as FARC recruited so many women is still not well understood. The reality is that FARC, by creating a self-contained organisation, combined feminisation with militarisation, an incongruous outcome that contradicted the objective of many female fighters. In order to investigate and understand the motivating factors for women enlisting in FARC, this paper will investigate the experiences of eight individual women against the patriarchal backdrop of Colombia during the late 20th century, focusing on their time with FARC, their reasons for joining, to what prompted them to leave, and contradictorily, what encouraged them to stay. In so doing, this paper reveals what aspects of FARC's mobilisation empowered its female combatants, while also assessing the paradox of their feminisation by the male fighters upon an already oppressed female population.

Table of Contents

Introduction	4
Analytical Framework.....	5
Methodology	7
Chapter I - Colombian Culture.....	10
Machismo and Conservatism	10
Violence Against Women	11
FARC's Evolution.....	12
Women in FARC	14
Chapter II - Motivations	16
Why Did Women Join?.....	16
Individual Motivations.....	18
Why Did Women Leave?.....	20
Why Did Women Stay?	23
Chapter III - Epilogue: Empowered?.....	26
Women and the Peace Accords.....	27
Women in Colombian Politics	28
Conclusion	31
List of Cited Works	33
Primary Sources:	33
Online Content:	36
Academic Journals:.....	38
Literature:.....	41
Books:	43

Introduction

Whilst the saying, “its a man’s world”¹ was once a readily accepted maxim for why so little attention has been paid to the women who live in it, the drastic changes the world has experienced over the course of the last century have altered this view. In today’s world, where women have successfully clawed their way closer to equality than ever before, the chasm in understanding female history is no longer brushed under the rug, but openly discussed as scholars strive to fill the abyss.

Following the rise of terrorism during the late 20th century, a new fascination developed, centred on the individuals who choose to partake in irregular warfare.² This interest intensifies tenfold when concentrated on female combatants, but as is the unfortunate norm across academic fields, there remains a large imbalance between what is known of female combatants in comparison to their male counterparts. This gap is significantly deeper in the world’s poorer regions, where the culture remains zealously conservative and strongly patriarchal, as is the case in Colombia. Despite the nation’s long history of civil unrest, its abundance of guerrilla organisations, and the remarkably high proportion of women within its groups, there is still a significant lack of understanding of female combatants. As such, this research follows the evolution of women as members of one such group, the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (FARC), from the group’s formation in the 1960’s, to their unprecedented female incorporation during the de-mobilising process of the 2010’s. This thesis aims to answer what factors prompted women to join FARC, and to what extent were they empowered by their mobilisation as guerrilleras .

¹ Ulrike Strasser and Heidi Tinsman, “It’s a Man’s World? World History Meets the History of Masculinity, in Latin American Studies, for Instance,” *Journal of World History* 21, no. 1 (March 2010): 75 – 96.

² Peter Chalk, “The Evolving Dynamic of Terrorism in the 1990s,” *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 53, no. 2 (1999): 152.

Analytical Framework

Despite the shortage of investigation into *guerrilleras*³ (female combatants) in comparison to *guerrilleros* (male combatants),⁴ researchers from a variety of academic fields have endeavoured to correct the balance. From Conflict to Feminism studies, scholars are investigating guerrilleras on an international-level and from a multitude of angles, all in the hopes of improving academic and popular understanding of the women who took up arms.

This investigation utilises the analytical infrastructure established by some of these scholars, namely Julia Heaton,⁵ Natalia Herrera and Douglas Porch,⁶ Anuradha K. Rajivan and Ruwanthi Senarathne,⁷ as well as Tazreena Sajjad.⁸ Each of these scholars has concluded that female participation in armed conflict is far more common than has been historically acknowledged, whilst also being hugely understudied,⁹ and that guerrilleras' experience is very different to that of their male counter-parts, hence the need for further study.¹⁰ Additionally, in their article “‘Like going to a fiesta’ – The role of female fighters in Colombia’s FARC-EP”,¹¹ Herrera and Porch argue that the focus placed upon women as victims of conflict, which female fighters continue to be seen as, has inhibited “from a discussion of the reasons for female enlistment in the guerrilla ranks”,¹³ thus inspiring this thesis’ focus upon female combatants’ motivations.¹⁴

Whilst the authors mentioned above provide the outline for this research, it is Julia Heaton’s work that provides the direct analytical framework for this

³ Ingvild Magnæs Gjelsvik, “Women, war and empowerment: A case study of female ex-combatants in Colombia,” Master’s Thesis: University of Tromsø (2010): 8.

⁴ Gjelsvik, “Women, war and empowerment,” 8.

⁵ Julia Heaton, “Revolutionary Gender Equality: The Dimensions and Limits of Emancipation in the Sandinista Revolution,” *Constellations* 8, no. 2 (2017): 23 - 37.

⁶ Natalia Herrera and Douglas Porch, “‘Like going to a fiesta’ – the role of female fighters in Colombia’s FARC-EP,” *Small Wars and Insurgencies Journal* 19, no. 4 (January 2009): 609 – 634.

⁷ Anuradha K. Rajivan and Ruwanthi Senarathne, “Women in armed conflicts: Inclusion and exclusion,” (2010/11) in *Asia-Pacific Human Development Report Background Papers Series 2010/11*. UNDP.

⁸ Tazreena Sajjad, “Women Guerrillas: Marching toward True Freedom? An Analysis of Women’s Experiences in the Frontlines of Guerrilla Warfare and in the Post-War Period,” *Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equity*, no. 59 (2004): 4 – 16.

⁹ Sajjad, “Women Guerrillas: Marching toward True Freedom?” 4.

¹⁰ Rajivan and Senarathne, “Women in armed conflicts,” 2.

¹¹ Herrera and Porch, “‘Like going to a fiesta,’” 609 – 634.

¹³ *Ibid*, 611.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 610.

investigation. This is due to the lack of theories centred on women in irregular organisations. As illustrated by Ana Sjölander, “the general lack of theoretical studies on female combatants in armed groups, in particular within Colombia, means that the effect of non-state militarization and gender is under-theorized.”¹⁵ Nevertheless, Heaton’s article supplies an ideal analytical framework for this investigation. Not only is her research thematically similar, but it also examines the role of women in the de-mobilisation process and the lasting impact guerrilla participation has on female combatants, and on the nation’s women as a whole.

Heaton’s article, “Revolutionary Gender Equality: The Dimensions and Limits of Female Emancipation in the Sandinista Revolution”, examines the mass-mobilisation of women in Nicaragua during the 1970s under the Sandinista Movement, and analyses the extent to which the women’s fight for emancipation was successful.¹⁶ Her investigation evaluates how the Sandinista Movement offered Nicaragua’s women the chance to challenge the traditional conceptualisation of their role in society, as well as the opportunity to participate in the re-structuring of the nation’s gender relations, and the extent to which this promise was fulfilled. Heaton concludes that despite the mass participation of women in the movement, and the apparent success they achieved during the revolutionary period, following the formation of Nicaragua’s new government, women’s newfound freedoms dissolved as their interests were side-lined in favour of redefining Nicaragua’s national identity. Despite their dedication, women were unable to escape Nicaragua’s gender biases and the Machismo attitude ingrained throughout Latin America.¹⁷

As this investigation seeks to emulate the example set by Julia Heaton, it too shall investigate both primary sources and academic literature to create an in-depth analysis of FARC’s female combatants. Following her model, this thesis seeks to establish an understanding of what Colombian culture was like for women: the political and socio-economic challenges they faced, and how such obstacles influenced their decisions to mobilise. Furthermore, this investigation will include

¹⁵ Anna Sjölander, “With this past, you’ll never become free,” Master’s Thesis: Uppsala University (2016): 30.

¹⁶ Heaton, “Revolutionary Gender Equality,” 24.

¹⁷ Ibid, 28 – 29.

women post-mobilisation, in an effort to quantify whether or not they were successful in achieving empowerment through mobilisation, following Heaton's own example.

Methodology

As an investigation into women, their motivations and their search for equality, this study is largely based upon transcripts of interviews, in other words: on oral history. The reasoning for this is two-fold. Firstly, oral history has proven itself valuable to all historical researchers, but particularly precious for revealing women's perspectives, especially in situations where women's experiences divert from their male counterparts, as they are often silenced.¹⁸ Secondly, personal accounts from FARC's guerrillas themselves, provide the clearest insight into what motivated them to enlist, and an opportunity to assess whether or not their objectives for enlistment were fulfilled.

Due to FARC's notoriety, across Latin America and worldwide, its combatants have been the focus of much intrigue and curiosity, thus generating much interest across a broad spectrum of audiences. This desire to understand the mass mobilisation of irregular forces nation-wide, and over an extended period of time has not only encouraged various academic investigations, but also a multitude of dialogues with its fighters across multi-media organisations. Though not at the forefront of this interest during its early years, the women who chose to turn their backs on the core of Colombian society have become of increasing interest to international media. This is chiefly due to the increasing recognition of women's interest groups and the growing women's movements that began emerging throughout Latin America during the second half of the 20th century.¹⁹ The resulting interviews, statements and first-hands accounts will provide the foundation of this investigation.

Despite the benefits of using combatants' own testimonies, as with any employment of primary sources, there are a number of dangers that accompany their

¹⁸ Kathryn Anderson and Dana C. Jack, "Learning to Listen: Interview Techniques and Analyses," in *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History*, ed. Sherna Berger and Daphne Patai (New York: Routledge, 1991), 11.

¹⁹ Jane S. Jaquette, "Introduction From Transition to Participation – Women's Movements and Democratic Politics," in *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History*, 2nd edition, ed. Jane S. Jaquette (New York: Routledge, 2018): 5 – 7.

application. The greatest challenge is memory. As Donald Swain observed, humans have proven a remarkable capacity for remembering, but they are incapable of perfect memory.²¹ According to John Tosh, what individuals do recall provides important insight into what events were most meaningful to them, and exactly this discrepancy “between fact and memory ultimately enhances the value of the oral sources as historical documents.”²²

A further challenge is the risk of generalization. As it is impossible to interview every woman who joined FARC and ascertain their exact motivational factors, this investigation seeks to identify overarching themes in the experiences of several women. The eight individuals selected for this study were chosen to provide a multifaceted view of women in the organisation, from high-ranking officials who surrendered, to women who transitioned with the group into a political party, to average guerrilleras who made up the bulk of group’s female soldiers. This thesis was limited to these eight women to provide in-depth analyses of their motivations and empowerment, whilst providing a well-rounded view of women from all ranks of FARC. Additionally, due to the limited number of guerrilleras who have shared their stories entirely, which has left researchers to make do with snippets published by various outlets, this investigation focused on these eight women for the detailed descriptions they have provided on their key experiences with FARC.

To combat the hazards of human memory and individual testimonies, this thesis incorporates secondary sources to both corroborate and enhance the analysis of the primary source material. Where personal accounts provide crucial insights, few supply the background information to fully comprehend them. Thus, it is essential to rely on secondary sources to understand the history behind the widespread disenfranchisement experienced by Colombian women, the nation’s ‘machismo’ society, and the evolution of FARC from a minor peasant rebellion to one of the oldest insurgencies of modern times.

²¹ Donald C. Swain, “Problems for Practitioners of Oral History,” *American Archivist* 28, no. 1 (1965): 68.

²² John Tosh, *The Pursuit of History: Aims, methods and new directions in the study of history* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 275.

FARC, although not immediately an active recruiter of guerrillas, distanced itself from its fellow irregular organisations by incorporating women into its ranks since its establishment.²³ Thus, marking FARC a notable case-study for this investigation. Though the lack of investigation conducted into Colombia's guerrillas should be reason enough to initiate such an investigation, this research is even more meaningful given the recent Peace Accords. The summits were the first time academics, ex-combatants, victims and legislators collaborated to address the problems that convinced many women joining FARC was their only option, an incredible achievement given the patriarchal nature of Colombia.²⁴

To fully investigate and answer the research question, this thesis is divided into three chapters, and each will in turn be divided into various sections. The first chapter will act as an introduction to Colombian culture, the realities its women face, and the evolution of FARC. The second chapter will provide the bulk of the research, as it covers women's personal accounts of their experiences within FARC, the reasons for their enlistment and why or why not they left the group. The third chapter will cover women during the peace process and their role in FARC's subsequent political party.

²³ S. V. Raghavan and V. Balasubramaniyan, "Evolving Role of Women in Terror Groups: Progression or Regression?" *Journal of International Women's Studies* 15, no. 2 (July 2014): 198.

²⁴ Mia Kazman, "Women of the FARC," *Perry Center Occasional Paper* (May 2019): 3-5.

Chapter I – Colombian Culture

To truly interpret what encouraged Colombian women to join FARC, and how their time as combatants, both as individuals and as a whole, impacted them as female citizens of Colombia, it is crucial to understand not only the foundation of FARC, but also Colombia's history and its society's hierarchy. As it is virtually impossible to summarize the entirety of the nation's culture, this initiation to Colombia will be confined to two major features that are directly tied to the focus of this research: the prevalence of machismo within Colombia's conservative culture and the widespread acceptance of violence against women.

Machismo and Conservatism

Like many countries across Latin America, Colombian society has long been governed by strictly conservative values, as well as being deeply influenced by the widespread machismo heritage that permeates the region, a legacy of the culture imported by the Spanish Moors, who arrived in the Americas alongside the conquistadores.²⁵ Whilst there is no concrete definition of machismo, it can be understood as the "cult of virility", where the key traits are: exaggerated aggressiveness, hyper-sexuality, authoritarianism, arrogance, superiority and sexual hostility in male-to-female relationships.²⁶ This accompanies an almost total abdication of domestic responsibility, leaving men estranged from the household, even from their roles of husbands and fathers, thus creating a social divide between the lives, ambitions and understandings of the sexes.²⁷ This is best illustrated in a traditional Hispanic saying: "*La mujer en la casa, el hombre en la calle*",²⁸ which translates to "woman in the home, man in street".²⁹

Realising the influence machismo has upon Colombian society may raise questions as to why so many women tolerated such behaviour, and why they did not

²⁵ Elena Garcés, *Colombian Women: The Struggle Out of Silence* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2008), 151.

²⁶ Elizabeth, E. Brusco, *The Reformation of Machismo: Evangelical Conversion and Gender Colombia*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), 78.

²⁷ Brusco, *The Reformation of Machismo*, 79 – 80.

²⁸ Pauline Turner, "Religious Aspects of Women's Role in the Nicaraguan Revolution," in *Women, Religion and Social Change*, ed. Yvonne Yazbacak Haddad and Ellison Banks Findly (New York: State of New York Press, 1985), 322.

²⁹ Turner, "Religious Aspects of Women's Role in the Nicaraguan Revolution," 322.

attempt to unshackle themselves from the capricious tendencies of a machismo man. According to Elena Garcés, the answer is simply that Colombian culture did not allow for it. Whilst machismo firmly cemented women as inferior to men, the Catholic Church continuously reinforced the notion of women as substandard and worthy of suffering, relating it back to the supposed fall of the human race at the hands of Eve.³¹ This view, Garcés finds, fortifies the notion that women must be firmly restrained for the safety and well-being of everyone, as they were untrustworthy and wicked, making it the responsibility of ‘their’ men, be it a father or husband, to keep them under control.³² As such, Colombian society crushed any attempts to emancipate its women. Indoctrination also suppressed endeavours to initiate change as tradition pushed girls into the roles of housekeeper and caretaker, following in the footsteps of their mothers and adhering to their father’s commands, as his word was law.³³

Violence Against Women

It is a devastating truth that violence against women, or gender-based violence, is not only hugely prevalent across Latin America, but is also widely tolerated – a direct result of tradition, the patriarchal familial organisations, and religious culture.³⁶ Colombia is no exception, with a report from the United Nations Development Programme in 2000 estimating that 60 – 70% of the nation’s women have experienced some form of violence.³⁷ The overwhelming majority of violence is domestic, and in spite of the laws in place to limit the prevalence of domestic violence, it remains largely ignored as it is considered to be a ‘private matter’. In keeping with the norms of Colombian society, the concealed rules that deprive women of autonomy reinforce the notion that women’s bodies can be appropriated and treated as men see fit.³⁸ A study found that 93% of all Colombia domestic violence is directed towards women, and a further inquiry estimated that 41% of women aged 15 to 49 had experienced physical violence at the hands of a spouse or

³¹ Garcés, *Colombian Women*, 168.

³² *Ibid*, 96 – 97.

³³ Garcés *Ibid*, 151 – 153.

³⁶ M. B. Rondon, “From Marianism to terrorism: the many faces of violence against women in Latin America,” *Archives of women’s mental health* 6, no. 3 (2003): 157.

³⁷ Amnesty International, *Colombia: Scarred bodies, hidden crimes – Sexual Violence against Women in the Armed Conflict*, (London: Amnesty International, October 12, 2004), 9 – 10.

³⁸ Amnesty International, *Colombia*, 11.

intimate partner.³⁹ However, these figures are only estimates, as it is believed only 5% of female victims vocalise their abuse.⁴⁰ Female silence is mainly attributed to the discrimination women face once they come forward, both from their community, as well as from the judicial and law enforcements systems that preserve the belief that women are to blame.⁴²

FARC's Evolution

Like most of Colombia's unrest, FARC owes its roots to La Violencia, a conflict that lasted from 1946 to roughly 1958, though it continued in parts of Colombia until 1966.⁴⁸ This volatile expression of peasant grievances led to the establishment of several peasant enclaves, a move backed by the Colombian Communist Party (PCC), the hero of Colombia's poor. The growing power of these enclaves led the government to attempt to eradicate them, leading to a new phase of conflict. This was exemplified on May 27th 1964, when the Colombian military launched an unsuccessful assault against the "Southern Tolima Bloc"⁴⁹ located in the village of Marquetalia.⁵⁰ The group, commanded by Manuel "Tirofijo" Marulanda, was unshakable, and following their success, quickly joined with other enclave groups to form the 'Southern Bloc' following the First Guerrilla Conference in 1965. It was at the Second Guerrilla Conference in 1966 that the Southern Bloc officially became FARC, though the group sees the launching of 'Operation Marquetalia' as its actual date of origin.⁵¹

To say the group started off with a bang would be an understatement. During the 1970's FARC extended its military presence across the country, but it has always focused on changing society from below. By the 1980s, FARC was operating as a de-facto government for the rural communities the state had never successfully controlled,

³⁹ Boris Wijkström and Lucinda O'Hanlon, *Violence Against Women in Colombia: Report prepared by the World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT) for the 31st Session of Committee against Torture*, (Geneva: World Organisation Against Torture, 2003), 18 – 19.

⁴⁰ Wijkström and O'Hanlon, *Violence Against Women in Colombia*, 22.

⁴² *Ibid*, 22.

⁴⁸ Norman A. Bailey, "La Violencia in Colombia," *Journal of Inter-American Studies* 9, no. 4 (Oct. 1967): 561 - 562.

⁴⁹ Steven Dudley, *Walking Ghosts: Murder and Guerrilla Politics in Colombia*, (New York: Routledge, 1995), 9.

⁵⁰ Garry Leech, *The FARC: The Longest Insurgency*, (London: Zed Books, 2001), 14.

⁵¹ Leech, *The FARC*, 14 – 16.

whilst continuing to expand nation-wide.⁵² This boom was largely due to FARC finally partaking in coca cultivation in 1978, which supplied the group with the resources it required to expand.⁵³ By its Seventh Conference in May 1982, FARC had sufficient funds to finally adopt a true army-like structure, an achievement they commemorated by changing their name to Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia – Ejército del Pueblo, or Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People’s Army. The subsequent re-shaping also led to the adoption of an offense-minded military strategy that actively sought out large-scale confrontations with the state; a shift the FARC claimed made then an “authentically offensive guerrilla movement”.⁵⁴

Following its transition to FARC-EP, the group continued to grow and install its forces across the country, all whilst relying on the jungle to hide itself from the government. Through a series of kidnappings, select bomb-attacks and military offenses – which escalated through the late 1990’s and culminated in the early 2000’s – financed by its billion-dollar income from the illegal drug market, FARC continued to pressure the government to incorporate its own ideology into the nation’s political agenda.⁵⁵ At its peak, FARC operated across more than a third of Colombia, and became the country’s largest guerrilla organisation, playing a critical role in the country’s civil conflict. Over the course of the last half of the 20th century, the conflict left approximately 220,000 Colombians dead and almost 6 million people displaced.⁵⁶ As an irregular organisation scattered throughout the country’s jungles, it is hard to know the exact number of FARC members, but it is estimated to have had roughly 10,000 members during the 1990s,⁵⁷ which swelled to between 15,000 and 20,000 members throughout the 2000’s.⁵⁸

⁵² Ibid, 25.

⁵³ Francisco Gutiérrez-Sanín “The FARC’s militaristic blueprint,” *Small Wars & Insurgencies Journal* 29, no. 4 (August 2018): 637.

⁵⁴ Leech, *The FARC*, 26.

⁵⁵ John Otis, *The FARC and Colombia’s Illegal Drug Trade* (Wilson Centre, November 2014): 2 – 9.

⁵⁶ Danielle Renwick. *FARC, ELN Colombia’s Left Wing Guerrillas*, (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 2016) 1 – 2.

⁵⁷ Jon-Paul Maddaloni, *An Analysis of the FARC in Colombia: Breaking the Frame of FM 3-24*, (Fort Leavenworth: School of Advanced Military Studies, 2009),16.

⁵⁸ Maddaloni, *An Analysis of the FARC in Colombia*, 21.

FARC's numbers diminished hugely, to approximately 7,000 members, during the early 2010's, which coincided with another attempt at peace in 2012, which began to end the guerrilla warfare. Finally, peace was consolidated with the 2016 Havana Accords,⁵⁹ though in October of 2019, FARC leaders announced they were re-arming, as they believed the Colombian government had violated the peace agreement.⁶⁰

Women in FARC

Women's incorporation into FARC was immediate, as two of the group's original 48 combatants who partook in the events at Marquetalia in 1964 were female.⁶¹ Throughout the 1960s, they continued to participate in FARC's endeavours, but during this time, women were not expected to perform combat duties, instead they were mainly contained to traditional 'female' roles.⁶² As FARC continued to expand into the 1970s, the formal incorporation of women became a subject of open debate. The group's main leader, Tirofijo, was against their formal admission, as he did not believe they were physically capable or resilient enough to meet the demands of war.⁶³ However, as the group took on more of a militaristic model and officially transitioned into an army, the roles available to women began to change. The new structure centred itself on lifelong membership, perpetual training, ideological education, and strict segregation from civilian life for all members.

Following this transition to a totalitarian model, FARC actively recruited women, as the programme for expansion was tied to the notion that the more sectors of the population FARC incorporated, the greater the chance of its success. In 1985, the organisation contentiously proclaimed equality for women within their order, both a political and social move.⁶⁴ By incorporating women, FARC officials ensured guerrillas' intimate lives were entirely contained within its camps, thus diminishing

⁵⁹ Rafael R. Ioris and Antonio A. R., "Colombia's Fractured History and Continued Challenges Following the Havana Accord," *Journal of Peacebuilding & Development* 13, no. 1 (2018): 78 – 80.

⁶⁰ Dylan Baddour and Athony Faiola, "As Colombia peace accord unravels, ex-FARC leaders take up arms, announce return to conflict," *The Washington Post*, 29 August 2019. Accessed April 15, 2020.

⁶¹ Sajjad, "Women Guerrillas," 15.

⁶² Francisco Gutiérrez Sanín and Francy Carranza Franco, "Organizing women for combat: The experience of the FARC in the Colombian war," *Journal of Agrarian Change* 17 (2017): 773.

⁶³ Sanín and Franco, "Organizing women for combat," 773.

⁶⁴ Gutiérrez-Sanín, "The FARC's militaristic," 637.

the threat of external variables and making the organisation entirely self-contained.⁶⁵ Since their formal incorporation, women represented 20% – 40% of FARC's combatants, estimated to be roughly 16,000 – 18,000 members by 2001,⁶⁶ making it the organisation with the highest incorporation of women across Latin America.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Sanín and Franco, "Organizing women for combat," 773 – 774.

⁶⁶ Bilal Y. Saab and Alexandra W. Taylor, "Criminality and Armed Groups: A Comparative Study of FARC and Paramilitary Groups in Colombia," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 32, no. 6 (2009): 459.

⁶⁷ Herrera and Porch, "'Like going to a fiesta'," 612 – 613.

Chapter II – Motivations

After establishing an outline of Colombian women's circumstances and the context in which FARC was formed, it is possible to re-focus this investigation on the women who joined FARC. This chapter will centre on the individual motivations of guerrilleras to identify the factors that motivated women to join and leave the organisation. As such, this section endeavours to provide greater insight into the expectations women had when joining the group, and whether their experiences as FARC guerrilleras aligned with such expectations.

Why Did Women Join?

Pinpointing exactly why women joined FARC is a complex endeavour, and fulfilling it entirely is virtually impossible, as there is no way to interview every FARC guerrillera to inquire about her reasoning for joining. However, it is possible to identify common themes, through examining the academic literature available, and from these draw preliminary conclusions about why women joined. These theories can then be compared with the women's first hand accounts explaining their motivations. The combination of these methods will hopefully illuminate trends in women's motivations, and reveal what they hoped to achieve through their enlistment.

According to Natalia Herrera and Douglas Porch, the FARC exploited "the shortcomings of Colombian rural society as the forces shaping women's motivations".⁶⁹ Thus, the group presented itself as a "lifeline"⁷⁰ to young women and girls, as it offered a "certain degree of autonomy and personal development otherwise unattainable for rural women."⁷¹ Additionally, FARC also seemingly guaranteed women protection from the daily violence that plagued Colombia's female population. FARC first published its stance on women's rights in 1982, stating that it did not "discriminate against women, who follow the same principles as men and are entitled to the same rights"⁷² and promising punishment to any who discriminate,

⁶⁹ Ibid, 611.

⁷⁰ Ibid, 611.

⁷¹ Sanín and Franco, "Organizing women for combat," 772.

⁷² Nadine Isabelle Lainer, "Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration of Women Ex-Combatants of the FARC: Challenging Militarized Masculinity Through Gender-Responsive DDR Programming in Colombia," (Master's Thesis: The New School, 2016): 57.

regardless of their rank. Following this, FARC declared “a zero tolerance policy against rape”⁷³ and claimed it “executes men who commit the act”.⁷⁴

As it is widely acknowledged that the Colombian state disregards female existence by “ignoring women’s political capacity and human rights”,⁷⁵ it is hardly surprising that when an organisation promised females equal rights to their male compatriots, hundreds of women jumped at the opportunity. To them, FARC was a dazzling opportunity for escape. Through Herrera and Porch’s research, it is evident that FARC offered a wholly compartmentalised way of life, a sense of accomplishment and the chance to personally fight for their ideals, with the support of an organisation that possessed the wherewithal to challenge the government.⁷⁶ However, as women, joining FARC was considered a far more egression sin than for a man. Not only were the women turning their backs on their ‘womanhood’, the act of committing to an insurgency group as a woman was formally acknowledged as a protest against the government and a call for change.⁷⁷ Additionally, in a society where violence against women was and still is so prevalent, life as a guerrillera seemingly provided women with a sanctuary from such abuse, as explained by a female fighter, “In Colombian society... they kill women... they rape women – they are like slaves to their husbands. Whereas here in the FARC, we [women] do have rights.”⁷⁸

Though FARC’s guerrilleras faced constant threat, there appears to be an agreement amongst scholars that the centre of FARC's appeal was its “emancipatory ideal.”⁷⁹ Fransico Gutiérrez Sanín and Francy Carranza Franco emphasize this conclusion in their observation that “FARC offers women a certain degree of autonomy and personal development otherwise unattainable for rural women.”⁸⁰ In spite of this, to best understand why women enlisted, it is vital to hear the stories from

⁷³ Leech, *The FARC*, 53.

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, 53.

⁷⁵ Garcés, *Colombian Women*, 103.

⁷⁶ Herrera and Porch, “Like going to a fiesta,” 612.

⁷⁷ Alexandra Welsh, “Women of the Jungle: Guerrilleras on the Front Lines of the FARC-EP,” *Glendon Journal of International Studies* 8, no. 1 (2015): 10.

⁷⁸ Kiran Stallone and Julia Zulver, “The feminists of Farc: ‘We are not demobilizing, we are mobilizing politically,’” *The Guardian*, 27 March, 2017. Accessed April 13, 2020.

⁷⁹ Herrera and Porch, “Like going to a fiesta,” 627.

⁸⁰ Gutiérrez Sanín and Carranza Franco, “Organizing women for combat,” 772.

individual women explaining their motivations. The following sections will investigate a number of personal accounts of FARC's ex-guerrilleras as they discuss their experiences with the group.

Individual Motivations

One notable individual who shared her story was Elda 'Karina' Neyis Mosquera, the only FARC guerrillera to become a Front Commander,⁸¹ who held sole command of the organisation's division in Antioquia, until her surrender in May of 2008.⁸² At 11-years-old, Karina's dreams of becoming a nurse were dashed when her father withdrew her from school. Most Colombian men, Karina's father included, did not see further education as necessary for girls, given their futures were destined to be limited to raising children and looking after the home. This was a crushing to Karina, and led her to join the Communist Youth group in her village. A few years later, Karina first connected with FARC when she attended the festivals they hosted, which left her stunned by the quantities of food available, and led her to eventually join the group at 16-years-old. Karina states "I became part of the war not because I wanted to harm people but because I was a victim of the state... unfortunately, I became an aggressor".⁸³ Karina's story is not dissimilar to many others, as to her, FARC's offer of a chance at autonomy and personal improvement, as identified by Sanín and Franco, was not one to be missed.

Another guerrillera who shared parts of her story is Leidy. Joining FARC was her dream, as her rural upbringing was dominated by guerrillas. To Leidy, it was only a natural progression to join the force, though it took her three attempts at enrolment before she was finally incorporated at 17-years-old. Unlike the military, who Leidy saw as "abusers",⁸⁴ she considered FARC to be a fighting force to end injustice and inequality, claiming she "was one of the many women who joined due to her ideals... revolutionary, socialist and communist ideals and principles".⁸⁵ Thus FARC offered

⁸¹ Ibid, 775.

⁸² Latin America Digital Beat Staff, *Leader of Colombian Rebel Group FARC Confirmed Dead* (University of New Mexico, 2008): 3 – 4.

⁸³ Elda Neyis Mosquera, "She Was Colombia's Most-Fearred Female Revolutionary. Can She Help It Find Peace?" Interview by Maureen Orth. *Vanity Fair*, August 2, 2018. Accessed April 10, 2020.

⁸⁴ Ingvild Magnæs Gjelsvik, "Women, war and empowerment: A case study of female ex-combatants in Colombia," (Master's Thesis, University of Tromsø, 2010): 37.

⁸⁵ Gjelsvik, "Women, war and empowerment," 37.

her the opportunity to fight for her beliefs and join those who shared her vision for Colombia, making her “very proud to be in their [FARC’s] real ranks”.⁸⁶

High-ranking guerrillera Sandra Ramírez the “sentimental *compañera* [wife]”,⁸⁷ of 24 years of FARC’s founder and leader Tirofijo, has also openly discussed her FARC experience. Born into a peasant family of 15 children, under the name of Griselda Lobo, Ramírez dreamed of becoming a doctor, but coming from a peasant family with 15 children, they could ill-afford to give their daughter such an education.⁸⁹ Taking matters into her own hands, Ramírez joined FARC at 17-years-old, which afforded her the opportunity to study nursing and practice the profession of her dreams. Her outstanding dedication to the organisation and its success caught the eye of Tirofijo, who came to exclusively trust her to prepare his meals, eventually leading to their romantic relationship.⁹⁰ Throughout her 32 years with the organisation, Ramírez has staunchly maintained that since the organisation began, “the guerrilla... have equality in rights and chores. Women and men share everything... men and women participate equally... women can do the same things as men”.⁹¹

Studying first-hand accounts is especially important when conducting research such as this, as it reveals incentives that have been otherwise over-looked, due to their ‘abnormality’. Whilst most researchers focus on women’s motivation deriving solely from a desire to escape, other women utilised the opportunity of FARC to pursue their ‘unorthodox’ passions. This was the case for Xiomara, a guerrillera who fled her home to join FARC at 14-years-old. She states it was her love of guns, an adoration that developed at a young age, which ultimately motivated her to join FARC, as the respect brought by weapons is “no small thing for a woman in a profoundly sexist

⁸⁶ Ibid, 74.

⁸⁷ Ramírez, Sandra. “Sandra Ramírez Candidata de las FARC al Senado y viuda de ‘Tirofijo’: ‘Las FARC han cumplido todos los compromisos que hicimos.’” Interview by María Paz Salas. *La Tercera*, December 9, 2017. Accessed May 20, 2020.

⁸⁹ Manuella Libardi, “Sandra Ramírez: The vast majority of our party remain in peace.” *Open Democracy*, September 6, 2019. Accessed May 20, 2020.

⁹⁰ Paula Delgado-King, “The ‘sentimental *compañera*’ of the FARC founder and leader, Sandra Ramírez: a politician-in-training?” *Taking About Colombia*, July 10, 2013. Accessed May 20, 2020.

⁹¹ Delgado-King, “The ‘sentimental *compañera*’ of the FARC founder and leader Sandra Ramírez.”

society”.⁹² Xiomara spent her youth daydreaming of a career with the police or in the military, but as such fields required qualifications beyond her grasp, she joined the guerrillas to pursue her passion.

Whilst Xiomara’s story may seem an interesting but isolated occurrence that is not of great relevance to this investigation, but upon further examination, it highlights a largely overlooked element of motivation. Whilst a number of academic investigations believe that: “many women were not specifically looking to improve their economic situation in Colombia at all”,⁹³ in the case of women such as Xiomara who wished to pursue a military career, FARC proved more appealing than Colombia’s military. Where women constituted almost half of FARC’s soldiers, only 2% of the Colombian Army’s service-people were female, and those who were enrolled were restricted to administrative tasks, a stark contrast to the roles of guerrillas.⁹⁴ Furthermore, where the Colombian army offered female soldiers US \$250 in wages, FARC offered a hundred dollars more, at \$350, a significant amount of money for impoverished Colombians.⁹⁵

For each of these women, FARC apparently offered them the chance to obtain the lifestyle they wanted, and escape the oppressive culture into which they were born.⁹⁶ It presented them with the opportunity to achieve goals their society would otherwise force them to sacrifice. In this sense, FARC appears to be the liberator so many women longed for, but did the reality live up to the promises – were they victims or victors?

Why Did Women Leave?

Women left FARC for many reasons, but an influential feature was a desire to regain authority over their bodies, as noted by Ana Sjölander. She observed that FARC’s female incorporation was characterised by strict control over women’s

⁹² Jasmine Garsd, “She misses being a guerrilla, but this former FARC fighter is starting a new life back home,” *The World*, 31 October 2016. Accessed April 10, 2020.

⁹³ Derek Comba, “Women’s Involvement in the Sandinistas and the FARC,” *Undergraduate Research Journal* 19, no. 9 (2015): 5.

⁹⁴ Sajjad, “Women Guerrillas,” 15.

⁹⁵ Raghavan and Balasubramanian, “Evolving Role of Women in Terror Groups,” 205.

⁹⁶ Martha I. Morgan, “Taking Machismo to Court: The Gender Jurisprudence of the Colombian Constitutional Court,” *The University of Miami Inter-American Law Review* 30, no. 2 (1999): 256.

bodies, their relationships and their sexuality.⁹⁷ This highlights the paradox that though many women joined FARC to escape Colombia's repressive culture, the group maintained its own oppressive practices that equally impeded on guerrillas' freedoms.⁹⁸

Within FARC's system, the use of contraceptives was mandatory,⁹⁹ and women were stripped of their femininity to fully commit to the rigid code of guerrilla conduct.¹⁰⁰ Such policies were contradictory to women's desires to escape constant suppression by others. FARC declared that the mandatory use of contraceptives for their members was "because the conditions of war determine so".¹⁰¹ In cases where they failed, abortion was employed, a termination they claim their guerrillas are aware of and only occurs with their consent.¹⁰² In reality, such policies led to thousands of forced abortions, largely conducted by guerrillas without any medical knowledge.

This was the case for Sonia, a 14-year-old FARC soldier, who, along with four other girls, "plead [with their superiors] to let us have the babies, but they [FARC] refused",¹⁰³ only to undergo a forced termination during her second trimester without her consent. She was injected with an unknown substance, causing her to be very ill for about two months, whilst another girl was almost killed by the treatment. When her condition improved, Sonia was taken to a doctor, who found "pieces"¹⁰⁴ of her baby still remaining inside her, a life threatening condition that led to another round of medicine, before she was sufficiently recuperated to return to guard duty.

Claudia Roa, a guerrillera of 11 years, underwent similarly gruesome treatment at the hands of FARC. After being recruited at 14-years-old under the

⁹⁷ Sjölander, "With this past, you'll never become free," 47.

⁹⁸ Lainer, "Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration of Women Ex-Combatants of the FARC," 65.

⁹⁹ Sanín and Franco, "Organizing women for combat," 775.

¹⁰⁰ Lainer, "Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration of Women Ex-Combatants of the FARC," 59.

¹⁰¹ Secretariat of the Central High Command of the FARC-EP, "Guerrilla combatants are revolutionary, aware and free women," last modified January 2, 2016. Accessed April 14, 2020.

¹⁰² Secretariat, "Guerrilla combatants are revolutionary, aware and free women."

¹⁰³ Pilar Hernández and Amanda Romero, "Adolescent Girls in Colombia's Guerrilla," *Journal of Prevention and Intervention in the Community* 26, no.1 (2003): 33.

¹⁰⁴ Hernández and Romero, "Adolescent Girls in Colombia's Guerrilla," 32.

guarantee of unlimited opportunities to study and achieve success, none of which she believe “ever turned out to be true”,¹⁰⁵ Roa’s newborn son was killed by her fellow guerrillas:

“Eight months into my pregnancy, I [Roa] was given pills without me knowing to induce the birth... the baby was born alive. I held the baby for a moment... and then I passed out. That’s when my child was taken away. A female fighter told me they had killed my baby. They suffocated him by putting a hand over his mouth and nose.”¹⁰⁶ (Moloney, 2013)

Alongside the horrors of forced abortions, the contraceptives issued to the women were sometimes of dubious origins. Xiomara, who mobilised out of her love of guns, was one of the few to be discharged on the grounds of ill-health. Her malady was caused by the birth control foisted upon her. She was so sick that she was forced to abandon her beloved life in the jungle and seek work in the city. In payment for her years of service, the hormones given to Xiomara ended her ability to live the life she wanted, and rendered her infertile, “the birth control really messed me up. I can’t have children.”¹⁰⁷

Sexual abuse also led to many to de-mobilise, a pandemic fuelled by the group’s etiquette, a remnant of machismo, which demanded that if a “*campañera* [guerrillera] has embraced the revolution... she must sleep with all her *campañeros* [guerrilleros]... guerrilleras must be available for sexual relation”,¹⁰⁸ though this is staunchly denied by FARC representatives. Guerrilleras quickly realised that the many promises of equality and sexual freedom were not entirely true. In reality, a life with FARC encompassed many forms of gender harassment and aggression.¹⁰⁹ Additionally, despite claims of promoting solely on merit, FARC’s intense ‘machismo’ culture prevented women from being promoted to the top ranks: no

¹⁰⁵ Anastasia Moloney, “Lured into fighting Colombia’s girl rebels face abuse,” *Thomas Reuters Foundation*, December 3, 2013. Accessed April 10, 2020.

¹⁰⁶ Moloney, “Lured into fighting Colombia’s girl rebels face abuse.”

¹⁰⁷ Garsd, “She misses being a guerrilla.”

¹⁰⁸ Herrera and Porch, “Like going to a fiesta,” 622.

¹⁰⁹ Sanín and Franco, “Organizing women for combat,” 775.

woman ever achieved posts in the secretariat, or in the political and military decision-making bodies.¹¹⁰

It appears that the studied women enlisted in FARC were capable of enduring the physical hardships of guerrilla life, and that they were committed to succeed. However, they struggled with the sexual abuse and consequences thereof. It was the combination of abuse and sexual inequality that often led to disappointment and eventual withdrawal from FARC.

Why Did Women Stay?

Women remained loyal to FARC for several reasons, one of which appears to be the slim opportunity of promotion, as highlighted by Ingvild Masgnæs Gjelsvik, who noted that though few women attained higher ranks, “both men and women equally had to earn their rank”,¹¹¹ often at great personal sacrifice. FARC-based success and survival for women was centred upon the sexual ‘services’ they provided, leaving female guerrillas to see their body as a weapon.¹¹² It was also instrumental for women seeking success to be able instil fear in those around them, thus eradicating the possibility that they would be seen as weak or feminine. This meant that when women did rise through the ranks, they boasted formidable reputations, amassed through ruthlessness in combat, making them feared “by all the guerrillas”.¹¹³ This is a direct parallel to Julia Heaton’s findings in the case of the Nicaraguan Sandinistas, where she identified that when women did attain the few leadership roles open to them, they came at “enormous personal sacrifice”.¹¹⁴

After making such huge personal sacrifices, it was a challenge to think of quitting. For Karina, her ruthlessness and battle scars, an eye lost in combat, transformed her into one of FARC’s most feared commanders and one of its highest-ranking guerrilleras. When she fell pregnant, she was allowed to take ‘maternity-leave’ to give birth to her daughter, a rare privilege, but was still required to return to

¹¹⁰ Santiago Jose Sanchez, “Male commanders kept female rebels out of FARC’s top posts, journalist says,” *Agencia EFE* March 17, 2019. Accessed April 19, 2020.

¹¹¹ Gjelsvik, “Women, war and empowerment,” 37.

¹¹² Herrera and Porch, “‘Like going to a fiesta’,” 628.

¹¹³ *Ibid* Porch, 619.

¹¹⁴ Heaton, “Revolutionary Gender Equality,” 32.

FARC just weeks after delivering, leaving her new-born to be raised by family.¹¹⁵ Karina's story is akin to that of many guerrilleras, who perceived their allegiance to FARC as outweighing their duty to their children or a desire to preserve their 'rights' as a woman. Their motivation was a need "to complete the mission".¹¹⁶

Another reason women chose to remain with FARC was knowledge of what faced them once they returned to civilian life. Alongside the risk of arrest and severe punishment if the authorities caught them, they were likely to be shunned by society. Though men face similar peril, women's wickedness was twofold: they turned against their own society, and also against their inherent femininity, a formidable rebellion against Colombian society's strict gender roles.¹¹⁷ Whilst it was very challenging for ex-guerrilleras, who had found some freedom as combatants, to give up their autonomy, as was expected if they returned to civilian life, escaping was also dangerous, as it is well known that FARC executes those who attempt to flee. According to one ex-combatant, Anna-Maria, who successfully escaped, she continues to live in fear years later, because "they [FARC] hunt you down and kill you."¹¹⁸ She is angry with the government for the discrimination she has faced post de-mobilisation, and asks why "they [Colombia's government] tell people they have to escape from these armed groups when there's no support for them?"¹¹⁹

Based on the academic material available, and the personal accounts of several FARC guerrilleras, it is evident that a large portion of FARC's female fighters joined the group to flee or fight the oppressive nature of their society. In the cases of Karina and Sandra, FARC provided them with a unique possibility to complete the education taken from them by their socio-economic standing. For Leidy, the FARC represented a means to right the injustices she witnessed in her community, enabling her to take matters into her own hands. Finally, for Xiomara, FARC validated her passion for guns in a way neither her society nor her government could, due to her femininity. For each of these women, FARC was an apparatus that granted them equal standing with the systems that sought to oppress them.

¹¹⁵ Mosquera, "She Was Colombia's Most-Feared Revolutionary."

¹¹⁶ Garsd, "She misses being a guerrilla."

¹¹⁷ Gjelsvik, "Women, war and empowerment," 56 – 59.

¹¹⁸ Toby Muse, "Women of the FARC," *CGTN America*, March 25, 2016, YouTube Video, 12:15. Accessed April 7, 2020.

¹¹⁹ Muse, "Women of the FARC," *CGTN America*.

Upon further inspection, it becomes clear that each of these women's obstacles can be traced back to machismo culture and gender-discrimination, as the underlying motivating factor for each of them to join FARC was their sex, thus making them reliant on external structures to seek empowerment. However, in a cruel twist of fate, it was this very same machismo and discrimination that these women sought to escape, that welcomed them upon arrival in FARC, and seemingly demanded more of them than their male compatriots. It required guerrilleras to make more sacrifices, be more aggressive, more dedicated, and more tolerant. It was this gender-inequality that resulted in obligatory contraceptives for guerrilleras, which for women like Xiomara, permanently damaged their health. It also led to horrific forced abortions, as was the case for Sonia, or the murder of newborn babies, as experienced by Claudia. However, as disenfranchising FARC was for some, it proved to be equally empowering for others.

Though the FARC promoted the equal distribution of tasks among men and women, it was ruled by a patriarchal structure of command and most of the guerrilleras interviewed failed to see the absence of females in leadership positions as an evidence of discrimination... "FARC women are not Martians nor do they come from Jupiter, they are Colombian women. And as Colombian women they end up replicating there [in the guerrilla] what they socially learnt as little girls."¹²¹ (Andrea Torrens Flores, 55)

¹²¹ Flores, "The Path from Mobilisation to Reintegration of FARC Ex-Guerrilleras," 55.

Chapter III – Epilogue: Empowered?

Addressing the empowering qualities of FARC is a complex task, especially without first-hand knowledge of Colombian women's lives pre- and post-mobilisation as a FARC guerrillera. However, it is possible to locate areas in which women received new freedoms and representation by examining the role they played in FARC's de-mobilisation, the roles they hold in the newly founded political party of FARC, and again, at what the women feel themselves. As such, this chapter endeavours to provide some provisional answers to the question of how did women's mobilisation as part of FARC lead to their socio-political emancipation.

Before continuing with this examination, it is important to once again turn to the framework established by Julia Heaton. Prior to analysing female emancipation under the Sandinista movement, and the subsequent Nicaraguan Sandinista Liberation Front government, she outlined certain structural obstacles and the realities of the organisation. Thus, Heaton provides a fair basis upon which to evaluate Nicaraguan women's empowerment through their mobilisation, consequently facilitating a deeper analysis of the success of women's emancipation attempts.

In keeping with Heaton's framework, it important to note that women's liberation played no role in FARC's original agenda, rather, women's freedom was seen as natural consequence of national liberation from oligarchical rule.¹²² It was not until FARC's 7th National Conference in 1982 that women's interests were first added to the organisation's agenda, though this was only in relation to the rights of guerrilleras within the group and not related to the broader issue of women's liberation in Colombia as a whole.¹²³ Gradually, FARC did increasingly incorporate women's rights issues into its agenda, though largely at the behest of women themselves. Their persistence yielded some results, and, in 2016, the FARC openly claimed to be part of the "world-wide [movement] against... patriarchy and all forms of discrimination between human beings".¹²⁵

¹²² Lainer, "Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration of Women Ex-Combatants of the FARC," 56.

¹²³ *Ibid*, 59.

¹²⁵ *Ibid*, 59.

Women and the Peace Accords

On November 24th 2016, the Colombian government, under the administration of President Juan Manuel Santos, and FARC, lead by its Commander-in-Chief, Timoleón Jiménez, signed a final peace agreement.¹²⁶ This ground-breaking achievement was the result of four years of formal negotiations between the two groups, which took place in Havana, Cuba, and formally ended the longest armed conflict of the Western Hemisphere.¹²⁷ It was also the first time women were represented during an attempt at peace on both sides, with almost half of FARC's delegation being female,¹²⁸ and it actively promoted women's equal participation and representation through the entirety of the peace making process.¹²⁹

The Peace Accords "gender-based approach",¹³⁰ as coined by Alexandra Phelan, was in stark contrast to women's roles and representation in earlier peace making attempts, where only a handful of women had been engaged.¹³¹ In June 2014, the government announced the creation of a sub-commission dedicated to issues of gender, which was predominantly comprised of women, and represented by equal numbers of FARC members and government officials. According to Virginia M. Bouvier, this sub-commission was innovative, and provided a key vehicle for women's empowerment.¹³³ It addressed a variety of women's issues; from creating programs that encourage female participation and leadership in politics, to reconciling the socio-economic and political marginalisation of women and members of the LBGTQ+ community across Colombia.¹³⁴

This dedication to reconciling the issues Colombian women faced, which ultimately contributed to many women's mobilisation, marks a major change in how

¹²⁶ E. Evan Ellis, *Transnational Organized Crime in Latin American and the Caribbean: From Evolving Threats and Responses to Integrated, Adaptive Solutions* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2018), 77.

¹²⁷ Renata Segura and Delphine Mechoulan, "Made in Havana: How Colombia and the FARC Decided to End the War," (New York: International Peace Institute, February 2017): 1.

¹²⁸ Julián Cortés, *The FARC-EP: Beyond the Rifles, "Reaching the Heart" of the Colombian Peasants*, (Wageningen University & Research, 2017), 118.

¹²⁹ Roslyn Warren et al., "Inclusive Justice: How Women Shape Transitional Justice in Tunisia and Colombia," (Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security, 2017): 38 – 40.

¹³⁰ Alexandra Phelan, "Engaging Insurgency: The Impact of the 2016 Colombian Peace Agreement on FARC's Political Participation," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 42, no. 9 (2019): 846.

¹³¹ Virginia M. Bouvier, "Gender and the Role of Women in Colombia's Peace Process," New York: UN Women (March 4, 2016): 17.

¹³³ Bouvier, "Gender and the Role of Women in Colombia's Peace Process," 21.

¹³⁴ Phelan, "Engaging Insurgency," 846 – 847.

Colombia managed the gender inequality that had been pervasive within the country for so long. This was a major win for the women who had utilised the FARC to fight for recognition and inclusion.

Women in Colombian Politics

Following the Peace Accords, FARC evolved into a fully-fledged political party, entitled the *Fuerza Alternativa Revolucionaria del Común* (FARC).¹³⁵ The FARC Party announced its dedication to ‘*empoderamiento colectivo*’, or collective empowerment, the system of joint struggle for emancipation and female participation in public spheres almost immediately.¹³⁶ FARC claims that once women are empowered, through equal access to education and pay, fighting violence against women, as well as the elimination of machismo, society itself will become stronger.¹³⁷ To achieve these goals, FARC adopted ‘insurgent feminism’, its own interpretation of feminism. According to the head of FARC’s national commission on women and gender, FARC’s “feminism is called insurgent because we [FARC] changed the type of fight, but we [FARC] did not renounce the fight to transform society.”¹³⁸

Additionally, FARC filled several of its Senate seats with ex-guerrilleras, and subsequently claimed that the presence of women within their political party “is greater than in traditional parties”.¹³⁹ Of these former female fighters, perhaps the most well-known are Sandra Ramírez, whose history with FARC was discussed in Chapter II, and Victoria Sandino, who were both sworn into the Colombian Senate in 2018.

Victoria Sandino was a member of FARC for 24 years, and worked her way up the group’s hierarchy to become one of its few female commanders. Like many women, she joined FARC as a way to defend herself, as “having a gun made us

¹³⁵ Angela Barajas, “Colombia’s FARC unveils new political party,” *CNN World*, September 1, 2017. Accessed April 16, 2020.

¹³⁶ Mujeres Farianas, “Tesis de Mujer y Género FARC-EP: Congreso Constitutivo del Partido,” *Feminism Insurgente* (2017): 4.

¹³⁷ Mujeres Farianas, “Tesis de Mujer y Género,” 5.

¹³⁸ Rachel Schmidt, “Framing a Revolution: Identity, Gender, and Rebel Group Cohesion in Colombia,” *Carleton University: Norman Paterson School of International Affairs* (2020): 22.

¹³⁹ Victoria Sandino, “Interview with Victoria Sandino,” *FARC-EP International*, last modified January 3, 2018. Accessed April 10, 2020.

[women] strong”,¹⁴⁰ though she never expected to attain the position and influence she now holds. She now leads the party’s policy on women’s issues, and in an unimaginable opportunity for a girl born to an impoverished family in the Colombian jungle, Victoria has even travelled to Europe to discuss her guerrilla experiences with the United Nations.¹⁴¹ Although she is pleased “that the violence in the battlefield has stopped”, she argues that FARC was good for women, and “offered an enormous possibility to develop ourselves [women]...and project the future of the country we [FARC’s women] want to build where we have equal rights”.¹⁴²

Similarly, Sandra Ramírez, the first woman included during the Havana Peace talks,¹⁴³ echoes Victoria’s sentiments, stating, “what I am today I owe to the guerrilla organisation that formed me”.¹⁴⁴ This appreciation of FARC is a common theme amongst the women who chose not to leave the group, instead de-mobilising post-Final Agreement. Though they may disagree with some of the decision and actions taken by FARC, women such as Marta, another FARC ex-guerrillera, believe that “being a guerrillera gave you a different position from the one you had before, and also gave you the feeling of power through your gun and uniform. It situates you in a completely different context than the one of the humiliated and beaten rural woman”.¹⁴⁵

Joining FARC empowered different women in different ways. For women reluctant to get married or become mothers, guerrillera-hood preserved their independence. For Leidy, FARC awarded her such a strong sense of independence that even after de-mobilising, she “prefer[s] to stay alone, rather than being under the machismo”.¹⁴⁶ Thus, even the group’s distribution of contraceptives was a liberating experience, as it awarded women some control over their bodies, and restricted

¹⁴⁰ Laura Jayne Dixon, “Taking the Fight From the Field to the Legislature,” *U.S. News & World Report*, December 3, 2018. Accessed April 19, 2020.

¹⁴¹ Dixon, “Taking the Fight From the Field to the Legislature.”

¹⁴² Victoria Sandino, “Voice of Russia: Interview with Victoria Sandino,” interview by Brittany Peterson, *FARC-EP International*, November 13, 2013. Accessed April 10, 2020

¹⁴³ Sandra Ramírez, “Q&A: Colombia’s FARC Guerrilleras ‘Took Up Arms to Make Ourselves Heard,’” interview by Patricia Grogg, *Inter Press Service*, September 27, 2012. Accessed May 20, 2020.

¹⁴⁴ Libardi, “Sandra Ramírez: The vast majority of our party remain in peace.”

¹⁴⁵ Andrea Torrens Flores, “The Path From Mobilization to Reintegration of FARC Ex-Guerrilleras,” Master’s Thesis: University of Amsterdam (2018): 39.

¹⁴⁶ Gjelsvik, “Women, War and Empowerment,” 60.

‘freedom’ to express their sexuality, unthinkable opportunities in conservative Colombia. For other women, like Xiomara, who wished to pursue an otherwise unattainable profession, either due to social or economic reasons, joining FARC was the chance to fulfil such dreams. However, for almost all Colombian women, who had spent their lives under the strict male control, the military training and arming FARC awarded its guerrilleras was liberating.¹⁴⁷ Furthermore, in cases where women attained higher rank, such as Karina, they were awarded the un-imaginable power of command over male soldiers, a tremendous achievement in patriarchal Colombia. However, for many other women, FARC was an even greater disappointment than Colombia’s state and culture, as at least within their own society, they were well aware of the limitations placed upon them. Instead FARC lured vulnerable women into their ranks with promises that never came to fruition, as pointed out by Claudia, “they promised me [Claudia] thousands of things, that I’d learn stuff, that there’d be many opportunities to study... I believed them. But none of these promises ever turned out to be true.”¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁷ Herrera and Porch, “Like Going to a Fiesta,” 611.

¹⁴⁸ Moloney, “Lured into fighting Colombia’s girl rebels face abuse.”

Conclusion

Whilst FARC presents a fascinating case study for a multitude of investigations, its employment and treatment of women is arguably the most noteworthy. Not only were women amongst the first members of FARC, they also constituted a sizeable portion of the group's fighters throughout its fifty year reign. Whilst this research has endeavoured to reveal many truths about women's roles and experiences as part of FARC, the most glaring reality is that guerrilleras' experiences are hugely complex, diverse and predominantly context-dependent. As a result, it is crucial to listen to the stories of guerrilleras themselves, as this thesis has endeavoured to do.

With regard to motivating factors, it is clear from the stories of Karina, Leidy, Xiomara and Sandra that FARC presented a unique opportunity for women to fight for their own futures, not only as Colombian citizens but also as women in a destructively patriarchal society. With its promises of equality and freedom, FARC appeared as the white knight of liberation, seemingly putting its words into actions by arming women who were almost always the victim of the men in their lives.

The question of empowerment is harder to answer, as the level of liberation each woman experienced was hugely dependent on individual circumstances. Women such as Victoria Sandino and Sandra Ramírez achieved levels of freedom they could have only dreamed about as children, whilst others, such as Sonia and Claudia experienced only further abuse and suppression at the hands of FARC. Whilst FARC did liberate women from their traditional roles as housewives and caretakers, and present them with the opportunity to take on roles that were normally restricted to men, it did impose its own restrictions and discriminations upon its female combatants. Where Colombian society demanded women be overly feminized, incapable of anything without a man, FARC demanded the opposite, eliminating all traces of womanhood, apart from the sexual benefits they could provide. In the rare circumstance that a woman was able to mould herself into the version of a woman FARC wanted her to be, absent of femininity but willing to perform 'womanly' duties, she could finally attain equal footing with her male compatriots.

Within the Colombian context, greater understanding of what left its women feeling that they had no choice but to join a guerrilla organisation to escape the socio-political injustice, will assist the government de-mobilisation efforts, and continue to promote peace and stability within the country. This understanding of machismo, and the gender-discrimination that has become so prevalent across Colombia is more crucial than ever given FARC's re-mobilisation efforts. Further research into the empowering qualities of irregular organisations held for women, is crucial across the board, but especially so in Latin America due to the multitude of guerrilla organisations that emerged in the region during the 20th century, and the high percentage of women included in so many of them.

Whilst there is still so little known about women's empowerment through mobilisation in irregular organisations, this research has aimed to offer some insight into the women of FARC, examining them as individuals living in a violent and oppressive society, not as victims or criminals as is the norm. In this way, it has ventured to reveal the detrimental impact machismo and gender-discrimination had upon the lives of so many women, and how ingrained it was in Colombian society, making it inescapable for women, even within purportedly 'immune' organisations. Whilst it is evident that certain women did achieve the empowerment they sought, many others were left feeling just as exploited and victimized as they had been upon mobilisation.

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