

Youth Combatants in Colombia

Intersecting Identities, Reintegration, and Peacebuilding

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The dividing line between “youth” and “adult” is ever ambiguous and context-dependent. However, a clear definition of this line is crucial as it pertains to legal recruitment into the armed forces. In Colombia, “the rules defining minors are contradictory. International humanitarian law permits the recruitment of children at age 15, but the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child (2000), ratified by Colombia in 2005, sets the standard at 18 years of age” (Bouvier 14). Yet regardless of these rules, every armed group in the Colombian conflict has recruited youth combatants. The unique experience of a youth combatant in the Colombian conflict is shaped not only by his or her young age but also by his or her intersecting class, racial, sexual, and gender identities. Gender has a particularly strong influence, and male and female youth combatants face distinct challenges when confronting stereotypical tropes of masculinity and femininity in the context of conflict. The reintegration process proves to be difficult for former youth combatants, many of whom are stigmatized or rejected by their former communities. Today, in the post-accord (though not post-conflict) period in Colombia, it is paramount to view former youth combatants and youth in general as capable peacebuilders instead of mere victims and perpetrators.

The youth combatant experience in the Colombian conflict is in no way monolithic; rather, it is shaped by each youth’s particular intersection of identities. While some youths are forcibly recruited into armed groups, others, particularly those of a low socioeconomic status, voluntarily decide to join the forces. However, child protection specialist Michael Wessels argues that “their decisions cannot be regarded as voluntary because they are nearly always bounded by desperation and survival needs” (Wessells 364). Although lower class children certainly make active decisions to join armed groups, their decisions should not be considered voluntary because their sense of agency is constrained by their class. Victoria Sanford conducted

interviews with child soldiers in both Guatemala and Colombia, and the testimony of Gaspar, a Tz'utijil-Maya and member of the Guatemalan army, demonstrates this concept of class-based constrained agency. In his testimony, Gaspar expresses the initial excitement he felt regarding the prospect of learning to read and write in the army. However, he was subsequently disappointed when he realized that in reality, joining the army was not an opportunity to get ahead. He reflects, "The army says we will learn to read and write, but when you go into the army, they teach you very little. They give you a weapon and they teach you to kill. They give you shoes because you don't have any. Many times, you join the army for a pair of shoes. When they grab you to recruit you, they say, 'You don't have any shoes'" (Sanford 59). If it had not been for Gaspar's material and educational poverty, he likely would not have made his "voluntary" decision to join the army. Class-based constrained agency is an abiding concept, as is evidenced by the poem that the young soldier in Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quixote* recites on his way to battle: "I'm forced to go to war / because I'm so poor; / if I had money, believe / me I wouldn't leave" (Cervantes 617).

Youth combatants' racial identities also shape their experience within armed groups. In particular, indigenous children are disproportionately recruited into the armed forces. According to the International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs, indigenous people represent 3.4% of Colombia's national population. However, out of the 18,000 children who Natalia Springer calculated were "directly involved in the armed conflict as part of guerrillas or post-demobilization groups known as *bandas criminales*...29% of the children were indigenous" (Martuscelli and Villa 395). In addition to comprising a staggeringly high percentage of youth combatants, indigenous children often experience excessive cruelty upon recruitment and within the armed forces. In a Human Rights Watch report by Sebastian Bret, Juan José, a Sicuani from

the department of Vichada, offers a reflection on his recruitment into the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). He recounts:

As they were passing through the village, they tried to persuade me. They said that no one suffers in the guerrilla movement, that you have everything you need, and you don't kill anyone. But it was a lie, because once you're in, it's all different and they order you to do all sorts of things. Then they told me that if I didn't join, they would kill me. The same thing happened with several other indigenous recruits. There were other indigenous people with the guerrillas, women and children (Brett 44).

Indigenous children are especially vulnerable targets for the guerrillas because of their intersecting identities. Not only are they young and racially marginalized, but they also tend to come from rural areas of poverty with poor educational infrastructure. In particular, children from the 27 different indigenous groups within the rural department of Vaupés have been targeted. A 2009 report from Mitu, Vaupés by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees stated, "In the past two years, the leading cause of displacement has been the recruitment of indigenous children by illegal armed groups. In 2008, some 500 families fled their homes, most because their children were about to be taken into illegal groups" (Verney). Displacement is particularly painful for indigenous populations because they have strong cultural ties to their land.

Another identity that influences the youth combatant experience is sexual orientation. Although many LGBTQI+ youth combatants kept their sexual orientation hidden during their time in the armed forces, the post-accord period has allowed more LGBTQI+ former combatants

to share their stories, though still not without facing threats. Cristian Camilo Gonzalez was forcibly recruited into the FARC when he was 14. In an interview with the Thomas Reuters Foundation, Gonzalez shared, “Under their rules, homosexuality was banned and even punished by death. For the FARC, homosexuality was seen as a Yankee affliction and a crime. My sexuality was incompatible with the rules” (Moloney). Once Gonzalez realized the grave persecution he would face if his homosexuality were to be discovered, he seized the first opportunity he had to escape. He admitted, “It was a huge risk. I walked for days until I was sure they had lost my track” (Moloney). And although heterosexual girls do not suffer the same kind of persecution that LGBTQI+ girls and boys do within the FARC, their sexuality is still greatly restrained. Based on interviews with seven adolescent girls who had been FARC combatants between the ages of 13 and 17, Pilar Hernández and Amanda Romero concluded that proper sexual education, especially for girls, is sorely lacking within the context of guerrilla life. They argue, “Sexuality understood as an overarching frame of identity and development is an area requiring extensive psychological care and education. The social and cultural context within their communities and within the guerrilla life limits these girls’ sexuality to their capacity to offer pleasure and bear children” (Hernández and Romero 33). Beyond their role as providers of pleasure to men and children to the community, there is little consideration given to the girls’ own concerns such as their capacity to receive pleasure, how to address sexually transmitted diseases, and how to handle unwanted pregnancies.

The United Nations’ *Progress Study on Youth, Peace, and Security* asserts:

“Understanding how gender identities feed into violent conflict is key, as is focusing more deeply on the interplay between different intersecting identities (age, race, ethnicity, social class, sexual orientation, ability, religion, urban/rural setting) and gender” (United Nations 16). Thus

far, I have analyzed how youth combatants' class, race, sexual orientation, and sexuality have influenced their experience in the Colombian armed forces; it is crucial to now analyze how these intersecting identities interact with gender.

Youth combatants' gender identities are inextricably tied to both their motivations for joining the armed forces and the challenges they experience within the ranks. In a report for UN Women, Virginia Bouvier delineates enlistment rationale along the gender lines:

For boys, joining armed groups—both the military as well as illegal armed groups—provides one of the few rites of passage available for marking the transition into manhood...Domestic abuse and lack of meaningful options for girls are among the main push factors women cite for joining the FARC (Bouvier 15).

For girls seeking independence and leadership opportunities, the structure of the FARC tends to be more attractive than broader Colombian society, and FARC recruiters are well aware of their organization's appeal in contrast to the highly patriarchal surrounding society. In their article on the role of female fighters within the FARC, Natalia Herrera and Douglas Porch contend that the guerrilla exploits this systemic inequity during recruitment:

The combination of poverty, lack of education, and limited opportunity and autonomy offered to women in the highly patriarchal Colombian society means that young *campesinas* are particularly vulnerable to FARC recruitment campaigns (Herrera and Porch 611).

Once a young woman enlists in the FARC, she learns that physical and sexual violence directed towards women is strictly forbidden. A woman also has the freedom to choose her own partner (as long as her choice is approved by her superiors) and to have a public relationship with him, but “sexuality is rigidly controlled in the guerrilla life. Contraception is strictly enforced on women only...women were solely responsible for preventing pregnancies” (Hernández and Romero 32). If a woman becomes pregnant, the FARC leaders force her to have an abortion. Sonia, age 14, shared the story of her own forced abortion:

I got pregnant and they did not allow me to have the baby. They took us to the town where we spent about 5 to 6 months. We were 4. They took us in a car to another camp. At night they gave us pills, and administered us some injections, and then we fell asleep. The next day I felt sick. I was very sick for 2 months, one of the girls almost died... she was sent to Bogotá and we didn't know if she died (32).

Despite the increased sexual freedom that women experience within the FARC, the dire consequences of pregnancy within the armed forces take a great toll on women both physically and psychologically.

Young men are also highly vulnerable to recruitment campaigns, as is evidenced by a return to the idea of joining an armed group as a rite of passage into manhood. In his study of masculinities and gang violence in Medellín, Colombia, Adam Baird found many similarities

between soldiering and gang violence because of the uniting factors of hegemonic masculinity and weaponry. He writes,

Like soldiering, the capacity for violence is a rite of passage into the gang and a definitive assertion of male adulthood. Notes said, 'Holding a gun for the first time means putting on the long trousers.'... Semiotically, the gun is perhaps the most palpable symbol of hegemonic male power. It has an aesthetic, even libidinal quality, reflecting the emotion, seduction and 'power of commodity desire' (Baird 203).

This notion of "putting on the long trousers" relates not only to masculinity but also to class-based constrained agency. While many lower-class boys would prefer to obtain the sense of "male power" that Colombian society demands of them in an alternative way, their poverty and lack of education makes weapon wielding violence their only viable option. In an interview with Baird, Mechudo, a drug dealer in a Medellín gang, referenced the lack of job opportunities in his community and described the type of job for which he would leave the gang: "Ahhh, yeah, a job, yeah. I'd like to work but there's nothin' to do, bro. ... Err, like working in a bank downtown. One of those jobs. I like how they wear a suit, how they are polite and treat people well. I'd like to work in a bank, not just for the money but for the status it gives you, working in a decent job at a good company" (Baird 207-208). Yet in Mechudo's case, his intersecting class and gender identities left him with no choice but to join the gang if he desired both a way out of poverty and proof of his masculinity.

The intersecting identities of class, race, sexual orientation, sexuality, and gender continue to influence the experiences of former youth combatants during the reintegration process. In order to combat the stigma and rejection that many former youth combatants face upon reintegration, education and engagement between the reintegrants and community members should be prioritized. Unfortunately, as social workers Myriam Denov and Ines Marchand found, “The reinsertion program for child soldiers in Colombia focuses on ‘protecting’ demobilized youth and Colombian society from each other by keeping them separate, rather than openly addressing the issue of fear and stigmatization that each group has for the other” (Denov and Marchand 238). This “protection” and separation ultimately prevents demobilized youth from receiving the community acceptance and support that they desperately need to reintegrate. Reintegration is especially difficult for demobilized youth who are indigenous, as “guerrillas of indigenous background are considered tainted by interaction with non-indigenous society and are welcomed back in their communities only after they have undergone lengthy purification rituals, ‘which pisses them off, so they leave’” (Herrera and Porch 626). Girls and women also struggle in gender-traditional disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) programs. Bouvier writes,

Past DDR programs have perpetuated traditional roles for women and ignored the social and political aspirations of many female ex-combatants. Within the FARC, women constitute up to 40% of the membership and engage in a variety of roles, including positions of military and political authority.... Ensuring meaningful social and political engagement for these women will be key to their successful integration into civilian life (Bouvier 24-25).

Instead of keeping former combatants and community members separate, it is paramount that the community is educated on the unique needs of former combatants and has the opportunity to engage with them in order to work toward acceptance and true integration.

In accordance with the United Nations' *Progress Study on Youth, Peace, and Security*, governments and international actors should cease casting youth as mere victims and perpetrators and instead recognize their peacebuilding contributions as "the missing peace" (United Nations 3). Whether they were constrained by their age, class, race, sexual orientation, sexuality, or gender and left with no choice but to join the armed forces, former youth combatants can certainly be viewed as victims of circumstance. Yet it also must be acknowledged that these same youths were complicit in perpetrating war crimes against Colombian civilians. However, beyond being labelled as a victim and/or perpetrator, every youth has the potential to assume an identity as a peacebuilder. Applying a gendered lens to peacebuilding, the United Nations states, "Investing in youth peacebuilding work focused on promoting positive, gender-equitable and non-violent masculine roles and identities is an essential step towards fostering peaceful and inclusive societies" (United Nations 16). Alvin, a youth leader from the Costo de Oro peace community, was engaged in peacebuilding work that promoted non-violent masculinities far before the Colombian peace accords were even signed. Despite the fact that he had seen many male peers turn to weaponry over the years, he boldly maintained a non-violent position. In an interview with Victoria Sanford, he expressed,

One of the principal sources of support for us, for the youth, is the example of the process of the peace communities. We are non-violent. We don't support what the

armed actors are doing. We have developed a way of life without weapons. We have shown the Colombian government and also the world that we are capable of building peace (Sanford 75).

Since the signing of the Colombian peace accords, even more spaces have been opening up for youth to participate in peacebuilding efforts. Regarding the potentiality and complexity of former youth combatants engaging in these new peacebuilding spaces, Patricia Nabuco Martuscelli and Rafael Duarte Villa state,

In the Colombian case, children involved in the conflict are labeled as victims of the armed conflict and ambiguously represented as risks that put pressure on the peace process because of the risk of re-recruitment and the social perception of them as threats. On the other hand, the Colombian agreements provide spaces to guarantee participation of these child victims as potential peace-builders or stakeholders (Martuscelli and Villa 398).

However, as Angela Lederach argues in her article “Youth Provoking Peace: An Intersectional Approach to Territorial Peacebuilding in Colombia” the mere signing of peace accords and the creation of these spaces in writing is not enough to build a sustainable peace. As Elmer, a young man she interviewed in the Alta Montaña region, articulated,

Until they begin to work with communities, the accords will remain in the air and will not be grounded. The work of peacebuilding is distinct from laying down

arms and peace accords. ... There are many processes, associations, and youth peace committees in the territory, if we could unite these processes, that would permit us to build, as the accords say, ‘a stable and lasting peace’” (Lederach 32).

By applying a lens of intersectionality to youth combatant experiences in Colombia, it is clear that each youth’s intersecting class, race, sexual orientation, sexuality, and gender identities color their particular experience. These identities continue to shape the reintegration processes of former youth combatants, and their unique needs should be incorporated into disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration programs. Going forward in the post-accord period in Colombia, the contributions of former youth combatants and youth in general should be considered the key to building an inclusive peace.

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