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## From 'bad women' to role models: making Demobilisation and Reintegration gender-transformative

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With the demobilisation of the former FARC guerrillas in Colombia, Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) processes are in the public eye again in Latin America. Thanks to the Women, Peace and Security Agenda, much work is being done so that gender can no longer be overlooked in such processes. This was not the case when the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity (URNG) guerrillas demobilised, over twenty years ago.

Although gender is now squarely on the DDR agenda, this does not mean that DDR processes currently fare much better at transforming gender inequality. Lessons from Guatemala's past can therefore prove useful for

the future of Colombia and other countries. This blog, based on the article [From gender-blind to gender-transformative reintegration: women's experiences with social reintegration in Guatemala](#), describes the many challenges that Guatemala's gender-blind DDR programme produced for women, and identifies how DDR could better promote the transformation of gender inequality.

### **DDR and gender: transforming or maintaining inequalities?**

Although women in armed groups often break through traditional gender roles, societies do not tend to change accordingly, forcing female ex-combatants to return to 'feminised' roles. UNSCR 1325 called for DDR to consider the different needs of female and male ex-combatants – unfortunately producing few notable changes in practice. Livelihood training for women has for example often focused on supposedly female skills like sewing or hairdressing, while obstacles for women's employment are generally not addressed.

Many of the 23 Guatemalan female ex-combatants interviewed experienced such problems. Not much is known about their experiences, since although two truth commissions operated in the country, their focus was on survivors rather than perpetrators – thus disregarding the fact that many ex-combatants also suffered violence, including sexual violence, and lost family members. The study looked at their experiences with long-term social reintegration.

As *guerrilleras*, women had a variety of functions. In addition to being combatants, they served in the medical support team, as radio operators, or political representatives. Although guerrilla life was hard, many women are proud of having fought for a just cause, and feel satisfaction for having learned to read and write and acquired medical, political and many other skills. Since everyday practice was largely equal for men and women, and men adopted 'feminine' tasks like washing or cooking, women felt they experienced some form of gender equality. Nevertheless,

guerrilla leadership was male and women's participation was more an instrument towards the revolutionary cause than a goal in itself.

This became apparent in the DDR process, which did not have a gender perspective. All ex-combatants received some education, health and housing assistance, as well as economic and technical support for a 'productive project', for example to open a shop. These projects failed in most cases. Education support also had limited success, since women lacked proven work experience or professional training. In the meantime, the URNG leadership focused its energy on becoming a political party, leaving the ex-combatants to their own devices. Therefore, although there are no clear numbers in relation to this, according to one participant, ex-combatants now "form an army of unemployed". This situation has gendered dynamics.



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## Family relations at the centre of reintegration

The private sphere is often left unaddressed by DDR and other post-conflict mechanisms, but it strongly affects women's possibilities to participate actively in society. One participant explained that although gendered role divisions had been equal during conflict, "as soon as we demobilised, the women had to go back to the kitchen and to give birth". This is common to post-conflict contexts, where ex-combatants often experience a loss of agency after conflict. This was hard to accept for women who had learnt that their capacities went beyond traditional gender roles.

Several participants experienced domestic violence, or identified this in other couples. One participant explained that "after the demobilisation many demobilised comrades started to take liquor. They ended up being drunk, violent". Yet the magnitude of domestic violence among ex-combatant couples is unclear, because criticising such behaviour among former comrades is considered a taboo. Other painful experiences included not being able to support ill family members, some of whom died while the women were in the guerrilla camps. Women were often blamed for this, regarded to have failed at their gendered role of caring.

Traditional gender roles, and especially childcare responsibilities, also made it difficult for women to work and study. Some women found ways around this, for example working night shifts or getting up in the middle of the night to study. Others, mostly urban women from middle class backgrounds, were able to pay for childcare. However, many participants currently do not have stable or well-paid jobs and are facing poverty. This shows that reintegration crosses the public and private spheres. Either women assumed a double burden of work and caring tasks, or they sacrificed one or the other.

## Female ex-combatants in society: from stigmatised to agents of change

Women experienced gendered impacts in wider society too. Many of them feel stigmatised for having been *guerrilleras*. Two women were fired or

resigned from state institutions, being bullied and criticised for being assertive and outspoken. Women were doubly stigmatised: for having been a guerrilla member, and for speaking their mind in a patriarchal and authoritarian society.

The change from collective guerrilla life to the tough reality of surviving in society, facing poverty and *machismo* (a hegemonic form of overt, exaggerated masculinity), was a shock for many women. The individual focus of most DDR processes aims to break command and control structures, but maintaining collective structures can help ex-combatants to rely on each other for support, safety, and psychological well-being. The importance of the collective is apparent from Guatemala, where in a few cases land was purchased for groups of ex-combatants who had nowhere to return to. Some of the participants lived in such communities, where women have more active social and political roles as cooperative board members or even community mayors. They believe this is because conflict-era gender roles were better preserved here.

Participation in social and community organisations has formed a way of diminishing the stigma towards ex-combatants. For example, women's groups have implemented health projects within their community, and organisational and leadership processes in neighbouring communities. One participant explained: "I believe that what helped here, in creating relationships and build trust with the people, was the support of this community, in terms of health, to the surrounding communities".



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### **Making reintegration gender transformative**

The post-conflict return to traditional gender roles for female ex-combatants is a lost opportunity, especially given their emancipatory experiences as *guerrilleras*. To prevent this, collective and organisational processes should be promoted among female ex-combatants. In addition, reintegration processes must address gender relations in the various spheres of women's lives. In addition to support in the public spheres of education, employment and politics, attention should be paid to household and family relationships. This not only requires providing childcare, but also gendered training and awareness raising to assist men and women to adapt to a civilian life with new roles.

Reintegration must go hand in hand with transitional justice, which can improve social reintegration and promote gender equality by increasing its focus on ex-combatants. Truth commissions could for example expand their scope from the recognition of the crimes committed in conflict – also against female ex-combatants – to encompass the emancipatory processes and the changed gender roles that took place. Using such examples of agency, female ex-combatants can turn from 'bad women' into role models, whose experiences of emancipation can help to transform gender relations.

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This post draws on the author's article ['From gender-blind to gender-transformative reintegration: Women's experiences with social](#)

[reintegration in Guatemala](#)' (International Feminist Journal of Politics, 2020).

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