

**Beyond Child Soldiering:
Children as Creative Entrepreneurs in Contexts of Violence in
Colombia**

Niousha Roshani

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I, Niousha Roshani, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

Abstract

Children in Colombia have engaged in chronic warfare since before the country's foundation. However, current policy and intervention models targeting war-affected children in Colombia have been designed and implemented through the narrow scope of child recruitment, disregarding other dynamics of the war and representing child combatants as one-dimensional victims. Many young combatants outside the recognised armed forces are excluded from interventions and forms of support granted to child soldiers. Children residing in areas of armed conflict or other prolonged situations of violence often become perpetrators (Boyden & de Berry, 2004; Kuper, 2005; Rosen, 2005). Recent studies present evidence that many children participate in conflict of their own volition, utilising creativity and resilience to improve their circumstances (Rosen, 2005; Honwana, 2006; Hart, 2006; Rosen, 2007; Poretti, 2008; Mayall & Morrow, 2011). This study builds on these analyses by exploring the perspectives of young people with varying forms of engagement in conflict beyond child soldiering in the Colombian conflict.

Utilising a combination of creative qualitative methods in workshops with young people, including audio-visual activities, capoeira, and dancing, enabled me to collect data on their responses to violence in two contrasting communities in Cali and Medellín. In learning about the trajectories of children's lives under conditions of protracted violence and economic uncertainty in a fragmented context, this study analyses in two locations the ways young people have negotiated their daily responsibilities and developed survival strategies while employing their agency when navigating multidimensional types of violence.

The analysis reveals young people's realities and responses to interconnected forms of violence and inequalities in Colombia examining their experiences of direct engagement with violence and the structural uncertainties resulting from the protracted conflict, and how memory is used in relation to the fragmented contexts of their lives. The findings pointed to the link between the various dynamics of their participation in contexts of violence in Colombia as they shift between roles and identities beyond child soldiering; and how young people maximise opportunities and resist limiting conditions by

employing their resilience as creative entrepreneurs. The thesis concludes on the one hand that it is not feasible to examine children's engagement in the Colombian war only through the lens of child soldiering as a phenomenon on its own. On the other hand, it argues that children are not just tactical agents—making strategic decisions based on resources available to them (Honwana, 2006)—but also use their creativity and entrepreneurial agency shifting among myriad identities and roles, earning privileges and power and resisting exclusion, inequality and their limiting circumstances.

Impact Statement

In the international imagination, media representations of Colombia have been limited to violence, drug cartels, cocaine, drug mules, kidnappings and more negative depictions. The recent peace negotiations with the FARC brought a gust of hope, not only in the country but also internationally, for an end to a decades-long war. Current talks with the ELN have been stalled with the latest attacks in 2018 and the upcoming presidential elections that are leaning towards a right-winged government could possibly threaten the arduous work that has been done toward peace and reconciliation. The other side of the story is that human rights activists continue to be killed at an alarming rate, most of whom are Indigenous and of African descent. The violence continues in Colombia with the same or even greater intensity, among active armed groups, including the FARC among active armed groups. Young people remain at the crossroads of these violent dynamics. Yet, their perspectives and lived realities are not taken into account in the building of a 'post-conflict' society, in public policies and legislation both nationally and internationally, in the design of humanitarian interventions and even in academia.

The findings in my research can assist in underpinning some of the root causes of this continuing violence and provide an analysis of the experiences and insights of young people in contexts of violence in Colombia. This information can be extremely beneficial for future scholarship and also in the direction that the country takes in its efforts to establish a more peaceful society. My study's questioning of the definition of childhood as set forth by the UNCRC contributes to a new outlook of how childhood is perceived and conceptualised in Colombia. The same examination of understandings of young people can also be valuable in similar contexts of violence regionally and internationally and where local definitions are incongruent with the universality of the early phases of life. The knowledge produced in my thesis reconceptualises young people engaged in violence and brings forth that they are not just resilient agents but also creative entrepreneurs in the ways that they negotiate their circumstances and maximize their opportunities, breaking the negative paradigms of young urban poor youth in limited and violent contexts.

My research also found that young people engage in the armed conflict as combatants in many other forms than the recognized category of child soldiers and the over-emphasis on child soldiering can potentially mask the multitude of other young people engaged in the armed conflict. The unchanged structural inequalities, racial discrimination and social exclusion continue to propel young people to engage in war activities establishing a vicious cycle of violence. This information is not only key to the current post-conflict efforts in Colombia, humanitarian initiatives and to the definition of what constitutes a child soldier but also in the direction of research undertaken both within the country and internationally. The same is true for public policy design and legislation examining who is a child soldier and what constitutes the dynamics in which young people engage in violence. That leads to another important aspect of my research that is beneficial to policy, practice and research. The intersection of war, poverty, and inequalities in Colombia has produced different types of violence that are interconnected and multi-dimensional in which young people navigate—it is impossible to address or analyse one type of violence in isolation to other types. This calls for an urgent need to reframe the debate on child recruitment beyond the category of child soldiers, using the long-standing war, international legislation, and human rights as starting points.

My use of visual methods can also be particularly of value in future scholarship working with young people, especially in difficult and delicate contexts. Employing visual methods has demonstrated its potential to not only obtain enriched data with very little to no interference with the responses but also grant young participants the power to decide which information to share about themselves and how to go about it. These findings are also crucial in relaying the importance of incorporating young people's perspectives in the design of the policies, laws, public discourses and responses that are meant to improve their livelihoods. My research's attempt to break the paradigms of victimisation, marginalisation, and poverty of young people helped to shift the discourse by focusing on the potential of their creativity and entrepreneurial agency. This could be highly beneficial in the capacity of the public, private and third sector as well as academic research to incorporate the positive contributions, attributes and roles of young people in the peace efforts and come to terms with Colombia's long relationship with violence.

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Glossary of Terms

AUC	<i>Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia</i> or United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia
BACRIM	<i>Bandas Criminales</i> or criminal gangs
DDR	Disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration
ELN	<i>Ejército de Liberación Nacional</i> or National Liberation Army
FARC	<i>Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia</i> or Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	The United Nations Children's Fund
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

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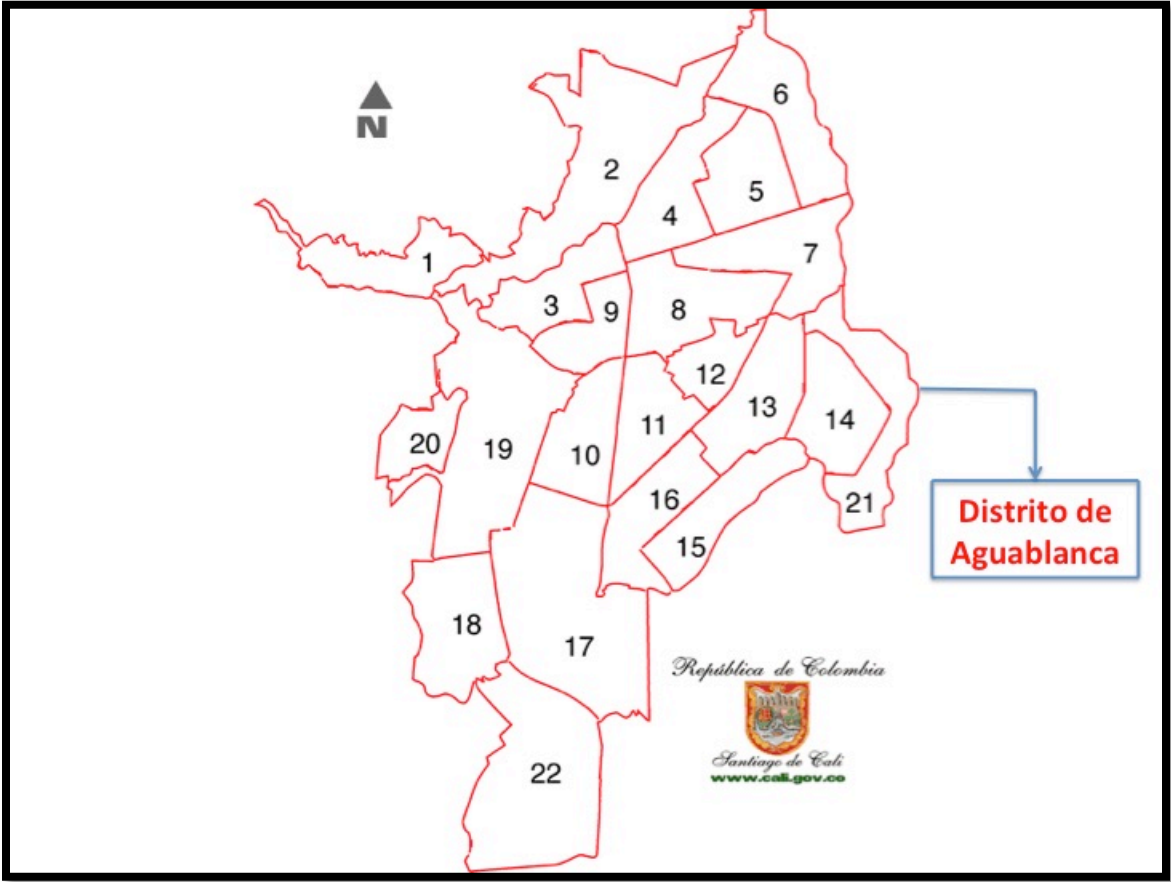
Maps

Map 1: Colombia in South America



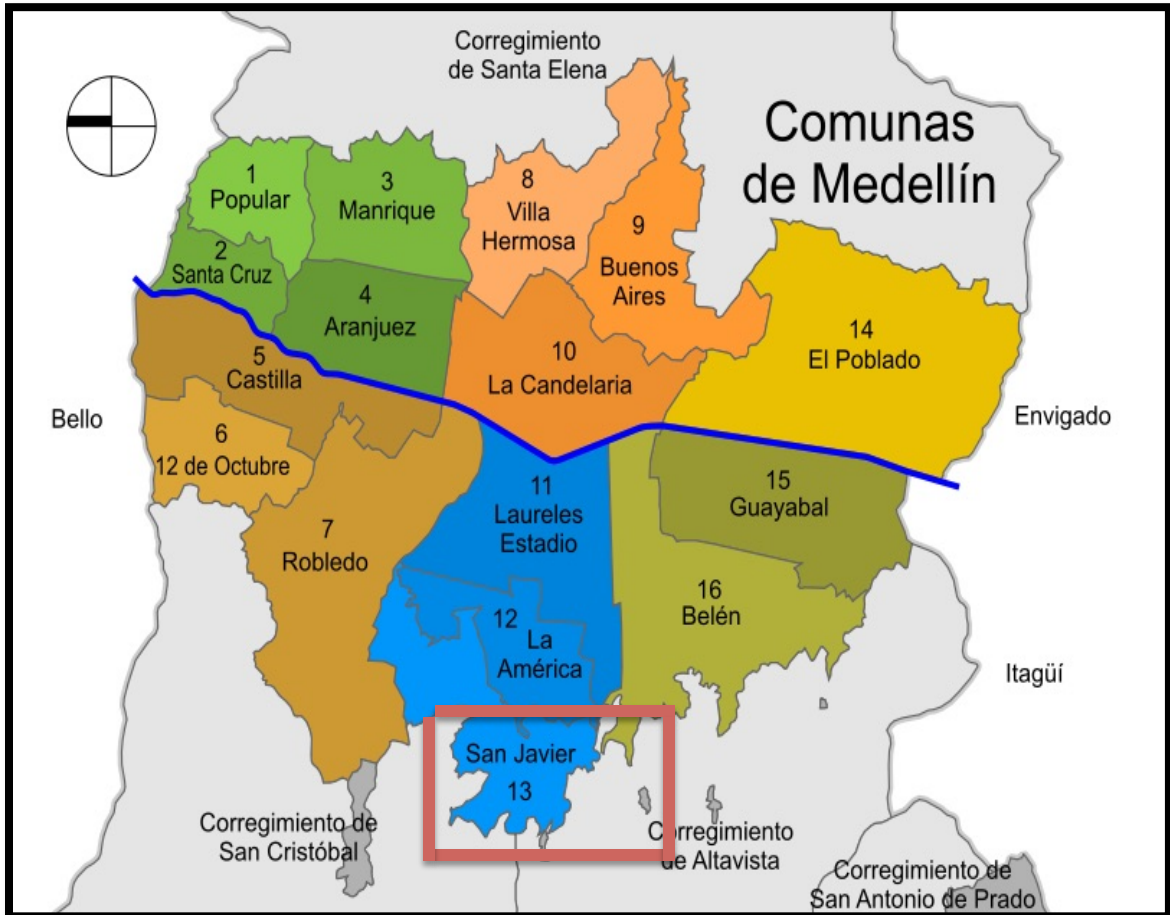
Source: United Nations

**Map 2: Comunes of Santiago de Cali: Research Site 1 – Comuna 21 –
Distrito de Aguablanca (District of Aguablanca) located in the far Eastern
part of the city**



Source: Alcaldía de Santiago de Cali

Map 3: Comunes of Medellín: Research Site 2 - Comuna 13 - *San Javier* located in the far Southern part of the city



Source: Local Government of Medellín

Chapter I: Introduction

1. Statement of the Problem

The definition of childhood as stipulated and adhered to by the UNCRC (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child) is strictly based on age demarcation and aligns with a rights-based approach. The result is that we have a conflict between this and local understandings of childhood, children's resilience and their capacity to make sound judgements (Hart, 2006a; Rosen, 2007). Children, especially those in contexts of conflict, are still largely perceived both in research and practice in terms of formal education rather than their experiences outside of school. The current lack of a nuanced understanding of the various lived realities of children in armed conflict has impeded efforts to adequately address their needs and adopt efficient responses to child recruitment.

The impact extreme violence has on the agency of children, as viewed and experienced by the children themselves, has, to date, been largely neglected. The existing literature dedicated to studying the relationship between children and war has been widely criticised for focusing on trauma and pathology while at the same time ignoring the greater and equally important societal dimensions of violence (Hart, 2006b; Boyden & de Berry, 2004; Hilker & Fraser, 2009). Contemporary research focused on the using of children in armed conflict has essentially been limited to the realm of child soldiering, which has resulted in a conflation of the issues associated with child soldiering with other important issues like child displacement, child trafficking, and hiring children as assassins (Hart, 2006a; Macmillan, 2009; Villanueva O'Driscoll et al., 2013).

Employing creative research methodologies, this study seeks to address these current limitations by studying the experiences of children engaged in violence in the modern Colombian context. More specifically this research focuses on the ways children in Colombia have negotiated daily responsibilities and survival strategies with the aim of developing a more comprehensive understanding of both their motivations for participating in conflict, and the effects their participation has on their daily lives. More broadly, this research goes a long way in helping to tackle the current need to

incorporate children's perspectives and their lived realities both in research and in the design and implementation of policies and responses that impact their lives.

The protracted conflict in Colombia is worth studying given it is continuously transforming and greatly affecting the realities of many of its young population. While a recent peace agreement has been signed between warring parties, more specifically one of the left wing groups, the FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) and the government, this is just the first step toward achieving peace in the country. Whereas the war was once widely understood as inspired by Marxist ideologies and involving left wing groups, this is no longer the case. Today's war in Colombia includes thousands of armed actors such as the BACRIMs (Criminal Gangs) and *sicarios* (hired assassins). The result is that young people have been and continue to be affected by and engaged in a cycle of violence in many ways beyond what is currently accounted for.

In this thesis I will be arguing for an expanding of how we currently view children's experiences in the modern Colombian conflict. Broadening our view beyond simply child soldiering, I argue that an analysis of this protracted conflict should include a myriad of other roles and occupations that children adopt, with the ultimate aim of helping to design and implement policies and practices concerning child protection and peace building efforts. As is illustrated by Patricia Holland (2004, p. 20), children's voices have been muted and controlled by adults 'as objects of imagery, very rarely its makers'. By focusing on these issues through the lens of artistic methods, this thesis seeks to break from a general tendency in public policy and implemented programs to interpret the lives of children in armed conflict via the languages and scripts that have typically been used to understand the adult experience.

Throughout the thesis I emphasise that the term 'child', as per the definition of the UNCRC, is problematic within the Colombian context. I have instead decided to use the terms 'young people', 'young person' or 'youth' to refer to the participants in my study, except for when the individual refers to their own self as a 'child' or where I determined that the term 'child' reflected their positioning.

2. Theoretical Rationale

This research engages with several bodies of theoretical work: 1. A sociology of childhood developed by Jens Qvortrup (1994) and then built on by Allison James and Alan Prout (1997) and Berry Mayall (2004); 2. The relationship between violence and social capital elaborated by Caroline Moser and Cathy McIlwaine (2004) and Clemencia Rodríguez (2011); and 3. Resilience and agency raised by Jo Boyden (2003) and Jo Boyden and Gillian Mann (2005), and 4. Tactical agency introduced by Alcinda Honwana (2006). The rationale for such a framework starts by recognising the relationship between childhood, violence, social capital, agency, and resilience. The aim is to develop an integrated approach towards the complex conflict scenarios that have affected young people in Colombia for many decades.

Recognising that childhood is specific to context and circumstances, my study in Colombia is essential to understanding the ways in which children have responded to violence. By contextualising children's lives with ideas about their roles, abilities, rights, and responsibilities, researchers have argued that it is vital to consider the ways in which childhood is conceptualised and experienced within different societies and cultures (James & Prout, 1990; Mayall, 2002; Boyden, 2003; Korbin, 2003). James and Prout (1997, p. 8) developed the concept that childhood must be understood not only as a biological but also as a social construction:

Childhood is understood as a social construction. As such it provides an interpretive frame for contextualising the early years of human life. Childhood, as distinct from biological immaturity, is neither a natural nor universal feature of human groups but appears as a specific structural and cultural component of many societies.

Jens Qvortrup (1994), Berry Mayall (2002), and Jason Hart and Bex Tyrer (2006) [have](#) also noted that childhood is specific to place, and children are active agents in a social context, suggesting there is no single definition of childhood—elaborated in Chapter III.

Tobias Hecht (1998) further explained that in Brazil, the understanding of childhood differs according to social and economic status. He distinguishes between *nurtured* and *nurturing* childhood. A childhood raised in a wealthy environment is considered to be a *nurtured status* and a childhood experienced in poverty is a time for *nurturing* the household. Hecht noted that the nurtured childhood of the rich in Brazil has much in

common with the ideal contemporary middle-class childhoods in Europe and North America. In contrast, in poor households children tend to experience a nurturing childhood where they are expected to be productive members of their family from a very young age. Similarly to Brazil, Colombia suffers from a large disparity between social classes (World Bank, 2014). In both Latin American states, many cultural and ethnic backgrounds—including matriarchal and patriarchal societies—coexist (Aptekar, 1988).

Both Colombia and Brazil employ the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child definition of childhood, beginning at birth and ending at age 18 (UN General Assembly, 1989). This definition is incongruent with local constructions of childhood, excluding their notions of, and contributions to, what childhood is and should be. Therefore, the specific context in which studies of children are conducted has implications for both international considerations of childhood, and in helping the researcher to produce an integrated and inclusive understanding of childhoods indigenous to a particular location.

The diversity of childhoods in Colombia is also subject to the protracted conflict continuously shaping its affected populations and social milieus (Nordstrom, 2004). Colombian childhoods are at the intersection of the many manifestations of violence and physical, human, natural, and social capital - a valuable insight that is provided by Caroline Moser and Cathy McIlwaine in their assessment of perpetuated violence in Latin America (2004). They stressed that different types of violence are interrelated in the Colombian context, with significant reinforcing linkages between them. For example, political violence regarding disputed territory that is used primarily for producing drugs leads to social conflict between community members. This in turn helps intensify domestic and gender-based violence. Moser and Clark (2001) have argued that domestic violence, including physical, sexual and verbal violence between a couple and against children, results in family members, especially young men, leaving home, engaging in drug use and joining gangs. This cycle of interrelated violence between the private and the public spheres can lead to other kinds of economic violence and to the destruction of trust and solidarity.

Clemencia Rodríguez (2011) has maintained that the impact of war on societies stretches beyond the direct attacks in Colombia, also destroying the social, democratic,

and cultural fabric of communities in instances where its members are obliged to live alongside armed forces. Rodríguez emphasises the relationship between social fabric and child recruitment, arguing that insurgent groups recruit the children of communities weakened by social mistrust, terror, individualism, and insecurity. Rodríguez also states that the extended presence of armed groups and their custom of drafting civilians as informants and supporters, either by force or voluntarily, destroys existing ties of unity, solidarity and trust in communities, replacing them with isolation and terror. Consequently, sentiments of powerlessness and victimisation are generated as conflict and disunion among community members increases, the use of violence and force is normalised, and extreme and totalitarian beliefs are soon adopted.

Rodríguez created the link between agency, child recruitment, and social fabric by confirming that reconstituting traditional solidarities, communications, and collective participation, strengthens the community as it responds to armed violence and helps keep young people away from armed groups. The different types of violence deeply embedded in the layers of Colombian society weaken and transform the social fabric of communities, and these intersect with the ways in which children navigate the resulting phenomena of war including child recruitment, forced displacement, and child trafficking (Vigh, 2009). The links between social capital and child recruitment influence the identities the child builds with the surrounding environment, defining and redefining the meanings of childhood in different contexts.

However, even in the most distressing of situations, children negotiate the opportunities available to them and need to be recognised as social agents in their own right, an important point that is stressed by Jo Boyden (2003). Boyden argued that a discourse of children as powerless and reliant on adults during difficult circumstances does not promote their coping mechanisms and resilience, nor does it accurately portray their realities. Alcinda Honwana (2006) supported this claim by arguing that in contexts of armed conflict faced by daily adversities, children do not constitute a homogenous group of helpless victims; they exercise their agency by making strategic decisions based on resources available to them, a process she defines as 'tactical agency' (p. 4).

Honwana affirmed that children are shaped by their particular experiences and circumstances and, even in situations of coercion, children are still able to exercise

choices they deem best for them. Disregarding children's own perceptions can lead to inadequate intervention; far from addressing the children's real needs and welfare, it can actually cause harm (Boyden, 2003). Although Boyden has valued the resilience of children, she has also challenged the concept of resilience on the basis that levels of resilience differ in each child as they experience and respond to adversity in multiple ways. Colombian scholarship has recently begun to question the discourse of resilience, acknowledging it may be confused with the normalisation of war as a phenomenon and the resulting tendency to resolve issues through the use of violence (Riaño-Alcalá, 2006)—as is elaborated in Chapter III.

As is explained by Jo Boyden and Gillian Mann (2005), perpetual war not only destroys the social fabric of societies but also results in chronic poverty and structural uncertainties, which gradually take root in families and communities, causing vicious cycles of violence. As Colombia's conflict emerged out of a sense of social injustice and inequality, poverty directly intersected with violence. As poverty becomes chronic so does violence. A child born into this type of adversity is more likely to navigate between the various dynamics of the conflict at the intersection of age, gender, race, ethnicity, socio-economic backgrounds, and social capital. Nonetheless, children negotiate their opportunities and realities, displaying their resilience and making use of their tactical agency in the contexts in which they live—which both affect children and are in turn affected by them.

While there exists a wide literature recognising children's agency and resilience in contexts of adversity and armed conflict (Peters & Richards, 1998; Boyden, 2003; Korbin, 2003; Boyden & Mann, 2005; Honwana, 2006; James & Prout, 2008; Bjørkhaug, 2010), I identified key gaps in how authors conceptualise childhood and violence in Colombia. My research aims to address this shortfall. The outcomes of the dichotomy between local understandings of childhood and children's roles in Colombian society, and that defined by the CRC, are two-fold: on the one hand, children engaged in the armed conflict have been apprehended as vulnerable and exploited victims and their notions of and contributions to what childhood is and should be, have not been taken into account (Jaramillo Castillo, 2007; Rosen, 2007; Bjørkhaug, 2010; Mayall & Morrow, 2011; Pachón, 2016), as discussed in Chapters III, V, and VIII. On the other hand, child recruitment has been examined as a phenomenon in isolation to other forms of

engagement of children in war dynamics, ignoring in the process the interconnectedness in their rationalisations of and motives for violence (Hart, 2006a; Rosen, 2007; Vigh, 2009; Villanueva O'Driscoll et al., 2013)—also developed in Chapters III, V, and VIII.

In my attempt to address these gaps and provide an account of young people's lived realities from their perspectives, I have adopted a creative approach looking at the experiences of children in their various forms of engagement in war beyond child soldiering with the aim of including other dynamics of the armed conflict, which they continuously navigate. Inspired by visual methods employed by Buckingham and de Block (2007) and Morrow (2001) with children in the U.K., and by Clark-Ibáñez (2007) and Charmaraman (2008) with children in the U.S., I extended their use to a conflict setting and specifically to the Colombian context. I recognise the interconnectedness of the multiple dimensions of the violence in Colombia, expanding the notion of children's engagement in war. I employ visual methods with children at the centre of their own productions allowing them to have more control over what they choose to share and how they portray themselves. In doing so, my research highlights children as creative agents who are making decisions they deem best for their circumstances rather than treating them as subjects of adult exploitation. Finally, I underline children's positions as celebrated 'liberators' and 'little adults' in Colombia's past wars, which clashes with their current statuses as per the CRC definition of childhood.

3. Personal Rationale

My interest in the topic of young people experiencing war, social exclusion, and discrimination emerges primarily from my personal history and that of my family, which led me to my professional experience in this field. As members of the Baha'i faith my family had been persecuted in Iran and like the rest of the community were deprived of their human rights. The situation worsened for our religious group when the political situation worsened, acting as a precursor to what has been referred to as the Islamic revolution. It eventually resulted in genocide with the killing of hundreds of thousands of innocent civilians. It is with a heavy heart that I see that this persecution continues today.

With the situation for the Baha'is worsening in Iran and my original family name being Baha'i, my family decided to leave the country and found asylum in Argentina. However, prior to their move to South America, my parents decided to travel to Cote d'Ivoire to fulfil my father's dream of working with children on the African continent. We travelled to Abidjan when I was one year old. Soon after their arrival, the revolution broke in Iran and what followed was a change of government. Much to the dismay of many, Iran went from a monarchy to an Islamic republic. My parents were banned from entering Iran as Baha'is and became stateless. Our family members and friends were being tortured and killed. We became refugees in Cote d'Ivoire, a nation that was emerging from colonialism and had obtained its 'independence' from France in 1960.

I grew up in a shantytown and experienced deprivation, marginalisation, social exclusion and lack of opportunities. While French became my first language, I experienced a great deal of discrimination based both on my ethnicity and my socio-economic background when I studied on a scholarship at a French institution in the wealthy part of the city of Abidjan. Such exclusionary forms of discrimination condemned me to silence and isolation, preventing my meaningful participation in class and from engaging with my peers.

My work with young people began at a very young age when accompanying my parents on different missions across the country during weekends, holidays and summer breaks. I would hold literacy classes with children and women, and sessions on important issues like human rights, environmental protection, sanitation and empowerment. During the armed conflicts taking place in neighbouring Liberia and Sierra Leone, I worked with refugee populations especially children and youth. I found that children were often reduced to helpless victims and their perspectives and experiences were not taken into account. It was the adults who narrated their realities and determined their needs. This is why I decided to use creative activities (visual methods, theatre, and dance) with young people as an alternative and participatory way of engaging them in their new host community and highlighting their agency in the process.

The children responded positively to the activities and were able to share their experiences and strong emotions through verbal and non-verbal means, and they were able to position themselves in a meaningful way in their new environment. From then I

adopted creative expressions as my main methodology working with young people across different regions of the globe including in juvenile centres across North America and with street children in El Salvador and Jamaica. It became a lifestyle I was accustomed to, and I then decided I would specialise in working with young people in contexts of violence, marginalisation and social exclusion.

My experience was also deeply shaped by what I encountered during a backpacking trip to Colombia. There I met an older woman who had been forcibly displaced from the Chocó department, one of the most affected regions of the country. She had also endured a massacre of the people of her hometown and had lost two of her sons who were combatants in opposing armed groups. Her story reminded me of my family's story as well as of the significance of having one's voice heard. I made a promise to her that I would help expose the realities of the internally displaced people in Colombia especially those experienced by young people, as they are often silenced and the most affected by the negative circumstances in which they live.

One of the ways I was able to help do this was to focus my research for my Master's degree on the displacement-recruitment-displacement cycle of war-affected children. Following the completion of my studies I created a non-profit organisation working with young people in contexts of violence in various countries including Colombia, using a variety of creative methods and a child-centred approach. Both my personal and professional experience made clear to me the importance of having a diversity of narratives in enhancing social inclusion and shaping personal identities and the identity of the community in which young people live.

The broader issue of the situation in Colombia and the more specific issue about its children engaged in war, was not at that moment on the agendas of powerful institutions and organisations. Young people were and continue to be excluded from major decisions that greatly affected their livelihoods and reduced them to vulnerable and powerless victims. Young people are deterred from thinking critically about their circumstances and the society in which they live, creating an enormous discrepancy between reality and assumptions. This inspired and motivated me to produce knowledge on the perspectives and realities lived by children in that context, highlight their roles in violence and peace, and the agency and the creativity they employ even in the most

difficult circumstances. I believed I could make a meaningful contribution to both policy and practice by advancing my studies on the topic and helping to break the current pattern of reducing children in contexts of war to destitute and exploited beings, tackling the issue at its source rather than attempting to 'cure' the symptoms.

4. Research Focus and Questions

Many questions arise when considering the nexus of agency, resilience, and social capital within the social construction of childhood in armed conflict. If resilience refers to positive adaptation in the face of adversity, then when a child becomes a soldier in order to secure social, political, or economic capital, can that act be characterised as resilience, entrepreneurship, survival strategy, or victimhood? How has the overt attention on child soldiering overshadowed other unrecognised child combatants? What are children's own understandings of the violence that surrounds them and in which they engage, and what are its implications on notions of childhood in Colombia?

A key question that inspires my research topic is: in light of the gaps in contemporary understanding of the spectrum of roles that children play in conflict, how might a more nuanced study of the ways in which war-affected children negotiate childhood within Colombia's armed conflict provide insight into means for bridging these gaps? This research aims to understand young people's experiences and perspectives of the Colombian conflict, providing a link between the various dynamics of their experiences in the war and a break from the tendency of conceptually limiting them solely to child soldiering.

My overarching research question is:

How do children in Colombia negotiate violence in their everyday lives?

My subquestions are as follows:

1. What forms of violence do children encounter in Colombia in their everyday lives?

2. How do factors such as age, gender, ethnicity, and other social aspects influence children's perceptions and experiences of the armed conflict in Colombia?
3. What tactics do children use to negotiate contexts of violence in Colombia?
4. What is the potential for visual methodologies in research with young people in conflict areas?
5. What are the implications of this analysis for violence prevention in Colombia?

As elaborated in Chapter IV, my study addresses these questions using a combination of qualitative methods that enabled me to explore children's experiences in my research from their own perspectives (Morrow, 2001; Mason, 2002). The dangers and risks involved in implementing my study in conflict-affected regions of Colombia meant that data collection was not simple requiring ongoing ethical considerations and flexibility in my approach. Given the delicacy of the context, I chose to employ creative methods and a participatory approach when designing the activities to be carried out with young people. This allowed them to be in charge of the information they chose to provide and how they would go about representing it (Boyden & Ennew, 1997; Ennew & Plateau, 2004; Hart and & Tyrer, 2006).

5. Organisation of the Thesis

Theoretical Framework

Chapter II provides an overview of the historical and political background of Colombia and its relationship to the contexts of poverty and violence. The chapter further elaborates the link between social capital and violence and studies the dynamics of gender, race relations, identities, and education, highlighting the intersectionality of the factors and the outcomes of the armed conflict.

Chapter III begins reviewing the theoretical literature on childhood in Latin America and the incongruity of the notion of childhood as defined by the UNCRC in the Colombian

context. I then present a variety of perspectives and studies on the many ways that children engage in contexts of violence, specifically within the Colombian context examining child recruitment and forced displacement.

Research Design

Chapter IV starts by presenting factual information about the socio-economic, political, and historical contexts of the specific research locations of Cali and Medellín. This chapter continues describing the research design, the methods used, as well as ethical considerations and limitations of the study design. Chapters V to VII analyse the data in relation to the RQs.

Data Analysis

Chapter V investigates the multiple types of violence that children who engage directly in the war encounter in Colombia and how they manage the violence as both a limitation and opportunity. This chapter also provides insight into the parallel experiences of recognised and unrecognised young combatants.

Chapter VI examines children's perceptions of daily uncertainties, including fear and insecurity, in their communities in Cali and Medellín. I emphasise the structural factors underlying the different types of violence in that context.

Chapter VII looks at the role that memory plays in moving forward and analyses how children use different forms of memory to cope with the violence, uncertainty, loss, and uprooting they continuously face. It also explores ways in which memory serves to provide meaning to their experiences and physical spaces in attempts to attain a sense of belonging and continuity in their lives.

Chapter VIII discusses the results, drawing on the conceptual framework proposed in Chapter II, and concludes with a summary of the main study findings. It also discusses the implications of the results for interventions as well as ideas for further research.

Chapter II: Inequality and Violence in Colombia

This chapter provides an overview of the historical, cultural, socio-economic, and political background relevant to the study of children's interactions with war intertwined with the perplexing complexities of Colombia's enduring relationship with violence. I begin by conveying the historical and social context of the numerous civil wars in Colombia leading to the current one in the midst of recent peace negotiations with left wing groups, focusing in particular on the interconnected undercurrents of the armed parties and industries involved. I examine the link between social capital and violence central to the analysis of my research and its significance in young people's well-being, identity building, and resilience in circumstances of daily violence in Colombia.

Additionally, I discuss the importance of gender dynamics at the intersection of the multi-dimensions of violence, poverty, and inequalities in the analysis of the armed conflict in Colombia, especially including the furthering of the study of masculinity in those contexts. Finally, within a racially diverse country, it is important to recognise that Afro-Colombians are the most affected by the armed conflict. Therefore a significant amount of my data was drawn from accounts and visual productions of Afro-Colombian youth. I will discuss racial discrimination underlying the inequalities experienced by Afro-descendants in Colombia.

1. Historical and Social Context

Colombia has a long history of protracted wars creating complex and brutal scenarios in which political grievances, inequalities and exclusion mix and overlap with economic pursuits over the country's abundant resources (Rodríguez, 2011). In the 19th century Colombia experienced eight civil wars and a further 14 more localised wars, reflecting the deep roots of violence in the country (Moser & McIlwaine, 2004). Presently, Colombia ranks high among the most violent nations in the world (Gaviria, 2000) while paradoxically being the region's oldest democracy (Moser & McIlwaine, 2004).

Beginning in the 16th century, the era of colonisation of the Americas was founded on a series of massacres of Indigenous people and pillaging of resources (Galeano, 1971).

Ravaged by the introduction of diseases and genocide, Indigenous populations plummeted in numbers, and were replaced by African victims of the transatlantic slave trade (Galeano, 1971). In subsequent decades, the region suffered a continuum of conflicts over power, sovereignty, and resources until Colombia's independence from the Spanish in 1810 (Richani, 2002). In 1819, Gran Colombia was formed, consisting of present-day Colombia, Ecuador, Venezuela, and Panama; the new nation was governed by its first president and revolutionary, Simón Bolívar, also known as 'the liberator' (Bushnell, 2003). Subject to economic and political pressures, Gran Colombia collapsed in 1830 leading to social and political chaos (Bushnell, 2003) and eventually to the launch of the Thousand Days' War in 1899 that devastated the nation (Pachón, 2016). The war that lasted 1,130 days was a battle for power between the liberal and conservative parties that included guerrilla groups (Pachón, 2016) and the participation of children following the practice of an old tradition (Jaramillo Castillo, 1991).

After the war ended, Colombia's peace was short-lived with the commencement of yet another civil war in 1946 called *La Violencia* that lasted close to a decade and caused hundreds of thousands deaths, including the assassination of the liberal presidential candidate, Jorge Eliécer Gaitán (Tate, 2007). The liberal party aimed to disrupt the economic and political monopoly of the elite and the Church, threatening the power bases of the conservative party, which only served to intensify the existing conflict (Moser & McIlwaine, 2004). The resulting civil war mostly took place in rural settings distant from the traditional war structures and marked by unprecedented levels of violence (Pachón, 2016). Millions of peasants and farmers became forcibly displaced and migrated to the outskirts of larger cities leading to the rise and expansion of shantytowns (Moser & McIlwaine, 2004). The result of the loss of their properties to the benefit of larger landowners led to a revolt of peasants and the creation of the first structured revolutionary group (Pachón, 2016).

Additionally, this era of violence marked the start of the institutionalised fear and insecurity observable in contemporary Colombian society that has gradually destroyed the social networks that have historically sustained rural communities (Moser & McIlwaine, 2004). While an agreement between the liberal and conservative parties to alternate the ruling of the country marked the official end of *La Violencia* in 1958, the

conflict intensified in rural areas outside of the Colombian government's reach (Martin-Ortega, 2008; Villanueva O'Driscoll et. al, 2013).

The impact of *La Violencia* spilled into what has become the current war, recognised as the longest internal conflict in the Western Hemisphere (Martin-Ortega, 2008). The high levels of corruption among government officials and their lack of presence and control over the nation's territories have allowed warfare, impunity, and power abuse by the elite to persist (Richani, 2002). The increasing inequalities and exclusion from political participation of the poor, together with the majority of land being owned by a privileged minority, gave rise to left-wing guerrilla groups formed by peasants highly inspired by the wave of Marxism in both Latin America and Africa during that period (Pachón, 2016). While there were over a hundred groups operating, the most prominent were FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia), ELN (National Liberation Army), M-19 (Movement of April 19), and an Indigenous militia called Quintín Lame (Pachón, 2016). Powerful landowners created their own militia in response to the rise of guerrilla groups. The militia was initially and unofficially supported by the government and grew into the most recognised movement known as the AUC (United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia) (Rubio, 2001; Richani, 2002). As insurgent groups gained authority throughout Colombia, civilians' engagement in both left- and right-wing groups increased dramatically, creating greater divisions in the country (Rubio, 2001).

In the 1980s, Colombia's economy experienced a significant transition from coffee production to the cocaine and mining industries, making the country the largest global producer of cocaine, providing nearly 80 per cent of the world's supply (Saab & Taylor, 2009). Profits from this illegal industry have fuelled the conflict through both the government and warlord coffers (Saab & Taylor, 2009). While the largest militias, such as the FARC, ELN, and AUC, gained prominence and recognition both nationally and internationally, numerous groups have been involved in the armed conflict. These groups have continuously changed and are therefore difficult to categorise (Moser & McIlwaine, 2004).

All parties involved in the war have obtained a large portion of their income from the narcotics trade, the preservation and production of coca plantations, kidnapping, extortion, and they have used children in this highly profitable activity (Saab & Taylor,

2009). Consequently, the conflict over power, resources, and land has intensified, as have associated violent acts like massacres, kidnappings, forced disappearances, and some smaller scale crimes (Gaviria, 2000). In the last two decades, Colombia has had the highest rates of kidnappings and massacres in the world (Rubio, 2001). With the complex negotiations of involved parties over the highly profitable industries, the lines between drug cartels, left-, and right-wing groups have become blurred (The Centre for Justice and Accountability, 2011), and political violence has blended with other categories of crime and violence (Pécaut, 1999). It is thus unrealistic to differentiate between the economic and political motivations of a given crime (Gaviria, 2000).

Moreover, the delineations between insurgent and state combatants, and between militias and civilians, have been obscured (Kalyvas, 2006). State forces have contributed to the increasing violence in Colombia and are responsible for a large number of human rights abuses (Romero, 2003). Their collaboration with paramilitary groups has been highly condemned and has given rise to the commonly used term *parapolítica* (parapolitics) (Romero, 2003). Consequently, corruption has flourished and civilians remain targets of the resulting multidimensional and complex violence (Rubio, 2001; Moser & McIlwaine, 2004).

In more recent years, the exploitation of other natural resources and the multiplication of multinational companies in Colombia intensified the existing violence (Moser & McIlwaine, 2004). Particularly with the increase in oil exploration, conflict amplified and diversified between left-wing groups opposing the privatisation of the industry and paramilitary and state forces fighting the guerrillas (Dureau & Florez, 2000). In addition to oil, mining has also been a site of dispute over its gold and emerald production, which has led to an unpredictable collaboration between wealthy business leaders, armed groups, and mafias (Rodríguez, 2011). While the United States has historically interfered in political, economic, and social affairs in Colombia, it increased its military operations in the country under Plan Colombia, officially adopted in 1999, which is aimed at tackling the growing drug industry and offering alternative crops to coca growers (Richani, 2002; Livingstone 2003).

The implementation of this agreement made Colombia the largest beneficiary of U.S. military aid in the world (Riaño-Alcalá, 2006), exacerbating the armed conflict (Moser &

McIlwaine, 2004). Not only did the plan fail in its aims to lower cocaine production and create sustainable economic conditions to lower poverty levels, it actually contributed to forced displacement (Ahumada Beltrán et al., 2004). This has placed Colombia among the five top countries with the largest internal displacement (Bilak et al., 2016) and the number one nation with regards to the total number of displaced people (UNHCR, 2016).

The total number of internally displaced people increased to 6.9 million in 2015 compared to 6 million in 2014 (UNHCR, 2016). The indiscriminate fumigation of coca shrubs destroyed all other crops of small landowners and caused the loss of other assets like cattle. Moreover, the consequences were expressed in rural residents' health as the chemicals in the fumigation penetrated their lungs and caused many skin diseases (Ahumada Beltrán et al., 2004). The government initiative also became grounds for additional conflict with left-wing groups and civilians became increasingly caught in the crossfire between the opponents. As a result, many peasant families were forced to leave their lands and they soon joined the large communities of internally displaced people already living in Colombia's cities and neighbouring countries (Ahumada Beltrán et al., 2004).

While it has always been known that the government has collaborated with paramilitary groups, this became official with the beginning of Álvaro Uribe's presidency in 2002 when he formally announced the joint venture to crack down on left-wing rebels (Livingstone, 2003). Their solidarity not only failed to defeat guerrilla groups and caused additional atrocities with impunity, but it also falsely claimed the complete demobilisation of the AUC (Livingstone, 2003). Large numbers of young paramilitary ex-combatants continued their skills in warfare and terrorism by forming numerous armed groups known as BACRIM (*bandas criminales emergentes*) or criminal gangs (Livingstone, 2003; Richani, 2002). While these newly formed militias continue to fulfil the functions of the armed conflict, the Colombian government does not recognise BACRIM as a legitimate armed group (Watchlist, 2012). Consequently, victims of BACRIM groups are not identified as such, whether as displaced people or former combatants, meaning they are not entitled to receive any support or allowed to undergo a DDR process.

With the multiplication of actors, the various types of violence in Colombia are continuously forming and destroying alliances and the daily lives of civilians have been

increasingly instilled with fear and insecurity (Rodríguez, 2011). The armed authority governing a community controls all dynamics from personal movements to public events and transactions (Rodríguez, 2011). Implementing taxation of legal and illegal businesses and controlling access to infrastructures and facilities have been practices implemented by both right- and left-wing groups (Rodríguez, 2011). Contrary to guerrilla movements that initially attempted to break away from the power of the Church, paramilitary groups have used terrorism to instill moral grounds derived from conservative Catholicism (Romero, 2003).

In banning any activity they deemed as a threat to traditional family values and society, paramilitary groups have committed some of the greatest atrocities in the name of 'social cleansing' (Romero, 2003). While all parties engaged in the war have been responsible for human rights abuses across the country, paramilitary groups have been largely responsible for the violence in urban dwellings (Romero, 2003). The multiplicity and complexity of the violence in Colombia has been able to thrive given the high levels of impunity in the country (Moser & McIlwaine, 2004; Watchlist, 2012). Consequently, a growing mistrust and sense of illegitimacy toward the state has led to the creating of myriad militias attempting to govern in areas where the state has failed to do so (Moser & McIlwaine, 2004). The growing violence and the associated fear and insecurity has broken the social networks within communities and trust between civilians directly reflected in the social fabric. This is an important aspect of the conflict that I will explore in the next section.

2. Social Capital and Violence

The link between social capital and violence is explored throughout my research in relation to children's well-being and their identities within social networks and communities. While 'violence' is a highly contested term in its definition, and the criteria for measuring and categorising it is also highly contested (Taussig, 1992; Pécaut, 1999; Nordstrom, 2004), it is generally recognised as the intentional practice of harm enforcing power for the purpose of particular benefits (Nordstrom, 2004; Moser et. al, 2005). Caroline Nordstrom (2004) noted that violence is applied 'to create terror and hierarchies of domination and submission based on the control of force' (p.61). However, in a

context of protracted conflict, war's violence does not end with bodily harm, as it destroys and reconstructs its affected populations and their social environments. Nordstrom specified that while there is a high tendency to focus on different war events, there is little discussion of different violences and how different individuals are experiencing them over time and place. In the analysis chapters that will follow, I will explore violence in its many forms and perceptions by young Colombians at the intersection of individual characters, age, gender, race, ethnicity, and socio-economic backgrounds.

Similarly, there is a vast literature on social capital. In Pierre Bourdieu's development of the field he regarded social capital as 'the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition' (1986, p. 248). For the purpose of this research, it will be defined as the deep-seated ties, norms, and obligations existing amongst community members, most commonly referred to in Colombia as 'social fabric'. As social capital can generate and provide benefits through the membership of social networks or organisations (Portes, 1998, p. 6), it can also have detrimental and exclusionary effects (Putzel, 1997, p. 939), as some people with more access to social capital can purposely bar others from its benefits (Portes, 1998, pp.15-19). Within my research, I am particularly interested in the relationship between social fabric, violence, agency, and resilience in the Colombian context developed by Caroline Moser and McIlwaine (2004) and Clemencia Rodriguez (2011).

Moser and McIlwaine (2004, p. 156) utilised the concept of social capital by analysing the intersectionality of violence, trust, and social institutions, and noted that violence and fear not only impinge on the ability of individuals and households to function, but also affect the social dynamics within communities. The authors argued that local people in Latin America often use the terms 'social fabric' or 'social unity' in lieu of 'social capital', relating them to the nature of violence while discussing and assessing the social institutions present in their communities. Thus, the concept of social capital is introduced here as an analytical construct used to better understand the impact of violence on social relations in local poor communities.

The definition of social capital used in Moser and McIlwaine's study of violence in Latin America indicates the norms, obligations, and reciprocity integrated in the structural development of communities. Two dimensions of social capital are presented, distinguishing between structural and cognitive social capital, and productive and perverse social capital. While structural social capital entails the roles and interpersonal relationships operating within the realm of formal and informal organisations (Uphoff, 2000), cognitive capital concentrates on ideas and attitudes as well as values, norms, and beliefs shared amongst members of a community (Moser & McIlwaine, 2004, p. 158). Productive social capital is defined as the social relationships that may create institutional transformation and promote economic growth while perverse social capital refers to the networks supporting vicious conduct and criminal activity (Rubio, 1997).

The study also distinguished between horizontal and vertical organisations, a concept originally discussed by Putnam (1993). The former entails relationships between close friends and neighbours within a community or with community-based organisations, whilst the latter refers to relationships between community members and external people or organisations. The study recognised a common concern in Colombian communities for trust and feelings of unity and solidarity, both of which are key elements of cognitive capital and when lacking can be closely related to the domination of fear.

The results from Moser and McIlwaine's study showed that fear was often the outcome of the simultaneous experiences of various types of violence. The study examined the intersectionality of intra-family violence, insecurity, gang activity, drug taking, robbery, killing and delinquency, causing social mistrust, lack of unity, and fear. Clemencia Rodríguez (2011, p. 2) confirmed that the prolonged presence of armed groups in a community destroys its 'social, democratic, and cultural fabric', instilling high levels of distrust, fear, and uncertainty into the residents' daily lives. Moser, McIlwaine, and Rodríguez reiterated a very important characteristic of Colombian communities living under constant threat, the importance of remaining silent, or as is often said in Colombia '*we have two eyes but one mouth*'.

This necessary social norm ultimately results in a lack of trust, erosion of solidarity, and a shift toward individualism. Pierre Bourdieu went as far as asserting that "the profits which accrue from membership in a group are the basis of the solidarity which makes

them possible” (Bourdieu 1986, p. 249). Lack of collaboration and communication amongst people in Colombia is a direct outcome of fear generated by both social violence and economic violence, and is related to gang activities, delinquency, and warfare (Moser & McIlwaine, 2004). The deterioration of bonds in the community also creates a deep sense of isolation for its residents, followed by sentiments of helplessness and victimisation in the face of war atrocities (Rodríguez, 2011). As a result the use of violence and coercion to solve differences among community members becomes normalised and legitimised (Rodríguez, 2011).

Moser and McIlwaine (2004, p. 54) claimed that communities in Colombia identified a lack of trust, unity, community networks, and low levels of social organisation, which is linked to livelihood security, as the absence of social capital. Testimonies from their study stated that the local community had a heavy atmosphere characterised by an unwillingness to help others. The prevalence of fear and violence not only fragments cognitive social capital but also affects social organisations in local communities and networks (structural social capital), giving rise to violence-related groups (perverse social capital) (Moser & McIlwaine, 2004, pp. 164-165). Nevertheless, even in the midst of violence, fear, and mistrust, some organisations were identified as contributing to the reconstruction of social capital to reduce violence, such as women’s groups (p. 174). The authors concluded that recognising the relations between social capital and violence not only helps to understand people’s experiences of violence, but also helps to achieve its reduction (p. 177).

Clemencia Rodríguez (2011) asserted that the reconstruction of social fabric is key to the achievement of sustainable peace as it bolsters the agency of the community to resist the detrimental impact of violence. She highlighted the use of media to reconstitute social fabric torn by war, as it can help residents to communicate, reconnect, and share their lived realities in an attempt to make sense of their experiences. Most importantly, Rodríguez made the link between social fabric and children’s engagement in war. She explained that when a community enjoys strong social bonds and fosters participation of all its members in its decision-making and activities, a new culture advocating non-violent means emerges, directly reflecting in young people’s choices as to whether to follow violent paths. A stronger and more unified community will enjoy higher resilience

levels in response to violence and will be more challenging to disintegration and corruption.

In the next section I will explore the intersectionality of gender in the context of armed conflict in Colombia with the ultimate aim of improving the analysis and understanding of the current war particularly its different dimensions.

3. The Gendered Dynamics of Armed Conflict

Gender as a category of analysis is an essential lens through which to fully understand the existence, causes, practices, and consequences of war. Gendered norms are present in all segments of society and may be augmented or changed particularly in contexts of war (Moser & Clark, 2001). Armed conflict affects both women and men. However, war affairs, including peace negotiations, are largely controlled by men (Bell & O'Rourke, 2007). This is predominantly the outcome of ascribed gender roles where norms about masculinity ascribe men the role of the aggressor while women are viewed as the victim (Moser & Clark, 2001). Experiences of violence thus vary according to gender as well as access to assets and circumstances during conflict (Moser & Clark, 2001). This is especially true for Colombia, a largely patriarchal society with significant gender-based violence and discrimination—age, ethnicity and gender shape experiences and consequences of violence (Moser & McIlwaine, 2004). With different types of violence interconnecting and intersecting in the Colombian context as seen in Chapter I, gender-based and domestic violence play a key role in shaping experiences of childhood and children's motives for and perceptions of the violence—discussed in Chapters V, VI, VII, and VIII.

In contexts of structural and socio-political uncertainties, women and girls, particularly from poor backgrounds may be disproportionately impacted by structural and socio-political uncertainties of violence (Parkes & Unterhalter, 2015). While men are more likely to suffer from direct physical violence including injury and killing through combat; women are more likely to experience sexual violence (Parkes & Unterhalter, 2015). Moreover, with norms dictating for boys and men to provide for the household, financial hardship and power imbalances often result in converting girls and women's bodies into a variety of lucrative products and services (Parkes & Unterhalter, 2015). Girls and

women's bodies have also been used as a site for violence for marginalised and emasculated boys and men to unleash their frustration and exercise power they have been denied (Parkes & Unterhalter, 2015). Although power is associated with male dominance (Moser & Clark, 2001), Mary K. Burguières (1990) argued that violence is masculine regardless of whether the perpetrator and violence incorporate masculine attributes.

The dominating notion of 'manliness' in war regions and the indisputable relation between weapons and masculinity are both major factors in inciting boys and young men to engage in armed conflict (Schmidt, 2007). Kimberly Theidon (2009) affirmed that the creation of certain characteristics of masculinity entailing violence do not just emerge from militarism, but are, rather, necessary for sustaining it. Referring to the situation in Colombia, she claimed representations of young soldiers as strong and powerful in possession of a gun have been used to form violent idealised attributes of masculinity. Former male combatants in her study all shared hegemonic masculinity as a common denominator.

R.W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt defined hegemonic masculinity as 'the pattern of practice (i.e., things done, not just a set of role expectations or an identity) that allowed men's dominance over women to continue' (2005, p. 832). Theidon argued that hegemonic masculinities annul the possibility for other types of masculinities to exist. The failure to reproduce hegemonic masculinities results in an identity crisis and violence is often used as a means to regain power and restore a sense of the accepted form of masculinity (Moore, 1994).

Socio-economic uncertainties, marginalisation and insecurity also threaten the ability to achieve hegemonic masculinities and can trigger additional violence (Connell, 2008). Theidon emphasised militarised masculinity as 'the fusion of certain practices and images of maleness with the use of weapons, the exercise of violence, and the performance of an aggressive and frequently misogynist masculinity' (2009, p. 5). The image of armed men in uniforms as a strategy to attract women is a significant factor in both male and female engagement in the Colombian war (Schmidt, 2007).

The armed conflict reinforces existing gender norms and intensifies gender-based violence, especially in poor communities where armed groups generally operate (Schmidt, 2007). While women have always been the targets of violent acts during armed conflicts, recent wars have moved beyond the combat field to include civil society, blurring the lines between state and non-state violence (Nordstrom, 2004; Parkes & Unterhalter, 2015).

Colombian women living in urban areas may be more at risk of domestic violence than those residing in rural areas (Moser & McIlwaine, 2004). The high incidence of sexual violence women have faced during the Colombian conflict has been described as a tactic of war (Meertens, 2012; Ocampo González, 2015). Attacks on women involving rape and murder in Colombia have been found to be a strategy of subjugation by a dominant group attempting to destroy the structure of a community and instill terror (Meertens, 2012). Sexual violence during armed conflicts has also been used to disgrace and intimidate the opponent (Machel, 1996). Girl and women combatants are commonly subjected to sexual violence during their participation in armed forces—rape, forced sterilisation, coerced abortion, sexual slavery, forced prostitution, and gang rape are used as punishments (Schwitalla & Dietrich, 2007). It is essential therefore not to limit females to the status of either victims or perpetrators, as is often the case; active women fighters endure sexual violence and injustices (Schwitalla & Dietrich, 2007).

Gender norms and structures in the Colombian context differed among right and left-wing groups. While guerrilla movements have historically broken away from the Church, paramilitary groups have aimed to instill religious values promoting the patriarchal model of family structures with clearly defined gender roles (Schmidt, 2007). The guerrillas have taken pride in employing a large number of women in battles, contrary to right-wing forces, although both sides of the conflict have committed high levels of violence against women, including coerced abortion and sexual exploitation (Schmidt, 2007). Women have continuously been used and abused by all parties involved in the war as a strategy to control and humiliate the group's opponents (Schmidt, 2007).

While FARC has a large number of female combatants and even commanders, the group is still operated predominantly by male leaders (Schmidt, 2007). Moreover, rather than led by ideology, girls and women's decisions to join armed forces are highly

determined by the group's presence in their communities and the recruiter's sexual preferences (Schmidt, 2007). At the same time, FARC has been known to recruit more women so as to portray an image of social advancement on which it heavily relies, although not necessarily because it practices values of gender equality (Schmidt, 2007).

On the other hand, right-wing forces have rejected women's participation as combatants as it could potentially damage the traditional patriarchal and *machista* model they advocate, thus limiting female participation to more conventional roles of servants, cooks, and sexual partners (Schmidt, 2007). As a result, much of the attention granted to demobilised ex-combatants, both in practice and in academia, leaves out the majority of girls and women engaged in paramilitary groups as their roles did not consist of fighting (Schmidt, 2007).

Donna Meertens (2012) discussed the inequalities that affect women during events of forced displacement. The author stated that while there has been humanitarian action in response to forced displacement, the Colombian government has failed to restore victims' rights and pursue justice. The process of transitional justice, particularly for women, would allow the opportunity to include their lived realities in the process of historical memory and recognition for gender-based abuse. Meertens (2012) confirmed that although certain state legislations and initiatives aim at additional support for women¹, their specific gender needs have not been taken into consideration in the planning and implementation of responses to the collateral effects and human rights violations of the armed conflict. The impact of displacement on women is far greater than on men given the existing gender inequality and discrimination, especially in new environments without a support network (Meertens, 2012). It is therefore undeniable that gender violence intersects with multi-dimensional manifestations of poverty and inequalities (Parkes & Unterhalter, 2015).

These gender-related concerns are also absent in the design and application of DDR programs (Schwitalla & Dietrich, 2007; Theidon, 2009). While sexual violence has been endemic in the Colombian conflict, current policies in the DDR process are gender-

¹ See Law 387 on assistance to displaced populations and Law 1448, the Victim's Law (Law 1448) geared toward victims of human rights violations during the armed conflict.

neutral and adopt the same approach for both men and women. They do not recognise and address girls and women's experiences of gender violence before, during, and after conflict (Schwitalla & Dietrich, 2007; Giraldo, 2012). The gendered impacts of war persist beyond the end of combat (Parkes & Unterhalter, 2015). Nonetheless, gender violence has become silenced, institutionalised and eventually legitimised by society (Parkes & Unterhalter, 2015). While women constitute 30 per cent of combatants in insurgent forces in Colombia, they symbolise weakness in the *machista* culture and are barred from the decision-making process in both the war and initiatives to end it (Giraldo, 2012).

The number of demobilised women is also significantly lower than that of men and proportional to women's rates of participation, amounting to almost one third of all illegal combatants (Giraldo, 2012). In addition to the stigma experienced by demobilised combatants, female former soldiers endure abuse from their communities who recognise women's engagement in war as a threat to their conventional roles (Giraldo, 2012). This is especially true in regions predominantly governed by paramilitary groups whose approach lies in the establishment of traditional gender roles and religious values (Schmidt, 2007). While men are viewed as living up to hegemonic ideals as fighters, greeted with respect upon reintegration in their communities, women are despised and rejected for undertaking what are considered strictly male endeavours (Londoño & Nieto, 2006). Violence can therefore be used to sustain gender hierarchies assuring that women are excluded from power structures and privileges are granted to men (Parkes & Unterhalter, 2015).

It is also important to note that gender roles have taken on new dimensions in response to the war. Armed conflict is undeniably devastating, however it can allow women to gain additional financial and social independence relative to their previous status, and even emancipation (Parkes & Unterhalter, 2015). Forced displacement in particular has shifted the gender power relations as women are increasingly becoming heads of households as a result of family breakdowns, uprooting, and separation with male counterparts due to deaths, disappearances, or the weight of financial restraints and insecurity (Meertens, 2012).

The adoption of new social and economic roles by women has ruptured the traditional family and labour structure (Meertens, 2012). While policies designed for displaced

populations have favoured female-led households, they have not taken into account the significant losses resulting from displacement and the associated gender-based violence and injustices (Meertens, 2012). The multi-dimensions of poverty produced by displacement is cyclical and inhibits households, predominantly those led by women, to overcome financial barriers and rebuild their lives (Meertens, 2012). Changes favouring women's social, political, and economic status are therefore generally temporary and structural and social inequalities eventually restore the gender order (Parkes & Unterhalter, 2015).

Women and girls remain the most vulnerable section of the population within the multidimensional violence in Colombia. With rampant levels of gender-based violence and injustices in Colombia, it is crucial to incorporate gender and its relationship to violence and power in order to both successfully understand the dynamics of the war and to design efficient policies to help address the issues. Theidon (2009) is among the authors to have highlighted the importance of understanding how norms about gender, masculinity and femininity influence experiences and responses to violence. Moreover, it is essential to recognise and examine gender at the intersection of the multi-dimensions of poverty, violence, and inequalities (Parkes & Unterhalter, 2015). In addition to the gendered dynamics in Colombia's war, the country's ethnic and racial diversity plays a significant role in the dynamics of the conflict directly affecting its young population. In the following section I offer an account of the racial dimensions, inequalities, and identities in Colombia.

4. Racial Discrimination and Inequality

Colombia has the second largest population of Afro-descendants in Latin America after Brazil, estimated to range between 30 and 50 per cent (Sanchez & Bryan, 2003). Yet, little research has been done on Afro-Colombian young people. As Peter Wade (2012) confirmed, academic disciplines, such as history, anthropology and sociology, have largely ignored Afro-Colombians, instead concentrating on slavery, Indigenous peoples, and the poor defined in terms of class rather than ethnic identity.

Discussing race in Latin America is challenging as notions of racism and racial inequality are often rejected (Wade, 1993). Colombia was historically built on the systemic

oppression of Afro-descendants, however the tendency to deny racism, predominantly by the elite, and claim their nation to be of mixed race is still widely pervasive (Wade, 1993, 2012; Hernández, 2013). The concept of racial democracy, which claims that racism and racial inequality cannot and do not exist in Latin America because of its diversity, is still rampant in Colombia despite much criticism over the last two decades (Hernández, 2014). Racial democracy claims that the social and economic exclusion of Afro-descendants is the result of their poverty and not their racial background (Wade, 1993; 1997).

In modern Latin American society, race and the pervasiveness of racism remain uncomfortable and controversial topics of discussion as Whites become increasingly convinced that they are colour-blind and beyond systemic racial privileges (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). Johan Galtung (1969) explained it as 'structural violence', a term he often used to discuss social structures in which poverty and high levels of social inequality, including racial inequality are normalised and reproduced by its elite members. The present-day racial stigmatisation of Afro-descendants was cemented and normalised by the hegemonic system of White supremacy that benefits from their socio-economic exclusion (Hernández, 2013). In the early 1800s, the Colombian government endeavoured to 'whiten' the population (Ortiz, 2007) through a policy based on the notion of improving the race or *mejorar la raza* (Wade, 1997; Rahier, 1998). The fear of a political uprising of Indigenous or Afro-descendant populations feeds the need to whiten the population to this day (Ortiz, 2007). Many years after the emancipation of slaves, institutionalised and legitimised racism has played a major role in preventing Afro-descendants from holding political, social, and economic positions of power and has persisted across society (Reales, 2001; 2011).

Today, Afro-Colombians continue to be deeply confronted with and affected by a number of structural issues manifested in the unequal and discriminatory distribution of Colombia's assets (Delaney, 2008; Barón & Vergara F., 2015). They are frequently excluded from social, political, and economic power structures (Wade, 2012) resulting in high levels of illiteracy, high dropout rates, and other systemic barriers impeding their access to higher education (IACHR, 2009). It is estimated that 80 per cent of Afro-Colombians live below the poverty line (Freedom House, 2016). Poverty, weak infrastructure, poor educational and health facilities, and lack of services plague areas

populated predominantly by Afro-descendants (Delaney, 2008). Most internally displaced people within Colombia are also of African descent (Herrera, 2012).

The high rates of homicide in the country are mostly concentrated amongst young, male adults of African descent (Romero, 2007; CODHES, 2012). Buenaventura, an important trade city on the Pacific coast of Colombia largely populated with Afro-Colombians, earned the title of Colombia's deadliest city (Romero, 2007). Structural participatory exclusion and inequality play major roles in these young men's committing and suffering from crime (Moser et. al, 2005; Rizzini & Bush, 2013). Not only does exclusion make young Afro-Colombians vulnerable to violence it also makes them particularly susceptible to use and abuse by illegal and state armed forces. As a result of social disenfranchisement, studies have found that young Afro-descendants feel powerless and impotent and often resort to acts of violence to earn social status, respect, attention, and self-esteem (Atehortúa Cruz et. al, 1998; Machado & Ocoro, 2004).

Authors have found that systemic discrimination mechanisms have been concealed because of the cyclical nature of poverty and underdevelopment (Wade, 2012; Barón & Vergara F., 2015). Contrary to the notion of racial democracy, racism causes social inequality—racial discrimination remains the principal contributor to the chronic poverty experienced by its targeted population (Li, 2015). Discriminatory rhetoric, including stereotypes like delinquency or animalism, continues to have profound impacts on Afro-Colombians (Wade, 2006). Eduardo Moncada (2009) found that Afro-Colombian youth sometimes choose not to leave their neighbourhoods for fear of being racially profiled as criminals. Racial discrimination stretches to the areas of employment limiting employment opportunities for Afro-descendant youth. A study conducted in Bogotá by Centro de Estudios de Derecho, Justicia y Sociedad, Dejusticia found that a White person is 20 per cent more likely to be called for a work interview compared to a 10 per cent probability for an Indigenous or Afro-Colombian person (Mayorga et al., 2013). Tanya K. Hernández (2013) has argued that even in the absence of discriminatory laws, ideologies that may appear as progressive contribute to institutionalised racism and inequality.

Colombia's current systems have created limited efforts to combat racial discrimination without including Afro-descendants in the process or providing any references for Black

youth. This is directly reflected in the peace process where Afro-Colombians were excluded from any decision-making. While the Colombian government has signed and ratified international human rights treaties aimed at protecting ethnic groups, and have adopted national legislations against discrimination, Afro-Colombians are continuously subjected to violations of their civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights. They are also the most affected by the armed conflict and its associated violence, fear, and insecurity.

5. Conclusion

This analysis of Colombia's historical, cultural, socio-economic, and political history has revealed that the country's long relationship with violence intersects with deep inequalities, marginalisation, and poverty. The current conflict is an extension of a continuum of wars over power and resources Colombia has suffered since its inception, leading to an institutionalised culture of violence, fear, and insecurity. The involvement of all warring parties in highly profitable activities such as the narcotics trade has blurred the lines between political violence and other types of economically motivated crime and violence and has extended the battlefield to include innocent civilians. We can therefore understand violence as multi-dimensional beyond physical, emotional, and sexual coercion. It is rooted in the history of Colombia and is established in the many layers of society from political to neighbourhood to the daily interactions of everyday people faced with structural uncertainties and inequalities and socio-economic and political exclusion.

The complexities involved in the interconnected and multi-dimensional manifestations of violence and the associated fear and insecurity has deeply impacted the social capital of communities. This has resulted in a weakening of the trust between its dwellers and has greatly inhibited their capacity to operate and develop. An understanding of the intersectionality of social capital and violence is central to the analysis of my research and its significance in young people's well-being, identity building, and resilience in circumstances of daily violence in Colombia. Studies have shown that strong social capital fosters resilience in young Colombian people and limits their vulnerability to the outcomes of violence and their engagement in violent activities. Making use of this notion for the analysis of my research questions has enabled a more thorough

understanding of the dynamics endured and created by young people in the context of the Colombian armed conflict.

It is also important to understand that whilst race, gender and class are significant characteristics in Colombian society, they cannot be examined as three separate models of oppression and as independent of the many forms of violence. Rather they are interlinking and mutually affect one another, providing a clearer view of the struggles that young people face in their daily lives and in turn impact the social capital of communities. In the analysis of armed conflict, experiences of violence differ according to gender, race, and class and cannot be studied in isolation from each other. With the historical multi-faceted inequalities rooted in racial and gender discrimination in Colombia, it is clear that gender and race intersect with violence, poverty, exclusion and oppression. The ascribed gender roles and projected image of the masculine identity of control over women and providers of the household can often result in frustration faced with the inability to reproduce the ideal—they exercise violence as a means of oppression and power and the portrayal of hegemonic masculinities. However, while war disproportionately affects women more than men and intensifies existing gender norms, it can challenge gender roles and grant women more social and financial autonomy, even only temporarily as often is the case.

In my analysis chapters (Chapters V-VII) I will explore the complex ways and social networks influencing young people's experiences, creations and perceptions of their circumstances, keeping in mind that race and gender interact with poverty, violence and inequalities to produce different responses to violence. In the next chapter I will examine the dichotomous notions of childhood in Latin American and the model promoted by the UNCRC. I will also provide an overview of children's engagement in armed conflict, emphasising the Colombian model and making the case that 'age' is an essential and poorly understood factor in violence, war and reconciliation.

Chapter III: Children Engaged in Violence in Colombia

Childhood is sometimes understood as a decontextualised, universal, unchanging and natural stage of life characterised by innocence, dependence, and vulnerability (Freeman, 1983, p. 7; Hockey & James, 1993). Nevertheless, a study of the history of childhood reveals that it can be understood as constructed in a variety of forms according to time and geography (James & Prout, 1990; Mayall 2002; Boyden, 2003; Korbin, 2003). To fully understand children, they need to be framed within the context in which they live (Aptekar, 1991) and recognised that they too impact their social context. A variety of factors such as socio-economic status, religion, employment, gender, race, politics, and education shape children's experiences of the world and perceptions of and coping strategies with their realities (Rosen, 2005; Hart & Tyrer, 2006). Consequently, an attempt to comprehend children's engagement in the war in Colombia requires a study of childhood framed within the historical, social, and political context of that region.

The 'accepted' international definition of a child however, as is adopted by Colombia and defined in the UNCRC under Article 1, is 'every human being below the age of 18 years unless, under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier' (1989). This universal notion of childhood promoted by humanitarian discourses also influences children's perceptions of their realities and their experiences of childhood. Both researchers and practitioners have generally examined childhood through the lens of education discounting children's learning processes in their daily lives. I have not adopted a focus on schools in this study, rather I focus on children's experiences in other arenas of their lives that are most meaningful to them.

An understanding of the complexity of what defines 'child' and 'childhood' is significant to discussions of how varying notions of childhood are negotiated and what is their impact in the context of armed conflict (Hart & Tyrer, 2006). This chapter aims to deliver a variety of perspectives on conceptions of childhood in the region, including modern definitions, their historical evolution in war contexts, predominantly in Colombia. The first section considers what constitutes childhood and adolescence in Latin America, providing an overview of the various studies conducted in this area. The second section explores perspectives of studies undertaken on childhood and violence discussing

various notions of child soldiering and children's resilience and agency in contexts of war. The final section looks at child recruitment in the Colombian context, introducing a history of child soldiers followed by an overview of contemporary young fighters, demonstrating that child soldiering is not a new phenomenon in Colombia and is rooted in its long relationship with violence and cultural understandings. I argue that there is a tension between international expectations and definitions of childhood as per the UNCRC and those that operate in the historical and everyday lives of Colombian children.

1. Childhood and Adolescence in Latin America

1.1. Studies of Latin American Childhood

Current scholarship on childhood has mostly been influenced by discourses in North America and Europe (Wells, 2009, p. 8), excluding experiences of Latin American childhoods from the common 'global morality' (Kuznesof, 2005, p. 859). Studies focusing on the history of Latin American childhood are fewer and far more recent than those looking at the North American childhood experience, (Hecht, 1998, p. 3) dating only since the 1980s (Kuznesof, 2005, p. 859). There is however literature from Latin America claiming that childhood is not a steady phase of life bound by age demarcation and independent of societal and cultural factors (Aptekar, 1989).

While studies of Latin American history have been centred on family life, children and childhood have been omitted from the literature (Kuznesof, 2005, p. 860). Maritza Díaz Barón (2015) pointed out that when children were included in research in Colombia, it was part of the larger study rather than a subject of its own. Ximena Pachón Castrillón (2009) stresses the need to dedicate more academic research in this field related to Colombia, as studies in this area are near non-existent.

In his research on childhood from a Latin American perspective, Tobias Hecht's (2002) observed that alternative conceptualisations of childhood would bring a new perspective to the familial characteristics in the history of the region. Anna L. Peterson and Kay Almere Read (2002) confirmed that contemporary Western ideas of childhood— notions of a stage of innocence in need of protection, centred on recreational and educational

functions are incongruent with the realities of children in the Global South and in some urban contexts of the Global North. The authors' comparative analysis of the multitude of delineations of childhood throughout Central America contested contemporary beliefs that children in poor and war-affected contexts in regions of the Global South do not experience childhood. Rather, they affirmed that most children experience a childhood that differs from that of affluent Westerners. They concluded that investigating alternative experiences and meanings of childhood can help illuminate interpretations of childhood and the social construction of identity, the relations between individuals and communities, the nature of moral agency, and the role they play in understanding politics and its relationship to childhood in Central America and elsewhere.

The promotion of an 'exemplary' childhood in the Western-driven late 19th- and early 20th-century movement to 'save the children' created limitations for societies that are unable to replicate such an ideal of childhood (Rizzini, 2002). Rizzini (2002) argued that the child-saving movement in Brazil that attempted to imitate European and North American discourses in fact limited the rights of poor Brazilian children by conditioning them to submission and victimisation. As a result Brazil emphasised laws and services geared toward problematic children rather than on policies aimed at making quality education available to all children. Rizzini noted that these actions further marginalised Brazilian children and targeted them as threats to society. The same was observed with street children in Colombia who are seen as a menace to the rest of society as they challenge the concept of a traditional family, with a father and mother as heads of household and children in need of their protection and care (Aptekar, 1991).

While these studies strengthen notions of the diversity of childhoods, they also place this polarity in a Global North and Global South opposition where the North exemplifies the 'good' and 'inoffensive' childhood comparing to South's 'bad' and 'immoral' childhood (MacMillan, 2009). The clash in understandings of childhood does however go beyond the Global North and Latin America. In Colombia for instance, as in other contexts, different childhoods co-exist and contrast due to the socio-economic and cultural factors of the society (Díaz Barón, 2015).

Examining children's lives in different cultural contexts allows for a clearer understanding of their capabilities in a developmental setting and enables researchers to unravel social

norms that are shaped by children's needs and by society at large (Aptekar, 1991). Although centred on street children, two main studies developed by Tobias Hecht (1998) and Lewis Aptekar (1993) have substantially contributed to comparative insights on different types of childhood in the Latin America context. Their work has laid the foundation for my study in understanding the variety of childhoods within the Latin American region and how children negotiate and continuously redefine childhoods in adverse circumstances allowing for a clearer analysis of the construction of childhoods in Colombia.

1.1.1.Nurtured and Nurturing Childhood

In his ethnographic study of street children in Northeast Brazil, Hecht (1998) noted two key classifications of childhood: nurtured childhood and nurturing childhood. The author argued that childhood experienced by the wealthy is a nurtured condition whereas childhood experienced by the poor is defined by its duty to nurture the household. He specified that while rich, nurtured children are granted love by their families based on their childhood status, the love that poor, nurturing children receive is proportional to their responsibility to provide for their households, predominantly their mothers.

In wealthy families in Northeast Brazil, parenting is defined as a giving and providing duty for their children without expecting anything in return except seeing the replication of an innocent and happy childhood (Hecht, 1998). This perception of a secure and protected childhood aligns with the approach advocated by humanitarian organisations where the child leads a work-free and hardship-free life (Boyden, 1997). In the same manner, Hecht (1998) noted that the nurtured children in Northeast Brazil experience a similar 'ideal' or idealised childhood to those in Europe and North America.

Contrary to nurtured children whose roles are largely limited to consumption and dependency, the role of nurturing children is determined by their responsibility and contributions to their families (Hecht, 1998). While the privileges enjoyed by the rich, nurtured, children are granted to them in virtue of this position, nurturing children have to earn them. Nurtured children represent a continuous expense to their families, whereas nurturing children provide for their families. Nurtured children are separated into their

own category from the older generations of their households, whereas nurturing children hold the responsibility of the well being of the adults in their families. While nurtured children are generally dependent on adults, nurturing children tend to be more independent (Hecht, 1998).

Another notable difference between the two categories, as explained by Hecht, refers to the family structure. Nurtured children are usually raised in households led by their biological fathers and mothers, whereas nurturing children often navigate between various female-led households other than their biological mother's. This dualism does however eventually vanish and despite the sharp disparities between the two, they share a common characteristic, namely that they experience childhood within their households contrary to street children. Hecht concluded that childhood, as a socially constructed context, is consistent with and determined on life within a home.

While Hecht's analysis took place in Brazil, these two types of childhood could be applied within the Colombian context that shares cultural and historical characteristics with Brazil. Moreover, this notion of childhood has supported my analysis in examining young people's motivations in engaging in the Colombian war activities and their tactical decisions in dealing with their circumstances (Honwana, 2006).

1.1.2. Gamines and Chupagruesos

Similarly to Hecht, Aptekar (1993) views childhood in Colombia as a period defined by historical and societal phenomena rather than an age demarcation contrary to the UNCRC. As evident in his research, Aptekar found that children's responses to society and the issues they encounter during their transition toward adulthood are subject to the characteristics of their personalities and the course of their development. Aptekar identified two types of childhood in Colombian street lifestyle: *gaminismo* (leader lifestyle) and *chupagruetic* (follower lifestyle). Those who live the former are typically referred to as *gamines*, whilst adherents of the latter are typically called *chupagruesos*.

Aptekar defined *gamines* or rascals as highly skilled at living on their wits, on which their life is dependent, with the need to exercise their independence while defying any figures or rules of authority. *Gamines* usually leave home at a young age, avoid any form of

attachment, and generally experience great difficulty in adapting to their adult surroundings. In contrast, *chupagruesos* or followers are more submissive and have often experienced abandonment by their caretakers. Consequently, they fall under the dominance of their older and larger counterparts and face less challenges adjusting to adult power structures.

Gaminismo is a short period in a child's life that ends when adolescence is reached, and when the young person gradually loses the benefits associated with their small statures. *Gamines* make a drastic decision when they leave their households to mark their independence and go on to become entrepreneurs either through sales or criminal activities. Those who do not follow the *gaminismo* path tend to take up the more servile *chupagruesic* lifestyle.

According to Aptekar, *chupagruesos*, like *gamines* tend to experience great difficulty during their adolescence. Their status of abandonment by their family results in great emotional commotion—they often show higher levels of difficulty gaining independence, suffer from low self-esteem, and are limited by their fears. Their servile attitudes help facilitate their adaptation and make them more suitable candidates for unskilled employment. While *chupagruesos* tend to avoid criminal activities and lead a more 'stable' lifestyle, they do not typically enjoy the same levels of gratification and success as *gamines* who often undertake entrepreneurial endeavours.

Aptekar examined the apparent difficulty both *gamines* and *chupagruesos* face due to their evolving physical appearance—with their small stature, they are able to invoke compassion and even some degree of trust making tasks such as begging much more successful. As they grow older, they lose their 'adorable' features and start to be perceived as delinquents and threats to the social order. The change in status marks the end of childhood and the beginning of adulthood. The same understanding can be applied for children in combat in the eyes of the international community; younger children receive more attention, compassion and benefits from public policies; especially in demobilisation processes. Once they enter adolescence, they are considered dangerous and generally feared by the rest of society. Toward the end of their childhood they are considered outlaws.

Contrary to common beliefs and to Hecht's notion of childhood within the home, Aptekar's analysis found that those who showed strength in leaving their households were more equipped when dealing with adversity than children who stayed at home or had been forced out of their families. Aptekar explained that having been granted more responsibility from a young age, *gamines* earn early independence and facilitate their detachment from their households as opposed to *chupagruesos* who retain sentiments of rejection and neglect. It can therefore be noted that childhood is bound to a historical and societal framework.

Aptekar and Hecht agreed that childhood is not a global phenomenon defined by age, but rather is contextualized phenomenon experienced in a variety of forms which corresponds with the definitions as set forth by the sociology of childhood (James & Prout, 1990; Mayall 2002). While both authors provided a depiction of childhoods experienced by street children, Hecht emphasised economic circumstances as a determinant of the type of lived childhood and made the distinction between childhoods lived at home and on the street. On the other hand, Aptekar provided an overview of childhoods on the street bound primarily by personality traits rather than socio-economic conditions. These findings establish that even within a given framework such as Colombia, many types of childhoods can be experienced independent of age.

Given studies of Latin American childhoods have been rooted in their position within the family, I will dedicate the next subsection to exploring family models in the region and their relationship to the development of childhoods.

1.2. Family Structures

Family structures have served as the central focus in the study of Latin American history (Wells, 2009) and family and kinship have operated as significant institutions for social stability (Kuznesof, 2005). Kuznesof has pointed out that the Latin American family is exemplified as an establishment that is fundamentally patriarchal, based on monogamous matrimony and driven by reproduction. Ann Jefferson and Paul Lokken (2011) have argued that Latin Americans rely predominantly on their family relationships to reach livelihood assets such as a home, work opportunities, or even a life partner.

They esteem the family nucleus to be the most viable and trustworthy source to obtain prospects for growth (Jefferson & Lokken, 2011).

Aptekar (1988, p. 283) pointed out that in Colombia, 'matrifocal' and 'patrifocal' families co-exist with significant differences between the two. Patrifocal families are the dominant group, primarily composed of European descendants enjoying greater levels of power. Matrifocal families generally belong to the lower strata of society and consist of Indigenous and Afro-Colombian populations. These two types determine the childhood significantly—children from poorer backgrounds are often raised by single mothers who are often victims of abusive male partners and unable to leave due to their financial dependence on the man (Aptekar, 1988).

A large majority of children in contexts of poverty are brought up in female-led households accustomed to raise independent boys from a very young age, as opposed to wealthier Colombian families of European descent (Aptekar, 1988). In poor or matrifocal communities, women hold the responsibility to grant entrance to men into their family as fathers of their children (Aptekar, 1988). Patrifocal families generally belong to the higher social strata and are formed once they have received the blessing of the Church (Aptekar, 1988). Children of patrifocal families are generally nurtured at home until they form families of their own, experiencing a nurturing childhood (Hecht, 1998). While wealthier boys grow up under extreme pressure from their fathers to attain the highest levels of masculinity, they are excessively spoiled by their mothers leading to a tremendous dependence between the two (Aptekar, 1988). Boys from poorer families learn from a young age that they must leave home before reaching adolescence (Aptekar, 1988). While younger boys often deem their mothers their references for guidance and knowledge, once they reach puberty they no longer require their approval and feedback (Hecht, 1998).

The same dynamics can be observed across gender roles in Colombia. Aptekar (1988) described girls from wealthy milieus to be strictly administered by their parents. Prior to reaching puberty, girls initiate their learning process about their selection of boys, fully aware that their future social status is highly dependent on that of their future spouse. Contrary to this, girls from poorer households are raised to be fully independent from

men. Aptekar stated that girls start to build their identities regardless of their encounters with men and are expected to stay at home even once they become mothers.

The family structures described above are applicable to other regions of Latin America and the Caribbean (Smith, 1982). In lower socio-economic societies throughout the region, households are commonly characterised by the leading role of the mother and the absence or distant role of the father. This structure is identified by a variety of labels (Smith, 1982). In Colombia, they are referred to as matrifocal households (Gutierrez, 1972), while Caribbean region recognises them as maternal or grandmother families (Comitas & Lowenthal, 1973). These categorisations have been in place for an extended period of time and are historically bound by ethnic and racial delineations (Burkett, 1978).

As opposed to Spanish households, property rights were granted to Inca women, a system that still prevails today in certain communities (Burkett, 1978). Similarly, women generally lead families of African descent, contrary to the structure introduced by the Spaniards (Mathews, 1973). Considering the heritage of slavery and the diversity of cultural understandings of family structures in each region of Latin America, it is inevitable to have a multitude of ways of being a child. These characteristics are highly significant in the analysis of my data as a large majority of the participants in my study were of African descent and had experienced a single mother-led household.

While families in Latin America play a central role for social stability (Kuznesof, 2005), they also determine the level of violence and engagement of young people in war (Moser & McIlwaine, 2004). In the next section I take a deeper look at the children's relationship with violence, referring to concepts of childhood and violence in various contexts. I also look at the more recent attention on child soldiering highly condemning children's involvement in war, contrasting this with their resilience and capacity to make decisions out of their own volition. Again this helps to highlight the dichotomy between local understandings of childhood and the definition set forth by the UNCRC.

2. Childhood, Young People and Violence

2.1. Notions of Children's Engagement in Violence

In situations of armed conflict or violence, a significant number of young people below the age of eighteen join armed groups of their own will, challenging conventional ideas of children as vulnerable and passive victims and presenting evidence that they are also creative resilient actors aiming to improve their lives (Peters & Richards, 1998; Rosen, 2005; Honwana, 2006; Hart & Tyrer, 2006; Rosen, 2008; Poretti, 2008). A large body of research has emphasised the traumatic effect of war on children rather than exploring their realities from their own perspectives, resulting in the inability to take into account the multiple dimensions of violence and reducing children to powerless objects (Boyden & de Berry, 1997; Boyden & Levison, 2000; Hart & Tyrer, 2006; Hilker & Fraser, 2009). Assumptions that children are helpless victims in conflict have dissuaded more rigorous engagement with children as significant active elements of warfare (Boyden & Levison, 2000; Hart & Tyrer, 2006).

Recent literature on child soldiers has contested the widespread humanitarian discourse depicting child combatants merely as weak and incompetent beings exploited by adults as low-cost, dispensable, and easily manipulated resources of war (Rosen, 2005). While not discounting children's experiences of trauma and hardship, my aim is for this research to go beyond this paradigm, adopting a more detailed account of wider contextual and societal factors in which they experience childhood positioning them within the sociology of childhood developed by Jens Qvortrup (1994); James and Prout (1997); and Berry Mayall (2004) (Chapter I, section 2).

Children have historically held a significant but often unacknowledged role as influential actors in political conflicts. Their engagement in war has raised unique problems as their actions do not conform to current understandings of children as passive innocents (Berents, 2008) whom adults have forced and intimidated into soldiering (Boyden and de Berry, 2004). In fact, many authors have demonstrated across different contexts of war that children have challenged the dominant morals of their societies and took on decisions they deemed as noble and praiseworthy. David Rosen (2005) gave the example of Jewish children and youth during World War II, who took up arms and fought

to control their destiny and identity as Jews, Zionists, socialists, and communists, driven by a combination of necessity, honour, and moral duty (Rosen, 2005). The same was observed with youth combatants in Sierra Leone, where, Krijn Peters and Paul Richards (1998, pp. 183-184) argued, child soldiers made decisions as 'rational human actors' who have a 'surprisingly mature understanding of their predicament'.

Furthermore, Angela Veale's report (2003) on female ex-combatants from the Tigray Peoples Liberation in Ethiopia recruited at an age as young as five, found that none of these women identified themselves as helpless or victims. Julia Villanueva O'Driscoll et al. (2013) noted a similar dynamic in their study of disengaged children in the Colombian war, many girls felt they held more power with their involvement in armed groups. It is obvious that while children undeniably face great levels of adversities, they do not form a uniform group of victims. They are in fact significant elements of society who shape their decisions bound by their individual encounters and conditions.

Current demobilisation programs in place in Colombia are based on the incorrect assumption that former child soldiers have been recruited by force based on the ideology of children's incapacity to make sensible choices (Bjørkhaug, 2010). This does not mean that they have an unlimited range of options they can choose from, rather they have made decisions within certain limitations and taken advantage of the prospects that are available to them (Honwana, 2006; Honwana, 2009). Ingrid Bjørkhaug (2010) has argued that even in a position of a certain level of obligation, children are still able to make conscious choices. In circumstances of extreme hardship, individuals often discover their ability to challenge and utilise the social and emotional resources available to them, making them apt to handle the most severe circumstances and develop individual responsibility (de Smedt, 1998).

By solely emphasising individual responses to high levels of hardship as is most often done, Jo Boyden and Joanna de Berry (2004) point out that there is a great risk of overlooking meaningful interpretations of war:

War does not just cause psychosocial and emotional harm, but also attacks the most fundamental conditions of sociality, endangering social allegiances and confidence, and drastically reducing social interaction and trust. (p. XIV)

In examining the links between youth exclusion, violence, conflict and fragile states, Lyndsay Hilker and Erika Fraser (2009) further stressed the importance of embracing a holistic approach to assessing violence by recognising its multiple dimensions (from interpersonal to political violence), which when overlapping can result in the engagement of young people in violence. They argued that the structural violence, together with the lack of opportunities marginalising young people in many developing countries, could lead to frustration and disappointment, which, in some instances can result in youth's involvement in violence. Research on children experiencing violence needs to focus on the types of violence experienced and perpetrated by children and depict how violence is situated and acts within the bounds of cultural contexts when ensuring provision, protection, and participation to children (Korbin, 2003). In the following subsection I offer an overview of perspectives of children's military engagement and the ramifications resulting from the increase of attention on child soldiers.

1.1. Phenomenon of Child Soldiering

Child soldiering has existed as long as wars (Rosen, 2005). As explained in the previous section, although children have always partaken in war, there has recently been an increased amount of attention concentrated on the phenomenon of child soldiering. Nonetheless, there are no exact figures of child combatants in global wars and they are only estimated to be hundreds of thousands (Machel, 1996). The contemporary notion of childhood as a stage of innocence and weakness juxtaposed with adults portrayed to be strong, competent, and responsible, has led to the widespread agreement that war is not an affair of children (Shepler, 2005; Rosen, 2007).

One major event, the signing of the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in 1989, which was subsequently ratified by 196 countries (UN General Assembly, 1989) including Colombia, marked this new definition of early stages of life making the rights of children a priority. The emerging international devotion to children's rights and the intervention of UN agencies in regions of war led to the designing and implementation of disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration programs (DDR) and eventually to the first UN report written by Graça Machel in 1996, *The Impact of Armed Conflict on Children*. Humanitarian and human rights groups that seek to ban the military use of children follow the Cape Town Principles defining a child soldier as 'any person

under eighteen years of age who has been recruited or used by an armed force or armed group in any capacity' (UNICEF, 1997). It does not only refer to a child who is carrying or has carried arms (UNICEF, 1997). Consequently, the international discussion on child recruitment has been limited to the age factor differentiating a child from an adult (Rosen, 2007).

In his review of the phenomenon of child recruitment, Jason Hart (2006a) debated the sharp rise of attention in children's participation in armed conflicts. Hart claims many publications have been based on the erroneous belief that child soldiering is a recent phenomenon of global concern. He clarified that both academics and practitioners using this discourse not only condemn the position of a child in military activities, but also define where children should experience their childhood, creating a great inconsistency with local understandings of childhood. Moreover, as we have seen in section 1.2 of this chapter as well as in section 1 of Chapter I, the parameters of childhood as defined by the UNCRC can be quite problematic as many children globally are unable to attain such childhood.

There is a great need to fully engage with children's experiences and contextualise them within their socio-cultural practices and power structures (Hart, 2006a). Hart has called for a re-conceptualisation of child soldiering, as current practices of humanitarian organisations function within a limited understanding of children's lived realities and thus do not adopt the adequate measures to actually address their needs. He has suggested that there is a shift in the paradigm of children's decisions to partake in war from exploited victims to individuals capable of making sound decisions, and specified that given their need for survival in regions of political violence, youth are keener to negotiate their entry in power structures rather than make choices based on their morality. Moreover, many young people, especially boys, base their decision to engage in war as a means to hasten their access to adulthood by demonstrating their ability to protect and provide for their families and communities (Hart, 2006a; Honwana, 2006). Supporting Rosen's claim that children's engagement in war is an old phenomenon (2005), Hart concluded that not all child soldiers are the same and each situation of recruitment is unique, a notion that is unfortunately not taken into account by a large majority of experts in the field who adopt a standardised global discourse of child recruitment.

Rosen (2005) also noted that while very young people have served in armed forces and armed groups for centuries, the increase in attention on the problem derives from the widely held belief that the recruitment of children is a uniquely modern form of child abuse and exploitation. This further illustrates the failure of studies to go beyond child soldiers when examining the situation of children in conflict in Colombia, highlighting the importance of recognising the connection between all forms of uses of children in militia, which is an important aspect of my research.

Hart (2006a) noted that the current increase of activity to enhance awareness and prevent recruitment has largely grown in isolation from research documenting the scale, history, and conflicting nature of children's military engagement. For instance, David Rosen (2005) described that in Nazi-occupied Europe, most children became child soldiers because it was the only way to save their lives. In many cases, if children choose to remain civilians, they run a high risk of being killed (Hart, 2006a).

While Berry Mayall (2004) drew attention to the biological and socially constructed vulnerability of children as a reason for adults to treat them as incompetent, Hart (2006a) argued that the assumed inherent weakness of the young is what actually gives them their 'power' in symbolic terms, legitimising the growing concern and determination to provide the necessary protection and explaining that the UNCRC is by far the most ratified UN convention. A lot of the discourse about child soldiers remains dominated by the global focus on the need to offer an umbrella of protection to 'children' (Silva, 2008). However, children's involvement in militias often characterised as exploitation of their inherent vulnerability, has created a political divide between good and evil. This has helped secure the sense of one's own society as essentially decent in the Global North while claiming concern for children in other 'morally wrong' countries of the Global South (Macmillan, 2009). While the focus remains on 'evil' countries of the Global South that recruit children in war such as Colombia, the United States and United Kingdom continue their efforts to encourage young people toward a future career in the armed services (Macmillan, 2009). Hart (2006a; 2006c) has questioned if there is indeed a candid interest in the protection of children in wealthier countries, eventually disrupting their proclaimed image as righteous and concerned nations that is used to justify political interventions in less powerful regions.

Another notable factor inspiring the excessive attention granted to the issue of child recruitment is the demarcation of age established by the UNCRC. Age is used as the main criteria by humanitarian organisations and demobilisation processes to define what childhood is and how it should be experienced worldwide. Age defines who should belong to the category of child soldiers (Rosen, 2007). David Rosen (2007) explained that the notion of childhood used by all of these institutions is a highly politicised construct predominantly used to justify and legitimise political schemes without accounting for the cultural parameters in which children's experiences take place. Fortunately, the most recent writings pay greater attention to the contexts of children's lives and this emerging research has the potential to furnish a more holistic and contextualised understanding of conflict and its consequences for the young (Shepler, 2004; Honwana, 2006; Waldmann, 2007; Pachón, 2009; Villanueva O'Driscoll et al., 2013; Pachón, 2016).

However, in certain key respects, scholarship lacks important specificity, particularly with respect to age and maturity. This is especially true when considering the almost universal acceptance by the world's nation states of the UNCRC's dividing line between 'adulthood' and 'childhood' at age 18 (Hart, 2006a; 2006c). This universal instrument, as is explained by David Rosen (2007), is centred on the belief that the multitudes of paradigms of childhood worldwide should be discarded to adopt one standardised definition of childhood thereby completely ignoring the social and cultural implications of reconfiguring age groups. Aside from the challenges arising from the UNCRC definition of childhood, international law on child soldiering is also incongruent with local notions of children's engagement in war (Rosen, 2007). Furthermore, categorising children as 'child soldiers' presupposes them as a product of adult exploitation: helpless and abused (Peters & Richards, 1998; Rosen, 2007; Macmillan, 2009). The resulting concept of child soldiers advocated by international law undermines and constrains the development of local understandings and further inhibits the adoption of adequate and efficient legal and political responses to child recruitment (Rosen, 2007; Macmillan, 2009).

In addition to the discussed constraints of the UNCRC's rigid universal definition of childhood, Hart (2008) noted that decision-makers often ignore the irrelevance of the construction of a category of the population called 'children' to young people of a specific age group. There are important differences between those in early childhood and others

engaged in processes of transition toward the roles and responsibilities associated with adulthood, although still within the same general category of childhood. Hart has proposed using the term 'adolescence', as most of the experiences lived by children in situations of armed conflict are specific to a later stage in their lives.

Many authors however still treat all under-eighteens as essentially the same, often treating adolescents as young dependent children. Although anthropologist Alice Schlegel (1995) defined adolescence across diverse societies and cultures as a period between childhood and adulthood during which its participants behave and are treated differently than either their seniors or their juniors, Hart (2008) specified that as a period in the life course, its length, the terms by which it is labelled, and the practices that it involves may vary. He defined adolescence as a period of life marked by biology and also by social responsibility, involving negotiations of regulations and obligations resulting from cultural and political factors. We must not therefore assume its universality, although conditions arising from political violence worldwide have shown to shorten the adolescence stage and rush 'children' to adulthood (Hart, 2008). Jo Boyden (2001) explained that the death, disappearance or disablement of parents or other caregivers could compel young people to take on fully the roles, if not the status, of adults.

In settings of political violence and displacement, the responsibilities of young people can multiply literally overnight; school pupils can suddenly become soldiers, political leaders, heads of households, and primary caregivers (Hart, 2008). Young people take on different roles and acquire new profiles in a context of multidimensional violence where many dynamics are intertwined (Moser & McIlwaine, 2004). In the following section I explore the need to reconceptualise childhood shifting from victimhood to recognising their agency and resilience in negotiating with their circumstances.

2.2.Children's Agency and Resilience in Contexts of War

While it is necessary to observe and listen to the voices of child soldiers about the distressing events they have experienced, it could lead to victimisation and mask the ways in which children have acted in their environment to survive (Boyden, 2003). The participation of children in peace-building efforts, particularly in regions where conflict is

continuing, reveals their desire for change and their capability to alter their situation (Boyden, 2003; Honwana, 2006).

Contemporary studies have recognised the capacity of children to make informed decisions and make use of power, even in circumstances not of their choosing (Peters & Richards, 1998; Korbin, 2003; Boyden & de Berry, 2004; Rosen, 2005; Honwana, 2006; James & Prout, 2008; Hart, 2006c; Rosen, 2008; Poretti, 2008). Furthermore, developmental models of childhood have long advanced the notion that the capacity for rational thinking is present in children and scholars have increasingly argued for the recognition of children's decisional autonomy (James & Prout, 1997; Hartman, 2000; Mayall, 2004). It is clear that children are not able to exercise agency in the same way as adults, in part because of the structural constraints inherent in society. It is therefore important to ask 'in what ways children can employ their agency (Berents, 2008, p. 9)?' One can conclude that agency is directly connected to power; the agent must be able to put their power into practice in a given situation (Honwana, 2006).

Jo Boyden (2003) examined how the notion of an innocent, powerless, and vulnerable early phase of life interacts with and foments the association of children in contexts of war with trauma and victimisation. Similarly to Jason Hart (2006c) and David Rosen (2007), she suggested the urgent need to reconceptualise the understanding of childhood as a period not only bound by physical criteria but also by individual and societal characteristics. This change in paradigm, she explained, requires perceiving children as active elements of their environments who shape and are shaped by the adversities they face.

Similarly, Lewis Aptekar (1988) concluded that even in the most difficult situations, children in his study in Colombia attempted to defy their realities with the creation of highly organised groups protecting and providing for their members. In these social gangs mandated by rules and sanctions, each child occupied a specific role in a hierarchic form, based on the needs for the survival and growth of the group (Aptekar, 1998). Peterson and Read (2002) remarked that children also hold political roles in their societies in Central America, and are considered to be highly esteemed among their community members. The authors emphasised that children's roles in opposition movements and popular understandings of their participation challenge conventional

Western developmental views of both childhood and political action. They also question the notion that children are unaware of the causes and consequences of war and thus cannot be responsible political actors.

Yet, children, in interaction with society, make sense of their lives and experiences and draw upon resources in order to find pathways for their lives – a process that has been defined as resilience (Honwana, 2006; Alvis Palma, 2008). This concept suggests an emphasis on capacity and strength as opposed to the focus on pathology, damage, and trauma. In her account of resilience amongst older children in a setting of armed conflict in Colombia, Colombian psychologist Diana Isabel Alvis Palma (2008) defined resilience as a construction that emerges when people affected by socio-political violence, the organisations that seek to support them, and the wider society, engage together in a process of meaning-making where fresh resources and agency are constructed and accounts of hope and of the future unfold. She suggested that rather than enquiring into risk factors, such as the experience of violence, abandonment, and displacement, it is more useful to discover factors and resources that contribute to protection and wellbeing, thus using an approach centred upon resilience. This key point is central to my analysis of the responses to violence of young participants in my study.

Jo Boyden and Joanna de Berry (2000) defined resilience as coping strategies of children exposed to highly stressful situations. They claimed that the recognition and support of children's competencies and resourcefulness could lead to better child protection rather than victimisation by moving away from a focus on child pathology and towards the recognition of children as social actors with capacities and valid understandings of their surroundings. However, Jo Boyden and Gillian Mann (2005) reviewed the discourse of resilience and the cultural framework shaped by and shaping children's responses to hardship and found that the notion of resilience cannot be used as a generic theory to examine how children cope with adversity. Instead it needs to be studied within each specific context. They make the point that relying on their own individual capacities to cope does not imply vindicating irresponsible governments that choose to disregard their obligations toward children, shortcomings in policy or practice, or to ignore that children remain among the most severely affected by the adverse circumstances of armed conflict. They argue that children's experiences of adversity are

mediated by a combination of internal and external factors that are inseparable from the social, political, and economic contexts in which they live.

As a consequence, many children have joined the closest authoritarian group, seeking new prospects and growth in social status (Hart, 2006a; Beirens, 2008; Peters, 2012). In some cases, families have supported their children's access to an armed force as simply another economic opportunity, as a chance to leave the marginalised region in which they live, and/or access to education often promised by the illegal units. As there are many ways in which individuals respond to their realities, the assumption based on the uniformity of how children respond to extreme conditions is highly flawed (Boyden, 2003). While the widely held belief of childhood as a uniform phase has been scrutinised, some characteristics of childhood remain universal (Boyden, 2003) such as the incremented suffering endured by their smaller bodies (Parker, 1996). The suggested ideology of children as resourceful agents in contexts of hardship does not entail that they should cope in a certain way with their difficulties but rather that it is essential to recognise and take into account children's negotiations with and contributions to their environments (Boyden, 2003).

The literature on the history of children and studies on children in contexts of violence reveals a large number of strong young individuals who gained independence from their families at a very young age and showed their capacity and creativity in handling adverse circumstances, which is also seen among the young participants in my study. Hence, it compels a review of current notions of age demarcation and contextualised understandings of children's roles and positions in their societies. Understanding why certain children are more negatively impacted by armed conflict than others, and how particular ones develop certain coping mechanisms, requires the recognition of many childhoods embedded within different global cultures (Boyden, 2003). Both resilience and agency are subject to each individual child and cannot be generalised—the social, political, and economic contexts shape how children cope with different situations, including armed conflict (Boyden and Mann, 2005). Children of different ages and genders have distinct capacities and will negotiate with their experiences in diverse ways, influenced by both their nature and the environment in which they live (Boyden and Mann, 2005).

As I pointed out in the previous chapter, child recruitment is not a new phenomenon and the contexts in which children engage in war are subject to their environments, gender, age, and ethnicity. It is therefore important to explore children's engagement in war within the Colombian context. I will discuss this important point in greater detail in the following section.

3. Child Recruitment in the Colombian Context

3.1. Child Soldiers in Colombian History

In terms of global history, children's engagement in armed conflict is not a new phenomenon and this is even less so in the Colombian context (Pachón, 2009; 2016). From the late 19th and early 20th century Ximena Pachón (2009; 2016) elucidated that children have been found on battlefields as soldiers in the various internal wars. Carlos Eduardo Jaramillo Castillo (1991) stressed the widespread culture of violence that encompassed everyone in Colombia at the end of the 19th century and reported children's engagement in the Thousand Days' War starting in 1899. Ximena Pachón (2009) has explained that child combatants are referred to as 'small bells' by right-wing forces for their use as patrols, 'beehives' by the left-wing groups as their ability to 'sting' their opponents before they become aware of the assault, or 'carts' by urban gangs as they can traffic arms and other goods through checkpoints and go unnoticed. Pachón has noted that child soldiers continued to play an important role in the Colombian armed conflict at the beginning of the 21st century. Child soldiers are found among the multiplicity of childhoods that have existed in the history of the country, contributing to one of the most intricate and multifaceted classifications in the study of Colombian childhood. Pachón further explained that childhood in Colombia has developed in a violent environment where the concept of *machismo* or male chauvinism, the power of weapons, and the use of force became the accepted and valued way to face life and way of solving all conflicts.

While Colombian history has revolved around armed conflict and children have always taken part in military life, Ximena Pachón (2016) has argued that while the discourse on the incongruence of childhood and war initiated within urban contexts in the 1970s, it

was intensified by the dissemination of reports and campaigns by humanitarians and academics aiming to save children in the 1990s. The newly introduced notion of children as victims of war contrasted with their prior celebration as heroes in combat (Pachón, 2009) and as Carlos Eduardo Jaramillo Castillo (2007) explained, children had historically been vital political assets in Colombia and engaged in military operations as early in age as possible. Not only were the child militias esteemed and even dreaded by other combatants, their placement in war troops was deemed as privileged—receiving adequate meals and earning their officers attention and respect (Jaramillo Castillo, 2007). Jaramillo Castillo recorded that younger recruits were preferred for their unique attributes including their ‘agility, quickness, compliance with orders, and their lack of fear of risks and death’ (p. 77). Battalions formed entirely of children aged as young as 10 years old, on both sides of the war, was a common occurrence fulfilling a longstanding custom in Colombian history (Jaramillo Castillo, 2007).

Children also held their fighting positions in *La Violencia* or ‘The Violence’ that lasted from 1946 to 1965 (Pachón, 2016). While discourses of agency in contexts of war intensified in more recent literature, Colombian writers such as Monsignor Guzmán, Orlando Fals Borda, and Eduardo Umaña Luna (1962, p. 12) depicted children as ‘little soldiers’ to eventually become the ‘future leaders’ and as significant and ‘active elements of the tragedy’. Children’s engagements in *La Violencia* was reported not only in terms of acts of bravery but predominantly fearless, and the most prized soldiers despite their small statures (Pachón, 2016).

Aside from the many roles children occupied, including as soldiers, messengers, spies, and servants, not all were initially active fighters and many endured the violence as civilians (Pachón, 2016). As often was the case, many youngsters joined one of the armed groups or formed new ones to seek revenge for the killings of their kin and became some of the most fearsome commanders (Ortis, 1984). Consequently, many small gangs of child militias were created composed of new combatants or former recruits having escaped from other battalions (Ortis, 1984). Ximena Pachón (2016) stressed that many of these children had been immersed in a widespread culture of death and torture, having witnessed many of their family members and communities massacred—violence had become their only language, as many were too young to fully grasp the cause behind the struggle of many liberal movements.

Historian Carlos Miguel Ortis (1984) explained that many children joined guerrilla groups not merely as means for revenge but also as the result of the state's failure toward its citizens, the prevailing social injustice, and high levels of impunity. Caught in a cycle of extreme violence which they could not escape, and having lost their loved ones and support network, many children found refuge in the mountains under the protection of the guerrilla where they were able to rebuild their lives, take on new occupations, and create surrogate families. In the words of Ximena Pachón (2016, p. 86), the guerrilla became the 'great peasant child governess of the country' and formed the next leaders of the contemporary war elaborated in the next segment.

3.2. Contemporary Young Colombian Combatants

As we have now learnt, child soldiering has always taken place in the history of Colombia and many aspects of its modern-day manifestations are an extension of its older traditions. Nonetheless, and as seen in Sections 2.1 and 2.2, there has been a recent and noteworthy surge in attention from academics, policymakers, and practitioners condemning children's participation in armed conflicts and attempting to comprehend why they join violent circles. They have been treating this as a new phenomenon.

In the same manner as their young counterparts in previous Colombian wars, contemporary child soldiers' experience the death and torture of their loved ones and the destruction of their communities, but they are also significantly valiant and fearsome combatants placing Colombia high among countries with the most child soldiers (Pachón, 2016). Although the number of child militias remains significant in Colombia, the discourse surrounding their engagement in the war is far less studied as compared to other regions (Bjørkhaug, 2010) and has been largely limited to second-hand accounts via reports of journalists and academics working with children that have left combatant life (Pachón, 2016).

While it has been found that most children in Colombia join armed groups of their own will, state agencies implementing demobilisation processes treat former young soldiers as victims of a coerced operation basing their ideologies on children's incapacity to

make adequate and deliberate decisions (Bjørkhaug, 2010). As reiterated by Ximena Pachón (2009; 2016) and whilst recognising children's adverse realities, Ingunn Bjørkhaug (2010) asserted that contrary to the government and humanitarian policies of treating them as part of a uniform cluster of victims, child combatants in Colombia are rather active and significant players in their environments, each with their own unique story. Even if Colombian children choose violent paths under pressure led by poverty and survival schemes, they still practice their agency to negotiate resources available to them to best deal with their circumstances (Bjørkhaug, 2010); what Alcinda Honwana (2006, p. 51; 2009, p. 63) has called 'tactical agency'.

Contemporary child recruitment has often been associated with constant exposure to violence in their families, communities, or by means of the media, including witnessing or hearing about combat, shootings, bombings, kidnappings, poverty, and absence of educational opportunities (Brett, 2003; Brett & Specht, 2004; Wessells, 2006). Child recruitment has also been condemned as one of the worst forms of abuse (Watchlist, 2012) along with the worst forms of child labour (ILO, 1999). Though war undeniably produces more poverty for a great majority of its civilians and exhausts the assets of a country, it cannot be presumed that it necessarily creates child labour (Hart, 2002).

In the Colombian armed conflict, children have historically held different roles in its military operations, as it has been an established and respected custom (Pachón, 2016). Jason Hart (2012) has argued that children's engagement in war is not inescapably detrimental to their wellbeing, and in some instances, children may gain some sense of stability and increase their confidence in periods of insecurity and ceaseless change. For many children, their proximity to military commanders, access to weapons, and the strenuous physical drills, provide them with a sense of power and vigour (Pachón, 2016). While the present-day war is predominantly led by economic factors (Waldmann, 2007), child combatants in the FARC and ELN are required to study Marxist ideologies, icons such as Che Guevara and Camilo Torres, and to learn the history of the group (Pachón, 2016). On the other hand, the experiences of children in paramilitary groups are quite distinct and involve no causes behind the fighting other than the use of extreme physical violence grounded in power struggles over territory and lucrative industries (Pachón, 2016).

At the same time, the common denominator among young Colombians involved in the current war is their exclusion from power structures (Moser et. al, 2005; Pachón, 2016), including from educational and employment opportunities. Ximena Pachón (2016) explained that in some cases, mothers hand over their children to the guerrilla groups in hopes of escaping the misery and uncertainties they were subjected to. Many youngsters join the war as an extension of their family's involvement in the left-wing guerrilla or based on the group that represents the authority in their community (Álvarez-Correa & Aguirre, 2002). Children who are born within military groups generally join their parents in what Ximena Pachón (2016, p. 89) has called the 'pre-designated path'.

The poor structural conditions of their society, the prevailing inequalities, and the violent circles encompassing children propel many to join illegal militias (Llorente et. al, 2004). All children, particularly those from vulnerable populations, are highly exposed to recruitment by armed groups with almost 90 per cent of child recruitment happening in rural areas (Villar-Márquez & Harper, 2010). Increasing numbers of children have become victims of murder and physical abuse through their association with the internal conflict and the social norms mandated by both the state and illegal armed actors who control their communities (Pachón, 2016).

Ximena Pachón (2016) concluded that while children have always fought in Colombian wars, their current recruitment is based on the facility with which they are enlisted and the government's failure to protect them. In their assessment of children's engagement in armed groups in Colombia, Villanueva O'Driscoll et al. (2013) stressed that it is the society in which children live that needs to be examined rather than placing the onus on children. Lack of employment and educational options, subjection to mistreatment, growing in an environment where violence is a common language, and the prevalence of illegal activities, propel many children into collaboration with gangs, drug traffickers, guerrillas, urban militias, local police, the armed forces and others linked to the conflict (Villanueva O'Driscoll et al., 2013).

In a society historically led by machismo, coercion, and violence, and provided with few alternatives, it should be no surprise there are large numbers of children joining violent circles (Pachón, 2016). As it is common for children to leave demobilisation programs to enter other armed groups, in what Ximena Pachón (2016, p. 91) called the 'recycling of

minor fighters', and as the root causes of the conflict remain unchanged, there will be a tremendous impediment in resolving the violence in Colombia.

4. Conclusion

The scholarship discussed in this chapter has helped me to refine my theoretical framing about childhood, agency and resilience in contexts of violence. Utilising the approach offered by the sociology of childhood that specifies childhood is not a universal phenomenon and needs to be framed within the context in which it is experienced, has enabled me to view my study through the lens of local ideas about children's roles, responsibilities, identities, capacities, and responses to the dynamics surrounding them. An attempt to comprehend children's engagement in the war in Colombia requires a study of childhood within the wider historical, social, and political contextual factors of the region.

As reviewed in this chapter, a significant number of children have partaken in war activities across different regions of the globe out of their own volition contrasting with established notions of children as helpless victims in need of adult protection arising from the UNCRC definition of childhood. There exists a dichotomy between the symbolism of childhood promoted by the universal instrument and local perceptions and experiences of childhoods. Children living in circumstances and cultural understandings that do not replicate the Western model of childhood are not deprived of childhood; rather they experience the early phases of life in different ways. Nonetheless, the implications of the standardised definition of childhood of the UNCRC, namely that they become a threat to the rest of society disrupting the conventional image of what and how a child ought to be, creates limitations for societies in which children are unable to attain an ideal childhood. Moreover, it creates a moral divide between what is considered 'good' replicated in the Global North and 'evil' in regions of the Global South.

Children's engagement in and experiences of war also varies according to their specific environments, gender, age, ethnicity, and resilience. There are many types of childhood experienced within the dynamics of violence subject to the individualities of each child as seen in studies undertaken in the Latin American context by Aptekar (1993) and Hecht

(1998). This provides the ability to move beyond the notion of children as victims to recognizing children's capacities to make judgments they deem best for their livelihoods and shape their opportunities and that of their communities, this is what Alcinda Honwana (2006) has defined as 'tactical agency' (Chapter I, section 2).

In addition to these constraints, the dividing line between 'adulthood' and 'childhood' at age 18 presents challenges to the law with respect to child soldiering. While child soldiering has historically been a significant characteristic of global wars, it handles child soldiering as a modern phenomenon and condemns children's engagement in war as morally wrong. Consequently, an excessive attention has been granted in recent years to the issue of child recruitment widening the gap between the 'rights' accorded to children by the UNCRC and the realities of children's lives in the context of other social identities, family life, knowledge, politics and war. There exists a need to move beyond a rights-based approach, investigating how children construct meaning of their experiences as opportunities and limitations and utilise their agency as influential actors in their environments.

The study of Colombian childhood reveals that child militias have always occupied an important space, both privileged and esteemed, in the history of the country. Child combatants were celebrated as heroes and recognised as vital political assets. This contrasts with their current status as victims of war, creating incongruence in the meaning children construct as soldiers. While the modern-day armed conflict is an extension of Colombia's violent past and older traditions, the common denominator among its modern-day young combatants is their subjectivity to exclusion from socio-economic and political realms and the lack of opportunities for growth available to them.

The protracted conflict has also established a culture of violence where the use of force has become the legitimate way to resolve any conflict or limitation. Though it is undeniable to recognise the losses children endured during the Colombian armed conflict, this chapter has highlighted their position as valiant and influential elements of their environments, contrasting with the notions of childhood brought upon by the UNCRC. My study seeks to tackle the current gaps in the literature on Colombian childhoods in contexts of war that often limits young people to victims bound by age by recognising their meaningful contributions to their social, economic, and political

communities that help create new identities and maximise opportunities for growth.

In my attempt to best address my main research question examining how children in Colombia negotiate violence in their everyday lives, I adopted in the following chapters a child-centred approach looking at children's lives from their perspectives—acknowledging children's agency and their ability to make decisions out of their volition was at the core of both the design of the data collection and my analysis of the data. I focused on the everyday lives of children in two different locations in Colombia offering different contexts of violence, rather than within institutions, including schools. Therefore, my theoretical framework and literature review led to my choice of methods addressed in the next chapter. I also deeply consider the socio-historical background, and the intersectionality of violence, social capital, race, and gender as well concepts of childhood, agency, and voice, all of which are important issues that I have raised in this chapter.

Chapter IV: Methods

The chapter has three aims. First, to contextualise the study by describing the main characteristics of the two fieldwork locations: the city of Cali and specifically the community of Potrero Grande, and Comuna 13 in the city of Medellín. Second, to describe the development of the methodology to address the research questions. Third, describe the data collection methods, the participants and the data analysis. I also address ethical issues, limitations arising from the research design and how they have been managed. I reflect on the dynamics of the fieldwork, my role as a researcher, complications associated with generating data on children's perspectives, and how my background may have affected the research.

My research seeks to understand children's perceptions of their realities and the dynamics of conflict affecting their everyday lives, and how they negotiate and respond to violence and its effects. I adopted a qualitative approach utilising a combination of methods that aims to produce knowledge from the meanings young participants give to the events in their lives and their perspectives on the issues and opportunities in their environments impacting their livelihoods (Morrow, 2001; Mason, 2002). My conceptual framework (see Chapter I) drew on the sociology of childhood, emphasising that children are active social agents who shape their social structures and dynamics (James & Prout, 1997). I designed my research to engage with young people as co-researchers and minimise power relations between the adult researcher and the child participants (Boyden & Ennew, 1997; Marr & Malone, 2007).

The use of visual methods allowed children to actively participate in the creative process, allowing them to express difficult and complicated lived experiences with minimal interference from the researcher (de Block & Buckingham, 2007). These methods also allowed for a profound understanding of the topics of the research from children's interpretations, shifting from observing to immersing oneself in the environment (Schratz and Lechner-Kreidl, 2004). Using a combination of qualitative methods with young people in two different geographical contexts of Colombia allowed the collection of interconnected data of the different realities they experience, the meanings they build around them and outcomes otherwise overlooked (Morrow, 2001; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2006; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010). This supported an analysis

of the intersectional nature of the violence the young people experience as discussed in Chapters I and III.

2. Study Setting

I conducted research in the communities of Comuna 13 in the city of Medellín and in Potrero Grande, district of Aguablanca, in the city of Cali (see maps on p. 8 & 9). Among the three largest cities in Colombia, Cali and Medellín are comprised of a large population of young people and embody the various dynamics of violence I was interested in studying, including significant numbers of forcibly displaced people, a high prevalence of young *sicarios*, child recruitment, narco-industry, and host a diversity of ethnic and cultural backgrounds. While both cities have been primary destinations of IDPs migrating from rural regions, I was aware that selecting these two locations would limit me to urban dynamics.

I had plans to expand my research to more regions of Colombia. However, given the risks of working in contexts of violence, I had to improvise and adapt opportunistically to obtain the data. The protracted conflict in Colombia has reached many regions of the country with characteristics other than those found in Cali and Medellín. These distinguishable characteristics included armed groups controlling particular regions, cultural and ethnic differences directly affecting responses to violence, state presence and state interventions. I was therefore conscious that these two locations would enable me to respond to my research questions and allow me to look in depth at contrasts between the two settings; however it would not encompass all of the dynamics of the national conflict.

2.1. Medellín

I undertook my research in the neighbourhood of Comuna 13 in Medellín located in the centre of the country (see Map 3 on p. 14). I organized workshops with participants with the collaboration of Fundación Pazamano, which works to empower youth in marginalised sectors of the city, particularly in Comuna 13. Medellín was once considered the most dangerous city in the world and home to the largest drug cartels in the 1980s (Alsema, 2009). Led by Pablo Escobar, the most prominent drug lord and

trafficker often referred to as the 'king of cocaine' (Rubio, 2001), Medellín became a strategic centre for the powerful narcotics industry starting in the 1980s with the proliferation of drug cartels (Livingstone, 2003). This had a significant impact on the social dynamics of the city, which included an increase in the presence of right and left wing militias (Riaño-Alcalá, 2006). Many young people became trapped in cycles of violence with many joining newly formed gangs, becoming *sicarios*, and undertaking illegal activities run by the drug cartels and armed groups (Riaño-Alcalá, 2006).

While the collapse of the monopolised industry followed the death of Pablo Escobar in 1993 (Rubio, 2001), the struggle over the control of territories and lucrative industries by both militias and gangs continued and intensified the violence in the city, especially in low-income neighbourhoods (Riaño-Alcalá, 2006). One of the wealthiest cities in Colombia, Medellín has also served as a political hub for the nation, encouraging a unique mix of political actors and social cleansing gangs (Riaño-Alcalá, 2006). It has also been the refuge of a large percentage of forcibly displaced people hoping to rebuild their lives and take part in the growing economy (Sánchez & Atehortúa, 2008).

In the last two decades Comuna 13 in particular has been the epicentre of violence and struggle for criminal control within the Medellín valley (Sánchez & Atehortúa, 2008). Residents have been caught in the crossfire and forcibly displaced from their homes (Sánchez & Atehortúa, 2008). Even after Escobar's death in 1993, violence persisted amid on-going feuds between left-wing guerrilla groups and paramilitaries working for traffickers (Livingstone, 2003). Today, Medellín's criminal elite still benefit from the international cocaine trade, laundering much of the money in the city's economy.

After a period of relative calm, the violence in the city intensified with the proliferation of new gangs following the failed demobilisation of the paramilitaries in 2008. Caught in the crossfire between armed groups and the police, young people are in constant danger of being stigmatised and/or targeted by outsiders as being members of a particular armed group (Godfrey-Wood, 2009). Residents are confined to set areas marked by invisible frontiers that constantly shift with control over territory.

In 2002 the government launched the largest military operation in the conflict's history, called *Operación Orión*, in Comuna 13 to fight insurgent groups (Verdad Abierta, 2012).

This operation was not aimed specifically at insurgent groups and resulted in the killing of hundreds of innocent young civilians (Verdad Abierta, 2012). Young people were wrongly labelled ‘guerrillas’; this label came to be known as ‘false positives’—the extrajudicial killings of thousands of civilians by members of the armed forces who dressed their victims as guerrillas to be rewarded for their combat kills (Godfrey-Wood, 2009).

Comuna 13 is still one of the most dangerous communities in the city and is home to one of the most inadequate educational systems in the country (Sánchez & Atehortúa, 2008). The increasing engagement of young people with violent activities reinforced the association of the image of poor urban youth with *sicarios*, gang members, guerrillas or insurgent fighters limiting any prospects for investments in education or employment by the state (Riaño-Alcalá, 2006). The stigmatisation of poor urban youth generated a decrease in employment and education opportunities in low-income neighbourhoods furthering their socio-economic and political exclusion (Riaño-Alcalá, 2006).

Comuna 13 has one of the highest rates of unemployment in the city—15.7% compared to 13.7% of unemployment in Medellín (Sánchez & Atehortúa, 2008). As a result, the stigmatisation and exclusion experienced by young people in poor neighbourhoods led to an escalation of youth violence (Ortiz 1991). The socio-economic conditions in these communities laid the foundation for the operations of militias and guerrillas justifying the need for their intervention to compensate for the failure of the state to provide for its citizens (Sánchez & Atehortúa, 2008). This has also meant that more young people have engaged with militias with the promise of income prospects and upward social mobility (Sánchez & Atehortúa, 2008).

I led workshops between August and October 2012 in *Casa AMI* or House AMI (Association of Women of *Las Independencias*²), a community centre in Comuna 13 serving and supported by many of the grassroots initiatives in the neighbourhood. The centre allowed both the young participants in my study from different neighbourhoods of the commune and myself to gather and work safely in one location.

² *Las Independencias* is a sector of Comuna 13 that was heavily affected by *Operación Orión*.

2.2.Cali

I conducted the second part of my research in the community of Potrero Grande, in the district of Aguablanca, city of Cali, department of El Valle del Cauca in the southwestern region of the country (see Map 2 on p. 13). Cali is one of the three major cities in Colombia and home to the largest Afro-Colombian population. It is the capital of the Pacific Colombian coast and serves as one of the main trade hubs of the country. Cali has suffered from similar levels of violence as Medellín, if not more.

Although the establishment of drug cartels was initiated in Medellín in the early 1970s, Cali soon became its sister city with large cartels dominating the drug trade and intensified following the death of Pablo Escobar (Rubio, 2001). As a result, the control of the country's drug trade became dispersed and switched to the hands of small and medium trafficking organisations (Rubio, 2001). While the production of cocaine in Colombia has dropped in recent years (UNODC, 2013), fighting between gangs has increased as profits diminish.

Another factor increasing the violence in Cali is its proximity to Buenaventura, one of the major Colombian ports on the Pacific Ocean and the greatest hub for the drug trade. As the armed conflict intensified on the Pacific coastline, many people were forcibly displaced and migrated to Cali in search of protection and economic survival. The increase in immigrants meant an over-population in already marginalised and financially deprived communities, worsening the existing poverty, lack of opportunities, and delinquency (Dávila, 2001).

The Aguablanca District covers an extensive area in the southeast of Cali housing populations from very low-income social strata that settled both legally and illegally. The district of Aguablanca is one of the most violent areas of Cali (Urrea Giraldo & Quintín Quílez, 2000) with a murder rate in some neighbourhoods reaching 140 for every 100,000 inhabitants annually (Hamilton et al., 2011). Active in Aguablanca are left- and right-wing insurgent groups, gangs, and *oficinas* (hitmen quarters), all of which employ children as hitmen called *sicarios* (Urrea Giraldo & Quintín Quílez, 2000). Aguablanca has one of the largest Afro-Colombian communities, as well as some of the lowest economic levels and a concentration of internally displaced people (Barbary et. al, 1999). According to a CIDSE (Centre for Socioeconomic Research and Documentation)

study in Colombia, the Afro-descendant population in Cali is 27 per cent, of which 62 per cent are in communes 6, 7, 13, 14, 15, and 16, three of which are part of the Aguablanca District.

Cali's economy collapsed in the 1990s after the capture of Pablo Escobar and the fall of its drug cartels. A large part of its poverty is concentrated in the poor peripheries of the city, mainly Aguablanca where I conducted my research (Dávila, 2001). Cali's small elite group owns most of its land and resources (Dávila, 2001), depriving the rest of the population of most of social, educational, and financial opportunities. Although some of the privileged members of high society rejected the soaring Cali cartels in the 1980s and 1990s, many profited from the large sums of cash invested into the city's economy in sectors ranging from retail, manufacturing, construction, the agro-industry sector, and other means of money laundering (Dávila, 2001).

The fall of the major drug cartels in Cali in the late 1990s meant the beginning of a great recession in the city while the confrontation between paramilitary, guerrilla, and other criminal armed groups continued increasing violence to unprecedented levels. Another factor contributing to the fall of Cali's economy is the shift from rural to urban poverty (Dávila, 2001), with the augmenting violence and land occupation by left- and right-wing actors. Motivated by political unrest in nearby rural regions, an increasing number of displaced people migrated to Cali (Dávila, 2001) especially from the Pacific coast and the department of Chocó. The reality of social disparities in Cali is not only apparent in its residents' choice of neighbourhood but also in their access to adequate health, education, and other social services (Dávila, 2001).

While school attendance rates in Cali were above the national average in the early 2000s, the educational levels in Aguablanca were below average with attendance decreasing with higher age (Hamilton et al., 2011). The significant number of non-governmental organizations active in Cali since the 1960s have so far failed to bridge the gap in educational opportunities in low-income areas like Aguablanca, prompting private foundations to step in (Dávila, 2001). Although private foundations have played an important role in the provision of services and social programs in deprived neighbourhoods of the city, their creation by the elite was a direct response to the rise of

left-wing movements and political parties and the increasing discontent of residents of areas such as Aguablanca (Dávila, 2001).

I led workshops between January and March 2012 in Casa 6 of the Casas Francisco Esperanza, a program of the Fundación Paz y Bien (www.fundacionpazybien.org), an NGO operating in various communities in Cali. While the organisation is largely sustained by the Church, it also receives the support of various international and local NGOs as well as from educational and governmental institutions. There are various *Casas Francisco Esperanza* (Francisco Esperanza Houses) located throughout the city that are part of a non-governmental organisation that leads a community network to provide assistance to individuals displaced by violence via community food halls, microcredit programs, assistance to pregnant youth, and conflict resolution.

3. Research Design

There are different subjective realities to the experiences and perspectives of each child in my study—this led to my adopting a constructionist position (Crotty, 1998; Scotland, 2012). Since I aimed to study reality from the meanings that children attach to their lives around their daily encounters with violence (Chapters I & III), I decided to adopt an interpretivist viewpoint (Crotty, 1998; Scotland, 2012). I have chosen to work from these vantage points because I am analysing how children view the dynamics in their surroundings and their responses to violence in their lives. In order to undertake this analysis, I used a combination of qualitative methods that allowed me to capture the subjective experiences of the child participants in my study and produce a variety of interconnected data (Morrow, 2001). I have challenged the conventional representation of children entirely from the adult's standpoint, 'as objects of imagery, very rarely its makers' (Holland, 2004, p. 20) and have attempted to make the data collection as participatory as possible (Chapters I & III). To this end, I have employed visual based methods when designing the activities with children (Clark-Ibáñez, 2007). My creative choice of methods was also influenced by the fact that I was operating in a delicate and dangerous context.

I based the design of my research in part on previous studies conducted with young people that used a child-centred multi-method approach that enabled youth to choose

their representations (Palloff, 1996; Morrow, 2001; Marr & Malone, 2007; de Block & Buckingham, 2007; Clark-Ibáñez, 2007). I was also influenced by my personal and professional history (Chapter I) and my own creativity and experience using visual methodologies with young people.

4. Preliminary Visit

Prior to this research I worked with young people in contexts of violence and armed conflict in Colombia using visual and creative methods since 2004 and prior to that, in other contexts of armed conflict for over a decade including Liberia, Cote d'Ivoire, El Salvador, Jamaica, Haiti, and Brazil. My extended experience in Colombia enabled me to utilise resources including creating a wide network of resources and individuals working in a similar field and having access to research that has not been published or digitalised.

My professional background working with communities in contexts of war as well as my personal experience with war (Chapter I, section 3) aided the process of establishing trust with many local communities most affected by the armed conflict (Maxwell, 2008). My prior study of the field also enabled me to explore my theories and methods in that particular context and their possible outcomes, and question my pre-conceived notions and research questions (Van Teijlingen and Hundley, 2001; Maxwell, 2008). Additionally, having worked with children in other conflict-affected regions, together with my personal encounter with war, allowed me to establish a stronger connection and relationship with those having undergone a similar experience in Colombia. Thus, my experience working with children, familiarity with war, local cultures and contexts in Colombia, and my fluency in Spanish facilitated the implementation of my fieldwork for this study.

For the specific purposes of this research, I travelled to Bogotá in July 2011 to identify appropriate locations for my fieldwork. I first visited centres in Bogota and Medellín that I had previously worked with. These centres receive former young combatants who have engaged with militia and gangs. Both locations were extremely supportive of my research and confirmed I could implement the work. For the workshops, I contacted one

of the founders of Fundación Pazamano who identified Casa AMI in Comuna 13 and offered to support me when I returned.

I was also keen on conducting part of the research in Cali given both its large population of Afro-Colombians and the prevalence of child *sicarios*. I had previously conducted some short-term work with former child soldiers and *sicarios*, and therefore already had knowledge of the city and communities. I also contacted a former colleague who worked with a local organisation and who confirmed his support for my work. However, a week prior to traveling to Cali, he disappeared and all forms of contact information no longer worked. I was never able to find out what happened to him.

I knew of another colleague working in Bogota who had contacts in Cali and who put me in touch with Fundación Paz y Bien in Cali that she thought might be of interest. I contacted the organisation by phone and after explaining my research, the manager showed interest in my work and offered me the use of their centres in Potrero Grande as my study site. While I had initially planned to extend my research to other regions of Colombia, I had to be opportunistic and adapt my research. I also had to factor in the dangers and risks for the children and myself as well as the gatekeepers involved with each location.

5. Data Collection

5.1. Data Collection Period

I was in Colombia collecting data between December 2010 and October 2012. My fieldwork consisted of three stages: an introductory phase including contact with gatekeepers and establishing support networks, in-depth interviews with former child soldiers and *sicarios*, and creative workshops with young people in Cali and Medellín. Participant observation of the fieldwork was carried out concurrently throughout the entire data collection period.

5.2. Gatekeeping and Establishing Support Networks

Creating the initial contacts and gaining the trust of gatekeepers was not an easy task, especially in a context of protracted war, which involves risks for both the individuals involved in the research and the researcher (Hart and Tyrer, 2006; Hobbs, 2006). It helped me a great deal that I had similar experiences with war, displacement, discrimination, and social exclusion. I knew how to approach and break the ice with gatekeepers, be more sensitive to their experiences and their defence and protection mechanisms, and how to establish trust. Additionally, having been raised in the Global South and my ethnicity as non-White made me more approachable and less likely to be associated with the wealthy elite in Colombia. As I had been working for many years in Colombia prior to conducting my fieldwork, I had already established support networks with grassroots, local and international organisations, community leaders, former child soldiers and *sicarios* which enabled me to either reconnect with them or be recommended to others that could support me. I was also familiar with both Cali and Medellin having previously worked there and had many contacts and friends who supported me throughout my research. I spent the time during my previous visits to Colombia and my preliminary visit establishing the initial relationships between December 2010 and July 2011.

The most challenging network to establish was with *sicarios* given the danger involved in engaging with them and the extreme levels of violence in their neighbourhoods. During previous work conducted in Cali I had made contact with one of the former *sicarios* who facilitated my access to both the neighbourhood and the circle of *sicarios*. To help ensure my safety I was told not to judge them or raise any doubt of any affiliation with the police or any government authority. Once more, the fact that I had also been both raised in a poor neighbourhood and in a Sub-Saharan country allowed me to gain a much closer connection to young *sicarios* as a large majority of them were of African descent.

In the case of former child soldiers, it was made easier as they were no longer combatants. I did face some initial reluctance from the director of the centre working with former child soldiers (Saunders, 2006). However when the centre's director discovered my creative approach, he felt far more comfortable. His main worry was the risk of re-victimisation and the harm caused by remembering past experiences. I reassured him I

would be using a creative approach and he supported me throughout the data collection process.

In Medellín, I had previously created a relationship with the founder of the Fundación Pazamano who introduced me during my preliminary visit to one of the community leaders of Comuna 13 who was also responsible for Casa Ami, the centre where I conducted the workshop. I discussed the research with her to obtain her approval, to get any suggestions regarding how I could improve my approach, and for contextualising my approach. She offered her full support in gathering the youth for the workshops and together we decided on a schedule. She approved of my use of visual based methods and using a child-centred approach that treated children as participants rather than subjects. She felt the participants would also benefit from the project, as their perspectives would be reflected with minimal interference from outsiders.

Although I had previously visited Cali and worked there on several occasions, I did not personally know Fundación Paz y Bien. A colleague referred me to one of the coordinators of the organisation and I spoke to her over the phone to discuss the research and the possibility of conducting the fieldwork with them. She was extremely helpful and suggested I arrive a few days prior to the start of the workshop to determine the location and the participants. Once in Cali, I met with her and she introduced me to the local coordinator at Casa 6 in Potrero Grande where I carried out the workshops. As young people would generally go to Casa 6 every afternoon from 2 to 5pm, the local coordinator suggested I occupied this period to conduct the workshops.

5.3. Engaging Research Participants

I collected data with young people from different contexts of violence including those who had directly engaged in violence and those who were facing the long-term effects of violence. While I was aiming to conduct my research specifically with young people who had a more direct experience with violence, I did not have prior access to the background of the participants, which prevented me from cherry picking those with specific experiences. However, since violence was routine in both communities, all young people were likely to have a direct experience in some way. I wanted to reflect the

different realities of children with violence and implement a more inclusive approach as all residents of the selected neighbourhoods faced violence in its different forms on a daily basis. Moreover, as my ontological assumption in my research held that different children had different realities, I made sure that my sample sources involved children from diverse backgrounds with violence including former child soldiers, child *sicarios*, and participants in the workshops carried out in Cali and Medellín. To broaden my understanding of the themes, I also engaged in conversations with community leaders, university professors, social workers, NGOs, government programs, young people in different contexts of violence across Colombia, journalists, photographers and filmmakers.

To engage research participants, I worked with the social workers of the respective organisations in each location who explained my research purpose and approach of the activities to the community leaders and young people and offered them the choice of partaking in the study (Hart & Tyrer, 2006; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2006). The only exception to my selection of participants was the case of Ana, a former combatant whom I met independently during a work assignment in Colombia (Chapter VI, section 1.2). All participants were recruited through an opt-in policy and informed consent was ensured through on-going discussions during the study (Hart & Tyrer, 2006; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2006). I made it clear that any participant was free to withdraw at any time. The anonymity and confidentiality of participants was respected to secure their identities and safety and that of their families by asking permission for the use of visual data, changing the names and locations, and not releasing confidential information outside of the research process (Hart & Tyrer, 2006; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2006; Alderson & Morrow, 2011).

5.4. Data Collection Methods

I used a combination of verbal and non-verbal methods to maximise the participation and comfort levels of all children in my research, and as an effective means to enable them to communicate difficult themes and their realities from their own perspectives, (Flick, 1998). The methods included in-depth interviews, creative workshops, and participant observation with former child soldiers, *sicarios*, and participants in workshops I conducted in Potrero Grande in Cali, and Comuna 13 in Medellín as shown in Table 1

below. I have specified the methods and data source used for each special objective, which align with my research questions and my epistemological lens used to interpret children’s realities from their perspectives.

Table 2. Summary of objectives, methods and data source

Special Objectives	Method(s)	Data source
To explore the forms of violence children encounter in Colombia in their everyday live.	In-depth interviews	Former child soldiers
		Child <i>sicarios</i>
		Participants in workshops
	Visually based methods	Participants in workshops
	Participant Observation	Community leaders; university professors; social workers, NGOs; government programs; young people in different contexts of violence across Colombia; journalists; photographers and filmmakers.
To determine how factors such as age, gender, ethnicity, and other social aspects play a role in children’s perceptions of the armed conflict in Colombia.	In-depth interviews	Former child soldiers
		Child <i>sicarios</i>
		Participants in workshops
	Visually based methods	Participants in workshops
	Participant Observation	Interaction between young people in the workshops, in their neighbourhoods, and in their homes; and between them and other residents, social workers, and I.
To examine tactics children use to negotiate contexts of violence in Colombia.	In-depth interviews	Former child soldiers
		Child <i>sicarios</i>
		Participants in workshops
	Visually based methods	Participants in workshops
To assess the potential for visual methodologies in research with	Visually based methods	Participants in workshops

young people in conflict areas.	Participant Observation	Responses of participants to activities carried in the workshops, and their transitional behaviour at the start and throughout the program.
To study the implications of this analysis for violence prevention in Colombia.	In-depth interviews	Former child soldiers
		Child <i>sicarios</i>
		Participants in workshops
	Visually Based methods	Participants in workshops

5.4.1. Participant Observation

The participant observation component of the fieldwork took place on a continuous basis throughout my data collection period, and combined with other methods, was used as a fundamental component of the qualitative data collection. This gave me the opportunity to learn about aspects of child participants they may have been unwilling to discuss in an interview, group discussion or other activities I implemented (Silverman, 1993, 2005). Based on my observations of their daily behaviour, personality, comfort level and their particular mood, power dynamics between participants and social workers, and their participation level during the workshop or interview, I would choose the approach for that specific day or period. My approach included adjusting methods and questions, deciding which children to speak to or engage with and the right moment to do so. I also adapted my energy levels, modified the kind and length of activities and determined the personal space required for each child depending on each child's comfort with each topic, their strengths and limitations, and the personal issues affecting them.

I kept a field diary where I annotated my observations after each data collection session (Silverman, 1993) and often consulted my field notes during my data analysis to remind myself of my initial observations and to compare data. Prior to initiating the fieldwork in Cali and Medellín, I spent a couple of weeks adjusting to each city. I rented a private room in a family house in both locations and during my fieldwork in each city; I visited other communities and attended lectures at Universidad del Valle in Cali and Universidad de Antioquia in Medellín. I also spoke to social workers within Fundación

Paz y Bien and Fundación Pazamanos as well as to community leaders from different areas of each city.

5.4.2. Visually Based Methods

My starting point was the constructivist assumption that different children have distinct realities (Crotty, 1998). I aimed to capture the subjective meanings children gave to their own realities and experiences with violence, rendering the study as participatory as possible and with the least amount of interference from outsider adults. To do so, and given the delicate and dangerous context in which I needed to carry out my research, I employed visually based methods when designing the activities with children (Boyden & Ennew, 1997; Ennew & Plateau, 2004; Hart and & Tyrer, 2006). Visual methods enable a participatory approach with young participants as co-researchers to discuss subjects that may be particularly difficult for them, fostering processes of resilience rather than victimisation, and lowering the risks of power imbalances with the researcher (Boyden & Ennew, 1997; Ennew & Plateau, 2004; Schratz-Hadwich et. al, 2004; de Block & Buckingham, 2007; Didkowsky et al., 2009). The employment of non-verbal methods opens possibilities to reach dimensions in participants' experiences difficult to vocalise (Ennew & Plateau, 2004; Bagnoli, 2009). The data resulting from visual methods aimed to incite discussions about other dimensions of the participants' experiences and the community, identifying issues and exploring ways to resolve them (Morrow, 2001).

Giving young people an element of ownership of the research as the producers of their own productions and granting significance to their work also aims to reduce and disrupt the gap in power between them and the researcher (Clark-Ibanez, 2007). This method is extremely valuable in contexts where power imbalances between researcher and participants are amplified, especially when working with marginalised populations (Liebenberg, 2009). Granting power to youth in directing their own productions makes the research more pertinent to them (Blackbeard & Lindegger, 2007; Clark-Ibanez, 2007), and provides them with the liberty to choose which aspects of their experiences to incorporate and how to portray them (Karlsson, 2001). A visual approach can allow a more comprehensive interaction and increase perceptions of children's lived realities in a variety of ways beyond standard analysis (Weber, 2008). Anna Bagnoli (2009) has

explained that the employment of non-verbal methods opens possibilities to reach dimensions in participants' experiences that would be difficult to vocalise.

Through the visually based methods workshops, I hoped to collect data that would reflect the subjective realities of children by exploring children's interpretations of and responses to violence in their everyday lives in Colombia. For this purpose, I spent three months in each location in Potrero Grande in Cali between January and March 2012 and in Comuna 13 in Medellín between August and October 2012. The relationship I had previously established during my preliminary visit with the local organisations working with young people in both communities enabled me to have easy access to the youth and invite them to participate in the workshops. I had previously prepared the activities I would implement in each workshop and purchased some of the equipment and materials needed such as cameras, camcorders, memory sticks, and chargers. However, as each location and participants had unique characteristics and requirements, I did need to contextualise and improvise a few of the activities. I spent most of the first month preparing the materials and activities, and acclimatising.

In each location, many young people came to a few sessions of the workshop and left. Some never returned but a few did attend most of the program. There were 65 children in total who I interacted with either individually or in groups in both Potrero Grande and Comuna 13. Those who attended the sessions on a more regular basis amounted to approximately 15 in each location ranging between the ages of nine to 18 years old (with the exception of one 22 year old participant whom I interviewed).

Of the three-month workshop in each location, I spent the second and third months implementing the activities five times a week for three to five hours per day. There were some exceptions to the frequency of the sessions held as some days fell on a holiday, and on other occasions it was either too dangerous for the youth to leave their homes or for me to enter the neighbourhood. The period dedicated to each session also varied based on the responses by the young participants. For example in both locations young participants showed more enthusiasm during the photography sessions, requiring flexibility on my part and prompting me to extend the time allocated for them (Hart & Tyrer, 2006). I spent a longer period over activities involving any writing in Medellín than in Cali given the larger number of illiterate youth in Cali (I substituted with visual activities

they felt more at ease with). While I did spend a significant amount of time in the filmmaking session, the actual implementation of the activity was not always possible given the danger it would involve (moving around the community and trespassing the invisible frontiers laid out by gangs among others), especially in Medellín where I decided to limit its use to ensure our safeties (Hart & Tyrer, 2006; Hobbs, 2006).

The participants in the workshop often engaged in the implementation and the creative process. Some social workers also helped during the sessions. The workshops encompassed three aspects of the children's lived experiences: *My Life, My Family, and My Neighbourhood*. I chose to explore these themes with young people to respond to my research question rather than topics of violence so as to avoid any risks of victimisation and stigmatisation (Ennew & Plateau, 2004; Didkowsky et al., 2009). I was influenced by Virginia Morrow's study that used qualitative methods with young people (2001) as well as Wendy Ewald and Alexandra Lighfoot's guide to working with children using photography and writing (2001). The latter offered me some of the creative activities I did with young people and enabled me to learn about the process of using photography with children.

I believed I would be able to discover a wider range of information about children's experiences by widening the scope of my study (Schratz & Walker, 1995, Morrow, 2001). My background in the arts, especially dancing and capoeira came in extremely handy during the workshops. I would initiate the workshops with ice-breaking activities so they got to know each other better and loosen up. These activities were also useful when young participants requested a change of activities e.g. If they were uncomfortable with a theme, or were simply tired of discussing negative aspects of their lives. I would then proceed to implementing the activities over the series of sessions, although it would often be subject to how participants would respond to them and the time it would take to conduct them:

- Poster making: Participants would be divided into 3 groups, and each group would be handed colour markers, glue, scissors, old magazines, colour paper and other creative material available. Each group would choose one topic that was most significant in their lives, families or neighbourhoods. Using images and/or writing, they created a group poster on the chosen topic. Once they were

done, each group would present their production to the rest of participants and explain why their topic was meaningful to them and why each image/text was chosen.

- Timeline: Each participant was asked to draw where they were on a line presently, in their past, and their future projections and expectations of their lives, as well as the most important events and changes related to their biographies.
- Relational Maps: Children were asked to draw a representation of themselves, then to place people in their lives most important to them either linearly or around them with the closest ones to them as the most meaningful individuals.
- Maps of 'My Neighbourhood': Each participant was asked to draw a spatial map of their neighbourhood with the most significant geographical locations and what a neighbourhood represents to them.
- Self-portrait: This method encouraged them to reflect on their lives and identities (Marr & Malone, 2007). Paper and coloured pencils were distributed and participants were asked to indicate on paper (drawing, writing, and/or collage) what they were currently experiencing in their lives, what made them happy or sad, and to include important people and events.
- What is photography? Each child brought their favourite photographs and explained why they had chosen them and the story behind each one. In groups of three, they chose five photos each of different scenes from magazines and books and were asked to create a story based on what they saw and share it in a group discussion. I proceeded to teach about the basics of photography and asked what photography meant to them. The next step included learning about drawing with the light and how it was originally done using colour papers, their favourite object and sunlight. Participants also learned the importance of framing, positioning and perspectives in photography using cut frames made of card and/or paper.

- Building Cameras: Participants learned about the first cameras and were asked to each bring a large can of milk to the session to create a pinhole camera. They were able to personalise their cameras by decorating them with paint. While their productions were drying, we made a dark room using large plastic black bags and tape. It was an amusing procedure for the participants and they felt part of the making of the project. I was able to obtain all of the necessary material to develop the photos. Once the cameras were ready, each participant took self-portraits with their cameras and took them to the dark room to develop their first photos.
- Shooting time: Each participant was handed a disposable camera and used the workshop period to shoot what was most meaningful to them and according to the topics brought up in-group discussions in previous sessions. Some requested to take the cameras home with them and take the photos over the weekend or on their own chosen time. Participants were aiming to tell a story with each image and encouraged to have in mind a storyline, a topic they would like to see reflected in each photo using the techniques learned in photography (including framing, light position, focus, etc.). As photographs allow several interpretations of a single topic (Clark-Ibáñez, 2004), young people are able to generate many aspects of a story from a photograph and open a dialogue about the contexts in which it was taken (Marr & Malone, 2007).
- Choosing my favourite photos: I developed the rolls used by the participants at a photography lab into proof sheets. Each participant then selected three photos that were most significant to them. They were given the choice to exhibit their photos and explain what it meant to them with their fellow participants or simply share them in private with me.
- 'My autobiography' – Learning to write a script: Participants were asked to develop their story in writing or drawing. As some children were not comfortable writing for technical reasons, or simply because they did not want their story recorded on a piece of paper, I gave them the option of telling their story either in the third person or using audio.

- Film in the making: Children learned about the basics of videography including creating a moving picture in the dark room. Some of the youth even created a skit using mime that would be projected for the rest of the participants in the dark room. As I only had a few camcorders available, young participants took turns using them. Not everyone decided to film, some did not feel comfortable while others preferred other means of storytelling. Based on the scripts they had previously developed, those who had decided to film were asked to create a story using film, with the option of interviewing and being the sole narrator.
- Group discussions: Throughout the workshop, participants discussed perceptions of their neighbourhoods, their sense of belonging and identity, safety, and favourite activities and spaces in casual group talks. Some discussions were related to the research questions of my research while others were on other topics of their choice depending on how they felt on the particular day.

In addition to these activities, and depending on the context and the choice of each individual, I often had to improvise by using other means such as voice recordings in lieu of writing, orally sharing their perspectives, or simply showing me what they had produced without allowing me to keep it (Ennew and Plateau, 2004; Boyden, 2004; Hart & Tyrer, 2006). After each session, we debriefed and shared our observations where I frequently asked participants for suggestions and where they thought there could be improvements in the design of the workshop fostering positive thoughts in young people (Ennew & Plateau, 2004).

As I implemented the workshop in Cali first, I was less prepared than I was for the workshop in Medellín. I discovered I needed to include additional activities in Cali to incentivise the discussion and analysis of social issues affecting them (Boyden, 2004; Hart & Tyrer, 2006). Given that many of the young participants in Cali had never had any interaction with NGOs or social workers, some were both sceptical and had more difficulty discussing certain topics. I also found the need to discuss issues related to racial discrimination and identity in Cali as most of the participants were of African descent and had endured racial discrimination and inequality. My background growing up in West Africa and my identification as Ivorian as well as my experience with ethnic discrimination and social exclusion also helped bridge the gap between us.

Given that the workshops included a mix of girls and boys, although boys generally took the lead in most of the activities, issues of gender arose in individual visual productions rather than group discussions as well as in personal interviews. Girls would generally feel uncomfortable discussing gender issues in front of other participants, which I respected and allocated the necessary time to do it later in private. My being female had the impact of helping girls to feel more at ease when sharing gender issues and other personal and sensitive subjects.

The workshops and in-depth interviews in Cali and Medellín ran concurrently. The creative activities allowed the participants to feel more at ease with me and with the themes brought up during the sessions. The information obtained during the interviews helped me to understand the data the participants produced in the workshops and vice-versa. As I had already interacted with the participants prior to carrying out the in-depth interviews, I was able to establish trust and gear the conversation accordingly, avoiding any uncomfortable themes.

5.4.3. In-depth Interviews

The in-depth interviews originated from three sources: former child soldiers, child *sicarios*, and participants in the visual methods workshops. These helped to broaden the children’s input about their diverse encounters with violence. I undertook a total of 51 interviews as shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Profile of interviewees

In-depth Interviews			
Age Range	Non-workshop participants	Workshop participants	
		Cali	Medellin
9-14 years old	1 former girl soldier	2 girls & 3 boys	3 girls & 2 boys
	1 former boy soldier		
	2 boy <i>sicarios</i>		

15-18 years old	4 former girl soldiers	4 girls & 6 boys	5 girls & 6 boys
	5 former boy soldiers		
	3 boy <i>sicarios</i>		
<18 years old	1 former girl soldier	0	1 girl
	2 former boy soldier		

Among the non-workshop participants, I conducted interviews with 6 former girl soldiers, 8 former boy soldiers, and 5 boy *sicarios*. In the workshops I interviewed 15 girls and 17 boys. I carried out one interview with a former girl soldier who was 20 years old as her story of recruitment initiated when she was a child. Another case included a workshop participant in Medellin who was 22 years old whom I decided to interview as she was a community leader and quite knowledgeable about her neighbourhood.

I carried out three types of interviews: interviews with young participants in the workshop that were conducted concurrently with the creative activities between January and March 2012 in Cali and between August and October 2012 in Medellín; interviews with former child soldiers (inside a program and once they were already out)³ during September 2011; and interviews with *sicarios* in Cali during October 2012 (see Table 2). My designing of the interviews was guided by Jo Boyden and Judith Ennew's manual to conducting participatory research with children (1997) and Jason Hart and Bex Tyrer's research with children in contexts of armed conflict (2006).

The duration of each interview ranged from 45 minutes to two hours. I allocated enough time to interact with the participant and only began when I sensed they were comfortable. Interviews with the same participant were often carried out over various encounters depending on the context, their comfort level, and to make sure the data obtained was varied enough (Maxwell, 2008). Given the sensitive context, I decided not to follow a pre-specified set of questions or interview instrument. Rather, I conducted 'loosely structured interviews' using open-ended questions that followed up issues

³ Any information that could possibly be linked to the former child soldier has been omitted for security reasons.

brought up by the participant in former responses (Mason, 2002, p. 62). This approach allowed the interview to resemble more of a chat where participants would not feel interrogated and avoid the risk of generating fragmented narratives (Mason, 2002). I asked questions that flowed from the immediate context on a one-to-one interaction so as to grant them more privacy, to avoid any risks to the participant (Silverman, 1993; Mason, 2002; Blaxter et. al, 2006; Alderson & Morrow, 2011) and to minimise influencing the response of the interviewees (Boyden & Ennew, 1997; Maxwell, 2008). Depending on the fluidity of the account of each interviewee, I would guide them with the topics related to the research questions (Boyden & Ennew, 1997; Ennew & Plateau, 2004; Hart & Tyrer, 2006; Maxwell, 2008).

The interviews I carried out with *sicarios* in Cali were more in conversational form, or sometimes a monologue depending on what they were more comfortable with (Maxwell, 2008). Even though I had previously established a relationship with most of the child *sicarios*, it still remained a significant challenge. I was often not sure I would be able to find them in the same home or if they would still be alive. The 'conversations' were quite difficult as many were often under the effect of narcotics and incoherent. I often had to reschedule or cancel the interview. Many were angry and the conversation would gear toward an unrelated subject. On some occasions a few of the interviewees' colleagues became sceptical of my presence in their neighbourhood, which also incited doubt among the other participants. Given the threat of violence, I sometimes arranged to meet the child *sicarios* at a nearby café or quiet place of their choice. The account I chose to include in depth in this study (Chapter V, section 5.1) was the most coherent and it helped that I knew the mother and sister. I was also invited to the *sicario's* home to share a meal and meet his family. The time allocated for these interviews could not be determined, as the situation and emotional state of the young *sicarios* would fluctuate.

The interviews with the former child soldiers were far less challenging and were either done at a centre specialised in receiving them, or on an individual basis once they had left the centre⁴. I had visited the centres during my preliminary visit prior to returning to lead the interviews and had established a relationship with the director and coordinator. In one of the centres, the director was the one to decide which children I could speak to,

⁴ The location of the centres is omitted as to ensure the protection of the interviewees.

while at another centre, I was left free to spend some time with the youth and engage in conversation and activities with them. I sensed that as a woman, former child soldiers, both boys and girls felt more at ease when sharing their experiences with me, however this did not prove always to be the case. Nonetheless, boys generally did not associate me with someone they may fear, and girls felt more comfortable relating on gender issues. I would often initiate my visit with a creative and fun activity that was enjoyable for them such as dancing, capoeira, and creative games. At the same time, this approach also helped to enhance the interview process and the data resulting from them as they had the potential to address certain issues based on trust, lack of familiarity, and power relations when carrying out interviews (Maxwell, 2008; Didkowsky et al., 2009).

Many of the interviews I was able to conduct were fragmented and/or interrupted as they often would be sceptical about sharing information about their past or would change their mind and decide to end the conversation (Malone, 2006; Hart & Tyrer, 2006). The interview period often took longer than I had anticipated and sometimes, I would not be able to obtain any information. The interviews I chose to discuss in depth in this study are the most elaborate and coherent accounts. One of those was that of a former child soldier I had met during a consultancy I had carried out for an organisation prior to my fieldwork (Chapter V, section 1.2). As I had kept in touch with her and she agreed to share her story with me, I was able to record it in a very short period of time.

Within the workshops I conducted interviews with the young people who seemed more comfortable and willing to speak. Fundación Paz y Bien in Cali and Fundación Paz y Bien in Medellín enabled the interviews. Most of the interviews took place in the community centre. A few of the young participants requested I go to their homes or somewhere quiet in their neighbourhood. The interviews were not done right away but rather toward the middle and end of the workshop depending on the comfort level of the participants. Many chose not to do the interviews and preferred other methods of participating such as using audio to record their perspectives and stories or taking photographs to share their accounts (Malone, 2006; Bagnoli, 2009).

Because I had already developed many of the topics related to my research prior to the interviews, using visually based methods, it was much easier for the young participants to engage in the dialogue, although some were very brief and preferred not to elaborate.

Anna Bagnoli (2009) explored the analytical potential of visually based methods and argued that 'applying them in the context of an interview can open up participants' interpretations of questions, and allow a creative way of interviewing that is responsive to participants' own meanings and associations' (p. 547). Those who did agree to do the interviews were familiar with both the research objectives and myself.

When I did carry out the interviews outside of the centre, I would cover the transportation costs and invite them to share a meal or dessert. At times, as was the case in Medellin, some of the participants asked to go to a capoeira class with me. Other times I took them to a local art exhibition or dance performance. On one occasion I arranged for a filmmaker friend to give a presentation to the participants.

The informed consent for both the interviews and workshop material was obtained at the beginning of the workshop and each participant was provided with an information sheet containing the purpose of the research, what the data would be used for, and their right to leave the research at any time (Morrow, 2001; Hart & Tyrer, 2006; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2006; Alderson & Morrow, 2011). Some participants were illiterate but did not reveal this until I discovered it during the workshop. I made sure to read the informed consent form several times and allowed them several days to reflect on it to see if they still chose to continue. While the participants were fully aware of the research, many did not understand its use and admitted coming to the workshops because they thought it was 'fun' and they loved the skills they were learning.

5. Data Analysis

5.1.Preparation of the Data

My main task was to ensure that I organised the data so as to identify the relations and the cross-sectional themes pertinent to my research questions (Silverman, 1993, Maxwell, 2008). I aimed to tri-angulate and cross-reference across data sets, identify key themes in relation to my research questions, identify consistencies and contradictions that would inform my analysis of those themes, compare and contrast the data from the different locations, identify gaps and further questions, and relate the data to other

research and discussions pertinent to my research questions and my theoretical framework (Chapters I, sections 2 & 4) (Silverman, 1993; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2006).

I started the organisation of my data with the interviews. The interviews I conducted were in Spanish, and most were recorded digitally unless the participant did not feel comfortable and notes were taken instead (Silverman, 1993). I listened to all interviews and initially classified them into folders by location, and then by category of interviewee (former child soldier, *sicario*, participant in the creative workshops), and finally by name of the participant in each location. Not all of the interviews could be fully utilised as many were fragmented. In the case of participants within the workshops, some narratives were incoherent—participants would not fully engage in the conversation and/or research topics (Ennew & Plateau, 2004; Malone, 2006; Bagnoli, 2009). As the participants in the workshop were distinct from each other, not all would be interested in developing certain themes, but would be present during the sessions because of their friends, out of curiosity and/or because of the ‘fun’ activities. I thus selected the interviews that were coherent or the least fragmented and transcribed the ones I deemed appropriate for the topics of my research, which I categorised by recurring themes, methods, and location (Maxwell, 2008). I reviewed all the transcriptions to ensure accuracy and reliability. I finally entered the selected data into a database and colour coded each recurring theme per method used and by location (Appendix C).

I then proceeded to the data obtained from the visually based methods, which I separated by location and category used during the workshops, *My Life, My Family, and My Neighbourhood*. Within each category I classified the data by the implemented activity (eg. poster, lifeline, audio, etc.). I entered the data into the same database used for the interviews and colour coded each recurring theme by methods used and location (Maxwell, 2008). As I often think in Spanish and prefer to stay as close as possible to the context of the language, I only translated data that I selected for writing the analysis chapters.

Finally, I referred to my field diaries and organised my written observations of the field setting that recorded what was seen, heard, or observed (Silverman, 1993). While I used a participatory approach with young participants and triangulation to avoid personal biases and ensure the validity of my data, the research questions I had previously

composed, my research design and my pre-conceived notions inevitably played a role in organising and selecting data (Silverman, 1993, Hart & Tyrer, 2006; Maxwell, 2008). In order to minimise the risks associated with intrinsic bias, I checked for the consistency of results produced by different methods as well as utilizing various theories to analyse the data (Patton, 2002; Hart & Tyrer, 2006).

5.2.Content Analysis

I was careful in ensuring the analysis was systematic and fully included the experiences of all participants, and thus initiated data analysis simultaneously with data collection (Maxwell, 2008). My aim was to analyse the content of each data item and use a coding system to identify and categorise data items while paying attention to the frequency of various categories (Appendix C). Most of the analysis involved comparing and contrasting data across the different groups of participants and locations. I also discussed contradictions within narratives and compared those with my observations recorded in my field notes (Silverman, 1993; Maxwell, 2008). I developed my analysis of the collected data, compared and contrasted my findings in parallel with the existing literature. As complete objectivity is impossible when gathering and analysing data, I was constantly reflexive so as to minimise any risks of bias (Hart & Tyrer, 2006; Maxwell, 2008).

When analysing the data from child *sicarios* and former child soldiers, I selected the most coherent and detailed narratives that would provide as much nuance to their engagement in and perspectives of the armed conflict (Maxwell, 2008). While these testimonies depicted extreme levels of violence experienced by young people and some of the narratives had been influenced by the language of humanitarian organisations (Chapter V), I avoided describing them as 'helpless victims' and rather focused on their coping mechanisms (Boyden & Ennew, 1997; Malone, 2006).

In validating children's testimonies in research, Boyden (2003) asserted that when positioning children as powerless, there is a great risk of advocating for adult-led research rather than incorporating them in the process as individuals with valuable perspectives. Young participants in my research had often expressed their frustration at

being excluded from decision-making with regards to policy, research and programs that affected their lives, and reduced to the negative social construct depicting them as incompetent and intellectually limited. I made sure to constantly question my own perspective and to centre my analysis on the young participants (Boyden & Ennew, 1997; Hart & Tyrer, 2006; Maxwell, 2008).

The analysis of the data from the creative workshops was completed at different stages during and after the data collection process. The initial analysis was carried out simultaneously with the data collection where young people participated in the formulation of the topics by (1) looking at the pictures and footage in groups and selecting particular ones that 'told the story' of issues brought up in the group activities and (2) presenting their work to each other and explaining their own productions. Incorporating children in the analysis of their visual productions creates a co-learning process where the researcher learns in conjunction with the children about their realities and the circumstances surrounding them (Schatz-Hadwich et. al, 2004; Maxwell, 2008). Thus, young people chose the themes that were most significant to them and how they impacted their daily lives (Boyden & Ennew, 1997). Peter Park (1993, p. 18) has argued that the use of a participatory approach yields results that can be 'as much a process of recovery as of discovery'. Children can also experience a boost in their self-esteem by demonstrating their skills and productions to their peers (Schatz-Hadwich et. al, 2004).

As the data from the workshops was substantial as compared to the interviews of former child soldiers and child *sicarios*, I based the analysis of the content of data on the themes and sub-themes colour coded in the database created during the preparation phase (Appendix C). I pulled the themes examining all visual productions of young participants in the workshops including their drawings, photographs, videos, reading their written scripts, listening to the in-depth interviews, and going over my field notes. I repeated the reviewing process many times to help ensure a comprehensive and thorough analysis. Finally, I continuously consulted my literature review comparing and contrasting the existing theories with the recurring themes in my data and my interpretation of the findings.

5.3. Thematic Analysis

From the results of my content analysis (Appendix C), I was able to draw the data from all implemented methods and thematically code them ensuring triangulation (Silverman, 1993; Hart & Tyrer, 2006; Maxwell, 2008). Together with the arising themes and sub-themes from the analysis of the in-depth interviews and creative productions, I compared and contrasted the results with my field notes (Silverman, 1993). I then identified the themes that were most discussed across the data produced in the creative workshops in order to understand the participants' categories and how they were used across the different activities (Patton, 2002; Braun and Clarke, 2006). I displayed the most recurring themes using a colour code starting at the top from the highest to lowest frequency in Table 3.

Table 3: Most discussed themes by participants in Cali and Medellín

CALI	MEDELLIN
Conflict	Death
Neighbourhood Violence	Arms
The street	Shootings
War between neighbourhoods	Friends
Gang violence	The Street
Homicide	Death of Friends
Drug Trafficking	Conflict
Armed Groups	Neighbourhood Violence
Invisible Frontiers	Neighbourhood
Drug usage	Recruitment
Friends	Invisible Frontiers
Money	Home
Death	Youth
Domestic violence	Youth Training and Agency
Daily injustice	Family Violence
Arms	Operation Orion

Despair for lack of money and opportunities	Drug Trafficking
School	War

I proceeded by analysing the most recurring themes in both communities where the creative workshops were implemented as well as in the in-depth interviews. In order to build up the analysis in the most cohesive and comprehensive manner, and to provide a broader understanding than my content analysis, I depicted common themes across my data and categorised them into eight groups as shown in Table 4. Throughout the thematic analysis I continuously consulted and supported my findings with academic literature and my field diaries (Silverman, 1993; Maxwell, 2008).

Table 4: Summary of themes brought up by all participants

Most Recurring Themes
Public Sphere: The Street, Neighbourhood/Gang Violence/Invisible Frontiers
Death
Migration/Displacement
Family/Stepfather/Domestic Violence
Education/Opportunities
Money/Poverty/Power
Race/Social Inequality/Injustice
Recruitment/ <i>Oficinas</i>

Based on the most recurring themes I identified across my data and my research questions, I used the themes as headlines within each chapter where I analysed the respective data for each section. Throughout the completion of the analysis chapters,

the connection across the data and theories was incremented and changes to the structure of the thesis were continuously made so as to improve the fluidity of the writing and guide the narrative of my thesis into a single story (Silverman, 1993; Maxwell, 2008).

6. Ethical Considerations

6.1. Ethics Guidelines and Advice

I sought and obtained ethical approval from the Institute of Education Faculty Research Ethics Committee (FREC) prior to conducting the research in Colombia. Anonymity and confidentiality were essential given the existing conflict in the areas of Colombia I was conducting my study and the sensitive nature of the topic. I designed the data collection, storage and analysis to make sure they preserved the confidentiality and anonymity of participants. Moreover, I regularly assessed the suitability of the site with regard to safety and stability.

My research abided by the following guidelines:

- BERA 2004 (paragraph 5) 'requires' that member researchers comply with Article 12 of United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child: 'children who are capable of forming their own views should be granted the right to express their views freely in all matters affecting them, commensurate with their age and maturity. Children should therefore be facilitated to give fully informed consent.'
- BERA 2004 (paragraph 7): 'In the case of participants whose age, intellectual capability or other vulnerable circumstance may limit the extent to which they can be expected to understand or agree voluntarily to undertake their role, researchers must fully explore alternative ways in which they can be enabled to make authentic responses. In such circumstances, researchers must also seek the collaboration and approval of those who act in guardianship (e.g. parents) or as "responsible others".'

I also drew on advice from my supervisors and from resources such as:

- <http://www.younglives.org.uk/files/working-papers/wp53-the-ethics-of-social-research-with-children-and-families-in-young-lives-practical-experiences>
- <http://www.the-sra.org.uk/guidelines.htm>

6.2. Researcher Practice

I made sure to practice certain precautions to respect the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants and their families. I asked for permission for the use of visual data of the participants; changed the names of participants and locations; maintained confidential information within the research process; changed the reported characteristics of participants if appropriate; dismissed the use of identifiable photos or videos and/or concealed identities by using pixilation; ensured that all records from the materials collected were stored securely and encrypted notes to conceal identities where such security was not possible.

In order to identify and avoid potential risks arising from children's involvement as participants in research, I obtained advice and permission from knowledgeable locals or experts in the culture of the community in which the research was to be conducted as to the suitability of particular methods and the most appropriate way to raise specific issues. Participants were carefully selected with a view to sample suitability, family agreement, ability to work collectively with minimum conflict, and understanding and commitment to the process of personal participation. I ensured that the participants' identities and security were respected (see section 6.2.1). I was affiliated with local schools, international organisations, local community leaders, NGO staff members, academics, rights monitors and journalists as sources in ensuring safety and ethical measures. When necessary, I revised my workshop plans and location to adapt to local needs and circumstances. I was also fully aware of ethics obligations in cases of human rights' violations and have acted as much as possible to stop the abuse by getting in touch with the appropriate persons.

In situations where children and their families struggled to survive, the issue of payment for research became particularly acute. Even if there was no expectation of material reward, I was aware of the possible loss of income and the costs involved for participating children. At the very least, I reimbursed transportation and other incidental costs and provided refreshments or meals to participants. Rewards did not have to be clearly economic and in some settings the provision of symbolic rewards—e.g. a certificate of participation—were appreciated. Since the initiation of research activities could raise hopes of direct reward and thus misunderstandings could arise, I was always transparent about the rewards and potential benefits that children may expect to gain.

7. Reflexivity in the Field: Being the Researcher

Gaining children's confidence was a demanding task given trust issues among participants and community members (Boyden & de Berry, 2004; Hart & Tyrer, 2006). Maintaining their trust was another challenge and children were quite susceptible to inconsistency from my side, such as expecting me to be there every day including national holidays when the community centre was closed or when security issues arose.

Depending on the day, participants were keener on discussing matters that were important to them and their perspectives of the conflict in Colombia that affected them on a daily basis (Hart & Tyrer, 2006). On some occasions they preferred to enjoy themselves and do other activities unrelated to the workshop, which was quite a challenge given my time restrictions and schedule. They would also tell me at times that they wanted to discuss 'happy things' and leave the 'ugly' behind, which I had to respect and be flexible enough to adjust to so as to avoid any risks of re-victimisation (Ennew & Plateau, 2004; Malone, 2006). I constantly reminded myself that I had to serve as a facilitator rather than an expert and grant children the freedom to express their choices, perceptions, and aspirations while always taking precautions not to put them at risk (Boyden & Ennew, 1997; Stoecker, 1999; Hart, 2006b).

Initially some of the young participants automatically assumed I would see them as mere delinquents, not trust them especially with expensive equipment, or not believe they would be capable of learning and using some of the devices. Although I did feel at ease

with them, the coordinators had warned me that the majority of the children would usually steal the property. I was wary at times when they were operating any of the valuables and had to constantly keep my eye on the door, for they would often leave the premises without notifying me. Fortunately there was no stealing.

In the case of Potrero Grande, I had chosen to work with youth who had not undergone any peace or reintegration programs and were just starting to attend some of the workshops offered by the local community centre. I had decided to do so in order to obtain as much data from the participants without the influence of a 'peace' construction, which might have led to their defining their lives and perspectives through terms often used by human rights organisations. I found it more challenging to engage with youth in Potrero Grande unaccustomed to expressing their perspectives or desires freely, contrary to the young participants in Comuna 13 who had been interacting on a regular basis with humanitarian organisations. In addition, the racial inequality in Potrero Grande meant I had to adopt a slightly different approach and address the issues related to ethnicity that young people were facing both in their communities and in their city (Malone, 2006; Hart & Tyrer, 2006). The location of the community in which I was carrying out the workshops in both Cali and Medellin played an important factor in my interaction with young participants. Youth in Comuna 13 were much more aware of the happenings outside of their community given the location and geography of the neighbourhood and accessibility to the metro as opposed to Potrero Grande, which was remotely located and deprived of efficient public transport.

As a non-Black and non-Colombian, I was aware I would have to face further challenges (Hart & Tyrer, 2006) especially in Potrero Grande. The fact I had travelled from Europe and was staying in wealthier areas in both Cali and Medellin resulted in assumptions. I had to deal with these pre-conceived notions throughout the workshop and make sure it did not create any further barriers between the children and me (Boyden & Ennew, 1997; Ennew & Plateau, 2004). They felt much easier with me when they learned I had been raised in a poor area in Africa, and that my family had escaped genocide.

I became aware that I had to prove I was 'hip' enough for the youth so as to help dispel further barriers between us. This was important to maintain their interest in the workshops and to build friendly relationships. It meant I had to be full of energy for each

session of the workshop, and share my knowledge and appreciation of local music and dance. I also had to adapt the activities for each session according to their emotional state and desires on the particular day, meaning that sometimes they would prefer to do a more physically energetic activity than I had initially planned (Boyden & Ennew, 1997; Malone, 2006; Hart Tyrer, 2006; Bagnoli, 2009). Malone (2006) has commented that when using a child-centred approach, it is essential to take into account that children are not homogeneous and variations and adaptations need to be made to meet each child's needs and abilities.

As sociologist Randy Stoecker (1999, p. 840) has argued, the research serves as a means rather than as the objective where the researcher should fulfil the roles of 'animator, community organiser, popular educator, and participatory researcher'. Often I would be spontaneous and order food and we would dance. I had to be 'hip' enough for them to think of me as acceptable and to break the adult-child power relation and the pre-conceived notion that I was boring because I was not of African descent (Boyden & Ennew, 1997). I also had to set my authority in an older sister fashion which they were accustomed to, so as ensure they did not feel I was 'above them'.

I would not say that I was granted more power because I was the researcher. On the contrary, I was going into their territory and was constantly tested. Some participants would occasionally 'lose faith' in me if they felt disappointed in the course of the workshop or if a piece of equipment was faulty. For instance one of the cameras a participant wanted did not work, he felt extremely deceived and was upset at me. On another occasion, participants were angry when a workshop was cancelled due to shootings in the neighbourhood or because of a shutdown in public transport I relied on for travel to the site. The constant pressure to be 'hip' meant I would often get extremely tired given the high energy of the children and the extreme heat; this, coupled with the fact that I had to raise my voice to make myself heard, would cause me to lose a bit of my fluency in 'hip' Colombian Spanish, and I would speak with a slightly heavier French accent (see Chapter I; section 3).

As Jason Hart and Bex Tyrer (2006) have noted, the use of language by the researcher must be adapted to the children and ensure complete clarity; as well as assure that the researcher understands the language used by the participants for younger children may

have a limited vocabulary and use different words to express themselves. Similarly, I was faced with a language dilemma with some of the youth on a few occasions in both communities as a particular slang is often used in each region, and sometimes it is very specific to each city or even neighbourhood (Boyden & Ennew, 1997). Youth in both communities used their own slang and their level of Spanish was not great given their limited years of schooling. Understanding them as they used their own expressions and vocabulary was a challenge at times and I had to either ask them or seek the coordinators' support.

Participants continuously asked me when I was to return and a few of them were angry about my departure. While I had initially told them I would only be there temporarily, they felt as though I was abandoning them and started a project that was to be abruptly interrupted. Moreover, they had put their trust in me in a place where it is rare to trust anyone and I was perceived to be giving up on them. It was quite emotionally difficult as I felt responsible, a common phenomenon where the researcher takes the role of a 'surrogate parent' (Hart & Tyrer, 2006, p. 25). However I also knew that it was a dilemma I would have to face and made sure I would keep in touch with them.

While I was very familiar with both the Colombian and the local contexts in which I held the study with young participants, I still encountered many challenges I had not anticipated and continuously had to re-design and adapt my methodology and approach to the specific framework (Malone, 2006; Hart & Tyrer, 2006). Many issues still arise from my 'intervention' as a researcher and the effect it may have had on the young people's lives with whom I worked, although I did my best to ensure I minimised any negative impact (Park, 1993).

Based on the analysis of my data and the identification of recurring themes for young participants in my study, I organised the findings and discussion into the three following chapters. In Chapter V I examine the different types of violence experienced by young people directly engaged in war activities and how they cope with their circumstances. In Chapter VI I discuss youth's perceptions of the structural factors underlying violence in Cali and Medellín. In Chapter VII I explore how young people use memory to cope with their losses and daily violence.

Chapter V: Encounters with Multiple Types of Violence: From Victims to Combatants

'He killed for ideals;

He killed for survival;

He killed for revenge;

He killed for money;

He killed'.

Anonymous 13-year-old *sicario*, Aguablanca, Cali.

In this chapter I explore how a particular group of young people—those who engage directly in violence—cope daily with the circumstances of violence and examine how they negotiate violence as both a limitation and opportunity. Rather than viewing children as passive victims of war, my analysis examines how youth negotiate different roles including victims, perpetrators, survivors, and/or go-getters attempting to move on with their lives (Chapter III, section 2.1). Drawing from Alcinda Honwana's theory of tactical agency (2006), I attempt to challenge the generalised perception that all children want a worry-free childhood and only circumstances lead them to choose one of fighting (Reader et. al, 2000; de Berry, 2001; Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, 2004; Mayall & Morrow, 2011) by shifting from 'why' and 'how' they join armed groups to the assessment of how children utilise creativity and entrepreneurial skills to improve their circumstances. In addition to the notion of tactical agency, I also seek to highlight how young Colombians in my study utilized their wit and creativity in reshaping their realities and experiences and maximizing and recreating their opportunities displaying their entrepreneurial agency.

In this chapter I elaborate on the main types of violence experienced by the participants in this research, found in the accounts of those identified as child soldiers and the unrecognised combatants labelled as *sicarios* or hitmen. I start by discussing the construction of the term 'child soldiers' in Colombia and the consequences of the politicisation of this category by humanitarian groups (Chapter III, section 3.1). I discuss the sense of morality enacted by the Church in their attempt to 'save' children engaged in war. Not all child combatants undergo the same experiences nor partake in war for the same reasons. Many display in their motives for violence what Tobias Hecht (1998) has

called ‘nurturing childhood’ (Chapter III, section 1.1.1)—children from poor backgrounds struggle to win their mothers’ affection, contributing to and supporting their households. Do young people engaged in the conflict have a political agenda or is engagement a means of hustling, protection, or a strategy for upward mobility?

To address this question, I examine the positions children adopt in direct experiences of violence depending on circumstances and personal choice, as methods of survival or opportunistically. I focus on two categories of combatants: those who actively engage in the armed conflict, leaving home to join a left- or right-wing armed group, or the army, and those who join a locally organised gang or become *sicarios*. I begin the analysis with two long narratives of former girl soldiers in order to examine the circumstances around their engagement in armed groups and further discuss the accounts provided by two former boy soldiers and a boy *sicario*. My analysis examines the ways in which young people negotiate violence and tactics they adopt based on their individual characters and contexts surrounding them. Has the excessive attention and politicisation of child soldiering concealed and overshadowed the rest of children engaging in the armed conflict?

While a recent cease-fire was signed between one of the armed groups, the FARC, and the national government, Colombia is still undergoing an armed conflict and there are many risks involved for both the researcher and the people involved in the process of addressing these issues. As a result, participating organisations and some participants in this chapter requested complete anonymity. Many opted not to speak about issues related to the war and their past. Finally, I took careful precautions in my analysis not to disclose any armed groups young people collaborated with as well as specific locations where events took place.

1. The Acknowledged Soldiers

This section analyses the experiences and perspectives of former child soldiers officially recognised by the national government as both victims and combatants of the armed conflict. I conducted individual interviews and various group discussions in two host institutes for demobilised children in Bogotá and Medellín. I have selected four narratives to analyse, two from girls and two from boys, in order to provide a balance. It was

generally easier to speak to the girls and trust was established from the start, most likely given our common gender, which allowed us to spend more time with each other and generate cohesive narratives. It was slightly more challenging with boys and it took several meetings to obtain their accounts. A probable explanation, aside from our gender difference, could be a general reluctance to speak to a foreigner or possibly reveal any sign of vulnerability as boys—following the norm that masculinity requires staying in control and not revealing emotion or signs of vulnerability (Sallee & Harris, 2011; Flood, 2013). I begin by including the full accounts of the two girls I interacted with, and then discuss extracts from the boys' accounts.

The following discussion is derived from interviews I undertook in an organisation⁵ dedicated toward DDR programs in Bogotá for child soldiers who had either been captured by the national army or managed to escape from the group they belonged to. The institute gathers children from different parts of the country, including those who had been displaced and those who had not at the time of demobilisation. Young people from opposing groups were placed together as a strategy of 'salvation' and peaceful cohabitation. The centre also receives children from various marginalised contexts not limited to former child soldiers, although most of its participants were from this category at the time of my research. It is important to note that this organisation is religious-based and follows Catholic principles. Although I interacted on many occasions with numerous former child soldiers, it was quite challenging to obtain a coherent version of their individual experiences. To that end, I present here two narratives I was able to obtain, in order to provide a thorough background of each story that touches on many of the themes discussed in this chapter.

1.1. Viviana, 16-year-old

I begin with Viviana's narrative providing a clear understanding of the choices she made and the contexts in which she made those decisions. She requested to tell her story in a narrative form to be audio recorded and to ensure that no data would reveal her identity.

I was born when my father died, and I was having lots of problems with my stepfather who was very violent and would beat us with my mom. The violence at

⁵ The organisation requested anonymity to ensure the protection of the children.

home became unbearable when I turned nine years old and I hated my stepfather. By then, I had a boyfriend who was actually doing pretty well financially and when I finally asked him, he told me he did some work for the guerrilla⁶ which made me think. He brought me to see them and they made me promises of possibilities to earn money, to go forward in life, get an education, and I kept on thinking of my mother, and my dream to buy her a house one day, and to never have to put up with my stepfather and his violence anymore. And so I joined.

In the beginning, they treated me like a queen, but it wasn't long before I started getting beaten and put to do very difficult tasks like digging ditches, carrying weapons, and some weapons can be quite heavy, guarding the group for 12 hours or even more than a day sometimes on foot which can be quite tiring, and beaten over and over again, this is all besides fighting in combat. The worst part was having to sleep with them which they took turns in having me. I would cry and cry and they would beat me when they saw me crying, telling me to cry for real things. After nine months, I wanted to run away, I couldn't take it anymore, but they kept on threatening to kill me with a bullet in the head if I tried. I still did so with another friend, but unfortunately they caught us. They killed my friend, they hit her and she ran further and they shot her. Thank God I was alive but they caught me and life became harder. They tied me to a pole with a rope and it would rain, and we had to shower and do our necessities right there, in front of all the men, and feel all of the humiliation, all of this was really difficult for me, and more so because of my age.

When I turned 12 years old, I told myself I couldn't do it anymore, because I didn't have a childhood, it's a childhood I don't wish on anyone. There is so much pain in me. Every time I shower, I see the scars left on my body, and I remember. So, at 12, I decided with other companions to go sell some merchandise, and so we went to a village to sell them, and I succeeded in escaping. But I was so unlucky that another group caught me, and it got even harder because this group was even stronger than the previous one⁷. They would force me to sleep with them. One of my companions got pregnant, and they made her have an abortion by kicking her, and with the pain of the abortion and with no rest or anything, she died as well because she started to bleed and everything. Very hard. I couldn't take it anymore. I would say I couldn't do it anymore. But with every word saying I couldn't do it anymore, it was additional pain for me knowing that I had gone after a dream to go forward in life, to study, as they had proposed to me, but no, everything was the contrary now.

After that, I got really scared because I almost got pregnant, I was really scared, so, I wouldn't get my periods, but it was because, not because I was pregnant, but because of the beating that I had received. From all the beating, my body wasn't the same anymore. So it was really hard, and they thought I was pregnant and they wanted me to get tested. Everything came out negative. So they would say that I was sick, and I had a disease. So what they did is, they tied me to a pole, and left me there for two weeks, and only gave me extremely bad food, and that's all, and they had me tied up because they would say that I had to die. Afterward, they decided to set me free because I was really weak and not well from all the efforts I did while tied up and the beating. So, when I turned 14, they told me to go, because I got hit in the foot by a bullet, my left foot, and they told me to go and recuperate. They were going

⁶ Specifications about which group recruited her are not being made as per her request and for security reasons.

⁷ Id.

to send me to my mom's but they sent me to a lady who worked with them who would take care of my foot. But my foot was getting worse from the infection. Had I stayed there, I would have lost my foot. And they decided to send me to the hospital. My mom arrived and decided to hide me from them, but I couldn't go back to my land because they would send pamphlets with my name on it saying I was on the black list. The black list has the names of those they are looking to kill. And also because I knew a lot of their secrets. The time I was with them, I knew where they kept the money, merchandise, how they recruited people, how they would place the bombs, how they did everything. So with all these secrets I knew about, it was more convenient for them to see me dead than alive. So this is my story more or less. A bit painful, although it is not as hard as before because before I couldn't even tell it because I would cry a lot and now I am able to overcome it.

1.2. Ana, 20-year-old

The following narrative tells the story of Ana, 20 years old at the time of the interview, using both audio and video recording. I encountered Ana in an unusual way as she was assisting me with the logistics for research I was conducting in Colombia being unaware of her former status. In the following two years, she provided me with further insight into my understanding of the phenomenon of child soldiering given her lived experience and her profound analysis of the dynamics of the armed conflict.

My story begins around the time when I was 4 years old, and after my mom's death caused by, let's call it a political persecution. One day the army arrived, and, well, she was murdered together with eight other peasants, accusing her of being, let's say, collaborating with the guerrillas, according to them. And well, nothing. I think that was one of the first cases of 'false positives'⁸ to take place in the country, because before they weren't referred to as 'false positives'. Instead, they would accuse anyone of being part of or helping the guerrilla and that would give them the right to murder.

Witnessing the death of a parent is terrible. Knowing that you are now by yourself is terrible, but witnessing their death is even worse; it's something that scars you forever. I was hiding in the attic when I saw them murder my mom. They cut her in little pieces. I hid terrified for a few days before my father returned. We had to, from that moment onward, we had to be displaced as the army was also looking for my father. We moved from one place to another. We were very afraid. We had to leave behind the few things we had. We were in a constant state of fear. Fear itself made my dad, obliged him to get involved in another armed group to protect himself. They offered him protection and he worked for them in exchange, and they would protect me. So, all the pressure that he was under at that moment led him to accept this deal. So, from that moment forward, we both got involved with an armed group.

Children are still being recruited in Colombia even though people like to deny it. And the government denies it. They started training me when I was very

⁸ False positives are innocent civilians killed by members of the armed forces who dressed their victims as guerrillas in order to present them as combat kills (Godfrey-Wood, 2009).

little. So they started to train me with books about Lenin and communist politics. They would teach us about weapons, about ammunition, about strategies of combat. Imagine! While most children were playing 'you're it' at school, I would play 'get to know these guns'. Well, not only me, there were lots of children like me who took part in that. For them, we were just another weapon. So when you face a child with a real soldier, there is an obvious disadvantage for them. And the soldiers, or our enemy, would always have pity for the children. This would give the guerrilla time to attack. In these combats, everything you see in the middle of the war, I saw how they killed and died on both sides. Also, your partners become your family, your siblings. Those who grew up with you surrounded by that become your family. So seeing them fall dead next to me, and even I have scars all over my body from all the combats and grenade shrapnel, and from landmines. Let's just say that it is a miracle that I can be here telling this story because like I was saying, the war was a horrible thing and those terrifying experiences that you must go through amidst combat really leave a mark on you by seeing the death of children, friends, even the enemy itself. It was not only the combats, and having to confront the enemy directly, but there were also planes that would throw bombs.

My father was also murdered within this group, so I was then all by myself. And then I was left alone without my dad, even though he was never really with me because we were always split up. Many of the children would escape. They would escape because it was hard, it was very hard. When they would escape, they would obviously tell me: 'let's go! I'll take you with me' etc.. But I would tell them: 'No, you have a mother waiting for you, your father, siblings,' because many of them had been snatched away.

I was eventually captured by the army while in combat. When they captured me, they took me away in a helicopter. They took me to a something I believed to be a battalion. I have no idea but it looked like a military place. They blindfolded me, they never let me see the place where I was. They only took it off when I was in a dungeon-like place. And they tortured me. I kept telling them that I was a minor, that they had to respect my rights. I told them to take me to a jail instead of keeping me there. But what they wanted was to get as much information out of me as possible, that I would collaborate. They spat on me; they would throw water on me. They tied me to a chair so that I wouldn't escape. They would try to negotiate with me. They tried bribing me for information by offering me money. And they said they would lock me up or even murder me if I didn't cooperate. They would point guns at my face. They would blow things up to scare me. They would shoot at the corners where I was. They tried intimidating me every way possible. They wouldn't bring me food over or anything, just the water I got when they threw it at me. I would ask for water and they would throw a full bucket at me or they would dip my face in it, but they would never just give me water to drink. I was there for a long time, around 15 days, I think, or maybe more, with no food and being tortured for information. 'Tell me where you come from, what did you do?' You become psychologically blocked and there is tremendous fear. It's something I would never wish on anyone. I thought I wouldn't make it out alive. It was torturous. Miraculously, they eventually got tired, when they saw me so weak I could barely stand up, they got tired. They took me out and transferred me to a jail. That felt like a blessing to me.

I analyse these two selected narratives in the subsequent sections, drawing also on data from other interviews with girls and boys. I address the transformation in the perception of children's engagement in war and the development of a morality associated with the construction of this group; the evolving factors behind children's decisions in negotiating with violence; and finally, the emergence of the excessive attention granted to the category of child soldiers.

2. Morality and a Constructed Image of Child Soldiers

Drawing from young participants' narratives in my study, I attempt to illustrate the development of a morality associated with children's involvement in the Colombian war and the recently constructed notion of child soldiering based on Western ideals. The victimisation of child soldiers stems from representations of children as physically vulnerable and inept, irrational, and uncontrollable (MacMillan, 2009), limiting their ability to reason and rendering them powerless. Accordingly, the imposed definition of childhood conflicts with cultural understandings in Colombia and transforms under-eighteen combatants from young adulthood (*little adults* as they used to be called) to victimised children dependent on adults.

Child combatants have been involved in all wars in Colombia (Pachón, 2009) and as David Rosen has continuously argued, child soldiering is not a new phenomenon (2005). In fact, the term 'child soldier' is not commonly used in Colombia. The most accepted phrase is 'children associated with the armed conflict'. Ximena Pachón (2009) stated that since the late 19th and early 20th century, children have been fulfilling the role of 'soldiers or *guerrilleros*' in the various civil wars and continue to play an important role in the contemporary Colombian armed conflict. Thus, she affirmed, it should not be surprising that armed groups use a high proportion of children in their ranks.

The issue of children 'associated' with armed conflicts worldwide has only had relevance in recent years. From data collected from former child soldiers, I noticed they represented themselves as victims, in contrast with other young people in my research. The victimisation of their condition as 'child soldiers' was only revealed to them once they entered a demobilisation process. Both Ana and Viviana for instance had gone through a DDR process, interacted with countless NGOs and social workers, received

'therapy' sessions, and related their stories to many journalists and researchers, all of which were likely to have influenced their self-representation.

This, together with constant interaction with humanitarian organisations that represent disengaged children as victims, explains the way their self-representations changed over time. Moreover, and as discussed in previous chapters, the various understandings of childhood in Colombia are distinct from the present notion that has been applied in that region. As children continuously served in the ranks of the various armed groups fighting in Colombia's wars and were often celebrated as liberators in the struggle for independence (Jaramillo Castillo, 2007), the idea based on contemporary beliefs that child soldiering is worse than adult soldiering does not fit initially in its cultural context. One of the most prominent figures of Colombian history, Simón Bolívar, also known as the liberator, started as a soldier at 14 years of age (Lynch, 2007). Nonetheless, with the current CRC definition of childhood, the increasing international pressure on the Colombian government to release all child soldiers from active armed groups' ranks, and humanitarian organisations to 'save' child combatants, the notion of child soldiering as a monstrous and victimising act has been gradually infiltrating the cultural understandings in Colombia.

Moreover, international media and reports from a large number of organisations have highlighted the use of children in the armed conflict in Colombia placing the country among those with the largest numbers of child soldiers. While Colombia ratified the CRC in 1991 (Human Rights Watch, 2003), its governments have been continuously denying the alarming numbers of child soldiers serving in a variety of armed groups in an attempt to deliver an improved image of the country and exempt themselves from any prosecution for human rights violations⁹. As Ana stated in her account, 'children are still being recruited in Colombia even though people like to deny it. And the government denies it'¹⁰. The tactical coerced forgetting used by the state is widely discussed by anthropologist Pilar Riaño-Alcalá who explained that the country's 'unresolved relationship with the past' is filled with 'losses and humiliations' (2006, p. 9). Peter

⁹ Interview with *Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar* (Family Welfare Institute). Author requested anonymity.

¹⁰ The previous government of Álvaro Uribe denied there being an armed conflict, but rather a presence of terrorists referring to left-wing guerrilla groups.

Waldmann further argued that the phenomenon of unresolved deaths in Colombia leads to a pervasive culture of violence linking the 'inflation of illegal acts of violence and the swift forgetting of them' (2007, p. 68).

At the same time, a sense of morality condemning the notion of children as soldiers, as well as defining what a child should be, emerges in the various accounts of former child soldiers I have collected. As mentioned before, the Catholic Church manages both institutes that host captured or runaway child soldiers. Once more, although children experienced soldiering differently from each other, most of their stories reflected feelings of deep regret and guilt. Many of those with whom I spoke initially felt shame in telling me what they had done; they continuously asked me not to judge them and justified their actions while in combat. I also noticed the emphasis they placed on who they were then and where they were at the time of the interview. 'I was really bad', shared one 14-year-old former soldier in Bogotá, 'I was angry and wanted to see everyone suffer'. Another 13-year-old former girl soldier in the institute in Medellín confessed her crimes with a heavy feeling of guilt: 'I know I was bad, I was really bad. I got into many vices. I know I killed a lot of people, and I don't want my mother to know. So now I'm trying to become a good person'.

Participants in both Church-run institutes were required to attend a weekly mass and daily prayer sessions and confessions. Young people also attended workshops on human rights and therapy sessions accompanied by psychologists and social workers. According to their interpretations, it appeared that children were made aware of their status as victims once they entered the process of demobilisation. While interacting with humanitarian organisations and social workers that follow the widely adopted conception of childhood, which privileges innocence, vulnerability and the decision-making incapacity of children, as under-eighteens, they are approached as victims. Aside from being categorised as victims, the disassociated children entering a (re)integration process I interacted with were introduced to this concept of childhood for the first time, together with what their rights as under-eighteens represent. They were further convinced that their rights had been violated by the recruiting armed group and were thus granted the identity of victims from thereon. As one 16-year-old boy in Bogotá told me with a confused look, 'I don't know why they call us children'. They are faced with the term 'children' in many cases for the first time. As many of the former child soldiers in the

host institutions originated from rural regions, they started to work and take on what in Western ideology are considered adult responsibilities from a young age. Even today, children in rural areas are still seen as 'little adults' with equal responsibilities and working duties (Jaramillo Castillo, 2007). Jaramillo Castillo stated that the only differences between adults and children in Colombia prior to 1910 were attributed to the obvious, such as their physical stature and strength (Jaramillo Castillo, p. 233).

The identification as 'victims' in the accounts of my interviewees appeared to be linked to the way their experiences had been re-framed by the organisations. As previously stated, child combatants in Colombia are not a new phenomenon. As a social worker in Bogotá clarified, 'Colombia has always been at war, not just for the last six decades'. The emergence of the modern construct of child soldiers creates a disturbance to the social system that has been in place for more than 100 years. Prior to that, child soldiers were celebrated for their bravery and heroism; now they are condemned for the same role. In a separate oral recording, Ana repeatedly emphasised the loss of childhood, not just her own but also of those under-eighteens serving in the variety of armed groups in Colombia, 'They changed our toys for arms; they robbed us of our childhood'. She also conveys in her narrative her perception of what childhood ought to be:

They would teach us about weapons, about ammunition, about strategies of combat. Imagine! While most children were playing 'you're it' at school, I would play 'get to know these guns'. Well, not only me, there were lots of children like me who took part in that. For them, we were just another weapon.

Ana joined the first guerrilla group with her father at age four and had never attended school prior to that. She lived in a remote farmhouse with her parents and had no experience of schooling or any reference to it. Until she was captured by the national army and placed into a demobilisation process, she served in the battlefield in rural and distant areas of the country. In her narrative, she accentuates the wrongness of the notion of children bearing arms and calls out for her status as a victim exclaiming 'Imagine!' Her depiction of childhood here clearly derives from a concept of childhood that sees children as innocent and childhood as a separate special phase. I am not denying the possibility that during her time serving in the armed group, she may have desired a different life or was made aware of the difficulties of being a combatant. Rather, I attempt to emphasise the consequences of victimisation and the application of the present model of childhood, annulling the possibility for other types of childhoods,

and that even in the midst of extreme hardships, a child can have a childhood, however distinct that may be.

In her depiction of her childhood being eliminated, Viviana illustrates the dichotomy between the prescribed definition of childhood discussed above and the one she experienced: 'When I turned 12 years old, I told myself I couldn't do it anymore, because I didn't have a childhood, it's a childhood I don't wish on anyone'. Furthermore, children in limited social, economic, and political contexts cannot put into practice that vision of childhood constructed by wealthier societies and imposed by the CRC, and thus can be of limited relevance to them (Hart, 2006a). I would go even further and argue that it could be detrimental to their wellbeing. On the one hand, they are victimised by virtue of having been combatants, and on the other, they are convinced that unless they experienced a childhood defined by innocence, they simply had none and are not considered 'normal'. The young ex-combatants I interacted with never used the word 'children' but rather referred to themselves as youth or youngsters. In fact, many of them would get offended if I did address them using the word children. In his narrative, 16-year-old David described the arduous process he had to endure while engaged in the ELN. He had to show bravery and the attributes of a 'man' to gain privilege and power among the group:

Afterward, things got easier because they sent us on an operation in the city. Once there, we had the mission to launch an attack on the army and everything went as expected. Having successfully fulfilled the mission, they left me in the village working as a militia, where all I had to do was collect extortions from anyone transporting fuel to the town.

At the same time, while David felt pride while telling me his story, displaying his courage and his success in making large amounts of money while engaged in the group, he also showed signs of guilt and regret, possibly originating from his exposure to moral standards of the church-run organisation:

My future: always reach my goals and one of the main ones is to be happy with my family, and ask them for forgiveness for my lack of thinking before leaving the house. Have a good job, a spouse and children, whom I can educate so they never go through life like I did in my past, but thank God and to all the people, I was able to overcome.

The dichotomy between the current construction and the cultural understandings of childhood can also be noted in Viviana's account:

They tied me to a pole with a rope and it would rain, and we had to shower and do our necessities right there, in front of all the men, and felt all of the humiliation, all of this was really difficult for me, and more so because of my age.

At this moment in her life, Viviana was less than 12 years old and no longer saw herself as a child. She described the humiliation she felt partly because of her age; she was no longer a child. In fact, she denied she ever had a childhood or at least as per modern childhood definition. Moreover, she was sexually active with her boyfriend at least by the time she was nine years old. A social worker¹¹ focusing on cases of sexual violence and gender in Colombia explained that although it is culturally accepted for children in certain parts of the country to begin sexual activities at a very young age, it is often a symbolic end of childhood and the passage into adulthood. During my time with her, Viviana continuously shared with me her desire to ‘make it’ one day and buy her mother a house. In her narrative, she displays ‘nurturing childhood’ (Hecht, 1998) in her explanations of the motives that pushed her to join the armed group initially. Her need to nurture her mother—provide her with a less violent environment and financial freedom was one of the main reasons that propelled her to leave her home in search for better opportunities. In her interview, she added:

I want my mother to be a woman who doesn’t work anymore. I want to be the one who takes care of her. It’s a dream. When I realised that I could fulfil this dream, I decide to go and join the group. I want to buy the dream house for my mother, not that she works for it, but that I do work for her. And that’s how they convinced me.

At the same time, although Viviana’s need to provide for her family can be viewed as exhibiting behaviours normally associated with masculinity norms, Donny Meertens (2004) explained that the war in Colombia has created new gender dynamics giving way to an increase in women-led households. The inverse in gender roles has led to an augmented number of women exhibiting provider femininities.

During the interview, Viviana also referred to a longing to pursue her studies one day, learn English, and become an air hostess to support her mother. This was her reasoning to seek better opportunities by enlisting in an armed group, especially one that could provide her with educational and work opportunities—she used her creativity and resilience strategically to overcome the structural inequalities she faced. Viviana acted

¹¹ Requested complete anonymity.

based on what she considered the best solution in that given context, by 'maximising the circumstances created by the constraints' (Honwana, 2006, p. 51).

I am not attempting to illustrate a childhood in Colombia depleted of any tenderness and innocence. Ana explains that the groups to which she belonged used those very attributes granted to children as a strategy of war, 'So when you face a child with a real soldier, there is an obvious disadvantage for them. And the soldiers, or our enemy would always have pity for the children. This would give the guerrilla time to attack'.

In this case, guerrilla groups use the association of vulnerability and innocence of children to their advantage. Children are placed in the front line in combat as an attempt to put off the soldiers they are facing. This could be seen as an exploitation of children given their stature, or agency granted to them for being valuable warriors. At the same time, she also removed any competence in combat if a soldier is under the age of 18, and considered only adults to be 'real' combatants, once more denying children of all merit and positive attributes while fighting.

The techniques behind the creation of 'child soldier' as an identity have unexpected political effects. Struggles over childhood and child rights in Colombia are productive sites in that they become the locus for other kinds of political struggles. The official terminology used by the Colombian government referring to armed groups other than state forces includes adjective such as subversive, illegal, unlawful, outlawed, and illegitimate, creating the dichotomy between 'good'/'legal' and 'evil'/'illegal'. The government uses the humanitarian discourse of child soldiers to vilify the enemy and legitimise its interventions, despite committing continuous human rights violations. According to a social worker in the department of Nariño, the national army has been the greatest perpetrator of sexual violence toward minors in Colombia. The indoctrination bolstering the rightfulness of the state versus left-wing groups was argued by Jason Hart (2006a) as a strategy used in many settings across the globe. The demonisation of guerrilla groups legitimised the army's brutal violations of children pertaining to those groups both during and after they disengaged. In the city of Tumaco, known to be one of the most affected by the armed conflict, I was shown a pamphlet used by state forces titled *How to perform impalement on a guerrilla girl*, which sadly had occurred on various occasions. Although the state has been accused continuously of committing atrocities

throughout Colombia, they partly succeeded in depicting the left-wing groups as immoral and inhuman while claiming the moral high ground with their international audience.

My analysis in this section reveals that contextualising the concept of childhood and its involvement in armed conflict is essential to a more thorough understanding of this phenomenon and helps to provide a more global perspective with regards to the child soldier academic discourse. In the next section, I discuss the factors behind children's decisions to join armed groups in a war that was initiated based on social inequality and Marxist teachings.

3. Doctrine or all about economics?

'The motive of war is money'.

17-year-old former boy soldier

The dynamics of the Colombian conflict and the armed groups have changed on many levels. According to anthropologist Ximena Pachón, 'there has never existed lasting peace in Colombia, wars have always been part of our realities and history'¹². However, the current conflict was initiated on the basis of social inequality and Marxist ideologies, as explained in Chapter II. Today it is a conflict over resources financed by some of the most lucrative industries including narco-trafficking, and has apparently lost its political reasoning. All parties involved in the war have benefitted from the drug trade as well as other economies including kidnapping, trafficking of people, arms and other goods, and extortion, sustaining the economy of war (Vergara González, 2007, p. 580). As 17-year-old former combat, Daniel, repeated several times in his audio recording, 'the motive of war is money'.

Although there has been a shift in the motives for the war in Colombia and it is now dominated by power and money, the underlying causes for the conflict have remained the same. Social inequality is still prevalent across the country and the elite, composed of a small fraction of the population, still owns and controls the majority of the land (Chapter II, Section 1). It is not surprising that children in unstable and deprived contexts seek to improve their livelihoods and that of their families by attempting to take part in

¹² Based on an oral interview I conducted.

the economy of war. While many studies have pointed out that a large percentage of recruited children come from challenged backgrounds, such as family separation, dismantled families, poverty, social exclusion, no access to education or work, forcible displacement, and homelessness (Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, 2004), not all child soldiers have the same experience nor share reasons to join an armed group. The discourse based on the assumption that children in distressed conditions will eventually take part in violence negates their agency (Shepler, 2004) and limits our understanding of them to helpless incompetent beings.

I am not denying that challenging situations can contribute to the underlying causes of children pursuing any opportunity available to overcome adversities. Nevertheless, my argument is that children not only make the best possible decisions in given circumstances, or in other words, they use 'tactical agency' (Honwana, 2007), but also maximize and recreate their opportunities using their entrepreneurial agency. For instance, 17-year-old David lived with his parents and siblings and when the ELN passed through his town he then decided to join, as he could make more money than he was already making. This is not to say that David's family was wealthy, however they were not facing extreme adversities either, according to his narrative:

I started to like money more. For me, every three months, I would end up with 200,000 or 300,000 pesos benefits easily. Simple as that. So I told myself, I can make more money. I can leave my house and start working over there. And leave the plants to my brothers so they can administer them¹³.

In some cases, as in David's, a family's relationship with an illegal activity, often linked to an armed group, incites the child to join them (Shepler, 2004). His decision to leave his home for economic opportunities could even be considered entrepreneurial. He explained that over time, he improved his status in the group, from porter to manager to finally earning a percentage of the benefits from the drug sales. At his young age, he was able to earn relatively large sums of money, enjoy high levels of consumption, and take care of his family. He felt powerful and like a fulfilled 'man'. Undergoing the process of DDR where he was told that he was a child, a dependent, and that his rights had been violated, victimised him and dismantled his pride, his power, his identity, and his sense of masculinity (Villanueva O'Driscoll et al., 2013).

¹³ He is referring to coca shrubs.

While recognising that soldiering might be coerced in certain circumstances, Hanne Beirens (2008) argued that for some young people, it may be the most viable route to social progress. Moreover, and as discussed in the previous section, historically, labour marks initiation into childhood in Colombia. Consequently, children are not surprised to work or join an armed group at an early age, in fact it is considered quite ordinary.

Child labour is not a new phenomenon in Colombia nor is it frowned upon in rural or poor regions. Rather, the change in dynamics has occurred over the increased militarisation of children across the country. In my interviews I often heard children express their aspirations to be 'professional' soldiers. They viewed military life as a possible career choice. A former 17-year-old gang member in the city of Cali conveyed that he desperately looked for a work opportunity 'for good people' over many months and finally opted for the army when he found no alternatives. A social worker in the city of Pasto affirmed 'the state military in Colombia has been known as the largest employer in the country,' thus sustaining the livelihoods of many of its young population. According to the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA), Colombia has the largest army in Latin America and its defence budget has roughly tripled since 2000, thereby increasing its capacity to recruit large numbers of young Colombians.

One former combatant in Bogotá clarified that in certain areas of the country where one particular 'illegal' group rules, young people foresee their acceptance into the group as an upgrade in their social status. 'They are more respected by their friends and belong to a group who looks out for them,' he continued. The status of a soldier is still highly valued in many countries and joining a military group can often be synonymous with a higher social position, possibly improving the quality of life of the family as a whole (Hart, 2006a; Beirens, 2008). Moreover, and as is often the case in regions most affected by the conflict in Colombia, income-generating labour normally undertaken by young people is often replaced by more profitable economies such as the drug or oil industry, which is controlled and fought over by a variety of military units. Consequently, youth and their families turn to the war industry (Richards, 2002). Such are the cases of traditional fishing villages on the Pacific coast turning toward the manufacturing and trafficking of cocaine or Indigenous farming, families exchanging their ancestral crops for coca shrubs.

While young people take the most desirable routes in given circumstances, reflecting their agency and ability to make sound judgements, there still remains a strong correlation between social inequality and recruitment in contemporary battles. In previous wars, child combatants came from a variety of social and economic backgrounds. In 1819, Simón Bolívar forcibly recruited all males between the ages of 15 to 40 to partake in the war (Ocampo López, 1989, p. 54). Therefore, recruitment into armed groups was not limited to socially marginalised and economically deprived populations, contrary to what is happening today.

Daniel stressed the lack of representation of the poor and socially excluded. The current war began to put an end to the abuse of power by the ruling elite, demonstrating the continuous feelings of exploitation and being unrepresented amongst Colombia's young people. The practice of recruiting discontented angry youth into violent political demonstrations reflects the continuity of the child soldier phenomenon (Shepler, 2004). Opponents of the national government, in attempts to pursue their own interests, take advantage of the socially and economically marginalised youth (Shepler, 2004). The promise of material and educational benefits is often used to attract them into the ranks of armed groups.

In Viviana's case, education represented a powerful tool to eventually realise higher financial means. She sought freedom for both her and her family away from the abuse of her stepfather and the financial dependence on him:

I started to hear around that if you are able to study, you can move forward in life. And I thought to myself, I will start studying, then I make good money and buy my mother the house that she always wanted without her having to put up with my stepfather. I have scars all over my body that remind me of him and how many times he beat me. By joining the group, I thought I could get my mom out of this, as well as my brothers and sisters so they don't suffer any longer.

She enlisted in a guerrilla group based on promises of education and work opportunities. 'Well, we all want a future', she explained. Recruitment to Viviana represented the optimal path based on her available options demonstrating her tactical agency (Honwana, 2006), but also an upgrade in her social status and that of her family maximizing her opportunities, displaying her entrepreneurial agency.

Although the current war has evolved into an economic one, some regiments of left-wing groups still use Marxist discourses to indoctrinate and recruit marginalised youth. Not all units within the guerrilla groups function in the same manner and much of the imposed philosophy and norms are dependent upon their leaders. While Viviana and Ana both joined leftist groups, they had very distinct experiences. Both suffered violence in their families, however Ana's entry into the guerrilla group was motivated by political violence and a decision taken by her father. She was indoctrinated with 'books about Lenin and communist politics', supporting and legitimising the need for the left-wing groups to take up arms against the government. The murder of her mother by state forces further propelled her to continue fighting, as she narrated. While she faced many adversities partaking in the group, she remained under the protection of the commander, given her father's role and high status.

During the interviews I conducted with her, she continuously expressed lack of trust towards the state rather than the group that recruited her, similarly to how other youngsters demonstrated their anger toward their government. Likewise, Daniel stated that many youth in deprived circumstances experience social exclusion that leaves many with extreme feelings of rancour, anger, and even rage. The deep humiliation of constantly being rejected, discriminated against, and abused, he explained, propels youngsters to seek an outlet for their frustration and desire for revenge by causing harm to others. Militias involved in the conflict use these 'weaknesses' and feelings of discouragement to recruit children.

Daniel clarified that they use the youth's rage and mistrust toward the government to create 'machines to kill', indoctrinated with Marxist ideologies. Young people seemed to be on a quest for belonging and recognition in the family, community, conflict, armed groups, or elsewhere. They also seemed to desire what other privileged youth possessed and what has been continuously denied to them. Poverty and social inequality stand at the core of recruitment—all young combatants 'tend to share membership in an excluded and educationally-disadvantaged youth underclass' (Shepler, 2004, p. 26).

Economic factors have played a prominent role in the political violence in Colombia, especially since the 1980s with the expansion of the narcotics trade (Richani, 2002). The

propensity to use coercion and violence is historically deeply anchored in the culture. The current structural conditions and material incentives have allowed for such a culture of violence to rise (Waldmann, 2007). On the other hand, the exclusion of certain groups, especially youth, from economic, social, and political arenas, has fostered the creation of subcultures of violence and attitudes of resistance in protest against society in general. As long as there is a presence of war and the conditions that initially incited youth to make the decision to partake in violence remain the same, armed groups will continue to recruit them, continuously finding new and innovative ways to do so. Ana described this process as a cycle of violence needing to be nourished by new waves of recruits where some children enter and others leave. A wide variety of lucrative commodities keep the war sustainable, blurring the lines between illegal activities, motives for the conflict, and the multidimensional types of violence. As an adolescent in Cali said, 'war is the best business'.

I dedicate the next sub-section to examining how the construction of the category of child soldiers and the excess of associated attention granted to that group have created certain exclusive privileges denied to other unrecognised child combatants.

4. Child Soldiers as a Privileged Category

As the title of this subsection suggests, I will discuss the ways that children formally recognised as child soldiers benefit from inordinate attention, nationally and internationally, and are granted privileges denied to other categories of children involved in armed conflict. I am not denying or undermining the horrific circumstances experienced by recognised combatants or suggesting by any means that they lead a fortunate life, but rather seek to highlight the politicisation of child soldiers and its consequences. Most studies on children engaged in war are directly or indirectly centred, if not solely, focused on the category of child soldiers. As Jason Hart (2006a) and Lorraine MacMillan (2009) have asked, why should child soldiering attract so much attention when far larger numbers of children suffer and die from other causes? I will elaborate on the consequences of the overt attention granted to child soldiers as a category, as well as focus on how they are benefited once captured in comparison with other children facing extreme adversities in the Colombian war.

As discussed in Chapter III, the concern over the scourge of child soldiering has attracted in recent years a growing body of child rights advocates, researchers, and led to the adoption of new protocols and laws. Although it is not a new phenomenon in Colombia (Pachón, 2009), the contemporary discourse on child soldiers appeals to completely different sentiments (Rosen, 2005, pp. 4-8). This growing international attention toward children engaged with armed groups has led to the development of reintegration programmes worldwide. The Colombian situation offers a rare example of the implementation of reinsertion programmes while the conflict is ongoing.

An expert in child protection working in the Putumayo Department, stressed that the excessive attention granted to child soldiers needed to be extended to the remainder of children greatly affected by war on a daily basis. To begin with, there is a notion that child soldiers require special attention. Current discourses conceptualise children as naturally defenceless and weak, which is ironically what grants them their powerful position (Hart, 2006a). These constructions support the legitimisation of the practices deployed by humanitarian organisations and policy makers based on the ideology that child soldiers are victims by virtue of being under-eighteen-year-old combatants. Their recruitment as soldiers is commonly characterised as exploitation of their inherent vulnerability. Furthermore, since the ratification of the CRC by the Colombian government in 1989, the state has the obligation to recognise children's rights and to protect them (Linares Cantillo, 2008).

Ana drew on the discourse of childhood innocence/victimhood to reflect back on her own experience: 'they used us like bait in the conflict. Little by little, I realised I had lost my childhood, and started to feel like a victim, I wanted to get out of this process'. She also recalled the invisibility of young combatants who do not undergo demobilisation through state processes as a result of the fixation on the lives of child soldiers. She stressed that those who do not disengage formally die nameless in battle: 'children who remain in silence, who die in combat without anyone ever having known what happened to them. It's the voice of silence'.

On the other hand, child soldiers can turn themselves in to the state forces at any time, that is, if they are willing and able to successfully escape the armed group in which they serve. Not all child soldiers however share the same experiences. They differ based on

the group they belonged to, and within the group, the *frente* or division they fought with, as well as their personal characteristics such as age, gender, resilience level, and finally, the location where they were stationed. Although both were part of a guerrilla group, Viviana and Ana had very distinct experiences and expectations. David, a 16-year-old former soldier with the ELN, explains why he left the group:

I know I could make more money than I already was so I took off with them. I had a higher position on the ladder of the narco-industry so things were going well. We were also charging extortions for anyone transporting gasoline. But I received a threat from a member of the FARC, they wanted in on the money as well. He told me I had to leave or otherwise he would kill me himself. So I decided to go and surrender to the army at 2:30 in the morning of the same day.

David acted based on what was best for him in that given context, maximising opportunities available to him. He made a decision to leave the group and seek protection with state forces, and had that option to do so. He was eventually placed in the Church-run organisation where I met him in Medellín. It can be argued that based on Ana's story, and many other children's, protection is not guaranteed once in the custody of state forces. On the contrary, in Ana's case, she was tortured before it was proven that she was a minor in an attempt to extricate as much information on the functioning of the FARC.

Although by Colombian law a minor cannot be interrogated, children have been used for intelligence work, detecting mass graves, identifying members of the groups, and revealing their functioning and any information that can be retrieved using all means possible (Villanueva O'Driscoll et al., 2013). Nonetheless, the fact that legislation exists both nationally (Law 1095 of the Code of Infancy and Adolescence, 2006) and internationally, protecting under-eighteen combatants, places child soldiers at a much more privileged position than other children engaged in the armed conflict (Villanueva O'Driscoll et al., 2013). An example of such children are those recruited by armed groups that are not formally recognised by the government as part of the armed conflict, but rather categorised as criminal gang members. These children who are under 18 years old are considered criminals and treated as such (Valero, 2012) with no laws protecting them.

Another privilege granted to child combatants is that they bear no legal responsibilities for their actions if committed while they were under the age of 18. Child soldiers and

adult soldiers are therefore treated very differently. Again, laws and policies securing that privilege are based on the contemporary model of childhood as a state of inherent helplessness and need of protection. Both Ana and Viviana had committed crimes outlawed by their government including murder, torture, and kidnapping. Under the laws protecting them as minors, neither of them was prosecuted for their acts. These legislations help contrast the Colombian model of childhood with the contemporary model—the basis of humanitarian interventions designed to support the reintegration of former child combatants into civil life.

Evidently, this standard is based on the assumption that children were civilians prior to joining the armed group and had their childhoods stolen from them, thus the need to restore 'normalcy' to their lives. Ana, for instance, was separated from her father at the age of four and raised by members of the armed group. As she mentions, the other combatants had become her family, constituting her 'normalcy' and, defeating attempts to reintegrate her into a life she was not accustomed to. These misconceptions about experiences of early phases of life by child combatants have assigned a certain identity to child soldiers, representing them as a threat to societal norms and reinforcing the need to restore social order (Macmillan, 2009).

By adopting the identity of innocent children, youth in Colombia are moving from an obvious inherent power, to a power legitimated through international structures. The Geneva Conventions already contain the ingredients necessary to extend greater protection to child soldiers than is commonly acknowledged. The criteria and reasoning identifying the category of child soldiers offer explicit guidelines for the treatment they are entitled to, including enhanced opportunities to withdraw from combat and modified treatment in detention.

Former child combatants with whom I interacted seemed to see many opportunities in their new life and made many references to them. Although a possible construction of humanitarian organisations and the Church-run centre attempting to restore 'hope' in their lives, I could not help but notice the contrast in the accounts of other children engaged in the armed conflict not recognised as child soldiers. The latter constantly made reference to the lack of opportunities and the absence of tools needed for them to overcome the barriers of social exclusion and marginalisation. A social worker in the

department of Nariño confirmed that prior to engaging in armed conflict, many young people are deprived of any possibilities to transcend the poverty and misery limiting them but are often presented with opportunities once they undergo the demobilisation process.

That is not to say that the DDR programs are free from flaws, on the contrary, the process faces many limitations that often catalyse youngsters to re-recruitment. The Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers (2004) stated that the government DDR program had only demobilised 10 per cent of children involved in the armed conflict. The scandal over the failed demobilisation of the paramilitaries starting in 2003 revealed that children from that group had never entered the process (Watchlist, 2012) leading to increasing impunity.

As experiences vary among child soldiers, so do their decisions to lead the life they wish for, as well as their resilience levels. In the case of 17-year-old Daniel, he maximised the benefits he received by the Church-run organisation in Medellín and is now one of the leading coordinators working with other former child combatants. Daniel contrasted his life on the streets and the violence in his household with his newly acquired position in life. Prior to demobilization process, he was not given any attention and faced similar contexts of social exclusion, poverty, and violence as other marginalised children. David, a fellow 17-year-old participant in the program, shared the same perception of the possibilities he is now encountering:

Now, I understand that life is full of opportunities and anyone really wants to, regardless of the harm I have caused in my past as a barrier to move forward in life. Every day, I give my all to be able to fulfill what I want.

Although the current programs seem to favour certain former combatants, recruitment has not decreased. The previously mentioned expert in child protection from Putumayo argued that unless the current programs to 'rebuild' children's lives through DDR processes are redesigned to address their needs at an early age through preventative measures. Regardless of their status and engagement in the armed conflict, they will continue to enlist in the variety of armed groups. She questioned the fate of those children not recognised as child soldiers but who join armed groups based on the same dilemmas as the 'legitimate' combatants. She stressed the danger of focusing solely on the issue of child soldiers and their reasons for engagement rather than focusing on the

fundamentally complex realities of the war as causation. As long as there is war and the social, economic, and cultural conditions remain favourable for armed groups to operate, the phenomenon will prevail, she continued. It is a matter of economics, power, and resources and as long as humanitarian organisations and international community do not take that into consideration, nothing will change, she concluded. Daniel stressed the inefficiency of current interventions and approaches by humanitarian entities:

War is the best business. It will not end as long as there is social inequality. The UN and other organisations think that they are doing something for us, but they are not. They don't even listen to us. We are not represented, we are just fooled. When one of us tried to fight for the pueblo (people), they killed him because he actually came from the pueblo¹⁴.

Contemporary discussions among advocacy groups still revolve around the issue of child recruitment in isolation from both the local context and the multiple factors that perpetuate children's engagement in war (Hart, 2006a). In a recent consultancy for an international organisation on children's involvement in the armed conflict in Colombia, I was obligated to follow the same iniquitous approach based on naming and shaming insurgent groups and recommending them not to use children in their ranks, without elaborating on the main issues reflected in young people's realities. Humanitarian organisations attempt to treat the symptoms rather than adopting approaches that take into account the deep-rooted causes (Hart, 2006a). It is essential to reframe the current debate using war, international legislations, and human rights as the starting point rather than focusing solely on child recruitment (Hart, 2006a). Ana clarified that child recruitment will continue as long as there is war:

The heirs of this generation of war have prevented this country to move forward and have a peace process. War has been normalised together with the recruitment of children. Until Colombia and the rest of the world fail to provide a real solution to this, they will continue to be part of the problem. It is a cycle where some children leave while others join.

It is essential to design approaches based on the larger context of the presence of the armed conflict in which child recruitment lies, rather than decontextualising the phenomenon of children's engagement and limiting it to a single dynamic. As Julia Villanueva O'Driscoll et al. (2013) illustrated in their research of demobilised children in

¹⁴ Here, Daniel refers to Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, leader of a populist movement in Colombia assassinated in 1948. By 'people', he means the poor and laborer sector of the population.

Colombia, rather than analysing recruitment on an individual basis attributing a problem to the child, we should depart from the standpoint of a societal problem. Instead, advocacy agencies routinely focus their energies working primarily on individual cases and continuing the political legacy of condemning the existence of child combatants. Ultimately, we know very little about the situations of children serving in armed groups not formally recognised by governmental institutions, nor are we aware of those disengaged from armed groups who did not go through the formal reintegration structures.

In the next section I will talk in greater detail about the child combatants known as *sicarios* who are not formally recognised as child soldiers and are further excluded from social structures.

5. The Unrecognised Combatants

‘...where blood flows more than water’.

Adolescent boy, Cali.

This last section introduces the category of children who are active combatants in the armed conflict in Colombia but not recognised by the government as legitimate soldiers, and further ignored by humanitarian organisations and international legislations. These youth, commonly referred to as *sicarios* or hitmen in Colombia, perform a variety of tasks for the different armed groups patrolling their neighbourhoods, including committing murders, concealing arms and drugs, transporting drugs or illegal goods, kidnapping, robbing, and managing the extortions in their communities.

It was extremely difficult to gather data from *sicarios* given the nature of their work and the mutual danger it implied for me to be involved with them. Many were reluctant to approach me but I was able to engage with nine of them over a series of visits through a common contact. All of those who agreed to participate in the research and whom I encountered were males. Their narratives appeared to be fragmented, as is often the case with children in contexts of war stemming from daily uncertainties, fear and insecurity (Gray & Lombardo, 2001). Many of the participants were affected by drugs during each of our meetings, making the conversations incoherent and difficult to assess. Moreover, telling their stories was not an activity to which they were accustomed, especially to an outsider.

Nonetheless, I was able to gather some of their experiences and perspectives on different topics of their choice to discuss. While I did not ask them direct questions of their involvement in the conflict, they addressed the issues spontaneously. Given the dangerous nature of the interviews and the reluctance to share their opinions with me, I have kept complete anonymity about their locations and identities as per their request. Whilst I was able to obtain several interviews by video camera, some recorded by me and most directed by the youth themselves, I was on several occasions required by the young people in my study to destroy the material as well as completely omit the use of any recording device. The most cohesive narrative I was able to obtain was that of 13-year-old Hernán, which I decided to include in this section to provide a glimpse into his daily realities. Hernán was unfortunately killed less than a year after I met him.

5.1.Hernán, 13-year-old *Sicario*

Below is an account from Hernán, a 13-year-old *sicario*:

What can I tell you? You didn't have the kind of life I've had, so you don't know. My father was a son-of-a-bitch who used to hit my mom more than once a day. I almost killed him one day, I couldn't bear to see my mom crying and not do anything. And why do you think? Well, for money, what else? You see? It's just another life, what do you know about it?

In spite of everything, I am a man. I have my wife. I sustain the house and my mother doesn't have to sell her body to bring us food. So you are going to ask me if I killed? Why would I lie and tell you no. But I'm not the only one and we are not the real assassins. Those who control all this war are the politicians sitting there on their thrones with all the money of the country and sending us to die in poverty. You can judge me all you want but I ask you: which is the worst crime? To kill my family, my blood or others I don't know? To see my mother slowly die while my sister's rapist is set free while she serves in jail for something she didn't do and do nothing as a man? Tell me, which is the worst crime?

What can I tell you more? We do all kind of work. I started really young but they didn't want to take me in at the beginning, they thought I couldn't handle it so I had to show I was different. I would carry their things, hide them, send messages, and slowly they trusted me with more important things. I didn't get paid at the beginning because you see, you have to earn it to be part of them. If you're lucky and you show you're good, you can work for the big guys and get more money. Over here, it's the paracos¹⁵ who control the area but you never see the big ones, it's our boss who passes on the jobs to us. I met one of the big guys. He liked me...and one day asked to do my first big job, I had to take down a really big guy in the city you know, those

¹⁵ Referring to paramilitary groups.

who control this country. He thought I was just a little beggar in the street so it was easy to get close to him and shoot him dead. Most of the kids out here have a hard time the first time they kill, but I didn't think about it. You get used to it. I was so angry inside, and I use it when I kill, it helps me not think. It's a shitty life but I gotta do what I gotta do. And yes, I want to get my family out of here one day in a beautiful house, have a family, and even go to church, why not? It's easy to sit there in your comfortable neighbourhood and judge me, but what do you know?

Although vital to the sustenance of the war in Colombia, child *sicarios* are the lowest in the criminal food chain and receive only an extremely small fraction of what is paid for an assassination. 'All of the armed groups involved in the conflict, especially the FARC and paramilitaries, rely on children for their operations in the cities', said a social worker in Cali. She explained that although children cannot be prosecuted under Colombian law, they are sent to facilities that are often over-populated where they encounter even more abuse and violence and are usually put back onto the street. The lack of adequate governmental services addressing the needs of young people in deprived and violent urban areas, combined with the failure of the legal system resulting in high impunity, in fact heavily contribute to the exploitation of children by armed groups. 'In the absence of the government, children are left to kill and be killed', she concluded. A young *sicario* in Cali explained the relationship between death and money: 'After all, death is the industry, because we do other types of work, but the main thing is to kill on demand'.

Generally speaking, child *sicarios* are recruited for murder as they can go unnoticed by security officials and are very inexpensive. The less experience a *sicario* has and the lower profile the victim, the more attractive their use becomes, while remaining as efficient as the work of more experienced killers. Hernán, on the other hand, was one of the most sought after *sicarios* following the successful completion of his task in killing a high profile politician who refused to collaborate with the paramilitaries. Although his recruitment was of his own choosing, he shared the same structural conditions of poverty, social inequality and family violence as the children in my study who engage directly in the war, formally recognised as child soldiers. In his narrative above, Hernán illustrated money as a means to liberation, especially that of his mother and sister from servitude and violence:

My father was a son-of-a-bitch who used to hit my mom more than once a day. I almost killed him one day, I couldn't bear to see my mom crying and not do anything. And why do you think? Well, for money, what else? ... I sustain the house and my mother doesn't have to sell her body to bring us food.

In a similar way to Viviana's need to take care of her mother discussed in the prior sections, Hernán also displayed nurturing characteristics—he was highly independent and progressively took on the responsibility of adults from a young age (Hecht, 1998). Like most children living in poverty, he started working from a very young age and was expected to bring money to his household. His duty to perform any task necessary to ensure the protection and sustenance of his family can also be viewed as provider masculinity (Connell, 2005). In fact, he legitimised the violence he committed in order to prevent the one perpetrated toward his mother and sister. He confronted the commonly accepted ethics of society that condemn his acts with his own morality:

Which is the worst crime? To kill my family, my blood or others I don't know? To see my mother slowly die while my sister's rapist is set free while she serves in jail for something she didn't do and do nothing as a man? Tell me, which is the worst crime?

While Hernán was only 13 years old, referring to him as a child would be inappropriate and even insulting to him. In his account, he reaffirmed his masculinity and adulthood by initially confronting his father and eventually replacing him as 'the man of the house'. He also mentioned his wife, whom he also sustained and protected, once more establishing his manhood. Having performed important tasks as a *sicario* and earning a larger amount of money as compared to his colleagues, Hernán had acquired recognition and respect among his peers. Although members of his community generally feared him, as he commonly patrolled his neighbourhood with a gun made visible in his belt, he appeared nurturing at home with his family, as I also observed from my meetings with his mother and sister. In this setting, he showed no signs of violence. This observation offers an alternative to those characteristics typically associated with hegemonic masculinity, which emphasise negative characteristics that depict men as unemotional, non-nurturing, aggressive, and dispassionate (Connell, 1998). Above all, Hernán had acquired a power through money and status that is commonly denied to young dwellers of his community.

A young *sicario* in Cali stated that the philosophy of the *sicario* is that it is better to live fast with dignity and power and die young, than to die in poverty and humiliation: 'Who kills lives; who dies buries himself. This is the law of the street'. Once they become acquainted with a life of violence, it is very difficult to introduce other lifestyles (Vargas-Barón, 2010). Hernán demonstrated his creativity in agency by 'doing what he has to do' to handle his circumstances in the way that seemed best to him given his life

experiences. In his case, he chose the path of violence to escape from one in his household. Like many young people in marginalised contexts, Hernán was angry at the system of elites that positioned him in poverty and accused the state of being the 'real assassin'.

He channeled his anger through the violence he committed which in turn helped him avoid any feelings of remorse and empathy. At the same time, he did not want to be judged for his decisions and continuously attempted to justify them. Although he appeared to be relatively successful in his role as a *sicario*, he aspired to live a different life away from his neighbourhood, a life he envisioned as 'normal'. He went as far as wishing to attend religious events and did not feel excluded from the possibility of doing so. Above all, although Hernán chose the path of *sicariato*, he wanted to be considered a regular human being who was successfully taking care of his loved ones.

The search for recognition and power is a common trait among my interviewees both as former child soldiers and *sicarios*. All parties involved in the conflict overlapped at one point or another, at times collaborating with each other and at others acting as rivals. Given the protracted nature of the conflict in Colombia, the interconnectedness of the many types of violence, and the continuous dynamics of the war, it has never been clear which party holds more power. A breakdown of public authority blurs the border between public and private combatants, and between combatants and civilians (Kaldor, 2006).

Children who have not gone through a formal reintegration programme after demobilising from armed groups, as in the case of the *sicarios*, have received little research attention. A social worker in Cali argued that the conflict has only intensified over the last years and the number of child *sicarios* has increased dramatically, in spite of the peace talks between the government and the left-wing groups. As the conflict over resources surges, so does the need for more 'personnel' to sustain the economy of war.

Though in Colombia the conflict is above all linked to illicit drugs, violence in Colombia has also been fuelled by licit development in the oil, mining, and agribusiness sectors (Gray, 2008) sustaining the confrontation between the different actors of the armed conflict. A social worker in Medellín explained that the rivalry between paramilitary and guerrilla groups continued although the government denies the existence of the right-

wing groups that underwent a failed demobilisation process in the early 2000s. Today, she argues, it is much worse, as the formally known paramilitary group, the AUC has been reorganised and replaced by many resurgent paramilitary groups such as the *Urabeños*, and the *Paisas*, heirs of paramilitary leader 'Don Berna'.

Large urban shantytowns, home to the city's poorest, are breeding grounds for guerrilla militias. To fight them, the paramilitary forces ally with street gangs who receive funds and weapons from the paramilitaries in return for the services of child *sicarios*. 'They even sign formal contracts for their specific jobs at very high pays', she said, 'it is very good business and the need for children only rises'. Hernán was recruited by paramilitaries in his neighbourhood to perform tasks necessary for the functioning of the group, fulfilling the requirements for categorisation as a child soldier. *Sicarios* do not have to leave society in order to be engaged in an armed group. They can perform both the roles of civilians at night and combatants by day, and remain by definition child soldiers.

Due to the many deficiencies and shortcomings of the current demobilisation process (Chapter II), many former child soldiers risk re-recruitment and often go back to doing what they know best—they become *sicarios* or join a BACRIM or criminal gang (Chapter II). A social worker that requested the anonymity of her work location explained that given that the reintegration program ends at 18 years of age, youth often seek an armed group to work for as they are confronted with the same structural conditions that propelled them to initially join. Several interviewees pointed out that the solution for the conflict has mostly been sought on a military level and that little has been done to solve structural problems.

It is also more profitable to join an armed group than to find work. That is, if the possibility indeed exists as former child soldiers often find trouble and discrimination in obtaining employment. In many cases, children surrender to the army and join the DDR programs to receive the funds from the government and leave shortly after to join another group. Although national reports display a large number of children having gone through the demobilisation process, a social worker clarified that the reality shows the armed groups operating in the same location under different names, only reflecting the failure of the program. Furthermore, they are simply called BACRIMs and referred to as

'emerging groups', as they are newly emerging or criminal gangs, thus completely exiting the realm of the armed conflict and as a result deleted from the agenda of public policies and humanitarian organisations. Rather than recognising them as armed actors of the war in Colombia, the state considers them simply as gangs resulting from youth delinquency. While the Colombian government may decide not to include the child *sicario* phenomenon within the dynamics of the armed conflict, the actual situation and everyday life of the population reveal a different reality.

It is highly questionable why children engaged with criminal gangs are seen and treated as delinquents whilst those having worked with recognised armed groups are considered victims in the eyes of authorities and humanitarian organisations. Both categories are comprised of children who engage with the war for the same motives, yet attention and care is only provided to the legitimised and recognised combatants, in isolation from the rest of the population affected by the armed conflict. As shown in my data, while the current war remains continuously nurtured by illegitimate 'day-time' child soldiers and increasing rates of violence, a sustainable and tangible peace agreement in Colombia will be more challenging to achieve.

6. Conclusion

In this chapter I have analysed narratives associated with different categories of child combatants and explored the multiplicity of violence in relation to the shifting roles young people take, from victims, throughout actors of violence, observers, witnesses, to agents of resistance. Young Colombians' perceive violence as interconnected, fluid, and multidimensional, escalating from the household, to the street in the *barrio*, to a combat between armed groups. As the result of socio-economic and political exclusion, a given child can experience displacement and recruitment into recognised and unrecognised groups, as their parents' or their own choices, to increase their social and economic status, seek revenge or as an outlet for their anger.

While the war in Colombia has affected many more children than just child combatants, there has been an imbalance of attention from humanitarian organisations, researchers, and policy makers pertaining to the issues of child soldiers and their reasons for joining armed groups (Chapter III, section 2.2). The focus has been on the aftermath of

recruitment, attempting to provide protection and support once the phenomenon has occurred, rather than on the root dynamics of the different types of violence encompassing all children involved. To fully understand the dynamics of child recruitment in Colombia, it is essential to comprehend how that category was constructed and evolved to what is perceived today. Child soldiering is not a new phenomenon and in Colombia, children have been important players in its warfare since its founding and were even celebrated as heroes, contrary to the contemporary humanitarian discourse condemning children as soldiers (Chapter III, section 3.1). Therefore, on the one hand, a change occurred from praising children engaged in war as liberators, to victimising them upon entering the demobilisation process.

On the other hand, a strong sense about the morality associated with child soldiering, emerged with a newly constructed definition of childhood, as per the UNCRC (Chapter III, section 2.2). This narrow construct of childhood clashes with the cultural understandings and their perceptions of their identities. Children are both victimised by virtue of having been soldiers and denied any childhood if it differs from present-day understandings. 'Little adults' become little victims, creating an annulment of their ability to utilise their creativity and resilience to improve their circumstances.

The children in this research continuously mentioned social inequality, exclusion, and injustice as grounds for their anger towards the system subduing them. Taking advantage of their discontent and rancour, all parties in the conflict have recruited young people by promising them educational and financial opportunities. For many young people from deprived contexts, becoming a soldier or taking part in the conflict is the most practical path to social progress. Given that the current conflict is steered by material drives and sustained by lucrative trades, it is thus inevitable that young people living in severely limiting conditions pursue ways to improve their lives based on their circumstances using their tactical agency (Honwana, 2006) and maximize their opportunities by participating in the profitable activities of war, using their creativity and entrepreneurial agency to overcome structural disparities (Chapter I, section 2). However, not all deprived young people have the same experiences and partake in war or do so for the same reasons. What they share, as research showed, is their similar background of structural limitations and social exclusion (Chapter III, section 3.2). Both young men and women were mainly driven to the armed conflict by economic reasons

and shared many characteristics including nurturing childhoods and experiences of intense physical violence. However only the women spoke of repeated sexual violence and exploitation.

In spite of considerable research and laws available on the issue of children's engagement in violence, it is not clear who should be recognised as a child soldier. Child soldiers are considered exploited and granted special treatment to ensure that their rights are restored as per the UNCRC. They are presented with hopeful opportunities including educational and work prospects. Far from being flawless, the greatest limitations of programs designed for child soldiers lie in solely targeting legitimate combatants, leaving out a large number of unrecognized combatants such as child *sicarios*. Similarly to child soldiers, *sicarios* attempt to escape their contexts of poverty and marginalisation by harnessing power through war activities. They also make decisions to cope with violence based on their understandings of their responsibilities to nurture and provide for their families (Chapter III, section 1). In the same manner, they strategically utilise not only their tactical agency (Honwana, 2006) but also their creativity and entrepreneurial agency to demonstrate their political stand in breaking the barriers of social inequity.

Filling the increasing demand for cheap labour in the violence market, armed groups use the services of young *sicarios* for their operations blurring the lines between war dynamics and industries. It is therefore very common for former child soldiers to join a BACRIM or become a *sicario* upon leaving the demobilisation process. Finally, questions remain surrounding the culture of violence that has infiltrated the many layers of Colombian society together with the normalisation of war, the high levels of impunity and the silence imposed onto its countless victims. In the following chapter I will address many of these pertinent issues and I will begin to examine how young people in poor urban dwellings cope with the daily uncertainties caused by the different demonstrations of violence.

Chapter VI: Perceptions of Daily Uncertainties: Structural Factors Underlying Violence

In contrast to the last chapter's focus on direct engagement in violent groups, I dedicate this chapter to examining the indirect engagement in, and experiences of, violence of the young participants in my study and their perspectives of the dynamics created by daily violence in the communities of Potrero Grande in Cali and Comuna 13 in Medellín. Analysing the data I collected from the creative workshops, I explore the different manifestations of violence that help form the context of social, economic, and political fear and insecurity. I explore what young people perceive as the reasons for the perpetual violence and how they respond to their circumstances, including both limitations and opportunities.

Throughout the analysis of my data, I identified insecurity and uncertainty at the core of children's understanding of reasons for violence. In this chapter, I start by discussing the main types of uncertainty experienced by young people in their *barrios* or neighbourhoods, found in the participants' accounts focusing on the pervasiveness and normalisation of violence. The different types of violence in local communities stem from political conflicts at the national level and are intertwining (Pécaut; 1999). Using my data, I show children's analyses of the interconnection of their political, social, and economic surroundings and the national-level armed conflict, bridging the gap between interpersonal and political violence. Drawing from a variety of creative methods (Chapter IV, Section 3.2) used to gather information from participants in my study, in both locations of Aguablanca and Comuna 13, I have identified four sources of uncertainty in their accounts: the absence of safety, stigmatisation and exclusion, quest for money, and absence of a common place and unity.

Violence is typically portrayed by young dwellers of Cali and Medellín as interconnected, fluid, and multidimensional, starting from the household to the street in the *barrio*, to combat between armed groups. I describe the ways in which young people negotiate violence and its associated uncertainties and the different tactics they adopt based on their individual characters and contexts. In the following sections I analyse and elaborate further on young people's perspectives of the root causes of violence reflected in the data from both communities where the research was undertaken by comparing and

contrasting the two, stressing the significance of violence in relation to other livelihood tribulations (Moser & McIlwaine, 2004).

1. Absence of Safety

1.1. The Domination of Fear

The ubiquity of violence, interlaced with the uncertainties generated by a perpetual state of conflict prompting constant change in the identities of young urban dwellers, meant there was an increase in fear and insecurity. Fear and insecurity is a topic continuously brought up in the collected data and is therefore worthy of closer analysis.

A good example of the young urban dwellers' identification of fear and insecurity was evident in a poster-making activity in Aguablanca, where participants were asked to form three groups and choose a theme that was most significant to them in their neighbourhood, as part of the *My Life, My Family, My Neighbourhood* model (Chapter IV, section 3.2). The first group chose safety or 'lack of' as a theme, as is stated in Figure 1A (Appendix A): 'Safety is fundamental in our neighbourhood for people who live there, so that they can escape death'. In presenting their posters, topics of fear and insecurity (or 'lack of safety') were explained to be inextricably interlinked. When fear is perpetual in a given context, it eventually becomes institutionalised as a way of life commanding daily interaction between residents and responses to violence (Taussig, 1992).

Fear is defined as 'the institutional, cultural, and psychological repercussion of violence' (Koonings & Kruijt, 1999, p. 15). The construction of fear is commonly associated with state-generated political violence, as in the Colombian case, but also with various insurgent groups committing forced disappearances, torture, assassinations, massacres, and other civilian abuses (Riaño-Alcalá, 2006). Once having experienced violence caused by political armed actors, many victims persist in a perpetual state of fear (Moser & McIlwaine, 2004). Cycles of atrocities and terror make death a 'commodity' (p. 2) for urban youngsters in Colombia. For 15-year-old Jessica from Cali: 'Life in Potrero Grande is lent to us, as it can be taken away at any time and it is at constant risk 24 hours a

day'. Violence is inherent to the daily realities of urban dwellers in Colombia and has become an essential part of the functioning of society (Pécaut, 1999).

Pécaut further stated that the ordinariness of violence eventually starts to hide the fear associated with it, making it possible for people to survive. Fear develops as an automated response to an endlessly threatening context (Lira, 1998, p. 56) and leads to silence as the only form of protection (Torres-Rivas, 1999). In a group discussion with the Cali participants, 17-year-old Jorge explained the extent to which fear can inhibit any prospects for a change in his community and the value of silence: 'to stay alive, we don't seek justice'. He described the extent to which the violent atrocities occurring in Potrero Grande provided 'no way' out of the cyclical violence in the *barrio*.

In Jorge's community, the state's absence and the failure of an intervention resulting in more murders and disappearances, as was the case of the false positives¹⁶, meant that the option for reporting a crime was simply non-existent. Furthermore, the media and journalists have proven the association between local authorities and established gangs, demonstrating high levels of corruption. Finally, verbalising an account of murder or any crime committed by a community member would equate to denouncing a gang member, possibly leading to torture, death, or forced disappearance.

Fear not only stems from death itself but also from the threat of death imposed by the totalitarian domination of an entire territory and every aspect of its residents' lives. The rapid proliferation of gangs, *sicarios* (hitmen), and urban militias in urban settings of Colombia, predominantly through the drug cartel leaders of Cali and Medellín, filled the vacuum left by the state and became the chief authority in the controlled territories of the cities' poor outskirts. In Cali, 16-year-old Cristhian explained:

The neighbourhood is large and has commerce and other businesses that have to pay for protection. This money is collected for the strong man who controls the gang and hands out what he receives. Because of these profits, there are violent conflicts over territorial control.

Once a gang has a monopoly on violence in a given area, it can regulate the distribution of staples like milk and bread, extort construction businesses working on government

¹⁶ False positives are innocent civilians killed by members of the armed forces who dressed their victims as guerrillas in order to present them as combat kills.

projects designed to improve the neighbourhood's quality of life, impose tolls on buses and cabs entering the area, and exert many other types of protection racket.

In his video production¹⁷, 16-year-old Cesar asked his community members their perceptions of life in Potrero Grande:

Adolescent boy: 'we like to live here but there's too much violence and you can't go out everyday with confidence, and if you do, it's to our own luck'.

The same fear and insecurity is felt among Comuna 13's residents and reflected in 17-year-old Gustavo's photos. He described the photograph (Figure 2A) of the path he used to take with his friends to walk home from school but is no longer able to use due to the increasing violence and invisible frontiers (Chapter IV, Section 1). In Figure 3A, Saul explained that children nowadays have been confined to their limited living spaces rather than having the liberty to play with each other outside, because of the crossfire between different gangs, the paramilitaries, and the military or police.

The lack of safety among citizens in their communities is associated with the failure of the state to maintain public security systems. However, the increase in militarisation of a police force has meant a growth in violence and civilian abuse and death, as is the case with Operation Orion (Chapter IV, Section 1). The emergence of informal neighbourhood watches in response to the failure of public authorities to intervene, led to the control of sectors of the communities by criminal gangs and paramilitaries, often targeting children and youth as both victims and perpetrators (Scheper-Hughes, 1996). Both informal and state militarisation have caused an augmented sense of fear and insecurity among poor residents, inhibiting growth and the ability to overcome adversities both individually and at the community level.

Fear has also been defined as the outcome of exclusion and uncertainty (Koonings & Kruijt, 1999), beyond personal security, discussed in the sections that follow. The continuing political violence and the endemic everyday violence engrain fear in local urban communities producing an overall sense of insecurity and helplessness (Arriagada & Godoy, 2000). Livelihood uncertainties and structural factors are closely interconnected at the root of urban violence, as is denoted by Caroline Moser and

¹⁷ Video can be viewed at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aGQw-5K1i3I>

Catherine McIlwaine (2004). With violence unceasingly migrating to urban settings over the years and the ever-present memory of past government-provoked atrocities, fear has continued to dominate the peripheries of large cities and is sustained by criminal institutions. This is an important point I will elaborate further on in the next subsection.

1.2. Contesting Neighbourhood Power

The district of Aguablanca (Chapter IV, Section 1.1) is categorised as the poorest and most dangerous zone of Cali and more specifically Potrero Grande is one of its most feared and marginalised neighbourhoods. Most of the children in this community have never left Potrero Grande or Aguablanca, due to economic and frontier restrictions imposed by different gangs. To establish their power, criminal groups mark invisible frontiers in which they employ a terrorising scheme controlling everything from civilians' every movement to extorting local businesses to recruiting children to fuel their organisation.

The long established narco-trafficking units in both Cali and Medellín have utilised young people to run their operations and monitor every segment of the community. Adolescents who had served as 'eyes' for gang members, by guarding a city corner in exchange for sharing in their social life and maybe partaking of a little liquor or illegal drugs, had to take sides and join a gang, either from pressure inside the gangs they were engaged in or because they had become suspicious to members of rival neighbouring gangs. Today, these invisible frontiers within the communities have become extremely dangerous for young people to cross.

Coming from a specific block or small neighbourhood implicitly makes young people members of the local gang and therefore possible targets for rivals. Within these frontiers, children and adolescents are identified with the gang that controls the area whether or not they join in. Membership is not clandestine as it is not a stigma within the area controlled by the gang. Indeed, members seek fame and public recognition. One adolescent from Cali said: 'When you have a mean face, they don't approach you', referring to gang members patrolling the area. Looking tough and 'mean' could save a young man's life and help him impose his authority, as he would obtain esteem from his peers and gang members.

Another 17-year-old boy from the same community explained that in order to demonstrate their bravery to their own groups, and to gain respect within their own gang or their community, young people sometimes chose to end the life of their peers. In the similar way that violence is multidimensional, youth's roles are continuously shifted from sufferers to perpetrators of violence (Riaño-Alcalá, 2006). Caroline Moser and Catherine McIlwaine (2004) explained the multiplicity and interrelationships of the different types of violence in a country experiencing war, as the experiences of the political everyday violence cannot be separated from other types. In war-torn countries, violence may become the principal means to deal with conflicts, as a survival strategy, to have one's voice heard, as resistance, or as a means to attain certain benefits (Tedesco, 2000).

A poster illustration made by young participants in Potrero Grande depicts the reasons for killing, highlighting the shifting roles based on each context: 'He killed for ideals; he killed for survival; he killed for revenge; he killed for money; he killed'. As political violence can produce a generational shift prompting children to assume adult responsibilities at an early age, children will continue to acquire new identities and negotiate power and survival modes in an attempt to make sense of their lives. It is also important to note that a constant state of fear and insecurity, coupled with material deprivation, affects community residents' dignity and confidence.

The constant sense of humiliation, helplessness, wealth inequities, and social exclusion often prompts a desire to confront the system in order to reverse power relations (Lindner, 2003; Peters, 2012). In other words, when subjugated individuals redefine their condition as structural violence, they tend to protest their situation with more violence, and in some cases, extreme violence (Lindner, 2003, p. 2). In a written statement, 17-year-old Gustavo from Comuna 13 explained that young people in his community only think of arms, and aspire of becoming *guerrilleros* or guerrilla fighters so they can become 'someone in life' or hold a meaningful position in society and earn the respect of others.

16-year-old Cali dweller, Cristhian, further depicted the fight for power in his community through imposing territorial restrictions referred to as 'invisible frontiers':

Basically, what I could say about 'invisible frontiers' is the following; there are spaces where young people from distinct sectors dispute over micro-trafficking. That is one of the main causes to this problem, but also, these same youth have

faced issues with each other before, or rivalries from school or childhood in this own neighbourhood. They come all this way and what they do is take revenge basically if you want to call it that way. And the way they do it is through conflicts and even to take the opponent's life away. On the other hand, micro-trafficking is what has been fuelling the invisible frontiers, mostly drugs that they use to attract the most vulnerable youth, especially those with problems at home, lack of affection. They start stimulating them to buy arms, motorcycles and everything that they cannot find in their homes on the material and affectionate level. So they look for strategic ways like that. Also, those who live in areas like Potrero Grande are conflictive youth from other places who were displaced, and they want to keep controlling the area where they live as they used to, and be in charge of the drug trafficking and other illegal activities. These are the main reasons why invisible frontiers exist here, on top of the other factors such as lack of employment, opportunities, education, and everything else. These characteristics always come up when you ask a youth who is involved directly or indirectly in the armed conflict.

Cristhian made the link between violence experienced within households and that perpetrated in his neighbourhood. Violence stems from the home and is an indicator of collective violence that has become legitimised and 'routinised'. This violence is no longer considered a societal issue (Lindner, 2003, p. 99), in the same manner violence in the public sphere has become normalised.

In their depiction of symbolic violence, Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc Wacquant (1992) argued that social agents accept the world as is without any objectivity and find the order of structures as natural because their minds develop within those social structures—a phenomenon believed to be the very foundation of domination. Young people, especially young men, feel a strong desire for domination, mostly outside their homes since they cannot control their own lives given the high levels of insecurity, poor or non-existent opportunities, violence experienced both at home and in their neighbourhoods, and lack of power over the right 'to decide life or death' (Foucault, 1978, p. 135). This is where the private and public spheres intertwine, with intra-family violence practiced as 'social power', generating other types of violence, and violence outside the home as a causal factor of domestic violence (Moser & McIlwaine, 2004, p. 100).

In the same way that young people fulfill the need for control outside their homes and have a tendency to reproduce the violence experienced in their households, Cristhian explained that young people are lured into armed groups and gangs by addressing their deficits in affection and dignity—what they cannot obtain at home.

Young people from poor neighbourhoods experiencing daily marginalisation feel more valuable and powerful with material goods usually only accessible to the economic and social elite.

On the other hand, the need to control and negotiate identities also stems from other causal factors of war such as forced displacement. Poor areas in the peripheries of cities such as Cali and Medellín are often the primary hosts to large numbers of displaced populations from neighbouring regions. Having lost or left behind all or most of their material belongings, displaced people in my study often expressed that the most valuable properties they no longer possessed were their dignity and self-esteem. Cristhian explained that young displaced Colombians often get involved in criminal undertakings in his neighbourhood of Potrero Grande and seek control over the territory and its activities in the same manner they used to on their own land. The increase in population caused by displaced settlers in already overcrowded communities such as Potrero Grande exacerbates the poor economy and the high levels of violence, affecting both fear and security. In the next subsection, I examine the gendered dimensions of insecurity as cross-sectional to all categories of violence.

1.3. Gendered Experiences of Insecurity

Caroline Moser stated that, 'violence and conflict are both gendered activities' (2001, p. 30), stressing that gender is present not only in social violence, but also in economic and political violence positioning women and men as both perpetrators and victims. More importantly, gender cuts across all levels of motives of violence and shapes men and women's experiences of violence. While both matrifocal and patrifocal societies in Colombia co-exist (Aptekar, 1998) (Chapter III; section 1.2), the country remains largely patriarchal with significant machismo, gender-based violence and discrimination. Sexual violence has been a widespread yet silenced practice that has enjoyed the highest levels of impunity. Cases of domestic physical violence and acid attacks have also been on the rise according to community leaders I interviewed in both Cali and Medellín. The two main fears expressed by young girls in Potrero Grande and Comuna 13, were sexual violence and prostitution, in addition to the insecurity and uncertainties all residents were subject to.

Yuli, a 15-year-old from Potrero Grande, discussed her fear of sexual violence: “Violence affects me because there are many young rapists now, and many of the girls already with children, not thinking about education and moving forward in life, they stay in a corner doing drugs”. Gender is rooted in power relations and linked to male authority and dominance (McIlwaine & Moser, 2001). Caroline Moser stressed the interrelationship and gendered nature of different types of violence and their causes at the structural, institutional, interpersonal, and individual levels. She explained that male gang violence is correlated to the interaction between low self-esteem, a desire for power-asserting male dominance, dysfunctional families, peer pressure, lack of educational and employment opportunities, and patriarchal ideologies. Furthermore, their needs to nurture their households and obtain early independence also play an important role in their decision-making (Aptekar, 1993; Hecht, 1998) (Chapter III, section 1.1).

12-year-old Lizet from the same community expressed her fear of abuse by gangs in her neighbourhood:

I am afraid because there are many problems because I can not move freely through my neighbourhood because of the invisible borders, the powerful ones pick the prettiest girls and often, they are taken away from their families and into prostitution.

Adult prostitution is legal in designated tolerance zones in Colombia, but the enforcement of, and restriction to the zones remains difficult. Prostitution, including that of minors, is prevalent across the country and aggravated by poverty, violence, and internal displacement. Sex trafficking of women remains a major issue in Colombia and one of the most lucrative industries, often operated by illegal armed groups (U.S. Department of State, 2009; Nagle, 2013). Jessica, a 15-year-old participant from Potrero Grande, explains below the prostitution phenomenon in her neighbourhood and its relationship to other causal factors:

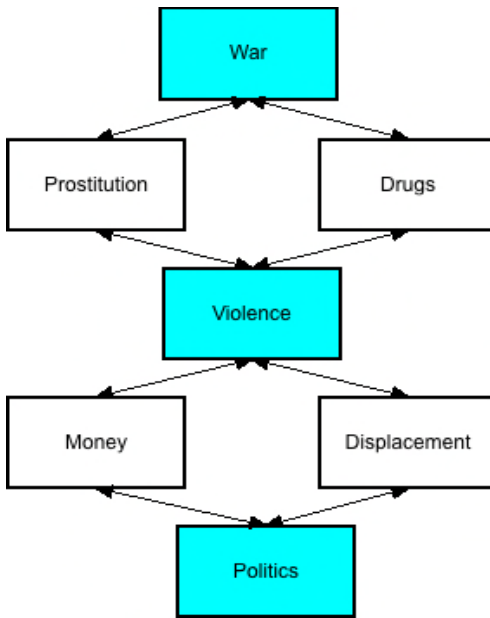


Figure 1: Translation of Jessica's Illustration. Original found in Appendix A, Figure 4A.

Jessica perceived a link between prostitution and drugs, as often, the infrastructure used for smuggling drugs by insurgent groups across borders is also used to smuggle other commodities, including women (Moser & Clark, 2001). The perpetuity of the Colombian conflict is essentially due to the endless emergence of illegal armed groups uniting with former opponents to fighting state forces and for mutual illicit benefits, including human trafficking and prostitution (Moser & Clark, 2001). The largest brothels in coastal and border cities are run by drug cartels, illegal armed groups including paramilitaries, and BACRIMs (Moser & Clark, 2001).

Similarly to her fellow participants, Jessica blamed politicians for the war and on-going violence in her country, reflecting on the institutional mistrust prevalent in poor and deprived communities. She positioned her vision of three pillars of the issues in her country as war, violence, and politics, which in turn give rise to money and forced displacement, and prostitution and drug trafficking. Jessica illustrated the interrelationships between different causal factors of violence in a very similar manner Caroline Moser and Catherine McIlwaine argued (2004). Jessica showed that war creates contexts of prostitution and drug trafficking, which in turn exacerbate the war, causing further violence. She related the quest for money and forced displacement to

both violence and politics, supporting one of her fellow participant's claim that 'war is the easiest way to make money'.

The data from Comuna 13 confirmed the presence of gender inequality, power relations, sexual abuse, institutional mistrust, and prostitution. In a poster illustration made by young participants of Comuna 13 (Figure 5A), a link was made between customary images of women in the media, specifically in *telenovelas* or soap operas, and the representation of women in their community. In the centre of the poster, children placed an image of a man holding a bag of money and drew arrows connecting it to all of the issues they illustrated in the collage. Some of those included the link between excess money, soap operas, television hostesses, and pornography. Once more, children saw greed and power as the responsible actors for many of the issues they were subject to in their communities.

In the oral presentation of their work, youth participants explained the link between the increasing culture of plastic surgery, highly common in Medellín, and the deep-rooted drug cartels in the city. Drug lords often recruit young attractive women in poverty for their own sexual satisfaction and accompaniment, funding their many surgical procedures to achieve the desired aesthetics. The city of Medellín has also long been reputed to host some of the most physically appealing women in the country. The continuing unattainable beauty standards have pushed many young girls into prostitution, pornography, drug trafficking (often used as 'mules'¹⁸), and being trafficked within the country or across borders for sexual exploitation to acquire the means for plastic surgery. The poster illustration depicts gender symbols interlaced with a question mark next to a drawn image of an arm, connecting gender power dynamics and male dominance to the violence, in the same portrayal as Jessica's diagram.

Generally, boys participated more actively in my study than girls in both Cali and Medellín, and cases of sexual abuse were not often mentioned even if they did occur. Girls engaged in conversations about their neighbourhoods and shared their perspectives of the daily uncertainties and experiences with violence in an indirect

¹⁸ A drug mule is defined as a person who smuggles illegal drugs across borders by concealing them in a body cavity.

manner without delving into the violence occurring in their private spheres. The few personal stories and perceptions that were shared with me were done privately or in written statements but kept anonymous. In some instances, participants spoke in the third person to relate a personal story to protect themselves and possibly to hide a related feeling of shame. For example, the community leader who was assisting me with the workshops in Comuna 13 gave me the following written statement mentioning that the author decided to remain unidentified:

This story should never be repeated!

In a place far removed from our department, lived a humble, hard-working, happy family committed to their daily work. The household was made of the father, mother, and two daughters whom they dearly loved with tenderness and understanding. Her parents always lived working so nothing would go missing at home. The older girl of just ten years of age, one day stayed home alone because her parents had still not come back from working their land. When least expected arrived an evil, terrible, aggressive, vulgar man who abused that girl. The girl in the midst of tears, fright, fear, cried out for help, but in the middle of the thick jungle, no one could provide any help. The girl sadly suffered not telling anyone what had happened, because the man had threatened with her life and that of her family.

Three months passed by and the girl was no longer able to stand the suffering and told her mother. Through tears and pain, the mother took courage and strength and travelled to the nearest village to report the case. But the worst had yet to come as she found out that the girl was pregnant from the man who had abused her. Things went worsening in the family, until the Colombian Institute of Family Wellbeing took over the case and processed the legal aspect of it so the girl would not have to go through with the pregnancy.

All change at the end, but the saddest thing is that state agencies like the police, prosecution, etc. They know the case and do nothing to retain the guilty and prevent other victims from falling.

Finally, the family moved to Medellín to avoid any risk of anything bad happening and running away from the death threats, and punishment of the rest of the village. The family smiled again, but we must fight so that this story does not repeat itself, and that justice is done.

The End.

Given the failure of government authorities to establish prevention and protection systems for victims of sexual abuse, most cases go unreported. Moreover, the high impunity prevalent in Colombia, especially for sexual assault, demonstrates the lack of acknowledgement of this issue by authorities and the rest of society as a serious criminal offence that needs to be prosecuted. According to a study carried out by ABColombia (2013), less than 18 per cent of cases of sexual abuse against women in Colombia between the years of 2001 to 2009 were reported, of which two in 100 were prosecuted, leading to an impunity rate of 98 per cent. Furthermore, apart from the

obstacles in accessing services and seeking justice faced by victims of gender-based violence in Colombia, as narrated in the story above, displaced women and girls face even greater barriers as they become more vulnerable to further sexual violence, prostitution, and human trafficking (Nagle, 2013).

In addition to the widespread phenomena of sexual exploitation and abuse in Colombia, especially in poor urban settings and 'red zones' in rural regions, girls also expressed other fears equally affecting boys in their community. Ariana, a 14-year-old girl from Comuna 13 explained how the continuing conflict in Colombia had been affecting her:

The conflict has affected me and my family because where I live, there is a lot of violence. They kill a lot of people, they treat us as if we were puppets, they recruit many young people, they displace many families from their homes or farms, and they also rape girls.

In a group discussion on dynamics in Comuna 13, children argued that although girls and women did not necessarily carry arms within the gangs, they often attracted young recruits by seducing them. They also noted that many of the girls entered prostitution through the gangs and were subdued by psychological and physical violence, even those who were pursuing their studies. Finally, they explained that gang members drugged young girls to get them addicted to the chemicals, often kidnapping them and forcing them into prostitution. Once addicted and prostituted, girls belonged to the *cerebro* or brain, the person heading the criminal organisation and to whom they owed their lives.

While the economic and social consequences of violence are a burden for all members of society, they have gender-specific implications as evidenced through my data. At the same time, gender-based violence is exacerbated by the armed conflict; its causal factors include the failure of the state to serve and protect its citizens and the lack of opportunities available to young people in poor urban dwellings. Aside from all the variables intensifying violence both in and outside the household, the adversities added by the context of forced displacement are an additional factor to the existing lack of safety. In the next section, I study children's experiences of forced displacement, both in their personal lives and through those of their neighbours.

1.4. Forced Displacement

Many of the youth participants from the communities in Medellín and Cali had experienced internal displacement directly or indirectly. As stated in the literature section in Chapter III, Colombia ranks among the five countries with the largest number of internally displaced people worldwide, surpassing six million (Bilak et al., 2016). Large cities, such as Cali and Medellín, are the principal hosts of the increasing number of people fleeing violence, who often settle in the outskirts where the cost of living is more affordable. Medellín was essentially classified as the city with the highest number of displaced people (Sánchez Mojica, 2013), a relatively new phenomenon known as intra-urban displacement, which will be discussed in this section.

As forcibly displaced people face life-threatening consequences if their identities were to be revealed, I took careful provisions when elaborating on this issue with my participants. Generally, as was the case for other personal matters, children either communicated their perspectives and stories of displacement using the third person narrative, freeing themselves from any possible recognition, or they chose to speak with me privately. The subject of displacement was a common one among young participants given its magnitude across the country.

In Potrero Grande, young residents explained that the district of Aguablanca was mainly a place of transit for many of its new residents forcibly displaced from other parts of the country. These new residents came mainly from the Pacific coast and the deeply war-affected neighbouring department of El Cauca. Many of them were hoping to find a more permanent refuge or were waiting for the conflict to lessen so they could return to their homeland. However, most of them were doomed to stay and establish themselves in Aguablanca.

In an already overly populated neighbourhood with very few opportunities for employment and education, internally displaced people were not welcomed and were continuously discriminated against. Some of the displaced families I interviewed revealed that their children were not allowed in classrooms, with the excuses of having lower educational levels than their peers and over-crowded classrooms. The social workers from Casa Francisco Esperanza clarified that some of the IDPs were recent settlers in Potrero Grande, whereas most had arrived many years ago, and although

some of the children were second-generation residents, they remained victims of continuous discrimination added to the existing stigma associated with the neighbourhood. As they are considered to be the state's responsibility, they are often targeted and subjected to persecution and harassment.

Current residents developed fear toward the IDPs, further alienating the recent migrants. In return, the IDPs shared the mutual emotional response, inhibiting and decelerating the process of integration and building trust in the community. The structural factors underlying the violence related to forced displacement, combined with the emotional response from displacement, reinforce the existing structural violence and increase IDPs' susceptibility to exploitation and further displacement.

One of the recent cases of forced displacement in Potrero Grande was a family that had arrived from the department of El Cauca where they used to farm their lands over many generations. They were from the Indigenous group, Páez-Nasas. Given their delicate situation, they requested anonymity. One of their two children, a girl of nine years of age, described her perception of war and her unfortunate experience in a collage (Figure 6A, Appendix A): 'War: there were lots of deaths because of the guerrilla. They took away our loved ones. We had to leave displaced leaving our lands'.

Aside from cultural differences that can often create tensions among community members from different ethnic backgrounds, displaced people from rural regions encounter many difficulties adjusting to an urban context, especially when it comes to employment. As former farmers, their skills are hardly adaptable to the work force requirements in the city, especially in marginalised districts such as Aguablanca with very limited employment opportunities.

The flat landscape of Aguablanca was also not attractive to most displaced Indigenous people of El Cauca, a mountainous region of the country. Aguablanca mostly received displaced people from the Pacific coast of Colombia with flat terrains and access to water channels, therefore making the Páez-Nasa family an exception. Furthermore, communication can also become a barrier as Indigenous people have their own languages and more often than not, are not fluent in Spanish. For children assimilating

into a foreign culture, neighbourhood, and educational system, the transition can become difficult, delaying a sense of belonging.

Finally, the family confessed that they were waiting for support from the government with their displaced status and hoped to return to their home as soon as possible. They feared slowly losing their cultural identity and ancestral lands and they worried that their children would become corrupted by the delinquency in Aguablanca. The extreme hardships and pain associated with forcibly leaving their belongings and culture behind and having to settle in an unwelcoming environment lead to further division in the community—with several factors such as different ethnic, racial and regional backgrounds, stigma associated with displaced communities, added poverty, and over-population weaken an already fragile social fabric.

Although historically, the large masses of displaced people arriving in urban settings had fled violence in their rural homelands, the new trend of forced displacement was becoming intra-urban. Medellín seemed to be at a greater disadvantage with this increasing recent phenomenon compared to Cali. The number of BACRIMs cropping up in the city's deprived communities intensified the terror, leading to mass displacement between neighbourhoods. Intra-urban displaced people faced similar dilemmas to those coming from further away. Both groups lost their properties and belongings, broke their social bonds, and were living in constant fear and insecurity. Liceth, an 11-year-old participant in Comuna 13, recounted the unfortunate fate of her uncle and his family who had been recently displaced after having received numerous death threats by a notorious BACRIM:

It was very painful to leave the house that they had been able to buy after many many years of hard work and only lived there for five years. It was also very hard to leave their pets, especially their puppies, one white and one coffee-coloured that they couldn't take with them. We had to quickly say goodbye to them in the middle of the night as they were leaving really early in the morning before the sunrise. My uncle had received a visit from the head of a combo a few weeks back asking him to give him the house because it was a really good location for the group. But my uncle did not want to give him the house after having worked so hard for it. So on Saturday night, they waited until he came back home and cornered him threatening him to death together with his family because the time that he had to do the necessary had expired.

In reiterating her witnessed experience of the forced displacement of her neighbours, Liceth made reference to the pets they had to leave behind. When their lives are

disrupted by a crisis, young children may express themselves in a different manner than adults, putting what they can trust and control into perspective. Here, Liceth channelled her emotions into what was important to her, in this case animals, possibly to help her feel more in control, build a stronger self connection, and as a means to maintain as much continuity and normalcy as possible. Routine activities, classes, after-school activities, and friends are generally disrupted comforts in contexts of war that can help children feel more secure and better able to cope with adversities.

While mass displacement was becoming increasingly common in Comuna 13, the community leader of Casa AMI explained to me that children were actually the most affected by forced recruitment by the BACRIMs or any of the insurgent groups. Unfortunately, displacement caused by BACRIMs is not recognised by the Colombian government, therefore its victims do not acquire IDP status or receive any state assistance, and less so when they are children who are often associated with delinquent groups. As a consequence, they cannot access relief and protection programs.

Cali remains one of the cities with the highest number of displaced people, especially given its proximity to the city of Buenaventura within the department of Valle del Cauca. According to updates from Human Rights Watch (2015), Buenaventura has the highest rate of forced displacement in Colombia. With alarming numbers of incoming IDPs and the growing creation of *invasiones* or 'illegal settlements' in Cali, the city's communes have suffered from greater structural, economic, and social uncertainties keeping its residents in a prolonged state of limbo. These conditions, together with more pronounced racial discrimination than its Medellín counterpart, have inhibited the fostering of trust among its dwellers, a sense of belonging, and strengthening of its social fabric as one community leader explained.

Displaced individuals lose the bonds they have created over many years with their community and their extended families, as they are uprooted from their place of origin and separated from all that is familiar. Aside from their material losses, IDPs are left with fractured cultural and social identities, and kinships and social fabrics, as they experience abrupt changes and new challenges in their host localities. Displaced people face the cessation of stable work relationships, educational opportunities, access to food, and adequate shelter and health services. They also become more vulnerable to

acts of violence including sexual abuse, forced disappearances, re-displacement, and recruitment into armed groups.

Aside from these more immediate consequences, forced displacement erodes social and cultural community ties, leading to the breakdown of trust among residents and the deterioration of the neighbourhood's social fabric. At the same time, there is significant mistrust toward the state and the elite as a result of the pervasive corruption of government officials and the lack of services provided to citizens. Young people experience exclusion, stigmatised both by the negative construct of youth and that of their neighbourhood, which is a topic I further elaborate on in the subsequent section.

2. Corruption, Stigmatisation and Exclusion

2.1. Institutional Mistrust

As shown across my data from both Cali and Medellín, state authorities were the main entity held accountable by participants for the increasing violence, its underlying structural factors, and responsible for the social issues present in those communities. On the one hand, the lack of a state presence in low-income communities deprives its residents of basic services, adequate housing, safety and protection, and opportunities to grow and lead a balanced and dignified life. On the other hand, when the government makes an appearance in the poor neighbourhoods most affected by the on-going armed conflict, it is generally not positive, as was the case in the invasion of Comuna 13 in Medellín under Operation Orion and the continuous police abuse experienced by many of Aguablanca's youth. The mistrust and rebellion engendered by the government pushes marginalised citizens, especially youngsters, to seek (often illicit) alternative opportunities, in order to survive and thrive.

As shown in Figure 7A produced by 14-year-old Diego from Cali, there is a great mistrust of the national government, the national army, and police; children perceive the state as the perpetrator and the cause of the conflict in Colombia. In the illustration, war is written on the top left corner with a drawing and label of a politician below. Two arrows branch off from the politician to the statement: 'Politicians help narco-trafficking', with a relatively large drawing of a banknote with the word 'money' below it. The child then

introduced 'My neighbourhood' below, branching off into 'problems' on one side and 'drug' on the other side, illustrated by a drawing of different drug products and a user. At the bottom of the artwork, the child drew a killing scene with diverse weapons labelled as 'arms'.

The drawing clearly illustrates that the child made the link between the state and narco-trafficking, which in turn fuels the conflict and violence in his neighbourhood, as also explained by him in a private discussion. Diego stated that the police patrolling the area are often accomplices of the drug traffickers and often linked to the BACRIM groups. As the drug trade was decentralised from the hands of the notorious drug cartels of Cali and Medellín in the 1990s, a larger number of smaller groups now have control over the industry (Livingstone, 2003), mainly in the peripheries of urban settings. However, the drug trafficking network is still operated at the macro-level by influential tycoons who have partnerships with Colombian and American governmental institutions (Livingstone, 2003).

In a video produced by Cesar in Aguablanca titled, 'Stories Behind the Promise', the mistrust in the government was repeatedly relayed by the residents through a 'broken promise' for a better life in settling that community. Most of the district of Aguablanca was developed through an illegal urbanisation process that benefited many corrupt government officials and drug cartels through money laundering. The lack of proper city planning meant that the development was carried out without any assignment or provision of public services (cali.gov). Much of Aguablanca has been populated over the years by squatters, especially with the intensification of the conflict on the Pacific coast, and has been established with 'subnormal' settlements (Hamilton et al., 2011, p. 17). 57 per cent of the Aguablanca population is indigenous to Cali while the remainder migrated from the Pacific (Livingstone, 2003).

In his film production, Cesar asked the residents of the community what promises were made to them by the government to bring them to Potrero Grande. Cesar explained to me that many residents refused to appear on camera and those who did opted to leave out their personal details. The participants, as can be seen in video, vary in age and gender, however most are adolescents:

Adolescent boy: 'They promise us, well, a better life, no conflict, that there will be no more robberies, we would have homes'.

Man: 'They never told us that these houses were.... repossessed; but that we arrived through relocation; leaving where we lived close to the river. We came from an at-risk area; but we were never told there [that the houses had been repossessed], because we were fooled'.

Woman: 'Well, we were promised that the interest charged on the houses would not increase; that our standard of living was going to change'.

Adolescent girl: 'The houses that they promised, they never gave them; the houses are not dignity-enabling to live in; some homes have four to five families living in them; only one room...there's no privacy; there's nothing'.

Adolescent girl: 'First of all, they told us that we were being relocated to improve our lives, to improve our homes, that they were taking us to homes where we would have rooms, a living room, bathroom, kitchen, that it will be big here, mostly to improve our quality of life. When we got here, we found a small house where there was no room. There were families of five to 10 people who had to return to where they came from because they could not fit in the house'.

Residents of Potrero Grande arrived in their new settlement fleeing insecurity and rising violence; they sought a better life based on promises made by the local government for a safe community and improved living conditions. *El País*, the renowned newspaper, reported that the repossession of homes is a very lucrative industry involving judges, lawyers, and 'auction cartels' as they are called in Cali (Unidad Investigativa, 2009). The news source references many cases of residents of poor districts, such as Aguablanca, who lost their homes despite making their mortgage payments—judges often favour the bank and grant the 'auction cartels' the authority to repossess their homes and put them for sale on the market. The lack of work opportunities, together with an increase in interests for borrowed loans, makes it very difficult for residents to maintain their homes.

As is the case for many poor households, a large number of people live under the same roof to make ends meet. The lack of privacy and space can often lead to incidences of violence and abuse, both physical and sexual (Barbarin et. al, 2001). When children and adults share a limited living space, especially sleeping areas, cases of incest can occur among relatives or stepparents (Worling, 1995). Many of the cases of children and youth whom I interviewed during my research had left home at an early age due to physical and sexual abuse by a parent or stepparent.

The failure to provide adequate basic services to citizens and to keep the promises made during electoral campaigns only form a minor part of the widely embedded corruption of the Colombian government. The country's long history of political exclusion imposed by the state, aggravated by civilian abuses by the army and police, and the high levels of impunity, use of terror against the local population, forced disappearances, extortion, and the proliferation of arms, created further national mistrust and a culture of individualism. In Comuna 13, 17-year-old Daniela held the state accountable for the war in her country:

I believe the person responsible for the conflict in Colombia is the government who keeps giving arms to the guerrilla so they can keep fighting killing more people, and at the same time work with the paramilitaries. War is a big money-making industry and those at the top become richer every day.

Daniela brought up the government's partnership with paramilitary groups, often referred to as *parapolitica* or para-politics, an association that continues to cause tragedies across the country, including massacres, systematic rape, child recruitment, human trafficking, and forced displacement among countless others. Similarly to many of her peers, Daniela characterised the state as the 'assassins' responsible for the atrocities occurring on a daily basis. In Jorge's words in Cali, 'how can we expect the government to protect us when it is them who kills us? They want us dead while they continue to become richer.'

A system rooted in inequality persists in Colombia, which was at the very core of the conflict that emerged many decades ago. Clearly defined class structures determine who will receive better education, access to loans, employment, safety, and impunity, while others remained marginalised, socially, politically and economically excluded, face higher crime, higher unemployment and less opportunity. I will describe the issues of employment and education in greater detail in the next subsection.

2.2. Employment and Education

Aside from inadequate housing and lack of basic services necessary for healthy living conditions, high unemployment rates, poverty, poor educational levels, racial discrimination, stigmatisation, and marginalisation are only some of the structural causes that lead to the increasing violence in both communities of Comuna 13 and Aguablanca (Chapter IV, Section 1). The accumulation of daily uncertainties and a dubious future

affects individuals in adopting a defensive position toward an inequitable power structure by taking part in different forms of violence (Moser & McIlwaine, 2004). Across my data, the lack of opportunities for employment and education was the main cause of the continuing armed conflict as perceived by the young participants in both locations of Comuna 13 and Aguablanca. In Aguablanca, 17-year-old Jerry stressed the consequences of the lack of work accessible to young people in his community:

Violence here in Aguablanca is generated by lack of education and jobs for young people but mostly because of the lack of work. Because of that, youth look for ways to make easy money and when they do not see any solutions to their problems, they join outlawed groups, guerrilla, Aguilas Negras, Rastrojos, among others.

Although it has been shown that the interconnection between poverty, unemployment, and lack of education is the root cause of economic violence in Colombia (Moser & McIlwaine, 2004), unemployment rather than poverty was given precedence by the young participants in my research.

Jerry explains that young people join a violent group as a way out of their problems and increasing poverty when they are unable to find any other alternatives. He raises the notion of 'easy money', a term often used in Colombia referring to illegal industries where large sums of money are made available upon completion of a task, in most cases in drug trafficking and in *sicariato* or hitman 'career'.

The economic recession in Medellín and Cali that followed the fall of the major drug cartels in the 1990s is perceived as a major cause of violence and insecurity as it led to a high unemployment rate throughout the country but retained the culture of easy money. Diego also made the same link between the quests for money, problems regarding lack of employment, and violence in his neighbourhood of Aguablanca (Figure 7A). He showed the dynamics at the top of the Colombian hierarchical society, connecting politicians to money and the drug industry in a similar manner as his fellow participants, demonstrating his country's deeply rooted economic and social inequality.

On the other hand and below the elite group, Diego illustrated his neighbourhood with its main characteristics of unemployment and poverty that he labelled as 'problems', the easy money making drug industry together with the consumption of drugs as a way of dealing with the frustration and despair, the eruption of violence between young people,

and the proliferation of arms. He placed the privileged and powerful at the top of his drawing and his neighbourhood at the bottom, characterising it with all of its negative aspects to demonstrate the social, political, and economic marginalisation and exclusion of the residents of Aguablanca.

Exclusion, poverty, and lack of access to opportunities are also prevalent in Comuna 13. Daniela made the connection between youth's involvement in violence and the non-existent access to education and extracurricular activities in the arts and sports:

Here in my neighbourhood, very few people have access to university, and none of us here have siblings who went to university. There is no public access to participate in a sport, no access to culture, theatre, you have to pay for everything, even your health. These all lead our youth to be involved in violence.

According to their research in Colombia, Caroline Moser and Catherine McIlwaine (2004) stressed that in Medellín, violence and criminal activities were considered by its residents as the last recourse as part of their survival schemes. The unemployment rate in Medellín during the recession, especially in the most critical year in 1999, was the highest in the country, reaching 22.6 per cent (DANE, 1999). However, the economic crisis also greatly affected the construction industries in Cali and Medellín with the fall of the major drug cartels (DANE, 1999), as money was often laundered through infrastructure investment. In Cali in particular, the increase in unemployment also meant a higher number of recruits in the left-wing guerrilla groups (DANE, 1999).

Joining a militia as a way out of poverty is not however exclusive to Cali, as it is a well-known strategy of young Colombians throughout the country. In my interviews with the Colombian Institute of Family Wellbeing in Cali, the social worker stated that the Colombian national army was the highest recruiter in the country, one of the main reasons why peace would not be profitable for the government, as many youth would be left without employment. When sharing their aspirations for the future, many of the young participants in both Cali and Medellín aspired to be 'professional soldiers'.

The Colombian Ombudsman (2015) published a recent report about the percentage of soldiers according to their social background, classified into strata 0 to 6 with the latter being the wealthiest (Colombian Ombudsman, 2015). The study shows that between 2008 and 2012, 80 per cent of soldiers in the military pertained to strata zero, one and two, demonstrating the correlation between poverty and recruitment into armed forces,

both state and non-state groups. As the following saying is often heard in Colombia: 'The rich ask for war; the poor provide the dead.'

Additionally, Aguablanca faces yet another dilemma that surrenders its young residents to further discrimination and stigmatisation; Afro-Colombians constitute close to 50 per cent of its population and 40 per cent of Cali's Afro-Colombian population (Moncada, 2009). Cali has the largest urban population of African descent with over 12 per cent of the country's Afro-Colombian population (Barbary et. al., 1999). As the result of social disenfranchisement, young Afro-descendants of Aguablanca feel powerless and impotent and often resort to acts of violence to earn social status, respect, attention, and self-esteem (Atehortua et al., 1998; Machado & Ocoro, 2004).

Furthermore, Eduardo Moncada (2009) noted in his study of violence and race in Colombia that young Afro-descendants in Aguablanca are nervous to leave their neighbourhoods because they are often associated with crime by non-Blacks. Young dwellers of Aguablanca are not desirable candidates for employment, even when and if they are able to find a work opportunity.

Although restricted in terms of possibilities, many young dwellers of Aguablanca see in education the solution to the many problems in their community. In his film, Cesar asked young people about proposals beneficial to their community. One adolescent girl responded: 'Offer pedagogic educational proposals, recreation proposals so young people can loose fear and fly with their imagination'

However important access to quality education may be, unless it is able to offer feasible employment prospects, it will not tackle the causes of economic and social violence. Young people find few incentives in educational institutions that are already underfunded and rather opt for illegal activities or joining an armed group as their only employment opportunity. They do not make the connection between acquiring education, especially given the traditional dogmatic pedagogy used in schools, and the possibilities it may lead to afterward in terms of employment, economic growth, and most importantly, a way out of their current living situation. Undeniably, lack of resources and economic opportunities leads to higher creativity in young people in their 'hustling' strategies for higher compensated illegal undertakings (Rubio, 1998).

On the other hand, attending school does not instil in many at-risk youth the confidence they need to face and overcome the daily adversities of their neighbourhood. This is especially true for boys who were shown to have a lower attendance in classrooms than girls, according to my interviews with teachers and community leaders in Aguablanca and Comuna 13. Many adolescent boys, especially in Aguablanca, appeared to be illiterate and opted for visual methods during the course of the workshop, feeling ashamed of their educational handicap.

Aside from very poor quality education, public schools in poor areas are under-resourced and offer limited enrolment for its young residents, especially if they are struggling academically. Moreover, the time necessary for studying often needs to be invested in working to be able to make ends meet. As many households in poor neighbourhoods are led by single mothers, boys often take the position of the male figure in the family at a very young age, which often disrupts their studies if they did indeed continue their education past primary school. Finally, taking on the role of the breadwinner reaffirms their masculinity as opposed to attending school. With money in their pockets, young adolescents can also have access not just to more material goods, such as better clothing or even a motorcycle, but they also often take pride in many women.

In the following subsection, I will discuss the stigmatisation of youth given their acquired negative image and the neighbourhood they live in, which leads to their further exclusion on social, political, and economic grounds.

3. A Negative Image of Youth

In addition to the scarcity of employment opportunities available to young dwellers of Potrero Grande and Comuna 13, they also endured further exclusion based on where they are from and the constructed negative image of youth by the media, which are two interchangeable phenomena. The potentially dangerous results of media content and comments made by prominent leaders in the country on the young poor cannot be underestimated, as once such accusations are made—and repeated as ‘truths’ by the Colombian media—the lives of those accused are put in grave danger.

Soledad, the community leader of Casa AMI in Comuna 13 explained that often, death threats against those singled out followed and in many cases people had actually been assassinated by the national army, or insurgent groups following their labelling as a 'guerrilla', 'criminal', or 'terrorist' by senior officials:

The negative image of our youth persists in the current situation in Comuna 13 for its high rates of homicides where young people perish on a daily basis. Just because they look different, they are labelled as criminals. And just because they live in this barrio, they are considered criminals, guerrillas, paramilitaries, enough to die in the hands of the military as often happens now. And often happened during Orión¹⁹.

In Potrero Grande, one young male opting for anonymity described the extent of the harm caused by the negative portrayal of Aguablanca: 'When we put our address on the job application, we are not even considered'. Young residents of Aguablanca, as is often the case for those living in urban peripheries throughout the country, are not desirable candidates because they represent poverty, delinquency, and in most cases, a non-European appearance that is highly desired by the elite. The discrimination youth of Aguablanca experienced, based on the area's destructive reputation, is also shared by participants in *Stories Behind the Promise*.

Woman: 'So if youth who leave here look for employment, only knowing that they live in Potrero Grande, they don't give them a job, for youth as well as women. So we are always discriminated against'.

Adolescent girl: 'Well, we are often rejected because we live here. So many of the youth who are here need quality of life and find a way to continue working, but they can't because they are rejected just because the mere fact of living here, you are excluded. There's also no good education, and even when older they always exclude us'.

Stereotypes of violence and delinquency reinforce social exclusion, which in turn fosters violence and insecurity. Moreover, social exclusion also involves other forms of marginalisation, where one reinforces the other. Such is the case of economic exclusion that makes it far more difficult to advance in education, and vice-versa. Additionally, and as discussed in Section 2.2, poor urban youth face stigmatisation but also a lack of work and educational opportunities, which is the main impediment for them to progress further. The continual stigmatisation of a community not only damages the relationship

¹⁹ Operación Orión was the largest military operation launched in Comuna 13 in 2002 to fight insurgent groups present in the neighbourhood. However, the operation caused the forced disappearances of many and killed hundreds of innocent young civilians (Verdad Abierta, 2012).

between urban residents by creating and maintaining a negative image, but also sustains and even widens the social, political, and economic inequality.

Furthermore, youngsters in my study in both cities conveyed their need for ample experimentation with their identities and how they saw themselves in the future, rather than having it constructed by the rest of society, especially the media. They expressed their deep frustration that their sense of self was not in their own hands but mainly manufactured and consumed by outside audiences, destroying any prospect for growth and an improved livelihood:

Adolescent girl: 'We can say that the society in which we live is very corrupt and youth somehow don't have the necessary opportunity to move forward or we are simply discriminated against because we live in a sector like this one because nothing positive is ever reflected (in the news), always the negative. The bad, and always that'.

The media continues to portray young people as the greatest perpetrators of the growing violence in Colombia. Youth, especially of African descent, are seen as menaces to society and politically disruptive, further marginalising them. While young men are both victims and perpetrators of the region's crime, it is mainly due to exclusion from the economy.

The transformative image of youth in Colombia dates from the 1980s with the proliferation of the drug industry. Drug cartels established themselves in poor *barrios* of major cities, especially Medellín and Cali, targeting young people who were faced by an increasing unemployment rate (Riaño-Alcalá, 2000). Narco-organisations built their infrastructures around existing *parches* and *combos*, young people's informal social networks, and made youth their allies for any of their required functions (Riaño-Alcalá, 2000). At the same time, guerrilla groups had long prevailed in urban, poor communities, spreading their political views and pursuing new young recruits to join their ranks (Ortiz Sarmiento, 1991). Young dwellers were presented with tempting opportunities for power, prestige, and economic growth within these two types of organisations. With the proliferation of youth gangs in the city's shantytowns, young people suddenly became the face of violence.

Today, youth are caught in a seemingly inescapable image and face higher levels of discrimination than the rest of society. Evidently, this phenomenon took place in areas where the state failed in providing basic services. In a group discussion in Potrero Grande, 17-year-old Daniel explained the relationship between the political exclusion of the community's youth and the on-going violence. He stressed how the lack of governmental services triggers the conditions for young residents to join violent activities:

If there were people who cared about us in the district, all of this violence would change. If there were work opportunities in the neighbourhood, less youth would be involved in activities that aren't good for them; all of this is because of a lack of employment. The neighbourhood would have a different reputation, and would mitigate the violence and everything would be different.

In Comuna 13, the negative portrayal of the community was also associated with the government's failure toward its citizens, once more accentuating the mistrust in state institutions. In his selected photo, 17-year-old Saul used a metaphor (Figure 8A) to illustrate the marginalisation of his community by the state and the negative image it gained:

I chose this because it seems very contradictory, the same sign says 'No Littering' and at the same time, it is part of a lot of garbage. A bit like our political system that keeps us at the bottom and makes us look like we are the bad guys where in fact, they are the creators of this whole mess.

At the same time, dwellers of Comuna 13 and Potrero Grande did not remain passive regarding the depiction of death and danger as synonymous with their communities. They are constantly struggling for a different image that would be more inclusive of their positive characteristics. Young people in my study in both cities continuously attempted to provide an antidote to such views in their narratives. 16-year-old resident of Potrero Grande, Alberto, supported the image of young people beyond violence. 'The neighbourhood is not just about violence, here there are youth who have culture, and who see themselves reflected here, who have aspirations and talents, and who want to move forward and grow', said Alberto.

In *Stories Behind the Promise*, community members relied heavily on the positive change that education could possibly create in transforming the identity of their *barrio* and create a stronger social fabric among its residents:

Young man: 'The result we would like is that this neighbourhood be recognised for its transformation, because after being known for its violence, that it has a new

identity as a neighbourhood of progress, of peaceful co-existence, of cultural enterprises’.

The same dynamics took place with residents of Comuna 13. In his photo (Figure 9A), Saul attempted to deconstruct the violent and destructive representation of the poor urban youth and deliver another version of a young man in his community:

I chose his photo, because this is from young people’s perspectives, what we want to show to the rest of the world. I am showing our talents, a youth who is taking a photograph, of what he wants others to see, and to show him thinking.

The community leader of Casa AMI shared that young people were striving for a change of community identity to highlight and celebrate the positive. ‘We are more than just violence and homicides, we are courage, bravery and dignity,’ she said. She explained that the improvement of the quality of life in their neighbourhood was obtained from the shift of ownership from the government of initiatives for growth designed for their communities. Rather than a military intervention undertaken by the state, as was the case of Operation Orion, she advocated for sustainable peace based on social, economic, and political inclusion of their young population. ‘This social acquisition was successful because of the social exercise of appropriation of what is ours and the empowerment of the territory’, she concluded.

In a group activity, Saul resisted his association as a violent perpetrator and envisions his future with hope and determination:

My Future: ‘In this period, my dreams open up that I am sure will become reality. I will be a great entrepreneur working and fighting to see my family prosper. I will work for my neighbourhood to see this erroneous image change that the media have been showing of us. I will become one of the best writers of Latin America and why not, of the world’.

Through his resilience, he persisted in defying the predestined violent fate of Comuna 13’s youth and surpassed the countless limitations imposed on him in a selected photograph (Figure 10A). He told me, ‘I chose this one. Why? Because it’s my true home. Because I’m a dreamer. So I live in the clouds thinking and dreaming of good things’. The strong desire to change the images of their communities and of themselves was prevalent among participants in both locations; they grew tired of the media always portraying negativity and sensationalising the violence they were facing. They wanted a more ‘ordinary’ or ‘simple’ life, as they would call it, with educational access, a *plan de vida* (life plan), and to ‘be someone in life’. Young people wanted to be recognised for

their strengths and talents, valued as equal citizens, and not generalised as delinquents merely because their environments had obliged them to negotiate daily violence and injustices.

Moreover, and as previously discussed, many young people are wrongly accused and disappeared by armed gangs, believing they belong to an opposing group; others are assassinated by government forces as false positives or tortured and imprisoned for being wrongly accused of working with a left-wing armed group. Finally, the perception of both Comuna 13 and Potrero Grande as synonyms of death, extreme violence, and delinquency, has led to an increasing level of stigmatisation, further pushing those youth into marginalisation, poverty, and violence.

As life tends to be quite volatile and short in high-risk areas, such as Comuna 13 and Aguablanca, residents live on a day-to-day basis and long-term goals are often discarded. Concrete proposals for employment following fast career training are often preferred to long-lasting educational objectives. As a result and which I discuss in the following section, many young people choose the track of easy-money, taking part in gangs and drug activities.

3. Poverty and Easy Money

3.1. Youth's Involvement in Gangs

Violence in Colombia has shifted from predominantly rural to urban, adopting new characteristics. One of them is the proliferation of gangs and predominantly of child *sicarios* or hitmen (Chapter V, Section 2). According to Colombian historian Gonzalo Sánchez G., *sicarios* are pawns of a kind of 'death industry' (2001, p. 7) that mark the expansion of urban violence. Neighbourhood militias, generally resulting from paramilitary groups, often contract child *sicarios* for many of their functions, predominantly to fulfil their acts of social cleansing.

In establishing a certain 'moral' order in society, social cleansing initiatives, often carried out with the support of the local police and influential individuals, entail the elimination of delinquents, prostitutes, beggars, and disrupters of 'common righteousness'. Given the

multi-layered and interconnected nature of violence in Colombia, it is quite common for these criminal groups to collaborate with each other and for young people to navigate between the different dynamics of urban violence.

In both of my workshops in Cali and Medellín, many of the children worked or were still connected in some way to one of the BACRIMs or *oficinas* (Chapters II and IV). However, most of my data in this section stems from my research in Cali, as the phenomenon of gang violence was granted more significance by young residents of Potrero Grande. Some of my sample included children involved in a variety of gangs, while others had family members or friends who pertained to those groups.

Again, it is important to note that it was common for children to use the third person when relating their personal stories, as to avoid being identified or labelled as a 'bad person' during the course of my research. Many of these groups are directly connected to both left- and right-wing forces, especially paramilitary groups or other organised criminal networks. In the diagram below, 16-year-old Javier in Aguablanca describes violence in its many forms, penetrating the layers of society from top to bottom.

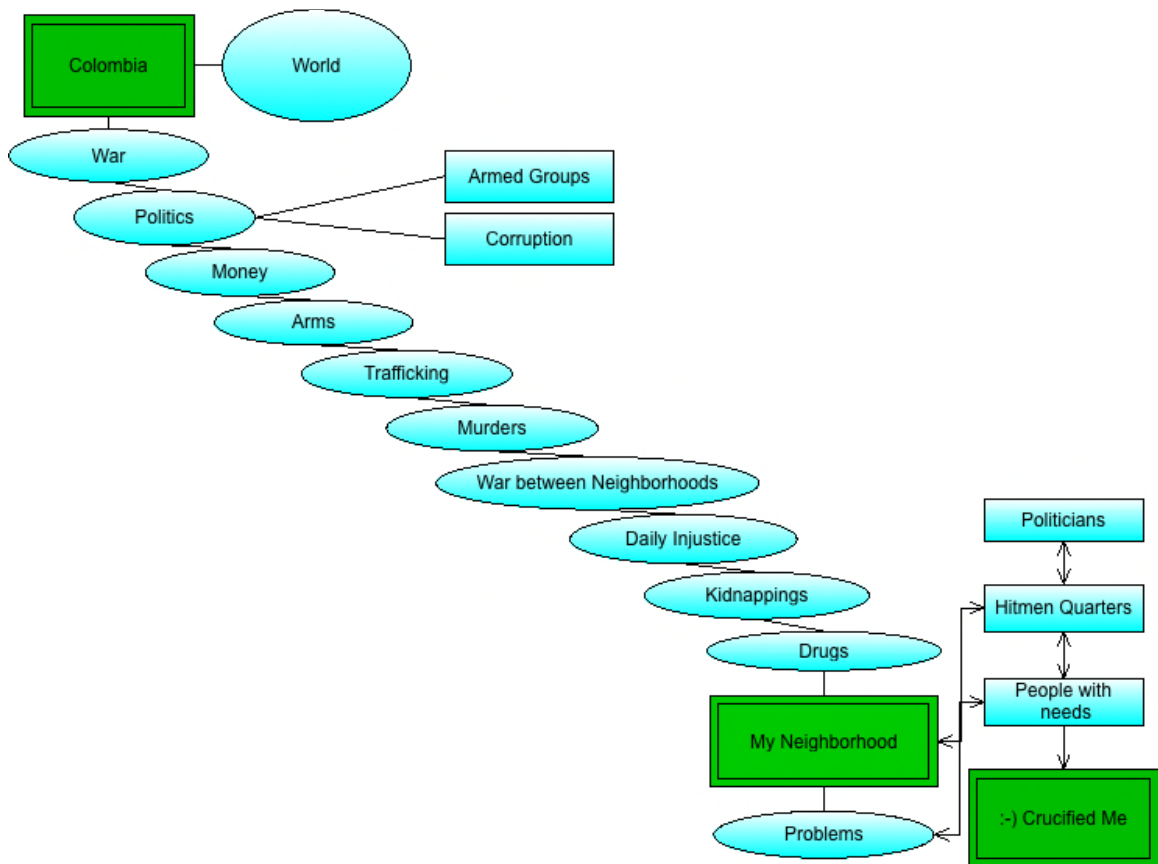


Figure 2: Translation of Javier's illustration. Original found in Appendix A, Figure 11A.

Javier explained through his illustration how children are often hired by *oficinas* to perform the functions of the armed group, depicting the linkage between the various types of violence. He drew a double arrow between 'hitmen quarters' and politicians, showing the collaboration between the two. Javier explained from his illustration that the government works directly with gangs in the neighbourhood to 'retrieve benefits for themselves', in his own words, such as obtaining votes, controlling the drug and arms trafficking, and eliminating undesirable candidates. He stressed the fraudulence of the state by linking the words 'politics' and 'corruption' at the top of this drawing.

In a similar way to his co-participants, he showed his mistrust in governmental entities while blaming them for the on-going injustices and increasing violence. Javier placed 'politics' together with 'armed groups', both under 'war', again demonstrating who he felt was responsible for the war and the outcomes he placed below. He listed, in a very explanatory and systematic way, the consequences of each phenomenon beginning at the national level, 'Colombia', and led to his neighbourhood and eventually to himself at

the bottom. Extortions, kidnappings, drug and arms trafficking, corruption and most importantly, social daily injustices, are clearly marked as interconnected. Javier positions himself at the bottom as powerless or 'crucified', buried by the numerous layers of structural violence and war dynamics as barriers to the top where the elite, including politicians, and access to money are located. Nonetheless, even in the midst of tremendous hardship, Javier shows his irony with his drawing of a smiley face next to 'crucified'.

A higher resilience in young people with a wider support network has been argued by many researchers (Rodríguez, 2011; Moser & McIlwaine, 2004) to lower the incidences of use and recruitment by armed groups. Many of the young participants expressed the lack of opportunities in their neighbourhoods as the cause for them to join gangs and criminal activities. In his produced video, Cesar asked his community's residents in Potrero Grande why young people get involved in violence:

Adolescent girl: '...because of the lack of opportunities for youth...often because they say they live here in Potrero. They don't accept them in universities, they don't give them work opportunities, so what do they do? They go and kill, they steal and the government doesn't see that'.

Similarly, Javier's drawing highlights the needs of young people and their engagement in 'hitmen quarters' and 'problems' in his neighbourhood where the lack of opportunities makes them susceptible to recruitment by criminal groups. He described the dynamics of youth's involvement in gangs and the reasons for the growing violence, trafficking of arms and drugs, war between neighbourhoods and the invisible frontiers, daily injustice, and kidnappings among many other issues Potrero Grande is subject to. In an oral explanation of his work, Javier explained that in Potrero Grande, one is either a victim of a gang or one becomes a gang member. Another 17-year-old adolescent who opted for anonymity supported Javier's affirmation and described how it works in rough neighbourhoods such as Potrero Grande, 'Who kills lives, and who dies, buries themselves; this is the law of the street'.

In communities plagued with extreme violence, such as Potrero Grande, 'survival of the fittest' or 'kill or be killed' are the reigning mottos and whoever makes it through is seen as the 'winner', in the children's own words. Violence then becomes the tool to overcome the structural inequality. An example in Cesar's film highlights the pervasiveness of violence and the ephemerality of life in his neighbourhood:

Adolescent boy: 'Over here, many are born and few live...because there is a lot of delinquency/crime here in the neighbourhood'.

Cesar also expressed his fear for his own life on several occasions as he had been threatened by gangs in his neighbourhood to either join them or wait to be killed. He explained that because he was studying, gang members considered his actions a betrayal and an attempt by him to overpower them. Following an educational institution is synonymous with siding with the state and the privileged, which goes against gang philosophy. 'Some youth join one gang to be protected from another gang they fear', he further states. It appeared that when young people were presented with an opportunity to leave that vicious cycle of violence of kill or be killed, they also feared for their lives as they were going against the system established by gang members.

On the other hand, some of the youth in the video revealed that some people get involved in gangs because they simply want to and not necessarily because they had no opportunities, emphasising individual willpower and 'resilience':

Adolescent boy: 'The lack of work, what else? The lack of resources, you know, jobs, food, and many do it because they want to/ as a vice'.

Young boy: 'Many end up stealing because the mother does not work, because of this, of necessity and...Some people say that it's because they like it and often it can be true because many have it all in their homes and steal because they want to'.

What is commonly frowned upon and considered a vice by some of Potrero Grande's residents is not necessarily true for others who seek power and recognition from the most notorious groups in the neighbourhood. Colombian anthropologist María Victoria Uribe (2004) noted that in rural Colombia, reverence is widely granted to the most notorious and fearsome individuals from their acts of violence. This form of deference dates back to the period of *La Violencia*—war leaders responsible for multiple massacres instilled fear and terror in populations, but also respect and admiration (Sánchez & Meertens, 2001).

The same behavioural pattern can be observed in places like Potrero Grande where gangs have imposed their power and dominion and inspired many youth to join their ranks. Pertaining to a powerful group and upgrading one's internal status, in terms of level of assignments and success rates, also means more income and access to

material goods. Greed is a factor that Peter Waldmann (2007) uses to explain the violence in Colombia, alongside the quest for power and a deep-rooted culture of violence. Peter Waldmann has described the phenomenon of gangs as a subculture of violence with its own language; they have an affinity for certain types of music and films, drug consumption, and material goods, such as arms and motorcycles, accentuating their macho nature. The acquiring of goods and power that make young men self-confident machos the easy and fast way is discussed in the following section—the culture of narcotics that changed the nature of the armed conflict in Colombia.

3.2. Drug Industry

The continued presence of paramilitary and guerrilla groups in communities such as Aguablanca means that the people must cope daily with living in a culture of violence. In particular, children are targeted by the militia and offered ‘really good pay to do illegal business’, as one young male resident of Potrero explained. Colombians call it *la cultura del dinero fácil* or the culture of ‘easy money’ making, which became prominent with the expansion of drug trafficking that started in the 1970s. One male resident of Potrero Grande, who refused to give his name and age, described the phenomenon of easy money in his country:

We Colombians have one major problem: we don’t want to work, we think everything should be easy, so much that we don’t have to make any effort at all, and because of that, we look for the fast and easy route, so we steal, cheat, deceive, and even kill. Politicians do the same and set the example for the rest of us. If they do it, why shouldn’t we? They say they work for us and love poor people, but it’s a big lie, all they want is our vote and after that, all they think of is money. Because war is the biggest money-maker for the people up there.

During the height of the drug trade, significant sums of money flooded the major cities, especially Cali and Medellín. ‘Drug lords were distributing cash in the streets and anyone who worked around them had an exorbitant way of living’, explained a community leader in Comuna 13 in Medellín. ‘They activated a false economy, a culture of abundance and “easy to get everything” mentality among all of us’, she continued. She concluded by stating that the ‘ease’ of making money through drugs has dragged many people into a fool’s paradise and has also structured a culture that has not been easy to deconstruct nor eradicate.

At the same time, state corruption and the high impunity they benefit from, have provided the grounds for many at the bottom spectrum of society to use the same strategies to obtain what they need and/or desire as justified by the adolescent above. Peter Waldmann (2007) and Krijn Peters (2012) made the link between the social and economic exclusion of young people in poor and deprived communities and the engendered resistance and violence toward the elite. The significant social disparities in Colombia accentuated the haves and have-nots, generating anger among youth participants in my research.

Participating in illegal activities does not only serve to satisfy one's basic needs but also discretionary buying power, a sign of higher status and overall power. The increasing exposure to social media and television, combined with the trends created by gang subcultures, has prompted many youth to use any means to acquire the desired products. Another young man from Potrero Grande, who also opted for anonymity, explained the link between the increasing pressure of consumerism and young people involved in drug trafficking:

When you think of a young man who works hard selling things and his mother works all day as a servant cleaning rich people's homes, he could get three times the money he makes selling drugs and get his mother out of this job. At the same time, the culture of consumerism constantly tells us to buy, buy, buy. To be recognised in one's community and earn respect, you have to be with beautiful clothes, new shoes, this is what society stimulates, to buy and buy more. When one doesn't have the power to satisfy his desire to have, he will find the way to do so, he will join a trafficking organisation, he will steal, he will use violence.

There are a number of motives for youth to join a criminal organisation funded by a cartel: economic benefits, support and security, peer pressure, and the model of 'the modern version of the self-confident macho who shows no scruples as he works his way up, or someone like Pablo Escobar' (Waldmann, 2007, p. 67)—the notorious drug lord who emerged from a poor background and became one of the most powerful and wealthiest figures of Colombian history. Although feared by Colombian society, Escobar inspired admiration and respect both for his care and 'investment'—money laundering—into the infrastructure in Medellín and other parts of the country, creating employment and boosting the economy, but also for his achievements, reaching the height of Colombian society through criminal paths.

Youth dwellers of Comuna 13 continuously made the link between the drug industry in their community and youth violence. Saul, 17-year-old resident of Comuna 13, explained in the diagram below, the system stemming from war at the national level leading to the increasing number of killings in his neighbourhood:

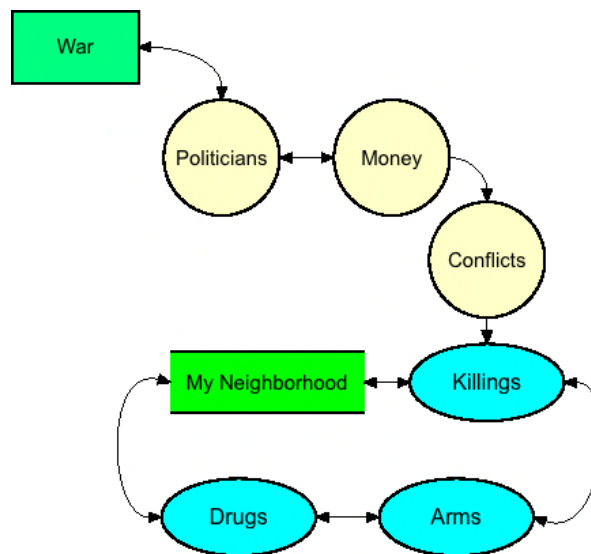


Figure 3: Translation of Saul's diagram. Original found in Appendix A, Figure 12A.

Similarly to Javier from Potrero Grande, Saul emphasised the monopoly of power and money held by politicians who trigger and maintain the system of conflicts:

Impunity and corruption. It is the national system itself that stimulates Colombians everyday to commit the little crimes of corruption and dishonesty. If the system doesn't work for us and doesn't do things right, we'll do them our way. In each of us, there is a sense of justice and a sense of revenge.

Saul focused on the impunity enjoyed by the major actors of the drug trade as 'it's always the small fish that are caught and punished, never the big fish like the politicians'. He affirmed that where there is impunity, there is no justice leaving each person to decide on the path of righteousness. Consequently, an extreme level of individualism reigns in Colombian society and 'each individual confronts society as if it were a menacing jungle' (Restrepo, 2001, p. 98). Saul explained the involvement of the government in the drug industry arguing that they are in fact the main actors:

The trafficker in a small community like ours is just a soldier; the real trafficker is not here. The real trafficker is in congress. How do you think all these weapons got

here? How do they get in? They are definitely not made here, so someone is trading them and getting them here, and making lots of money. We live in a rich country that keeps its people in chronic misery. Why? Because our misery keep the people at the top rich and powerful.

The narcotics trade has certainly intensified and nurtured a culture of violence benefiting the powerful at the expense of the disadvantaged. The obvious socio-economic structures in Colombia have continuously marked tension between the elite and the underprivileged. The pursuit of opportunities and improved livelihoods, reinforced by social, economic and political exclusion, has justified many young people's involvement in the easy way of money making through criminal careers. However, this attitude differs for each young person depending on his or her family life and community infrastructure and support, as is discussed further in the subsequent section.

4. The Lack of a Common Place and Family Disintegration

4.1. Family Structure

The dismantling of families due to a protracted conflict is unfortunately a common phenomenon. The responsibility for raising children and supporting the household often relies solely on the mother, as is the case of most young participants in Potrero Grande and Comuna 13. In Gustavo's family for instance, his mother raised 10 children with the sporadic support of her extended family, leaving her with very limited time at home.

Paradoxically, while women suffer from high rates of gender-based violence in Colombia, especially in poor contexts, the position of the mother is often sacred and highly respected. As I discussed in Chapter V, it is common for children, especially boys at a very young age, to undertake any form of available labour to care for their mother and the rest of the household. Many young boys take on heavy responsibilities and put their lives at risk to provide for their families, earn the respect of their mothers as breadwinners, and fill in the missing male figure roles. They cease to consider themselves children, especially when older than 12 years of age. For example one self-identified youth in Cali expressed his lack of understanding of the categorisation of children by stating, 'I don't know why they call us children'. Many of the male participants showed discontent, even offense, if the word 'children' was used to refer to them. They

explained that their significance and their responsibility as young men were being taken away when referred to as children. 'Well, the thing is, we are no longer children, we are men', one young resident of Comuna 13 clarified.

The extent of exuberating and marking their manhood was key to young men, both at home and outside. The acknowledgment of their power could be equated as an improved livelihood as it would defy the imposed limitations set by authority figures, such as gangs and the police or military, as well as open or create new paths of money-making opportunities. As previously discussed, the lack of communication and power granted to youth within their households often led them to compensate by seeking recognition in their neighbourhood. They did so by either imposing their authority through terrorising schemes or finding ways to earn money through legal and illegal activities in order to support their households. According to Gustavo in Comuna 13, the pressure placed upon young people to contribute to the expenses of their homes, topped with the scarcity of employment opportunities for youth, created considerable frustration and anger and eventually conflict with peers, leading to an increase in violence in the neighbourhood.

On the one hand, the large majority of the participants' households were female-led, where the father's position was either empty or often occupied by a stepfather or the temporary partner of the mother. Cesar recalled his personal experience when his father passed away:

Although I am the youngest boy in the family, I also consider myself as the most responsible one as the rest of my brothers took the wrong path. My father was not present very much, and when he was, it meant more violence. But when he passed, my mother was left with all the expenses of the house by herself. I had to do the right thing. So I left school and got a job.

On the other hand, family structures are constantly redesigned away from the traditional model, under the increasing forced displacement, a common phenomenon in both communities of my study. Women often leave their dangerous positions to seek refuge with their children elsewhere in the country, while the father figure, if existent, remains in their hometown to continue working to support his family. With time, women often take in a male partner who eventually replaces the father figure of the children. While most participants in both neighbourhoods stated that children had conflicting relationships with their mother's companion, often they were physically and sexually abused by the new

family member, in the case of 17-year-old Henry from Comuna 13, his stepfather represented all that his biological father lacked in attributes. However, this was a unique case among all of my participants' experiences and their accounts of other residents in their communities. The consequences of forced displacement, including the adversities adapting to a new environment, acquiring the necessary support network to survive, and earning a sufficient income while attempting to raise children, often lead to a great amount of conflict among family members. Unfortunately, the youngest in the household generally becomes the most vulnerable to the violence at home.

In the following sub-section I examine the violence between family members as a result of variables like the continuous transformation and construction of family structures in Colombia.

4.2. Intra-Family Violence

Although violence in the family was a common occurrence in most of the participants' lives in Medellín and Cali, it was brought up sporadically, always in private, and often with a great level of reluctance. The 'culture of silence' discussed earlier in the chapter also stretches to family abuse; mainly given that it is associated with a feeling of humiliation, especially in the case of sexual violence (Moser & McIlwaine, 2004), and the pressure placed by its perpetrators. To further exacerbate the situation, intra-family violence is frequently not acknowledged as an issue as it has become 'normalised' and standardised in Colombia (Moser & McIlwaine, 2004, p. 99).

Many of the children in both locations indicated domestic violence and mistreatment as primary causes of their involvement in violence. In a group discussion in Cali, participants explained that many other types of uncertainties triggered the violence at home; they listed the lack of money, the lack of opportunities, the poor access to health facilities and care, and the daily fear and insecurity in the neighbourhood, as factors leading to an increased level of domestic abuse. Intra-family violence is known to be the cradle of other types of violence, but also aggravated by them, once more demonstrating the interrelationship of different forms of violence (Moser & McIlwaine, 2004). The experience of conflict alters behaviour, attitude, and even culture (Waldmann, 2007),

which in turn affect the probability and frequency of domestic violence (Noe & Rieckmann, 2013).

The youth in my study further specified that aside from daily insecurities, the direct experience of the armed conflict intensified the violence experienced at home; this includes the involvement of family in an armed group, forced displacement, assassination of a relative, and death threats. They explained that abuse was not just perpetrated by the biological parents but also by stepparents, grandparents, older siblings, distant relatives, and as was often the case, the mother's male partner. Although father figures generally committed physical and emotional violence at home, Henry explained that he was the exception as his biological father was violent while his stepfather represented the exemplary parent. Henry's father was serving his sentence in jail for his involvement in drug trafficking and other illegal activities when his stepfather was killed by armed gangs after having been extorted for large sums of money he was unable to pay. Juana, the community leader of AMI in Comuna 13, described the most common scenario in female-led households:

Mothers are left on their own to raise all the children but also have to sustain the household, so they are often absent at home, and other members take advantage of that to impose their power and abuse of the most vulnerable ones. This system doesn't support women, so they take on a man for support but it's worse most of the time. There's a lot of jealousy between the men in the house. Lots of cases of rape, the man imposes his dominion onto them. This is why I raise my children alone and will never allow a man close to them.

Juana revealed to me that she had informally adopted one of the young participants, whose identity will remain anonymous as per her request, after the girl had run away from home to escape her father's sexual abuse. Although the girl had gathered the courage to tell the mother, she was accused of lying and destroying the family. Juana described the household of the girl to be extremely poor and mostly maintained by the father and concluded that the mother could not separate from the father because of her financial dependence.

Unfortunately, cases of rape and incest are a common occurrence in Colombia, as previously discussed in this chapter, and I came across many similar cases throughout my research. The violations are usually not reported as they are considered taboo by the rest of society, especially the Church that has a strong presence in Colombia,

particularly in poor communities. The pride of the family or caretakers would also be put at stake if such a case were to be dealt with. Age hierarchy is also an important variable in family abuse and older siblings often take advantage of the younger ones in the household. As elaborated earlier in the chapter, Gustavo, 17-year-old resident of Comuna 13, related his experience of violence from his older brother who also used violence outside the home to gain more power and recognition.

In Cali, the dynamics of violence at home were similar to those of Comuna 13 and were the primary reason for many children to leave the house at a very young age. Alexis, 16-year-old new resident of Potrero Grande, confessed that he originally joined a BACRIM in his hometown in the department of Cauca to avoid his father's beatings toward him and his mother. 'It was humiliating', he explained, 'I was a "no one" and I couldn't do anything to stop him, so I left'. Cesar, from the same community, left his birthplace of Tumaco with his mother to escape a household of extreme abuse by his father. He recounted an instance of his father's violent behaviour under the influence of alcohol and confessed he threatened him with a knife in an attempt to protect his mother.

Recurring violence at home often triggered feelings of anger and helplessness in the young participants' lives and a desire to seek an environment where they could be given worth and appreciation. Some resorted to violent behaviours outside the home to release the frustration and impotency produced by the toxic household situations and secure their own power. Others, such as Cesar, nurtured the relationship with the mother by attempting to reverse the dynamics of violence they had experienced over the years. In the next subsection I will discuss the different ways in which intra-familial violence affects the underlying forces in the neighbourhood and vice-versa.

4.3. Implications of Intra-Family Violence for Violence Outside the

Household

As demonstrated in the previous sections, violence in households was interlaced with the different types of violence and its causes, in a mutual cause and effect cycle. Young participants' accounts showed that the dynamics of abuse at home triggered violent behaviours outside the home. Consequently, the ramifications of the armed conflict reached all family members, even those who were not directly linked to any insurgent

groups. In Aguablanca, Cesar recounted instances of family members being threatened or killed by gangs to take revenge on young recruits who failed to obey them, as a result of a betrayal or by refusing to join their ranks. Murder of a kin also occurred following an instance of rape to ensure the silence of the victim or as punishment after the abuse had been reported. Cesar clarified that these murders also take place simply to terrorise the community, to pressure children to enlist in their groups, or to punish a relative who did not pay his 'taxes' or fees of extortion. He personally experienced losing a parent to the terrifying militias in his hometown of Tumaco, on the Pacific Colombian coast and home to many of the most notorious BACRIM groups. At the same time, Cesar's mother and her children had left Tumaco shortly prior to the tragic event with her children and settled in Potrero Grande. Cesar described his father as an extremely violent man, leading him and his siblings to fear for their lives and that of their mother. He clarified that they left Tumaco to escape his father's domestic violence, but also the death threats of the BACRIMs that had become increasingly frequent.

Although father figures generally caused most instances of domestic abuse, they also involved women and children as perpetrators, where children based their dominance in relation to age (Moser & McIlwaine, 2004). In his autobiography exercise, Gustavo from Comuna 13 expressed the violence he experienced from his older brother now serving his sentence in prison. He described his sibling as a 'terror' and the painful separation from the rest of the family under the growing violence in his community:

He was a person with ambitions who wanted money, but the easy way. He grew up and wanted to have power. This made him a bad person for many. In 2010, he took the nickname of John Chombe who everyone knows as a terror. The following year, he was captured by the police as the leader of a combo (gang). It was the biggest pain and sadness for my mother and others affected.

Here, the search for power and the culture of 'easy money', discussed earlier in the chapter, greatly affected Gustavo's family. While one of his kin took the role of perpetrator of violence, two of his other siblings were victims of gang violence. While one was forcibly displaced after receiving continuous death threats from a BACRIM and separated from the family for many years, another was the victim of crossfire between opposing gangs and nearly lost his life.

Death threats by insurgent groups are a common occurrence across Colombia. In a group activity in Medellín, participants identified the main insecurities and dynamics in

their community in the poster named 'humanity' (Figure 5A); they placed death, power, *señalar*, rumour, and hate under the category of indifference. The act of *señalar* or 'pointing out' was yet another means of terrorism used by armed groups—threatening pamphlets are circulated in the community, signalling the next victim of recruitment or execution. The strategy involves a list of names passed around in a community signalling a possible traitor, often falsely reported by another local seeking revenge or escaping a possible extortion or death threat. Many of the participants shared the painful memories of having had a sibling taken away from their family as a 'traitor' by a gang or state forces, or as a 'false positive' (Chapters V and VI). Occasionally, they explained, after a guilty person had been captured by one of the armed or state groups, the detainee would blame another, often innocent, person to escape torture or death.

According to my participants, even if one desired so, it was impossible to avoid the violence in their lives; one ended up directly involved in a war that was not theirs and that they did not choose. The continuous and increasing violence, inside and outside the home, also greatly contributed to the residents' lack of trust in each other. Family disintegration and the absence of closeness among kin was a meaningful factor in participants' lives in both communities. Cali dwellers chose 'union' as the title of a poster in a group activity and listed it as one of the aspects of their communities that affected them the most. They selected two categories under 'union' that were most significant to them: the unity in the neighbourhood and that in the family. They explained that the family was the cradle for communication and a safe haven. Disintegrated households took away the safety of a common place and led many young people to seek that missing link in their relations with gangs, providing them with a sense of belonging.

In the final sub-section I share young people's desire for kinship and stronger bonds among community members, which is manifested in a variety of ways, in an attempt to reconstruct a social fabric that has been torn apart by violence.

4.4. Community Trust and Social Fabric

The term 'social fabric' or social capital is often used in Colombia among its residents to describe community ties and trust, and often referred to by my participants in their narratives (Chapter II, section 2). The expression reflects community-based initiatives

that encompass solidarity of the movements and organisations of civil societies, rather than interventions from the state or external organisations. In this section, I utilise ‘social fabric’ to encompass how young people address the lack of unity, communication, sense of belonging, and need for stronger community bonds. At the same time, I discuss contrasting ways of creating and restructuring social fabric among my participants portraying the different roles they adopt and varying experiences they live in contexts of violence.

One of the main themes chosen by a group of participants during a poster activity in Potrero Grande was ‘unity’ or lack thereof. The large piece of paper had the following written on it: ‘If there is unity in our neighbourhood, violence would not penetrate our lives. It is in gathering where family is formed’. Again, the importance of social fabric as the key ingredient to resist violence is reflected here. Caroline Moser and Catherine McIlwaine (2004) also recognised in their research that lack of trust, unity, support networks, and poor community organisation were identified as the components of a decaying social fabric and directly connected to the absence of security and wellbeing (Chapter II, section 2). The term *unión* (union), referring to community unity or network, was most commonly used in Potrero Grande. In Comuna 13, with similar dynamics revolving around violence, the chosen term to reflect the lack of trust and solidarity among its residents was ‘humanity’ (Figure 5A). In the poster produced from a group activity, participants associated violence with division, death, sadness, problems and rivalry; and associated lack of communication to fights, rumour, pain, separation, loneliness and conflict.

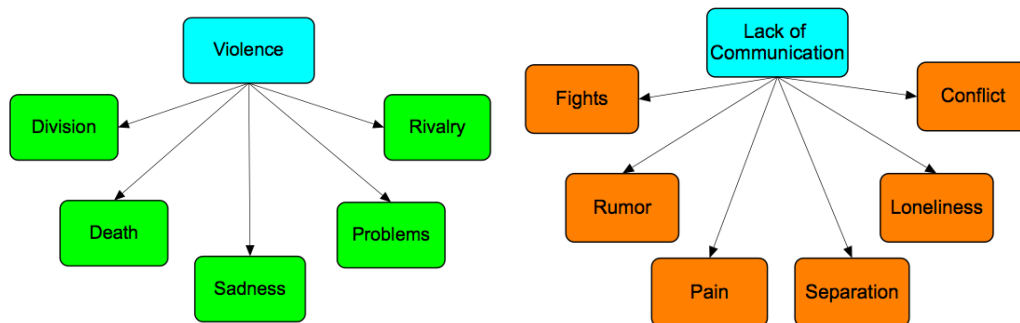


Figure 4: Poster activity in Comuna 13 themed 'Humanity'. Original found in Appendix A, Figure 5A.

A major concern of young people in both communities was the disintegration of the community due to the conflict separating and pitting residents against each other. It is clearly demonstrated in the illustration above, on the left, with the use of words such as 'division' and 'rivalry' as direct outcomes of violence; while the diagram on the right connects 'lack of communication' with 'conflict', 'fights', and 'separation'. According to the participants, a higher degree of solidarity and harmony among residents would be the key ingredient for stronger community ties and a powerful tool to confront and resist the war.

As shown above, violence does not only disrupt the regular functioning of individuals and families, but also corrodes human relationships in a community, including trust, solidarity, and values (Moser & McIlwaine, 2004). At the same time, there seems to exist an attempt to build social networks as a means of survival among young people in Aguablanca through creating or joining a gang. On the same poster themed *unión*, Aguablanca participants wrote: 'We all survive separately; we form groups to protect each other but we kill each other at the same time. When it comes to it, we don't do anything about it because we have frontiers that we cannot cross'. 17-year-old Daniel from the same community explained in an interview that young people create the *parches*, the urban slang for a group of young people, as a means for protection—one either belongs to a group or is against it, in which case one dies. As these groups gradually empower themselves through involvement in illegal industries, connections with major armed groups, and use of extortions, their need for control of territory simultaneously increases. Consequently, the rivalry between the different groups augments and as delinquency and crime increase with the infiltration of drug traffickers, the groups use violence as a tool to control and impose their power in the neighbourhood.

Joining a group can mean both protection and an increased chance of death, as groups often engage in conflict. Daniel also explained that when someone belonged to a particular group he or she could be targeted by other gang members, even walking alone was highly risky and could be deadly. Moving around the community in a group ensured each member of the *parche* protection and solidarity, especially when having to trespass invisible frontiers. Many of the youth in Aguablanca explained that they often give up on school on certain days or altogether, or on work, for fear of crossing an

invisible frontier that could lead to threats and eventually their death or that of a family member.

In a group protected by their 'brothers' and the power it holds in the neighbourhood, they encounter the courage and camaraderie of their companions to defy and resist the imposed confinement set by other gangs. In Aguablanca, as in Comuna 13 and other urban dwellings in Colombia, violence can be equated with death and trauma but also safety and survival. Young community members negotiate the advantages and disadvantages of avoiding, joining or creating *parches*. They weave their versions of social fabric, in attempts to create the solidarity and unity lacking in their family units and communities, to protect themselves, to survive and confront the negative outcomes of war, or take part in the conflict targeting power and growth (Peters & Richards, 1998).

As seen across the narratives of young people in my study, violence is everywhere and inescapable, starting in the household and reaching every corner of the neighbourhood. The pervasiveness of violence promotes fear; it begins in the family nucleus and spreads to the wider system, such as the institutions surrounding young people including and especially the government. Where the government fails to provide common safe spaces for young people, such as adequately equipped schools, sports facilities, and community centres, *parches* of youth are created either out of companionship, a violent gang, or to unify building power in the face of social inequality and exclusion.

Daphne Alvarez Villa (2013) suggested that political exclusion is at the heart of distrust toward the state, which in turn damages social capital. The political and economic segregation predominant in Colombia has caused the gradual deterioration of civic engagement and cooperation among its citizens. Many of the youth participants in my study saw no way out of their *barrio* and felt excluded from the rest of the country. Their strong yearning to *salir pa'lante* or 'thrive ahead' in any way they could was a way to defy both the odds that had been limiting them and the system established by the elite at the top. Their insistence on the importance of having a safe common place was parallel with their strong desire to establish trust in themselves and in others; and a desire to receive the support in creating a *plan de vida* or plan of life, synonymous with their future beyond violence and the limitations of their marginalised neighbourhood.

In Comuna 13, Henry listed all of the benefits of having common space in his neighbourhood: 'more communication, union, brotherhood, companionship, solidarity, peace, and friendship because out there, you can barely find them'. Similar benefits to a common place can also be found in educational facilities allowing young people to gather safely while learning useful skills. Young residents of Potrero Grande insisted on the positive impact of Technocentro, the recently built educational facility in their neighbourhood that allows young residents to gather without fear and be versed in digital media, defying social exclusion, invisible frontiers, and limitations of the increasing violence in their community.

Moreover, young dwellers of both communities conveyed that a common place meant they could gather and freely express themselves, and begin to see their significance in their community by voicing their perspectives on what is happening around them, from political corruption to exclusion. They further explained that a common physical structure was the key ingredient in strengthening the unity in their community, allowing young people to build trust in each other as well as casting away the dangers of crossing an invisible frontier and the pressure of joining an armed group.

5. Conclusion

This chapter provided an analysis of young people's perceptions of the main motives for violence from a social, political, and economic perspective stemming from data collected with young people in Potrero Grande in Cali and Comuna 13 in Medellín. It has demonstrated that in the case of continuous conflict, violence penetrates all layers of society, debilitating the social fabric of the community (Chapter II, section 2), navigating between the public and private spheres, from the national to the personal level with no distinction between political and non-political violence. Through their accounts children highlighted the intersectionality of their daily uncertainties and the instances of different types of violence, as well as identified whom they held responsible for their current circumstances.

Although the absence of safety was discussed as the main cause of the everyday violence, the associated fear and insecurity have been recalled throughout children's narratives as cross-sectional. The struggle over power and lucrative industries of rival

armed groups in the communities exacerbated the existing violence and fear among its residents. Women and girls faced the additional dilemma of gender; most perpetrators were identified as men and most victims as women. With limiting conditions and scarce resources, many young dwellers in my research visualised themselves at the bottom of the power hierarchy.

Furthermore, Colombia has been historically marked by deep structural inequalities that deeply affect its young population. Accordingly, young participants in my research heavily emphasised their exclusion from social, economic, and political realms. They constantly navigated between different identities as tactics for survival, protection, and maximising opportunities (Honwana, 2006; Vigh, 2009) (Chapter III, section 2.1) propelled by lack of employment and educational options, subjection to mistreatment, growing up where violence is the common language, and the prevalence of illegal activities (Chapter IV, section 1).

Additionally, youth participants identified the failure of the state to serve, protect, and include residents of deprived neighbourhoods in the political and economic system, among the principal drivers of violence in their communities. Not only were youth in my research highly aware of the complexity of dynamics resulting from violence and exclusion, they were also very clear about holding the government responsible for the current marginalization of young Colombians. For many youth excluded from power structures and deprived of legitimate outlets to express their grievances, violence provided an opportunity to be heard and to resist daily uncertainties by gaining control over their own lives.

On the other hand, youth continuously stressed the negative repercussions of the inescapable stereotypes of violence and delinquency attributed to them by the media and elite. As a result, they felt frustrated at the perception that they were a demographic at risk and threatening to society, rather than being viewed as autonomous and capable social and political actors (Chapter III, section 2.1). Such an image limited their capabilities and freedoms, inhibiting them from pursuing opportunities that could improve their lives, contribute to their neighbourhoods, build social trust, and thus reinforce the 'social fabric' of their communities.

The discourse on children in contexts of war affirmed that they experience violence, its causes, and consequences in different ways depending on their age, gender, and ethnic group. However, the experiences of and responses to violence of the young participants in this study varied based on their personality traits, social and economic status, and the prevalent culture of violence. They negotiated violence and its associated uncertainties by creating new identities and shifting between existing ones, not as merely passive victims (Chapter III, section 2.1 and 2.3). While some opted for power and made the most out of the business of violence, others sought protection by joining an armed group or moving up the ladder by becoming 'professional' soldiers. Those from fractured homes recreated the kinship among *parches* or *combos*, to resist the system, or maximising opportunities for growth through any available space or program in their communities. The creative ways by which young people navigated through opportunities and challenges contrasted with the assumed illegitimacy of young people's voices and experiences in limited environments (Chapter III, section 2 and 3).

Many youth's accounts contained experiences of violence within their homes linked to instances of violence outside their households. Ongoing war deeply affect the stability within families, propelling many young participants in my research to take on nurturing roles in order to make up for the absence of their adult caretakers (Chapter III, section 1.1). Children pertaining to families offering them a stronger support network showed more resilience and were less likely to choose violent paths. Similarly, young people from communities with a stronger social fabric demonstrated increased resistance to violence and a more developed sense of identity and belonging (Chapter II, section 2).

In the same way that violence intersects with fear, insecurity, and uncertainty as multidimensional, so are the associated dynamics involving young people. Examining children's involvement in war in isolation to the context in which it takes place inhibits the understanding of the lived realities of young people. Through accounts of children's practices of remembering and forgetting, in the following chapter I attempt to portray how young people make sense of their experiences with resilience and resistance to the continuing changes and disruption caused by the perpetual violence.

Chapter VII: Imposed Silence: Exploring Children's Practices of Memory and Violence

Building from my detailed analysis about young people's perspectives and negotiations with daily uncertainties intertwined with multidimensional manifestations of violence, I dedicate this chapter to examining their negotiation strategies with regards to loss, absence, and doubt; and their attempts to deconstruct and reconstruct their circumstances through different forms of remembering, forgetting, and re-imagining. Colombia's established culture of fear following the decades-long war, together with high levels of impunity, has institutionalised a law of silence and forced forgetting among affected populations; necessary to maintain power relations and project national progress (Restrepo Rhodes, 2014). At the same time, the extreme levels of civilian forced disappearances, the lack of acknowledgment and assistance to victims, and an almost 100 per cent impunity, have buried the tales of loss and death for a large majority of Colombians (Chapter II, Section 1).

In this chapter I examine the connections between young people, memories, and violence through accounts of how places and events are rendered meaningful in both Cali and Medellín: where daily life has been profoundly affected by multi-layered violent conflict where numerous armed actors, scenarios and forms of violence interplay. I aim to understand how practices of remembering and forgetting shape and are shaped by the lived experience of violence. I question the role memory plays for young Colombians as a means for human and cultural survival when their social and material worlds are threatened. Through examining visual, written, and oral data of young people's self-representations of their personal stories, their communities, and their futures, I also compare and contrast personal and collective memory.

My analysis draws on multiple data sources given the young people I worked with narrated their memories in different ways: sometimes orally, in writing, or a combination of photography, filming, and different forms of illustrations, such as drawing and collage. I begin by discussing young peoples' acts of remembering and forgetting of their experiences of uprooting, loss, and death. I then go on to describe their practices of resistance to silencing, pain, anger, and physical confinement by building creative

mechanisms to restore stability and purpose in their lives. Through these acts of remembering and forgetting, young people imaginatively fashion their selves using their knowledge of how historical, political, economic, and social complexities complicate their ideas of personhood. These processes, however, are continuously fragmented and suppressed by widespread violence, increasing fear, and insecurity that redefine Colombian societies. How do young dwellers cope with daily uncertainties through acts of remembering and forgetting in both Cali and Medellín? How does memory act as a form of resistance, resilience, and a path for new opportunities?

1. Narratives of Loss and Death

Loss and death were common themes in the accounts of my study's young participants in both communities in Medellín and Cali. Each individual dealt with their grief and constructed meaning from their suffering in different ways, grounded in their personalities, family histories, and understandings of death, and according to characteristics of their communities. First I'd like to refer to an account offered by 16-year-old Olga of Medellín's Comuna 13.

Olga clearly illustrates in her photo (Figure 1B) resistance to loss and territorial violence by remembering the assassination of her older brother shortly before she was born. The following is written next to the photo of the deceased: 'Luis Alfonso—Death is not forgetfulness because you are always with me in my soul, mind and heart—Born: 21st of April; Sacrificed: 31st of May, 1991'. Luis Alfonso was murdered because he crossed a frontier set by criminal groups in his neighbourhood. Confined by these physical boundaries, community dwellers can make use of remembering to transgress them 'with more ease and freedom than do individuals' (Riaño Alcalá, 2006, p. 96), and challenge the power of violence to disrupt and destroy. Like many of her fellow youngsters in Comuna 13, Olga used memory to trespass structural limitations and overcome emotional challenges. She expressed a lot of resentment toward the injustice and inequity present in the daily lives of her community's residents. She used the word 'sacrifice' in her photo description to relay the innocent lives lost for a war, as Colombians often refer to, not their own, and to benefit the social elite.

Colombian social scientist Juan David Villa Gómez (2013) explained that in contexts of armed conflict, feelings of resentment and hatred emerge as a result of continuous impotence and powerlessness in the face of injustice; accumulated, unspoken hurt; and inability to report on abuses. He argued that anger could actually be the catalyst for consciousness and a process to claim human rights. However, when anger fails to lead to recognition of the committed injustice, victims express their feelings of resentment as a way 'to give meaning, focus, and guide their anger, pain, and impotence emotions' (Gómez, 2013, p. 40).

Similarly to Olga, young participants in both communities expressed their anger and pain as a means to demand their rights and address the lack of governmental support. They continuously referred to the absence of the state in marginalised regions where the conflict was heaviest. Eduardo, a 17-year-old resident of Potrero Grande in Cali, expressed his views of the government's role in the increasing violence:

There's a lot of conflict in Colombia because of the president and his corrupt government, because he makes promises and once he obtains the throne, he runs the government without thinking of other people, of the citizens. He needs to stop working with armed groups, and the police and the army need to surrender their arms, stop recruiting young people, give us the freedom we deserve, or come up with agreements that do not jeopardise our lives, let us continue with our lives, because all they do is ruin us.

Many young people carry deep and largely unprocessed personal losses: from the death of a close friend, to the imprisonment of a family member, the breakdown of their home structure, and more. Gustavo, a 16-year-old boy, recounted friends lost to Operation Orion as one the most significant events in his illustration for the lifeline exercise (Figure 2B). Many youth have a huge reservoir of depression, fear, and anger leading to pessimism, despair about their future, silence, and sometimes violence. The produced anger, the inability to seek justice, the high impunity, and the continuous humiliation in the face of the powerful perpetrator dehumanises and 'reduces the victim to its simplest expression' (Villa Gómez, 2013, p. 4).

'To stay alive, we don't seek justice', was an explanation of the silence resulting from subjugation provided by 17-year-old Daniel from Potrero Grande during a group discussion on what was most significant to them in their neighbourhoods. Fear, terror, and the possibility of being re-victimised form part of daily realities in the lives of Colombian residents in communities most affected by the armed conflict. The prolonged

presence of armed groups that continuously intimidate community members with violence, extortion, threats, and mockery, corrupts the social bonds and trust between people. Consequently, some people choose silence over confrontation in an attempt to resolve the issues present in their communities. They do so to protect their lives and that of their loved ones in an environment devoid of trust, not knowing who the enemy is at any given time. In the same group discussion mentioned above, Daniel further explained that 'cultural values disappear in war, no one trusts anyone'.

As discussed in the preceding chapter, in contexts of constant fear, social fabric is deteriorated and individualism replaces collectiveness. Nonetheless, a sense of a collective is more present in certain settings, such as Comuna 13, where young residents have managed to transport their memories to the public domain. In contrast, lacking access to a collective, young community members of Potrero Grande opted to retain their memories from trespassing their private spheres as a means to protect themselves from further suffering or out of the fear generated by the enforced silencing. The next section attempts to clarify the different ways in which young residents in both cities use memory to tackle their daily injustices and imposed silencing.

2. The Struggle Out of Silence

As examined in the previous chapter, a culture of fear and silence prevails in Colombia as a result of extreme levels of violence, starting from within the household to the public realm. Strategies of forced silence have been used at various societal levels in the context of political violence in Colombia (Moser & McIlwaine, 2004) to maintain power and impunity and to further victimise affected individuals (Chapter II, Section 1; Chapter VI, Section 1). Jorge Eduardo Suárez Gómez (2011) has defined Colombia as a society dominated by a routinisation of war and oblivion, where memories remain in the private sphere and few are able to reach the public sphere (García, 2003). Across my data, there is a constant shift among youth between resistance to the imposed oblivion and desire to escape violence and death.

The data from the young people I worked with in the community in Medellín showed that they dealt with their pasts by including memories of the deceased in their families into their daily lives and resisting the forced forgetting of their losses caused by decades of

war. The dwellers of Comuna 13 long fought to receive the support of the government and unearth mass graves where thousands of youth had disappeared as false positives—the extrajudicial massacre of thousands of civilians by members of the armed forces who dressed their victims as guerrillas in order to present them as combat kills (Chapter V, Section 1). Olga's photo (Figure 1B) depicts this phenomenon where her brother became its victim; she challenged the established system of silence and attempted to break from the private sphere by displaying publicly what had taken place.

In a study of the role of collective memory in Colombia using empirical data, Juan David Villa Gómez (2013) argued that when pain becomes communal, a mutual consolation is generated, leading to increased resilience, the re-establishment of trust, and the creation of solid ties among community members. The shift from personal to communal memory enables the victims of political violence to overcome their anger and resentment and move on with their lives. When memories are not granted meaning nor included in a national narrative, they remain individual experiences that are often dismissed and eventually erased (Pécaut, 2003). The mutual support provides a sense of purpose to the victims, enabling them to recover some of their dignity and lessen feelings of impotence—they begin to step out of the victims' sphere and recuperate stability and a certain sense of 'normality' (Villa Gómez, 2013, p. 42).

However, in my study, the process of discussing the participants' experiences, in both Cali and Medellín, was not immediate, whether in groups or through individual activities. More often, especially in Cali, there was a strong reluctance to initially participate in my workshops. They seemed reluctant to share their pain and open old wounds without the possibility of receiving further personal or group support. Julio, a 17-year-old resident of Potrero Grande, asked me in a private session why he should open his wounds once more and see me leave with his pains exposed, as nothing ever changes.

While Cali's young dwellers did not enjoy the same freedom and support network to remember, the experience in Medellín was smoother, as there existed many more organisations present in the community or at the city level offering different types of support: from psychosocial assistance to finding employment and educational opportunities. The city is known as the most socially developed in Colombia, with a very solid sense of pride and belonging, both key ingredients for a stronger social fabric.

Residents in Comuna 13 have access to more communal support than in Potrero Grande, and this may be why it appeared easier among my participants from Comuna 13 to share their pains knowing that there will be mutual consolation. Contrary to Medellín, young people in Potrero Grande perceived the revival of some of their past experiences as an impediment to moving on and overcoming negative feelings, or as Villa Gómez has called it, 'normality'. On several occasions throughout the workshop, they would decide to recount their and their community's positive attributes by singing songs typical of Cali, culturally known as the world capital of salsa, and exhibiting their artistic talents in groups. I was continuously reminded that Potrero Grande was much more than violence and they no longer wanted to be stigmatised solely because they belonged to that neighbourhood synonymous with violence and hitmen.

Contrary to Potrero Grande, residents of Comuna 13 struggled against oblivion and the ephemeral characteristic of their daily realities. For instance, the occurrence of trauma that is communal rather than individually targeted, such as Operation Orion and the false positives episode (Chapter IV, Section 1), tended to unite its victims rather than generate separation and mistrust. The discovery of the mass graves filled with the bodies of young innocent victims from both tragedies led to the residents' struggle to receive recognition from the local government for the inflicted harm; they were successful in disinterring the mass graves. The plan followed with the construction of a memorial site for the deceased where they had been buried and exposed the deep social wounds of the residents and the unresolved relationship with the past.

The historian, Julio Aróstegui (2004), explained that although there seems to be a culture of short-lived experiences and realities as a consequence of permanent accelerated change, it is only a façade as it clashes with the yearning for the perdurable. Pilar Riaño Alcalá (2006, p. XXIV) also discussed the contradiction between memory and forgetting and explained that although there exists 'a strong sense of the ephemeral' among community members, the will to live clashes with an endless state of death.

The lifeline produced by Gustavo from Comuna 13 in Figure 2B illustrated how narratives can assist in constructing coherence in times of rapid change and in making sense of what may seem a series of contradictions. The sequence of events in Gustavo's life depicts both happy and painful memories; he shows the happiness with

his family and his achievements in school, the war in his neighbourhood referring to Operation Orion, and common activities among adolescents such as sharing with his friends, playing football, and even simpler events such as a dog bite that marked his life. Although he refers to the conflict, wounded people, and loss of friends due to the war, he still maintains a certain level of stability, and what Villa Gómez would call 'normality', through the recollection of more ordinary events.

The same was true with the young participants in Potrero Grande; although most of them narrated daily occurrences of violence in their lives, they were more keen on recounting the events common in an adolescent's life such as someone they had a crush on, their artistic talents, how they liked to be seen, their closest friends, etc. Figure 3B shows a photo of Alexis, a 15-year-old new resident of Potrero Grande, that he took of himself explaining what it meant to him: 'I like the way I am' (Chapter VI, Section 2.3). Different narratives in a single form of data, such as the lifeline exercise, drew out how young people co-construct forms of meaning and attempt to maintain continuity in a fragmented environment. It also showed how youth refuse to make sense of traumatic experiences of violence and resist images and expectations about them and how they react.

As seen in this section, young people break the enforced silence in various ways, including developing coherent narratives and collective memories. I observed that the ways by which they struggle out of silence are relative to their structural environments, as illustrated clearly by the differences in the two settings. In the following section I discuss young people's practices of memory, marking places in their neighbourhoods and creating new spaces with their existing memories, fantasies, and imaginations.

3. Creating Spaces through Memory and Imagination

The community of Comuna 13 marks the importance of memory as a tool of resistance as shown in Figure 4B in a photo captured by a 17-year-old boy, Saul: 'War oppresses us; memory liberates us'. Community radios have been commonly used in Colombia as a form of resistance and memory, tying people together through resilience and grief. In a poster group activity shown in Figure 5B, 'faith' and 'memory' are placed together under the chosen topic 'humanity'. The prints left on the second sheet of paper underneath the

first one were explained: 'These are the traces we leave even when the conflict tries to separate and erase us. We will not be forgotten'. In walking distance from Comuna 13, the city of Medellín built a space called *El Museo Casa de la Memoria* or Museum House of Memory. The centre aims to gather people and places that contribute to the construction of historical memory, the dignification of the victims of the armed conflict, symbolic reparation, resistance, and to the reconstruction of social fabric. The museum often works in collaboration with Comuna 13 to launch 'memory' events, such as the next scheduled one called 'grammatical bodies: art to expose and re-build our memory'.

Furthermore, Comuna 13 created *Cuenta la 13* or Comuna 13 Recounts, a radio program involving all ages to share stories of hope and remembrance, shielding their communities from armed conflict's negative impacts and shaping their experiences of daily violence. Community leader of Comuna 13, Socorro Mosquera, states in an interview:

We have this radio so we can tell all that is happening to us without being cut off, because we have the right to tell when we are being killed or displaced, but also the right to have a voice. We can tell the entire world now what we want to tell. We have many projects now for young people, so that in the middle of all the war and resistance, we can also live in peace.

The community was also able to launch their own website²⁰ in 2011 with the support of the Association of Journalists of the University of Antioquia and others. The initiative *Cuenta la 13* was born out of the project Digital Narratives for Inclusion in Territories of Armed Conflict, initiated in 2010 through nine workshops and encounters with a team of journalists, students, anthropologists, and psychologists who accompanied and supported young people and women in a process of sharing their narratives. The sessions took place in the community centre led by the Association of Independent Women (AMI) in a first phase including The Body, The Image, The Sound, The Video and Memory. In the following months women and young people who were the initial participants continued producing their stories through *Cuenta la 13*.

Comuna 13 and the city of Medellín have far more opportunities for support and a much stronger social fabric than Aguablanca. The young participants of my study from Comuna 13 grew up with the community centre led by AMI, specifically under the strong

²⁰ *Cuenta la 13*; www.cuentala13.org

leadership of a woman of African descent whom they looked up to and was a dependable source of support. Figure 6B, a photo taken by 15-year-old Jessica from Comuna 13, captures the importance of the program *Cuenta la 13*. The poster states the following:

La 13 tells stories of hope: Without having studied journalism or knowing how to operate a camera, 25 younger children, youth, and adults measured up to be the narrators and protagonists of what happens in Comuna 13.

In another photo taken by one of the young participants (Figure 7B), 16-year-old Gustavo marked the importance of this initiative, capturing graffiti art on a wall of his community, representing *Cuenta la 13*. Furthermore, Jessica recounts, in her photo shown in Figure 6B, the participation of younger children in the weekly radio program, *Cuenta la 13*, showing the inclusion of participants of all ages. The program is described on *Cuenta la 13*'s website as such:

Cuenta la 13 Radio is where we take over words publicly to enable the voices of our boys, girls, youth and women to be heard. It is led and conducted by the youth and women, and younger children themselves, in the same manner that it includes the participation of young collaborating leaders, or university students or professionals in journalism, cultural managing, psychology, and social work.

Semillas del Futuro or Seeds of the Future, another initiative launched by *Cuenta la 13* and AMI, is a program to work with young people of Comuna 13 toward leadership in their communities through educational projects. The project produced a song with younger children singing about an end to killings and a desire to live in peace called 'The Rigor of the People'²¹. Below the video, the following description was added: 'The planting continues, our influence is to take place where the state will never reach since it cannot sell our dreams, the struggle is continuous and the action is constant'.

All of these examples illustrate how collective memories are reinforced and encouraged in Medellín. Contrary to dynamics of memory in Comuna 13, I noticed that the youth from Potrero Grande in Aguablanca, Cali tried to forget rather than remember as a means of survival or use their imaginations to create different memories far from reality. During the autobiography exercise for instance, many participants decided not to write and rather record their voices or simply did not share any personal information about

²¹ Video can be seen at:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0SsWNllyd4I&list=UUhq2dT2QIYkiTzCfOC9c-2A#t=17>

their lives. Some told me that it was because of security, others because their pasts were too 'ugly'.

In the case of Alexis in Cali, a 15-year-old boy originally from the department of El Cauca in the south-western part of Colombia, he chose to depict his story through a fantasy biography during the initial activities of the workshop:

My name is Alexis, I am 15 years old and I am from Cali where I was born. I am an only child and my father often travels for work, so I try to help my mom with the house after school. I like my neighbourhood, although I would like to have more friends. I like pretty girls and my girlfriend is the prettiest in my school, I think that is why other guys are jealous of me.

Alexis would barely speak, although he smiled a lot. He had different physical features and stood out from the rest of the group, which drew my attention even more to his story. I started to notice inconsistency in his portrayals, starting with his production of likes and dislikes (Figure 10B) where participants were asked to place themselves in relation to what meant most to them in their lives, both positively and negatively (e.g. people who mattered a lot would be placed closest to participant and those less further away). His lifeline (Figure 11B) confirmed my doubts as it differed from the story he had initially provided and the introduction he had given me when we met. When he submitted his finished product, he didn't pass it on to me like the rest of the participants, he kept it until the end of the session and approached me to give it to me. The lifeline contained the major events in Alexis' life including death as a recurring event:

- *1996: Birth*
- *My first month*
- *My first year*
- *My oldest brother 9 killed*
- *My fifth birthday*
- *When I went to school before*
- *My 10th birthday*
- *My oldest brother went to jail*
- *When I started to steal*
- *When I went to Medellín*
- *When I started to smoke*
- *When I killed*

- *(Future) I want a house*
- *I want to be someone in life*

Because of my surprise when I looked at what he had handed to me, I asked one of the social workers in the community centre about him; they told me he had just moved there two weeks prior with his mother and brother from the department of Cauca to escape recruitment by the paramilitaries. He and his family were now part of the large displaced community in Aguablanca. For several decades, El Cauca has been a centre of massacres perpetrated by various armed groups that have recruited a large number of young people. The department is also home to large groups of Indigenous people, some of the most affected by the on-going violence. However, the account provided by the social worker did not match the events depicted in Alexis' lifeline. It was not until shortly after meeting Alexis' mother that I obtained what I believe was the real story.

She was happy to meet me and told me that Alexis was really enjoying the workshops. I was surprised to see him home in the morning as he would normally be in school and when I inquired about it he remained quiet and was asked by his mother to leave. His mother then sat me down and explained to me what had really happened, which was far from the stories I had been previously provided. Alexis was part of a BACRIM in a small town, which she chose not to reveal to me, and he had been convicted of various felonies throughout his adolescence, however, managing to avoid incarceration. After his first murder, he was threatened with death by an opposing gang, which prompted his mother to take her two sons and move to Potrero Grande where they had distant relatives.

She did not provide me with many details but explained the context to me and asked for my discretion, as she was trying to build a new life for her family. Alexis' different narratives in his portrayal of his experiences appear fragmented in their inconsistency—his lived realities contrasted with either his desires for a different life or what was expected of him, or even both. His accounts may have also been the product of the constructed negative image associated with poor, marginalised youth and a desire for new possibilities and life paths. His lifeline does not appear to depict continuity, unlike the example in Figure 2B. His lifeline instead goes downward as if to suggest his past experiences and actions weigh on his present reality and push him further down. His

move to Potrero Grande with his mother to escape death also gave him a new beginning.

Likewise, young people in Potrero Grande would express their feelings of saturation, of focusing on the negativity in their lives and communities and would decide to rather speak of the positive, their talents and aspirations, and even asked to take a field trip. In one of the video shots, they decided to sing popular songs together from Cali demonstrating their musical skills through a project they had been working on together with a volunteer musician. I observed the same attitude with 12-year-old Diego from the same community who decided to only mark the present in his lifeline exercise with his aspirations for the future. He left the past blank and chose not to speak of it (Figure 11B). He proudly explained that he wanted to pursue a law degree and also become an army commander at the national level. Like many of his fellow young residents, Diego did not want to talk to me about his past but rather emphasised his future aspirations. Memory in his case was no longer about continuity but rather about possibility. Cali's young dwellers wanted to redefine themselves by their possible futures and positive attributes in lieu of their limiting pasts that continue to enchain them.

In a similar attempt to drift away from negative associations, 16-year-old Alberto, originally from the town of Tumaco on the Pacific coast, who was forcibly displaced with his siblings and mother on several occasions, portrayed his pride of his African descent in one of the photos he took during the free shooting assignment of young people in the neighbourhood (Figure 12B). He explained the photo as representative of his ancestry and culture: 'The children²² show our race and culture; they are of African descent. We come from the Pacific coast, a very strong African identity and characteristic'. Alberto continued to illustrate his pride in his African heritage in a video he produced as a result of the workshop called *Stories Behind the Promise*²³ where he depicts the perspectives of the community residents on their neighbourhood and a promise made by the government for improved livelihoods and educational facilities when they were relocated to Potrero Grande. The video begins by portraying the growing violence but also contrasts with images of talented youth playing musical instruments and women

²² Referring to young people below the age of twelve.

²³ Video can be seen at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SimvHb8uoIA&feature=youtu.be>

protesting for their rights. Alberto produced another video named *Caminos Negro* or Black Paths from his hometown, Tumaco, and what it meant for young people like him to be Afro-Colombian. Below, Alberto described his first production:

My name is Cesar Alberto Castro, I am 17 years and am the youngest of five siblings. Currently, I live in the city of Cali in the district 21 with my mother, my father died about 8 months ago. I am studying for my last year of school, I am a very cheerful and respectful to others, or so I'm told. I like to get involved in anything that has to do with art and culture. My dream is to become a great chef in a near future, if this is not possible I would become an excellent singer. My neighbourhood has different conflicts. As I enjoy the arts, culture and social work, I decided to do this documentary. The most serious problems are crime, drugs and the lack of opportunities. Somehow, I am affected by these situations that are unfortunate. This area is isolated by the rest of the town of Cali, and with this film I would like to show the best face of my community. I would like to help create jobs involving youth and mothers who are within these conflicts. They are the same young people who generate the conflict either by not keeping the mind on something productive.

Alberto was conveying his identity by remembering his ancestry, in which he took great pride, against the backdrop of the confining negative image of urban youth, especially of Afro-descendant urban youth. Just like his fellow participants, he was choosing to drive memory on the positive aspects of his reality to resist the harmful constructs imposed on residents of Aguablanca, consisting in its majority of an Afro-descendant population.

Some youth chose denial as a way of dealing with their realities, such as 17-year-old Jorge from Potrero Grande who had recorded some video footage in the last section of activities of the workshop and decided to erase it completely. He explained to me that he did not like it, as it was 'ugly'. Jorge had recently left the gang he belonged to after his younger brother had been fatally shot by an opposing group. Through an oral testimony, he told me that he felt he had set a bad example for his brother and was responsible for his death. He asked me to never inquire about his life again as he did not feel comfortable opening the wounds he had been trying to close, which I respected.

Instead, I noticed his great interest in the SLR camera I was carrying around, especially after I invited a documentary filmmaker to share a bit about his work with the youth in Potrero Grande. I handed it to him and put him in charge of documenting the workshop and leading some of the activities, which he gladly took responsibility for and proved to be extremely talented. Jorge, like many other youth in Potrero Grande who lack

opportunities and live in marginalised communities, was seeking recognition and visibility. He wanted to be remembered for his skills and contributions, rather than associated with the constant violence in his community. Jorge, like many other youth who do not want to emotionally expose themselves and receive no support, opted for oblivion and silence. That is the way he chose to give meaning to the experiences he had endured in an unsettling, violent, and constantly fluctuating setting.

Adolescents are learning how to manage their rapidly changing environments, minds, bodies, and emotions while navigating their way through the most important years of their growth. They are developing key skills that will enable them to manage life and cope with adversity at the same time as exploring their identities and potential. The participating adolescents' strong drive to move forward with their *Plan de Vida* (Life Plan), as they often call it, is matched in intensity by their remembrance, learning, and enhancing their wellbeing through acts of resilience and resistance. Such is the case of Comuna 13 through the creation of AMI, *Cuenta la 13*, and *Seeds for the Future*, among other initiatives.

When social fabric is deeply affected by the daily growing violence, it is through remembering and forgetting that young people make sense of the losses in their lives to violence (Villa Gómez, 2013). Villa Gómez (2013) described the processes of memory construction as an emotional recovery in three phases, from the private to the communal and eventually the socio-political level. He explained that memories move from the individual to the group level and the stories progress to a regional and even national level, creating spaces of memory for victims to vent their anger and pain and acquire a sense of freedom, and even a political stand. He explained that there is a subjective transformation through collective memory construction involving reinforcement as well as recovery.

Young dwellers of Comuna 13's acts of remembering and forgetting appeared to be highly linked to processes of the strongly established collective memory processes of the adults in their communities and even to an inter-generational practice of remembering unlike those living in Potrero Grande. One reason for this could be associated with the much stronger stigmatisation and exclusion experienced by residents of Potrero Grande for pertaining to the neighbourhood. Its dwellers do not possess a sense of belonging,

leading to a weak social fabric. As a result, there is no room for a sense of collective. Memory remains mainly in the private sphere and most stories often go untold.

As shown in this section, I observed that the existence of a stronger social fabric in a community, such as in the case of Medellín, provided the support network allowing its residents to remember. It fostered and encouraged a sense of the collective, permitting individual memories to leave their private sphere and be displayed in public. In Potrero Grande, young people in my study lacked the support of the collective and thus chose to forget or re-imagine as an attempt to re-fashion their lived realities. The use of visual methods in this research enabled me to explore some of these differences and to note where shared activities fostered or shut down the sharing of memory. I would even say that the use of visual methods with the young participants reinforced and reaffirmed their choices and stances in relation to memory. While some decided to erase certain events of their lives that may have been too painful or 'ugly', others felt the need to revive periods that were significant to them and hold on to a certain past or re-imagine their past and present to recreate a life that they desired, highlighting children's agency to negotiate their realities and change in their current and future circumstances. As seen earlier in this chapter, children clearly manifested their desires to resist or embrace memory in its different forms and selected the medium they were most comfortable with to reflect their standpoints. Nonetheless, a deeper sense of reflection on their current lives and conditions and discussion of their aspirations for the future most likely disrupted their perceptions of self and choices available for a better livelihood—(re)igniting memories of the past and prompting them to go beyond their limited environments. Questions for future research in relation to memory and its use for peace processes and reconciliation in limited and unchanged structural conditions remain. Can the recollection and preservation of memory further harm young people in societies with a weak social fabric and characterised by poverty and deep-seated social inequalities, exclusion, and discrimination? What are parallel actions that need to accompany memory initiatives in a country that has suffered high levels of violence over a prolonged period of time?

4. Conclusion

Within place and territorial references, young dwellers submerged in an enforced silence in Colombia are able to tell the tales pronounced by the violence in their lives. Shifting between remembering and forgetting allows them to make sense of their experiences and inject them with meaning and stability in a context fragmented with daily uncertainties. In attaching memory through practices of remembering, forgetting, or re-imagining to a corner of their neighbourhood, young people can (re)create their own sense of belonging and resist the continual uprooting that has been deeply entrenched in their lives. The active ways in which young people remembered and forgot demonstrated their tactical agency (Honwana, 2006) as well as their creativity and entrepreneurial agency as examined in Chapters V and VI.

Memory resides beyond the individual. Even in circumstances of inevitable oblivion, youth manifest their memories through recollection, denial, and re-creation by marking physical spaces surrounding them. They engaged actively on their streets in reclaiming the representations of their experiences and their aspirations, in protest of their lack of visibility and granted significance. In doing so, they created private spaces within public territories transcending their memories to the social realm. Just as confrontational young gang members mark territorial spaces of their neighbourhood with invisible frontiers, others use creative means such as graffiti, murals, monuments, and memorials for the same reason. Visualising lived or imagined memories constitutes one outlet to reconstruct their recollections of loss in a non-violent manner, find new meanings in the experience and gain some control over it.

In both communities, personal memories are woven within political and social processes. Yet, Potrero Grande's young did not enjoy the same luxury of memory as those of Comuna 13. They did not have the opportunity to use memory in the same way to reconstruct their identities. With weak community ties, collective mourning was non-existent. Young people become vulnerable when they expose their recollections and their pain without a support system. Their memories form a barrier between themselves and their environment, and once removed, pain ensues.

Faced with no collective support, the youth in Potrero Grande chose to forget in order to cope with their issues of loss. While keeping their memories to themselves prevented

them from immediate additional pain. Many of the youth showed suffering from large reservoirs of depression, fear, and anger that often led them to deep despair about their futures. Some among them sought new pathways of life, re-imagining their conditions and aspiring for better futures. What may appear as extreme choices of denial may be manifestations of their creativity and tactical and entrepreneurial agency in their detachment from 'ugly' pasts in order to create new selves and open paths for better opportunities.

With the continuous negative depictions of urban youth in the media, especially those of African descent, and the stigmatisation of their community, young people in Potrero Grande absorbed the deleterious perceptions adults have of them and often built them into their identities. They wanted to be recognised for their skills, talents, positive attributes, and their African ancestry. For this, they chose to forget their pasts, to break free of the heavy burdens they had been obliged to carry but did not choose to do so. Some of them decided to re-invent their present and depict positive memories of themselves, resisting their pasts and aspiring for improved futures, once more employing their tactical and entrepreneurial agency.

On the other hand, residents of Comuna 13 celebrated the dead through collective grieving. Joining communities of mourning and sharing their experiences helped participants of Comuna 13 create alternative 'families', providing them with a safe haven to explore their identities and make sense of their experiences against the backdrop of the devastating sequels of violence. Their memories were granted significance and transported to a social meaning serving as a passage between their personal and national history. By embedding their place in the story of their neighbourhood, young dwellers of Comuna 13 were able to develop a stronger sense of belonging to their community and a higher representation in the regional history.

Through collective narratives, the ties between community members became stronger, solidifying the social fabric. While memory allowed many of the youth in my research to process their losses, it also prevented others from transitioning from the past into the future and often became an obsession of preservation and invariability. Some of the young participants held on to their anger and the pain of their losses, unable to complete their mourning, haunted by their memories and that of their peers and neighbourhood.

Though practices of memory can assist in processing deep losses, when obsessive, they can become a hindrance to letting go of the past and rebuilding new beginnings. This complicated picture emerged largely through the visual data as it both enabled the young participants to take more control, develop or destroy their representations and also allowed me, as researcher, to take a more facilitator role, stepping back from and observing the process of representation.

Although young people in communities in Cali and Medellín differed in using memory to deal with the oppressing power of violence, in both settings they expressed and cherished the importance of unity—a collective space where they could build trust relations and solidify community bonds. As social fabric is weakened by the protracted war, communities are destroyed and people are divided by fear and mistrust. Violence reduces interactions and trust among residents and hinders the possibility of collectively coming to terms with loss. Gathering in a common place to share stories, in what Riaño Alcalá calls '*communities of memory*', community members defy the physical marks of violence and repossess the confiscated territories, create and fortify social ties, and re-establish stability as *history makers* (2006, p. 96). Where there is a presence of a strong social fabric and thus a greater sense of the collective, there is more support among residents giving way to the luxury of memory—individuals choose to remember. Once stories are granted significance and woven in the collective history of communities and regions, young people may become aware that their lives matter and can better cope with unceasing losses and limitations imposed by the persistent violence.

Chapter VIII: Discussions and Conclusion

'Even if you're not part of the war, they put you in it'.

Anonymous youth, Cali.

In this chapter I summarise the main findings from Chapters V, VI, and VII in dialogue with the interdisciplinary theoretical approaches reviewed in Chapter I. The main objective of this chapter is to answer the overarching research question: how do children in Colombia negotiate violence in their everyday lives? I answer this by first addressing the specific research questions: what forms of violence do children encounter in Colombia in their everyday lives? How do factors such as age, gender, ethnicity, and other social aspects play a role in children's perceptions of the armed conflict in Colombia? What tactics do children use to negotiate contexts of violence in Colombia? What is the potential for visual methodologies in research with young people? What are the implications of this analysis for violence prevention in Colombia?

Given my use of visual methods, I have decided to synthesise and link the themes emerging from the analysis through a diagram. This diagram will be constructed gradually, building on a discussion of young people's perceptions of forms and contexts of violence, then on their tactics in negotiating violence, and finally on the cyclical relationship of how young people affect and are affected by the multidimensional violence in Colombia. I will then draw some conclusions about how young people negotiate violence utilizing their creativity and entrepreneurial agency and the need to reframe the debate on children's engagement in war beyond child soldiering. I will end with reflections on the usefulness and limitations of the methods used and suggestions for future research.

1. Forms of Violence Young People Encounter and Perceptions of the Armed Conflict

1.1. Evolving War. Unchanged Conditions.

'Living with certain uncertainty can be in transit for several generations'.

Franz Fanon

As I discussed in earlier chapters, and which is also stressed by many researchers (Brett & Specht, 2004; Hart, 2006a; Gates & Reich, 2010; Mack, 2010), the issue of children's engagement with armed conflict that has received the attention of academics, humanitarians, and governments is primarily a manifestation of the existence of war. Protracted conflict has created a culture of violence, militarising and invading children's identities in a manner that will carry on unabated in the present context. To assume otherwise would be unrealistic.

Many factors have altered the nature of the present warfare in Colombia. As discussed in Chapter V, Section 1.2, the conflict is no longer justified by philosophical ideals but is instead inspired by financial motives. The emergence of more recently formed militias (Chapter II, Section 1) has blurred the lines between different armed actors. The government's collaboration with gangs, *sicarios*, and recognised armed groups has also increased based on the interdependence of their operations.

On a geographical level, the conflict has shifted from rural to urban settings, meaning armed groups are now able to function virtually without detection in metropolitan areas and effectively pushing the conflict 'underground'. Given the proximity of living spaces in inner-city communities, young people are increasingly exposed to a variety of armed groups and war activities, and to an elite, accentuating social disparities. The inequality and exclusion experienced by the young and poor within these settings heightens their awareness of the stigmatisation and marginalisation pervasive within the community.

While the current conflict has undergone many changes, the structural conditions and inequalities that initiated the war have remained constant. As demonstrated in prior chapters, the data show that children who have directly or indirectly engaged in the armed conflict had backgrounds characterized by poverty and social exclusion. Young people repeatedly expressed frustration at the lack of work opportunities and educational prospects available to them, reinforcing their felt-exclusion from all power structures. Given this, left-wing militias continue to make use of Marxist ideals when recruiting young people at the margins of society, despite the war no longer being primarily ideological in nature. Indeed, my findings indicate that a large majority of children who joined the war, even those who claim to have acted 'voluntarily', did so to leave behind severe conditions in search of a better life. A young man from Cali described this distinction as 'obligated' versus 'forced' recruitment.

In other words, as opposed to being required or coerced to act in some way, children may also be 'obligated' to make certain choices based on available options, interests, and need. If present-day Colombian society fails to offer young people opportunities for growth and continues to fail to include them in the political, economic, and social spheres, recruitment and re-recruitment efforts will persist and most likely increase. Hence, it is fundamental to reframe the discourse on young people's engagement with violence using the presence of war, international legislations, and human rights as the point of departure rather than limiting it to child recruitment. In the following subsection, I explore these themes in greater detail by discussing the interlaced violence starting in the family unit, echoed in the *barrio*, and intensified by war within the nation.

1.2.From Household to the Street to National Combat

Chapters V-VII showed how, in a context of prolonged armed conflict, different types of violence are intertwined and directly linked to gradations of fear and insecurity. As Javier's diagram from Chapter VI, Section 3.1 demonstrated, violence permeates all layers of society, from the national to the personal level, leaving no distinction between political and non-political violence. Many of the children in the communities of Cali and Medellín had experienced violence within their homes, often translating to outbreaks of violence outside their households. As was eloquently put by a young woman in Medellín, 'how the story ends has to do with how it began at home'. Parallel instances of different types of violence in families and local communities stem from political conflicts at the national level and are inherently interconnected and mutually reinforcing.

The analysis offered in Chapter VI emphasises the omnipresence of fear and insecurity as one of the greatest inhibitors of growth and progress in poor urban communities, thereby placing great pressure on members of the household and leading some families to break up. The impact of poverty and uncertainty across generations should be added to this picture; most young participants referred to their family members' struggle to make a living, especially male providers. Constant states of uncertainty, insecurity, and increasing violence, have deeply affected many families. Many youth in my research consistently expressed a duty to take care of their family and took on nurturing positions

to make up for the absence of adult caretakers. This parallels Hecht's notion of nurturing childhoods (2008). My data in Chapter V also revealed that both boys and girls displayed nurturing feelings in similar manners, blurring boundaries between nurturing femininities and provider masculinities.

Moser and McIlwaine (2004) and Rodríguez (2011) have explored the notion of social capital or social fabric in the Colombian context with the aim of examining the relation between violence, trust, and social institutions. They affirmed that violence and fear impinge on the ability of individuals and households to function and affect the social dynamics within communities. In Chapter III, I stressed that the change in children's roles and responsibilities in contexts of war is directly linked to the collapse of structure and basic principles in society (Honwana, 2006), whereas data presented in Chapters V-VII showed that young people from households with a solid support network demonstrated greater levels of resilience and were less likely to choose violent pathways. The same relationship was true for children living in communities with a strong social fabric: they showed more resistance to violence and evinced a developed sense of identity and belonging.

My research, demonstrating the strong connection between what occurs within and beyond the household, supports Rodríguez's (2001) argument explaining the link between the social fabric of communities and the resilience shown by their members and emphasizing that social fabric is inversely proportional to the probability of recruitment of young people by armed groups. The social fabric or 'unity', as described by the youth, between community dwellers and within the family plays a significant role in influencing how young people decide to deal with violence and its outcomes.

1.3. At the Bottom of the Hierarchy of Violence

'To stay alive, we don't seek peace'.

Adolescent boy from Cali

Within this study, participants' accounts revealed a variety of indices of violence operating at different levels within society, such as a lack of state intervention in marginalised regions, diminished access to employment opportunities, options routinely being subject to area and ethnic stigmatisation, neglect by elites, pervasive levels of

corruption, scars left by political violence, and the armed forces' violent terrorism of Colombians and control of illegal industries and territories. Although children's views, perspectives, and experiences tend to be systematically overlooked and undervalued (Boyden and Levison, 2000; Hart and Tyrer, 2006), young people in my study showed high levels of consciousness and understanding of the complexities of the dynamics stemming from the pervasive violence and exclusion in their neighbourhoods, in their country, and around the world (see Chapter VI).

Importantly, the young people in my study were also aware of the actors responsible for keeping them at the bottom of the social ladder. They held the government accountable for corruption, involvement in war atrocities, and increasing marginalisation of young poor Colombians—thus increasing their general mistrust of the state. Based on their thorough analytical understanding of the undercurrents and interdependence of the political, economic, and social system in place, and contrary to modern notions of childhood as intrinsically associated with innocence, weakness, and dependence on adult guidance (Hart, 2006a; Honwana, 2006), young people were very conscious of their choices. This reinforces the notion that, even in situations of extreme hardship, young people are active survivors (Boyden, 2003) and make use of their tactical agency (Honwana, 2006) as well as their entrepreneurial agency.

Those participating in this research expressed frustration with their perceived helplessness and with the way they felt crushed by the weight of exclusionary power structures, daily uncertainty, insecurity, and ubiquitous violence. The lack of protagonism attributed to children in the development of their communities is largely a consequence of their weak position in society at large (Boyden & Levison, 2000), a standing that clashes with their former heroic stand and valued contributions of children in the Colombian context that were discussed in Chapter V. Colombia is an elitist country run by a robust establishment linked to corruption and human rights violations. A system rooted in inequality with clearly defined class structures determines access to privileges and opportunities for growth—reinforcing the crucial need to rethink children's responses to violence starting with the presence of war, the prevailing impunity and human rights as the starting point

The constant denial of access to power and the maintenance of subjugating contexts for youth propelled the participants in this study to seek paths granting them more control

over their lives. Influenced by their personality traits, family history, ethnicity, age, and gender, each young individual chose a way of gaining power putting their entrepreneurial agency into practice. Yet, and regardless of their individual choices, the common trait among young people who participated in my research was their similar background of educational and economic constraints and social exclusion.

Owing to this situation of relative disempowerment, I recorded a palpable amount of anger among youth participants, although different young people channelled resentment in different ways. Of particular significance, children, as an act of resistance against the indifference shown by the elite within their society, funnelled their frustration and pain into war activities. Resisting the lucrative hierarchical structure of violence and its power outcomes is nearly impossible in communities dominated by stakeholders. Youth often turned these barriers into opportunities with their entrepreneurial wit, taking advantage of the business of war and thus moving up within the hierarchy of control and influence.

Children who engaged in violence, indirectly or as combatants, shared similar motives of recognition, significance, and visibility—all of which they had been previously and consistently denied. Nonetheless, the negative construct of poor, urban youth, especially of Black youth, associated with delinquency and violence, pushes them further down the social ladder. Likewise, the physical segregation and stigmatisation they experienced reinforced these boundaries.

Figure 5 summarises the forms of violence young people encountered and how they perceived the dynamics surrounding them based on their personality, age, gender, ethnicity, and family milieu, as well as the social fabric of their community, interests, and necessities.

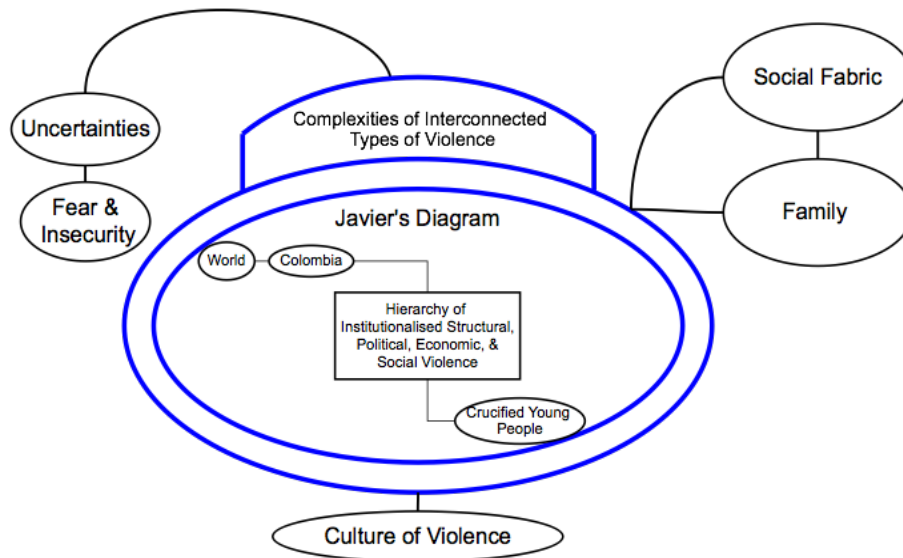


Figure 5: Forms and perceptions of contexts of violence by young people

Building on the diagram developed by 16-year-old Javier from Cali (Chapter VI, Section 3.1), which illustrates the interconnectedness of the different types of violence experienced by youth in his community, I have consolidated the findings from the perspectives of other young people in both Cali and Medellín. In doing so, I identified how youth envisage and position themselves in the hierarchy of institutionalised structural, political, economic, and social violence, as well as the relevance of uncertainty, fear and insecurity, the social fabric of the community, and family undercurrents that affect this construct of interconnected types of violence.

The above diagram helps display the power relations that make and sustain the culture of dominance and violence in Colombia, a culture that relies on the young and poor remaining subdued. As long as a fairly large population of young underprivileged have-nots continue to keep the power machine running, the elite who are profiting from this situation will continue to maintain positions of power. However, it is important to note that young people have not remained passive in their limited contexts. Indeed, the next section will explore the considerable resourcefulness demonstrated by young people in distressing situations, portraying their entrepreneurial agency and the manner and means by which they have continued to pursue better lives.

2. Tactics in Negotiating Contexts of Violence

2.1. Beating Exclusion and Invisibility

Young people in this study made their choices about their engagement in violence in an attempt to improve their livelihoods and boost their social status and that of their relatives, regardless of moral bounds. While war in Colombia is no longer primarily driven by Marxist ideology, if at all, many of the children engaged in warlike activities did so in an effort to combat inequalities, to display their resilience, and to assert strategic and entrepreneurial agency for personal political aims.

Children engaging in violence all shared a common background of poverty and marginalisation, however they did not form a homogeneous group of helpless victims. Each participant perceived violence in a distinct way and made decisions about their circumstances according to their personality traits, family, community, social and economic status, and the prevailing culture of violence. In a critical sense, and as a theme central to this inquiry, they negotiated violence and its associated uncertainties by creating new roles and shifting between existing ones, while also adopting different coping mechanisms putting into practice their entrepreneurial skills.

Alcinda Honwana (2006) explained that children are flexible in their roles when responding to their situations, especially during war. Whether their decisions were based on avoiding violence or using it as an opportunity, the young people in my study were all driven by a desire for power as a tactic to resist and overcome their exclusion from dominant structures. These children were keenly aware of how they were constructed in the media and by the elite, and how they were excluded from the public and ostracised from the communal polity. Thus, they made informed decisions to engage in battles that could empower them to make decisions affecting their lives as tactical and entrepreneurial agents. Children confronted their conditions as subjects and actively took part in their surrounding dynamics of limited opportunities and violence as a way of improving circumstances for themselves and their families while at the same time defying the construction of them as agents incapable of rational and informed decision-making (Aptekar, 1998; Boyden, 2003; Boyden & Mann, 2005; Hart, 2006a).

Young subjects repeatedly expressed a desire to be respected and seen by society, especially by those who had for so long neglected them. When a productive life seemed out of reach for those living in contexts of crime and poverty, many turned to violent activities. Young people made use of the profitable activities of war as a way of overcoming structural inequalities and in an effort to create opportunities. In upgrading social status and realising economic gains, these children were also acquiring political assets and positions of authority in their entourages. At the same time, war activities provided many young people with an avenue to manifest their grievances and an opportunity to gain social significance. Whether their choices branched off into taking part in military life as a soldier, becoming a *sicario* or a member of a BACRIM, or engaging in the trafficking industries, young people were able to forge a transition into adulthood.

Each child experiences war and its outcomes differently, and their reasons to engage or not in violence can vary greatly. A few of my young participants attempted to deviate from violence by working in a non-war activity or pursuing their studies. Many, regardless of the route they took, were recognised as combatants, gang members, or *sicarios* and made decisions based on their perceptions of their duties to nurture and provide for their families, thereby displaying what Tobias Hecht (1998) called 'nurturing childhoods'. In the same manner, they utilised their creativity and resilience in a strategic and entrepreneurial manner and demonstrated political stands by overcoming structural disparities and rupturing their conditions of invisibility and irrelevance. In doing so, children reconstructed their realities and redefined their identities, a point explored in greater detail in the following subsection.

2.2.Reconstructing Identities. Reinventing their Present.

Despite their exclusion from society, participants in this study sought ways to take a stand in the civic arena. In their attempts to make sense of their experiences of continuous occurrences of violence, they demonstrated their resistance to a constant state of change, uprooting, uncertainty, and stigmatisation by redefining their selves, their circumstances, and their surroundings with their entrepreneurial talents. They understood that a power battle was necessary to counterbalance the negative representations of poor urban youth, especially representations of Afro-descendants. As

stressed in Chapter VI, the Colombian media continuously showed that the lives of young members of socially marginalised communities did not matter, portraying them as outcasts and unworthy of the rights enjoyed by the privileged.

The national government and other armed actors have made it clear they do not recognise or value the lives of young Colombians. Urban youth have unceasingly struggled to counter destructive representations of them, defiantly redefining their sense of character by reclaiming their images and their streets. For many, resorting to violence helped them reposition themselves in the social strata, delivering an alternative image of young dwellers within poor urban settings (Sanchez & Bryan, 2003; Machado & Ocoro, 2004; Wade, 2012).

Young people also reclaimed their representations by marking their territories in their neighbourhoods, as discussed in Chapter VII and as evidence of what Pilar Riaño-Alcalá (2006) has called 'place-making'. They did so by attaching memory and meaning to neighbourhoods that provided them with the significance and continuity they could not find in a community saturated by violence. In the form of visual displays, graffiti, murals, monuments, and memorials, young people confronted their lack of visibility and irrelevance by imposing their memories, perceptions, and worth in the public realm. Moreover, they portrayed their response to the alleged incompetence of youth by demonstrating they were capable of accessing and appropriating power spaces that systemically rejected them. For example, young gang members discussed in Chapter VI, marked territorial spaces of their neighbourhoods with invisible frontiers, thereby affirming their power and aptitude.

Youth in my study were frustrated that they were denied self-determination and their identities were packaged and consumed by external audiences (Charmaraman, 2008), especially by the state and local governing authorities. Moreover, many of the children were engaged in a struggle against their inability to transition to adulthood. As a result of the uncertainties and feelings of powerlessness brought by war, they sought positions of power that allowed them greater control over the decisions that affected their lives and those of their families—once more supporting the necessity to reframe the discourse on children's engagement in violence starting from the pervasiveness of armed conflict, inequalities and exclusion.

Beyond tactical agents (Honwana, 2006), they also displayed aspirations for their futures, redefining their masculinities and femininities at times and confronting gender stereotypical roles—young men, like young women, displayed nurturing attributes, while some young women engaged in violence in the same ways as young men (see Chapter V). In doing so, these young people were not only making efforts to alter their prospects for the future; by re-creating their conditions and maximising their opportunities, they were also reinventing their present. They used memory to transform their livelihoods by reimagining their present circumstances, forgetting difficult and hurtful pasts, and picturing more promising futures, once more exhibiting their productive creativity.

While the youth of Potrero Grande did not have the same opportunities to reconstruct their identities by participating in NGO programmes as those in Comuna 13, my analysis shows how they refashioned their present and memories of themselves by choosing to forget their pasts as a way of liberating themselves from its burdens. Memory was used to transcend the barriers of social inequality, constant uprooting, fragmented lives, dismantled families, and communities fuelled by daily uncertainties, fear, and insecurity. They reconstituted social fabrics and their need to belong through collective mourning, or by forming a family, enlisting in a gang, or joining a community initiative that proclaimed unity.

The youth of Comuna 13 re-created alternative 'families' through collective narratives that strengthened the ties between community members, solidifying the social fabric. Others from broken families re-created their missing kinship among *parches* or *combos*, or any organisation where they could satisfy their need to belong and feed their yearning for more cooperative environments. Young people unceasingly made use of creative ways to navigate opportunities and challenges and to reconstruct their realities and identities, subsequently legitimising their voices and experiences.

Figure 6 adds a second half to the discussion diagram, summarising the tactics and entrepreneurial agency used by the young poor in Colombia when it comes to negotiating violent contexts.

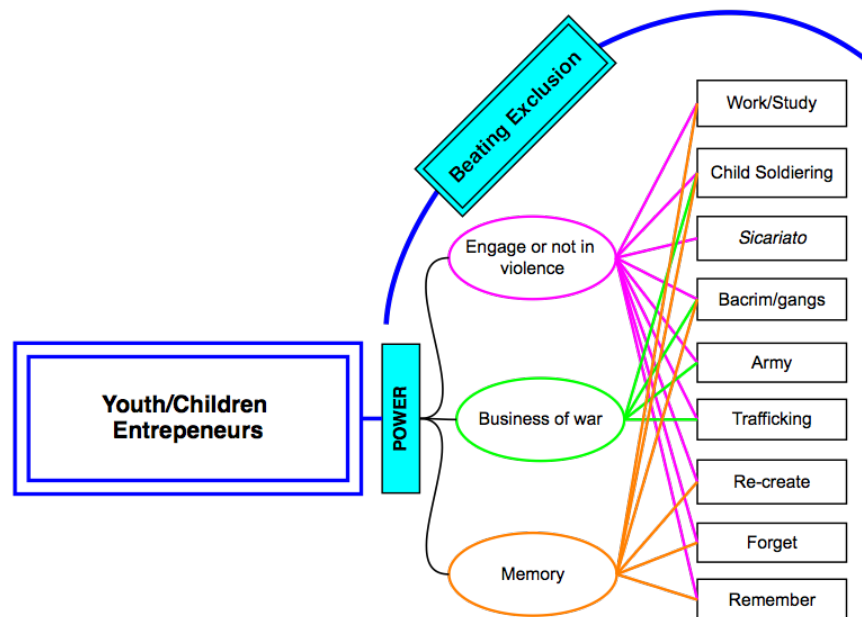


Figure 6: Tactics in Negotiating Violence

Figure 6 further illustrates that motives of and responses to violence are multidimensional and interconnected. While the young people made diverse choices in response to violence, ‘power’ was the common ground linking those choices. They understood that in order to be less affected by the violence surrounding them, and in order to lead better lives, they needed power. And as we can see, there were various paths by which to acquire that power.

3. Potential for Visual Methodologies in Research with Young People

While I envisaged using a planned series of visual methods in combination with other methods prior to holding the workshops with young people in both Cali and Medellín, many other creative forms of resistance and reaction emerged from youth themselves. During the development of the project, I found the need to adapt my methodology based on the context I was in and pursuant to my participants’ needs, will, and suggestions. Given my personal need to visualise information, it was only natural to apply my creativity and connect it to that of the young participants with whom I was engaging.

Using participatory visual methodologies in research with children and youth facing

adversity in contexts of war requires the process to incorporate the multiple functions of their lived realities so that research also becomes a means of intervention (Palloff, 1996). Many of the children participated in the process, at least initially, because of the benefits they were to gain, which in this case was the learning of new skills in media production and other creative avenues. Participants were not merely subjects of research but co-producers of a project, reducing the imbalance of power between researcher and subject within this study. Visual methods also addressed the issue of some young people's lack of engagement in the research process as well as the language barriers. While I speak Spanish, many young participants used slang I was unfamiliar with, meaning that creative visual methods granted more power to young people by giving them greater control over their narratives because they were able to choose what they wanted to represent.

The use of visual methods enabled young people in my study to make choices over what information they were going to share and which means they were to use to portray their stories and perspectives. This approach helped to reinforce and reaffirm their positions in relation to their experiences and highlight their agency to negotiate their opportunities and limitations. While some of the young participants chose to omit certain aspects or periods of their lives or recreate them in a distinct way, others decided to hold on to a past that was meaningful to them. Some avoided certain topics all together which they felt stigmatised them further or made them feel uncomfortable or saturated and instead opted for themes that they felt more relevant to their lives. A few of the participants felt more at ease taking photographs, others took over the filming aspect of the learning process, led the journalism initiative, or simply preferred to engage in-group discussions or speak privately. Their decisions varied based on various factors, including their personal experiences, personalities, interests, limitations, self-esteems, their neighborhoods and family histories. Many adolescent boys, especially those in Aguablanca, appeared to be illiterate, and so for them visual methods helped overcome a sense of shame while also providing the ability to transgress barriers of communication.

This power granted to young participants over their productions and participation served as a channel for them to exercise their agency by elucidating the complexities of their private and public spheres. Youth in my study were given complete freedom in directing

their productions and were encouraged to share their thoughts and visions of their worlds as they understood them, making the research more relevant to them. They had complete control over which parts of their realities to share and, in certain instances, many decided not to discuss or exhibit in any form events from their past in an effort to forget troubling memories.

Visuals, especially photographs, have the potential to galvanise individuals to collective action. Especially in Comuna 13, graffiti often involved political statements of youth inciting other young dwellers to rethink their circumstances and dynamics affecting their livelihoods and the community. In introducing their realities into the public sphere through a variety of visual means, children were also aiming to beat invisibility, and voice their concerns, perspectives, and values, helping affirm their social, economic, and political contributions to society.

The effectiveness of employing diverse visual methods demonstrated the potential of visual methods for research in general with young people and particularly in the context of conflict and humanitarian emergencies. They open the possibility of obtaining enriched data, examining issues in detail with little or no interference with the responses. Utilizing a variety of visual methodologies allows young people to express themselves in a variety of ways, overcoming language and writing ability barriers prevalent in contexts of intensified violence and social exclusion. Their non-verbal quality provides an alternative to young people who may fear recording their stories in writing due to insecurity in their neighbourhoods. The same holds true for young people who may resist remembering hurtful periods of their lives: they can have the option to visually or artistically interpret how they prefer to be portrayed and remembered. Finally, visual methods could avoid the linked feeling between writing with school experiences and direct interviews with police interrogation, both considered to be the 'institution'.

4. Key Findings

4.1. Beyond Child Soldiering: Shifting Roles Across Contexts of Violence

My contribution to knowledge in this section is two-fold: the issue remains the presence of armed conflict incorporating all children engaged in combat and not only those recognised by the national government as child soldiers; and the inequality and exclusion that gave rise to the conflict which remains at the core of the violence, propelling Colombia's young population to partake in the conflict through different means and by way of different roles—highlighting once more the distinction between 'obligated' and 'forced' recruitment. There is a crucial need to reframe the current debate on child recruitment beyond the category of child soldiers using the protracted war and its outcomes, international legislations such as the UNCRC, and human rights as departure points.

I conclude that it is not realistic to separate the activities of the war from the social structures that created and perpetuated the armed conflict these children have experienced. As violence is multidimensional and has penetrated the layers of Colombian society and weakened, as well as transformed, the social fabric of communities, I assert that children navigate between the resulting phenomena of war including, but not limited to, child recruitment. Moreover, the association between social capital and child recruitment influences the identities children build with their environment, defining and redefining childhood in different contexts.

I argue that examining children's responses to war through the scope of only one type of violence and its motives in isolation from other forms narrows the knowledge of the experiences of young people in that context. The existence of armed conflict requires the active participation of individuals, including children. All armed parties in the Colombian conflict, both ones recognised and unrecognised by the national government, need and use the services of children for their operations in combat and in related activities, blurring the lines between the large variety of war dynamics and industries.

Accordingly, I establish that children navigate between different armed groups, shifting amid their engagements in associated war undertakings and their roles between

categories of child combatants as child soldiers, *sicarios*, or members of a BACRIM. It is very common for a former child soldier to enter another armed group as a *sicario* or BACRIM member after a demobilisation process. Faced with the same structural shortcomings that prompted their decisions to engage in war and the many deficiencies of current DDR processes, young people make the most suitable decisions based on opportunities, even if that means returning to war activities. As in the case of child soldiers, *sicarios*, as well as those who join BACRIMs, endeavour to break away from their milieus of poverty and marginalisation, upgrading their social statuses and attaining power by engaging in war activities. What must be emphasized here is that these child militias are not recognised as legitimate combatants by the Colombian government, but are instead considered to be groups of common criminals.

While all three classifications of children share similar roles as combatants within the framework of the armed conflict in Colombia, only the recognised ones are labelled as child soldiers. There is no clear demarcation of who should be recognised as a child soldier; those who fall out of that category do not enjoy the benefits of a DDR process compared to their 'legitimate' counterparts. In addition to the government-run DDR program, local and international humanitarian organisations invest a great deal of their intervention initiatives and time spent lobbying for policies on behalf of child soldiers, leaving out the remainder of children engaged in the Colombian conflict. This categorisation allows for further marginalisation of thousands of victims suffering from the abuses of illegitimate combatants by removing their actions from the wider context of the extended conflict. As a result, current initiatives intended to protect the young at war have failed, as they do not challenge the sources of violence taking into perspective all of the encompassing war dynamics.

Child *sicarios*, as well as children engaged with a BACRIM, represent an important childhood space in Colombia, propelling children to choose between securing economic capital by collaborating with a militia, or social capital by working to avoid association with all armed groups. I contend that unless attention is given to *all* children affected by the war, and while the structural causes of the armed conflict that sustain inequality and suppress opportunities remain unchanged, the significant levels of violence that currently exist will not subside. When peaceful tactics are not possible in the dominant culture of

violence in Colombia, young people tend to return to what they know, adopting many and different roles beyond those we consider to be child soldiers.

With the strong financial incentives of the armed conflict and the structural limiting conditions of injustice, inequality, and exclusion, young people will continue to navigate between different identities and new groups will form, continuously feeding the cycle of armed conflict. As long as injustice and inequality thrive in Colombia, there will not be any possibility for peace.

Research has demonstrated that motives for, forms of and responses to violence in Colombia are multidimensional and interconnected. I claim that in a given context of protracted armed conflict, where many forms of violence interact and interlace, children will engage as child soldiers but also adopt other roles. To fully comprehend the phenomenon of violence in Colombia, the elements of the conflict cannot be considered in isolation. Examining forced displacement, for instance, requires taking into account recruitment and trafficking, among other undercurrents.

I introduce the danger of omitting child combatants, other than the identified child soldiers, in order to design and implement successful policies and best practices both for child protection and peace building. Solutions call for in-depth investigations into the ways childhood evolves under conditions of conflict in Colombia. Only a thorough and sober assessment of this sort can bridge the gap between the 'rights' accorded to children by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and the realities of their lives in the context of other socio-cultural factors and influences. Having explored the broader nature of the problem of violence confronted by young people in Colombia, I will in the next section portray the creativity children employ in their entrepreneurial agency as they navigate different identities in a tactical effort to maximise and even fashion new opportunities.

4.2. Young People are Creative Entrepreneurs

My second key conclusion is that young people are creative entrepreneurs and not passive subjects of violence. They should not be reduced to victimisation, and they use

their creativity and entrepreneurial agency to overcome exclusion and limiting conditions, even if their decisions are not optimal. They are go-getters who want to maximise their situations and opportunities in an effort to achieve upward mobility. In no way am I trying to romanticise their struggle or 'hustling'; instead, I seek to highlight the capacity, strength, defiance and creativity evident in the paths they choose as a part of their attempts to break the images imposed on them. I argue that a holistic conception of youth resilience can create space for more innovative thinking.

I demonstrate that children clearly understand their circumstances and options, and make decisions based on their perceptions of the world. Beyond escaping hardship and their low profile at the bottom of the social order, a large majority of youth in my research fashioned themselves through the use of wit and knowledge of how historical, political, and social complexities complicated ideas of personhood. Exploring their identities generally meant confronting issues of fear, insecurity, continuous violence, racism, social and economic discrimination, area stigmatisation, and general public distrust. Many of the young people I interacted with demonstrated a level of tenacity, focus, and entrepreneurial ingenuity, which was striking considering the hardships and barriers they have confronted and continue to face. My findings assert that young people are not just tactical agents, as discussed by Alcinda Honwana (2006), but also what I am calling 'creative entrepreneurs' employing and maximizing their entrepreneurial agency.

As I have shown in previous sections of this chapter, many of their creative and entrepreneurial endeavours also served to ease and hasten their passage into adulthood, a process that is made extremely challenging with the limitations tied to daily uncertainties and a prevailing context of violence. Local understandings of age demarcation in poor urban areas of Colombia require young people to take on adult responsibilities early in life, clashing with modern constructions of childhood. Because this was especially true for young males, I discuss how creativity and entrepreneurship were necessary tools in their enterprises with war activities as a contemporary rite of passage into manhood. In effect, they achieved recognition and celebration as 'heroes', in the same way boy combatants had been historically acknowledged (Chapters III and V).

Labelling those under the age of eighteen as 'children' and depicting them as powerless and reliant on adults, as guided by the UNCRC, can generate sentiments of despair and victimisation. This does not promote their abilities to cope or create; nor does it portray their realities. In the same manner that negative stereotypes are harmful to young people, portraying them as victims and 'innocent' children can damage their perceptions and experiences of personhood. I argue that employing the construct of the child as laid out by the UNCRC is not only inapt in the Colombian context but also destructive for its younger population. Disregarding young people's own perceptions can lead to inadequate intervention and a failure to meet their actual needs or take their welfare seriously.

Throughout my exchanges with these young participants, I was careful to frame conversations about youth in a way that did not limit their potential or create barriers. Mental constructs associating young people with detrimental aspects of society can result in a narrowing of both theory and practice. Thinking of them as not just tactical agents but also as creative entrepreneurs working within the wide range of circumstances in which they are engaged challenges the traditional approach.

Young people in my study were focused on demonstrating their capacities as not only consumers but also producers within society. They wanted to be recognised as social, economic, and political actors in charge of their destinies and those of their kin, their communities, and even their country. In this regard, it is essential that we rethink our tendency to categorise them as distinct from the rest of the population. On the other hand, it is also important to identify the privileges they are seeking and tackle the tactics they use with a more equal distribution of economic, political, and social resources.

Illustrating the above contributions to our understanding of these interrelated issues, the combination of Figures 5 and 6 in the diagram below (figure 7) displays the various multidimensional phenomena of violence in Colombia that are interconnected at the individual, family, and community levels. Figure 7 exhibits the entrepreneurial agency and creativity in earning power and privileges of young people as they work to address issues of exclusion and inequality, shifting between interlaced roles across different contexts of violence that extend beyond child soldiering. Finally, the diagram exemplifies children's function and their contribution to the cyclical phenomenon of

multidimensional violence in Colombia—where children are not only affected by the armed conflict but are also key actors in shaping the war with the choices they make.

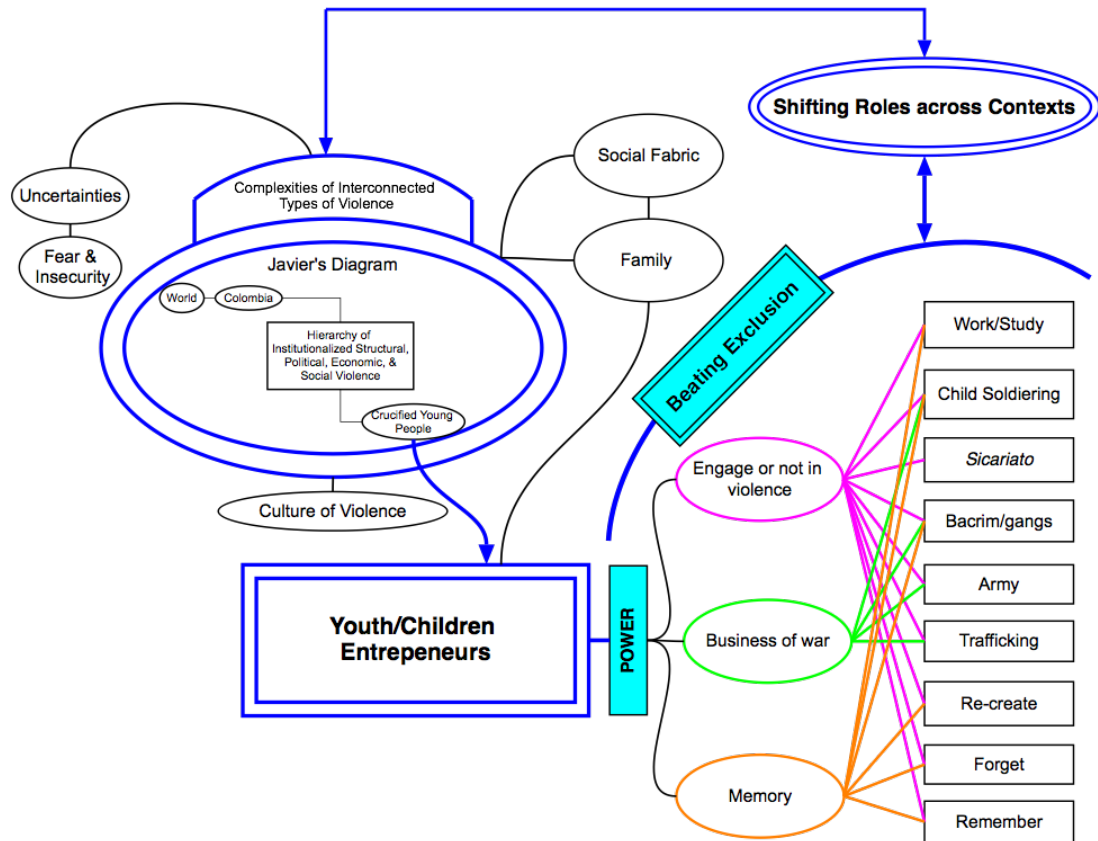


Figure 7: Creative young entrepreneurs in the cycle of multidimensional violence in Colombia

5. Challenges and Limitations of Research

In conducting this research, I faced multiple challenges, including the approach and research methods I had initially designed, difficulties with access, security issues, the reality of ethno-racial and gender discrimination experienced by the participants, geographical remoteness, what I represented as a foreigner and an academic, participation levels and power dynamics, among others. In certain instances, these complications forced limitations and gaps in the data collected. At the same time, these challenges presented opportunities, particularly as the strategies and solutions I employed allowed for perspectives that might not otherwise have been possible. In the

end, the access I enjoyed, coupled with the multiplicity of techniques, is one of the greatest strengths of this study.

One of the main challenges I faced initially was the set of assumptions on the nature of the setting and the participants on which I built a framework for my methodology prior to starting my fieldwork. I had to adapt to each setting based on the context I found, especially the characteristics of the children, their histories, their needs, and their interests. For instance, group discussions were more successful in Medellín, where young people were more engaged in conversation and did not feel threatened by others or the topic. This was largely due to the stronger social fabric of their community and the fact that they knew their experiences and challenges could be shared collectively, as well as their prior exposure to non-profit organisations and human rights initiatives that incentivised self-expression in the combating of human rights issues. In contrast, in the community in Cali, where there had been limited to no intervention by humanitarian organisations, young dwellers in Comuna 13 were more confident and keen to participate in the workshops I implemented as opposed to the discussion.

The location of the community in each city also played a prominent role in young people's engagement in my research. Comuna 13's proximity to the city centre, as well as the presence of a metro line and other forms of public transportation, meant that its young population were able to mobilise throughout Medellín, interact with the rest of the city, and take part in the facilities and programs offered by the government and humanitarian organisations. Aguablanca is far away from the centre of Cali, and access to the community in general is limited and difficult. Its young dwellers are comparatively isolated. Moreover, the larger number of Afro-descendants in Cali subject to great levels of racial discrimination had been systemically silenced and had lowered their self-esteem in the process of internalising racism.

As I reviewed in Chapter II, Afro-Colombians are the most affected by high levels of violence, both as victims and perpetrators, and the negative image promoted by the media and the elite has inhibited their prospects for growth, presenting them as incompetent and undesirable citizens. I found myself spending considerable time in deconstructing these notions and inviting these members to contribute to this research. For many of the youth in Cali, visual processes, especially filming and photography,

were more successful and desirable. Boys in general joined more actively than girls in both locations, especially in group discussions, although Medellín outweighed Cali in terms of participation by girls. While girls generally found it easier to engage with me, most likely because of same-sex identification, the imbalance in their engagement can be explained by the high levels of sexual violence experienced, cultural and local notions of gender, access to educational opportunities, and exposure to other young people.

Clearly, I faced many dilemmas in my research. Filming and some photography were not used as much as I thought they would be due to the security issues. While the flexibility and responsiveness of my approach was an asset, in extracting data on highly sensitive and personal subjects, there were challenges in analysing the visual data collected, starting with my interpretation. The amount of data collected from individuals was variable; some of the data for instance included fragments of conversations rather than uninterrupted taped interviews that could be easily transcribed. Although young people explained in a group discussion or privately to me according to their own choice, there were some difficulties at times to recognize and understand the data. I attempted to minimise the errors by triangulating the data collected from the same young person, allowing me to acquire a better and more encompassing understanding of their perspectives and experiences and ensuring coherence between data, interpretation and conclusions. As some of the youth only used their preferred method (e.g. video), if their pertaining data happened to be unclear to me, I would generally decide not to include it in my analysis.

Some youth also did not see value in the process, which I believe can be explained by the limited training session I was able to conduct. Another explanation is the absence of a culture of self-expression that exists in the Global North based on the notion of free speech and more liberties enjoyed. Many of the young participants avoided negative topics affecting their lives. When they did make use of cameras and camcorders, the product obtained was initially far from relevant to the topic of my research. Nonetheless, it revealed what actually mattered to them and the significance of the negative construct of poor urban youth. It is important to note that I began with the notion that it was vital to discuss the violence in their lives as an attempt to shed some visibility on what was taking place in many of the marginalised regions of Colombia. I had come to learn and accept that not all young participants thought the same way or saw the importance of

bringing up such topics.

Although I am accustomed to working in contexts of war, specifically the Colombian case, undertaking research in violence-prone areas was both very difficult and limiting. Sometimes I was unable to travel to the communities of Potrero Grande and Comuna 13 due to violence. Additionally, as conflict is dynamic, I had to be ready at any given time to let go of a part of my research or data to avoid any possible risks for both the young participants and myself. In one instance, I lost contact with a non-profit organisation coordinator with whom I was to conduct the workshops because he disappeared and changed all of his contact information. Unfortunately, it is very common for human rights activists and even academics to be threatened by different armed actors.

My characteristics as a researcher and the personalities of the young participants affected how I interacted with them and their responses and participation. I was a foreigner to them and one who was associated with the United States, which is often linked to the DEA (Drug Enforcement Administration) and 'evil' capitalism. Additionally, my gender was a disadvantage at times and a benefit at other times. The downside of being a woman was noticeable in the diminished credibility and respect accorded within this predominantly male chauvinist society where male participants felt a need to assert their masculinity.

Representing an academic institution was initially a great limitation in my research based on young people's customary mistrust of higher educational facilities. It was only with time that they slowly accepted me as a community worker and that they increased and intensified their participation in the research. Many of the youth took part in the workshops because of the value they saw in learning a new skill rather than contributing to research. While I am striving to reflect their perspectives in my analysis hoping it will somehow make a difference in the lives of poor urban youth in Colombia, the reality remains that I benefitted more from this unequal exchange as I will reach my goal in obtaining my degree, while their circumstances will remain the same. Ultimately, as they often reminded me, as an academic I was also contributing to the negative construct of young urban poor youth, and Black youth, as I had decided to investigate the negative aspects of their lives, limiting them to the conditions they were trying to break free from.

Given my data was collected in two different locations, I ran the risk of generalising the conclusions by applying them to all young people across the country. I was also aware of the validity of the tools, design, processes, and data used in my research. To minimise the risks of doing so, I attempted to make use of systematic sampling, triangulation and constant comparison, proper auditing and documentation, and multidimensional theory. I will dedicate the next section to offering suggestions about how to improve and further the research focused on young people's negotiations with violence in Colombia.

6. Implications for Interventions and Future Directions for Research

In a country such as Colombia where the conflict has been occurring for many decades, violence has become structural and entered the deepest layers of society. As Dowdney (2003) has suggested, the formal existence of an armed conflict is irrelevant when attending to children involved with 'organised armed violence'. The solution for the conflict has been primarily pursued on a military level; little has been done to solve further structural problems and other social concerns. Questions remain surrounding the culture of violence that has infiltrated the many layers of Colombian society together with the normalisation of war, the high levels of impunity, and the silence imposed on its countless victims.

A peace agreement between political parties would only be a start to resolving the conflict. On one hand, the current conflict is no longer based on Marxist ideologies and extends beyond left-wing groups to thousands of other armed actors, such as the BACRIMs and *sicarios*. Recognising the prevalence and impact of other parties involved in the conflict is a crucial step toward attempting to build a more peaceful society. On the other hand, the mistrust toward the state exhibited by many young civilians stems largely from the lack of accountability of the government to protect and provide for its citizens; the high impunity levels enjoyed by the rich and powerful, including, and especially, public officials; and unchanged inequalities that initially gave rise to the conflict. Changes need to take place at the structural level and need to instill a just system that favours poor Colombians and not exclusively the elite.

Chapter VI also revealed that the epicentre of the war has moved to urban areas, where

the expressions of armed violence are distinct and have different actors, like drug traffickers, that move in the shadowy world of illegal operations. The behaviour of very strong delinquent armed groups, including the thousands of BACRIMs, is growing in urban cities and educational centres. Among the young population, it is common to carry a gun, increasing the risks and the need for effective public policies. With the ubiquitous presence of numerous armed groups in poor urban neighbourhoods, and faced with constant discrimination and an inability to cope with the realities of civilian life once they complete the DDR program, young people often return to warfare activities, sustaining the cycle of recruitment as seen earlier in this chapter. The need to respond to armed violence in urban areas therefore requires other strategies, other types of dynamics, and other ways of looking at it than when linked solely to rural settings.

Most importantly the interlaced manifestations of violence, in which young people frequently navigate, create a variety of interconnected responses with the same young person moving across different forms of violence as a child soldier, a *sicario*, a BACRIM member, an internally displaced person, a trafficked person, etc. There is a strong necessity to break away from compartmentalising children engaged in and affected by violence, moving beyond a single category of young people (e.g. child soldiers) to examine the larger picture of the protracted and deeply entrenched violence in Colombia. On the other hand, the literature review in Chapter III and the analysis in Chapter V revealed that the notion of childhood, as defined by the CRC and used by humanitarian and state entities in Colombia, creates dissonance with the local understandings of what defines young people. 'Youth' or 'young people' are more accepted terms in Colombia.

The victimisation created with the notion of young people as fragile and incompetent is harmful to them, as I reviewed in Chapter V. It is critical to frame the early phases of life within local understandings and deconstruct the current victimisation of young people. Recognising their capabilities as competent individuals requires their participation in the decision-making over their livelihoods—involving young people more in the design of interventions that are supposed to affect them is a critical starting point; too often, those who set policy and programming priorities for youth do not interact with them.

As we saw in Chapter V, the current conflict is no longer led by the ideologies that

initiated it but by the large amount of money gained from its activities. The highly lucrative industries that sustain the conflict need to be carefully critiqued when seeking a solution that will help address the increasing rate of violence in the country. Illegal industries supply work and power within poor and marginalised populations and young people find creative ways to access privileges enjoyed by the higher castes of their society.

While I discussed some of the main challenges young people face in Colombia as the lack of economic and educational opportunities in Chapters V and VI, it was also shown as discussed in Chapter II that the growing violence was mainly due to inequalities and the relentless exclusion of young people from power structures pushing them further down the societal ladder. For this reason, it is crucial to acknowledge the link between inequality and violence and design a comprehensive plan for addressing youth development concerns, which would entail not only looking at those who are directly engaged in and affected by conflict, but also the broader young community that is inevitably indirectly affected, as discussed in this thesis. To do so, the current debate on children's engagement in violence needs to be reframed with an analysis departing from the root causes of the conflict that initiated out of social inequality, as well as a change in the current society that was built upon a divisive and exploitative class structure with a large portion of its young population at the very bottom of it.

The protracted conflict in Colombia has been continuously transforming in the same way the social reality of populations enduring it has also been transformed, both economically but also in the regional context. The programs designed for a specific period and region can sometimes be ineffective and inappropriate at a different time and place, thereby requiring much flexibility and creativity to adapt the interventions adequately. The use of creative and visual methods with young people both in programs and research could be highly beneficial in highlighting and including their different responses to their changing environments, encourage their participation and help to break the imposed silence that is prevalent in war-affected regions of the country.

Young people in my study repeatedly emphasised that they were rejected from decision-making spheres and their perspectives were never taken into account, highlighting the necessity to incorporate them in the design and implementation of responses aimed to

impact their circumstances. Moreover, the responses of the community can differ, as the reality can change dramatically, which has been a great challenge in obtaining sustainability in carried out initiatives. Although many of the dynamics in an armed conflict situation appear similar, the results from my data have demonstrated that each context is distinct, and it is essential to continuously contextualise each approach designed and implemented in order to work together with the communities in a successful manner.

As I mentioned in the limitations section in Chapter IV, and stemming from my final diagram (Figure 7), a more in-depth study with additional resources could employ a larger sample size from a higher number of locations, including both rural and urban regions and making a comparison between the two settings. Research exploring the dynamics of masculinity and its relationship to violence, and the constant shift and clash between patriarchal and matriarchal societies within Colombia and among its various cultural groups in the enactment of violence, could offer some enlightenment in understanding the complexities of war and young people's responses.

While there have been studies on race, gender and violence in Colombia, often in isolation to each other, a study of young people's roles, navigations and perspectives at the intersection of these could deliver key findings for the current peace negotiations and reconstruction in Colombia. More specifically and given that Afro-descendant populations have been the most affected population in Colombia and have historically been subject to racial discrimination and exclusion, an emphasis on how young Colombians of African descent negotiate their realities, resist and counter socio-economic and political exclusion within the framework of the conflict and contribute to the (re)building of their communities is crucial in understanding the current dynamics and adopting the adequate policies and practices. As my research demonstrated, the war in Colombia's war is multi-dimensional as are young people's motivations to engage in violence, and carrying out a thorough study extending beyond the dynamics illustrated in my final diagram (Figure 7) to other dynamics of the protracted conflict such as accessing cases of human trafficking and examining the direct link to other activities young people are currently engaging in, could provide insight for rethinking current approaches in theory and in practice.

Finally, as my research attempted to disrupt the negative and limiting paradigms of victimisation, marginalisation, and poverty, and contribute to the recognition of the potential of children's creativity and their entrepreneurial agency, a deeper reflection on the potential of academic research to exacerbate the negative image of young people in violent contexts could help shift the current outlook of poor urban youth examining their positive contributions and assets, and particularly their roles for successfully enacting the peace accords and coming to terms with Colombia's long history with violence.

Appendix A: Data Used in Chapter VI

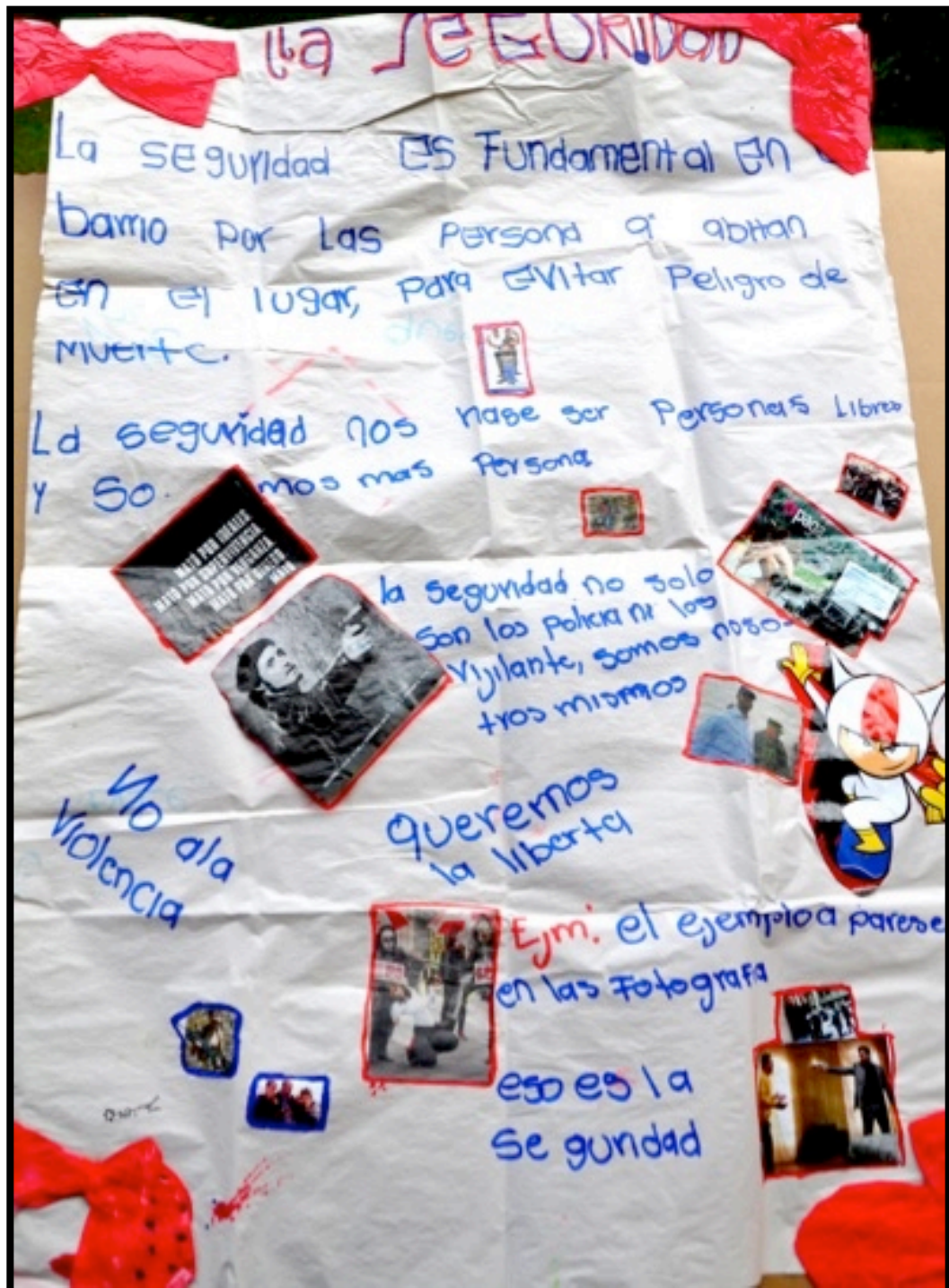


Figure 1A: Group discussion on themes most important to young people in Aguablanca: 'Safety makes us free and greater people'.



Figure 2A: This photograph shows friends walking home from school.



Figure 3A: This photograph illustrates how children nowadays are confined to their limited living spaces.

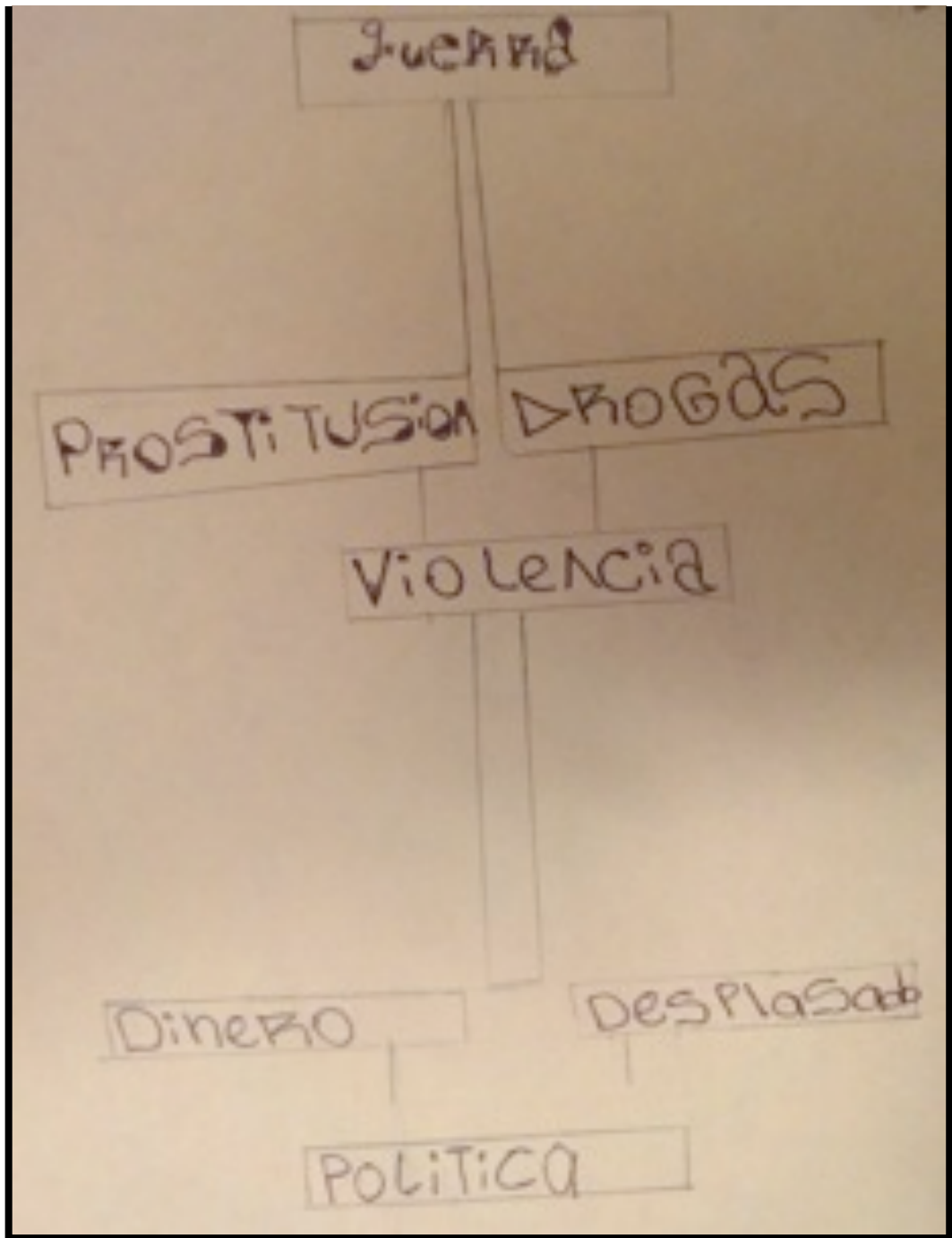


Figure 4A: Chart made by a young person. War \leftrightarrow Prostitution and Drugs \leftrightarrow Violence \leftrightarrow Money and Displaced \leftrightarrow Politics



Figure 5A: Group poster activity in Comuna 13, Medellín. The topic chosen by the youth of this community was 'Humanity'.

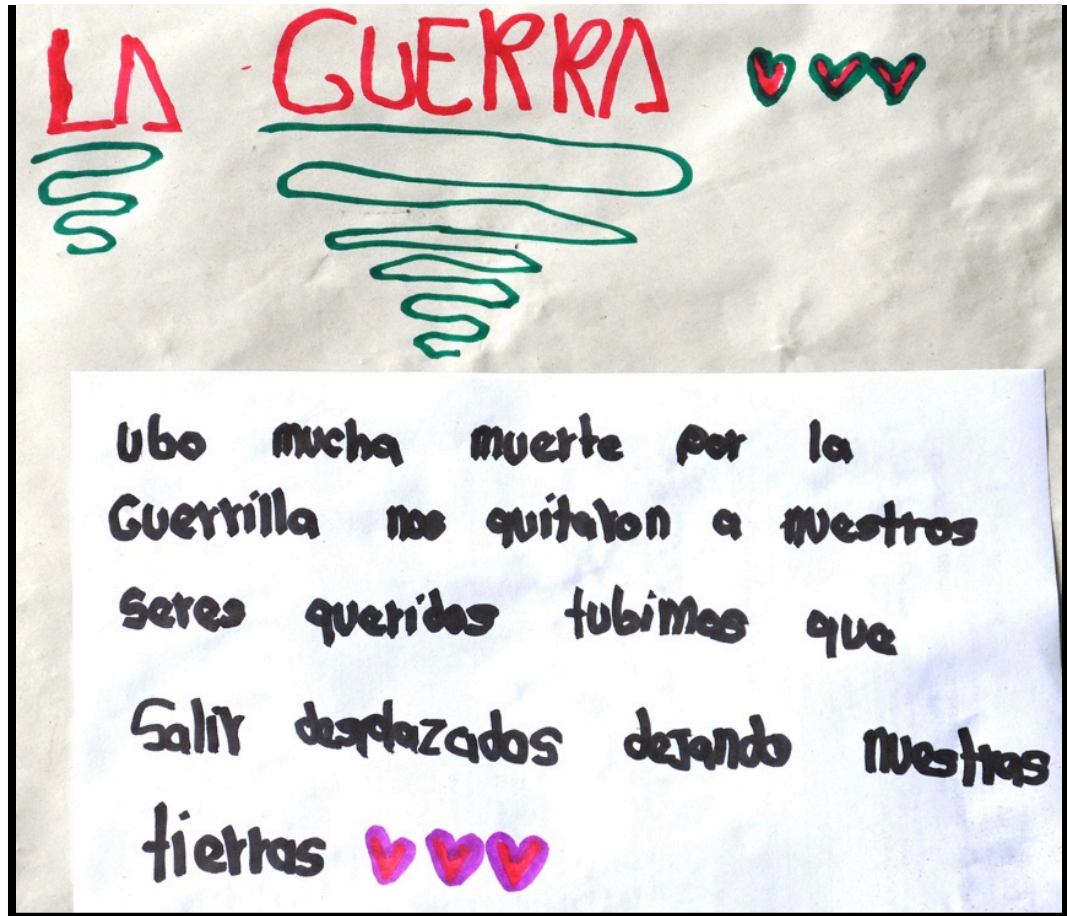


Figure 6A: Photograph of a young girl's perspective on war. A Páez-Nasa girl shares her experience of forced displacement.

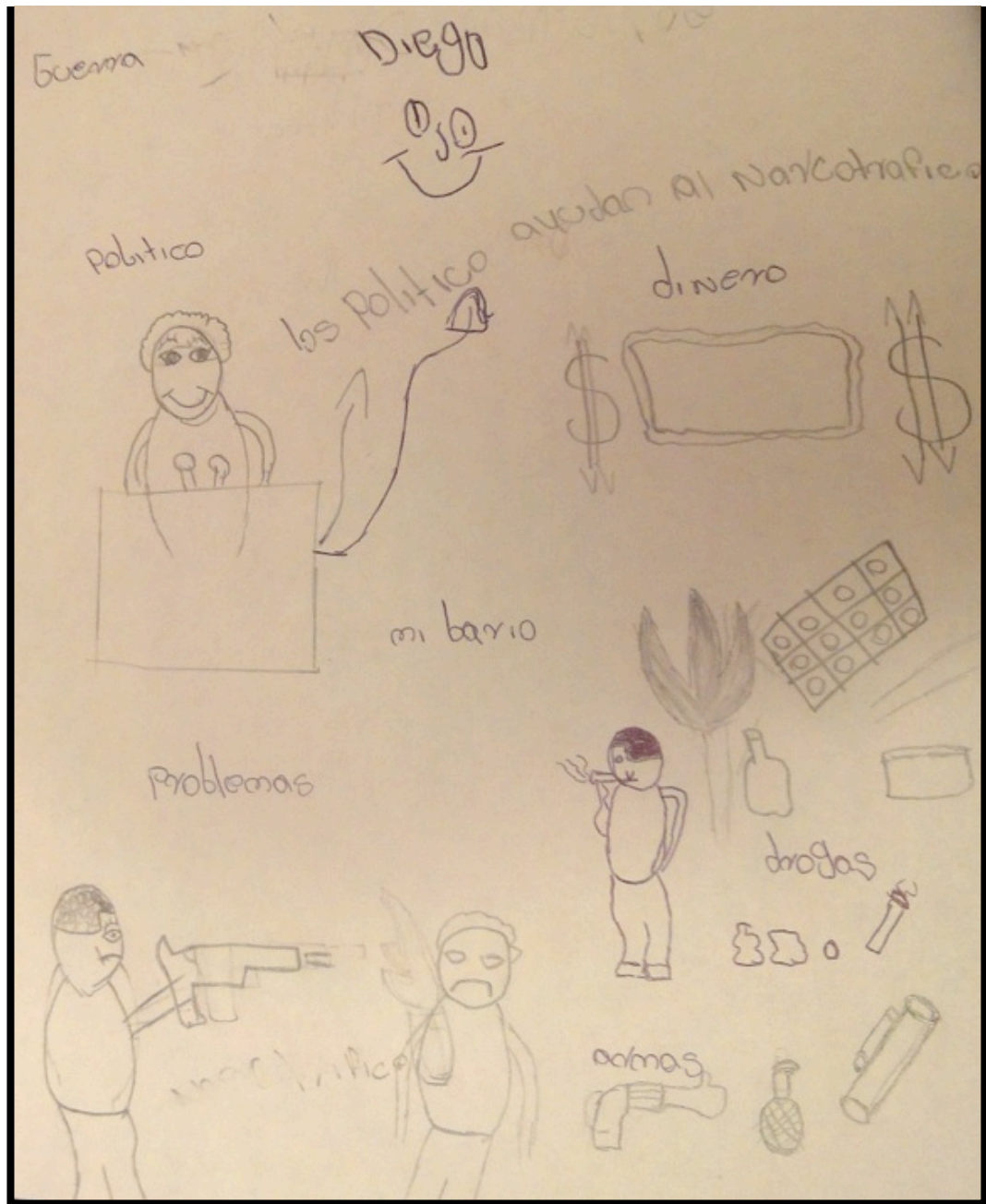


Figure 7A: Drawing by Diego. 'Politicians help narco-trafficking'.



Figure 8A: Photograph taken by Saul. He used the paradox found in this image to illustrate the one found in his community.



Figure 9A: Photograph of the distance. Saul defies the negative construct of youth in his community and portrays a capable and talented adolescent boy.



Figure 10A: Saul used the paradox found in this image to illustrate the one found in his community.

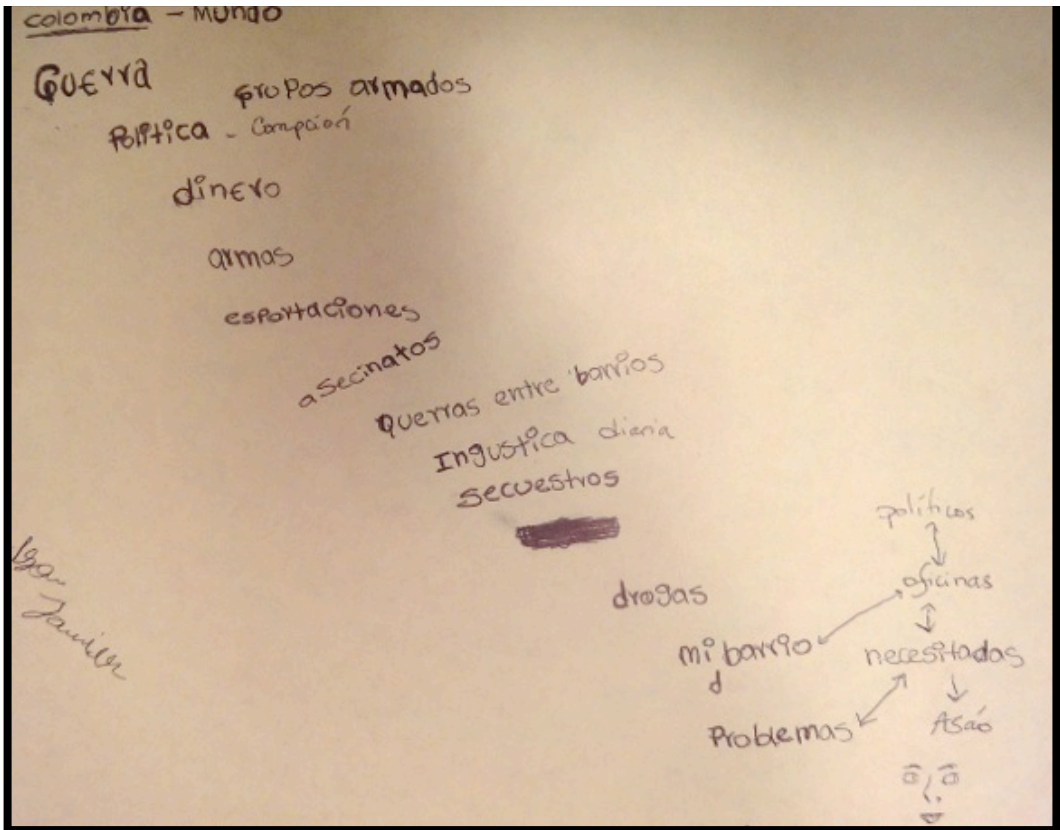


Figure 11A: Chain. From the top to bottom: Colombia-World \leftrightarrow War \leftrightarrow Politics-Armed groups and Corruption \leftrightarrow Money \leftrightarrow Arms \leftrightarrow Exportations \leftrightarrow Assassinations \leftrightarrow Wars between

neighbourhoods ← → Daily injustice ← → Kidnappings ← → Drugs ← → My neighbourhood-
Politicians ← → Hitmen offices ← → People with necessities ← → Problems ← → Toasted

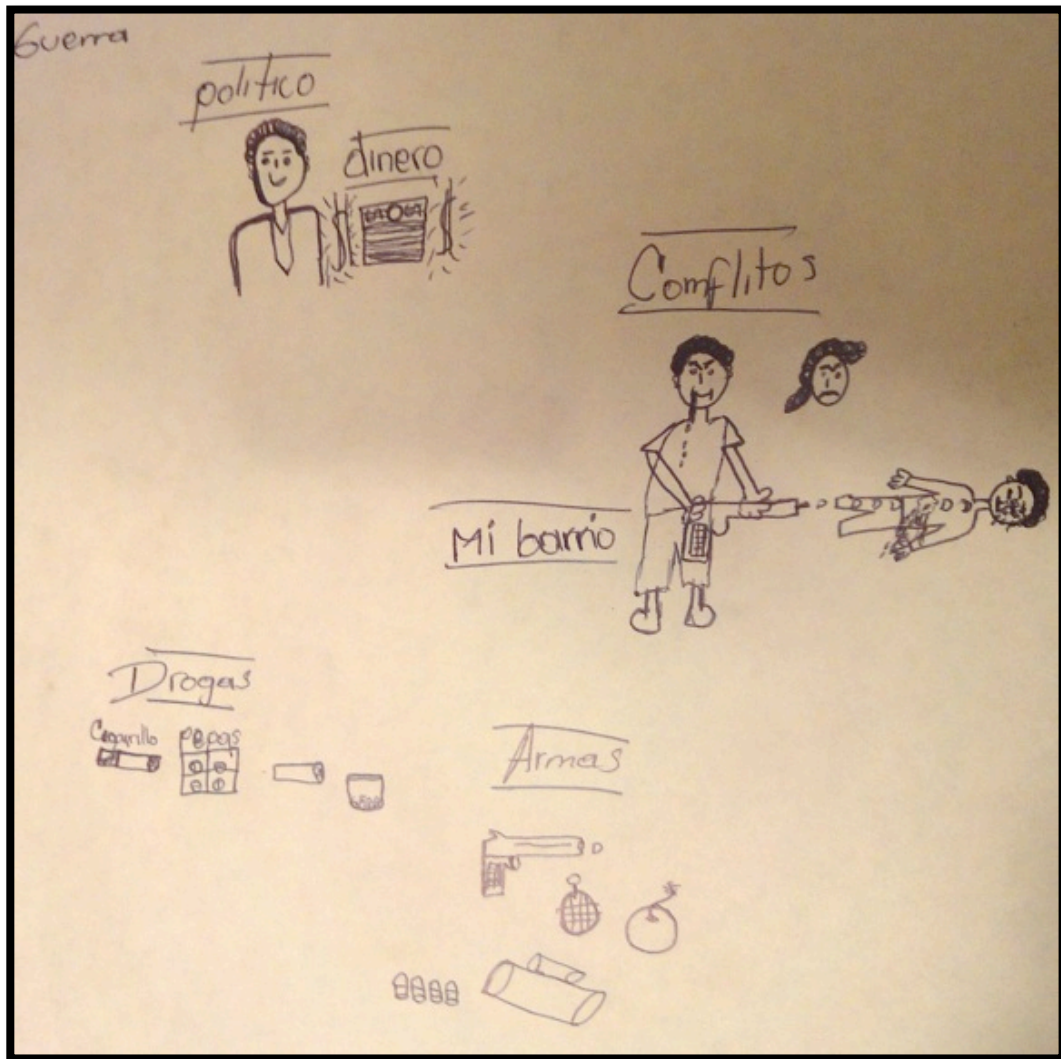


Figure 12A: Illustration by youth. From top-left to bottom: War; Politicians-Money; Conflicts; My Neighbourhood; Drugs; Arms.

Appendix B: Data Used in Chapter VII



Figure 1B: Resistance through Memory: 'Luis Alfonso-Death is not forgetfulness because you are always with my in my soul, mind and heart-Born: 24 of April; Sacrificed: 31 of May, 1991'.



Figure 4B: 'War oppresses us; Memory liberates us'

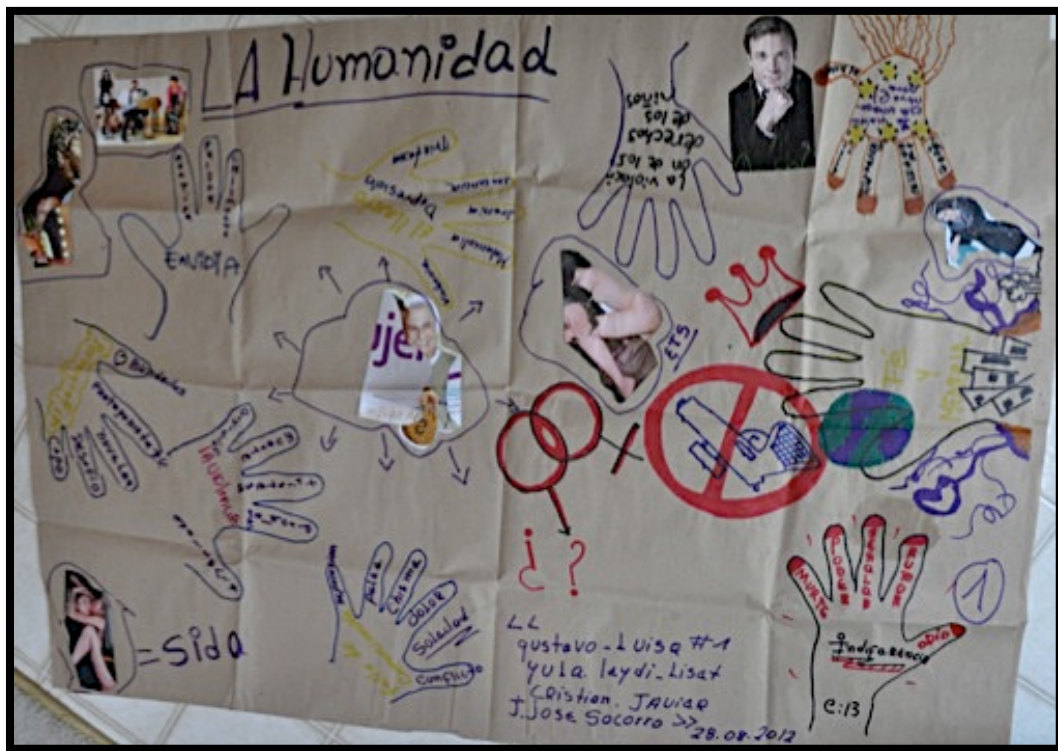


Figure 5B: Group poster activity in Comuna 13, Medellín. Topic chosen, 'Humanity'.



La 13 cuenta historias de esperanza

Sin haber estudiado periodismo o saber manejar una cámara, 25 niños, jóvenes y adultos se le midieron a ser narradores y protagonistas de lo que pasa en la comuna 13.



Foto: Juan Antonio Sánchez

Figure 6B: 'La 13 tells stories of hope: Without having studied journalism or knowing how to operate a camera, 25 children, youth, and adults measured up to be the narrators and protagonists of what happens in Comuna 13'.



Figure 7B: Graffiti art in Comuna 13 depicting the community radio program *Cuenta la 13*.



Figure 8B: Young children participate in the community radio program *Cuenta la 13* of Comuna 13.



Figure 9B: Likes and dislikes activity. Closest to 'self' is what is cherished the most and further away are what is disliked the most. From left to right; the street, my girlfriends; my family; school; my friends; my cousins.

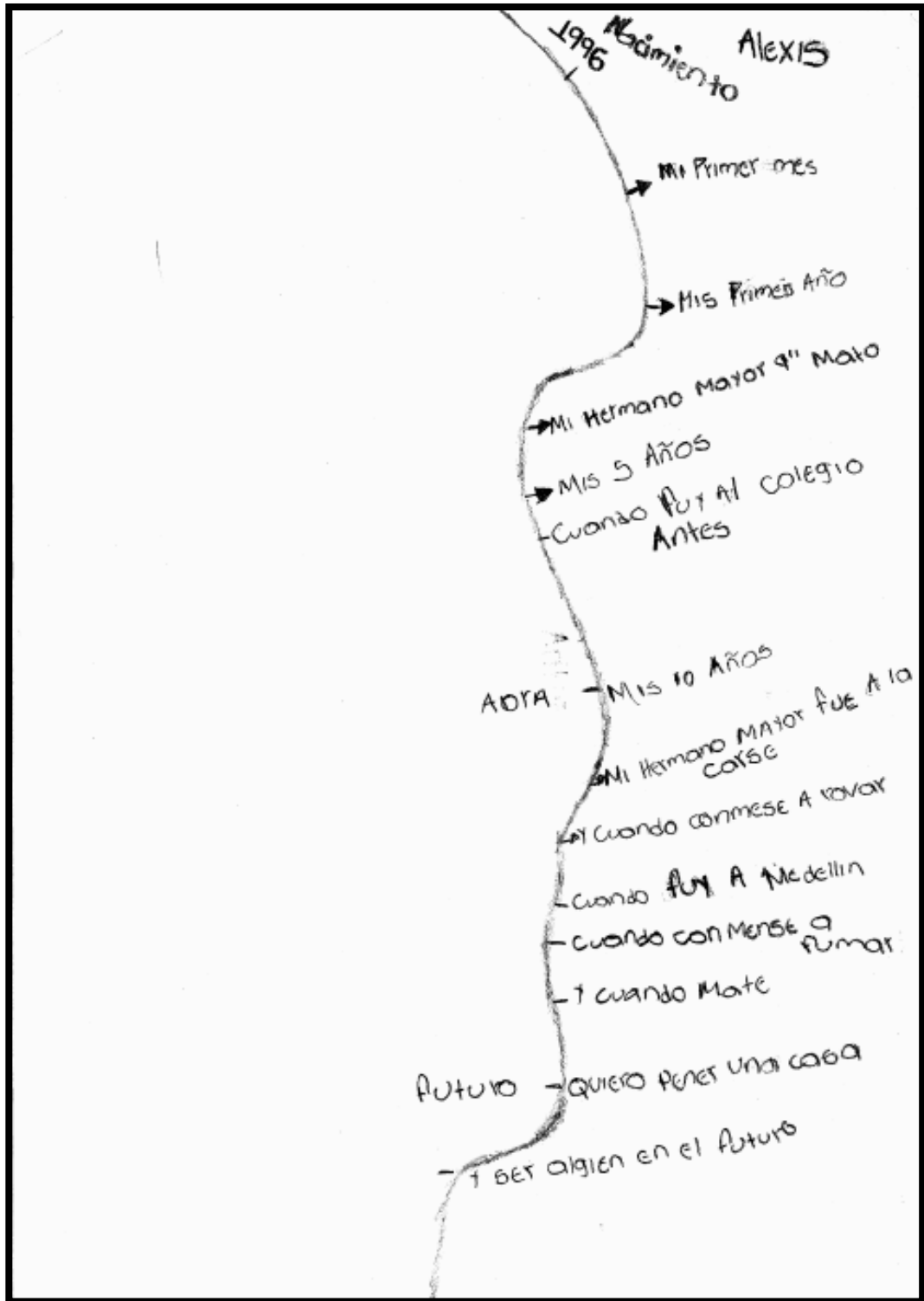


Figure 10B: Lefeline activity: The most significant events in my life.

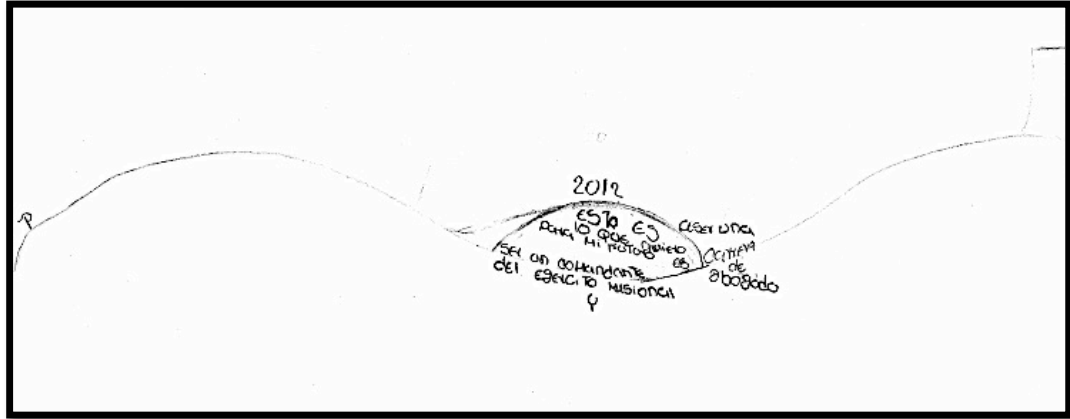


Figure 11B: Diego's lifeline: 2012—'This is what I want for my future is to be a commander in the national and do a law career'.



Figure 12B: 'The children show our race and culture, they are of African descent. We come from the Pacific coast, a very strong African identity and characteristic'.

Appendix C: Results of Contents Analysis

CALI											
Themes	Methods Used										Themes most brought up
	Lifeline	Posters	Likes/ Dislikes	Me/My Neighbourhood/ World	Freestyle Writing/ Autobiographies	Audio	Group Discussions	Photography	Video	Recurrence	
War			1	1			1		1	4	War
Conflict		1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	8	Conflict
World			1	1						2	
Neighbourhood Violence		1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	8	Neighbourhood Violence
War between neighbourhoods			1	1	1	1	1	1	1	7	War between neighbourhoods
Gang Violence			1	1	1	1	1		1	6	Gang violence
Shootings					1	1	1		1	4	Shootings
Prostitution				1			1			2	
Homicide	1		1	1		1	1		1	6	Homicide
Committed Murder	1				1				1	3	
Imprisonment	1									1	
Drug Trafficking		1	1	1			1	1	1	6	Drug Trafficking
Exports/ Trafficking			1		1					2	
Forced Displacement				1	1	1	1			4	Forced displacement
Racial Discrimination							1		1	2	
Migration	1				1				1	3	
Change of homes	1				1				1	3	
Armed Groups			1	1	1	1	1		1	6	Armed Groups
Hitmen		1	1				1		1	4	Hitmen
Death Threats (pamphlets)					1	1	1			3	
<i>Oficinas</i>			1				1		1	3	
Corruption			1							1	
Police		1					1			2	
President		1	1							2	
Massacres					1				1	2	
Death		1	1		1	1	1			5	Death
Death of a family member	1					1	1		1	4	Death of a family member

Issues at home		1			1		1	1		4	Issues at home
Domestic Violence		1			1	1	1		1	5	Domestic violence
Supporting family by joining an <i>oficina</i>		1								1	
Invisible frontiers		1			1	1	1	1	1	6	Invisible Frontiers
Falsehood		1								1	
Adolescent Pregnancy							1			1	
Social Inequality						1	1		1	3	
Daily Injustice			1		1		1	1	1	5	Daily injustice
Kidnappings			1							1	
Drug usage		1	1	1			1	1	1	6	Drug usage
Cannabis	1	1	1	1						4	Cannabis
Arms			1	1	1		1		1	5	Arms
Theft	1	1							1	3	
Despair for lack of money and opportunities		1	1			1	1		1	5	Despair for lack of money and opportunities
Family		1	1		1				1	4	Family
Female-led households							1			1	
Friends		1	1		1		1	1	1	6	Friends
Father		1	1							2	
Stepfather		1	1		1		1			4	Stepfather
School	1		1				1	1	1	5	School
Teachers	1		1							2	
The Street	1		1		1	1	1	1	1	7	The street
Curfew							1		1	2	
Amorous Relationships	1					1		1		3	
Communion	1									1	
Programs in Casas Francisco	1							1		2	
Freedom		1					1	1		3	
Unity		1					1			2	
Peace							1		1	2	
Dignity		1						1		2	
Security		1					1		1	3	
Politics			1	1			1			3	

Money		1	1	1	1		1		1	6	Money
Easy Money		1					1	1	1	4	Easy Money
Problems			1		1		1		1	4	Problems
Fights			1		1				1	3	
Lack of Opportunities (Education & Work)		1					1		1	3	
Poor or no education							1		1	2	
No family members had access to education							1			1	
Lack of Sport Facilities or Programs							1			1	
Lack of neighbourhood care (garbage)							1	1		2	
Environmental issues							1	1		2	
Lack of Recreational/Cultural Activities							1		1	2	
Lack of access to healthcare							1			1	
Aspirations	1	1			1			1	1	5	
Go to university	1	1			1					3	
Be a professional	1	1			1					3	
Longing for Home	1									1	
Be someone in the future	1				1		1		1	4	Be someone in the future

MEDELLIN											
Themes	Methods Used									Recurrence	Themes most brought up
	Lifeline	Posters	Likes/ Dislikes	Neighbourhood Maps	Autobiography / Freestyle writing	Audio	Group Discussions	Photography	Video		
War	1	1		1			1			4	War
Conflict		1		1	1	1	1	1	1	7	Conflict
Neighbourhood Violence	1			1	1	1	1	1	1	7	Neighbourhood Violence
Operation Orion	1				1		1	1		4	Operation Orion
Family Violence	1				1	1	1	1		5	Family Violence
Recruitment		1			1	1	1	1	1	6	Recruitment
Drug trafficking					1	1	1	1	1	5	Drug Trafficking
Human trafficking					1	1	1			3	
Forced Displacement					1	1	1	1	1	5	Police
Police	1						1		1	3	
Corrupt Politicians	1						1			2	
Rape	1					1				2	
Death	1	1		1	1	1	1	1	1	8	Death
Death of a family member	1				1	1	1	1		5	Death of a family member
Wounded	1					1	1			3	
Imprisonment of family member	1				1	1	1			4	
Issues at home	1					1	1		1	4	
Invisible frontiers				1	1	1	1	1	1	6	Invisible Frontiers
Rage	1					1				2	
Hate	1			1						2	
Rivalry		1			1		1	1		4	
Media's Negative Projection of Comuna 13	1						1	1		3	
Social Inequality						1	1			2	
AIDS		1								1	

Arms	1	1		1	1	1	1	1	1	8	Arms
Stray Bullets	1	1			1		1	1		5	
Shootings	1	1		1	1	1	1	1	1	8	Shootings
Committed murder					1	1			1	3	
Violent Games		1								1	
Adolescent Pregnancy		1				1				2	
Family	1		1		1	1	1	1		6	
Mother's Love	1				1	1				3	
Neighbourhood	1			1	1	1	1	1	1	7	Neighbourhood
Playground	1			1			1	1		4	
Home	1			1	1	1	1	1		6	Home
Church	1			1			1			3	
School	1			1	1		1			4	
Football Field	1			1						2	
Humanity		1						1		2	
Youth		1		1	1	1	1		1	6	Youth
Friends	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1		8	Friends
The Street	1	1		1	1	1	1	1	1	8	The Street
Neighbours	1	1		1			1			4	
Stores	1	1		1						3	
Health	1	1								2	
Death of Friends	1	1		1	1	1	1	1	1	8	Death of Friends
Ami's Programs	1	1		1			1	1		5	Ami's Programs
Youth Training and Agency	1	1		1	1		1	1		6	Youth Training and Agency
Extracurricular Activity/Sport	1	1		1	1		1			5	Extracurricular Activity/Sport
Music/Art	1	1								2	
Communion	1	1								2	
Baptism	1	1								2	
Knowledge	1	1								2	
Pride					1			1		2	

Freedom				1		1	1	1	1	5	Freedom
Unity	1			1						2	
Solidarity	1			1			1	1		4	
Love				1	1	1		1	1	5	Love
Politics	1						1		1	3	
Money	1				1	1	1	1	1	6	Money
Plastic Surgery		1								1	
Señalar	1	1				1	1		1	5	Señalar
STDS		1								1	
Envy	1	1		1		1	1	1		6	Envy
Gossip	1	1		1						3	
Pain		1			1	1	1	1	1	6	Pain
Loneliness		1				1			1	3	
Depression/ Sadness	1	1		1	1	1	1			6	Depression/ Sadness
Despair				1	1	1	1		1	5	Despair
Grievance	1	1		1	1	1	1	1		7	Grievance
Anxiety				1	1	1				3	
Abuse					1	1				2	
Faith & Remembrance		1			1		1	1		4	
Children's Rights Violations		1				1		1	1	4	
Pornography		1								1	
Television/ Novelas		1								1	
Indifference	1	1				1	1	1		5	Indifference
Challenge		1								1	
Lack of communication		1		1						2	
Separation/ Division	1	1								2	
Problems		1			1	1	1	1	1	6	Separation/ Division
Fights		1		1	1	1		1	1	6	Fights
Power		1				1	1	1		4	

Poverty	1				1		1	1		4	
Education	1				1	1	1	1	1	6	Education
Aspirations	1				1	1		1		4	

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