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# The Woman Warrior

A Post-structural Gender Analysis of *Guerrilleras* in  
Colombia

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# Abstract

The thesis is a study of female guerrilla soldiers, *guerrilleras*, in two Colombian guerrilla groups: the rural FARC-EP and the urban M-19. Firstly, the roles female *guerrilleras* play and the treatment of *guerrilleras* are described. Secondly, post-structural gender theory is used to understand the gender structures that underlie the division of labor within the groups. The study focuses on certain manifestations of gender structures in the groups: gender discrimination, gendered division of labor and processes of militarization.

In the two guerrilla groups, gender discrimination occurs frequently. In restricted areas progress towards gender equality has been made, but in principle the groups have not achieved gender equality. In addition to pulling the same work load as the men, *guerrilleras* are simultaneously situated in traditionally female support roles. Women do not have the same opportunities as men to reach positions of power. Sexual abuse and harassment occur within the guerrilla groups and are often used as a weapon against women.

The presence of *guerrilleras* has not changed the fundamental militarized and patriarchal construction of the guerrilla groups. Rather, women's presence in guerrilla groups reflects the militarization of society and of the *guerrilleras* themselves and not the achievement of gender equality.

*Key words:* Colombia, gender, *guerrillera*, post-structural theory, guerrilla

Words: 9684

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# 1 Introduction

“The history of war has quite literally been the *history* of war” argues Cristina Masters (2009 pg 30). War stories have throughout history been about men and told by men. When women have appeared in these war stories, they have often been cast in roles as mothers, nurses, and wives (ibid.; D’Amico & Weinstein 1999 pg 4). Despite the common understanding of men being soldiers, legends of women warriors date as far back in time as wars themselves (Dombrowski 1999 pg 2) and although women are often stereotyped as pacifists or war resisters, they have fought in wars (Turpin 1998 pg 9). Today, women are in increasing numbers taking part in traditionally male professions within militaries and being incorporated in combat units. No longer relegated to the margins, women have today become central to our dominant war stories (Masters 2009 pg 30).

Although women have fought in wars for centuries, they have often been relegated to second-class status in the military (Turpin 1998 pg 9). Women in the military are often confined to “support” or “women” roles – medical, secretarial and clerical, transport and communications – in which they neither carry weapons nor are expected to use them (Skjelsbaek & Smith 2001 pg 7; D’Amico 1998 pg 123). Women tend to occupy the lowest ranks within militaries (Turpin 1998 pg 9). Since the 1980’s the armed services in some countries have, in response to the second wave of women’s liberation movement, given women front-line roles (Carter 1998 pg 34). In recent decades there has been a shift toward increasing, although not equal, numbers of women in the military along with expanding roles for them (Turpin 1998 pg 10). Despite this, women are many times invisible within armed groups (Moser and Clark 2001 pg 33).

What happens when women choose to enter a male dominated organization like the military? What happens when women leave the traditionally female roles and become actors in areas that are traditionally male? Are men and women treated as equals within armies? These are questions that I have used as a starting point for this thesis. Taking women soldiers seriously allows one to see whether the patriarchal inclination to privilege masculinity is lessened when women join men in the ranks (Enloe 2007 pg 68). More specifically I want to investigate how female soldiers, in all ranks, are perceived in contrast to their male colleagues and if they are treated differently. I have chosen to do this by studying female guerilla soldiers, *guerrilleras*<sup>1</sup>, in different guerrilla groups in Colombia.

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<sup>1</sup> From now on I will use the term *guerrillera* when referring to female guerrilla soldiers.

There are several reasons why I have chosen to study guerrilla groups<sup>2</sup> instead of regular armies. First of all, this is an area not widely studied with gender perspectives in mind. Major works about guerrilla warfare have failed to give even cursory information on the role of women (Reif 1986 pg 147). Descriptions of guerrilla groups may mention female participation but do not give details such as the number of females involved or the duties they perform (ibid. pg 154). Secondly, the guerrilla groups studied in this thesis (see Chapter 4 for more about the groups) have a high percentage of female members, much higher than many other armed groups, including regular armies<sup>3</sup>. Women and girls are estimated to make up 25-50 percent of left-wing guerrilla units in Colombia (Schmidt 2007 pg 1). This implies that the groups would reasonably have certain rules and policies when dealing with female recruits, including unconscious attitudes towards *guerrilleras*. Thirdly, the guerrilla groups studied claim that they treat women and men equally. It is interesting to see if this corresponds with the picture painted by other sources such as ex-*guerrilleras*.

The choice to study Colombia was strategic. Colombia has one of the longest guerrilla conflicts in the world (more than 40 years to date) (Durán et al. 2008 pg 7). In 1999, violence (resulting from the armed conflict) was three times higher than in 1982, and the political and social arenas more fractured (Chernick 1999 pg 161). In spite of this, the conflict in Colombia is not given much attention in Western media, except when Westerners are kidnapped by or rescued from the guerrilla groups. With this thesis, I would also like to give attention to this conflict and offer an alternative way of studying it.

## 1.1 Purpose and Research Question

The purpose of this thesis is first of all to demonstrate what roles *guerrilleras* play and are allowed to play in different guerrilla groups in Colombia. I also want to demonstrate how the *guerrilleras* are treated by their (male) *compañeros*<sup>4</sup>. The second purpose is to, with the help of post-structural gender theories, try to understand what norms and standards underlie the division of labor within the groups, as well as the treatment of the *guerrilleras*. I presume that the roles that women are allowed to play are restricted by traditional and rigid gender norms.

Comprehensive research question:

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<sup>2</sup> A guerrilla group is a political organization operating in both rural and urban areas that uses armed warfare for the purpose of changing societal structure (Reif 1986 pg 147). Guerrilla means “little war”.

<sup>3</sup> Percentage of women in the military 2005: Britain 8.8%, Germany 5.2%, USA 15%, Russia 10.4%, France 12.8% (Enloe 2007 pg 70)

<sup>4</sup> companion

- How can post-structural gender theory help us understand how the incorporation of *guerrilleras* affects gender equality in Colombian guerrilla groups?

Specific research questions:

- How can post-structural gender theory help us understand the roles *guerrilleras* play in Colombian guerrilla groups?
- How can the treatment of *guerrilleras* in guerrilla groups in Colombia be understood with the help of post-structural gender theory?

## 1.2 Outline

To begin with, post-structural gender theories are presented. Thereafter, the methodology of the thesis and the choice of source material are discussed. Following this, a brief history of Colombia will be given, as well as information about and background of the different guerrilla groups. The fifth chapter of the thesis is the analysis of the *guerrilleras* in Colombia. Lastly, in chapter six, the conclusions are presented.

## 2 Gender Theories of International Relations

Using gender theories allows the researcher to explore and question the prevailing division of power and of labor within the research field of International Relations, but also power structures within the society. Feminist researchers have argued that traditional theories have been applied in ways that make it difficult to understand women's participation in social life, or to understand men's activities as gendered (Harding 1987 pg 3). By instead using gender theories, one is able to understand the phenomenon of female soldiers.

To be able to describe and understand how women are treated, and if treated differently from their male *compañeros* in the guerrilla groups, I have decided to use a post-structural gender perspective which links militarization, gender and armed conflict.

### 2.1 Post-structural Gender Theory

Within post-structural gender theories gender is seen as being socially constructed (and not biologically determined) (Woodward 2001 pg 75; Kronsell & Svedberg 2003 pg 54). But what does this imply? There are several key points in the literature on the social construction of gender. Gender is changeable and open to reproduction, alteration, challenge and resistance (Woodward 2001 pg 75). This implies that the traditional connection between masculinity and violence, as well as the connection between femininity and non-violence, is constructed and therefore possible to change, or deconstruct. Gender is also place and time-specific, which means that it is contingent on the cultures in which it is produced (ibid.). Gender is relational: one gender-identity may be subordinate while the other is dominant (ibid.).

Gender structures are "hidden" and are most effective when they are perceived to be natural (Kronsell & Svedberg 2003 pg 57). If femininity and masculinity are made to appear as natural categories and not the product of human decisions, it is harder to see the power structures underlying such a division (Enloe 2007 Pg 81). If this is achieved, then the entire patriarchal order is likely to take on the status of "natural" and not open to fundamental challenge (ibid.).

Within the field of post-structural gender theories, the phenomenon of female soldiers is perceived as constituting a complex problem and cannot be explained with one simple answer. The fact that there are increasing numbers of women

combatants is seen as problematic. Women soldiers are perceived to be a symptom of the militarization of society, not a sign of gender equality.

### 2.1.1 The Military: A Gendered Institution

The military<sup>5</sup> is not a gender-neutral institution. On the contrary, the military is based on strict interpretations of what masculinity and femininity should be – both within the institution and within society. Defense remains an area of politics which relies on formal gender segregation and reflects conservative gender roles (Kronsell & Svedberg 2001 pg 91). Being a gendered institution implies that “gender is present in the processes, practice, images and ideologies and distributions of power in the various sectors of social life” (Herbert 1998 pg 7). The military reflects, contributes to and helps maintain the gendered nature of the society’s broader social structure (ibid.; D’Amico & Weinstein 1999 pg 5). The military’s privileged position makes it not just a mirror of gender relations in society but also a fundamental site for the construction of gender: the defining of the boundaries of behaviour and life possibilities for men and women (D’Amico & Weinstein 1999 pg 5).

The military environment celebrates and privileges maleness (D’Amico 1998, pg 123). One question is whether the patriarchal beliefs and practices that shape the military’s culture recede when women join men in the ranks. When women enter the military and break down some of the barriers of the male-dominated institution, it might be interpreted as a spread of the norm of equality. The risk is that this kind of equality will make militaries more acceptable around the world and make militarized solutions to problems seem more legitimate (Enloe 2007 pg 69). The general public’s acceptance of women soldiers might spread the militarizing culture to the entire society (ibid. pg 80). As the number of women joining the military increases, the military will no longer represent only maleness and thereby, the military will be harder to distinguish from civilian society (ibid.). This could make it harder to scrutinize the military’s masculinized institutions (ibid.).

When joining a military organization the woman soldier undermines assumptions about biology, respectability and femininity and raises new questions about the roles and privileges of men (ibid. pg 65). Women may challenge both the central organizational principles and the gender identity of the male conscripts (Kronsell & Svedberg 2001 pg 89). Despite this, one can not draw the conclusion that women’s entry into the military will gradually transform it into a less hierarchical and patriarchal institution. Women entering military organizations do not automatically change the patriarchal and militarized nature of the military. Women soldiers, instead of demilitarizing the military, become more militarized themselves (Enloe 2007 pg 80) and thus enhance the gendered structure of the

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<sup>5</sup> “Military/Military organization” includes guerrilla groups



military. The women are likely to adopt the already established and rewarding patriarchal beliefs and values as their own (ibid.).

Post structural gender theories explain that female soldiers enhance and strengthen both the military's and society's gender related structures instead of deconstructing them. Masculinization, militarization and patriarchy each operate within the military as a socializing pressure and do not change easily (ibid. pg 80). Women's inclusion in the military cannot dismantle the basic idea of militarism because the fear and the rejection of the "other", the enemy, are linked to sexism (Klein 1998 pg 148).

## 3 Methodology and Material

### 3.1 Feminist Methodology

There exists extensive feminist critique of traditional theories of science and what kind of knowledge is considered scientific. Feminist researchers argue that traditional epistemologies (philosophical theories of knowledge) have systematically excluded the possibility that women could be agents of knowledge (Harding 1987 pg 4). Feminist researchers also argue that the traditional scientific production of knowledge, with its traditional view of objectivity, is stained by and an expression of the gender system of the greater society (Kronsell & Svedberg 2003 pg 56).

This critique has brought attention to assumptions and basic conditions within traditional research that have been “invisible” because they seem obvious (ibid. pg 57), such as gender structures. The reason why it is important to be attentive to social phenomenon that appears to be natural and self-evident is that these issues often represent a power structure within society (ibid.). Based on this, feminist research has the goal to question self-evident truths and show what norms underlie ideas that have been taken for granted and deemed natural (ibid.).

In traditional science it is important that regardless who the researcher is, the results of the study of a certain phenomenon should be the same, so called intersubjectivity. From a feminist perspective this is in principle impossible because identity and production of knowledge are closely interconnected (ibid. pg 59). The problem with traditional forms of “objectivist” research is that the researcher doesn’t acknowledge the impact he (usually a man) has on the subject he studies and that despite this, the result of his research is classified as being “true”. Of course, the cultural beliefs and behaviors of feminist researchers shape the results of their analyses no less than do those of traditional researchers (Harding 1987 pg 9). Only by avoiding the “objectivist” stance can researchers produce understandings which are free (or, at least, more free) of distortion from the unexamined beliefs of researchers themselves (ibid.). In feminist research it is argued that the beliefs and behaviors of the researcher are part of the empirical evidence for or against the conclusions the researcher comes to. This evidence must also be open to critical scrutiny, in the same way as traditionally defined evidence is open to scrutiny.

The purpose of gender research is to move beyond gender structures of the greater society by making them visible and describing their inner workings (ibid.

pg 59) but there is no distinctive feminist method of inquiry. By using different methods the goal to expose gender structures can be achieved.

When studying women soldiers there is a worry that by taking seriously the condition of women in the military and such women's experiences and ideas, the research might unintentionally help legitimize the military as a public institution and as an occupation (Enloe 2007 pg 82). This concern is rooted in an analysis recognizing how seductive militarization can be and the fact that a researcher can start out studying a military and then unconsciously start absorbing the discourse as well as the deeper assumptions of that military (ibid. pg 83). To become militarized is to adopt militaristic values (e.g., a belief in hierarchy, obedience and the use of force) and priorities as one's own, to see military solutions as particularly effective and to perceive the world as a dangerous place best approached with militaristic attitudes (ibid. pg 4). Most importantly, militarization privileges masculinity (Enloe 2000 pg 4) and this is why it is crucial for feminist researchers to avoid militarization. Anyone can become militarized.

Of course, the militarization of the researcher is not inevitable. The key is to be aware of the risk and to cultivate a heightened consciousness of how one's own compassion, imagination and sense of "seriousness" each can become militarized in the process of investigating women inside militaries (Enloe 2007 pg 83).

I experienced this as I started researching the subject of *guerrilleras* in Colombia. To start out I studied a biography written by a former *guerrillera* of the M-19 (see chapter 3.3 for more information). At times when analysing this book I was seduced by the thrill and excitement of being a *guerrillera*. I adopted the mindset of the M-19 *guerrillera* I was reading about and thereby started becoming militarized. I was very surprised that this had happened when I realized it. Fortunately this occurred at the beginning of the research process and it helped me develop a heightened consciousness regarding the powers of militarization. Thanks to this, I have been able to be aware of my own position as a researcher and avoiding becoming militarized.

Lastly, I would like to point out that gender is not the only characteristic that produces identity. Gender (being masculine and feminine) is always a category within every class, race and culture. In this sense women's and men's experiences, desires and interests differ within every class, race and culture (Harding 1987 pg 7). But class, race and culture are also always categories within gender. Even though this is true, in this thesis I will only discuss and analyze the gender aspect of guerrilla groups.

## 3.2 Gender Structures

Society is restricted by its structures, in this case historically unequal political, economic and social structures (Tickner pg 24f). Individuals are embedded in and constituted by these social structures (ibid.) and can not act independently from them. Human beings exist in relation to and in relations with others and are not seen as being essentially autonomous (Robinson pg 240).

For feminist researchers the object of study is the gender structures in society which help sustain gender inequality. In this thesis, the focus is therefore on the gender structures within guerrilla groups and not on the influence of certain individuals. The focus is on how the gender structures affect the way *guerrilleras* are treated and what roles they play. When studying the sources (described in the next section) I have concentrated on certain manifestations of the gender structures in the guerrilla groups: gender discrimination, a gendered division of labor and processes of militarization.

### 3.3 Material

I have used various types of materials to gather information. First of all, I have studied two biographies. One is written by María Vásquez Perdomo, an ex-*guerrillera* of the M-19 guerrilla group. She was a member of the group for almost twenty years and part of the M-19's central command (Vásquez Perdomo 2005 pg 189). The second book is written by three American men, Marc Gonsalves, Keith Stansell and Tom Howes, who were taken hostage by the FARC guerrilla. They lived in captivity for more than five years and firsthand witnessed the inner workings of the guerrilla. Even though these two books are based on experiences of different guerrilla groups, they complement each other in the aspect that one is written from within a guerrilla group and the other by hostages (i.e. the "enemy" of the guerrilla group).

I am aware of the possibility that ex-*guerrilleras* and ex-hostages may depict the guerrilla groups in an excessively negative way because of the consequences these groups have had on their lives. The information I have used from these biographies has therefore been verified through other sources.

I have also studied articles and books written by, mostly female, feminist researchers about guerrilla groups in Colombia and Latin America. In addition to this, I have used several books and articles about gender theories to write this thesis. I have also studied newspaper articles, mainly from Western media. My reason for choosing to work with many different types of source material is that it makes it possible to see if they accentuate the same issues and if they paint a similar picture. I have been able to study the conflict from an outsider's perspective (information about the *guerrilleras* from people outside the guerrilla groups) and from an insider's perspective (information from people within the groups). The implication of this is that I have been able to verify the information I have used by confirming descriptions from different sources. This has also allowed me to compare different narratives.

## 4 Colombia and its Guerrilla Groups

### 4.1 Brief History of Colombia's Guerrilla Wars

In the period of *La Violencia* (1948-1958), a result of the quarrel between the two traditional political parties (Liberal and Conservative), about 200,000 people died and countless peasants were forced to flee to the cities (Durán et al. 2008 pg 8). In 1958, the National Front was established as a power-sharing pact between the Liberal and Conservative parties in order to put an end to *La Violencia* (ibid. pg 9). The two parties agreed to take alternate turns in government, which caused the exclusion of all other political groups and actors outside the two traditional parties (ibid.). The result was that expressions of opposition could only legally be voiced through dissident groups within the traditional parties (ibid.). Guerrilla movements emerged in response to this political exclusion.

Two waves of guerrilla movements have emerged in Colombia; the first one during the 60s and the second during the 70s and 80s. I have chosen to study one group from each time period. These are described in the following sections.

### 4.2 The FARC-EP

FARC-EP or the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia – Ejército del Pueblo<sup>6</sup> is the largest guerilla force in Colombia (Chernick 1999 pg 196). At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the FARC was militarily the strongest subversive group in the Americas (Rochlin 2002 pg 96). The FARC was founded<sup>7</sup> in 1964 as a mobile guerrilla force (ibid.) and maintained its ties to the Communist Party of Colombia (Chernick 1999 pg 196). The formation was inspired by the failure of the Liberal Party to achieve any significant land reform in the country (Rochlin 2002 pg 97). The FARC is fundamentally a political organization that trains its fighters and followers to organize the political and social life of the communities where they maintain influence (Chernick 1999 pg 167; Hansson 2008 pg 7). The group is today dependent on kidnapping, extortion and so called revolutionary

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<sup>6</sup> Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People's Army

<sup>7</sup> by Manuel Marulanda and Jacobo Arenas (Carey 2006 pg 126).

taxation of productive enterprises (including the coca trade) to finance its insurgency (Chernick 1999 pg 196; Rochlin 2002 pg 100).

The FARC recruits largely in rural areas (Moser and Clark 2001 pg 33) and today there are an estimated 15000 FARC guerrillas (Gutiérrez Sanín 2008 pg 12), of which many are younger than eighteen. There are different estimations of how many women are FARC *guerrilleras*. According to Carey women accounted for one-third of FARC combatants by 2000 (Carey 2006 pg 127). According to Gutiérrez Sanín, the units attached to the top leadership of the FARC have a large female participation, near 30 percent (perhaps because of the presence of secretaries, orderlies, etc.), which then falls at the central operational level: less than 10 percent (Gutiérrez Sanín 2008 pg 10). Among the “normal” fronts, however, female presence is much higher: an average near 19 percent (*ibid.*). According to Rodrigo Granda, the leading international spokesperson for the FARC, women represent 43 percent of the guerrilla force (Batou 2008 pg 27).

The decision to join the FARC may be strongly motivated especially when sexual harassment at home is involved (Gutiérrez Sanín 2008 pg 23). Girls often join thinking that once they are a part of the armed group; they will be treated as equals and be given the same rights as men (WGWAC 2001 pg 37).

The FARC is often described as being a conservative organization with strict discipline and moral rules (Hansson 2008 pg 8). In the group’s “courts” the death penalty is not an uncommon form of punishment (*ibid.*). Joining the FARC is a lifelong commitment; recruits do not have the right to leave and deserters face severe punishments, almost always death (Gutiérrez Sanín 2008, pg 17). Joining the FARC also implies leaving normal life behind; family contacts are reduced to a minimum for security reasons (*ibid.*).

### 4.3 The M-19

The M-19 or the Movimiento 19 de Abril<sup>8</sup> emerged in 1973 as the armed wing of the National Popular Alliance (ANAPO), with supporters on the left (Schmidt 2005 pg xxv). The M-19 was established when a dissenting tendency inside the ANAPO combined with a group of young people, mainly from the FARC and the Communist Party, who were critical of using armed peasant resistance as a long-term strategy (Durán et al. 2008 pg 9). Initially the M-19 was linked to the ANAPO, but they were separated by internal processes (*ibid.* pg 10).

The M-19 was born as an urban group, which made it different from the other, mainly rural, guerrilla movements of the time, like the FARC (*ibid.*). The group was composed of mostly young, middle class students and urban popular sectors (*ibid.*). The M-19 was more adept at incorporating women into their ranks than earlier guerrilla organizations (Schmidt 2005 pg xii).

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<sup>8</sup> 19th of April Movement

The group's political-military vision derived from recognition of the oppression and misery in which the Colombian people were mired (ibid. g 10). It emerged as a critique of already existing left-wing groups in Colombia (ibid. pg 11). The M-19 promoted a new way of practising politics, seeking to connect with the people in the big cities by carrying out Robin Hood-like deeds (ibid.). These actions included distributing newspapers to spread their ideas; invasions of unions, schools, and meeting places to spread their propaganda to the working classes, teachers and students; and distributing food and toys in marginalised areas (ibid.). The group's actions won them the affection of the people (ibid.).

The M-19 was the first of many guerrilla groups in Colombia to start a negotiation process that concluded in a peace agreement. The result was that the M-19 demobilised as an armed group and led to some of its members founding a new political party, the Democratic Alliance M19 (AD-M19) (Durán et al 2008 pg 7).

## 5 Analysis: *Guerrilleras* in Colombia

This chapter gives a description and analysis of *guerrilleras* in the FARC and the M-19. The chapter is divided into two parts: the first addresses the different roles *guerrilleras* play and the second part addresses the way they are treated.

### 5.1 The Roles *Guerrilleras* Play

The guerrilla groups portray themselves as promoting gender equality. According to them, women and men in guerrilla groups have equal rights. Rodrigo Granda is the leading international spokesperson for the FARC (Batou 2008 pg 1). He states that “for the first time a left-wing organization and revolutionary movement has defined women as people who are absolutely free and enjoy full equality with men, taking on the same responsibilities and the same jobs, and having the same rights” (ibid pg 30f). He says “we could hardly mistreat our female comrades” (ibid.). Like their counterparts in other parts of Latin America, the FARC asserted on one hand that “guerrillas are like angels, they have no gender”; on the other hand, that the FARC confronts sexism and family issues (Carey 2006 pg 127). FARC leaders have attempted to address the issues of gender and issued specific guidelines to end discrimination against women (ibid.).

Despite this and in contradiction to what guerrilla leaders argue, matters of gender tend to occupy a distinctly secondary position in left-wing agendas (Schmidt 2005 pg xii). Otherwise radically oriented movements tend to reproduce the *machismo*<sup>9</sup> of the larger society because of highly patriarchal structures (Schindel 2006 pg 365). For example, the M-19 had more women amongst their national leaders than any other guerrilla movement but this did not mean that there were no difficulties regarding gender issues, or that the weight of chauvinist opinion did not affect the internal dynamics of the organisation (Durán et al. 2008 pg 13). As Vera Grabe, ex-member of the M-19, describes it:

El Flaco [one of the leaders] said, “There should not be women in the army because that causes a lot of problems. There are not any women in armies, not even in the Soviet army”. He quoted some other examples and obviously, there was mayhem. Women replied, “We are here. Are you going to sack us or what? What are you going to do with us? What is going to be our contribution then?” [...] This gave us the chance to discuss women-specific problems: comrades beaten up by their partners, others whose only task was to do laundry and

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<sup>9</sup> macho culture; belief in the superiority of males and masculinity over females and femininity



pregnancy as a problem for guerrillas. (Quoted by Madariaga, 2006 pg 127 in Durán et al. 2008 pg 13)

Women face the organizational constraints imposed by the movements, which may include male dominance as well as platforms which neglect issues important to women, such as a guarantee that their family will remain intact (Reif 1986 pg 149). Once inside the guerrilla organizations, women often have to face gender discrimination (Schindel 2006 pg 365).

War, by its very nature, has tended to discourage gender equality (Schmidt 2005 pg xi). Women combatants in Latin America have adapted to life under a masculine regime in which strength, courage, and control are valued, and submissiveness, weakness, and sensibility are seen as fundamental failures (Moser and Clark 2001 pg 33). When living in an environment such as this, women have had to constantly negotiate their identity. Rodrigo Granda points out that when the female warriors are away from the war situation, their behavior is “very feminine”, but in combat they are “every bit as tough as the men” (Batou 2008 pg 31). In the guerrilla groups it seems important that women accentuate their femininity when not involved in combat situations. Some observers argue that women can benefit their countries and the military organization (in this case guerrilla groups) only if they stay in the actual and the symbolic roles their male superiors assign them (Enloe 2007 pg 66). This seems to be accurate when analysing the FARC guerrilla.

So, while open to women, these guerrilla movements have remained male-dominated organizations. The male attitudes in the groups have usually confined women to purely supporting roles in revolutionary warfare (Schindel 2006 pg 366; Schmidt 2005 pg xi). *M-19 ex-guerrillera* María Vásquez Perdomo addresses this in her biography:

As I told my life story I began to question the power relations within an organization that, in spite of breaking the rules of mainstream society and even innovating some leftist political practices, maintained inequality with respect to women and, in the best of cases, emphasized or strengthened in us virtues identified with traditional feminine roles. (Vásquez Perdomo 2005 pg xxxiv)

As a result of living in this kind of an environment, women soldiers, instead of demilitarizing the military, instead become more militarized themselves (Enloe 2007 pg 80). Many women combatants have chosen to identify with the soldiers' code and to mirror the male warrior (Elshtain 1995 pg 243). They adopt the militaristic values and attitude and thus enhance the gendered structure of the military. This can be seen in Vásquez Perdomo's biography. She explains that her identity as a revolutionary suppressed her identity as a woman, an experience not unknown to other female Latin American radicals of her generation (Schmidt 2005 pg ix). Over many years, Vásquez Perdomo's female identity subordinated itself to her militancy (ibid. pg xiii). Only toward the end of her career as a revolutionary did issues of gender undermine her total devotion to guerrilla activity (ibid.). She states that when she left the militant life she discovered, for the first time, her feminine being (Vásquez Perdomo 2005 pg 243). She started to understand the straitjacketed gender roles and how she, despite her rebellion, had

played them, not really rebelling in this respect in spite of her political militancy (ibid.).

As stated earlier, the way the guerrilla groups officially describe their organizations is far from the reality described by former members and eyewitnesses. As women continue to discover, greater female participation in revolutionary action does not guarantee gender equality (Schmidt 2005 pg xii). Being a woman in a guerrilla group is not as simple as Granda makes it seem. Even guerrilla movements that somewhat challenge the division of labor by gender are located in fundamentally sexist societies (Lobao 1990 pg 217). Therefore, the division of labor by gender, which affects occupational, educational, and conventional political life, can be expected to filter down into guerrilla operations (ibid.). The following section will address issues dealing with the gendered division of labor in the FARC and the M-19.

### 5.1.1 Division of Labor

The military is a gendered institution and this is something that is evident when studying what roles *guerrilleras* are allowed to play and what assignments are given to the *guerrilleras* in Colombia. In the guerrilla groups, women are often utilized to take advantage of patriarchal images by distracting security forces or carrying weapons while attracting less suspicion than men (Schindel 2006 pg 366). As described by Vásquez Perdomo:

I took great pains to emphasize my womanhood, because people expected a *guerrillera* to be something of a tomboy, and I wanted to avoid arousing suspicion. (2005 pg 91)

The M-19 *guerrilleras* often used their femininity in order not to draw attention to them and fool the enemy so they could fulfil whatever the mission was. An explanation why this is not as frequently described in the FARC is that M-19 members are part of an urban guerrilla and therefore have more contact with society than do members of the FARC. Vásquez Perdomo describes how she used her femininity and gender to good advantage: to throw people off track, to dodge searches and to get information (Vásquez Perdomo 2005 pg 243). The idea to do this was in part given by M-19 leaders. For example, El Flaco (one of the leaders) stated that he preferred a woman at the wheel, both because women were more careful and because they aroused fewer suspicions (ibid. pg 88). Many similar stories can be found in Vásquez Perdomo's biography. Many times she had to use her femininity by dressing up like a lady, acting like a lady and working her powers of persuasion, as well as seduction. In the following excerpt she describes how she acted when stopped at a government controlled checkpoint.

They had focused their attention to me. I trusted in my power of seduction. I smiled at the man to calm him down. "Don't scare me with that thing, all right?" I stopped the car. The man kept pointing his gun at me through the window and another one asked for my papers and inspected them. [...] I was wearing shorts and a loose blouse. While the man was checking around I undid

one more button and flirtatiously put on the earrings I had in my pocket. I put my hand on my waist and unclipped the Walther [a handgun]. If they were going to frisk me, I would shoot first, even if the other guy killed me. (Vásquez Perdomo 2005 pg 100)

This type of gendered division of labor reflects sexism but at the same time it embodies strategy. Guerrillas may place women in support roles more out of strategic utility than sexism, because they can manipulate patriarchal images to the movement's advantage (Lobao 1990, pg 218). Women can oversee safe dwellings or store weapons without attracting as much suspicion as a gathering of males (ibid.). They can also pose as wives or mothers to gain entrance to restricted areas (ibid.). They can act as decoys and distract male attention in hit-run assaults (ibid.).

*Guerrilleras* use their femininity to fool the enemy. They are able to do this because of society's stereotype gender norms regulating what women (and men) are or are not allowed to do. If *guerrilleras* are caught and interrogated, they are punished for this. If captured, *guerrilleras* are invariably raped during interrogation (Coomaraswamy 2005 pg 57). Given the masculine nature of the military, female soldiers may be accountable not only as women but as soldiers/pseudomen (Herbert 1998 pg 13). When the issue is gender it is not simply whether we are female (or male) and if our actions are viewed as appropriate, but whether the action is viewed as appropriate to the setting in which we are observed (ibid. pg 12). This can be illustrated by the following excerpt from Vásquez Perdomo's biography:

The most macho men, the ones who underestimated us, wouldn't grant us the status of the enemy, and we took advantage of that. But when they discovered that we had penetrated their territory, war territory, they became implacable foes. They punished us twice as hard, once for being subversives and again for being women. This is why, when guerrilla women are tortured, rape or sexual assault in one form or another is almost always part of the treatment. (2005 pg 243)

Negotiations are another type of situation where women were assigned specific roles and encouraged to use their femininity. For example, when the M-19 was negotiating they decided that a woman should represent the group. The idea was that showing the country a feminine image that broke the stereotype of a guerrilla soldier and evoked sympathy would create a favorable atmosphere for negotiation (Vásquez Perdomo 2005 pg 113). One of the leaders argued that "that the organization needed a 'bouquet' of *berraca*<sup>10</sup> women to show off" during the cease-fire dialogues (ibid. 199).

Another illustration of the gendered division of labor in the guerrilla groups is female leaders. Female combatants in guerrilla forces in Colombia today rarely win top leadership positions (Schmidt 2005 pg xiii). For example, all the high leaders in the FARC described by Gonsalves, Howes and Stansell, were men

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<sup>10</sup> Colombian spanish word meaning fantastic or gutsy

(Gonsalves et al. 2009). In order to reach leadership positions or accomplish military tasks, women had to show more endurance and capacity than their male comrades (Schindel 2006 pg 366). And if they do reach leadership roles, their job isn't easy. For example, Vásquez Perdomo describes the difficult time she had convincing the men she led that she was a capable leader. She explains how the peasants she was in charge of resisted having a city woman in the lead – they did only what she ordered and every time she made a mistake they would smile slyly (Vásquez Perdomo 2005 pg 201). Not until she told them about the urban operations she had participated in did they stop putting up obstacles (ibid.). She also states that it was not easy to win the respect of the men because they (the female leaders) were underestimated (ibid. pg 189)

We constantly had to demonstrate to the men that we could do everything we demanded of them and more. We were famous for being hard and authoritarian, but it was the only way to command respect from the men. (ibid.)

It is rare that women win top leadership positions in the FARC, although there are women who have managed to gain influence by being romantically (or rather sexually) involved with male guerrillas of high rank. Gonsalves, Stansell and Howes describe how the *guerrillera* that was in a relationship with the group's leader got a privileged position because of this (Gonsalves et al. 2009 pg 258). She was awarded the best hours for guard duty and she unofficially assumed the role of the number two man in the camp (ibid.). She handled communications with the radio, managed the day-to-day operations of the camp's cooking and provisioning and she was in charge of the people that supplied and distributed the food (ibid.).

Most of the women in guerrillas are foot soldiers and have low ranking assignments. According to Gonsalves, Stansell and Howes the FARC made few allowances for gender (2009 pg 65) and generally, women in the lowest ranks had to work just as hard as the men, especially during marches. They were very impressed by the women's ability to march and write that "most of the women shamed us" (ibid.).

At one point I asked one of the FARC women if I could pick up her backpack to see how heavy it was. It was so loaded with her gear and food and other supplies for the rest of the unit that I could barely get it off the ground. (Gonsalves et al. 2009 pg 65)

Gonsalves, Stansell and Howes describe how one of the FARC leaders walked without a backpack, while his woman (one of the *guerrilleras*) carried her share of the heavy load like the rest of the group, including the hostages (ibid. pg 237). So, women had to carry the same work-load as the men (except the leader who did not carry anything). They also had other tasks, such as taking care of the hostages. For example, the female leader of the group that was in charge of the three American hostages, massaged and washed one of the hostage's feet (ibid. pg 52). These assignments were not usually given to men, unless he was the camp doctor. Note in the following excerpt another example of how the women did things that the men didn't.

Whenever we stopped, a couple of other female guerrillas would flutter around him [the leader, 'Fat Man'], making sure he had water, that his boots were free of stones, and that his blubbery thighs weren't chafing too badly. (Gonsalves et al. 2009 pg 237)

In the FARC guerrilla, the members are taught the philosophical and political positions of the armed group and this is something that increases the soldier identities in the *guerrilleras* (Keairns 2002 pg 15). They are then assigned to go out into the society and educate the population. Both male and female members of the FARC guerrilla take part in this. In these instances, *guerrilleras* learn how to speak in public and teach (ibid. pg 14). These are skills women in the Colombian society are not encouraged to learn, based on the idea that a woman's place is in the home. In this sense, some progress towards gender equality has been made in the FARC.

## 5.2 The Treatment of *Guerrilleras*

The treatment of *guerrilleras* can be exemplified through the way relationships and issues concerning sex are handled and addressed within the groups. Sexuality can be used to construct a model of prescribed behavior in which women (and men) are "kept in line" by defining acceptable boundaries of sexuality and gender norms (Herbert 1998 pg 15). Therefore, the following section of the chapter contains descriptions and analysis of relationships, sexual abuse, pregnancy and motherhood. In all of these areas the guerrilla groups have strict guidelines on how its members are allowed to act.

### 5.2.1 Relationships

Relationships between the members of the guerrilla groups are very common. In the FARC, superiors can order the separation of well established couples, responding to the imperatives of war or to their own desire of, for example getting rid of the husband and taking his place (Gutiérrez Sanín 2008 pg 18). According to the three Americans taken hostage, the FARC had control over every aspect of the guerrillas' lives, including romantic relationships:

Though we saw a lot of promiscuity and swapping of mates – you have to keep in mind that these were mostly teenagers and young adults in their early twenties – none of their official pairing off could be done without the approval of their superiors. If they wanted to be a couple, they had to get approval. [...] That [sex], the FARC *commandantes* couldn't control, but in all other ways they allowed the guerrillas little freedom with their love lives. (Gonsalves et al. 2009 pg 277f)

As mentioned earlier, *guerrilleras* would sometimes agree to a relationship because it brought with it special privileges and benefits (e.g., in general have a less brutal way of life) (Keirns 2002 pg 4). All of the male FARC leaders that appear in this book are in relationships with women much younger than themselves. The authors comment on this phenomenon and state that “given what we knew about the FARC and the sheer drudgery of their life, she was probably wise to pair off with someone of his rank” (Gonsalves et al. 2009 pg 311).

Vásquez Perdomo states that in areas of politics and participation some progress towards gender equality was made, but when dealing with love and emotional relationships the “*compañeros* were like all other Colombian men” (Vásquez Perdomo 2005 pg 244). This statement is exemplified many times in her biography. Vásquez Perdomo had her first child while living with the baby’s father, Ramiro. Even though they were treated as equals in some specific aspects of the armed struggle, the entire weight of the household fell on her.

He was intellectual, the one who worked, the one who was involved in politics, and I was his wife, the one who raised the baby and took care of the house. This division of labor was no different from the one my grandma had followed at the beginning of the century. [...] At most, Ramiro “helped” with some things, and according to a lot of *compañero* couples, I should have thanked him for his help. I myself thought his work justified his many absences. (Vásquez Perdomo 2005 pgs 59 and 62)

### 5.2.2 Sexual Abuse and Harassment

In feminist work, sexuality is considered an integral part of the power relations between men and women in society (Kronsell & Svedberg 2001 Pg 99). The predominantly masculine norms that exist within guerrilla groups contain a sexual dimension. This can be observed through occurrence of sexual harassment and abuse within military groups, when sex is turned into a weapon against *guerrilleras*. Sex and sexualized violence have even been described as important ingredients in the process of building up the soldier (ibid.).

Gonsalves, Howes and Stansell testify of many instances of sexual harassment within the FARC guerrilla. The male soldiers would refer to the *guerrilleras* as objects, asking the hostages “which one do you want?”, “how do you like her?”, and saying things like “take this one” and “a girl will be my gift to you” (Gonsalves et al. 2009 pgs 51 and 66).

Many *guerrilleras* are subject to sexual assault from their colleagues and commanders (Coomaraswamy 2005 pg 57). Some testimonies provided by ex-combatant girls show how they were subject to different types of violence – such as sexual abuse and harassment by their superiors – because of their gender (WGWAC 2001 pg 38; Keirns 2002 pg 4). For example, a FARC guerrilla woman shot at a comrade who was molesting her; she was seriously reprimanded and prescribed a strong dose of physical work but apparently, the molester went unscathed (Gutiérrez Sanín 2008 pg 13).

Gonsalves, Stansell and Howe describe the FARC guerrilla like this:

Even in those first three weeks with the FARC, we could see that as much as the FARC preached equality – and in some ways practiced it by having the women carry heavy loads, work equally hard and take their turns at guard duty – in many ways the women were sexual captives of the FARC men. (Gonsalves et al. 2009 pg 65)

This description made of women as sexual captives may seem far fetched. Based solely on the observation that sexual harassment and abuse occur in the FARC, the conclusion will probably not be that the *guerrilleras* are sexual captives of the FARC men. However, if you add the observation that *guerrilleras* tend to pair up with male guerrillas in order to gain influence and power, there is a stronger foundation for arguing this.

### 5.2.3 Pregnancy and Motherhood

Pregnancy and motherhood are specific issues that *guerrilleras* have to deal with. The guerrilla groups often have strict rules of what is allowed and what is prohibited. For example, the FARC guerrilla is not interested in increasing their numbers through childbirth (Gonsalves et al. 2009 pg 277f). The control of reproductive rights often goes hand-in-hand with the presence of female fighters (Coomaraswamy 2005 pg 57). The use of contraception is required for all *guerrilleras* in FARC (Carey 2006 pg 127) and women were threatened that they would be killed if they became pregnant (Keirns 2002 pg 4). Forced contraception is a type of gender-related violence girls and women suffer within armed groups (WGWAC 2001 pg 38).

Girl soldiers in Colombia received some form of contraception immediately upon their entry into the armed group and this was as much a part of their life as a soldier as their combat training (Keirns 2002 pg 9). They were given contraceptive injections even when they expressed their strong objection (ibid.; WGWAC 2001 pg 38).

Men were not given contraceptives and the burden of responsibility for fertility control was placed upon the women (ibid.; WGWAC 2001 pg 38). It was reported that condoms were given only to men with AIDS (Keirns 2002 pg 9). The fact that women were the ones to decide if they would consent to sex (ibid. pg 4) is used as an explanation for the responsibility of contraception being placed solely on the *guerrillera*.

If a *guerrillera* were to get pregnant the guerrilla group would make her have an abortion. Forced abortion is common in armed groups in Colombia (WGWAC 2001 pg 39). In the case of women combatants, pregnancy was equated to a “loss” of military capacity (Schindel 2006 pg 366). There are many testimonies from ex-*guerrilleras* that testify to the rules of forced abortion and the consequences for the girls and women made to suffer them (examples in Keirns 2002 pg 9; Hansson 2008 pg 8). FARC spokesman Rodrigo Granda confirms this:

Sometimes, by mistake or by accident, there are cases of involuntary pregnancy. [...] Within our organization, we do a lot of educational work on diffusion of information and prevention so that women are well informed about this matter

and about how to avoid pregnancy and/or sexually transmitted diseases. [...] Taking into consideration the objective rules and living conditions in the midst of combat, they are generally interrupted at the request of the combatants themselves. (Batou 2008 pg 30f)

In contrast to what Granda states, the pregnancies are not usually interrupted at the request of the combatants themselves. Gonsalves, Stansell and Howes witnessed this first hand. One of the FARC *guerrilleras* (Vanessa) was about four to five months pregnant when the word came that she was going to have to terminate the pregnancy and she was given drugs so that she would “spontaneously” abort her child (Gonsalves et al. 2009 pgs 293f):

Sitting in our area and listening to Vanessa’s mumbled protests and later her cries of discomfort followed by grief, I felt like I’d reached a new level of disgust with the FARC. [...] The next time we saw Vanessa, she was a broken woman. No amount of brainwashing could extinguish her maternal instincts. She knew she’d had no choice, that one way or another the FARC would take the baby from her. Just as they had done with Clara’s baby, they didn’t see a human life in that child; they saw the potential for death. To them, a child was a liability, a crying, mewling presence that might betray their position. One more mouth to feed, one more item to be humped through the jungle. (ibid.)

Motherhood is in itself a complex issue in most guerrilla organizations (Schindel 2006 pg 366). *Guerrilleras* reported there were some rare exceptions made to the abortion rule and the girl was permitted to have the baby (Keirns 2002 pg 9). In these instances the woman’s participation in the group was restricted during the pregnancy. Pregnant women in FARC know that, after giving birth, they will have to hand over the child to a relative, with no real prospect of seeing it on a regular basis (Gutiérrez Sanín 2008 pg 18).

In M-19 there are other types of restrictions for *guerrilleras* to become mothers. They have no rules of forced contraception or forced abortion, and women are allowed to keep their babies. Since the M-19 is more an urban than rural guerrilla, there are other possibilities of taking care of a child, than there are in a jungle camp of the FARC. Vásquez Perdomo describes how during her time as a stay-at-home mother, *compañeros* from the M-19 came and left weapons, money and propaganda for her to hold (Vásquez Perdomo 2005 pg 59). So in that sense, she was still part of the struggle during her time as a mother. Having said this, motherhood is still restricted if the woman is to participate fully in the armed struggle. Vásquez Perdomo describes how “her task as a mother came to an end” when she has to leave the country on behalf of the guerilla groups orders (Vásquez Perdomo 2005 pg 218f). She states that her “militant conscience left no room for personal options” and that she “didn’t even think about it [leaving her sons] as a choice” (ibid.).

I renounced my motherhood for the second time. I left the lives of my boys in the hands of others, trusting that we would have time together under better conditions in the future. War was not compatible with motherhood. Once more I put my mission as a soldier above my personal life. I did this with sadness, but without regret. (ibid. pg 219)



## 6 Conclusion

### 6.1 The Roles *Guerrilleras* Play

As argued in the previous chapter, the guerrilla groups studied in this thesis do not live up to their own preaching of gender equality. The guerrilla groups are not gender neutral and different types of gender discrimination occur frequently within the groups.

In some restricted areas progress towards gender equality has been made within the guerrilla groups. For example, *guerrilleras* are allowed to carry out certain traditionally male assignments such as taking part in combat and speaking in public. *Guerrilleras* are in this sense permitted to partly enter the masculine domain of soldiering. It seems as if the *guerrilleras* are given more masculine jobs and are allowed to play the same roles as their male *compañeros* when the guerrilla feels it necessary, when it suits the guerrilla. For example, this could be during marches when the guerrilla needs the manpower of every person in the group. Thanks to this, the guerrilla groups claim they promote gender equality because they allow women to do “men’s work”. As soon as the situation is not as pressing, the gendered division of labor is more evident.

The guerrilla groups are in principle not gender equal. As stated earlier, the *machismo* of the society is reproduced in the guerrilla groups. Guerrillas exist in a society where patriarchal norms and a gendered division of labor prevail. These norms and the gendered division of labor have filtered down into the guerrilla groups. The *guerrilleras* are often confined to the roles their male *compañeros* assign to them. In addition to pulling the same work load as the men, *guerrilleras* are simultaneously situated in traditionally female support roles, like taking care of hostages (in the FARC) and carrying the entire weight of the household (in the M-19). Women do not have the same opportunities as men of reaching positions of power and have trouble convincing men that they are capable leaders. The *guerrilleras* are also encouraged to accentuate their femininity to avoid suspicion during missions.

For *guerrilleras* living under a masculine regime where masculinity is favored, life is a balancing act between emphasizing their masculine traits in order to gain respect from the men and emphasizing their feminine traits in order to keep their identity as women. By acting femininely and in that way distinguishing themselves from male soldiers, the *guerrilleras* are less threatening to the male members of the groups (Yuval-Davis 1997 pg 101).

Encouraging the prevalence of women warriors does not seem to undermine the gender structures of guerrilla groups or of society. The presence of *guerrilleras* has not changed the fundamental militarized, gendered construction of the guerrilla groups, which are coercive, hierarchical and patriarchal. Rather, women's presence in guerrilla groups reflects the militarization of society and of the *guerrilleras* themselves and not the achievement of women's equality. Instead of redefining gender-based social values and hierarchical power structures, the existence of *guerrilleras* ends up promoting martial and masculine values. As *guerrilleras* mirror the male soldiers in the guerrilla groups, the masculine patriarchal identity is homogenized more widely. An increased female presence in the guerrilla groups has not guaranteed gender equality, and might instead be used as legitimisation of the groups' actions.

## 6.2 The Treatment of *Guerrilleras*

Instead of being treated equally, women are treated in relation to their gender, for example by facing restrictions concerning their relationships, sexuality and reproductive rights. An increase in the number of *guerrilleras* has not succeeded in changing the patriarchal nature of the military or providing gender equality. As demonstrated in the previous chapter, relationships among members of the guerrilla groups are very common. In the FARC, superiors try to regulate the relationships for example by ordering the separation of established couples. *Guerrilleras* start up relationships with much older male leaders within the groups in order to gain influence. In the M-19 progress towards gender equality has not come far in regard to relationships, where the gender roles still are traditional.

The relations of power between men and women that exist within society continue in the military (Yuval-Davis 1997 pg 89). These relations of power can be exemplified by sexual abuse and harassment. Sexual violence is often turned into a weapon against women. Both sexual abuse and harassment occur within the guerrilla groups. Some go as far as claiming that *guerrilleras* are sexual captives of the FARC men. The phenomenon of *guerrilleras* can therefore not be considered as merely an empowerment of women. The sexism of the military is by some critical feminists seen as a reason for women to not become soldiers (Turpin 1998 pg 10).

The majority of the Colombian society is Catholic, which means that contraceptives and abortion are condemned. The reality for Catholic women in Colombia is in that respect a direct opposite of the reality for FARC *guerrilleras*. The rules of forced contraception and the control of reproductive rights can be seen as a way to control *guerrilleras* in the FARC. In addition to this, the responsibility for fertility control is placed solely upon the *guerrilleras*. Forced abortions are another example of the control the guerrilla group has over its female members. While in the Colombian society contraceptives and abortion are forbidden, in FARC they are forced. Either way, the women are not in control of their own reproductive rights.

## 6.3 Future Research Ideas

It would be very interesting to study and compare the differences in the gendered structures of the guerrilla groups and those of the Colombian society. How are women treated in society compared to how they are treated as *guerrilleras*? How are female members in Colombia's paramilitary groups treated in comparison to *guerrilleras*?

When the armed conflict between the guerrillas, the paramilitaries and the government is resolved, it would be interesting to study the guerrilla groups as they disarm and dissolve. Where do the *guerrilleras* go when they return to society? How are they treated? Do they tend to emphasize the masculine traits learned as *guerrilleras* or will they accentuate their femininity? Would the ex-*guerrilleras* gain more prominence in society or would they remain disadvantaged in terms of the gendered division of power and resources when the armed conflict is over?

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