



SPOTLIGHT: Gender issues and sexual violence in the Colombian armed conflict

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The violation of girls' rights is often subsumed within the broader phenomenon of children's rights violations. Due to their specific needs, however, more attention must be paid to the particular situation of girls, who suffer due not only to their age but also to their gender. Growing awareness sheds light on the reality faced by girls in the Colombian armed conflict, where the vulnerabilities they suffer influence their recruitment by illegal armed groups (IAG), impacts their experiences within the group, and has implications for the specialized assistance they require after disengaging.¹



Girls at a picnic event held by the Mi Sangre program.

The general situation of girls in Colombia

Girls in vulnerable situations in Colombia live in conditions characterized by poverty, inequality and social and economic exclusion.² Economic vulnerability and a lack of resources often force families to migrate in search of opportunities. Children recruited by IAG often come from poor families, and are easily lured into the illegal groups by promises of new opportunities or escape from these challenging circumstances.

Girls experience systematic social injustice and discrimination³ within a patriarchal power structure that devalues females⁴ and limits their development by expecting them to fulfill traditional gender roles, including being assigned roles associated with adult women from an early age.⁵ For instance, many families don't consider education beyond primary school to be essential for their children, especially girls.⁶ This is significant given that education plays an important role in marking the boundary between childhood and adulthood.⁷

Girls are also vulnerable to physical and emotional abuse, and are more likely to be sexually abused. According to data from the Institute of Legal Medicine, the principal victims of sexual violence are girls between 7 and 14 years old, although exact figures are difficult to obtain. In 2011, 23,000 sexual assault exams were carried out, although it is unknown how many occurred in the context of the armed conflict and in militarized areas where sexual abuse by armed forces occurs frequently but is rarely reported.⁸ Numbers of girls who become pregnant at an early age are also increasing, with negative consequences for their health and psychosocial wellbeing.⁹

Joining an illegal armed group

Many girls in Colombia suffer physical and psychological abuse in their family environment without engaging directly in the armed conflict. However, in areas in which the IAG are present and active, some of girls who are recruited are attempting to escape from subordination, discrimination and violence in the home. They may be unsatisfied with their limited social and economic opportunities, feel abandoned, or seek to escape violence and abuse experienced within their families. Girls may perceive that the IAG offers protection, or an opportunity to give their lives meaning.¹⁰

For hundreds of girls from rural areas of Colombia, recruitment will significantly change their lives and the construction of their identities.¹¹ However, these girls are limited by the information and resources available to them. Most girls who join an IAG have few resources, come from families that are desperately poor or prone to violence, and lack information about other options. They are also often ignorant of the consequences of their decision: undoubtedly, the reality that awaits them will prove to be one of the worst experiences of their lives.

Experiences within illegal armed groups: roles and power relations

Upon entering an IAG, girls are drawn into a culture of violence and fear, forcing them to put aside their feelings, emotions and dreams, as well as their rights. In this new environment, they will be used in combat, be denied access to



education, face health risks and endure sexual abuse, among other rights violations.

Girls play many roles within the armed group, and their recruitment offers a number of benefits for the IAG. All children can be easily indoctrinated given their age, and girls in particular can be more easily dominated and subordinated. Girls also make good informants since they can more easily pass without notice.

On the surface, power relations within the group could be seen to provide greater equality by enabling girls to take on non-traditional roles and responsibilities. Above all, armed groups require able-bodied combatants, whether male or female. However, when we examine the situation more closely, it becomes clear that this is misleading.

The power structure of the IAG is based on a masculine logic that values physical strength and force. Also, although all members are given combat responsibilities, girls and women are often assigned domestic work, such as cooking and nursing, according to a traditional gendered division of labor. Finally, and most importantly, girls and women continue to be used as sexual objects.¹² This dynamic impacts the construction of girls' identities and imposes patterns of behavior.

Girls soon learn that in order to survive they must maximize their utility within the power relations of the group. To do this, they must either become more harsh and cruel in armed combat, in line with the masculine ideal, or make use of their femininity to establish sexual relationships with their supervisors or other male group members to rise through the ranks or secure privileges such as protection, food, and rest.¹³

Conditions within the armed group, far from improving their situation, promoting gender equality and helping girls to develop autonomy, actually encourage girls to depend on male providers and protectors in pursuit of security.

The female body: object of control, discipline and violence in the armed conflict

Armed conflict exacerbates the victimization that women and girls already experience, bringing a greater sophistication to practices of violence.¹⁴ The manner in which girls' rights are violated in conflict is based on underlying gender relations and a patriarchal power structure, which perceives women as

inferior to men, or in some cases as the object or property of men.¹⁵ The armed conflict strengthens patriarchal culture, based on the logic of domination-submission in which women and girls are victims based on their gender, with the added dimension of armed methods of control and domination.¹⁶



Hip hop week organized by the "Dreaming is a Right" campaign.

In the context of armed conflict, the female body becomes a political field marked by power relations and is defined, disciplined, dominated and violated by armed actors.¹⁷ The use of extreme violence to weaken the enemy makes women and girls even more vulnerable to victimization.¹⁸ Sexual violence can be used as an instrument of social control, creating fear in the victim and destroying the social fabric of local communities. In this context, gender-based violence can be seen as a symbolic control over women, reinforcing and strengthening the image of the male warrior.¹⁹

Sexual violence is often a cause of displacement in the armed conflict, and displacement in turn increases vulnerability to victimization.²⁰ This particularly impacts women and children, who make up 80% of the displaced population.²¹

Afro-Colombian and indigenous populations who live in highly militarized areas are also more vulnerable to sexual violence. This is due to the arbitrary abuse of local populations by all parties to the conflict, and general impunity for perpetrators.

Sexual violence and health risks in illegal armed groups

Sexual violence has a significant impact on girls who join an IAG. In addition to the rigors of combat that all child combatants must face, girls experience particular hardships.



Girls recruited by IAGs are frequently victims of serious and repeated acts of sexual violence. At the same time, stigmatization of sexual violence means that victims often feel unable to talk about it.

Girls who belong to an IAG and engage in sexual activity are exposed to numerous health risks.²³ Many are too young to have sex, as their bodies have not fully developed, and they are usually forced to use contraceptives for which their bodies are not physically prepared. Girls who become pregnant are forced to abort, procedures that are risky for young girls, and made even more dangerous by the unsafe combat field context.



Beneficiary of an early childhood project in Cauca.

Recovery and reintegration

Throughout their experiences in the armed group, girls experience violations of their bodies and rights. Other members of the group exercise power over them, limiting and negating their rights, their identities, and their mobility. This loss of power can result in reduced self-esteem and self-confidence. Many girls attempt escape from the IAG, despite the grave danger of such an attempt.

Reintegration into civilian life represents a transition that requires specialized assistance, using a differential approach that is sensitive to girls' experiences and needs.

Disengaged girls should be supported through a transformative process that helps them to better understand

and construct meaning in their lives. This process also supports them in understanding their value as girls able to control and transform their lives and destinies, and in knowing, demanding and defending their rights as women and citizens.²⁴ Between January 1st and February 28th 2014, the ICBF Specialized Program Information System reported the entry of 23 disengaged children and adolescents. It is important to note that of this group of 23 children and adolescents, 57% (13) were girls.

1. IOM uses the term "disengaged" rather than "demobilized" to refer to child soldiers. The concept of demobilization is applicable only to adult populations, and it implies criminal responsibility. In contrast, children and adolescents recruited by illegal armed groups are considered to be victims, as established in Law 1098 of 2006 and confirmed by the Victims Law of 2011.

2. Mercy Corps (2013), "Informe Final de Investigación: Características individuales, familiares, sociales, comunitarias e institucionales asociadas a la desvinculación y a la reintegración de las adolescentes y mujeres jóvenes que han pertenecido a grupos armados ilegales," Bogotá, 20 June 2013, pg. 16.

3. Ibid. pg. 8, citing Freedman (2004) pg. 8

4. Ibid. pg. 14, citing Lorenzo (1995) pg. 106

5. Ibid. pg. 7

6. Ibid. pg. 7, citing Cajamarca (2012), pg. 24

7. Ibid. pg. 8

8. Tornay, M. C. (2013), Colombia: La violencia sexual impune en el marco del conflicto armado. 3 March 2014. Available at: <http://www.feminicidio.net/colombia-la-violencia-impune-del-conflicto-armado>

9. Mercy Corps, pg. 51

10. Ibid. pg. 18

11. Ibid. pg. 16

12. Ibid. pg. 24, citing Coalico 2009, pg. 93

13. Ibid. pg. 20

14. Tornay. citing the Office of the Ombudsman

15. Mercy Corps (2013), pg. 22, citing Humanidad Vigente (2012), pg. 27

16. Ibid. pg. 21

17. Ibid. citing Fundación Plan 2012, pg. 93

18. Ibid. citing Cajamarca (2012) pg. 93

19. Ibid. citing Humanidad Vigente, 2012, pg.10

20. Internal Displacement Monitoring Center (2014), Displacement continues despite hopes for peace. 16 January 2014. Available at: <http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/201401-am-colombia-overview-en.pdf>

21. Tornay (2013)

22. El Espectador, Violencia sexual contra menores, una estrategia de guerra. Available at: <http://www.elespectador.com/noticias/politica/articulo-390871-violencia-sexual-contra-menores-una-estrategia-de-guerra>

23. Human Rights Watch (2003). "You'll Learn Not to Cry: Child Combatants in Colombia." Available at: <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2003/colombia0903/>

24. Ibid. pg. 29

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