

# POLITICAL REINCORPORATION OF FEMALE FARC–EP Ex–COMBATANTS: THE CREATION OF VICTIMS, HEROES, AND THREATS<sup>1</sup>

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## INTRODUCTION

Colombia<sup>3</sup> has experienced over a half-century of sustained conflict, the longest insurgency in Latin America.<sup>4</sup> Discord within the nation can be traced back to the 1940s, and has grown over the decades as insurgents created various armed groups to wrest territorial control and political influence from the Colombian state.<sup>5</sup> The largest of these groups, the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia – Ejército del Pueblo* (FARC–EP), formed in response to the suppression of communism in rural Colombia.<sup>6</sup> The FARC,<sup>7</sup> composed of mostly rural farmers and led by a small cohort of senior officers, stated it was initiating warfare on

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<sup>3</sup> All Spanish to English translations of the cited interviews in this paper were done by Viviana Andrea Sarmiento Peña of Bogotá, Colombia, and have been edited for length and/or clarity. All other Spanish to English translations were completed by the author.

<sup>4</sup> James J. Brittain, *Revolutionary Social Change in Colombia: The Origin and Direction of the FARC–EP* (New York: Pluto Press, 2010), xv.

<sup>5</sup> Claire Felter and Danielle Renwick, “Colombia’s Civil Conflict,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, January 1, 2017, <https://www.cfr.org/backgroundunder/colombias-civil-conflict>

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> The –EP is commonly removed from the acronym.

behalf of poor Colombian workers, in addition to promoting Communism.<sup>8</sup> The Colombian state claimed to be fighting to ensure stability within the country. Likewise, paramilitary groups, informally linked to the Colombian army, made defeating the insurgents their central aim.<sup>9</sup>

Since the late 1980s, the Colombian government and the FARC have attempted negotiations, culminating in a peace agreement in November 2016.<sup>10</sup> Similar to its response to other conflicts over the last three decades, Colombia implemented the 2016 disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) program to transition the FARC, and the country, from war to peace. With the disarmament and demobilization phases officially completed in October 2017, thousands of ex-guerrilla fighters, 30 percent of whom are women, began the transition from combatant to civilian as part of the reintegration phase.<sup>11</sup>

This article explores the political reintegration (known as political ‘reincorporation’ under the Colombian program, and henceforth in this article) of female FARC ex-combatants. Specifically, it analyzes the ways in which these women are variously invoked as ‘heroes,’ ‘victims,’ and ‘threats’ by state leaders, political elites, women’s advocacy organizations, and the women themselves. Such narratives have shaped the possibilities and constraints of life after conflict for these women in diffuse ways: from accessing welfare and employment, to

<sup>8</sup> “Who Are the FARC?,” *BBC News*, November 24, 2016, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-latin-america-36605769>; Manuel Marulanda Veléz, “The Origins of the FARC-EP: The Birth of the Armed Resistance,” in *War in Colombia: Made in the U.S.A.*, ed. Rebecca Toledo, Teresa Gutierrez, Sara Flounders, and Andy McInerney, 115-122 (New York: International Action Centre, 2003), quoted in Brittain, *Revolutionary Social Change in Colombia*, 15.

<sup>9</sup> Stephanie Hanson, “Colombia’s Right-Wing Paramilitaries and Splinter Groups,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, January 10, 2008, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/colombias-right-wing-paramilitaries-and-splinter-groups>

<sup>10</sup> Nicholas Casey and Federico Rios Escobar, “Colombia Struck a Peace Deal With Guerrillas, but Many Return to Arms,” *New York Times*, September 18, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/18/world/americas/colombia-farc-peace.html>

<sup>11</sup> United Nations Verification Mission in Colombia, “Press Release on Formal Delivering to Colombian Government of Material Resulting from Laydown of Arms Process, That Were Stored in the UN Mission General Armament Warehouse,” press release, October 3, 2017, ¶1, <https://colombia.unmissions.org/en/press-release-formal-delivering-colombian-government-material-resulting-laydown-arms-process-were>; Saidalia Giraldo, “Demobilized Women Combatants: Lessons from Colombia,” (paper, Thinking Gender Conference, 22 Annual Graduate Student Research Conference, UCLA Center for the Study of Women, Los Angeles, CA, February 3, 2012), 4, <https://escholarship.org/content/qt08z6h9qk/qt08z6h9qk.pdf?t=m2oizq&nosplash=5ebcb889b4fcd804010b58b0a68f17f>

managing their family relations. In particular, I will discuss the opportunities and constraints for reincorporating female ex-combatants within Colombia's formal politics.

Examining female FARC ex-combatants' participation in formal politics is important as it reflects not only the ways in which the Colombian state views female ex-combatants, but also how these women view their own political voices. As Johanna Söderström emphasizes in her work on combatant political reincorporation in Liberia, "political involvement...reflects the degree to which the ex-combatants feel that they have a political voice, no matter how that voice is articulated."<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, I am situating this article within the critical challenges to reincorporation and will explore female ex-combatant narratives about experiences in conflict in order to illustrate reincorporation as a prolonged, open ended process, rather than a finite phase defined only by policy.

This article reaches three conclusions: First, each narrative is constructed and reproduced by different actors with different motivations. Second, these narratives effectively shape the current reincorporation of female FARC ex-combatants into formal Colombian politics. Third, their experiences suggest that policymakers should view reincorporation as a potentially life-long process, rather than a neatly defined phase.

To accomplish this, the article consists of six sections. The first will briefly discuss the current state of DDR programs, focusing on the challenges within political reincorporation programs and policies. The second section will analyze the current Colombian political climate, and how it shapes the reincorporation of female FARC ex-combatants, by evaluating institutional structures, the nature of political violence in the country, peace negotiations and transitional justice, and the uncertain future of peace in Colombia.

Here, the analysis of institutional structures will examine how formal and informal institutions, and their leadership, marginalize female ex-combatants within the reincorporation process. Additionally, the discussion of political violence will investigate its impact upon the Colombian political climate, especially the prevalence of political violence against women. I further examine the complex peace negotiation process and the ensuing transitional justice program in order to highlight the ways in which female ex-combatants

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<sup>12</sup> Johanna Söderström, *Peacebuilding and Ex-Combatants: Political Reintegration in Liberia* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 14. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315762807>

are marginalized by both. Lastly, in this section I will discuss the uncertainties surrounding the future of sustained peace in Colombia and the implications for female FARC ex-combatants.

The third section will outline the specific narratives about female FARC ex-combatants, as well as who creates and perpetuates these narratives, and why. It will explore the creation and reproduction of the ‘victim’, ‘hero’, and ‘threat’ narratives, and will serve as a foundation for later analysis in the article. The fourth section will outline the current organization and condition of the FARC party. Here, I will argue that while the FARC’s strong internal cohesion allows women to fulfill leadership roles that are otherwise uncommon in other Colombian political parties, the constraints of the patriarchal hierarchy remaining from its time as an armed group ensure women continue to be politically subordinate to their male peers.

In the fifth section, I will present the Colombian government’s vision of the political reincorporation process, and how the process has allowed for an increase in the influence of women’s political advocacy groups. These groups are significant as they allow female ex-combatants to collectively create or destroy political narratives about themselves, thus giving non-elite female combatants a political voice.

The sixth and final section will conclude my analysis by profiling the two highest-ranking female ex-combatants in the FARC party: Senators Sandra Ramírez and Victoria Sandino Simanca Herrera. They serve as a significant point of comparison between elite and non-elite female experiences of political reincorporation in Colombia, as will be demonstrated through an analysis of how the three narratives of ‘victim’, ‘hero’, and ‘threat’ have impacted their political lives.

## **DDR AND POLITICAL REINCORPORATION PROGRAMS**

The current ‘sustainable peace’ reincorporation programs emerged within the last ten years, responding to the need to include non-state actors in the negotiation process.<sup>13</sup> This requirement necessitated a shift, during which DDR began to fulfill institutional voids during peacebuilding campaigns in weak states. Thus, the literature often argues that the DDR process is now inseparable from the post-conflict state-building process, especially in cases where weak state institutions

<sup>13</sup> Jairo Munive and Finn Stepputat, “Rethinking Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Programs,” *Stability* 4.1 (2015): 1–2, <https://doi.org/10.5334/sta.60>

may threaten the success of peace processes.<sup>14</sup>

However, women remain largely marginalized during political reincorporation processes.<sup>15</sup> Wenche Hauge, in her research on post-conflict political identity within armed groups, explains that often, “female returnees and ex-fighters face...a lack of skills, education and resources required to engage in an income-generating activity.”<sup>16</sup> Hauge further demonstrates that female fighters are also often subjected to gender discrimination within reincorporation policies, such as in Sierra Leone, where “female fighters were only entitled to receive economic assistance or land if they turned up together with their spouse, which was not always possible—and more important—not even desirable.”<sup>17</sup> Female ex-combatants are now expected to not only become fully productive members of their communities again, but to also allow their ‘successful’ transitions to be used as evidence of a political ‘peace.’<sup>18</sup> As Francisco Gutiérrez-Sanín and Andrea González-Peña argue, this burden of homecoming and peacebuilding placed on ex-combatants is difficult to achieve within the fragmented nature of modern conflict, especially when non-state armed groups have deep ties to criminal networks within local communities.<sup>19</sup>

Complicating this further, Mats Utas argues that women found agency and established identity in a variety of ways during war, and that committing

<sup>14</sup> Antonio Giustozzi, introduction to *Post-Conflict Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration: Bringing State-Building Back In*, ed. Antonio Giustozzi, 1st ed. (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2012), 20.

<sup>15</sup> Priscyll A. Avione and Rachel Tillman, “Demobilized Women in Colombia: Embodiment, Performativity, and Social Reconciliation,” in *Female Combatants in Conflict and Peace: Challenging Gender in Violence and Post-Conflict Reintegration*, ed. Seema Shekhawat (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 216–31. [https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137516565\\_14](https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137516565_14)

<sup>16</sup> Birgitte Sørensen, “Women and Post-Conflict Reconstruction: Issues and Sources” (working paper, WSP Occasional Paper no. 3, Program for Strategic and International Security Studies, United Nations Research Institute for Social Development, Geneva, Switzerland, June 1998), <http://hdl.handle.net/10419/148841>, quoted in Wenche Hauge, “Group Identity—a Neglected and Political Participation in Guatemala,” *Conflict, Security and Development* 8.3 (2008): 297, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14678800802323316>

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Kate Paarlberg-Kvam, “What’s to Come Is More Complicated: Feminist Visions of Peace in Colombia,” *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 21.2 (2018): 197–98, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2018.1487266>

<sup>19</sup> Francisco Gutiérrez-Sanín and Andrea González Peña, “Colombia’s Paramilitary DDR and Its Limits,” in *Post-Conflict Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration: Bringing State-Building Back In*, ed. Antonio Giustozzi, 1st ed. (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2012), 118.

violence was one of the most effective methods to do so. For many female ex-combatants, the idea of women participating in violence was not accepted within their local communities. Thus, asking these already stigmatized women to be ambassadors of peace when they returned home is problematic as it can further heighten their stigmatization.<sup>20</sup> In the case of Liberia in the 1990s, some women even returned to the front from refugee camps and reincorporation posts in order to regain agency experienced in conflict.<sup>21</sup> While few women from the FARC have dissented from the peace agreement and resumed arms, the same rejection of reincorporation has been present in Colombia. Women's peace organizations strengthened after the 2016 peace accord, sparking, as Kate Paarlberg-Kvam explains, "a revitalized feminist movement with a new space for radical, antineoliberal critique; and thousands of women fighters whose feminist rhetoric is concretized and strengthened by their experiences of demobilization."<sup>22</sup> As the Colombian women demonstrated, collectives of former combatants began to emerge as a means of circumventing the burden placed upon overtaxed or ineffective reincorporation programs.<sup>23</sup> Particularly for female ex-combatants, research is beginning to show that organizing in this capacity gives them some agency within state-led reincorporation programs.<sup>24</sup>

Additionally, for women, reincorporation entails relinquishing previously held autonomy. Meghan MacKenzie warns that political approaches and narratives which implore "women and girl soldiers to return to their 'normal places' in the community," destroy "any new roles or positions of authority they may have held during the conflict...and [in turn] any opportunities to rethink and reshape gender stereotypes and hierarchies are destroyed."<sup>25</sup> Political reincorporation programs do

<sup>20</sup> Mats Utas, "Victimcy, Girlfriending, Soldiering: Tactic Agency in a Young Woman's Social Navigation of the Liberian War Zone," *Anthropological Quarterly* 78.2 (2005): 404, <https://doi.org/10.1353/anq.2005.0032>.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 423.

<sup>22</sup> Paarlberg-Kvam, "What's to Come Is More Complicated," 213.

<sup>23</sup> Lalli Metsola, "'Reintegration' of Ex-Combatants and Former Fighters: A Lens into State Formation and Citizenship in Namibia," *Third World Quarterly* 27.6 (2006): 1122, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436590600842407>

<sup>24</sup> Luisa M. Dietrich Ortega, "Untapped Resources for Peace: A Comparative Study of Women's Organizations of Guerrilla Ex-Combatants in Colombia and El Salvador," in *Female Combatants in Conflict and Peace: Challenging Gender in Violence and Post-Conflict Reintegration*, ed. Seema Shekhawat (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 232-235. [https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137516565\\_15](https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137516565_15)

<sup>25</sup> Megan MacKenzie, "Securitization and Desecuritization: Female Soldiers and the Reconstruction of Women in Post-Conflict Sierra Leone," *Security Studies* 18.2 (2009): 258, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636410902900061>

not only consist of a series of ambiguous policies and token financial handouts to ex-combatants. Particularly for women, it involves a prolonged and intense battle with gendered expectations at both the national and community levels. Within the last decade, there has been increased academic research into the political reincorporation of female ex-combatants, however, it remains a critically understudied topic.

Due to its recent peace agreement and high percentage of demobilizing female ex-combatants, Colombia provides an opportunity to study the reincorporation of women. As it transitioned from armed group to political party, the FARC continued to be influential, and, thus, presents an excellent case study of the political reincorporation of female ex-combatants. The aim of this article is to examine the post-conflict experiences of reincorporating FARC female ex-guerrilla fighters and the politics surrounding those experiences. By first considering the political context of their reincorporation, and then analyzing the women's narratives about their experiences, we can discern the constraints and possibilities that reincorporation places upon their lives.

## COLOMBIAN POLITICAL CLIMATE

Female FARC ex-combatants face a number of difficulties while navigating the Colombian political reincorporation processes. In order to understand these complexities, one must first understand the Colombian political economy, as it invariably shapes reincorporation processes. This section will analyze the political economy in four parts: formal and informal institutions and their leaders, the current role of violence in politics, peace negotiations and political justice, and the uncertain future of the peace agreement.

Both during the conflict and within the current peace process, female FARC ex-combatants' experiences have been inextricably linked with the tensions in Colombia's political system. These tensions have yielded a variety of narratives describing female FARC ex-combatants, which have shaped the lived realities of reincorporation for these women.

### *Formal and Informal Institutions and their Political Elite*

Structurally, the Colombian government is divided into three branches: the executive, the legislative, and the judicial.<sup>26</sup> The head of government is the

<sup>26</sup> "South America, Colombia," *CIA World Factbook*, April 1, 2020, <https://www.cia.gov/library/>



president, currently Iván Duque Márquez, who was elected in August 2018 on the Democratic Center Party ticket.<sup>27</sup> Colombia uses a multi-party system, and, as a result of Duque's election, the Democratic Center Party now represents the 'government's party'. In all, there are ten major parties registered in Colombia, with many smaller, less influential ones throughout the nation. Legally, all blocs may register as an 'opposition party' to the government's party if they meet certain establishing criteria, which affords them political legitimacy and privileges.<sup>28</sup>

Since signing the peace accord in November 2016, the FARC has been a recognized and registered opposition party, with five seats in the Chamber of Representatives and an additional five in the Senate. While they retained the guerrilla group's acronym, the group renamed itself the Revolutionary Alternative Force of the Common (FARC, in Spanish) Party.<sup>29</sup> Currently, women occupy only two of the congressional seats allocated to the FARC.<sup>30</sup> While percentages alone are not enough to indicate political marginalization, the number is strikingly low. Additionally, the transformation of the armed group into a political party remains highly polarizing among other politicians and Colombian citizens.<sup>31</sup> Thus, the few elected FARC party women face multiple avenues of marginalization: first, simply as women in politics, and second, as leaders of a controversial political organization. This discrimination against these female politicians produces multifaceted barriers to elite political representation for female FARC ex-combatants.<sup>32</sup>

Colombia's executive and legislative branches contain additional sub-units: the executive includes the National Police and Military Forces of Colombia, and the legislative houses the bicameral Congress.<sup>33</sup> This organization is significant

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publications/the-world-factbook/geos/co.html

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Final Agreement for Ending the Conflict and Building a Stable and Lasting Peace, Colom.-FARC-EP, §2.1.1, November 24, 2016, U.N. Doc. S/2017/272.

<sup>29</sup> Jose M. Alonso Gonzalez, "How Is FARC's Political Party Going after Its First Year?," *Latin American Post*, September 13, 2018, <https://latinamericanpost.com/23229-how-is-farcs-political-party-going-after-its-first-year>

<sup>30</sup> "FARC Members Take Seats in Colombian Congress," *Justice for Colombia*, July 23, 2018, <https://justiceforcolombia.org/news/farc-members-take-seats-in-colombian-congress/>

<sup>31</sup> Angelika Rettberg, "Peace-Making Amidst an Unfinished Social Contract: The Case of Colombia," *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 14.1 (2019): 84-100, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17502977.2019.1619655>

<sup>32</sup> Kiran Stallone and Julia Zulver, "The Feminists of Farc: 'We Are Not Demobilising, We Are Mobilising Politically,'" *Guardian*, March 27, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2017/mar/27/feminists-farc-colombia-female-inequality>

<sup>33</sup> "South America, Colombia," *CIA World Factbook*.



because, while there is a constitutional separation of powers between the branches, corruption within the government undermines the political system.<sup>34</sup> As an example, Andrés Solimano argues that organized narco-terrorists unite state institutions in corruption, using the Colombian legal system to illustrate:

The effect of drug trafficking on the judicial system is a primary example of the impact of violent crime on institutions, where narco-terrorism, threats, and acts of kidnapping and assassination have influenced the administration of justice and changes in the penal code to benefit them. Corruption of the judicial system has manifested itself, for instance, in the arbitrary dismissal of evidence against, or the release of, well-known drug-traffickers.<sup>35</sup>

Furthering Solimano's point, Angelika Rettberg explains: "Colombia has been plagued by drug-trade related violence since the 1970s. The pervasive effects of drugs on politics, society, and the economy have been well documented, and include corruption, institutional atrophy, and a generalized perception of state incapacity."<sup>36</sup>

While narcotrafficking is not the only source of corruption in Colombian politics, the public strongly associates it with ex-FARC members, a fact which many oppositional politicians exploit when challenging FARC party policies.<sup>37</sup> For female ex-combatants seeking office, this is particularly damaging as they are subject to the same stigma as their male peers, but without access to the same economic, political, and social networks the drug trade provided.

Adversity to political cooperation with the FARC is best exemplified by the relationship between the last three Colombian presidents: Álvaro Uribe (2002-2010), Juan Manuel Santos (2010-2018), and Iván Duque Márquez (2018-present).<sup>38</sup> Former President Uribe is currently a senator for the

<sup>34</sup> Winifred Tate, "Paramilitary Politics and Corruption Talk in Colombia," *Culture, Theory and Critique* 59:4 (2018): 420, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14735784.2018.1522596>

<sup>35</sup> Andrés Solimano, ed., *Colombia : Essays on Conflict, Peace, and Development* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2000), 32-33.

<sup>36</sup> Rettberg, "Peace-Making," 87.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 10-14.

<sup>38</sup> "Can Colombia's President Iván Duque Find His Feet?," *Economist*, June 20, 2019, <https://www.economist.com/the-americas/2019/06/20/can-colombias-president-ivan-duque-find-his-feet>

Democratic Center Party and is widely viewed as the most influential politician within the current administration. When president, Uribe was lauded for making significant advances in the fight against the left-wing armed groups.<sup>39</sup> However, he was unsuccessful at dismantling the FARC. As a result, he supported Juan Manuel Santos, with whom his policy goals aligned as his presidential successor.<sup>40</sup> However, upon his election, Santos quickly began the peace negotiation process in a manner that alienated Uribe, causing Uribe to become a public political enemy to then-president Santos. Eventually, Uribe created a new political party (the current Democratic Center Party) to undermine Santos's support base.<sup>41</sup> Colombian citizens did not widely support the peace agreement, partly due to the influence of Uribe, who mobilized his Democratic Center party against the agreement, ultimately quashing a referendum to ratify it.<sup>42</sup>

A congressional vote, rather than a second national referendum, ultimately ratified the peace agreement in early October 2016.<sup>43</sup> Female ex-combatants were disproportionately affected by the frantic negotiations of the agreement, especially because the public believed the women received preferential treatment. As Catalina Ruiz-Navarro put it, “[within the first referendum] several sectors rejected the peace agreement arguing the gendered approach of the Agreement was an ‘ideology’ that de-stabilized family values, pushed for the transgression of traditional gender roles, and promoted homosexuality.”<sup>44</sup> While the decision to conduct a congressional vote, rather than a referendum, preserved much of this approach, significant portions of Colombian society still viewed the inclusion of ‘special privileges’ for female combatants as unnecessary and even counterproductive.

Despite Santos winning the Nobel Peace Prize in 2016 for his historic agreement with the FARC, he lost the 2018 presidential election to Iván Duque

<sup>39</sup> Maria A. Silva, “Alvaro Uribe: The Most Dangerous Man in Colombian Politics,” *Council on Hemispheric Affairs*, October 20, 2017, <http://www.coha.org/alvaro-uribe-the-most-dangerous-man-in-colombian-politics/>

<sup>40</sup> “Juan Manuel Santos,” *Colombia Reports*, March 9, 2019, <https://colombiareports.com/juan-manuel-santos/>

<sup>41</sup> “Democratic Center,” *Colombia Reports*, December 8, 2018, <https://colombiareports.com/democratic-center-colombia/>

<sup>42</sup> “La Polémica Valla Del Uribismo Contra La JEP,” *El Espectador*, March 24, 2019, <https://www.elespectador.com/noticias/politica/la-polemica-valla-del-uribismo-contra-la-jep-articulo-846721>; Silva, “Alvaro Uribe.”

<sup>43</sup> Rettberg, “Peace-Making,” 86-87.

<sup>44</sup> Catalina Ruiz-Navarro, “A Feminist Peace in Colombia?” *Heinrich Boll Stiftung: The Green Political Foundation*, February 14, 2019, <https://www.boell.de/en/2019/02/14/feminist-peace>

Márquez, Uribe's close political ally and preferred candidate.<sup>45</sup> Since gaining office, President Duque, who somewhat reluctantly supports the peace agreement, has been slow to enact key mandates, such as those concerning rural security.<sup>46</sup> As a result of these intensely personal political clashes at the highest level of the Colombian government, the success of the agreement is in jeopardy.

In response, critics argue that losing focus on implementing the peace agreement will hurt both the FARC party and the current administration politically. As Jaqueline O'Neill argued in *Foreign Policy*, the successful reincorporation of female ex-combatants is crucial to the political legitimacy of the FARC, the president, and the peace agreement:

For the FARC, ensuring women's full inclusion in the process... enables FARC leadership to sustain narratives about commitment to gender equality and fairness that could translate into votes during upcoming elections. For the government, focusing on women could solidify the country's reputation as a leader in defining global standards for addressing the aftermath of war.<sup>47</sup>

However, institutional exclusion of female ex-combatants in policymaking is only one constraint on their political participation. The reality of physical and psychological violence hinders them as well.

### *Current Role of Violence in Politics*

Violence and politics have long been symbiotic in Colombia; however, one must exercise caution when describing the nature of that violence. As Nazih Richani writes in the opening of his work, *Systems of Violence: The Political Economy of War and Peace in Colombia*, "the country's violent history has led some social scientists and policy makers to believe that an inherent cultural character has

<sup>45</sup> John P. Rathbone and Gideon Long, "Polarised Colombia Prepares for Polls amid Lukewarm Links with US," *Irish Times*, May 25, 2018, <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/world/polarised-colombia-prepares-for-polls-amid-lukewarm-links-with-us-1.3508532>; "Colombia's New President Iván Duque: Puppet or Rock Star?" *BBC News*, June 18, 2018, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-latin-america-44488011>

<sup>46</sup> "Colombia's President Iván Duque."

<sup>47</sup> Jaqueline O'Neill, "Are Women the Key to Peace in Colombia?" *Foreign Policy*, April 20, 2015, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/04/20/are-women-the-key-to-peace-in-colombia-farc-talks/>

contributed to such violence.”<sup>48</sup> Viewing violence as inherent is a dangerous and overly simplistic mischaracterization of a complex Colombian history. Thus, the approach to violence in this analysis is one that aims to account for all of the present and past tensions in Colombian politics, social life, and economics. Understanding this violence is significant when analyzing the political reincorporation of female ex-combatants. These women face incredibly high threats of violence—not only as former combatants, but also as women in an intensely patriarchal country.

One of the major vehicles of gendered violence in Colombia were the paramilitaries. In 1968, the Colombian Congress enacted Law 48, which legalized the creation of paramilitaries. The statute, which allowed the Colombian military to arm civilians to fight against guerrilla groups, was the primary military strategy until 2002.<sup>49</sup> In analyses of the conflict, the paramilitaries are widely regarded as the most vicious actors as they were indiscriminately violent against both civilians and guerrilla fighters.<sup>50</sup> While certainly not the only controversial law enacted during the conflict, Law 48 exemplifies the difficulty in determining the ‘perpetrators,’ ‘victims,’ and ‘prosecutors’ of violence within the Colombian conflict and surrounding politics. Law 48 allowed the state to act as all three depending upon the context. However, not all violence during the conflict was a result of state action. Just as state initiatives blurred the lines of responsibility, many non-state actors committed violence justified under their internal group ideology, but judged unnecessary by outsiders.<sup>51</sup>

Despite the enactment of the peace accords, political violence is still occurring in Colombia. This is associated with an increase in social violence, particularly in the country’s rural regions, where there is contention over social influence.<sup>52</sup> Incidents of political violence, defined by Solimano as the “commission of violent acts, motivated by desire, conscious or unconscious, to obtain or maintain political power,” are frequent against women in Colombia. Often, they are expressed as physical violence against female social and political activists.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>48</sup> Nazih Richani, *Systems of Violence: The Political Economy of War and Peace in Colombia*, (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2013), 1.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 202.

<sup>50</sup> Brittain, *Revolutionary Social Change*, 118.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 37–40.

<sup>52</sup> Joe P. Daniels, “Colombians Hear Grim Echo of Decades-Long War in Mayoral Contender’s Murder,” *Guardian*, October 25, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/oct/25/colombia-peace-deal-war-farc-karina-garcia>

<sup>53</sup> Solimano, *Colombia: Essays*, 12; Daniels, “Colombians Hear Grim Echo”; Angela Gomez, Electoral Observation Mission, interview by author, Colombia, September 9, 2019.

Jeffrey Stevenson Murer, in his work on political violence and national security, warns that policymakers should regard incidents of “...men raping women as...expression[s] of misogynist political violence” much more thoroughly and harshly than violence during protests and against symbolic state property.<sup>54</sup> In Colombia, for women to participate in politics, particularly in rural regions, is physically and psychologically dangerous. Thus, for female FARC ex-combatants to have any real political involvement after demobilization, they not only have to overcome the stigma associated with being a former guerrilla fighter, but also that of being a woman challenging socio-political order.

On October 15th, 2019, the UN Security Council released a statement relaying their “concern about the increase in attacks against political party candidates across the political spectrum...[and] their serious concern over the continued killings of community and social leaders, including women leaders, and of former FARC-EP members.”<sup>55</sup> I conducted an interview with two representatives, Angela Gomez and Camilo Vargas, from the Electoral Observation Mission (EOM), an organization that collects data on Colombian political violence. They remarked that not only was violence against political candidates high, but that, as Angela describes below, violence against female FARC candidates was particularly intense:

We are seeing that the violence is more hateful. It is more violent. Because the woman can be raped. The family can be hurt. Maybe the kind of violence is with more hate. If we are talking about ex-combatientes...it's more difficult because I think everyone in Colombia have a feeling, a bad feeling about ex-combatientes in general. And because forgiveness is hard.<sup>56</sup>

This violence has a chilling effect on political participation. Female FARC ex-combatants interested in political engagement likely experienced some form of gendered violence while in the armed group. This potential re-occurrence of

<sup>54</sup> Jeffrey S. Murer, “Political Violence,” in *The Oxford Handbook of U.S. National Security*, ed. Derek S. Reveron, Nikolas K. Gvosdev, and John A. Cloud (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2018), 500. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190680015.013.28>

<sup>55</sup> United Nations Security Council, “Security Council Press Statement on Colombia,” Press statement no. SC/13988, October 15, 2019, <https://colombia.unmissions.org/en/security-council-press-statement-colombia-sc13988>

<sup>56</sup> Gomez, interview by author.

that same violence, as they test the boundaries of their political reincorporation as a civilian, may be enough to dissuade them from participating altogether. Many female FARC ex-combatants experienced domestic abuse, among other types of gendered violence, during the conflict. However, there were also mechanisms in place to punish the perpetrators.<sup>57</sup> Referencing a similar situation in El Salvador, Jocelyn Viterna explained that these female fighters, used to seeing violence against their bodies punished by the military leadership, suddenly found themselves without protection from violence during reincorporation, particularly protection of a political nature.<sup>58</sup> Thus, they learned to fear and avoid situations in which violence may occur.

### *Peace Negotiations and Transitional Justice*

The Colombian government has attempted to negotiate peace with the FARC multiple times over the last two decades, finally reaching an agreement in November 2016. Though it was praised internationally as a progressive and remarkable agreement, there is dispute over which party actually ‘won.’ Due to stipulations within the accord itself, some Colombian citizens, particularly Uribe supporters, believe it was the FARC.<sup>59</sup> These policies include a monthly stipend to ex-guerrillas, and social and economic benefits for ex-combatants within the reincorporation process. Richani, in his work on the political economy of Colombia’s conflict during the peace negotiations, argues that peace was only achieved because political elites were growing weary of the costs of the war and its increasingly negative impact on the Colombian domestic economy and position in the global market.<sup>60</sup> Explaining the collapse of the ‘war system’, he further states that:

...sectors of the dominant classes [were] contemplating the deconstruction of the default hegemony, the war system, and reconstructing in its place a more “encompassing hegemony” by persuading the peasant-based guerrillas by granting them some concession as a price to accept a new basis of their authority and

<sup>57</sup> Brittain, *Revolutionary Social Change*, 192.

<sup>58</sup> Jocelyn Viterna, “Demobilization, Remobilization, and Retrenchment,” in *Women in War: The Micro-Processes of Mobilization in El Salvador* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 196. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199843633.001.000>

<sup>59</sup> “Juan Manuel Santos,” *Colombia Reports*; “Colombia’s President Iván Duque.”

<sup>60</sup> Richani, *Systems of Violence*, 129.

stabilizing property rights. The price of maintaining the war system has become too high and does not measure up to the opportunities that peace could offer to important sectors of the dominant class.<sup>61</sup>

These primarily economic motivations demonstrate the narrow view the political elite had of the social ramifications of the agreement. As Richani concludes, many elites saw an agreement as the most beneficial option for their finances, and often the social, political, and economic reincorporation of female ex-combatants did not affect elites.

Perhaps the most divisive aspect of the peace agreement is the transitional justice system. Colombians are divided not only over the merits of the system as a whole, but also over how it regards victims of the conflict, especially the primarily female victims of sexual crimes. The most significant product of the program is the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP), an extrajudicial court system tasked with trying conflict-related crimes committed by the FARC, state and paramilitary forces, and civilians.<sup>62</sup> The JEP's focus is on discerning the truth, with an emphasis on individual perpetrators being honest about their actions, especially if victims request an apology. The court's position is that "if the accused admits to his or her crimes up front, he or she will serve between five to eight years of an alternative sentence...if the crime is serious, and between two to five years if the crime is not."<sup>63</sup> These alternative sentences may include community service, reparations, or something else agreed upon between the victim, the court, and the perpetrator.<sup>64</sup>

However, despite its ostensible practicality, the transitional justice element of the peace agreement was the most contested portion during negotiations and was one of the primary reasons the peace agreement failed in the public referendum in early 2016.<sup>65</sup> It currently remains unpopular, particularly because those who are tried and 'convicted' by the JEP maintain their rights to political

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<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 147.

<sup>62</sup> Brian Harper and Holly K. Sonneland, "Explainer: Colombia's Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP)," *Americas Society/Council of the Americas*, August 3, 2018, <https://www.as-coa.org/articles/explainer-colombias-special-jurisdiction-peace-jep>

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> "La Polémica."



participation.<sup>66</sup>

Some of this disdain for the transitional court system can also be attributed to Uribe's anti-JEP campaigns. Uribe, as a result of his political initiatives, has become an obstacle to peace on multiple political and social fronts.<sup>67</sup> However, there remains evidence that some Colombian political leaders and policymakers strongly mistrust the court as an institution.<sup>68</sup> This mistrust is reflected within the current president's administration, as well. A proposed law formally legitimizing the JEP was approved by both the Congress and the Colombian Constitutional Court, only to be rejected by President Duque, which many critics see as a maneuver by the executive to continue undermining the peace agreement.<sup>69</sup>

FARC members' histories have provoked division, even at the highest levels of government. Several senior FARC politicians have been publicly accused of human rights violations and asked to step down from office.<sup>70</sup> I conducted an interview with Democratic Center Party Representative Margarita Restrepo, a staunch Uribe supporter, and self-named defender of female FARC victims. In the interview, she reiterated the accusations she had made in the media against FARC leaders, including against female former FARC commander and current FARC party senator, Victoria Sandino Simanca Herrera:

...They shouldn't be here [in Congress]. They are the evidence, they and many others, that they are being re-victimized. That's nonsense. Everyone knows, everyone knows what they did, who they are and what they keep doing - the terrorists of the FARC - in all of the national territory. So, it's simply a sophisticated distraction [to allow 'perpetrators' in Congress], and it is the humiliation and re-victimization of the victims.<sup>71</sup>

Representative Restrepo's accusations are significant as they reflect Mike Kesby's claims in his work on post-conflict gender contestations in Zimbabwe: that

<sup>66</sup> Harper and Sonneland, "Colombia's Special Jurisdiction."

<sup>67</sup> Jake Kincaid, "Colombia's Opponents of War Crimes Tribunal Clash with International Community," *Colombia Reports*, February 19, 2019, <https://colombiareports.com/colombias-hard-right-and-international-community-clash-over-war-crimes-tribunal/>

<sup>68</sup> "La Polémica."

<sup>69</sup> "Uncertainty for Colombia's Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP)," *ABColumbia*, March 21, 2019, <https://www.abcolombia.org.uk/uncertainty-for-colombias-special-jurisdiction-for-peace-jep/>

<sup>70</sup> Representative Margarita Restrepo, interview by author, Colombia, September 4, 2019.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

progress made regarding gendered stereotypes and traditions during conflict does not necessarily continue afterwards. This, he claims, is due to unrealistic linear expectations of progress and failure to account for “struggles over masculine identity within the analysis of gender relations.”<sup>72</sup> It is on this last point that Restrepo’s accusations are most salient, as women can themselves act as agents of the patriarchy, and be used as legitimate voices to criticize other women whose influence threatens a male-dominated social order.<sup>73</sup>

However, when it came to transitional justice, the priorities of the FARC and many Colombians were, overall, incompatible. The FARC resisted prosecution from the state after disarming. However, many Colombian citizens were unwilling to accept any agreement that promised anything short of full prosecution and punishment of abuses committed during the half-century of combat.<sup>74</sup> Former members of the armed group, including those now serving as politicians within the FARC party, question the JEP as well. Specifically, there is resistance to President Duque’s reluctance to finalize the JEP’s judicial procedures and jurisdiction.<sup>75</sup> To them, the JEP is a projection of unchecked state power, shrouded by a cloud of ‘legitimacy.’ Some members of the FARC even fear that the JEP is being used to exploit female former combatants.

Many of those I interviewed expressed disgust at the “lies” concerning the rates of sexual violence that women’s victim advocacy organizations reported to the JEP. They argue that the figures were inflated and meant to hurt the FARC party by making it seem like they are disorganized and brutal to their own members.<sup>76</sup> The transitional justice system, and specifically the JEP, created additional challenges for reincorporating women that their male peers did

<sup>72</sup> Mike Kesby, “Arenas for Control, Terrains of Gender Contestation: Guerrilla Struggle and Counter- Insurgency Warfare in Zimbabwe 1972-1980,” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 22.4 (1996): 561, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057079608708512>

<sup>73</sup> Anita Desai, “Women’s Role in Maintaining and/or Resisting Patriarchy,” in *Feminism and Contemporary Indian Women’s Writing*, ed. Elizabeth Jackson (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 112.

<sup>74</sup> “Why Colombians Distrust the FARC Peace Deal,” *The Economist*, May 24, 2018, <https://www.economist.com/the-economist-explains/2018/05/24/why-colombians-distrust-the-farc-peace-deal>

<sup>75</sup> Helen Murphy and Carlos Vargas, “Colombian Duque’s Bid to Change Peace Deal Rattles Sabres, but War Unlikely,” *Reuters*, March 17, 2019, <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-colombia-peace-analysis/colombian-duques-bid-to-change-peace-deal-rattles-sabres-but-war-unlikely-idUKKCN1QY0MS>

<sup>76</sup> Multiple interviews conducted by the author, Colombia, 2019.

not face. Female ex-combatants seeking election with the FARC party may be stigmatized on two fronts: first, if they admitted to crimes in front of the JEP, they may be viewed as ‘undeserving’ of their salvaged political opportunities; second, they may be criticized for remaining politically aligned with a group ‘known’ for sexually violating women.

This double standard of stigmatization applied to politically elite female ex-combatants is not the only form of the JEP’s marginalization of reincorporating female fighters. As Kelli Muddell and Hawkins Sibley explain in their work on gender and post-conflict justice: some women-centric restorative programs, such as reparations, are often criticized for “returning women to their status before the violations took place [and thus] likely to return to them to situations of discrimination and violence,” rather than “challeng[ing] the structural inequalities that women faced before the violations.”<sup>77</sup> Thus, whether they are a victim or an alleged perpetrator, being a female ex-combatant within Colombia’s transitional justice and greater restorative systems inevitably delegitimizes aspects of their political reincorporation.

### *An Uncertain Future*

The future of the peace agreement in Colombia remains uncertain. Within five years, almost half of all post-conflict peace agreements fail, and as of 2020, Colombia is nearing the three-and-a-half-year mark.<sup>78</sup> Peace accords fail for various reasons, depending on the countries and conflicts for which the accords were created. However, the presence of ‘spoilers,’ or those who pose political or violent challenges to peace, is a common antecedent.<sup>79</sup> Economic uncertainty, tied to what we might call the political ‘war system’ in Colombia, is also a predominant destabilizing factor. While the conflict devastated many aspects of Colombian society, the war became almost a political institution itself. Virginia Bouvier, reflecting on Richani’s work on ‘war systems,’ notes that the conflict has created alternative and durable political structures, as a result of “the failure of Colombia’s

<sup>77</sup> Kelli Muddell and Sibley Hawkins, “Module 2: Truth Seeking” (training document, Gender and Transitional Justice: A Training Module Series, International Center for Transitional Justice, New York, October 2018), 14, [https://www.ictj.org/sites/default/files/2\\_Gender%20%26%20TJ%20-%20Truth%20Seeking%20-%20Speaker%20Notes.pdf](https://www.ictj.org/sites/default/files/2_Gender%20%26%20TJ%20-%20Truth%20Seeking%20-%20Speaker%20Notes.pdf)

<sup>78</sup> Kofi Annan, “Learning the Lessons of Peace-Building” (lecture, Magee Campus, University of Ulster, United Kingdom, October 18, 2004), <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/speeches/2004-10-18/secretary-general-kofi-annan's-tip-o'neill-lecture-“learning-lessons”>

<sup>79</sup> Jack Snyder and Leslie Vinjamuri, “Trials and Errors” *International Security* 28.3 (2004): 13-15, <https://doi.org/10.1162/016228803773100066>

state institutions to mediate conflicts among antagonistic parties, the conflict parties' repeated adaptations to conflict, and a comfortable balance of power and sufficient incentives to make peace a less attractive alternative than war."<sup>80</sup> In turn, some analysts now fear that, by relying on the war for structure and legitimacy, Colombia's political and economic institutions may have limited capacity to build and maintain peace.<sup>81</sup>

These uncertainties arise from both domestic and international actors and policies. In October 2019, the *New York Times* reported on the instability of the Colombian peace agreement: "the government was slow to follow through on promises to invest in rural areas where extreme poverty led to violence in the first place. Social inequities remain rampant, and leaders of the most ardent rebel factions, left empty-handed and embarrassed, called for an official return to arms in early September."<sup>82</sup> The last portion of the statement references a call made on August 29th, 2019 by Iván Márquez,<sup>83</sup> a senior FARC commander and a primary peace negotiator, to boycott the agreement and resume conflict.<sup>84</sup>

As of 2018, the Kroc Institute, in conjunction with UN Women and other organizations, assessed the peace agreement as having 578 "concrete, observable, and measurable actions...of which, 130 have a gender perspective."<sup>85</sup> Furthermore, an analysis demonstrated that 51 percent of the gender components had not yet been initiated at all, and many others were only partially implemented. The investigation found a 14 percent gap between implementation of gendered and non-gendered commitments within all 578 stipulations.<sup>86</sup> This discrepancy demonstrates the lack of political and social prioritization of issues pertaining to female FARC ex-combatants, which, in turn, significantly affects their

<sup>80</sup> Virginia M. Bouvier, "Prologue: Prospects for Peace in Colombia," in *Systems of Violence*, xiii.

<sup>81</sup> Rettberg, "Peace-Making," 91-92.

<sup>82</sup> Mark R. Rinaldi, "A Peace Monument in Colombia Is Caught in a New Crossfire," *New York Times*, October 23, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/23/arts/design/colombia-farc-peace-monument.html>

<sup>83</sup> Not to be confused with President Iván Duque Marquez.

<sup>84</sup> Adam Isacson, "To Save Colombia's Peace Process, Prove the Extremists Wrong," *New York Times*, September 3, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/03/opinion/international-world/colombia-farc-peace.html>

<sup>85</sup> "Special Report on the Monitoring of the Gender Perspective in the Implementation of the Colombian Final Peace Accord," (report, Kroc Institute and the International Accompaniment Component, UN Women, Women's International Democratic Federation, and Sweden, Bogotá, Colombia, 2018), 5, [https://kroc.nd.edu/assets/297624/181113\\_gender\\_report\\_final.pdf](https://kroc.nd.edu/assets/297624/181113_gender_report_final.pdf)

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

reincorporation into those spheres. According to Kate Paarlberg-Kvam, not only do these implementation gaps result in material inequality between reincorporating men and women, but the peace itself structurally excludes women. Referencing the 2000 UN Security Council Resolution 1325, which called for equal inclusion of women in peace-building processes, she states: “UNSCR 1325 represented a victory for women activists around the world, who had been insisting for many years that women’s inclusion in peace talks was essential; at the same time, its implementation has at times been subject to a strictly numerical understanding of women’s representation.”<sup>87</sup> Presence with limited influence, she further claims, meant that women became agents of “masculinist peacemaking...in which peace has been understood as the pacification of violence and women and women’s concerns have been sidelined at best.”<sup>88</sup>

While uncertainty over the future success of the peace agreement does not affect only female ex-combatants, it is a constraint upon their political reincorporation, nonetheless. This national sense of uncertainty, coupled with a highly volatile and polarized political climate, generates exaggerated narratives about female FARC ex-combatants. This method of establishing control by political elites will be discussed in the next section.

### **POLITICAL NARRATIVES ABOUT FEMALE FARC EX-COMBATANTS**

The current political economy, persisting violence, uneven peace negotiations, and citizens’ uncertainty about the future, combine to produce a political climate that impedes the successful reincorporation of FARC ex-combatants, regardless of gender. However, female ex-combatants are exposed to a different reincorporation experience than their male counterparts and face a tension of political identities. In the following sections, I analyze the political narratives surrounding female FARC ex-combatants, their creation and reproduction, and the effects they have on these women.

Three main narratives are used to define the political identities of female FARC ex-guerrillas in Colombia: ‘victim,’ ‘hero,’ and ‘threat.’ It is important to note that these narratives are not always untrue, either in part or whole. Some women *are* victims, heroes, or threats to a variety of individuals, organizations, and institutions. However, these political narratives depart from that truth when the lived experiences of these women are diluted to caricatures.

<sup>87</sup> Paarlberg-Kvam, “What’s to Come Is More Complicated,” 198.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 200.

*Victim*

Cultural and academic discourses are adapting to the idea that a woman can not only be a combatant, but can also do incredible violence when in that role. However, even if they are active participants, women can still be reduced to being victims of war, and often have their status as perpetrators of violence compared to that of their male peers.<sup>89</sup> Unfortunately, women are disproportionately victims of conflict, regardless of their status as civilian or combatant. However, not all have been victimized, and even those who were, have an individual and nuanced experience of that victimization. At times, instrumentalizing ‘victimcy’ for individual or collective gain is an expression of political agency for those who have very limited options.<sup>90</sup>

The important distinction between the reality of women as victims within conflict and the political narratives of female ‘victimcy’ is that the narrative does not take the truth of individual experience into account. It is deliberate in its erasure of both context and individual agency. Reflecting on realities for both genders, Lalli Metsola notes that it reduces them to “needy, helpless and potentially dangerous: antisocial, roaming from the countryside to the streets, prone to drunkenness, promiscuity, and crime, and incapable of engaging productively in the economy.”<sup>91</sup> However, many women are able to find empowerment through victimization. Molly Talcott explores this concept with female Oaxaqueña activists who challenge gender, race and class violence with increased resistance, emboldened by the erosion of their fear as a result of constant exposure to violence.<sup>92</sup> She concludes that “...even in the tragic politicized violence against activist women, the political responses women are able to generate to their violent life chances and social conditions transcend mere victimization.”<sup>93</sup>

By labeling female FARC ex-combatants ‘victims’ of the very conflict in which they fought, policymakers are able to project their agenda upon them, as ‘victims’ are inherently viewed as lacking agency or any sense of what they

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<sup>89</sup> Utas, “Victimcy, Girlfriending, Soldiering,” 406.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 408.

<sup>91</sup> Metsola, “‘Reintegration’ of Ex-Combatants and Former Fighters,” 1123.

<sup>92</sup> Molly Talcott, “‘Together We Have Power’: Personal Traumas and Political Responses among Activist Oaxaqueñas,” *Latin American Perspectives* 41.1 (2014): 82-83, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0094582X13492142>

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

need.<sup>94</sup> When I discussed this issue with former President Santos, he promoted female FARC ex-combatants as “victims of the victims,” but went on to further clarify that “there is no major difference between the role of men or women from the FARC in the political work that they are starting to do after they give up their arms.”<sup>95</sup> By juxtaposing this sense of ‘victimhood’ and ‘equality with men,’ there is the potential for blame to be placed on women for having too much of the former, and not enough of the latter. Additionally, by positioning them as victims of their male comrades, political elites are able to continually fragment the strong political and social bonds that still make up the FARC party, thus reducing the actual threat the group poses to state authority, particularly in rural regions where the FARC still has significant influence.<sup>96</sup>

### *Hero*

Perhaps the narrative most rarely consigned to female FARC ex-combatants is that of a hero, though motherhood is a notable exception. ‘Hero’ status is generally saved for male combatants. Even though women were prominent in the fight for independence and the founding of the armed group, much of the FARC propaganda only includes male military leaders such as Simón Bolívar, who secured Colombian independence from Spain, and Manuel Marulanda, one of the FARC’s founders.<sup>97</sup>

However, when FARC ex-combatants become mothers, Colombian political elites begin to recognize them as ‘heroes,’ at least in that respect. This heroization first began with the women who chose to leave the FARC to either have children, or to find the children whom they had to abandon while moving from battle to battle. Political leaders lauded their ‘righteous’ decision to fulfil what one interviewee called their “traditional roles; [what the women] should be.”<sup>98</sup> Perhaps the most widely viewed as ‘heroic’ were the women who had children immediately after the signing of the peace accord, which was described as an overt transition

<sup>94</sup> Utas, “Victimcy, Girlfriending, Soldiering,” 407.

<sup>95</sup> Former President of Colombia Juan Manuel Santos, interview by author, Oxford, UK, November 6, 2019.

<sup>96</sup> Brittain, *Revolutionary Social Change*, 102.

<sup>97</sup> Brittain, *Revolutionary Social Change*, 191; “FARC, The Sequel - Will Colombia Return to War?,” *Economist*, September 5, 2019, <https://www.economist.com/the-americas/2019/09/05/will-colombia-return-to-war>

<sup>98</sup> María Eugenia Vásquez Perdomo, interview by author, Colombia, September 5, 2019; “Simon Bolivar - Accomplishments, Revolution & Death,” *Biography*, July 23, 2019, <https://www.biography.com/political-figure/simon-bolivar>



towards peace, even by former FARC fighters.<sup>99</sup> This experience was in contrast to mothers who left the FARC to raise children prior to the peace agreement, as those women were not unanimously respected. While political leaders still regarded these women as ‘heroes’, one of the women I interviewed regarded anyone who left early, regardless of cause, as ‘desertores,’ or deserters.<sup>100</sup> Important to this narrative is that the woman is heralded for rejecting her combatant status, and for embracing the traditionally feminine role of motherhood. In rejecting her violent past, she further highlights that motherhood is the more righteous path for a woman.

Political leaders also use the ‘hero’ narrative in a way that justifies the ‘othering’ of ex-combatants. The narrative allows for the idolization of one from a group to delegitimize the rest.<sup>101</sup> Since the signing of the peace agreement, and throughout the reincorporation process, the state has promoted the public image of the ‘ex-combatant mother.’ According to the state, these women choosing peace over combat creates a moral imperative for all other ex-combatants to choose peace, as well. Their bodies and their children are used as objects of public shaming to generate compliance with the peace agreement, as the agreement’s success is vital to the legitimacy of the current administration and its elite members.<sup>102</sup> Additionally, by increasing the social pressure on female FARC ex-combatants to become mothers, the government is ensuring that there is a limit on women’s agency to again pursue violence against the state.

While senior public officials are the most prominent creators of the ‘hero’ narrative, the reason the narrative remains so pervasive is that local officials, other ex-combatants, and even civilians take part in its creation, and moreso, its reproduction. Often, the motivation for their role in the narrative process is to establish and maintain patriarchal structures at the individual and collective levels.<sup>103</sup> According to the EOM’s Angela Gomez, local political candidates need to ally with a party in order to run for office, so many adopt narratives about female

<sup>99</sup> John Otis, “After Peace Agreement, A Baby Boom Among Colombia’s FARC Guerrillas,” *NPR*, May 3, 2017, <https://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2017/05/03/526690242/after-peace-agreement-a-baby-boom-among-colombias-farc-guerrillas?t=1574091333524>

<sup>100</sup> Ava, interview by author, Colombia, August 17, 2019.

<sup>101</sup> Metsola, “‘Reintegration’ of Ex-Combatants and Former Fighters,” 1123.

<sup>102</sup> Avione and Tillman, “Demobilized Women in Colombia,” 220.

<sup>103</sup> Kimberly Theidon, “Reconstructing Masculinities: The Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration of Former Combatants in Colombia,” *Human Rights Quarterly* 31.1 (2009): 31, <https://doi.org/10.1353/hrq.0.0053>

ex-combatants that promote traditional family values in order to gain backing from the FARC party.<sup>104</sup> The FARC party has an interest in this ‘hero’ narrative for two reasons. First, classifying women as heroes delegitimizes political elites’ claims that female combatants were victims of the conflict. Second, the narrative reinforces the admirability of a former combatant deciding to assume the traditionally female roles of mother and caretaker, thus allowing male ex-combatants less economic and political competition in their reincorporation process.<sup>105</sup>

The ‘hero’ narrative is particularly significant as it can be molded to fit what the actor utilizing it needs. It can be weaponized by political elites to promote one woman at the expense of others, or it can be harnessed by the women themselves to empower their demands for greater political inclusion. Sam Wilkins discusses this range in usage of the hero narrative by youth groups in his work on the 2008 death of a prominent Zimbabwean activist, Tonderai Ndira:

When given the opportunity, youth activists in Mabvuku-Tafara recall a diverse collection of heroes in Ndira, varying across multiple axes from peacemaker to street-fighter, visionary to comedian. What these recitals share is a will by activists to use the story of Ndira’s heroism to bring private, contentious imaginations of socio-political achievement into social relevance.<sup>106</sup>

As female FARC ex-guerrillas navigate their political reincorporation process, the ‘hero’ narrative can create possibilities for those who either choose or are in a position to fashion themselves as heroes. Alternatively, the narrative poses a real limitation to those women who choose not to, or simply cannot.

### *Threat*

The final narrative conceptualizes former female FARC guerrillas as ‘threats,’ which occurs in two contexts: as what Metsola calls a “threat to the security of the state,” and as a threat to the social order in Colombia.<sup>107</sup> This label is rarely used explicitly by political elites, but is implicit within their reincorporation

<sup>104</sup> Electoral Observation Mission, interview by author, Colombia, September 9, 2019.

<sup>105</sup> Theidon, “Reconstructing Masculinities,” 31.

<sup>106</sup> Sam Wilkins, “Ndira’s Wake: Politics, Memory and Mobility among the Youth of Mabvuku-Tafara, Harare,” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 39.4 (2013): 885, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057070.2013.858545>

<sup>107</sup> Metsola, “‘Reintegration’ of Ex-Combatants and Former Fighters,” 1123.

policies, which often serve to legitimize the control of these women. A woman who has already shown a capacity for violence against the state is dangerous because she has demonstrated her ability to invalidate traditional gender and societal norms.<sup>108</sup> Unless her voice and agency are diminished, that same woman can continue to invalidate those norms while entering politics within the state she once rebelled against.

The public narrative of ‘threatening’ female FARC ex-combatants describes the ‘threat’ these women pose to the social order. María Eugenia Vásquez Perdomo, a former guerrilla fighter with M-19 and current feminist activist in Colombia, described how a woman transitions from combatant to ex-combatant in a 2000 speech on reintegration:

A pressure, exerted the families in cases in which there were spouses, children and parents who demanded to make up for lost time and another, the company that charged the double transgression incurred by the guerrillas: your violent action against the establishment and its violation of the female patterns within which their conduct was not expected: became a threat to the social order in land as momentous as sexuality, reproduction and family care. In the new stage, guerrilla women were more stigmatized than recognized.<sup>109</sup>

The M-19 was one of the other left-wing guerrilla groups involved in the conflict, but had already demobilized and reintegrated itself in the early 1990s. However María faced significant obstacles to reintegration, similar to those FARC ex-combatants face now. In her speech, she spoke out against the Colombian policy makers’ stigmatization of women who dared to challenge the status quo. When they oppose the prevailing gender hierarchy and roles in Colombian politics and society, women’s bodies, actions, and voices, become a ‘threat’ because they challenge the legitimacy of those sexual and moral norms. If the norms defining what it means to be a woman are so easily invalidated, then those which define masculinity are susceptible to invalidation, as well.

Another way the political elite control the ‘threat’ that female FARC

<sup>108</sup> Ortega, “Untapped Resources for Peace,” 235.

<sup>109</sup> María Eugenia Vásquez Perdomo, “Life Is Written in Draft and Corrected Daily: Effects of Armed Conflict on Women Ex-Combatants,” (unpublished speech, 2000).

ex-combatants pose is by shaping the narrative to legitimize the state-led marginalization of these women. By justifying their attempts at ‘othering’ female ex-combatants, the state can then authorize the use of otherwise unacceptable means of ‘controlling’ the ‘threat’ from this population. This is important as the purported ‘danger’ these women pose highlights the failures of the state to build and maintain peace.

Many of the organizations formed by female FARC ex-combatants are publicly dictating that the government enact all provisions of the peace agreement, including those that assist ex-guerrillas. They also are demanding equal access to land, economic benefits, and political power as their male counterparts. The extremely influential women’s advocacy group formed by the FARC party, *Mujeres Farianas*, is at the forefront of this movement, often using social media platforms to popularize their demands. In an October 21st, 2019 Instagram post, they stated, “we are fighting for access to the land... economic autonomy...access to services of sexual and reproductive health...and the elimination of stigmas and stereotypes against the FARC and the women of the FARC.”<sup>110</sup> By exposing the state’s failure to fully implement the peace agreement and socially progressive legislation, the women undermine the state’s legitimacy to enact control over female FARC ex-combatants.

In the post-peace accord political climate in Colombia, the responsibility for a successful and lasting peace is placed, largely, upon the country’s leading politicians. To maintain that peace, they are charged with both reincorporating ex-combatants into socio-economic life, and engaging with their new congressional peers in the recently formed FARC political party. Thus, one means of influencing both situations simultaneously was by creating easily replicable narratives surrounding the ex-combatants.

While much rhetoric surrounds both male and female ex-guerrilla fighters, the political narratives about women are more delegitimizing and more readily accepted by the public. When I interviewed Herminia Rojas, a former M-19 fighter and current legal representative for the advocacy group *Network of Insurgent Women Ex-Combatants*, she responded to my question about demobilized life for women by stating, “...once women sign and they come back, I do think we take a step back, not generally, I can’t generalize, but in many cases, yes, we take a step

<sup>110</sup> Mujeres Farianas, “Woman Fariana,” *Partido Político FARC*, 2019, <https://www.partidofarc.com.co/en/woman-fariana>

back—women go back to their family-related and household roles.”<sup>111</sup> Herminia was not referring to any specific group or echelon of society, but was instead lamenting the oppressive climate that women face during reincorporation. Herminia’s formulation is important as it frames the most significant way that reincorporating female ex-combatants can become a political threat: challenging the status quo social order. If women reject the societal standard of being only mothers and caregivers and of being generally “low politics,” that means they assert claims to a place in the labor market, educational institutions, and elected or appointed political positions.<sup>112</sup> What makes female ex-combatants a more significant threat than non-combatant women in making these same claims is that the former have already proven their ability to organize around a political ideology—and in a militant manner that directly threatened state authority.

After a peace agreement is ratified, ‘control’ of ex-combatants is a common justification for state officials to severely restrict ex-combatants’ political identities and governmental avenues of redress. Metsola explains the way politicians frame the narratives of ex-combatants’ lives: “‘Reintegration’ has sought to prevent them from stepping out of their place...[while] policy makers garnered support by framing the issue of the ex-combatants as a moral issue at the centre of the nation’s historical identity.”<sup>113</sup> By framing the need for control of ex-combatant identity as a national crisis, politicians legitimized their narrative creation.

Why do these narratives exist? If ‘reincorporation’ is a distinct phase, with de jure straight-forward steps such as registration, medical assessments, and housing allocation, why are female FARC ex-combatants, in reality, struggling to access these programs, while also facing damaging narratives? Political narratives are commonly used as a means of controlling ex-combatants, as labeling them creates a justification to treat them differently than the rest of the population.

However, female ex-combatants are especially susceptible to these narratives. Such stereotypes are already simply applied to them as women. By challenging the social order through participating in combat, they have further threatened the government. Thus, this article examines how female FARC ex-combatants are navigating the three political narratives: ‘threat,’ ‘victim,’ and ‘hero’ during reincorporation.

The current Colombian political economy is disjointed and unable to

<sup>111</sup> Herminia Rojas, interview by author, Colombia, August 24, 2019.

<sup>112</sup> MacKenzie, “Securitization and Desecuritization,” 243-244.

<sup>113</sup> Metsola, “‘Reintegration’ of Ex-Combatants and Former Fighters,” 1123.

focus on reincorporating former FARC members. President Duque heads a weak state that has done little to further the implementation of specifically the rural security objectives outlined within the peace agreement.<sup>114</sup> Under his government, political violence has increased. For instance, at least 439 human rights advocates have been murdered since the signing of the peace agreement.<sup>115</sup> This, coupled with uncertainty as to the viability of long-term peace, has created a political climate that allows for stereotypes: By labeling female ex-combatants a ‘threat’ to political and social order, political elites justify extraordinary means to control and politically disempower the population. By labeling them ‘victims’, the state justifies stepping in and making decisions in their place, since ‘victims’ are often categorized as unable to act in their own best interest.<sup>116</sup> Lastly, by labeling select female ex-combatants as ‘heroes,’ political leaders curate the ‘perfect female ex-combatant’ by promoting those select few at the expense of others. In Colombia, the female FARC guerrillas who reached ‘hero’ status are those who were already politically well-connected, and now vocally support the state.

Ultimately, these narratives are used to both constrain and offer opportunities to the women in formal politics. By limiting the women’s agency, the state diminishes their ability to challenge the legitimacy of the traditional state and social orders. Therefore, they are unable to demand privileges legally afforded to them as both Colombian citizens, and ex-combatants within the reincorporation process, such as access to land ownership, reproductive rights, and equal political representation.

If female ex-combatants of the FARC can be reduced to three socio-political categories, then that means society only has to reincorporate those three identities. If female ex-combatants are able to construct their femininity in their own way—and not just as a ‘victim,’ ‘threat,’ or ‘hero’—the FARC’s revolutionary ideology therefore persists, which threatens the otherwise patriarchal, and anti-left wing political reincorporation desired by political elites. The influence of revolutionary ideas, stemming from both the women and their armed group, on their lived experiences in Colombian formal politics, will be explored next in this paper.

## CURRENT ORGANIZATION AND CONDITION OF THE FARC PARTY

In transitions towards peace after armed conflict, the issue of political rights

<sup>114</sup> “Colombia’s President Iván Duque.”

<sup>115</sup> Gillooly and Zvobgo, “Human Rights Workers.”

<sup>116</sup> Utas, “Victimcy, Girlfriending, Soldiering,” 407.

and privileges for ex-combatants is significant, particularly in cases of civil war. Discussing developments within political reincorporation practices, Johanna Söderström explains: “After war, the transformation of armed groups into political parties has become an integral part of peacebuilding, and an increasing number of armed groups transform into political parties and enter electoral politics,” and Colombia provides multiple examples of this transformation.<sup>117</sup> Upon its demobilization in 1990, another left-wing armed group, M-19, became the M-19 Democratic Alliance (AD/M-19) Party.<sup>118</sup> While AD/M-19 ultimately failed, studies have shown that many of its ex-combatant members have maintained an identity with the group and found new outlets for political participation.<sup>119</sup> Gustavo Petro, former mayor of Bogotá, former presidential candidate, and current senator, established the popular liberal movement ‘Progresistas’ in 2011. Since then, he has been one of the most successful former M-19 members in state politics, claiming legitimacy in ways previously reserved for non-ex-combatant political elites.<sup>120</sup> The historical transition of armed groups in Colombia into political parties during reintegration is important. Such examples set a precedent for the legitimation and potentially significant influence of the FARC party.

In 2008, while still an armed group, the FARC began a noticeable shift away from militarization. Instead, it began an internal reconsolidation, and adopted a strategy with greater emphasis upon political action rather than armed conflict.<sup>121</sup> This shift, among other factors, contributed to the initiation of the peace talks in 2012. Thus, the revolutionary guerrilla fighters transformed into a unarmed group which, according to Ugarriza and Quishpe, is “organized around a legal political party that bets on the social and political mobilization,” of its members to maintain political influence post-conflict.<sup>122</sup> While female ex-

<sup>117</sup> Johanna Söderström, “The Resilient, the Remobilized and the Removed: Party Mobilization among Former M19 Combatants,” *Civil Wars* 18.2 (2016): 214, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13698249.2016.1205565>

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, 216.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 217; Hernando A. Benavides Correa, “Gustavo Petro, el ‘progresista,’” *Semana*, September 29, 2011, <https://www.semana.com/nacion/articulo/gustavo-petro-progresista/247166-3>

<sup>121</sup> Juan E. Ugarriza and Rafael Quishpe, “Guerrilla sin armas: La reintegración política de FARC como transformación de los comunistas revolucionarios en Colombia,” in *Excombatientes y acuerdo de paz con las FARC-EP en Colombia: Balance de la etapa temprana*, ed. Erin McFee and Angelika Rettberg, 135-158 (Bogotá, Colombia: Ediciones Uniandes, 2019). <https://doi.org/10.30778/2019.45>

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.



combatants were not officially prohibited from participating in this mobilization, the opportunities that political reincorporation afforded them on paper did not always translate into their lived realities.

The organization of the FARC remained relatively intact when it became a political party, affording certain elite female ex-combatants political positions inaccessible to most of the women. In their analysis of the political trajectory of the FARC from armed group to legitimate political party, Ugarriza and Quishpe explain:

The hierarchical structure of the FARC party resembles that of the former guerrilla, in so much that armed elites are now political elites. While the organizational structure does not copy the military structure, it does have enough continuities, in the middle of its transformation, regarding the structure of the party in war. And likewise, the visible leaders of the party are in turn the members of the former Secretariat and General Staff Central [senior command groups of the FARC as an armed group].<sup>123</sup>

Women who were already serving in senior roles within the FARC often saw that status reflected in their post-agreement political positions. Senators Sandra Ramírez and Victoria Sandino are perhaps the best examples of this process. Senator Ramírez was a senior commander as well as the wife of Manuel Marulanda, a founder of the FARC, until his death in 2008. Senator Sandino also served in various senior roles, most prominently as commander of the FARC's Block 21.<sup>124</sup> I also conducted an interview with Valentina Beltrán, another female ex-combatant who, while not a Colombian household name, demonstrated an instance where female leadership and authority in the FARC was recognized as real political potential during reincorporation. Valentina was a member of the armed group for 25 years, primarily in combat support roles. When asked why she joined the FARC, she explained:

I was a student and activist in poor neighborhoods in the 1990s, when the neoliberal model was being implemented, during the

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 152. Translated by author.

<sup>124</sup> Juanita Ceballos, "Colombia: Talking Peace with a FARC Commander," *Al Jazeera*, 2016, <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2016/08/colombia-talking-peace-farc-commander-160809063317756.html>

genocide of the UP [a 1985 political party made up of demobilized guerrilla fighters which had thousands of its members killed by paramilitary and state forces <sup>125</sup>], and the peace processes of 1991. All those things made me make the decision of looking for a long-term [political engagement] process, and it was me who looked for the insurgency.<sup>126</sup>

Valentina's political experience prior to becoming an armed actor is reflected in the way she discussed her life as a guerrilla fighter, and her experiences of political reincorporation. Valentina noted that, while she didn't find "100 percent equality" in the FARC during the conflict, her experience in activism and urban background contributed to her strong performance as a leader, and her subsequent assignment of greater responsibilities in the group.<sup>127</sup> Valentina embodies aspects of the 'hero' narrative, acting as the "head woman" of the Territorial Training and Reincorporation Space (ETCR, in its Spanish acronym) she lived in. Everyone I spoke to concerning the political reincorporation of female ex-combatants asked if I had interviewed her yet, with many women at the camp refusing to speak to me until they had informed her first. Additionally, she was selected to run as the FARC candidate for mayor of her town. She told us that while she was proud to represent the FARC party, she was not voluntarily running for mayor, but simply following orders.<sup>128</sup> Thus, while she was being promoted as an electable, 'heroic' model of a former combatant, even Valentina's experience of political reincorporation had its borders drawn by her male superiors.

As such, this system of rewarding military merit with political assignments in the FARC party serves some female ex-combatants, but more often perpetuates the power differences between men and women of the FARC. Soraya Horos, a former UN Women official who worked with FARC women in the reincorporation process, explains:

So, if you look at the history of the political left in Colombia, you

<sup>125</sup> "Inter-American Court to Review Genocide of Patriotic Union Political Party," *Justice for Colombia*, 2018, <https://justiceforcolombia.org/news/inter-american-court-to-review-genocide-of-patriotic-union-political-party/>

<sup>126</sup> Valentina Beltran, interview by author, Colombia, August 18, 2019.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

will see that it is extremely patriarchal...this is true for Colombia, but also for Latin America and women's movement. Movements, I would say, because there is not only one... And I think that has to do with the fact that the feminist – feminist perspective – will always question a vertical way of organizing a group. Whether it is a social group or political group or even the way we look at and understand the state, except the modern state itself, right? The way it's organized right now follows the same pattern that military armies have, which is based on a hierarchy. So, because of that, which is a patriarchal system, every feminist view of what needs to be changed will clash, with that structure, right?

I think that's something, something that in the long term will happen as well with the FARC. That many women will stay inside. You know, as in any other political party, there are women who can be, who can criticize the party in the way it stimulates or not the participation of women. I think the FARC will follow the same path, and there will be women's groups who will create their own little groups to work on their own because the same structure will never give them...I mean, gender equality cannot, in any way, cannot be lifted within a hierarchy. Because equality between men and women, but also among men and among women, and also on the sexual diversity, let's say, that feminism has brought with...does not fit into that hierarchical form.<sup>129</sup>

Soraya's discussion of the inherently patriarchal vertical organization of the FARC party foresees the disillusionment of female members with the establishment. To expand upon her claims, one must also consider whether or not the FARC party is still 'revolutionary,' and how the answer to that question affects the political reincorporation of female ex-combatants. After a half-century of fighting for communist ideology in Colombia, the FARC party is now in a delicate position of having to bridge those revolutionary ideologies with the need to win the popular vote, particularly as its polling numbers have been notoriously low, receiving

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<sup>129</sup> Soraya Horos, interview by author, Colombia, September 24, 2019.

only 0.5% of the popular vote in a March 2018 election.<sup>130</sup> For women, that transition into the mainstream ultimately prioritizes party survival, at the cost of the autonomy they gained while in the armed group. As Julie Shayne explains in her work on post-conflict feminism in Latin America: “Post-accords periods often see a backlash against women in State institutions, public discourse and the media, as the “gender-bending” women...are violently put back in their place.”<sup>131</sup>

The victim, hero, and threat narratives are effectively marginalizing women on both the macro and micro scale. In utilizing these narratives, the political elites in Colombia, including those within the FARC party, are able to quell one of the most ‘revolutionary’ aspects of their legacy—‘wild’ and ‘immoral’ female fighters—in order to transition the armed group to a popular political entity. Specifically, the hierarchical structure of the FARC Party, directly allows for the stratification of its members, thus making it much easier to assign labels and reproduce narratives.

As Soraya discussed, the hierarchy labels a small, select group at the top, the ‘heroes.’ However, this hierarchy is ultimately supported by a base of ‘victims’ and ‘threats’ which inherently have less political power than those above them. Women, already marginalized within the Colombian political process, make up a majority of this foundation. Therefore, the integrity of the structure is reliant upon women remaining in the lower organizational tiers. To accomplish this, the ‘victims’ are disempowered from making their own decisions, and the ‘threats’ to the party’s political and social order are given limited access to resources such as educational programs and the labor market. To rein in ‘threats,’ the FARC party encourages them to remain home as mothers and caretakers, with some male party members actually engaging in physical violence to ensure women’s compliance.<sup>132</sup> This flattening of the female voice in the FARC party directly limits their access to political reincorporation. As Kesby argues, by reducing the threat politically mobilized female ex-combatants pose to traditionally powerful men, the reincorporation process is exploited to reproduce “the ‘permanence’ of

<sup>130</sup> “Colombia Election: Farc Fails to Win Support in First National Vote,” BBC News, March 12, 2018, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-latin-america-43367222>

<sup>131</sup> Julie Shayne, *The Revolution Question: Feminisms in El Salvador, Chile, and Cuba* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004); Paarlberg-Kvam, “What’s to Come Is More Complicated: Feminist Visions of Peace in Colombia,” 213.

<sup>132</sup> Isabella Flisi, “The Reintegration of Former Combatants in Colombia: Addressing Violent Masculinities in a Fragile Context,” *Gender and Development* 24.3 (2016): 394, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13552074.2016.1233667>

men [as dualistically opposed] to the ‘impermanence’ of women.”<sup>133</sup> The concept is additionally reflected within the FARC, as this same ‘impermanence’ of women allows political reincorporation policies to regard them simply as instruments of peacebuilding, rather than those for whom peace is built.

### POLITICAL REINCORPORATION AND THE EXPANSION OF WOMEN’S ORGANIZATIONS

Understanding how female FARC party members are limited by the party’s current political aims is important. The party itself is the primary interface female ex-combatants have with the peace agreement. However, both the peace agreement and the FARC itself have a contentious history when it comes to gender inclusivity.

Assessing the degree to which the FARC is a feminist organization is difficult, but worth exploring. The FARC did not actively recruit women until nearly two decades after the armed group’s creation, but at the group’s height, roughly 20 to 30 percent of its members were women.<sup>134</sup> Including women as combatants within the FARC was a decision based mostly on strategic, rather than ideological, needs. However, ideology did influence the decision to include women. As a left-wing, revolutionary group, the FARC did promote policies of equality, and many of the women who joined felt drawn to the ideology. Again, Sanín and Franco explain “as a result [of the need to recruit large numbers to meet rising demand in combat] their leftist ideology trumps traditional patriarchal structures.”<sup>135</sup> While some women were forcibly recruited into the FARC, and may have experienced personal victimization as a result, others did join voluntarily.<sup>136</sup>

While some women in the FARC were able to win significant legal victories, these were watered down by opposing parties and even the final products were not fully implemented. When peace talks first began in Havana, the only woman present on either side was Victoria Sandino.<sup>137</sup> Eventually, with Sandino’s efforts as well as campaigns by various Colombian women’s peace organizations, a gender sub-committee was created to address the needs of female ex-combatants.<sup>138</sup> As

<sup>133</sup> Kesby, “Arenas for Control, Terrains of Gender Contestation,” 567.

<sup>134</sup> Francisco Gutiérrez Sanín and Francy Carranza Franco, “Organizing Women for Combat: The Experience of the FARC in the Colombian War,” *Journal of Agrarian Change* 17.4 (2017): 770, <https://doi.org/10.1111/joac.12238>

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, 772.

<sup>136</sup> Sruthi Gottipati, “Colombia’s Female FARC Fighters Wage a New War, for Gender Parity,” *New Humanitarian*, September 7, 2017, <http://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/feature/2017/09/07/colombia-s-female-farc-fighters-wage-new-war-gender-parity>

<sup>137</sup> Ruiz-Navarro, “A Feminist Peace in Colombia?”

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*

Ruiz-Navarro reported in her work, “the Colombian government acknowledged the importance of resolving gender asymmetries and inequities; recognizing and guaranteeing the rights of women in rural areas; improving political participation of women; and addressing the rights of the victims at the end of the armed conflict.”<sup>139</sup> While the final product is rightfully lauded as the most progressive in the world at the time, it was still one which capitulated to those who feared gender inclusivity, precluding the implementation of many of the additions won by the gender subcommittee.<sup>140</sup> In her article discussing feminist ideas of peace in Colombia, Paarlberg-Kvam remarked:

In a demonstration of the potential power of gender inclusion in peace accords, the Colombian document was seen as a threat by the Church and various Evangelical groups, whose jeremiads about the documents “gender ideology” succeeded in securing their rejection in a public referendum. Following this brief hurdle, the accords were revised to include slightly softer language (“gender” was binarized into “men and women,” for example), and the Colombian Congress passed the accords in November of 2016.<sup>141</sup>

The ‘threat’ of ‘gender ideology’ in the peace agreement is significant as it shows the power of that narrative to affect actual change by limiting the reincorporation opportunities afforded to female ex-combatants. Groups opposing the gender-inclusive policies, such as those within religious sectors, claimed they “destabilized family values, pushed for the transgression of traditional gender roles, and promoted homosexuality.”<sup>142</sup> While a progressive agreement was ultimately put in place, it was only done once revisions were made to appease radical opposition parties, and had to be voted through Congress rather than put to another public referendum.

What this means for female ex-combatants is that they are re-marginalized on top of the already marginalizing process of political reincorporation; thus, the women encounter an environment in which they may have to continuously ally

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<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

<sup>140</sup> Paarlberg-Kvam, “What’s to Come Is More Complicated,” 195.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid., 200.

<sup>142</sup> Ruiz-Navarro, “A Feminist Peace in Colombia?”

themselves to affect change. While women's political organizations have long been present in Colombia, Paarlberg-Kvam notes that "with the FARC-EP demobilized, activists of all stripes may feel an increased freedom to speak. The removal of the FARC-EP as a polar referent for all Left political discourse could mean that activists' agendas enjoy a safer space."<sup>143</sup> Currently, two of the most well-known women's political advocacy organizations are *Mujeres Farianas*, the FARC party's official organization of female ex-combatants, and the *Rosa Blanca Corporation*, an organization comprised mostly of women who were sexually abused either while as members of the FARC or by someone in the armed group. Most of *Rosa Blanca*'s membership is female FARC ex-combatants, but not exclusively so.<sup>144</sup> Importantly, *Rosa Blanca* views the FARC as damagingly patriarchal—one more cog in Colombian sexism—a charge that *Mujeres Farianas* vigorously denies. These organizations are useful examples because, while both are vocal advocates on behalf of female ex-combatants, their views on the legitimacy of the three categories ('victim', 'hero', and 'threat') diverge, demonstrating the polarizing nature of the narratives.

One of the women I spoke to in *Mujeres Farianas*, Ava, indicated a strong loyalty to the FARC party, often referring to her fellow combatants as "family."<sup>145</sup> Two others were especially open about how the gender discrimination they face now, during reincorporation, exceeds any they may have faced during the conflict with their "family." Ava, a young mother who joined the FARC at 14 years old, elaborated on the difficulties of reincorporating:

Well, it has been something difficult to adapt to this life, starting even to adapt to having a household, because there [in the armed group] we were not used to it, because there we were equal, your husband could wash your clothing or cook, but now here they [the men] have given up, and that's tough, but we have to stay firm with the peace and to see for how long they allow us, and hoping death will not come.<sup>146</sup>

<sup>143</sup> Paarlberg-Kvam, "What's to Come Is More Complicated," 211.

<sup>144</sup> Plinio Apuleyo Mendoza, "Historia de Lorena Murcia, Presidenta de La Corporación Rosa Blanca," *El Tiempo*, May 6, 2019, <https://www.eltiempo.com/bogota/historia-de-lorena-murcia-presidenta-de-la-corporacion-rosa-blanca-358020>.

<sup>145</sup> Ava, interview by author, Colombia, August 17, 2019.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid.



While Ava acknowledged that male guerrilla fighters sometimes abandoned the FARC's policy of gender equality when it came to post-conflict household chores, she did not acknowledge the potential for sexual violence. When I asked Ava about her involvement with *Mujeres Farianas*, she proudly stated that she was present at the first national meeting in Bogotá.<sup>147</sup> However, when I asked her about the *Rosa Blanca Corporation*, she had a much different perspective, stating, "Uh, don't mention *Rosa Blanca* to me, because *Rosa Blanca* are just some women who deserted...that left the guerrilla and talk so badly and tell things that are just not true [in reference to their allegations of sexual assault by members of the FARC]."<sup>148</sup> When asked why she joined *Mujeres Farianas* over the *Rosa Blanca Corporation*, Ava stated, "The only thing we [*Mujeres Farianas*] want to do is to clarify...like building a network for communication for us to talk and say that that's a lie [the *Rosa Blanca Corporation's* claims], to clarify to the media our reality. That's what we want."<sup>149</sup> Ava was obviously very loyal to the *Mujeres Farianas* and expressed significant optimism that the group would seek political change on behalf of female FARC ex-combatants.<sup>150</sup>

Ava's testimony is important as it shows how a female ex-combatant can reject the 'victim' label while asserting her political voice through a women's advocacy group. The way she discusses *Rosa Blanca*—women claiming they were sexually assaulted while in the FARC—shows the complexity surrounding the issue of 'victimization' for female ex-guerrillas. This further highlights the vastly divergent experience of reincorporation and thus reinforces that policymakers should not view it as a set of tasks to be accomplished, but instead a lifelong journey for many ex-combatants.

For its part, the *Rosa Blanca Corporation* seemingly embraces the 'victim' narrative, using the victimization of the organization's members as a means for policy change. According to an *El Tiempo* profile of *Rosa Blanca's* president, Lorena Murcia, the organization was founded by a small group of women who were allegedly "forcibly recruited [to the FARC] as girls, and then raped and forced to abort."<sup>151</sup> In the signed peace agreement, those committing sexual crimes could originally be adjudicated through the JEP and be given an

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<sup>147</sup> Ibid.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid.

<sup>151</sup> Mendoza, "Historia de Lorena Murcia, Presidenta de La Corporación Rosa Blanca."

alternative sentence.<sup>152</sup> In response, the *Rosa Blanca Corporation* began lobbying politicians to recognize the sexual victimization of thousands of women, many of them FARC ex-combatants.<sup>153</sup> While President Duque pledged to amend the agreement to include punitive punishments for those convicted of sexual violence, no such change has yet been put into place.<sup>154</sup>

It would be inaccurate to view the use of the ‘victim’ narrative in this instance as entirely problematic. That would invalidate the policy changes enacted to benefit victimized female ex-combatants, and possibly invalidate their experiences of victimization. Post-conflict reincorporation studies are now engaging with women’s strategic use of their ‘victimhood’ in creating a new space for “self-representation.”<sup>155</sup> However, the *Rosa Blanca Corporation*’s adherence to the singular narrative serves to limit the political agency of many FARC female ex-combatants. *Rosa Blanca*’s refusal to submit evidence supporting their claims to the JEP, combined with the organization’s policy of infantilizing its members by referring to them as “girls” and deliberately posing them with children’s toys, constructs a reductive notion of ‘victimhood’.<sup>156</sup> This allows the very politicians they lobbied against to assume the voice of the victimized women, and reproduce the narrative, so long as it can be justified to ‘to serve the victims,’ regardless of the resultant constraints imposed upon the women’s political agency.

The large political and societal transitions which occur during post-conflict reincorporation phases allow the expansion of the rights and privileges afforded to female ex-combatants. The increased influence of women’s veteran advocacy groups during this time supports this claim. For example, in the October 2013 National Summit of Women for Peace, nine women’s organizations successfully lobbied both parties of the Havana peace talks to include more women in the negotiations.<sup>157</sup> This creation of political space is one of the possibilities open to

<sup>152</sup> Nacho Doce and Daniel Flynn, “In Colombia, Victims of Sexual Abuse Speak out after Peace Deal,” *Reuters*, 2018, <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-colombia-conflict-abuse/in-colombia-victims-of-sexual-abuse-speak-out-after-peace-deal-idUKKCN1M01OQ>

<sup>153</sup> Mendoza, “Historia de Lorena Murcia, Presidenta de La Corporación Rosa Blanca.”

<sup>154</sup> Doce and Flynn, “In Colombia, Victims of Sexual Abuse Speak out after Peace Deal.”

<sup>155</sup> Utas, “Victimcy, Girlfriending, Soldiering,” 403.

<sup>156</sup> “JEP Insists A Group Of Women Raped In The FARC Submit Reports,” *El Tiempo*, April 2, 2019, <https://www.eltiempo.com/justicia/jep-colombia/jep-insiste-a-corporacion-rosa-blanca-grupo-de-mujeres-violadas-en-las-farc-a-presentar-informes-344938>; “Las FARC y la lucha de niñas y niños víctimas de sus delitos sexuales,” Testigo Directo, video, 10:03, August 29, 2019. <https://youtu.be/YINaDuz9w98>

<sup>157</sup> Virginia M. Bouvier, “Gender and the Role of Women in Colombia’s Peace Process,” (report, United Nations Global Study on 15 Years of Implementation of UN Security Council Resolution

women in their political reincorporation process.<sup>158</sup> However, it is important to remember that building and maintaining peace is a significant driver of current Colombian policy. As David Cortright, in his research on changing approaches to the concept of peace, warns, this connection could be “abused as a tool of political propaganda.”<sup>159</sup> Particularly as it relates to the ‘threat’ narrative, Paarlberg-Kvam states that it is important to prevent “reductive notions of peace [which] can invisibilize or even criminalize contentious politics, leading to an increase in structural violence even as a society declares itself to be in peacetime.”<sup>160</sup> If the politics of female FARC ex-combatants are criminalized, or even marginalized, for their ‘contentious’ nature, the Colombian state could ‘other’ this group of women during their own political reincorporation process.

#### SENATORS SANDRA RAMÍREZ AND VICTORIA SANDINO SIMANCA HERRERA

The final portion of this article will examine two of the most politically prominent female FARC ex-combatants and analyze how the three narratives of ‘victim’, ‘hero’, and ‘threat’ shape their possibilities and limitations throughout the political reincorporation process. Senators Sandra Ramírez and Victoria Sandino were both elite figures in the FARC while it was an armed group and remained so during the transition to a political party. They use their political platforms to advocate for progressive policy change for both female ex-combatants and civilian women, with Senator Sandino leading the *Mujeres Farianas*.<sup>161</sup> However, in beginning to analyze the political influence of these two women, one must first acknowledge why these women do not have many peers at their level. Returning again to Paarlberg-Kvam’s argument that a feminist peace in Colombia is required to overcome patriarchal constraints, she explains that:

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1325 (2000), UN Women, New York, March 4, 2016), 20, <https://www.peacewomen.org/sites/default/files/Women-Colombia-Peace-Process-EN.pdf>

<sup>158</sup> Elisa Tarnaala, “Legacies of Violence and the Unfinished Past: Women in Post-Demobilization Colombia and Guatemala,” *Peacebuilding* 7.1 (2019): 105–109, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21647259.2018.1469340>

<sup>159</sup> Michael Howard, *Studies in War and Peace* (New York: Viking Press, 1971), 225, quoted in David Cortright, *Peace: A History of Movements and Ideas* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 6. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511812675>

<sup>160</sup> Paarlberg-Kvam, “What’s to Come Is More Complicated,” 196.

<sup>161</sup> Victoria Sandino (@SandinoVictoria), Twitter profile, <https://twitter.com/SandinoVictoria>; Sandra Ramírez (@SandraFARC), Twitter profile, <https://twitter.com/sandrafarc>

In the postwar period differences between women can reassert themselves, as the need to build coalitions wanes and social movement organizations are divided between those with access to resources and those without. Some organizational stars may rise while others fall; this may limit the power of women activists to address historic inequalities which underlie armed conflict.<sup>162</sup>

Senator Ramírez demonstrates the way in which access to political resources, in her case marriage to the founder of the FARC Manuel Marulanda, can advantage some women over others in formal politics. She served as her husband's radio operator during the conflict for over 20 years until his death in 2008.<sup>163</sup> However, that was not her only role during the war, and most accounts noted her communication and nursing skills, as well as her influence on Marulanda's strategic policy decisions. After his death, she continued his military agenda, but was not chosen to replace him on the Secretariat.<sup>164</sup> Instead, she was chosen to be one of the few FARC women at the peace talks in Havana, a senior member of the UN Monitoring and Verification Mechanism, and ultimately as one of the first ten senators of the FARC party—all of which were rewards hailed as a recognition of her strength, leadership, and heroism.<sup>165</sup> This example of unequal access to political resources demonstrates how the 'hero' narrative rewards elites, and how the process becomes cyclical. As these privileged women become more politically elite, their increased access to political resources becomes more legitimate, thus widening the opportunity gap between elite and non-elite FARC female ex-combatants.

This ascent to power within the FARC party is similar for Senator Sandino, who was also selected by the senior male commanders of the armed group to serve in Havana, as well as in the Senate.<sup>166</sup> While it would oversimplify the situation to refer to their appointments as 'token,' one must consider why these women were chosen over others. Ultimately, the FARC party needed to convince the voting population of its electability, and the current government administration of its

<sup>162</sup> Paarlberg-Kvam, "What's to Come Is More Complicated," 213.

<sup>163</sup> Gloria Castrillon, "'Sandra Ramírez,' la viuda del fundador de las Farc," *El Espectador*, July 20, 2018, <https://www.elespectador.com/colombia2020/politica/sandra-ramirez-la-viuda-del-fundador-de-las-farc-articulo-856920>

<sup>164</sup> Senator Sandra Ramírez, interview by author, Colombia, August 7, 2019.

<sup>165</sup> Castrillon, "'Sandra Ramírez,' la viuda del fundador de las Farc."

<sup>166</sup> Ceballos, "Colombia: Talking Peace with a FARC Commander"; "Victoria Sandino Simanca Herrera," *Congreso Visible*, <https://congresovisible.uniandes.edu.co/congresistas/perfil/victoria-sandino-simanca-herrera/13418/>

stability and legitimacy as a political party.

The FARC framed Senators Ramírez and Sandino as the ideal to which female ex-combatants should aspire, partly due to the two women having distinguished themselves as combatants in the armed group, but also because they helped diffuse the accusations that the party discriminates against women. In my interview with Senator Ramírez, I asked about the perception that she only has political authority due to her marriage. She responded:

It doesn't bother me at all, it doesn't bother me because I lived with comrade Marulanda for 24 years, with whom I had a beautiful relationship, full of difficulties, but very beautiful because I learned next to him. It was also having my own space to work, to be an empowered woman and ... and now as Senator the reference of being his widow doesn't bother me, it makes me proud it wasn't a life in which I was abused, or for example, that now I feel regret? No, at no point. Being next to him in such difficult circumstances of war, I always felt supported, I always felt the learning from him, I was never alone or pressured. So now of course, a part of this, of carrying this with me, in my heart, I know that as a Senator of the Republic I have lots of work ahead, and that I have a huge responsibility with my people, with the common people, with the comrades who were next to us for so many years, too.<sup>167</sup>

The Senator's response juxtaposes her formally subordinate position to the male commander with her current elite politics. Senator Ramírez utilized the influence she gained from her proximity to Marulanda, which demonstrates agency on her part. However, her emphasis on how much she learned from him, and that her otherwise subordinate relationship with him was not abusive, suggests her limited ability to challenge him publicly, or otherwise drastically change their power imbalance. This is the aspect of their relationship that the FARC party promotes as a 'heroic' sacrifice: her political success is a result of her obedience.

By framing the senators as the 'ideal' female ex-combatant, the FARC reproduced the 'hero' narrative of the two senators at the expense of the

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<sup>167</sup> Senator Ramírez, interview by author.

thousands of female FARC ex-combatants who do not have the same access to political resources. This creates an unreachable standard which ultimately denies non-elite women the legitimacy of being a 'hero,' or a 'good' female ex-combatant during their own political reincorporation.

The relationship to 'victimhood' is equally complex for both of the senators. The notion of women as inherently victimized by conflict is still prevalent both socially and in formal DDR programs, regardless of the role the women served in that conflict.<sup>168</sup> Since many women joined the FARC at very young ages, and were almost always under the command of men, many domestic and international institutions ultimately view female ex-combatants as victims of the conflict due to their limited agency within the armed group. This label of 'victim' is particularly problematic as it often connotes an individual without agency, an image challenged by these elite female FARC ex-combatants.<sup>169</sup>

Since her appointment as senator, Victoria Sandino has been accused of sexual abuse crimes against other female combatants in the FARC, including ordering their rapes, forcing abortions, and recruiting children.<sup>170</sup> These accusations were made by Representative Margarita Restrepo, a member of the current president's political party, a party opposing the FARC.<sup>171</sup> There have been requests for the JEP to investigate the allegations against Senator Sandino and her alleged male peers in Congress, but as of this writing, no investigation has taken place.<sup>172</sup> Thus, Senator Sandino serves as evidence that women may not only be victims of the conflict in which they participate. Even if she did not commit the alleged crimes, the fact that the allegations are being made by other members of the Colombian Congress is significant, as it demonstrates the power of the institutions to create a political space for female FARC ex-combatants, while also placing restrictions on women in that space.

<sup>168</sup> Avione and Tillman, "Demobilized Women in Colombia: Embodiment, Performativity, and Social Reconciliation," 216.

<sup>169</sup> Utas, "Victimcy, Girlfriending, Soldiering," 406.

<sup>170</sup> Interview: Restrepo; "Las FARC y la lucha de niñas y niños víctimas de sus delitos sexuales," 6:16 - 6:20.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid.

<sup>172</sup> Yuddy (@ykaritovar), "#ColombiaProvida ● Digamos NO al aborto ● Rechacemos presencia de Victoria Sandino en el Congreso ● Victoria Sandino proxeneta de las farc NO puede ser senadora ● La sanguinaria Victoria Sandino obligaba a niñas de @CorpoRosaBlanca abortar bajo amenaza de fusilamiento ● Asco." *Twitter*, October 25, 2019, 8:05 a.m., <https://twitter.com/ykaritovar/status/1187747127121924100?s=21>; "La JEP negó salida del país a la senadora de las Farc, Victoria Sandino," *Semana*, October 11, 2019, <https://www.semana.com/nacion/articulo/por-que-la-jep-le-nego-salida-del-pais-a-senadora-de-las-farc-victoria-sandino/639760>

Finally, one must consider the ‘threat’ narrative, and how it determines the relationship between the senators and other political elites and institutions in Colombia. In peacebuilding, there is an incentive to both enact progressive policies and return to a traditional sense of social order—generally an order under which the current political elites gained power.<sup>173</sup> As discussed previously, the idea of ‘revolutionary’ women within the FARC is one that has been minimized as it transitioned from an armed group to a political party. However, it is not only the FARC party that sees a threat in the gender-defying politics of female FARC ex-combatants.

The political reincorporation process is significantly more challenging for female ex-combatants than it is for their male peers. Remarking on this difference in the reintegration of female combatants in various African conflicts, Elise Barth writes:

Women’s involvement as combatants in revolutionary movements represents a break with earlier socialization represented by the values and way of life that their family has taught them. This can be contrasted with the role of males, which continue along the same lines as before. Men’s gender roles are reinforced by activities associated with being soldiers.<sup>174</sup>

Additionally, Wenche Hauge discusses the effects of group identity within DDR programs, stating that “women may actually have something to lose from a demobilisation process.”<sup>175</sup> Women of the FARC are reacting to this potential loss in various ways, including expanding the activism of women’s combatant advocacy groups. As explained in her work analyzing the future of a feminist peace in Colombia, Paarlberg-Kvam notes that the *Mujeres Farianas*, led by Senator Sandino and with frequent input by Senator Ramírez, “have levied cogent feminist critiques of the neoliberal model which are framed in explicitly anti-capitalist terms...[while also petitioning for] acceptance into the civilian

<sup>173</sup> Tarnaala, “Legacies of Violence and the Unfinished Past,” 103, 116.

<sup>174</sup> Elise F. Barth, “Peace as Disappointment: The Reintegration of Female Soldiers in Post-Conflict Societies—A Comparative Study from Africa,” (report, Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, PRIO International Peace Research Institute, Oslo, Norway, August 2002), 15, <https://www.prio.org/Publications/Publication/?x=7293>

<sup>175</sup> Hauge, “Group Identity—a Neglected and Political Participation in Guatemala,” 308.



women's movement."<sup>176</sup> These anti-capitalist challenges remind Colombian political institutions of the 'threatening' communist ideology of the FARC. Further, its alignment with civilian feminist movements also signals that these women will not be bound by the singular identity of being a female FARC ex-combatant. Instead, by joining other women in the fight for greater access to land ownership, stronger security in rural and border regions, and increased access to sexual rights for women, the *Mujeres Farianas* are exposing the failure of the state to solve those problems.<sup>177</sup> Each of these issues was directly addressed in the peace agreement; therefore, by highlighting the state's inadequate implementation of the agreement, these female ex-combatants threaten the Colombian state's monopoly over processes of political reincorporation.

By lending their voices to these organizations, women are giving them credibility. Thus, the double edge of the 'hero' narrative becomes evident. Both Senators Ramírez and Sandino effectively leverage the authority that the FARC party and the Colombian government have given them to promote issues affecting female ex-combatants. However, by placing Senators Ramírez and Sandino in positions of power due to their 'courage' and 'leadership,' these institutions cannot invalidate their voices for fear of undermining their own authority and legitimacy. This recognition of authority, even if reluctant, permits political participation for elite female ex-combatants.

## CONCLUSION

This article first explained the current political economy in Colombia, and specifically how the peace negotiations, political and social violence, transitional justice system, and uncertainty over the future of the peace agreement all create delegitimization within the political system. This destabilization is shaping the reincorporation process of FARC ex-combatants. One of the ways in which it is perpetuated is through the creation and reproduction of narratives defining the political identities of female ex-guerrillas. By labeling these women as either 'victims,' 'threats,' or 'heroes,' those with an interest in marginalizing female FARC ex-combatants from Colombian politics are able to do so.

Overall, the participation in elite politics is limited for reincorporating female ex-combatants of the FARC. However, the three political narratives of 'victim,' 'threat,' and 'hero,' influence the spectrum of constraints and possibilities

<sup>176</sup> Paarlberg-Kvam, "What's to Come Is More Complicated," 211-212.

<sup>177</sup> *Mujeres Farianas*, "Woman Fariana."

within that participation. Since its transition from an armed group in early 2017, the FARC has consistently performed poorly in elections, incentivizing the party to adapt its platform to one that can win the popular vote. In turn, this means appointing leaders who can turn ‘revolutionary’ ideas into mainstream politics. As the political elites and institutions in Colombia prioritize peacemaking and peacekeeping, their desire to return to a ‘traditional’ social order only increases. A patriarchal society is safe and familiar to many of the formal political structures in Colombia. Political elites exploit this familiarity in the name of ‘peacebuilding,’ instead retaining power throughout this significant period of transformation.

As female FARC ex-combatants seek political redress through either individual activism or membership in these influential veterans’ organizations, they are challenging the narrative that they are solely ‘victims’ who can be easily disregarded. Additionally, since the leaders of some of these organizations are the hand-picked, ‘exemplary’ female ex-combatants, some women create new political space by leveraging the use of the ‘hero’ narrative in order to gain legitimacy. This engagement with the various narratives allows female FARC ex-combatants to insert their voices throughout the political reincorporation process.

However, this approach is constrained by the third narrative: ‘threat.’ As these women continue to push the frontiers of their formal political rights and privileges, they are also highlighting the fragile boundaries of state authority in building and maintaining peace. This is evident in the relationship between Senators Sandra Ramírez and Victoria Sandino, and the three narratives. As the highest ranking female members of the FARC party, the two senators have expanded the possibilities of political engagement for female ex-combatants by remaining revolutionary in the Senate. However, their atypical ascents to power exemplify the unequal distribution of formal political privileges to female ex-combatants. Ultimately, the FARC women are not solely navigating elite political challenges, nor is political reincorporation only relegated to formal politics.

The highly egalitarian peace agreement has not prevented women from being ‘othered’ during processes of reincorporation. Because women are typically less socially and politically empowered than men, political elites can take advantage of their vulnerability to disenfranchise a major portion of the ex-combatant population. As Lalli Metsola explains, “The evils that the ex-combatants are associated with—migration, crime, alcoholism, loosening of family ties, indiscipline, HIV/AIDS—have a prominent place in upper

and middle class discourse, threatening their lifestyle and the orderly course of development as modernisation.”<sup>178</sup> Thus, elected elites and policymakers often employ ex-combatants in ways that politically disempower them under the justification of ‘national security’ and ‘peacebuilding.’<sup>179</sup> Female ex-combatants are most easily oppressed, especially in patriarchal societies such as Colombia’s, due to societal acceptance of their repression. As a result, female ex-combatants disrupt social order and traditional forms of ‘femininity’ when they engage in violence. In Colombia, many communities are grateful to have these women ‘put back in their place’ by state institutions.

By analyzing female FARC ex-combatant narratives, it is possible to determine their experiences of conflict and its aftermath, as well as the ramifications on the politics of reincorporation. The stories these women tell, and those that are told about them, suggest that reincorporation is much more than a phase, as state agencies in Colombia currently view it. Rather, it is a protracted process, especially for female ex-combatants who face marginalization from multiple angles.

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<sup>178</sup> Metsola, “‘Reintegration’ of Ex-Combatants and Former Fighters,” 1125.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid., 1124-1126.

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