

# A Gendered Peacebuilding Process: Challenges in DDR Programmes for Female Ex-combatants in Colombia

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## **Abstract**

This article explores the challenges that former female combatants from the guerrilla FARC-EP have encountered since the signing of the Colombian peace agreement in 2016. Despite the gender perspective provisions and the international guidelines, ex-combatant women still confront gender stereotypes during the reintegration process.

**Keywords:** women ex-combatant, reintegration process, peacebuilding, Colombia, DDR programme

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## **Introduction**

In 2016, the Colombian government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People’s Army (FARC-EP) signed a peace agreement that looked to end more than 50 years of armed conflict. The agreement established provisions to create mechanisms to solve roots of conflict, such as the inequality of land tenure and political, social, and economic exclusion. In this context, the accord established special elements for the disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration (DDR) process, which was considered as an essential step for the peacebuilding process.

The DDR process can be an opportunity for women to change social hierarchies and to be included in social and political representation processes. The United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 (2000) establishes that DDR programmes must include specific stipulations for women, taking distance of narrative of gender roles, because their needs and experiences in war differ from those of men.

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However, experiences do not show the accomplishments of these objectives. In opposition, former female combatants face different obstacles to their reintegration into society, most of them linked to gender roles and their invisibility (MacKenzie, 2009).

In this context, this article examines the question of how to face the challenges that female ex-combatants of FARC-EP have during the DDR process in Colombia after the signing of the peace agreement between the guerrilla FARC-EP and Colombian Government in 2016.

The article sustains that traditional war narratives are framed in gendered roles and the stereotype of femininity; instead, they transcend to peacebuilding contexts. The obstacles that women have been facing during the DDR process can be explained by gendered roles that remain in the practice of peacebuilding. Following this idea, the paper is divided into two main parts. The first is a general review of the guidelines for DDR programmes for women ex-combatants and their challenges. The second is the study of Colombian DDR programmes and the burdens that women still must face: recognition as political subjects, more than victims; lack of opportunities in education and work; political and physical safety; the need to show themselves to be recognised; and the lack of recognition of ethnic women ex-combatants. A qualitative methodology was used for the study, based on a content analysis of legal documents and public policies, as well as civil society reports, to compare the effects of policies in the Colombian DDR process for female ex-combatants.

### **DDR process: Female ex-combatants as part of conflict resolution programmes**

DDR processes contribute to the stabilisation of post-conflict contexts, with the objective of guaranteeing security and conditions for the sustainable reintegration of ex-combatants, and have the potential to “transform gender power hierarchies” (United Nations, 2014, p. 24; Goswami, 2015, p. 6). Women were historically excluded from DDR programmes (Steenbergen, 2020), and the UNSCR 1325 (2000) allowed for opportunities to be improved for women in DDR processes. The resolution recognises the importance of the “active participation of women in combat” and the use of the “gender lens” in the DDR processes and demands action from the international community to incorporate women in the different steps of conflict resolution (Maiden, 2014; Goswami, 2015, p. 2; K.C. and Whetstone, 2022). In addition, the UN’s CEDAW General Recommendation 30 on “Women in Conflict Prevention, Conflict, and Post-Conflict Situations” adds to the agenda

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elements of women's rights that have been overlooked in the operationalisation of UNSCR 1325 (Goswami, 2015, p. 15).

Despite the relevance of the UNSCR 1325, Maiden (2014) argues that there are no safe, inclusive, and equitable conditions for female ex-combatants. However, the DDR process can be formulated with a "more gender-conscious" framework to provide safety for women in their transition to civilian life (Maiden, 2014).

Female ex-combatants are still excluded from DDR programmes, and where they are included, the programmes reproduce inequalities. K.C. (2022) explained that reintegration programmes are more effective when they promote projects from bottom to top and recognise the grassroots experiences of women. Grassroot female ex-combatants have the expertise, skills, and resources to identify their issues and solutions. However, DDR processes have focused more on technicalities and the victimhood of women, leaving aside the consciousness of women's agency, their capability to create network locations in conflict, and their influence on transforming gendered identities and political opportunities (Viterna, 2013; Goswami, 2015).

The exclusion of women from DDR programmes breaks the opportunity for female ex-combatants to generate experiences that contribute to improving "gender equality and building an inclusive, positive peace" (Steenbergen, 2020, p. 1). Women's responsibility to return to normal as soon as possible means that "gender concerns often slip back to the status quo" (Goswami, 2015, p. 9).

DDR programmes have been conducted as a moralised process to return to normal and are gender-biased (MacKenzie, 2009). The programmes limit women to a stereotype of "victims" of conflict and list them as "dependents" or "camp followers," denying their roles as soldiers. Mackenzie's (2009) study identifies that the historical exclusion of women is reflected in the exclusion of women from reintegration programmes in post-conflict scenarios. The assumptions held in DDR programmes are framed from the perspective of women as peaceful, reducing their reproductive and motherhood capacities (Sjoberg, 2010).

These assumptions have also affected the confidence of women in the programmes throughout their history. Women perceived that to be part of DDR programmes, they needed to have a gun to be considered combatants, even when their roles in the guerrillas did not always require having one (MacKenzie, 2009). This perception did not guarantee the security of the ex-combatants and limited

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women to participate in DDR programmes because of their fear of being stigmatised by their families and communities (Inter-Agency Working Group on DDR (IAWG), 2006; MacKenzie, 2009; Dietrich Ortega, 2010; Dinis Cossa and Palik, 2023).

Dietrich Ortega (2010) exposes that DDR programmes have excluded and marginalised female ex-combatants and that the cost exceeds the potential benefits of the programmes, which is counterproductive for their reintegration. Women face the fact that DDR programmes do not address their capacity to meet specific women's needs; promote the gender-biased division of labour and do not focus on women's experiences and skills; and disintegrate collective groups, breaking the identity built during the conflict.

Similarly, Cossa and Palik (2023) argue that there are three reasons why women are excluded from DDR processes. The first reason is the perception that women do not constitute a threat; second, DDR programmes tend to benefit those who possess weapons due to the limited budget for the programmes; and third, women who were “forcefully recruited to become wives or combatants” start reintegrating individually (Cossa and Palik, 2023, p. 2). Additionally, DDR processes are more difficult for women than for men because women usually face resentment from civil society and have to quit their leadership skills (United Nations Department for Disarmament Affairs and Office of the Special Adviser on Gender Issues and the Advancement of Women, 2001; United Nations, 2014). In consequence, female ex-combatants receive training in “female skills” based on the “traditional sexual division of labour”, such as “cooking, tailoring, and mat weaving” (Dietrich Ortega, 2010, p. 2).

The discourse around the reintegration needs to not reproduce roles of women as “benevolent, nurturing, or victims in contrast to violent and aggressive males” (MacKenzie, 2009, p. 260). It is also important to deconstruct the categorised roles of females as victims in security practices and integrate the needs and experiences of former ex-combatants and their participation as agents, not only as victims (MacKenzie, 2009, p. 261). This could improve the security approach for every ex-combatant, reduce the stigma in their reintegration process, and generate major confidence in the programmes.

Dietrich Ortega (2010) also exposes that gender mainstreaming is important for transitional justice mechanisms to redirect the exclusion of women and be seen as political agents. This recognition is linked with their personal histories and ethnic backgrounds to achieve a transformation of

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conditions for lasting peace (Goswami, 2015). K.C. and Whetstone (2022) further encourage using UNSCR 1325 to creatively engage grassroots women with all the processes and put their needs at the centre of the programmes with an intersectional lens (K.C. and Whetstone, 2022, p. 9).

### **Colombian DDR process case study**

The objective of this section is to understand how the DDR process has developed in Colombia and the challenges faced by women. This section is divided into three main parts. The first is a summary of the peace agreement context and its provisions about DDR programmes. The second is a brief characterisation of the ex-combatants and, especially, of female ex-combatants. The third is an explanation of how the DDR process has been operationalised for women and what the main challenges have been.

#### ***Colombian context and reintegration process***

The armed conflict between the guerrilla FARC-EP and the state has developed into one of the longest and most violent conflicts in Latin America. On November 24, 2016, both parties signed the Final Agreement to end the armed conflict and build a stable and lasting peace (National Government of Colombia and FARC-EP, 2016). As part of this agreement, the combatants of the guerrilla acquired the compromise of disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration into civilian life under specific circumstances.

The DDR process started with the laying down of arms and continued with the transportation of ex-combatants to Transitional Local Zones for Normalisation (TLZN) and the plans to reincorporate the FARC-EP into civilian life (TLZN) (National Government of Colombia and FARC-EP, 2016). These would prepare the economic, political, and social reincorporation of the ex-combatants (National Government of Colombia and FARC-EP, 2016; Bolaño-Peña and Mejía-Escalante, 2020). The programmes would further be guaranteed by other conditions, such as security plans, basic income for the economic reintegration of the ex-combatants, one-off normalisation allowances, and education and social programmes (National Government of Colombia & FARC-EP, 2016). The

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principles, duties, and rights are included in a legal framework that summarises the guides of the present and future public policy in the Conpes 3931 2018<sup>1</sup>.

The general plan provided specific stipulations for women who would participate in the DDR programmes. These provisions are framed in the mandates of UNSCR 1325, which has become a tool for Colombian women to request the State for its international responsibility. In this context, the women organised themselves to create a coalition called “Women’s Initiative for Peace” (Iniciativa de Mujeres por la Paz). They asked the government to fulfil the objectives of UNSCR 1325, guarantee their participation in the negotiation table, and include a gender perspective (Bouvier, 2017; Vargas and Pérez, 2018).

Principally, 16 provisions of the peace agreement incorporated a gendered perspective for the DDR process. These mandates were integrated to have a complex response to women and their needs in the DDR process (UN Women, 2017). However, women have faced different challenges in the process, principally a lack of guarantees for their security, the slow response of government policies to their needs, and the institutional lack of coordination and a budget for the reintegration process (Morales Pinillos and Martínez Mina, 2018, p. 324; *Reincorporación para mujeres, comunidades étnicas y personas con discapacidad*, 2022). GPAZ (2021) highlights that 5 provisions have not been implemented, 13 are in progress, and only the provision on the creation of a national commission for security with the participation of women has been successfully executed.

### ***Characterisation of ex-combatants***

The armed conflict in Colombia has been characterised by the high participation of women in armed groups. In the FARC-EP guerrilla, the women participated in different roles as combatants, logistic operations, and direct work with the communities. One of the slogans of the women guerrillas was “FARC-EP also has a woman’s face” to indicate that women were included in the structure of the guerrilla (Mejía-Jerez and Anctil-Avoine, 2017). Most women saw an opportunity in the guerrilla to build a political project and rebel against gender stereotypes. However, the internal laws in the guerrilla left them in secondary places, and almost none of them were

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<sup>1</sup> All the processes have a normative framework that recognises the duties of the State to guarantee the reintegration and reincorporation of ex-combatants. The main legal pieces that compose this framework are Ley 1450 de 2011, Ley 1592 de 2012, Decreto 1391 de 2011, Resolución 754 de 2013, and others.

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recognised as commandants or at any high status in the guerrilla structure (Mejía-Jerez and Ancil-Avoine, 2017; Morales Pinillos and Martinez Mina, 2018).

The National University of Colombia oversaw creating a population census of ex-combatants. The University identified that 2,267 women, out of 10,015 ex-combatants, participated in the DDR process (Universidad Nacional de Colombia, 2017). Approximately 33% were part of the guerrillas, 12% were militants, and 7% were deprived of liberty (Universidad Nacional de Colombia, 2017). The census further showed that 30% of the ex-combatants had an ethnic background, and they self-identified as indigenous, Afro-Colombians, Palenqueros, Raizales, and Romanies. It is important to recognise that 54% of the ex-combatants had children, and 7.2% of the women were pregnant in the reintegration process, such that by the end of the disarmament and demobilisation, 1,135 of the women had children (Universidad Nacional de Colombia, 2017; Ruiz Herrera and Huertas Díaz, 2019, p. 14).

### ***Female ex-combatants: Expectation vs. reality***

As it was exposed, women were an important part of the structure of the guerrilla. The DDR process included specific conditions to improve the opportunities for women to reintegrate into society. Nonetheless, in practice, some of the promises remained on paper, and women have faced gender bias in their reintegration. In this section, we will discuss the five principal challenges faced by female ex-combatants in the DDR process in Colombia.

#### ***1. Recognition as political subjects, more than victims***

Women in the guerrilla suffered exclusion and violence inside the group. They were also limited and suffered violence based on gender due to their corporality as women (Mejía-Jerez and Ancil-Avoine, 2017). As part of the reintegration process, ex-combatants who suffered any victimisation have been accompanied by the institutional entities in charge of providing economic, health, and psychological support. However, many women have also felt institutional stigmatisation and rejection since they have broken social stereotypes as women (Morales Pinillos and Martinez Mina, 2018).

Many women decided to stay in the guerrillas as a political decision, looking for the transformation of their own realities and by their own choice (Téllez, 2018). Though the reintegration programme

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has made female ex-combatants invisible as political objects, Colombia repeated the experience told by Mackenzie (2009), and the programme identified the women principally for laying down arms, but they have been forgotten as peacebuilding actors. Women have had to come back to gender roles in the reintegration process to take care of their children and be invisible as political actors, “replacing the happiness of militancy with the joy of motherhood” (Elston, 2020, p. 15).

## ***2. Education and work***

The DDR programme included education plans for ex-combatants, especially to improve their skills and apply them to their own life projects. However, the education programmes focus on technical skills that are not enough to guarantee that women can achieve opportunities in the labour market. Moreover, this practice could generate major discrimination levels and the invisibility of women (Tautiva and Archila, 2017; Ruiz Herrera and Huertas Díaz, 2019). There is still a lack of opportunities for women to empower themselves. In November 2023, 35% of women were focused on care tasks, only 15% were dedicated to independent projects, and 12% had productive projects, but 49% did not receive any remuneration for their work (The United Nations Multi-donor Fund for Peace, 2023).

Tautiva and Archila (2017) report that learning programmes do not have flexible facilities for women with children or those who are pregnant. These problems add an additional burden for successful social and economic reintegration, limiting their capacities and leaving them relegated from decision-making spaces.

The work on productive projects has improved women's skills, and they have created and participated in most of the initiatives. By December 2022, the ex-combatants created 118 collective productive projects that involved the active participation of 1,087 women, and another 1,452 women created individual projects. Even though 84% of the women participate in these projects, most of them are not provided with the opportunity to make administrative or leadership decisions.

The UN verification mission explained that the lack of opportunities is due to the excessive burden of care tasks that women have to take on (Secretary-General, 2023). It is therefore important that gender-oriented policies be effectively embedded, allowing for the equalisation of care tasks between men and women, such that women can take up decision-making spaces on projects in which they participate for the development of their life projects.



### *3. Security: Political and physical*

Political reintegration provides opportunities for ex-combatants to address the political goals that drove them to join the rebel movement and contribute to gender equality, giving them a voice in decision-making processes that they have previously been excluded from (Steenbergen, 2020). The reintegration process must avoid the generation of “productive, reproductive, and political/peacebuilding labour” burdens and needs integral security programmes with gender dimension (Olsson and Gizelis, 2014; Steenbergen, 2020, p. 14).

The DDR process in Colombia has been broadly affected by the lack of security guarantees and the effective organisation of programmes by the government (UN Women, 2022). The stigma and patriarchal hierarchy are still prevalent in the political field in Colombia, and they are reflected in the reintegration process. The political representation of women in the parliament has been limited to only two representatives, although the party has the right to ten chairs (Carrillo Galván, 2022; Secretary-General, 2023). This is reflected in the local field, where the participation of women has increased but the percentage of women in contrast to men is still low. The result of the 2023 election was that only 18% of the authorities elected were women, and only one was an ex-combatant. These results show that women still have a long path to strengthen their presence in politics. Policies must further be aimed at strengthening women's participation in these scenarios, such that women are genuinely represented in power and decision-making.

The systematic violence against ex-combatants and female leaders has also affected their political participation and representation. From 2016 to 2022, ten political female ex-combatants were killed (Ruiz Herrera and Huertas Díaz, 2019; Carrillo Galván, 2022, p. 61). In January 2022, the Colombian Constitutional Court declared that the state had violated the fundamental rights of ex-combatants, their families, and members of the political party "Comunes," recognising the vulnerability of women as political participants (Pardo Schlesinger, 2022).

Female ex-combatants have, however, used their voices to be involved in the construction of the National Plan of Action of the 1325 Resolution by their participation in the technical commission with National Government representatives. The final document contains 18 specific actions to guarantee the transversalisation of the gender approach in the affirmative policies, programmes, and initiatives for women in the reintegration process, all of which serve as the foundation for public reintegration policies (The United Nations Multi-donor Fund for Peace, 2023).

#### ***4. Realities of the process***

Despite the transversalisation of the gender approach in public policy, female ex-combatants have remained politically invisible. Therefore, women have empowered themselves as political actors, showing their own stories outside the official frameworks of programmes and transitional justice. They have created processes from grassroots “to challenge their invisibility,” such as the creation of self-documentaries and “memory projects” narrating their own war and reintegration experiences (Elston, 2020, p. 76).

As Elston (2020) confirms, female ex-combatants have faced the fear of going from a collective lifestyle in the guerrillas to individual lives. Women have felt this process is “like jumping into a ‘void’” (Elston, 2020, p. 75) because of the isolation process that it involves. The recognition of grassroots processes would help women in the process of breaking the collective identity, by allowing them to represent themselves, challenge their invisibility, and “move beyond the limitations of official memory and transitional justice frameworks” (Elston, 2020, p. 75).

#### ***5. Indigenous women: Special programmes***

It is important that the peace agreement recognises the particularities of the different groups of women and their backgrounds. The rights need to be executed in daily lives because the participation and benefits of women in post-conflict situations vary according to their ethnicities and even the types of victimhood (Berry, 2017).

The indigenous peoples developed a prior consultation with the government where they agreed to the creation of special “Programmes for Harmonisation for Reintegration and Social and Economic Reincorporation with an Ethnic and Gender Approach, for indigenous ex-combatants”. The process resulted in the recognition of 578 indigenous ex-combatant women. (Agencia para la Reincorporación y la Normalización, 2021).

It has been a challenge to identify the special conditions for women in each case. This challenge is reproduced for Afro-Colombian, Palenqueras, and Romany women. It has been recognised that the experiences of indigenous women have allowed the creation of connections for reconciliation among the communities (Viterna, 2013; UN Verification Mission in Colombia, 2020, 2022).

## Conclusions

The DDR experience after UNSCR 1325 was not as expected. Despite the impact of the Resolution on the recognition of women's rights, the programmes reproduced gender-biased roles instead of changing social hierarchies.

In the case of the DDR process in Colombia, UNSCR 1325 had an important impact on women's organisations. The process from bottom to top at the grassroots guaranteed that the gender perspective was included in the peace agreement for the benefit of the ex-combatants and in the public policies to develop the stipulations in the peace agreement. However, women still face gender stereotypes that have limited their political work and risked their lives, without appropriate safety conditions.

The limited actions to improve the DDR process for women have further restricted their opportunities to improve their learning skills, impacting the labour market and political field. One of the main challenges that is important to analyse in greater depth is the reintegration process of ethnic women ex-combatants, which has limited documentation.

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