

# PEACEBUILDING AND FEMALE COMBATANTS: RETHINKING WOMEN'S INVOLVEMENT IN CONFLICT

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Much of the increased interest from academics and practitioners in women and conflict is often still framed through a highly gendered lens, highlighting their passive victimhood or inherent peacefulness. Of course, women often bear the brunt of conflict, and we should keep studying the gendered effects of armed conflict on civilian populations or focusing on women's peace activism. However, over the course of a conflict, women may simultaneously occupy more than one role and have more than one identity. The narratives created and reinforced by international actors, NGOs and academics alike can be problematic because they can silence women's diverse and multilayered experiences, enabling and legitimizing the post-conflict return of traditional gendered structures.

What is often missed, is that women also participate in conflict as combatants, often disrupting established gender roles by taking up arms and fighting for regime change, independence, religious beliefs or against repression and exploitation. Women's participation in violence is still mostly seen as an aberration, as a symbol of exceptionality.

In reality, far from being a niche issue, women are and have been part of the majority of non-state armed movements. With over 60% of armed groups having female members (including in active combat and leadership positions), their voices must be taken seriously. And yet, our understanding of female combatants continues to rely on gendered assumptions and does not really disrupt the established narrative. Regarding motivations for joining, emphasis is often placed on emotional motivations such as grief or abuse rather than political motivations such as injustice or repression. During the conflict, women's contributions, if acknowledged at all, are often framed in gendered ways, emphasizing the support functions they carry out or the violence they suffer as members of the group, e.g. sexual violence. After a conflict ends, women's wartime contributions are often marginalized or silenced altogether and the very issues that motivated women to join armed groups are sidelined which can lead to many women's needs and demands remaining unaddressed.

One reason for this simplistic understanding is a lack of direct engagement with women who engage in political

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Listening to the voices of female ex-combatant reveals a multi-layered and complex account of how they frame their wartime experiences and daily lives today.  
Source: Juan Camilo Cruz Orrego



violence. Dismissing the experience of women who are not victims but active participants in conflict renders their agency in conflict invisible and can be used to justify international interventions to 'save women and girls', such as in the case of Boko Haram, while the portrayal of women exclusively as 'agents for peace' further reinforces the supposed inherent peacefulness of women (and in turn the inherently violent nature of men) and depoliticizes their activism.

Since 2018, I am working on a participant action research project with female ex-combatants from Aceh (Indonesia), Burundi, Colombia, Nepal, Mindanao (Philippines) and Uganda. I work with eight co-researchers who were themselves former combatants and who collected video interviews with their peers. They decide which questions and topics to focus on, ranging from their motivations to join the fight, their experiences during their time in the movement and how their lives unfolded after the war. Understanding why women join armed groups, how they participate, how they demobilize and what they expect from their post-conflict lives is key to understanding what role they might play in peacebuilding and reconstruction efforts. The following paragraphs draw on the material gathered in the first phase of the project (2018-2020).

The reasons women give for joining armed movements largely match the ones given by their male comrades.

Many women hope for a better life, both in terms of economic opportunity and access to resources. Political motivations include fighting for regime change or for independence but also against discrimination. Finally – and often overemphasized – are personal reasons, such as the desire to avenge the killing of a family member or to follow a relative who has joined the rebellion. Often, several motivations interlink, for example a family facing economic hardship after the main breadwinner is killed in the conflict.

Once women join armed movements, their first few weeks are often structured in much the same ways as those of male recruits: by military training. After this, roles diversify by context. In some contexts, such as Nepal or Colombia, women take on almost equal combat positions; in others, such as Mindanao, they often take on so-called support roles, including logistics and intelligence. Different armed groups also have very different policies regarding the possibility of having children during the war. Some, like the PKK in Kurdistan and the FARC in Colombia, are strongly opposed to this, at times forcibly removing children or forcing abortions. In others, such as the Maoists in Nepal or the GAM in Aceh, pregnancy was accepted and women left their child with a family member while they rejoined their fight.

Much has been said and is still to be said about the exclusion of women from peace negotiations, but let me highlight some of the implications of the exclusion of female ex-combatants in particular. The absence of female ex-combatants at the negotiation stage most often results in their needs and concerns not being addressed by the peace agreement. Aceh is a prominent example: no woman was part of the official

negotiation parties on either side; no provisions for female combatants or even women in general were included in the Helsinki Memorandum of Understanding; and so there was no access to benefits such as trauma counselling or housing support after the agreement was signed.

Female combatants are much less likely to participate in official disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) programmes. There are several reasons for this: some are technical – such as the requirement to present a weapon to prove combatant status, which not all women can meet, or the lack of separate sleeping quarters and bathrooms; and some are societal – it is often easier for women to reintegrate 'spontaneously' by simply returning to their community without going through a formal process. Informal reintegration might be particularly attractive given the stigma of having been a combatant is often stronger for women. Joyce (pseudonym) from Burundi, for example, told her friends and family that she had been in Rwanda for work, hiding her combatant past from them for fear of marginalization.

Female fighters who do participate in DDR are often faced with programmes that seem to be aimed at reconstructing traditional gender roles, e.g. by finding husbands for them or teaching sewing skills. DDR thus sometimes serves as a gateway to 'normalizing' traditional gender relations,

often recreating pre-conflict stereotypical role distributions. The hope of some female combatants that they could transform gender relations and create an alternative future for themselves often only lasts until the reality of the peace agreement sets in, while the sense of empowerment they felt

during the conflict  fades away.

Just because gender norms have been challenged during conflict, this does not mean there will be long-lasting change once life returns to 'normal'. The way women are perceived and portrayed during and after conflicts affects peace processes and post-conflict reconstruction. If women are predominantly imagined as victims, they can only be taken into consideration in this capacity when the post-war order is designed. If practitioners, international organizations and civil society want to work towards transformative conflict resolution, they must find ways to take into account women's voices in all their diversity, including those of female combatants. Understanding how to transform wartime agency into peacetime agency may help peacebuilders, policymakers and ex-combatant communities to work together for a gender-just, inclusive and sustainable peace.



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