# Where have all the women gone?

## Female members of non-state armed groups in peace negotiations

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## Background to this paper

During the course of a participatory research project on politically motivated non-state armed groups (NSAGs)[1], or what we called "resistance and liberation movements", and their transition processes from armed resistance to party politics at Berghof Research Center, Berlin, we have been taken aback by the absence – physically and in discourse – of one important actor: female ex-combatants, women and girls. Concerned about their rare participation in the processes we set out to research, we decided to explore the whereabouts of female fighters in war-to-peace transition processes including peace negotiations, reintegration programmes (DDR) and processes of political conversion. While the peace process of the *Movimiento 19 de Abril* (M19) has been one of the nine case studies under scrutiny in our project, this article seeks to provide a comparative overview of female NSAG-members participation in peace negotiations around the globe, hoping to inspire some debate among this conference's participants on possible implications for Colombia. It starts outlining possible motivations for women to join NSGAs, and analyses role and tasks they fulfill within their respective movements, questioning in how far they differ from what their male companions do. In a second step, the article assesses female fighter's role in peace negotiations and evaluates their participation in reintegration and conversion processes. Finally, the paper critically discusses the impacts of UNSCR 1325 and aims to point out possible entry points for the international community to enhance female combatants' participation in war-to-peace transitions.

## 1 Women in non-state-armed groups

Internal, often asymmetric, violent conflicts between a government and its (armed) challenger are today at the centre stage of academics' and policy makers' attention. Challenging the state's monopoly of force, non-state armed groups are today increasingly recognized as key actor in conflict and its resolution and have become the subject matter of a large amount of literature seeking to explain their emergence, nature, structure, and their transformation after war. What this literature hardly addresses, however, is how gender and its various dimensions influence,

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[1] Case studies included: Aceh(Indonesia (GAM), Burundi (CNDD-FDD), Colombia (M19), El Salvador (FMLN), Nepal (CPN-M), Northern Ireland (Sinn Féin), South Africa (ANC), Sudan (SPLA), Kosovo (KLA).

shape and transform these groups. This is surprising when one realizes that the conflict environment in which NSAGs emerge and evolve is mutually influenced by and influencing gender identities, roles and structures. Blurring not only conventional categories of 'civilian' population vs. 'military' forces, and 'victims' vs. 'perpetrators', intra-conflicts also dispute our understanding of masculinities and femininities. According to Turshen '[t]he binary stereotype of active males/passive females also breaks down as the type of war changes. … As more and more civilians are drawn into conflicts, the conventional separation of male belligerents and female inhabitants no longer prevails' (1998: 1).

Mazurana has found that from 1990, women and girls have been members of fighting forces in at least 57 countries (Mazurana 2004) and research from several countries shows that 'women compromise between 10 and 30 percent of armed opposition groups' (Dietrich-Ortega 2009: 160). This has also been confirmed during a research project on non-state-armed-groups at Berghof Conflict Research, where estimated numbers of female involvement in armed groups ranged from 10% (e.eg. South Africa, Northern Ireland) up to 20% - 40% (e.g. Nepal, El Salvador, Colombia). The increasing recognition of female participation in non-state armed groups has also spurred a growing academic interest in women's involvement in violent (a broader research agenda on gender dimensions of non-state armed groups still needs to materialize though). Most of the academic work on female engagement with NSAGs stems as of today from anthropology, sociology, psychology, peace studies or political science and is based on empirical case studies using ethnographic research. While the majority of studies uses qualitative interviews as research method, recent work complements this with quantitative findings (See for instance Annan et al. 2008). Research tends to address female motives to join armed groups, their role within their movements, their identity as fighters and the challenges they face upon return to their communities (Cockburn 2004; Meintjes, Pillay and Turshen 2001; Pankhurst (ed.)2008; Hauge 2007). Another type of academic literature, often accompanied by practitioners lessons learned and policy recommendations around incorporation of gender dimensions into security planning, is concerned with integrating gender in mainstream security and peacebuilding programming. (Dietrich-Ortega 2009; Farr 2002; Jennings 2008; Strickland, Duvvury 2003, Watteville 2002). Until today, the bulk of research on female members of armed groups has focused on Latin America's guerrilla movements such as in El Salvador, Guatemala, Colombia or Nicaragua (See Herrera, Porch 2008; Ibánez 2005; Ramírez 2009) or on civil wars in Africa, with Sierra Leone, Liberia, Mozambique, Eritrea, Uganda and Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) being prominent countries under scrutiny (See Mazurana 2004; Coulter; Persson; Utas 2008). Recently and probably related to the international attention to 'terrorism', there has been an increasing interest in the specific topic of

female suicide bombers covering for instance the 'Freedom Birds' of LTTE in Sri Lanka, the 'Black Widows' from Chechnya or Palestinian suicide bombers (see Ness 2008). While some research stresses female fighters war-time activities as liberating, citing their experiences as 'going to a fiesta', 'the best what happened to me', the 'fulfilling of a childhood ambition' and the 'chance of my life' (Herrera and Porcher 2008; Hauge 2007), research has also highlighted that many female combatants experience massive violence during their involvement in armed groups and face acute difficulties when returning to civil life after conflict.

**2 Same motivations…**

Researchers have identified a range of motives for women to join non-state armed forces, for instance 'protection, disillusionment with the current regime; a desire for promises of positive change by opposition groups, including gender equality, self-enrichment; revenge; or political or economic gain' (Mazurana 2004: 25). Out of these variety of reasons, the most significant factor for women joining NSAGs refers to personal experiences of violence and state terrorism linking up with the search for security for oneself and protection for family and community members (see Herrera, Porch 2008: 614; Alison 2009: 224, Mazurana 2004). Secondly, women's decision to join armed opposition groups is strongly influenced by their social environment's involvement in the conflict, such as the participation of family and community members in NSAGs. However, this also works the other way round as women might be the ones pressuring others into armed resistance. As one woman states: 'May husband did not want to join. After some time, a year, he decided to join too. He was probably convinced by a provocative letter I sent him, telling him I would have to come kill him if he did not join, because he could get me into difficulties' (Mazurana 2004: 30). Besides personal experience of violence and family or community involvement in armed groups, political or ideological convictions for enlistment play an important role. Alison highlights that women explicitly referred to nationalist ideology as 'meta-reason for enlistment' (see Alison 2009: 128). In other cases, women would refer to fighting injustice or wanting a better world for their children as major reason for joining armed groups. The need for basic economic accommodation like food and clothing, the prospect of a salary or access to benefits such as training and some education are under certain circumstances another convincing argument for women to join armed groups. So is in some cases the attraction to a different, apparently empowered and adventurous life path. Herrera and Porch cite a woman who asserted that 'I like the FARC because I saw these women in uniform, with rifles looking very beautiful. I decided that (when I was old enough) I would have my equipment and a rifle' (cited in Herrera and Porch 2008: 616). Finally, we should not forget that women across the globe join non-state armed groups due to abduction and forced recruitment.

As a result of the magnitude of factors and the diversity of personal backgrounds and local conflict contexts, we cannot generalize the motives for joining armed groups. Women are not a homogenous group and researchers find different motivational priorities comparing for instance women from a low-educational, often rural, background and women with academic education who more often gave ideological reasons for joining an armed group. Interestingly, gender is the one argument never mentioned by any women as a trigger for their decision to join armed groups. Mazurana found that 'none joined the armed groups specifically to fight for women's rights or equality for women' even though some groups have campaigns particularly targeting women. The CNP (M) in Nepal for instance campaigned on issues like domestic violence or alcoholism ('dry law campaign') whereas the LTTE highlighted the autonomous lifestyle of women and their protection from sexual abuse within the movement. Even if gender concerns where at a later stage seen as being part of the larger agenda of equality and justice (Mazurana 2004: 32), gender justice has often been treated as a secondary objective that should not distract the group from reaching its primary goals, be their national, ideological, or ethno-political in nature. Referring to female combatants of the Colombian guerrilla group M-19 which dismantled in 1990, Vera Grabe recalls that most female combatants `believed the "political cause" was the real priority and saw the gender issue as a distraction.' (Quote from a forthcoming paper commissioned by Berghof Conflict Research, Berlin, 2010)

These findings lead us to question whether women and men actually have different, gender-specific motivations to join armed groups? Hauge and Thoresen demonstrate that in the case of the Guatemaltecan URNG, female main motives to join – awareness about injustice, experience of violence, personal ties to guerrilla members – did not reveal significant differences to male members (Hauge and Thoresen 2007). Can we conclude from the fact that women and men join armed groups for similar reasons that they fulfill similar tasks within these groups?

**3 …different tasks?**

While highlighting the 'multiple roles' of women in armed groups, a recent USAID report starts categorizing female members as 'forced participants' (often as a result of abduction), dependent 'followers' of fighters, assistants and supporters of fighters (not carrying weapons), or 'shields' for combatants. Only at the very end of the enumeration does the report acknowledge that some women also fulfill direct combat tasks as soldiers (USAID 2007: 5). Even though this description might resonate well with a traditional understanding of women as being both victims of war and naturally peaceful (meaning for an analysis of women in armed groups that they are only here because of forced recruitment, that they do not carry or use weapons, and that they are exploited within the group), it does not help to understand complex realities. When one looks at the ground, one will find

that running a war is not only about fighting and that there are much more functions than soldiering that are needed to maintain armed groups, such as information gathering, political strategizing, communication, fundraising, nursing and provision of basic needs such as food and shelter. Members of armed groups, both women and men, most often do fulfill several of these tasks in different moments of time. Firstly, this means that not all men in a group are front-fighters – some fulfill support roles, too, among them serving as porters, cookers, and sexual 'partners'. Secondly, even those men who take place in active battle don't do so all the time. This does however not diminish their contribution to the functioning of the group. The same should hold for women in armed groups. It is true that women are proportionally less often assigned to combat tasks and less represented at high-ranking posts. In fact, the majority of women combatants is to be found in the rank-and-file segments (Dietrich Ortega 2009: 162). However, that does not mean that women's contribution to the functioning of armed groups is somehow unsubstantial.

At the contrary, 'women and girls play a fundamental role in the maintenance of armed movements' (Anderlini 2007: 101). Referring to the case of Free Aceh Movement (*Gerakin Aceh Merdeka*, GAM) in Indonesia, Uning highlights that 'women played significant roles during the conflict because they were mostly responsible for intelligence, logistics, weapon smuggling, and guarding bases when men went out on patrol at night' (2008: 78). According to Herrera and Porch, female fighters within FARC serve as 'nurses, radio operators, explosives experts, specialist in logistics and finance, intelligence, propaganda and 'public order' (Herrera and Porch 2008: 620). As women seem to be less suspicious they have significant advantages in implementing certain activities. In some contexts, this is reflected by the growing use of female suicide bombers. As Skaine highlights, 'women have performed about one-third of Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam's (LTTE) suicide attacks and two-third of the attacks by the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK)(2006: 25). Female members also served to advertise the LTTE as an all-encompassing mass social movement (Alison 2009: 125). To conclude, armed groups do have good reasons to recruit women and they partly use the inclusion of women as a way to legitimize their cause. But despite the importance of both, men and women, to the functioning of NSAGs and the maintenance of conflict, their contribution is not equally validated once it comes to negotiating peace.

**4 Let the warring parties negotiate peace**

Peace negotiations are nowadays the most recommended and widely used strategy to end intra-state conflict. Since the 1990ies, negotiated settlements have ended 41 percent of all civil wars (other forms of settlements including ceasefire and stalemates or military victory of one party). There is a rich literature analysing the timing and sequencing, the actors involved, the design of peace

negotiations in order to establish the factors that lead to their success or failure (Duffy Toft 2010). This is not an easy task as peace negotiations vary greatly regarding their timing, length (some negotiations going on for years), the parties involved (bilateral, multilateral, degree of involvement of 'third actors', for instance CSOs), the support structure (domestic, internationally driven, regional), and the contents discussed. There are however two recurrent interdependent elements. Firstly, official peace negotiations tend to be elite driven, and therefore exclusive, processes. Secondly, their exclusionist character has a clear gender dimension. A review of 21 major peace processes by UNIFEM found that since 1992, women's participation in negotiating delegations averaged 5,9%, that women represented only 2,4% of signatories of peace agreements and that no women has been appointed Chief or Lead peace mediators in UN-sponsored peace talks. Referring to the peace negotiations in Nepal completed in 2006, Ian Martin (UNMIN) asserts that 'At all the political negotiation tables I have seen in Nepal during the peace process, not once have I seen a woman at the table. So far in the peace process, decisions are being made by men for women' (Villelas Arino 2008: 10). This is particularly surprising when one remembers that the Maoists insisted during the People' War on the fact that their armed movement incorporated between 40 – 50% of women. During the peace negotiations in Burundi, a male delegate insisted that 'the women are not parties to this conflict. This is not their concern. We cannot see why they have come, why they bother us. We are here and we represent them.' (Farr 2002: 11). The argument that war is not women's concern and that 'the warring factions should negotiate peace' (Lyytikäinen 2009: 1) does of course not hold. First of all, all civilians – and thus all women - are affected and thus concerned by war. Secondly, as has been shown throughout this article, women constitute an important part of the 'warring factions'. Why is it then that the argument is still successfully used? An extensive literature, both by researchers and practitioners, have so far investigated the general exclusion of women from official peace talks, starting with the exclusive character of peace negotiations, the male dominated political landscape, both the lacking access to power positions and capacity or training etc. However, there has been little effort to understand why '[t]here is a tendency across different negotiation processes involving armed opposition groups to exclude women, regardless of whether they achieved leaderships position in armed groups' (Dietrich-Ortega 2009: 163). The following section explores how the international discourse on female combatants interplays with locally existing barriers for women combatants such as structural restrictions to access to leadership positions, the power-bargaining character of peace negotiations, and lacking gender awareness by the conflict parties.

**5 UNSCR 1325, peace negotiations and female combatants**

In 2000, the United Nations Security Council adopted Resolution 1325 after a long process of civil society advocacy. Over 30 years ago, the first World Conference on Women in Mexico (1975) served as a catalyst for a global women's movement. However, women's experience in conflict and war would only reach the top of the agenda by 1995. One year after the genocide in Rwanda, the Beijing Platform for Action, signed in 1995 by 189 countries at the UN Fourth World Conference on Women, set out to promote women's equal participation in every stage of a peace process, especially decision-making. Inspired by a growing local, national and international women's activism in peacemaking and security- related issues, a group of NGOs later build the 'Ad Hoc Working Group on Women, Peace, and Security' to lobby for a Security Council resolution on that issue. Recognizing women's rights to participation in peace and security issues and protection in conflict zones, UNSCR 1325 was eventually adopted on October 31 of 2000 (Anderlini 2007: 73). Complemented and strengthened by resolutions UNSCRs 1820, 1888 and 1889[2], UNSCR 1325 serves as an umbrella for three areas of concern regarding women, war- and peacemaking: prevention, protection, and participation. Looking at the latter dimension and how it affects female combatants, it is interesting to note that the resolution does not explicitly mention their role in peace negotiations. Instead, the resolution embraces 'women and girls' as one broad category, hardly differentiating the various roles they might have in conflict. With regard to women combatants, there are only two hints to their existence. In clause 9, the resolution 'Calls upon all parties to armed conflict to respect fully international law applicable to the rights and protection of women and girls, especially as civilians', acknowledging thereby indirectly that not all women and girls are civilians. Consequently, in clause 13 the resolution 'Encourages all those involved in the planning for disarmament, demobilization and reintegration to consider the different needs of female and male ex-combatants and to take into account the needs of their dependants'. With regard to peace negotiations, the resolution does not allude to female members of armed groups at all. In its first clause, it urges 'Member States to ensure increased representation of women at all decision-making levels in national, regional and international institutions and mechanisms for the prevention, management, and resolution of conflict'. Clause 8 provides further details what that implies for the actors involved on the ground. The clause 'calls on all actors involved, when negotiating and implementing peace agreements, to adopt a gender perspective, including, inter alia:

(a) The special needs of women and girls during repatriation and resettlement and for rehabilitation, reintegration and post-conflict reconstruction; (b) Measures that support local women's peace initiatives and indigenous processes for conflict resolution, and that involve women in all of the

implementation mechanisms of the peace agreements; (c) Measures that ensure the protection of and respect for human rights of women and girls, particularly as they relate to the constitution, the electoral system, the police and the judiciary.'

Mentioning female combatants only in terms of their needs when it comes to reintegration, the resolution misses the point that these women could also play a very active role in negotiating their groups return into civil life. The reluctance of international terminology to acknowledge women's participation in armed groups, is also demonstrated by the notion of 'women associated with armed groups' (WAAFGs). While this terminology has the merit to make women who serve in non-combat tasks in armed groups visible in the first place, it is at the same time misleading as it does not necessarily reflect the self-identification of female members of NSAGs. Pugel for instance found that 71% of female combatants in Liberia defined their primary role as 'combat soldier' (compared to 87% of male members, cited in Jennings 2008:10). This self-identification clearly demonstrates that these women are aware both of their importance to a movements' functioning and of the difference in status between a 'combatant' and a 'supporter'. In fact, being identified as a combat soldier does in many circumstances lead to substantial benefits, especially when it comes to enrolment in DDR programmes. This might also be a reason why there is no international category for 'men associated with armed forces and groups' (MAAFG) even though male members of armed groups equally fulfill multiple tasks in conflict. In the sense that a gendered description of male and female members of NSAGs leads to different access to benefits and thus power, the very act of framing men and women differently, is political. The international community's uneasiness to deal with women soldiers makes might reinforce - instead of alleviate – already existing barriers for women combatants to take part in negotiations.

## 6 Local restrictions

On the side of the armed groups, several factors limit women's access to the negotiation table, among others gendered hierarchies, the power-bargaining character of peace negotiations, and the perception that gender equality is –if at all- a secondary objective. First of all, let us look at the structural level. As outlined in the previous chapters, women proportionally less often attain leadership positions within armed groups. This makes their chance to participate in exclusive, leadership-driven negotiation processes obviously less likely. In addition, women also might be less prepared to take part in negotiation processes as a result of them not being trained for that purpose. Itto reveals that when South Sudanese women claimed their representation through the introduction of quota during the negotiations, 'One senior male member of Sudan Peoples' Liberation Movement/Army SPLM/A delegation laughed and asked me where the women would be found to

fill these positions' (Itto 2006). Lacking experience or capacity of women to participate in high-level negotiation process alone however is not a sufficient explanation if we acknowledge that even women who did fulfill leadership positions within their movements would not be invited to take part in the negotiations. This leads us to have closer look at another factor, the understanding of peace negotiations as a competition for access to power. Excluding women from fighters list or diminishing their role is an easy mean to reduce the number of "competition" for scarce resources once an armed group is about to demobilize. This has for instance been clearly shown for the case of GAM in Aceh/Indonesia. Shadia Marhaban, the only female negotiator of GAM remembers that the negotiator would not even mention the group's female only battalion 'Inong Bale' thus risking the marginalization of female combatants on beneficiaries list. She asserts that: 'More significant is the fact that there was no specific agenda on women. In my discussions with some participants of both camps, it was revealed that the issue simply did not arise. They said there was no deliberate action to exclude women from the teams or to prevent discussions on gender issues, but there was no effort to include them either' (Marhaban, forthcoming paper commissioned by Berghof Conflict Research). This leads us to a third explanatory factor, the perception that gender justice is not a priority compared to the overarching goals of the armed struggle, be there ideological, religious, nationalist, or ethno-political and can be dealt with 'sometimes later', once 'peace has arrived'. When the primary concern for parties in conflict is power redistribution between different segments of society, gendered power imbalances are of secondary concern – including for many women. This opens the door to another question altogether: What do we expect from women negotiators? What difference, and for whom, would women's participation at the negotiation table make? But, finally, why would we even have to prove that women make a difference? In the end, there is no other societal group whose inclusion in decision-making would require that much justification.

**6 Conclusion**

This paper has revised women's motivations to join and the functions they fulfill within armed groups. It concludes that even though female combatants are numerically disproportionally represented in armed groups, especially in leadership positions, they fulfill multiple tasks that are important for the groups' survival and growth. The paper has contrasted these findings with the sidelining of female combatants in peace negotiations. So far, it seems that despite the possibility of individual women to gain new skills, resources and access to power during their involvement in armed groups, socio-cultural stereotypes and gender norms survive and shape a group's path to transformation. In the end, deep gender structures within armed movements might be no more than a mirror of societal gender arrangements and norms, despite the emancipatory discourse of some

movements and their targeted campaigns for women. On the other hand, these local restrictions are interlinked with the global discourse on women as victims or civil society activits/local peacebuilders that tend to construct women as apolitical homogenous group of participants in, but not negotiators of, peace. UNSCR 1325 has raised international awareness about women in war-to-peace transitions, encouraged local initiatives and prompted further research on the rights and roles of women and girls in peacebuilding. It has also provided policy makers with clear recommendations and civil society organizations are already monitoring their compliance. However, its major flaw lies in its incapacity to critically question the stereotyped discourses on women and men in war. Referring undifferentiated to 'women and girls', the resolution is likely to enhance an understanding of the female sex as en essentially unified body with unified goals and aims. In the future, concerted efforts on all levels, grassroots initiatives and civil society advocacy, high level policy-making as well as research, will thus be need to further improve our tools to make a difference on the ground.

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