**From gender-blind to gender-transformative reintegration: Women’s experiences with social reintegration in Guatemala**

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**Abstract**

Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) processes have become a standard component of international peace and security programming. Yet in spite of increasing attention to the need for gender-sensitive DDR in policy and academic debates, the stereotypical ways in which female ex-combatants have traditionally been addressed have led to inadequate gendered reintegration policies. This article describes the effects of a gender-blind reintegration process on the experiences with long-term social reintegration of female ex-combatants in Guatemala. Social reintegration is a profoundly gendered process, which involves the rebuilding of civilian identities, social relationships and trust between social groups. Based on in-depth interviews with female ex-combatants, this article describes how the absence of gender-sensitive reintegration strategies produced various problems for women. They faced problematic emotional and family relationships leading to psychological problems and even violence, as well as persisting stigma which produces anxiety and problems in the labour market. The article concludes with suggestions for making reintegration a gender-transformative process, by crossing the private-public divide, increasing collective strategies, and better aligning with transitional justice processes.

**Keywords**: Female ex-combatants, DDR, social reintegration, gender equality

**INTRODUCTION**

One of the challenges in the aftermath of armed conflict is to translate ambitious peace agreements into a reality on the ground. Processes of Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) are crucial for this by supporting former combatants to reintegrate into civilian life. Since the 1980s, over 60 DDR processes have been implemented, turning DDR into a standard element of international peace and security programming (Muggah and O’Donnell 2015). After initial processes of assembly and cantonment of troops, weapon surrender, and the dismantling of command structures, reinsertion and reintegration supports ex-combatants to transition to civilian life. In the last few decades, DDR has moved beyond a security perspective, embracing broader goals of building sustainable peace and promoting reconciliation (Knight and Özerdem 2004; Willems and Van Leeuwen 2014; Muggah and O’Donnell 2015). Reinsertion packages often play a large role in this, providing support measures such as temporary financial assistance or productive projects, education and livelihood skills training, health care, and housing. This support intends to facilitate longer-term reintegration, which occurs at the community level or in urban areas (Knight and Özerdem 2004; Ball and Van de Goor 2006; Bowd and Özerdem 2013).

This article will focus on reintegration. Often the weakest link in DDR, reintegration is little empirically studied (Theidon 2007; Waldorf 2009). It is a long-term process without a clearly defined timeframe, consisting of three strongly interrelated spheres of political, economic and social reintegration (Ball and Van de Goor 2006; Bowd and Özerdem 2013; Tarnaala 2016). Of these spheres, social reintegration is hardest to capture, since it involves the rebuilding of civilian identities, social relationships and trust between social groups (Bowd and Özerdem 2013; Friedman 2018). Returning ‘home’ is often fraught with difficulties. Communities and families are not always keen to receive ex-combatants, feeling that reintegration support privileges perpetrators over victims. These receiving communities, themselves often struggling to recover from conflict, are generally left to their own devices to deal with social reintegration (Theidon 2007; Worthen, Veale, and Kay 2010; Prieto 2012; Bowd and Özerdem 2013). Social relations are defined by power structures, including those along gender lines. Social reintegration is therefore also gendered. However, in spite of attention to gendered conflict experiences and gender-sensitive transitional justice and DDR, less is known about the gendered dynamics of reintegration or the impact of reintegration programmes on female ex-combatants and their communities (Friedman 2018), especially in the long term. This article analyses the results of the absence of a gender-sensitive approach to reintegration, analysing the case of Guatemala. Over twenty years after peace was signed and ex-combatants reintegrated, the difficult experiences of female ex-combatants in Guatemala provide insights into how reintegration processes could better integrate gender-sensitive actions and strategies.

The article proceeds by explaining how the stereotypical ways in which female ex-combatants have been addressed has led to inadequate or inexistent gendered reintegration policies. After briefly explaining the conflict in Guatemala and the methods used for this research, the article describes the gendered dynamics of guerrilla groups in Guatemala and the DDR process. The main section of the article then addresses long-term social reintegration in Guatemala, focusing particularly on gender within household and family relations, and the stigma experienced by female ex-combatants. The article concludes by suggesting how reintegration can be gendered in such a way to not only prevent peace from becoming ‘a disappointment’ for female ex-combatants (Barth 2002), but instead contributing to greater gender equality in post-conflict societies by bridging private-public divides, introducing collective reintegration strategies and coordinating better with transitional justice mechanisms.

**GENDER AND DDR**

The last few decades have seen increasing attention paid to the different impacts of conflict on women, reflected for example in the ‘women, peace and security’ agenda. The framing of this agenda, however, also reflects a wider tendency to understand gender as women. The inclusion of women’s ‘gendered’ experiences seems to reflect the recognition of sexual violence as *the* gendered conflict experience (Crosby and Lykes 2011; Buckley-Zistel and Zolkos 2012). This not only risks neglecting other gendered harms that women might have suffered, but also creates a context in which women’s role is limited to that of victims of violence. Women who perpetrate political violence have received less attention. Although these shortcomings have been critiqued by feminist IR scholars for decades (see for example Enloe 1998), these critiques have not often influenced policy.

Violent women are often regarded with fascination, or even as abnormalities (Vogel, Porter, and Kebbell 2014). They tend to be treated as victims of forced recruitment or (sexual) violence within armed groups, as bush wives or sex slaves. Their motivations to join armed groups are commonly explained in personal terms, for example following male family members or escaping – sexual – violence, whereas men’s violence is seen to be politically motivated. Women are therefore considered less guilty, having been instrumentalised by violent actors to fulfil their political goals (MacKenzie 2009; Gonzales Vaillant et al. 2012; Henshaw 2016; Eggert 2018). At the other extreme, they are seen as more violent and bad than men, because their transgression of gender norms of women being peaceful is perceived as more shocking (Alison 2004; Sjoberg and Gentry 2007). These portrayals uphold gendered stereotypes. Failing to understand the full array of women’s motivations to commit political violence ignores their conscious decisions to join armed groups, and thus their capacity of political choice and agency (Sjoberg and Gentry 2007).

In the last decades, a growing body of research has analysed women’s experiences as combatants with more nuance (for example MacKenzie 2009; Annan et al. 2011; D. K. Cohen 2013). This research both includes quantitative research analysing women’s motivations to rebel (Henshaw 2016) and their tasks within armed groups (Vogel, Porter, and Kebbell 2014), as well as qualitative analyses, for example of women’s participation in Latin American guerrilla groups (Dietrich Ortega 2012; Nieto-Valdivieso 2017). This is an important addition to research on gender and conflict, since women often constitute significant parts of armies, and even more so of guerrilla groups and liberation movements (Alison 2004). This research moreover evidences how throughout history, conflicts have led to shifts in gender roles and increases in women’s agency (Goldstein 2001). Several authors have provided crucial insights into the processes of women’s motivations to mobilise into Latin American guerrilla movements (Viterna 2006), their diverse roles in these movements (Gonzalez-Perez 2006), and their experiences in the aftermath of conflicts, particularly in relation to their political participation (Luciak 2001). Less research has been undertaken about the long-term impact of guerrilla participation and gender-blind DDR on women’s post-conflict lives, where the main contribution of this article lies.

Following the above historical development, initially most DDR programmes did not pay specific attention to gender. This historic neglect results partly from women’s frequent absence from peace negotiations, in which DDR is negotiated (Dietrich Ortega 2009). Women were long not seen as security concern, assumed to have support rather than combat roles (Barth 2002; Specht and Attree 2006; MacKenzie 2009; D. K. Cohen 2013). The so-called ‘one man one gun’ approach to DDR has prevented women from receiving benefits, while in other cases women have actively abstained from participating in DDR to avoid the stigma associated with armed group membership (Barth 2002; Specht and Attree 2006; MacKenzie 2009). More recently, it has been recognised that this lack of gendered attention ends up discriminating against women, returning them to communities that treat them as pariahs for having disrupted traditional gender norms. Stigma is even stronger when children were conceived during conflict, marking them as promiscuous and impure women (Dietrich Ortega 2009; Worthen, Veale, and Kay 2010). This reflects how in spite of temporary changes in gender roles, gender relations tend to stay intact (Zarkov 2006).

UN Security Council Resolution 1325 was the first to call for DDR to consider the different needs and access of female and male ex-combatants. This rather vague recommendation did not produce notable changes in practice. Livelihood training for women has often focused on supposedly female skills like sewing or hairdressing, reinforcing gendered stereotypes (Dietrich Ortega 2009; Jennings 2009). More structural obstacles for women’s employment, such as lower levels of education or childcare needs, are generally not addressed (Specht and Attree 2006; Jennings 2009). The 2006 Integrated Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Standards (IDDRS) include a gender module that addresses some of these shortcomings. Amongst others, it lists the need for childcare provisions, efforts to combat negative gender stereotypes and measures to reinforce the skills women obtained within armed groups, complemented with leadership training (UN IAWG 2006). Nevertheless, these recommendations again have failed to produce DDR policies that transform gender inequality. For example, the 2015 DDR process in the Central African Republic still used a ‘no weapon, no entry’ approach (Tarnaala 2016), whereas the Rwandan DDR process reproduced stereotypical understandings of Rwandan heteronormative military masculinities (Duriesmith and Holmes 2019). Furthermore, even the fairly progressive IDDRS guidelines tend to target women and their special needs, rather than addressing gender relations more broadly or disrupting traditional views on men’s and women’s roles.

Several authors (Specht and Attree 2006; Theidon 2009) argue that gendered reintegration policies should also engage men. This could prove important for preventing cases of domestic violence, which tend to be higher among ex-combatants’ families (Tabak 2011). Nevertheless, gender-based violence is a topic the international community has been reluctant to address (Tarnaala 2016). Perhaps this reflects how public violence continues to be seen as the principal threat to security, thus limiting reintegration policies to the public sphere, leaving violence and oppression in the private sphere unaddressed (Bernal 2001; Tabak 2011). This contrasts with the accounts of many female ex-combatants, including the participants in this research, who defined the private sphere and gender relations in the family as crucial in terms of reintegration success (Friedman 2018). In this article I argue that reintegration processes should address gender relations in both the public and private sphere in order to make the above described conflict-era gender role changes more permanent, and consolidate the agency that ex-combatants demonstrated by joining armed groups.

**RESEARCHING FEMALE EX-COMBATANTS’ STORIES IN GUATEMALA**

Since many DDR programmes have been implemented in Africa, much research has focused on that region. Colombia has also received some attention, especially the gender dynamics of paramilitary demobilisation (Theidon 2009; Tabak 2011). Publications about the FARC reincorporation process are emerging, without a specific gender focus so far (see for example McFee and Rettberg 2019). The present article focuses on Guatemala, a case which has received surprisingly little in-depth attention. An early case of DDR, before the Women, Peace and Security agenda or the IDDRS, little awareness existed of the need for a gender policy. Guatemala thus offers a good case to examine the effects of gender-blind reintegration policies on the lives of female ex-combatants. Nevertheless, it should be noted that Latin American guerrilla movements are of a different nature than other armed groups that have received more scholarly attention. Rather than originating because of religious or ethnic cleavages or economic gains, Latin America’s domestic guerrilla movements fought State oppression (Gonzalez-Perez 2006). The Guatemalan experience can therefore not be generalised across all armed groups, particularly outside of Latin America, as levels of violence used and gender roles are hard to be compared.

With the exception of a short democratic interval (1945-1954) which ended by a US-backed military coup, Guatemala’s twentieth century history was marked by authoritarian and military rule. This sparked an unsuccessful guerrilla uprising in the 1960s, followed by the creation of four different guerrilla groups in the 1970s. These eventually united in the *Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca* (Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity, URNG) in 1982, fighting for a socialist revolution. In the early 1980s, the URNG allegedly numbered between 6000-8000 armed combatants, a majority of whom were of indigenous background (Jonas 2000). Guerrilla activity provoked a bloody counterinsurgency campaign, which included acts of genocide through a scorched earth policy in the indigenous highlands between 1981 and 1983. Over 200,000 people were killed, 82% of them indigenous. The country’s UN-sponsored truth commission identified the state to be responsible for 93% of these crimes, compared to 3% guerrilla responsibility (Brett 2016). Peace was finally signed in December 1996, leading to the URNG’s demobilisation. Although clear data on the number of female ex-combatants are absent, according to a 1997 European Union survey, women constituted 15% of URNG’s combatants and 25% of political cadres (Luciak 2001).

Although Guatemala had two truth-seeking mechanisms, little is known about the experiences of guerrilla members. The Catholic Church-led REMHI commission only received 8% of its testimonies from perpetrators – including guerrillas, self-defence patrols and the army (Isaacs 2009) – while the UN-sponsored CEH commission also received a very low number of perpetrator testimonies, relying mainly on secondary sources on the guerrilla groups (Kruijt 2008). The CEH and REHMI reports’ gendered analyses focused mainly on sexual violence against women (Crosby and Lykes 2011), failing to address female ex-combatants’ stories, which also did not feature in most of the later gendered truth-seeking and historical memory processes in Guatemala. Not much is known about female ex-combatants’ post-conflict experiences either, which my research aims to help uncover.

To do this, I undertook visits to Guatemala in June-July 2018, March and November 2019, and conducted in-depth interviews with 23 female ex-combatants. Surprisingly perhaps, more than twenty years after the end of the armed conflict, many women are still hesitant to speak about their experiences as *guerrilleros* because of the political sensitivity of guerrilla membership*.* The building of relationships of trust was therefore essential. Although I did not have the luxury of a prolonged fieldwork period, I could build on previous relationships established during five years of working and living in Guatemala. These contacts helped me identify and invite other participants. Since such snowballing can lead to participants belonging to one social network, I initiated parallel ‘snowball networks’ to include participants of diverse socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds (Cohen and Arieli 2011).

As discussed in other research with ex-combatants, both the existence of networks and experiences – previous in my case – of going ‘local’ help establish legitimacy and trust (Hennings 2018). Nevertheless, some women were reluctant to participate because of previous unsatisfactory research experiences, in which results were never shared. This especially applied to a community of ex-combatants that formed a cooperative with agricultural and tourism projects, frequently receiving national and international volunteers and tourists. With a few exceptions, most women here showed signs of research fatigue (Clark 2008). This experience stands in stark contrast to the women who reintegrated individually, who felt their story had never been heard. A semi-structured interview guide was used, asking participants to place their experiences as *guerrilleros* within their wider life experience. In many cases this led to an almost uninterrupted narrative about their life, thus giving participants a large degree of freedom to decide on the essence of their story.

Participants belonged to all four guerrilla organisations. Most of them had directly participated in the guerrilla camps in the jungle and mountains, whereas others had participated in unarmed resistance activities. The women were from different areas, including Guatemala City, the coast, highlands and northern provinces. Some participants currently live in Guatemala City, others in two communities of ex-combatants, one of them relatively close to Guatemala City, another a *finca* (farm) in the north of the country. Representative of guerrilla membership, participants were both of indigenous and *mestiza[[1]](#endnote-1)* ethnic origin. Anonymity was guaranteed, and appreciated by most participants, who are identified with pseudonyms. Two participants – Maya and Sandra – insisted on being identified with their real name, since they judged the time right to break the silence around women’s guerrilla membership. I respected their decision, since doing otherwise would fail to take their political agency seriously (Wood 2006).

**GENDER EQUALITY IN AND AFTER THE GUERRILLA EXPERIENCE**

In order to understand the disappointment and frustration that social reintegration implied for women in Guatemala, it is important to first briefly explain what gender relations looked like within the guerrilla movement, and what the reintegration process entailed. Women had a variety of functions that went beyond support tasks. Many of the interviewed women were combatants, in addition performing tasks as diverse as medical support roles, radio operators, and international political representatives, while some came to occupy leadership roles. They remember difficult experiences, marked by endless days of walking in the jungle, tropical diseases, hunger, and the deaths of comrades or family members. Particularly painful for most was the separation from their children. Combatants were allowed to have partners and children, but in most cases children were raised by family members or supporters outside of the guerrilla camps. Nevertheless, the overriding sentiment emerging from the interviews is the satisfaction of having fought for a just cause, contradicting common assumptions that women join armed groups for personal rather than political reasons.

As a result of the literacy and political training provided in the guerrilla camps (Kruijt 2008), most guerrilla members, many of whom were from poor, rural and indigenous backgrounds, learned to read and write. Others also learned technical, political or medical skills. Clara, who worked in the medical support team, remembers the feeling of pride and emancipation this gave her, which other participants echoed: “There were many seriously wounded comrades, and I attended that large number of wounded, I never thought I would do such important things.”[[2]](#endnote-2) While women broke through some of the traditional gender roles of Guatemalan society, so did men. Gender roles were contingent within the guerrilla movement, where men and women performed the same tasks. Men’s adoption of ‘feminine’ tasks like washing or cooking, and values like caring and solidarity created fluid gendered identities (Dietrich Ortega 2012). Sonia explained that women were expected to be tough and ‘masculine’ to prove that they deserved being there: “’Ah, do you want to be here as a woman? Are you strong, are you a good soldier? Then you will do the same as I do’. So the women did very, very heavy tasks.”[[3]](#endnote-3) For many women, gaining respect in a male domain meant showing themselves capable of performing the same tasks as men: carrying a gun and heavy loads, committing violence, exposing themselves to dangerous situations, and enduring harsh conditions. This suggests a certain ‘de-gendering’ of guerrilla groups, where class struggles were prioritised over gendered inequalities and ‘sameness’ required women to assimilate to dominant, militarised norms (Gonzales Vaillant et al. 2012, 75; Duncanson and Woodward 2016).

Some participants mention there were cases of violence against women in the guerrilla movements, including sexual violence and forced abortions, even leading to suicide attempts. Gendered violence within the guerrilla movement is however a controversial and silenced topic in Guatemala. Some participants argue that suffering violence or abuse “depended on one’s character”, and that as a woman, “one had to make oneself be respected.”[[4]](#endnote-4) Sexual harassment was however a common aspect of the lives of many women in that time – and today – and therefore for many women experiencing harassment might not have been something out of the ordinary. Although women’s talents and skills were recognised and used, there was no deliberate policy to promote women’s emancipation or leadership, and guerrilla leadership was male. As Bernal (2001) remarks in the Eritrean case, the fact that men and women to some extent had similar roles made continuing inequalities in gender relations invisible, thus rendering specific measures to promote women’s inclusion unnecessary, also in the reintegration phase.

That gender equality was not a priority for the guerrilla leadership, nor a prominent issue at the international agenda at the time, became apparent in the DDR process, which consisted of a demobilisation phase of 60 days after the signing of the peace accord, implemented by the UN Verification Mission (Gobierno de Guatemala y Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca 1996). From January 1997 onwards, the approximately 3,000 remaining URNG combatants gathered in demobilisation camps, together with approximately 2,800 other members, including political and international representatives (Luciak 2001). Among them were 766 women (Hauge 2008). In these camps, they handed in their arms, and received education and health support. This was followed by an insertion phase of a year, implemented by the Special Commission for Incorporation, formed by government and guerrilla representatives, advised by the international community and by a newly created ex-combatants organisation, the Fundación Guillermo Toriello. In this phase, ex-combatants returned to their communities or in some cases to temporal housing. They received a support package that included a small economic lump sum of 3000 quetzales (now approximately $400.00), legal and housing support, and productive projects accompanied with some technical training, for example to open a shop or dining room. Also unarmed members of the URNG’s political and international structure were eligible for reincorporation support, although Claudia and Aura, who had been in urban and rural support structures rather than ‘in arms’, did not remember receiving such support. The final incorporation phase offered ex-combatants longer-term state services and specifically targeted programmes, implemented by the Fundación Guillermo Toriello with international financial support.

Productive projects failed in most cases. After decades of living in the ‘mountains’ without money, it was hard to manage a small business, especially without in-depth training on business skills or sufficient financial support to guarantee sustainability. Education support also had limited success. Some women managed to validate what they learned in the guerrilla movement and obtained primary or secondary school diplomas, but finding a job proved hard without proven work experience or professional training. The only clearly successful livelihood strategy was ‘work standardization’, a process in which teaching and medical skills obtained in the guerrilla movement were validated, followed by job offers by the Ministries of Education and Health. Also other research has stressed the importance of the recognition and validation of practical skills (Hauge 2008). Although the accord that created the DDR process states that the process will consider women, young people and disabled people as groups of prioritised attention, in practice none of the interviewed women noticed any specialised assistance, as Marisol described: “Everything was done in the same way, there was nothing done specifically [for women].”[[5]](#endnote-5)

In terms of political reintegration, the URNG turned into a political party. The legal constitution of this party, also called URNG, took about two years and absorbed most of the leadership’s energy and finances. This undermined the building of a broader social movement, to the disappointment of many of the guerrilla’s rank and file who felt abandoned and left to their own devices. Moreover, in spite of a gender quota within the party, women’s political participation was weak, as this was no longer considered a part of women’s role (Luciak 2001; Hauge 2008). According to Elizabeth, “they destroyed the women’s structures within the party […] so we used to say, we were better off when we were *guerrilleros* than when we demobilised.”[[6]](#endnote-6) This lack of post-conflict political participation was disappointing for many participants, as it undermined the sense of agency and emancipation acquired through guerrilla membership*.* Not building on this sense of agency and the temporary gender role changes described above is a lost opportunity, which social reintegration policies, together with transitional justice measures, should start to seize in order to promote post-conflict gender equality.

**SOCIAL REINTEGRATION**

Turning now to social reintegration, what did it mean to rebuild family and community relationships that had been interrupted by years or decades in the guerrilla movement? The reintegration process provided very little support with this. Although the Fundación Guillermo Toriello was meant to support ex-combatants with training and material assistance, it focused on economic reintegration rather than more personal needs. Very few participants received counselling in the reintegration process, while others mention that some of their peers refused to participate in such processes, since “they were not crazy.” Whereas some problems were faced by all combatants, others were clearly gendered, and traversed both the private and public domains, which in fact cannot be seen as separate.

**Female ex-combatants and their families**

Guatemala’s guerrilla groups allowed sexual relationships between combatants. In fact, most participants had one or several relationships while being in the guerrilla movement, and many had children during this time. Nevertheless, the dynamics of a guerrilla group meant that its members were always on the move, so there was no way of experiencing living together as a ‘normal’ couple. Elizabeth remembers “it was very difficult to maintain a relationship, because sometimes you were in one place, and then somewhere else.”[[7]](#endnote-7) Continuing those relationships after demobilisation was challenging for many couples. Many relationships did not survive, and gender inequality played an important role in this. Maya explained the contrast between the sharing of everyday tasks between men and women in the guerrilla camps, and post-conflict gender roles:

the sexual division of work was diluted a large deal in everyday guerrilla life. But that is interesting, because although we managed to achieve that there, as soon as we demobilised, the women had to go back to the kitchen and to give birth. That was really incredible.[[8]](#endnote-8)

This means that female ex-combatants often experienced a loss of agency after conflict. This is a lost opportunity not only at a personal, but also at a societal level, since the agency women showed as combatants could contribute to the transformation of societal gender norms (Marks 2019). Resembling other contexts, women’s conflict-era gender roles were seen as a necessary aberration only as long as conflict lasted, whereas returning to previous gender roles was a symbol that the conflict was over (Alison 2004; Björkdahl and Mannergren Selimovic 2015). Sonia observed that in peacetime, men “preferred traditional wives”, whereas Adriana said that her partner “was one of those who didn’t like it very much when I participated.” This was hard to accept for women who had learnt that their capacities went beyond traditional gender roles. Adriana rightly points out that not only the men are to blame, but also the patriarchal system to which they returned: “When they return and demobilise, many comrades return home to their mothers, who no longer let them perform those tasks. Because they return to the normal cultural patterns in society.” According to Sonia, the result was that “either the women gave in to a certain extent to *machista* pressures, or those who didn’t give in, they are single.”[[9]](#endnote-9) As a result, many female ex-combatants ended up being single mothers. Encountering a capitalist and patriarchal society, and in addition losing the earlier experienced solidarity and role equality for many women felt as a double betrayal, not only from society but also from their comrades (Barth 2002). This points to the importance that reintegration programmes include a stronger focus on social and family relationships and networks (Marks 2019).

The family was also the scene of domestic violence, which several participants experienced themselves or identified in other couples. Juana for example suffered psychological violence from her partner: “[what] was a bit traumatic is how after the demobilisation many demobilised comrades started to take liquor. They ended up being drunk, violent. I almost experienced that with my partner.”[[10]](#endnote-10) The effect of demobilisation on masculinities is significant and under-researched. Male ex-combatants often have conflict-related traumas, or experience finding themselves unemployed as an emasculating process. At the same time, dominant norms of masculinity, often called *machismo* in Latin America, prevent men from expressing fear, pain or uncertainty. Alcohol often forms an outlet for such frustrations, as it can help blocking or temporarily forgetting traumas (Dolan 2002). As Juana points out: “when something is going on, happiness, sadness or whatever: men drink.” It might therefore not be surprising that alcohol abuse is common among war veterans worldwide (Goldstein 2001). Alcohol often reinforces *machista* behaviour, leading to increased levels of violence against women (Hume 2009). Also other participants recognise that domestic violence among ex-combatant couples is a problem, although its magnitude is unclear, because criticising such behaviour among former comrades is considered a taboo. This shows the need to develop gendered reintegration strategies with men, for example through the development of non-violent ways of manhood and resolving conflicts, and strategies to involve men more positively in caring and family responsibilities (Ní Aoláin, Haynes, and Cahn 2011). The fluid gender roles, including caring tasks, empathy and solidarity, which men too experienced as *guerrilleros*, can be an important tool for this.

Haydee remembers many struggles with her husband. Although unemployed, her husband initially did not want Haydee to work. Nevertheless, gradually getting used to taking care of the household and caring for the couple’s daughter while Haydee was working, he then became reluctant to find a job himself, to Haydee’s dismay: “I need a hardworking man, not a *huevón* (lazy one).”[[11]](#endnote-11) This shows how gender roles, including expectations on men to be breadwinners, are deeply rooted in both men and women. Transforming gendered role expectations is a long-term and relational process. For Juana, gender and feminist training helped to work out the problems with her husband. Mónica agreed on the need for “support, to increase self-esteem.”[[12]](#endnote-12)

Other painful experiences were not having been there to support ill family members, some of whom died while the women were in the guerrilla camps, not allowed to have contact with family members. This had a specific emotional impact on women, who were blamed for having failed at their gendered role of caring. As Maya explains, this led to strong feelings of guilt for many: “especially the mothers, because I know many women who bought into the feelings of guilt: I left my children, I left my mother, I didn’t care as I should have’.”[[13]](#endnote-13) As men were not expected to fulfil those caring tasks, they were not blamed in the same way (Luciak 2001). This led to emotional problems that could have been prevented or at least ameliorated if those involved, male and female ex-combatants and their families, had received adequate psychosocial support and gendered training and awareness raising to destabilise fixed gendered roles that place the blame for such family traumas on women.

Traditional gender roles, and especially childcare responsibilities, presented an obstacle for women to work and study. Women were reunited with their children or started having children when peace was signed, as Lucía explained: “We were in a new moment and well, we started thinking about having a family.”[[14]](#endnote-14) Motherhood was not only a positive experience, as Sonia explained:

When the woman starts her commitment with motherhood and marriage and all that, her marginalisation grows considerably, because […] the state doesn’t give any benefit. There is no place where she can take her child to take care of it, so that she can incorporate herself into work where she can grow as a person, as a woman.[[15]](#endnote-15)

In Guatemala, it is common for mothers or mothers-in-law to look after their daughters’ children, but this was not an option for many ex-combatants, who had been unable to return to their communities of origin because of conflict-related dynamics. Some women found ways around this. Haydee for example worked night shifts so she could take care of her daughter during the day, while Lucía could leave her children with a neighbour while at other times she “got up at two or three in the morning to do my homework.”[[16]](#endnote-16) Others, mostly women from urban, *mestiza* and middle class backgrounds, were able to pay for childcare, confirming how class and ethnic differences can mark reintegration success (Bernal 2001). Raquel recognised this: “Following the principle that we all returned to our place of origin, I returned with many advantages. […] but the majority of combatants were poor farmers.”[[17]](#endnote-17) For many continuing to study or receive professional training was impossible. Verónica for example says: “I did not continue studying, because whatever I earned was for my children. If I wouldn’t have children, maybe I would have had a career.”[[18]](#endnote-18) She, like Alicia, Adriana and Silvia, and many others they know, have no stable job. According to Raquel, ex-combatants now “form an army of unemployed.”[[19]](#endnote-19)

Even in the relatively successful collective experience, where the cooperative managed to convince the state’s land agency to allow women to become cooperative members, men form the majority of cooperative members. This is because cooperative membership requires all members, men and women, to work equally on the land and for the cooperative. Since the state-sponsored nursery was closed, many women withdrew their membership as they found it too hard to combine the work for the cooperative with their childcare responsibilities – which evidently were not seen as work for the benefit of the cooperative. This shows that successful reintegration crosses the public and private spheres. Either women assumed a double burden of work and caring tasks, or they sacrificed one or the other. Reintegration support should support women to be active in both spheres, by providing professional training to increase women’s work opportunities, and provide childcare support for them to seize those opportunities. But to change rigid gender roles in the long run, sensitisation processes should engage both men and women to shift rigid gender roles which position women as those solely responsible for caring and household task, in order to share these in a more equal way.

**Female ex-combatants in society**

The conflict did not manage to reduce the strong inequality experienced along class and ethnic lines, and in the last decades, violence and insecurity have increased. The Guatemalan state has never officially recognised the truth commission findings or apologised for its share in the human rights violations committed during the conflict. In contrast, the state, military and economic elites and right-wing groups have adopted a strategy of portraying those demanding social justice as communists and terrorists (Aldana 2012; Brett 2016). Stigma is therefore something that the participants still experience. Sandra expresses the insecurity of not knowing how people will respond to the ‘ex-combatant label’:

If you are lucky and you have a good neighbour, you can talk about your life. Otherwise you can’t, because the power structures that existed in the time of the conflict are still there. And when they find you, they attack you, they judge you, they isolate you.[[20]](#endnote-20)

Sandra suffered bullying and harassment in a state institution created to monitor the peace accord after colleagues found out that she had been a *guerrillera*, that some of her family members had been forcibly disappeared and she herself had suffered sexual violence during detention:

they mocked me and told me ‘of course, it was because you were in the guerrilla group that those things happened to you’. And the man said, ‘the women who were raped by the army, they say they don’t like it that they rape them, but they do like it’. Imagine a man saying that![[21]](#endnote-21)

This stigma is gendered. Juana was fired from another state institution that was created because of the peace accords: “Because of the proposals that one makes and the constructive criticism in a state institution, I was fired! ‘That woman can’t be here’. And someone said, ‘that one must have been *guerrillera*’.” Also Adriana mentioned how in a departmental women’s organisation the other women “look at us like we will produce problems, conflict.”[[22]](#endnote-22) This evidences how women are doubly stigmatised: for having been a guerrilla member, and for speaking their mind in a patriarchal and authoritarian society where authority is commonly held by men.

Instead of recognising women’s emancipatory experiences during conflict, they are seen as conflictive and deviant, even twenty years after peace was signed. To increase the success of social reintegration, transitional justice should increase its focus on ex-combatants’ stories. Truth commissions and other reconciliation mechanisms could help uncover the complex experiences of ex-combatants, including the violence they and their family members suffered and their motivations to join armed groups. This could promote understanding and reduce fear within society (Dietrich Ortega 2009; Waldorf 2009). According to Maya, justice is important for this, both in cases of violence committed by guerrilla groups, and in cases like the Molina Theissen case, the first in Guatemala in which a former member of the revolutionary movement recognised in court that she had suffered sexual violence. For Maya, the conviction of four senior military officers in this case meant “saying: ‘yes, I was a member of that structure, but what they did has no justification’.”[[23]](#endnote-23) Cases like these could help combat stigmatisation.

The change from collective life in the guerrilla movements to the tough individual reality of surviving in society, in which *guerrilleros* were not looked well upon by society and where women faced societal structures of *machismo*, made the stigma harder to bear. Sonia, who is now a member of one of the political parties that originated from the URNG, explained:

[the women] learnt that they have rights and that they can defend them and have to fight for them, but in the end, they leave and encounter a totally adverse system. And they are isolated because they are alone in their communities and we don’t have the capacity to come together, and so they feel totally marginalised.[[24]](#endnote-24)

The individual focus of most DDR processes aims to break command and control structures to decrease the likelihood of rearming. At the same time, maintaining collective structures has advantages that can outweigh this risk, since ex-combatants can rely on each other to resolve problems in finding employment, while increasing their sense of physical safety and psychological well-being (De Vries and Wiegink 2011; Mcmullin 2013).

Although reintegration was individually focused in Guatemala, in some cases land was purchased for groups of ex-combatants who had nowhere to return to. These cases suggest that collective reintegration was a positive experience, especially for women, who have more active social and political roles here (Hauge 2008). Sonia explained: “In the communities, the women are better off, because the core was maintained.”[[25]](#endnote-25) Women form part of the cooperative board and perform other functions in the community in Northern Guatemala. Clara has been mayor of the ex-combatant community in central Guatemala, whose other members Haydee, Mónica, Adriana and Lucía are active members of disabled persons’, victims’ and women’s organisations. Participation in such organisations is a way of diminishing the stigma towards ex-combatants. A member of the ex-combatant cooperative explained it this way: “I believe that what helped here, in creating relationships and build trust with the people who didn’t know us, was the support of this community, in terms of health, to the surrounding communities.”[[26]](#endnote-26) Several women’s groups exist in this ex-combatant community, implementing health projects within their community, and organisational and leadership processes for women and youth in neighbouring communities.

Also other participants, including Maya, Silvia, Juana and Elizabeth participate in civil society spaces. As Gilmartin (2015) has showed in the case of Northern Ireland, in spite of virtually inexistent gendered support as part of the formal reintegration process and low participation in the political parties originating from the guerrilla movements, many women have other found ways to continue their social and political agency. This evidences that even though women’s inclusion in masculine guerrilla activities might not immediately lead to a transformation of gendered power relations, as discussed above, eventually it can help destabilise rigid understandings of gender norms and roles, at least for the women themselves (Duncanson and Woodward 2016). Monica for example explains:

In my case, the fight continues while there is no change, while the injustices and the causes of the conflict are still present. […] The armed struggle finished, but now we can fight using our mouth, by talking and listening. This is what we are left with because we no longer have arms, but we have our head to think, listen and talk.[[27]](#endnote-27)

Transitional justice processes should do a better job at listening too, by recognising not only the crimes that were committed in conflict – by all armed actors – but also by valuing the emancipatory processes that took place and the changed gender roles, which can serve as examples in the post-conflict situation. Promoting collective reintegration processes and strategies to build collective networks is important, as well as organisational and leadership training for women. In the cases of Colombia – prior to the current DDR process – and El Salvador, the creation of female ex-combatants organisations’ has enabled female ex-combatants to lobby for more gender-inclusive reintegration processes and defending women’s rights more broadly (Dietrich Ortega, 2015). The current reincorporation process of the FARC is often praised for its adoption of many gender-sensitive measures, including gender-specific psychosocial support and prevention strategies for violence against ex-combatants. Nevertheless, the implementation of these strategies is very slow, while female FARC members continue to suffer the stigma attached to women’s participation in war (Instancia Especial de Mujeres para el Enfoque de Género en la Paz 2019). This demonstrates the importance of political will to put progressive gendered measures into practice. Furthermore, a way of overcoming the social stigma could be to connect female ex-combatants with civilian women who might not have experienced new gender roles, for example by funding initiatives to bring together civil society women’s organisations with organisations of female ex-combatants, can contribute to the transformation of gender roles in society (Marks 2019), thus promoting gender-transformative reintegration.

**CONCLUSIONS**

By analysing the experiences of female ex-combatants with social integration, this article has shed light on an under-explored area within research on peace and conflict. The case of Guatemala allowed for understanding the long-term effects of social reintegration on the lives of female ex-combatants, evidencing that the tendency to leave ex-combatants and receiving communities to their own devices to deal with the social aspects of reintegration can have damaging impacts on women’s lives. This article has described dysfunctional emotional and social relationships, persisting gendered divisions of labour forcing women to return to caring and household tasks. This prevents many from becoming active in the political or economic sphere, chances at which are moreover reduced because of the continuing stigma attached to guerrilla membership, which is even stronger for women. Although the earlier mentioned IDDRS principles in fact address many of these issues, they do not offer the right responses, as the female-specific actions suggested are not sufficient to transform the structural gender inequality and societal distrust that are evident from the experiences described.

Instead, to consolidate women’s conflict-era gender roles, reintegration processes must address gender relations in the various spheres of women’s lives. In addition to support in the public spheres of education, employment and politics, more attention should be paid to household and family relationships. Addressing this problem not only requires providing childcare to guarantee women equal opportunities, but also gendered training and awareness raising to assist men and women to adapt to a civilian life with new roles, recognising and building upon women’s agency and men’s and women’s prior, more fluid gender roles. Reintegration must go hand in hand with transitional justice and reconciliation strategies which provide information and sensitisation to increase understanding of the experiences and motivations of ex-combatants. Collective reintegration or organisational processes among female ex-combatants, connecting them with other civil society organisations and communities can help build solidarity, overcome stigma and isolation, and consolidate women’s conflict-era agency. This way, female ex-combatants can turn from ‘bad women’ into role models, whose experiences of emancipation can help to transform gender relations.

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1. *Mestiza* refers to a mixed European and indigenous background. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Interview with author, June 2018. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Interview with author, July 2018. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Interviews with author, June 2018. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Interview with author, June 2018. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Interview with the author, June 2018. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Interview with the author, June 2018. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Interview with the author, June 2018. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Interviews with the author, June and July 2018. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Interview with the author, June 2018. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Interview with the author, July 2018. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Interviews with the author, June 2018. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Interview with the author, June 2018. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Interview with the author, July 2018. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Interview with the author, July 2018. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Interview with the author, July 2018. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Interview with the author, November 2019. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Interview with the author, July 2018. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Interview with the author, November 2019. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Interview with the author, July 2018. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Interviews with the author, June and July 2018. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Interview with the author, June 2018. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Interview with the author, July 2018. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Interview with the author, July 2018. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Focus group with the author, March 2019. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Interview with the author, June 2018. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)