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Gender-Transformative Peacebuilding in Colombia

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MIA SCHÖB, APR 22 2021

Maria is a farmer, campaigns for the Green Party in her region, and seeks to spend as much time as she can with her aging parents, her adult children, her sister's orphans, and the steadily growing number of her grandchildren. Like Maria, Mario is a coffee farmer in Southern Colombia. He is also a local politician fighting for better socio-economic integration of his region into the market. But Mario's focus in life is to be a good father to his children and support his wife in realizing her dream to study law someday. In a different and more urban corner of Colombia, Yana has finished her studies and decided to stop working for the municipality and instead create a home-based micro-enterprise, to be able to take care of her small children herself. Single father Ludovico chose a similar option years ago: when he does not train the local soccer team as part of a youth recruitment prevention initiative or is busy with voluntary work for the community council, he runs a bakery from his home and is a committed parent. To him, 'peace starts in the home, where we teach our kids to respect, to have equitable relationships and *convivencia* [to live side by side peacefully].'

Yana, Maria, Ludovico and Mario (pseudonyms) are ex-combatants from different guerrilla and paramilitary groups. After leaving their armed groups, they have reinvented themselves as civilians and built their lives at the urban and rural margins of different regions in Colombia. They share the experience of state accompaniment as participants of a so-called reintegration program. As such, they became research participants in my PhD project titled "Combatants for peace, queering figures, or 'just some more Colombians': co-constructions of ex-combatants' citizen-subjectivities in everyday reintegration practices". For this project, I draw on original empirical data, constructed mainly between 2017 and 2018, by virtue of feminist institutional ethnographic research in three regions and Colombia's major cities. The data comprises interviews and focus group discussions with over 300 people involved in reintegration, most of them ex-combatants and reintegration workers, as well as drawings, observation fieldnotes, and background documents of the reintegration program.

Ex-combatant reintegration: messy, tension-loaded and highly gendered

Reintegration is the development-oriented, social engineering element that complements security-focused disarmament and demobilization in larger Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) programs. The myriad variations of DDR programs have become integral components of peacebuilding across the globe. Bluntly simplified, such programs are a powerful tool for the formal state—the Colombian state, the 'nation-state', the Weberian ideal—to control the dangerous bodies of its former adversaries and to normalize their minds. Eventually, ex-combatants, who formerly constituted a threat to state and human security, become subsumed into the large body of disempowered, de-politicized and socio-economically marginalized 'common poor.' While the Colombian reintegration program purports to do so for peace, the peacebuilding contribution of ex-combatants themselves is hardly acknowledged as such—and neither are its gendered dimensions.

Lived experiences of reintegration are messier, more complex, and much more interesting than this smooth picture of top-down governance. To start with, *Reintegration* is a questionable term that does not adequately reflect most real-life experiences of the ex-combatants whom I have worked with in Colombia. It insinuates a 'going back' into an imagined pre-war status, which is hardly ever the case. Rather, my interlocutors found different lives after demobilizing, often in geographically and socio-economically different spaces. Furthermore, Yana's, Maria's, Ludovico's, or Mario's reintegration experiences reveal how ex-combatants and street-level reintegration workers

Gender-Transformative Peacebuilding in Colombia

Written by Mia Schöb

constantly struggle over, contest and negotiate differently what it means to be 'a good, decent or normal citizen' and what notions of 'peace' and 'state' underlie these assumptions. In the contradiction-loaded spaces of everyday reintegration, ex-combatants emerge as differently gendered and raced citizen-subjects, who stretch the boundaries of what is thinkable, doable and desirable within the gendered social order of peace in their regional contexts, however without all too violently transgressing these. Ex-combatants act as local-level peacebuilders who contribute to building peace and state in contextually situated ways that are often different from those envisioned in the smooth top-down picture.

This article focuses on ex-combatants' gender-transformative governance of the 'mini-state' of the family as a deeply political and gendered practice of ground-up peacebuilding that merits more research and policy recognition. The Colombian reintegration program conceptually builds on a sophisticated feminist strategy. It understands gender equality as a human right whose fulfillment is a precondition for achieving 'peace.' The reintegration program is to contribute to this gendered peacebuilding endeavor by empowering ex-combatant women, portrayed as particularly vulnerable, to enter the workforce and become autonomous economic actors. The program offers ex-combatant men access to non-sexist 'new masculinities' to encourage their support of women's empowerment.

These expectations for a 'cultural transformation towards gender equality' in reintegration enter into tensions with ex-combatants' and reintegration workers' realities. On the one hand, they clash with prevalent gender norms in the persistently militarized and patriarchal regions that mark the gendered social order of peace wherein ex-combatants aim to integrate themselves. On the other hand, gender equality may mean different things to policymakers in Bogotá than to ex-combatants, who often describe their in-group socialization to me as 'gender-equal.' They measure this perceived 'gender equality' against a masculinized standard and can only express it to me in masculine terms, such as 'doing the same as men' or 'being like men' (interviews with male and female ex-combatants, Colombia, 2017–2020). Yet, ex-combatant women like Maria draw a unique female strength from this experience that empowers them in civilian life—even when their 'man-like' strength is misinterpreted, and they are stigmatized as butches (*marimachos*) and exposed as ex-combatants in their communities or at the workplace. What is thinkable, doable and desirable to ex-combatants of different gender, age and ethnic groups is thus bound by the tensions between different gender regimes, their norms and expectations. Ex-combatants further carefully balance their gendered reintegration practices against social stigma and related security threats.

Gender-transformative governance of the 'mini-state' of the family: a manifestation of ground-up peace and statebuilding

The main pillar of gendered reintegration practices, as they are performed in everyday life, and the key site of ground-up peace and statebuilding is the 'mini-state' of the family. Interestingly, it has been largely overlooked by the national-level strategy and gender analyses of reintegration. Despite all differences, Yana's, Maria's, Ludovico's and Mario's gendered reintegration practices and peacebuilding priorities converge in the priority they give to their families and in their ambitions to govern these differently for peace. They define their citizen-subjectivities, their political activism, their desires and aspirations for civilian life in relation to the family: to them, 'being a good, decent, or normal citizen' also means being exemplary parents and partners. Some choose to prioritize parenting and family, making thereby a political claim to a fundamental right, to an option their war involvement had deprived them of previously. Prioritizing the family can also mean a deliberate choice in favor of home-based micro-businesses that respond to the local realities and allow them to combine childcare with a sustainable income.

Criticism against regional solutions to the gendered tensions unfolding in reintegration abounds. Male ex-combatants like Ludovico may be applauded as 'new men' who support gender equality and defy regional gender norms, as they prioritize care work and build their economic autonomy as home-based, self-employed single fathers. But they may also be de-securitized, discursively emasculated and denied their political agency, as they re-focus their agency from the public to the domestic space. Yana negotiates the option of establishing a home-based 'productive project' with her reintegration worker and husband because she chooses to prioritize motherhood and aims to govern her family differently: she wants to remedy the structural violence that she experienced herself and perceives as the root cause of Colombia's never-ending armed struggles. But Yana's priorities of home-based entrepreneurship combined with care work are not interpreted as manifestations of her political agency or as gender-transformative practices. Neither

Gender-Transformative Peacebuilding in Colombia

Written by Mia Schöb

is her assigned reintegration worker's support of Yana's choices legible to the formal state as a gender performance. Instead, situated practices are either blamed for 'not doing gender' at all or 'doing gender wrong.' The regional reintegration worker is seen as failing to understand 'what gender means' and female ex-combatants who take contextually bounded but deliberate decisions related to motherhood, partnership and family are portrayed as pure victims, who have surrendered to the pressures of patriarchal normative expectations to them as women.

Such black-or-white interpretations are themselves a form of violence to the regionally embedded solutions. Not acknowledging gender work through the family *as gender* work is a missed chance for the reintegration program to build on regional experiences and knowledge for current and future processes. Dismissing these practices ignores that they are not less feminist or political just because they are *also* contextually and intersectionally situated and negotiated against multiple tensions, contradictions and adversities in everyday reintegration. And it blinds out that ex-combatants contribute to peacebuilding by governing the 'mini-state' of their families differently: Maria, Ludovico, Yana, Mario, and their reintegration workers co-construct peace in and through the family in ways that are gender-transformative, including towards the feminist peace envisioned at the national level.

Eventually, such reluctance to recognize these ground-up contributions towards an overall feminist goal reveals tensions within feminist projects that precede and go beyond the Colombian reintegration experiences. Historically, the most difficult struggles over power in feminist movements have been fought over in bedrooms and private homes. The 'mini-state' of the nuclear family has been associated with heteronormative patriarchal models, constructed around marriage and the unit of the household. The family unit has also been the main affective reference for citizenship since the eighteenth century. And, by reproducing and policing patriarchal heteronormativity, the family has been at the core of building and maintaining patriarchal states. The family is also the space of the mundane, the personal, the private, the seemingly non-political, the feminine: the space to which women have been bound by the chains of patriarchy that feminist movements have struggled to overcome so hard. The pathway to women's liberation was through their integration to public life on the premise of gender equality, in particular through access to adequately remunerated labor, a rationale reflected in the feminist reintegration project seeking women's economic empowerment. In *Communion: The female search for love* (2002), bell hooks describes how, in American radical feminist movements, this struggle often implied women's renunciation to motherhood and heterosexual partnerships. The family had to be overcome for the sake of achieving gender equality.

Interestingly, what seems hardest in the regional scenarios in Colombia—women's integration into public spaces, politics and workforce—was where progress was most achieved in Western feminist struggles in the second half of the 20th century; the state at the larger scale was slowly becoming more gender-balanced and gender-equal. To the contrary, the space that proved most resistant to gender transformations was the family: even feminist 'new men' who supported their female peers' struggles and equality in public, who would take on an equal share in household chores and childcare, would be reluctant to give up real power in the governance of the 'mini-state' of the family, and patriarchal women would reproduce traditional partnership and family models, even if looking for gender equality outside the home. If the household/family is the foundation of citizenship and statebuilding and at the same time the core site where patriarchy is reproduced by both men and women, if it is the key site of gendered power struggles and simultaneously the most change-resistant smallest unit of the state, then its importance for gender-transformative statebuilding must not be disregarded. If it is also the core site of experiences of violence that motivate Colombians to join armed groups, then ex-combatants' contribution to building peace differently by choosing to be caring and loving parents, partners and citizens in the 'mini-state' of their families must not be underestimated.

Feminist scholars have long acknowledged care as an element of peacebuilding. Constructing their citizen-subjectivities in reintegration around their abilities as caretakers, even if not explicitly as gendered beings, male ex-combatants like Mario or Ludovico make a subtle claim to gendered peace and statebuilding from the 'mini-state' of the family up. Yana's is both a personal choice and a highly political decision to break a vicious cycle of structural and direct forms of violence that she experienced in her family as a child, in the 'big family' of the FARC as a combatant, and throughout her life in the experience of state neglect and abuse. She is creating a better 'mini-state' of the family, producing a small-scale social transformation to break up violent patriarchal structures from within. And so does Maria, who campaigns for regional politics but identifies her true politics in being with her extended family and preventing history from repeating itself: Maria is creating a different future for her children and grandchildren.

Gender-Transformative Peacebuilding in Colombia

Written by Mia Schöb

When ex-combatants choose to be loving sons and daughters, parents, grandparents, spouses, when they are caretakers by choice and become home-based entrepreneurs to be present with their loved ones, when they seek to govern their families differently because they want to remedy the structural violence that they perceive as the root causes of war and of the entanglement of their own life histories with armed violence, they build peace and state differently, and in highly gendered and deeply political ways, from the ground up.

Importantly, this does not mean that a rigid heteronormative patriarchal model is necessarily imposed through these regional practices: the concept of the family in Colombian reintegration is a flexible one. The notion of the family embraces multiple and changing constellations that are neither bound to heteronormativity nor to blood ties or legalized bonds like marriage. Patchwork constellations are more the rule than the exception, in particular where armed violence has impacted families through disappearances, deaths, or recruitment. The reintegration program acknowledges this and builds in the space for flexible, multiple and mutable family models (interview with reintegration designer, Bogotá, 2017). The 'mini-state' of the family as a core site of peace and statebuilding bears the potential to be more gender-transformative than only leveling out gendered labor division among men and women. The historical experience of feminist movements shows that gender equality writ large depends on the transformations that are hardest to achieve—in the bedroom, in the home, in interpersonal relations and role division. Reintegration practices co-constructed between ex-combatants and their reintegration workers make these changes within the boundaries of what is thinkable, doable and desirable. And this must be acknowledged as a gendered practice and a ground-up contribution to peace and statebuilding.

My empirically-grounded argument makes a deeply feminist claim and it should not be misread as anything else. I do not expose the importance of the family as the smallest unit of peace and statebuilding to discard the need for larger social and gendered transformations in Colombia. Positive lasting peace in Johan Galtung's sense will not be possible without larger social and mental demilitarization and more spaces for and appreciation of non-hegemonic masculinities and femininities. Neither should it be misunderstood in any way as buying in to the essentialist narrative that punishes ex-combatant women with a double stigmatization—for being ex-combatants and for being women—and that seeks a remedy in relegating them back to the apron and the stove. It is not to desecuritize or disempower male ex-combatants either, who perform 'new masculinities' by choosing to be exemplary fathers and partners, in relation to a persistently militarized, patriarchal and hyper-masculine security state. By no means should my analysis be read as attributing the burden of achieving gender equality as a precondition for peace on the shoulders of individual men and women (here: ex-combatants) exclusively.

Instead, I simply aim to bring the 'mini-state' of the family back into the discussion as a core space where peace and state are built from the ground up, where gender norms are re-negotiated and transformed—not necessarily in line with a top-down strategy, but in context-specific ways that nonetheless contribute to its larger objectives. I want to make a plea for more acknowledgment of the deeply political and gender-transformative practices of ground-up peace and statebuilding that take place in the 'mini-state' of the family. Lastly, my request to recognize the regional manifestations of gender work that ex-combatants and reintegration workers carry out in the everyday spaces of reintegration is not meant to prescribe how gender should be performed in reintegration practices. To the contrary, it is a claim in favor of context-sensitivity, of local forms of gender expertise and practice, and eventually a reaffirmation of what bell hooks sees at the core of the feminist struggle: that choice matters.

About the author:

Mia Schöb is a PhD candidate in International Relations/Political Science affiliated with the Gender Centre at the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies. For her doctoral research (2015–2021) and previous research projects, Mia has conducted extensive fieldwork in different Colombian regions. She has previously been a visiting research fellow at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), the Universidad de los Andes in Bogotá, and the Universidad de Antioquia in Medellín. Her thematic research portfolio includes gender and violence, non-state armed groups, peace and statebuilding, Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR),

Gender-Transformative Peacebuilding in Colombia

Written by Mia Schöb

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