

The Impact of the Colombian Guerrilla FARC-EP on the Social Empowerment of Women¹

El impacto de la guerrilla colombiana las FARC-EP en el empoderamiento social de las mujeres

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ABSTRACT

The article answers the question of how women's participation in the structures of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – the People's Army (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia – Ejército Popular) has contributed to their social empowerment. The first part of the paper presents the concept of empowerment. Subsequently, the article shows the reasons why women decided to join the guerrilla and their role in the organization. The last part of the paper examines the evolution of women during and after reintegration.

KEYWORDS: *women, Colombia, FARC-EP, reincorporation, empowerment.*

RESUMEN

El artículo responde a la pregunta de cómo la participación de las mujeres en las Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia – Ejército Popular ha contribuido a su empoderamiento social. En la primera parte del artículo se presenta el concepto de empoderamiento. A continuación, se exponen las razones por las que las mujeres decidieron unirse a la guerrilla y su papel en la organización. En la última parte del texto se examina la evolución de las mujeres durante y después de la reintegración.

PALABRAS CLAVE: *mujeres, Colombia, FARC-EP, reincorporación, empoderamiento.*

Introduction

Women of Colombia have always had to struggle against the demands imposed by the patriarchal society. Machismo and the resulting violence, the need to submit to men and the reduction of women to the role of wives and mothers have meant that a very limited number of women have had the opportunity to develop and define their own destiny. However, during the armed conflict in Colombia, many of them decided to join the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – the People's Army (*las Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia – Ejército del Pueblo*, FARC-EP), which helped them acquire practical knowledge. Moreover, it gave them decision-making power and a sense of initiative and allowed them to escape traditional societal roles. Within the guerrilla, women performed the same functions as men did (Interview with Yineth Trujillo). In addition, many of them worked as nurses, radio operators or economists, to name but a few.

With the signing of the 2016 Peace Agreement, known as the *Acuerdo Final para la terminación del conflicto y la construcción de una paz estable y duradera*, a period of reincorporation – the reintegration of former FARC-EP guerrillas into the society began. The return to civilian life meant that a new stage in life had in fact begun, which caused fear among some partisans as they needed to adapt to a different reality. Due to the *Acuerdo Final*, the former guerrilleros received five seats in both the House of Representatives and the

Senate, making them an active force on the Colombian political scene. It must be noted, however, that the former guerrillas were given the opportunity to be represented in parliament but were not granted the seats. The Peace Agreement guaranteed them those seats if they submitted a list of candidates for elections and won them.

Most of the former FARC-EP guerrillas decided to return to their families or to live in what was known as the *Zonas Veredales*². The reincorporation period became an opportunity to grow, pursue dreams and learn new skills. It should not be overlooked that this process allowed women to take on new roles, such as working in community organisations, participating in development projects, fighting for the rights of women and other minorities and being part of a political party. In addition, the private life, which was far different from guerrilla activities, allowed them to start families and become not only mothers or wives, but most importantly, free, and knowledgeable women.

The purpose of this article is to outline how activity in the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – the People’s Army has influenced the social empowerment of women. To this end, this text has been divided into four parts. The first part presents the concept of empowerment. The second section introduces the factors that influenced the decision to join the guerrilla, followed by a discussion of women’s roles in the FARC-EP. This is followed by a presentation of the 2016 Peace Agreement between the Colombian Government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – the People’s Army, with special focus on women’s issues. The last part of the article provides a close-up look at women’s development paths during and after the reincorporation. The text puts forward the hypothesis that, despite the machismo present within the FARC-EP and instances of sexual abuse, women’s activities in the guerrilla have contributed to their social empowerment.

The article has been drawn up using the historical method and qualitative analyses of the decision making and content. In addition, empirical techniques were employed, namely interviews with former members of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – the People’s Army.

The article was prepared on the basis of the available literature on the subject, in particular the published works which present the perspective of former FARC-EP members. After analyzing the texts, the interviews were held. All of them were recorded. Each of the eight former FARC-EP members gave permission for the recording to be used. One of the authors conducted the interviews while staying in Colombia. Each of the former FARC-EP members was asked the same set of questions. Two interviews, with Victoria Sandino (26 September), and with Yineth Trujillo (22 August) were held in Bogotá. Others, with Adriana, Danisa, Juliana, Karina and María, took place on October 17,

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² The Zonas Veredales have been transformed into Espacios Territoriales para Capacitación y Reincorporación (ETCR), which are now known as Antiguos Espacios Territoriales para Capacitación y Reincorporación.

2022, at the Antiguo Espacio Territorial de Capacitación y Reincorporación (AETCR) Miravalle. Six women joined the FARC-EP of their own free will, while one, Yineth Trujillo, was forcibly recruited as a child. Therefore, her vision of the guerrilla is quite different from others. Importantly, Victoria and María were active members of the organization for over 20 years, while the rest of the women joined the FARC-EP in the first decade of the 21st century.

The results of the interviews on the motives behind women's participation in FARC-EP, women's roles in the guerrilla and women's development paths after the reincorporation were used as an additional element of the previously conducted literature review.

Definition of empowerment

Empowerment is a complex and multidimensional social process in which an individual attempts to gain control over his or her own life (Gagandeep, 2009, p. 18). It is also about building awareness and capacity that leads to more active participation in society and greater decision-making power over all aspects of life.

In the context of women's emancipation, several types can be distinguished. The first is social empowerment, which refers to the strengthening of social relations and the position of women in social structures. In addition, it also addresses the issue of discrimination against women on the ground of race, ethnicity, religion, or gender. It is associated with feminism. Women's empowerment in terms of education means providing free access to education, which contributes to raising awareness of their rights and responsibilities. Economic empowerment in the context of women means that they gain a share of control over financial resources, as well as receive equal remuneration for their work regardless of their gender. On the other hand, political empowerment refers to the presence of women in politics and in decision-making bodies at all levels. Psychological empowerment makes women change their perception of traditional, patriarchal model and social obligations. Education, work, decision-making and travel give women psychological strength and a sense of self-worth, which is crucial for their personal development. In the reflections on the Colombian guerrilla – the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – the People's Army, the authors adopted the concept of social empowerment as dominant among women.

Motives behind women's participation in FARC-EP

The entry of women into the ranks of the FARC-EP stemmed from many, often very different reasons. The primary factor that led to the decision to join the guerrilla was poor economic situation. Colombia, like other Latin American

countries, struggles with a high rate of economic inequality³, which translates into poverty and exclusion for a large part of the population. This problem is most pressing in rural areas, where living conditions and opportunities for development are limited. A case in point is the story of Adriana, who comes from a large family and joined the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People’s Army, because her parents did not have the sufficient financial resources to feed their large family and provide her with the opportunity to pursue an academic career (Interview with Adriana).

The ideological considerations of joining the guerrilla were another motivation. The Eighth Conference of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People’s Army brought about a new strategy for the organisation, which was to move closer to the cities, resulting in the final seizure of power (Octava Conferencia, 1993). The decision was also taken to set up secret operational networks for reconnaissance and propaganda purposes, The Bolivarian Movement for a New Colombia (*el Movimiento Bolivariano por Nueva Colombia*) and the Secret Communist Party of Colombia (*el Partido Comunista Colombiano Clandestino*), the main objectives of which were to refer to the concept of Latin American unity, equality and prosperity preached by Simón Bolívar and to fight against imperialism (Medina Gallego, 2008, p 367). These ideas were also promoted by la *Juventud Comunista*. Through the activities of the aforementioned organisations, a greater number of women, mainly from the cities, decided to join the ranks of the partisans. A case in point is the story of María, who, due to her work in the Central Committee of the Communist Party, decided to join the FARC-EP (Interview with María).

Family was yet another factor that led women to join the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People’s Army. In many cases, close relatives (parents or siblings) were active in the guerrilla structures, which contributed to the women’s choice to join the FARC-EP. Examples include the story of Maria Alexandra Marin, a.k.a. Paula Sáenz Rochi, who joined the organisation because her brother was a guerrilla (Millán Cruz, 2019, p. 175).

In Colombian society, ppatriarchy, based on the dominant position of men in the family and the oppression of women, has permeated institutions and generations to this day (Moncayo, 2019, p. 105). Due to machismo and patriarchy, women become victims of violence on many levels, and their role is supposed to be reduced to merely being obedient wives to their husbands and mothers to their children. Therefore, the opportunity to join the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – the People’s Army was a chance to break free from this system and to emancipate. This is exemplified by the story of Solangy, who dreamed of a change because living among indigenous communities hindered her own development (Acosta *et al.*, 2022, p. 284).

³ The Gini coefficient in 2021 for Colombia was 0.46, which was not the highest result among Latin American countries, as, for example, in Brazil it was 0.488, and in Panama – 0.498 (CEPAL).

The desire to be respected was another reason to join the FARC-EP. The guerrilla was considered a space of gender equality. In this way, women could become active participants in the conflict and their lives were not limited to fulfilling traditional roles. For this reason, the FARC-EP attracted the interest of women who, like men, could wear a uniform that was a symbol of freedom. In the words of former guerrilla Danis: I have always liked being a guerrilla. FARC-EP were present in the San Vicente del Caguán region, so I made the decision to join' (Interview with Danisa).

The desire to take revenge for the harm and pain caused by the actions of the paramilitary group members was yet another reason for joining the partisans. When the territories under the control of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People's Army were taken over by *paramilitares*, their members used violence, including sexual violence, against Colombian women. In doing so, they wanted to annihilate all traces of the enemy (CNMH, 2017, p. 61). This is why some of the women decided to join the FARC-EP to take revenge on their abusers. María joined the guerrilla structure because her father had been murdered and she had been a victim of violence and received threats from the *paramilitares* (Santamaría, 2019, p. 165).

Women's roles in the guerrilla

According to the regulations of the FARC-EP, universal equality prevailed in the guerrilla ranks. This meant that everyone, regardless of age or gender, performed the same tasks. The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People's Army had a system of shifts based on the rotation of duties entrusted to the guerrillas (Interview with Victoria Sandino). One could not refuse an assigned task, so when a man was given a shift in the kitchen, he had to prepare meals for others. Furthermore, equality in the FARC-EP meant that women and men were treated equally in terms of physical endurance. Requirements in this regard were not reduced for women. The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People's Army was obliged to flee, which involved marching for many days or even weeks. In this case, the *farianas* had to keep up with the men, which was a great effort for them.

Being active in guerrilla structures very often involved taking part in numerous armed actions, which often ended with the need for rapid medical assistance. This role was fulfilled by the *guerrilleras*, who were offered various medical courses so that they could acquire relevant knowledge and skills useful in case of military operations. Adriana was one of the nurses in her unit and, over time, through education, she became familiar with medicine, which often allowed her to save lives (Interview with Adriana).

Partisan activity was based on communication between specific divisions. Radiotelegraphers were involved in receiving, encrypting, decrypting and sending messages. In addition, they were among the first to receive the latest

news from the front. The role of radio operators was frequently fulfilled by women, such as Olga Marin, a.k.a. Liliana López, whose work in this position provided insight into the details of how the FARC-EP functioned (Millán Cruz, 2019, pp. 53–54).

Within the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People’s Army, the responsibilities regarding administrative issues such as keeping records and supervising the flow of information were entrusted to women. In addition, the *farianas* were also entrusted with the role of economists, responsible for organising and supervising the given unit’s budget. Ivonne Riviera León was in charge of financial affairs. She was responsible for the planning and control of her unit’s expenses – food bills and other segments crucial to guerrilla activity (Millán Cruz, 2019, pp. 138–139). It is noteworthy that some women, like Karina, after some time took up positions as secretaries of the most important figures in the unit’s hierarchy, which gave them knowledge of their calendars, meetings and confidential information related to planned military actions (Interview with Karina).

Most of the members of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People’s Army came from rural areas, which in many cases meant having only a basic education or no education at all. For this reason, the chief commanders of the units would look for educated female teachers whose task was to teach reading and writing and to spread the partisan ideology. Alexandra Nariño was one of the teachers within the FARC-EP structures. Her teaching methods included using English language songs and films to make her students familiar with foreign-sounding words (Botero, 2011, pp. 37–38). Knowledge of the foreign language helped partisans in negotiations and conversations with representatives of foreign organisations. The teaching was not only held within the ranks of a specific group, as it was very important for partisan members to cooperate with the public in order to spread the idea of the guerrilla. Such role was assigned to Maria, who worked among Colombian citizens from rural backgrounds in an effort to increase their knowledge of how the FARC-EP operated, the problems prevalent in Colombia and how to contribute to solving them (Interview with Maria).

However, it should not be forgotten that, due to the machismo prevalent among the partisans, women were never included as members in the two most important institutions of the organisation, the Secretariado and the Estado Mayor Central. Additionally, despite the idea of gender equality, it was mainly men who commanded the relevant units of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – the People’s Army. Just as it was the case in rural communities, it was the male representatives who made the decisions. The situation was similar in the FARC-EP. In addition, some men felt that women did not have the necessary skills to command (Interview with Victoria Sandino). This did not mean, however, that everyone held a similar opinion because, as Zenaida Rueda Calderón recalls, her commander once sent her on a course with the aim of preparing her to become a squadron commander (Rueda Calderón, 2009, p. 48).

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Differences between the guerrilla and the public

The patriarchal character of the Colombian society and the prevalent machismo mean that the position of women is often limited to the traditional roles of wife and mother. In families with many children, where the older siblings are girls, the maternal roles are in fact imposed on them as if they were mothers to their younger sisters and brothers (Interview with Adriana). Not only do they help their siblings do their homework, but they also prepare meals or do the cleaning of the house. As a result, they do not have the time necessary to focus on their education, which leads to limited opportunities for women to pursue their own interests. It should not be forgotten that living conditions, particularly in rural areas, are complicated and parents frequently do not have the financial resources to support their children's further development.

Concerning the issue of the legal system and women's rights in Colombia, an important event that brought significant changes in this respect was the introduction of the new Constitution in 1991. Article 13 of the Constitution of 1991 ensured the freedom and equality of all citizens, regardless of gender, race, origin, language, religion and political views (Constitución Política de la República de Colombia de 1991). Moreover, Art. 42 and 43 confirmed the rights introduced by Decree No. 2820 of 1974, according to which women and men have the same rights and duties, and the principle of obedience of wives to their husbands was eliminated (Lopera Vélez & Díaz Jiménez, 2010, p. 33). It should be emphasized here that the implementation of the Constitution in 1991 also meant a further significant change, as it guaranteed women adequate and effective participation in political life, which was associated with the possibility of increasing their role as representatives of social and political organizations.

The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People's Army became an opportunity for women to gain freedom because every member of the guerrilla was treated equally. The organisation's 8th Conference, during which significant changes were introduced, was an event of great importance. Not only were sanctions initiated for anyone who discriminated against female guerrilla members, but it was also decided to recommend the use of contraceptives (Octava Conferencia, 1993). It is important to emphasise that the latter decision adopted was groundbreaking and strongly differentiated the FARC-EP from the Colombian society, in particular the rural areas where women did not have access to birth control. Moreover, knowledge about family planning was limited. Therefore, the opportunity to use contraceptives could be considered a privilege which implied a freedom and autonomy that women had not experienced in their civil life. It is noteworthy that women in the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People's Army could have an abortion if they became pregnant, which was another element that distinguished the guerrillas from the society. In this context, it should be noted that until 2006 Colombia was one of the countries where there was an almost complete

ban on abortion. The changes introduced in 2006 made it possible to perform abortions in three cases: when the pregnancy poses a threat to the mother's life or health; when there are serious birth defects of the fetus that make it impossible for it to survive, and when the pregnancy is the result of a criminal act or incest (Sentencia C-355/06). In 2022, there was another liberalization of legal regulations limiting abortion, as the Colombian Constitutional Court modified art. 122 of the Penal Code, thanks to which currently women can undergo abortion before 24 weeks of gestation (Sentencia C-055/22).

Although, unlike in civilian life, women in the guerrilla had the option of having abortions, the procedures were often performed in unsuitable and dangerous conditions. Patients were given medicines, such as a drug for ulcers causing uterine contractions or abortion pills (Misoprostol) (Machado, 2018, p. 142). These drugs were administered at every stage, even in advanced stage of pregnancy, which affected Juanita, who was given abortion pills, after which she went to the latrine and gave birth to a stillborn child (Corporación Rosa Blanca, 2022). Any wrongly performed abortion could lead to disability or death of the woman, or completely deprive her of the possibility of having a child. Moreover, forced termination of pregnancy often left a permanent mark on the psyche of former combatants. In some cases, the *farianas* were given partial anaesthesia so that they were aware of the entire procedure. During pregnancy and after forced abortion, women continued to do the same work as other guerrilleros. They had to carry wood or other heavy objects, work in constructing latrines or creating trenches (Corporación Rosa Blanca, 2022). If abortion was avoided, usually the child was killed immediately after birth or taken away and given to another person for upbringing (Machado, 2018, pp. 139–140). However, it should be emphasized that not all combatants were forced to undergo abortion. The partners of the commanders of individual units of the organization could decide whether they wanted to give birth to a child or undergo the procedure (Millán Cruz, 2019, p. 68).

However, in the context of pregnancy termination, it is important to emphasise that usually women were obliged to have an abortion – this was the case in particular from the 1990s, when the confrontations with the Colombian army and other armed groups operating within the state became more intense. The constant bombing forced the FARC-EP units to constantly reposition themselves, which rendered the raising of children impossible. In addition, pregnancies were associated with a reduction in combat-capable members, resulting in a decreased combat power.

In the Colombian society, just as in other countries of the Latin American region, violence against women is one of the major problems. In order to emphasise their dominant position, men sexually abuse women or use physical and psychological violence against them. As it has been mentioned, in 1993 the FARC-EP introduced sanctions against individuals discriminating against women. This, however, did not mean that incidents of harassment or forced sexual intercourse did not occur. They did occur, but their scale was

much more limited in comparison with similar occurrences in the population. In the words of a former *guerrillera*, Yineth Trujillo, ‘in the FARC-EP, I have only experienced violence once, at home – three times a day’ (Interview with Yineth Trujillo).

There are regions in Colombia where the presence of the state as an institution regulating social relations is not apparent. As a result, when domestic violence occurs, victims are unable to come forward for help. More so, access to education in these places is limited, so that children do not attend school and, as a result, cannot write or read – or they drop out at primary level. This is due to the lack of educational facilities close to their residence and the inability of parents, who do not have the financial means, to pay for further education. Therefore, for many people, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – the People’s Army became an opportunity to pursue education, enabling them to fulfil their dreams. Within the guerrilla, anyone could participate in various types of courses, through which a person obtained specific competences related to the subject matter of the training (Interview with Yineth Trujillo).

Peace process with FARC-EP incorporating the role of women in the negotiations

In 2010, Juan Manuel Santos became Colombia’s new president and he continued the policy pursued by his predecessor. In his inauguration speech of August 7, 2010, the new president emphasised that if the guerrillas ceased to use violence, his government would be open to any discussion on the possibility of peace (Fisas, 2010, p. 16). However, it was not until October 2012 that negotiations between the Colombian government and representatives of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People’s Army began in Havana. The final peace treaty, known as the *Acuerdo Final para la terminación del conflicto y la construcción de una paz estable y duradera*, was signed in November 2016.

Women were also involved in the peace negotiations between the government and the guerrillas. Even before the Havana negotiations began, in 2012, women’s and feminist organisations decided to create a space known as *Mujeres por la Paz*, where they presented their manifesto ‘*¡La paz sin las mujeres! ¡No va!*’ expressing the need for women’s active participation in the building of peace (Fernández-Matos & González-Martínez, 2019, p. 116). One year later, the *Primera Cumbre Nacional de Mujeres y Paz* (The First National Summit of Women and Peace) was organised in Bogotá, with a meeting of around 450 representatives from various organisations, including la Red Social de Mujeres, la Ruta Pacífica, la Asociación Nacional de Mujeres Campesinas, and Negras e Indígenas de Colombia. At the aforementioned Summit, proposals were made to ensure women’s decision-making in the peace process (López & Hernández, 2018, p. 127). Furthermore, a Gender Sub-Committee was established in 2014 at the following summit. It was attended by government delegate María

Paulina Riveros, FARC-EP representative Victoria Sandino Pereira, 36 female victims of the conflict, 18 women's and LGBTQ+ organisations, 10 experts on sexual violence and 10 former veterans of various national and international guerrilla groups. The Sub-Committee was in charge of incorporating the gender perspective into the agreements (De Oliveira Schuck & Brito, 2019, p. 86). The aforementioned Victoria Sandino is believed to be the first woman in the history of all of Latin America to take part in this type of negotiations. However, Sandino was not the only woman representative involved in the process aimed at signing the peace treaty, as Tanja Nijmeijer, aka Alexandra Nariño, was also present during the negotiations. Moreover, a delegation of representatives of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People's Army arrived in Havana, made up not only of the main commanders and negotiators, but also of individuals responsible for communication with the media and photographers (some of whom were women). Women's advocacy and their active participation in the peace process influenced the final form of the peace treaty, which addressed fundamental human freedoms and guaranteed a range of rights to various groups of the society.

The peace treaty of 2016 raised issues related to various social groups, including women. The preamble itself indicates that the treaty pays special attention to the fundamental rights of women, and each subsequent provision refers to the female gender, guaranteeing freedoms and regulating social relations. The first point addresses the integral reform of rural areas. In addition to issues relating to structural rural change, it includes the issue of gender equality. Every former member of the guerrilla should be recognised as an independent citizen, a holder of rights (regardless of her marital and family status). This is also where the definition of *mujer rural* comes in – it is any representative of the female gender who, regardless of her character and place of residence, carries out productive activities directly related to the country, even if these activities are not recognised or remunerated by the state information and measurement systems (Ley 731 de 2002). The term includes female farmers, women of indigenous origin and Afro-Colombian women who own no or little land. Political participation is the second issue raised by the Acuerdo Final de Paz. In the context of the Colombian female citizens, the most important objective was to increase their participation in the public life (e.g., inclusion of women in the electoral process through raising awareness and promoting their rights). Another aspect concerned the end of the conflict, in particular issues related to the political, social and economic reintegration process, which should be based on a differentiated approach to all its elements, including women's rights. One of the main objectives was to establish organisations that would participate in the process of increasing peace awareness and take steps to promote equality and women's participation at many levels. Next, the solution to the drug problem was reviewed. The records of the following pages of Acuerdo emphasised that it is women who had been particularly affected by criminal activities, including the production and commercialisation of illicit

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substances. These processes influenced specific forms of violence (trafficking, sexual exploitation) inflicted on women. A suggestion was made to solve the above problems by training women to design and monitor activities aimed at combating the illicit practices. The fifth point addressed the agreement on the victims of the conflict. The final point of the Acuerdo Final, on the other hand, involved formal and technical issues related to the process of implementing, executing and then controlling and monitoring what had been decided. It revisited the issue of gender equality and the recognition of women's rights regardless of their marital status, family and community relations. These values were recognised as a fundamental subject of law/legal rights to be constitutionally protected (Acuerdo Final, 2016).

In the context of the Peace Treaty signed by the Colombian Government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People's Army, it is important to pinpoint the difference between the concepts of demobilisation (*desmovilización*) and reincorporation (*reincorporación*). The Acuerdo Final does not contain the former word in any of its parts. The term demobilisation refers to individuals who made a voluntary decision to cease their previous activities in an armed organisation (guerrilla or paramilitary group) and then surrendered to the Colombian government (Decreto 128 de 2003). The term reincorporation, on the other hand, means reintegration into the society. Its scope includes everyone who signed the Acuerdo Final. It should be emphasised that *reincorporación* does not apply to anyone who, prior to the signing of the peace agreement, decided to desert and then surrender to the Colombian authorities.

Women's development paths after the reincorporation

Following the signing of the 2016 Peace Treaty and the start of the reincorporation process, an increase in the birth rate, or a 'baby boom', was observed among the former members of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People's Army. Leaving the ranks of the guerrilla, which was interfering in the private lives of every member, enabled the former *guerrilleras* to have and raise children.

While the FARC-EP was still active, the *farianas* were forbidden to become pregnant, as capable individuals ready to join the fight at any time were required. For this reason, women were forced to take contraceptives or undergo forced abortions. Furthermore, life as a partisan was associated with the need to move, with long and difficult marches, which did not provide suitable conditions for raising children. An increased sense of security and the discontinuation of the guerrilla rules translated into an increasing tendency to start families and raise children (Guerra-Cújae *et al.*, 2020, p. 26). For many women, the peace process became a realised dream of having a peaceful life surrounded by a loving family. One former FARC-EP member, Yamile, con-

fessed that she was happy to hear about the ongoing peace process given that she had already wanted to have a child and start a family since she was 24 years old (Abad, 2017).

Reintegration into society became an opportunity for women to develop what they dreamed of as children. One such thing was university education. Inability to continue education due to living far away from an educational institution and lack of sufficient financial resources contributed to the unavailability of further education. Upon joining the guerrilla, everyone could pursue their interests by attending various courses. It contributed to women's empowerment in terms of education. However, after the signing of the peace treaty, the knowledge and skills acquired during the period of activity in the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People's Army were not valid without the relevant certificate, as employers required the document. Therefore, the women who provided medical assistance within the guerrilla began attending studies or taking courses so that they could confirm their qualifications. Furthermore, for them, the opportunity to study also meant expanding their knowledge and acquiring new skills. One of the former FARC-EP members, Juliana, studied nursing in Cuba after signing the Acuerdo Final, but her ultimate dream was medicine, so she decided to pursue it by attending medical school now at the Universidad Tecnológica de Pereira (Interview with Juliana).

As it has been mentioned earlier, one of the points of the Havana Peace Agreement was to include the members of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People's Army in politics. A political party was established with the same acronym as that of the guerrilla – FARC (*la Fuerza Alternativa Revolucionaria del Común*)⁴. The said political formation holds 5 seats in both the House of Representatives and the Senate. Thanks to the peace, the former partisans were given the opportunity to be represented in parliament. They did not receive these seats. The peace guaranteed them these seats if they submitted a list of candidates for elections and won them. It must be emphasised that it is not only men who represent the FARC in Congress, as women delegates such as Sandra Ramírez and Victoria Sandino have also been – or still are – senators. They are not only present in politics, but also take actions to solve the problems of particular social groups, which testifies to their political and social empowerment. The latter of the mentioned *ex-guerrilleras* recalls that:

Through my work in the Congress I have learnt how the institution functions, as I had not had extensive knowledge of the subject before. It was obvious to me to represent the community, women etc. However, due to having my own voice in the Congress, I have experienced violent attacks from

⁴ Due to its negative connotation, the FARC party is now called Comunes.

politicians representing the extreme right wing. (Interview with Victoria Sandino)

For the women who were part of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – the People’s Army, life in the guerrilla had not always been easy. Long and arduous marches, the need to carry heavy equipment and participation in armed confrontations had a negative impact on the women. This is why some of them experienced crises in their private lives. Writing became one of the ways of overcoming them and understanding the past. Through the analysis of difficult memories, former FARC-EP member, Yineth Trujillo, in the process of writing down the story of her life, realised that no one should be judged without learning the context and she began to forgive the people from whom she had suffered abuse, which ultimately allowed her to experience happiness (Interview with Yineth). Moreover, she emphasised how important it is to speak about forgiveness and reconciliation in a country such as Colombia, where it was more important to defeat the internal enemy than to make peace, so that one can stop living in the past and focus on the positive.

Under the concluded Acuerdo Final, the so-called *Zonas Veredales Transitorias de Normalización* were created, where the guerrillas remained until they handed over their weapons and received their identity documents. The period during which the zones were functioning was limited, and with the end of that period, the *Espacios Territoriales de Capacitación y Reintegración* (ETCR), where groups of former guerrilleros are living with their families, began to operate. In one of the ETCRs, Miravalle, former FARC-EP members are strong women who perform a variety of roles. Maria is a representative of Cooperativa MMACOP, the motto of which is ‘*un sueño solidario hecho realidad*’. In addition, it also addresses issues related to the coordination of tourism-related activities, including accommodation and welcoming visitors who arrive in Miravalle. Karina, in turn, performs leadership roles in a number of organisations, for example, in Cooperativa MMACOP, where she is head of Comité de las Mujeres (this is an association that brings together not only former members of the FARC-EP, but also women representing the local community, with the aim of promoting women’s equality), and she represents Consejo de Paz. What is more, the former *guerrilleras* of Miravalle have been involved in the European Union-funded Mujer Mestiza, Indígena y Afrodescendiente (MIA) – a project seeking to strengthen the role of women through training in undertaking initiatives (Acción Cultural Popular, 2022). It involved women from or living in areas close to the ETCR de las Brisas in Chocó, de Agua Bonita and Miravalle in Caquetá. Through guerrilla warfare women gained freedom and relative equality with men, which they had never seen before. This has contributed to their psychological empowerment, as their perception of traditional roles has changed. Therefore, former female members of FARC-EP and the actions they have taken

contribute not only to the development and social empowerment of women, but also the entire community, including children.

Conclusions

The practical knowledge and skills gained in the ranks of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People’s Army have contributed to the development and social empowerment of women, despite the violence they experienced. Joining the guerrilla movement meant an opportunity to improve one’s economic situation. It was also a chance to escape the injustices suffered among one’s own community. Additionally, within the FARC-EP, women could fulfil their desire to be respected and experience equality. It should not be forgotten that the *guerrilleras* had the opportunity to develop their skills as nurses, radio operators, teachers or economists by attending various courses, which contributed to women’s empowerment in terms of education.

The beginning of the peace process between the Government of Colombia and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People’s Army meant new perspectives for women. The signed Acuerdo Final raises the issue of women’s fundamental rights, thus confirming their right to equality in relation to men, protection and political participation. This gave former *guerrilleras* an active role in both social and political life. In addition, through their activity they want to show how important the idea of peace, forgiveness and reconciliation is, in a country as violent as Colombia.

After their reintegration into civilian life, women have become and remain active in improving the living conditions of the communities they live in. Former FARC-EP members living in AETCR Miravalle hold leadership roles in local organisations and manage a variety of projects with a wide range of subjects, from agriculture to tourism to activities planned specifically for women. The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People’s Army contributed to the social, political and psychological empowerment of women. Within the guerrilla, they could feel they were equal to men, which changed the way they perceived themselves. After signing the agreement, they did not want to return to traditional roles, and some of them became leaders of their communities, thus showing that women could assume leadership roles. It has strengthened their sense of self-worth, giving them opportunities for development that they had not had before. It is noteworthy that, through guerrilla warfare, women are taking action based on their autonomous, individual and voluntary decisions. What is more, being active in a military organisation has strengthened their self-confidence and taught them self-defence techniques, which is extremely important in a country where there are so many instances of aggression against women. For this reason, every woman, regardless of her role in society, wants to be part of a community where everyone will have the opportunity to pursue their dreams.

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