

# From the Mountains to the Public Arena: The struggle of women ex-combatants of FARC-EP to make their voices heard

Victoria Sandino Simanca Herrera

Policy Insight Series:  
Gender-Inclusive  
Conflict Transformation

Issue 3  
March 2024

## Table of Contents

1	Introduction.....	2
2	Conflicts always hit women hardest.....	2
3	Teamwork and collective efforts during the Havana peace process .....	3
4	Risks and challenges when women decide to be protagonists of history .....	4
5	Mobilisation of women after the signing of the Final Peace Agreement .....	5
6	Recommendations from experience .....	7

### About the author

Victoria Sandino Simanca Herrera is an ex-guerrillera from the former FARC-EP, negotiator and signatory to the 2016 Final Peace Agreement. In Havana, she was coordinator of the Gender Subcommission. She is also a former Senator to the Republic of Colombia (2018-2022). She recently worked for the Office of the High Commissioner for Peace, producing guidelines for incorporating an intersectional and gender perspective in the various peace talks in the framework of the Colombian government's Total Peace policy.

© Berghof Foundation Operations gGmbH 2024. All rights reserved.

The opinions and views expressed in this report are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Berghof Foundation.

To cite this paper: Victoria Sandino Simanca Herrera. 2024. From the Mountains to the Public Arena: The struggle of women ex-combatants of FARC-EP to make their voices heard. Policy Insight Series: Gender-Inclusive Conflict Transformation (3). Berlin: Berghof Foundation.

# 1 Introduction

This report is the third issue in the Berghof Foundation Policy Insight Series on gender-inclusive conflict transformation. This series is part of the project *Supporting Women in Resistance And Liberation Movements in Peace Negotiations and Post-War Transitions*. Originated in 2018, the project has developed a peer-learning network for women from nine (active or former) Resistance and Liberation Movements (RLMs). Based on testimonies from the Network members, the series aims to provide insights for peacebuilding actors on how to enhance inclusive political transitions by engaging with female (ex-)combatants and women associated with RLMs during formal and informal peace processes and supporting their political, social and economic (re)integration into peaceful, democratic civilian life.

This paper is authored by Victoria Sandino Simanca Herrera, ex-guerrillera in the FARC-EP, negotiator and peace signatory.<sup>1</sup> In her own words, she recounts her experiences of the transition from the armed to the legal political struggle. She explains the obstacles she faced in continuing the struggle without arms, and concludes her analysis with a series of recommendations on how to guarantee the meaningful political participation of women ex-combatants.

## 2 Conflicts always hit women hardest

Armed conflicts around the world have evolved in different ways, according to the dynamics and drivers of conflict in each country. In Colombia, the armed conflict had many facets that make its analysis and the transition to peace a difficult, complex and challenging scenario.

The Colombian conflict has involved various types of violence, one of the principal forms being the **violence directed against political mobilisation**. This is reflected in the murder, torture, disappearance and displacement of people who have opposed diverse governments, with human rights defenders and rural communities, among others, also targeted. As a consequence, various national liberation or guerrilla movements have emerged in different regions of the country since the 1960s.

Amid these periods of violence, **women have been disproportionately affected** and were drawn to join the insurgency either out of political conviction, to save their own lives, or due to lack of opportunities. Colombia's became **the insurgency with the highest number of women members**. Since they first emerged, the guerrilla movements in Colombia have always counted on the participation of women, albeit in smaller numbers than men. As well as serving as **combatants, women have taken on support roles in intelligence, logistics, supply, health and other areas**.

The FARC-EP was founded on 27 May 1964 in the region of Marquetalia in southern Tolima, a department located in central Colombia. Initially, it was composed of 48 peasants (*campesinos*) (four of whom were women), who took up arms in response to the air and land attacks launched by the government of President

---

<sup>1</sup> This term is used in the Colombian context to refer to all those former FARC-EP members who endorsed the Havana Agreement.

Guillermo León Valencia and involving 16,000 troops. From that point onwards, they became a guerrilla movement engaged in armed resistance to the liberal and conservative political violence perpetrated in rural areas since the mid-twentieth century. The programmatic agenda included the right to land and structural reforms, which Colombia required to become a fairer and more equitable society. The armed struggle continued until the signing of the Final Peace Agreement in 2016, after four failed attempts to resolve the armed conflict through negotiation.

Throughout this process, the women guerrillas in FARC-EP contributed to education and literacy campaigns for the benefit of their comrades who did not know how to read or write and who represented the majority of the population, reflecting the conditions of state neglect experienced by rural communities at the time. Women also worked in nursing and communications and, from the 1990s and 2000s onwards, participated more actively in armed action and political campaigns, as my own case demonstrates. My role consisted in building a long-term relationship with the communities, developing support systems, strengthening organisational and community processes and maintaining direct dialogues with women in the community (who trusted us more than the state); they would recount day-to-day problems with their families, as well as conflicts with their partners, especially if they were experiencing domestic violence.

As a result of this political and military activism, many women gained some distinction in the various guerrilla movements. Some of us were able to assume responsibilities in mid-leadership positions, especially those who excelled in combat or armed conflict and also had a body of commanders who promoted them. Others gained recognition in the communities, building on their political training, experience in working with communities, and political militancy before joining the guerrillas. This was reflected in the negotiation process in Havana between the Colombian government and the FARC-EP insurgency from 2012 to 2016. The insurgency's peace delegation was composed of 17 men and 13 women, with the latter making up 43 per cent of the delegation. **This composition began to mark a difference from previous processes and was an important milestone in the role that we guerrilla women would play throughout the negotiations and in the peacebuilding process.**

### 3 Teamwork and collective efforts during the Havana peace process

The presence of **women combatants in Havana** took various forms, with women participating in diverse areas of work. Most of them performed **communication roles**, e.g. as videographers, editors of information brochures about the process, managers of social media accounts and the FARC-EP delegation's website, or producers of the news programme that emerged in the framework of the talks, as well as engaging in dialogue with representatives of the social movement. Some of us also sat at the table as **negotiators**.

All this work allowed us to engage in collective discussion of our role in the insurgency and the situation of women in Colombia and deepen our knowledge of feminism and the struggles of women in the world. Likewise, the commitment to incorporate the gender component, both in a cross-cutting and a specific

manner, across all the chapters of the agreement was the greatest achievement for women combatants in the entire Havana process. With the inclusion of the gender component, we were proposing to change the lives of rural women above all, thinking that at some point they would all be landowners and that women would also have full guarantees for the exercise of their political rights.

## 4 Risks and challenges when women decide to be protagonists of history

Our prominent role put us at the centre of attacks by the mass media and the extreme right in Colombia, which were aimed at minimising our role and insulting our intelligence, agency and capacity as political subjects.

As a result, we recognised that the risks we faced in the armed struggle did not end when we left the conflict arena; these risks continued, now transformed into stigmatisation, discrimination and exclusion that affected our lives as women ex-combatants who were seeking to contribute to a negotiated solution to the protracted armed conflict that had caused such suffering. These attacks increased as we gained visibility through our autonomous work in the subcommission that drafted the gender provisions of the Final Peace Agreement.

Today, there are ongoing **social stigmas against us** as women peace signatories who continue to work on building peace. These stigmatisations are a violation of our human dignity and the security of our lives, perpetrated by a society that condemns us for having had the audacity to take up arms against a violent regime such as Colombia's and for having broken traditional gender roles by participating and engaging in the armed conflict, and which rejects us all the more as we embark on our transition from armed to legal political struggle. All this hinders our effective participation because it **excludes us from influence and decision-making in the private, community and political spheres**.

Throughout the last seven years since the signing of the peace agreement, I have been forced to recognise that the risk posed by wider society continues on a daily basis. The pain caused by the war has left emotional and psychological scars, fears and traumas that affect us even in the most peaceful moments. In addition, there is a constant fear of those social prejudices that marginalise us as women insurgents and peace signatories and hinder us from accessing decent jobs – even when we have the required qualifications. We also experience violence for being leaders in our communities, for having a prominent political role or even for the mere fact of being recognised as women ex-combatants. In other words, not all the women ex-combatants have managed to resist or be immune to the risks that ultra-right groups pose to society.

In addition to the above, there were other obstacles to exercising our leadership as women who came from a history of struggle, who gave everything in the armed conflict and who now face the task of building peace. In our transition to civilian life, we wanted to bring our experience, capacities and mindset, as well as the learnings we acquired during our struggle, to the areas of political and community representation. We aspired to participate on equal terms with the men in our organisation, but there was one major obstacle: *machismo*.

Many of our comrades who had previously been involved in the insurgency, and who were now engaged in the field of political reincorporation, intended to continue acting as the **hierarchical and patriarchal leaders** they had been in military life. They were afraid of women's organisation, autonomy and the leadership we had been exercising at the national and territorial levels. Not only were they unwilling to allow women's representation to be proportional to our presence in the organisation, but they also attacked our positions regarding the construction of a feminism of our own, which we called "insurgent feminism".

Speaking from my personal experience, I have had to face many challenges, commencing with stigmatisation by sectors of the extreme right which, in the face of leadership and the work and defence of women's rights, had no other option but to attack me with **stigmatising media campaigns**. This, of course, makes the work more difficult and creates a barrier to effective political participation. Unfortunately, they were not the only ones. Another challenge has been the lack of a political collective to support my transition process. The party that emerged from the peace agreement, its leadership, those who were part of the former Secretariat, **did not allow women to work autonomously, nor did they allocate resources** for the performance of this work; in consequence, political engagement has been almost impossible.

No matter how much effort is made in organisational terms, it has not been possible to consolidate a political commitment to participation and representation, not only for myself but for the collective of women who were excluded from the party which emerged from the agreement. Thus, it is a challenge to resolve the issue by ensuring that left-wing organisations adopt the popular feminism or insurgent feminism that we women ex-combatants initiated by struggling, organising and calling for the elimination of violence against women, the recognition and exercise of their full citizenship rights and the non-discrimination against those of us who were insurgents.

## 5 Mobilisation of women after the signing of the Final Peace Agreement

The principal lesson I have learned since the signing of the peace agreement has undoubtedly been the importance of working with women at the grassroots level, contributing to their organisational process and motivating them to organise autonomously in their territories, in their communities, not only as a collective of women peace signatories but also with women from the broader community. **In making the transition to civil society, we do not forfeit our principles and demands for the transformation of society**, and women in particular. In other words, the struggle for these transformations must continue, and the best way is to carry on organising with the communities.

In the absence of the knowledge and experience that pursuing these political processes requires, we relied mainly on **cooperation with international organisations**, which supported us with resources or advice on training our comrades in leadership and strengthening their capacities in synergy with women leaders in the territories or young professional women who shared their knowledge, sometimes in exchange for payment and sometimes on a voluntary basis. This allowed us to design and implement a **national gender training school** which, among other things, worked on the gender component of the peace agreement, but also on elements of insurgent feminism.

The training courses were itinerant; we travelled to various regions of the country to work with the women in their own spaces, to learn about their circumstances and to co-create with them, based on their own scenarios, the action plans they wanted to advance to achieve genuine political, economic, social and cultural reincorporation into the communities where they wanted to be.

This territorial exercise was complemented by national meetings that allowed us to take stock of the activities, continue with political training and learn from the experiences that each participant brought from their territory. These gatherings also allowed us to build an “Integral Strategy for the Reincorporation of FARC-EP women”,<sup>2</sup> which formulated several lines of action on political, economic, social and socio-legal reincorporation, security guarantees, economic support for good living (*buen vivir*) and insurgent, egalitarian and nonviolent masculinities.

This entire organisational process generated such enthusiasm that a series of new women leaders began to emerge and stand out as never before. The women who recently arrived from the mountains, most of whom had no previous experience in community and women’s organising, were losing their fear; they were talking in the forums and meetings about our struggles, about what they wanted now, and about their commitment and intention to build peace. Many of us were motivated to engage in dialogue with women from the national women’s movement because we had already learned to voice our proposals and demands and bring them to the public domain.

A very important lesson during all this time concerned **women’s self-organising**. This includes formal structures such as associations, cooperatives or foundations with legal status vis-à-vis the competent state entities (which was very challenging due to lack of knowledge and support with paperwork). Organising can also be done informally but autonomously, through gender committees or grassroots collectives, to promote women’s initiatives in the productive sector, provide training and education in the Territorial Spaces for Capacity-Building and Reincorporation (ETCR),<sup>3</sup> strengthen their capacities, including political education, design strategies and specific actions in the territories in order to move forward, and, above all, engage with regional, national and international actors in order to amplify women’s demands. Another lesson we have learned relates to the **building of relationships between women ex-combatants and other women in the communities**. It could be said that a synergy was established between their respective struggles, which promoted and highlighted their leadership and led them to participate in national-level platforms. One of them is the National Platform of Popular Women, Peace and Territory (*La Plataforma Nacional de Mujeres Populares, Paz y Territorio*), driven by women peace signatories and women leaders from remote territories of the country. Another such space is the Conamu (*Coordinadora Nacional de Mujeres*) platform, led by women militants from the Comunes party. It has also been important to maintain a permanent communication network to publicise the work carried out, the lessons learned and the challenges faced.

---

<sup>2</sup> <https://partidocomunes.com.co/download/estrategia-de-reincorporacion-de-las-mujeres-exguerrilleras/>

<sup>3</sup> Within the framework of the peace agreement, twenty-four Territorial Spaces for Capacity-Building and Reincorporation (known by the Spanish acronym ETCR) were created to temporarily house ex-combatants and to give them a space to set up productive projects as part of their reintegration process (the latter being labelled as reincorporation in the Havana peace process).

However, for women ex-combatants, **moving from community and grassroots social action in the territories to political participation in elections is a major challenge**. In the first instance, they cannot count on the political parties' support to enter the electoral contest, nor do they have the economic resources to finance their campaigns, less still the support and training needed to develop their campaigns or governance programmes. Needless to say, the majority of women peace signatories who are active in formal politics and want to remain politically engaged do not find spaces or support in the party that emerged from the peace agreement. Many of us have been demanding equal participation for women, or at least to be represented in proportion to our presence in the ranks of the insurgency during the conflict. We also advocated for fair representation in the 10 seats reserved for our party in the Congress of the Republic for two consecutive terms after the peace agreement. In the first term, only two women were selected, and in the second, there was only one. In other words, meaningful representation continues to be the greatest challenge for women ex-combatants, together with security and childcare arrangements that allow them to study, work and engage in social, community and political activism.

## 6 Recommendations from experience

- = Women's effective political participation should be considered as a window of opportunity to break down the inequality and discrimination that affect the majority of women. This requires an institutional framework at the local and national levels that guarantees the development of **mechanisms and instruments which promote the meaningful exercise of citizenship by women ex-combatants in their transition to civilian life**. This will ensure genuine participation and expansion of women's political power, thus contributing to the construction of a feminist, collective, historically transformative and solidarity-based political subject.
- = **A specific allocation of resources** for women is required, linking gender issues within political parties with equality and equity criteria and allowing the empowerment of their leadership and their meaningful participation in decision-making spaces.
- = Guarantees by the state should include **measures to prevent stigmatisation and discrimination** by institutions and society.
- = Genuine and effective participation must be guaranteed, based on **diversified and inclusive leadership**. This is part of the democratic opening. This genuine participation by women who are in transition from the armed to the legal political struggle must be completely autonomous, not subordinated to the hierarchical and masculine decision-making of the former armed insurgency. Women must have the capacity to exert real and effective influence. Women's leadership and participation cannot be instrumentalised. They cannot be reduced to meaningless quotas aimed at fulfilling formal requirements or conveying the appearance of inclusion.
- = **Internal democracy within social organisations and political parties**, especially if they call themselves "revolutionary", must have the capacity to promote integrative intra-party reflection on the organisational reality and distinct voices and interests of their members, always with respect, equality, non-discrimination, and, above all, a full guarantee that political parties are safe spaces, empowering the voices of women, their demands and interests. Real equality must be promoted

among men and women comrades who were involved in the struggle, because women's agency and leadership are not a threat to other leaders; they are, however, a threat to exclusionary, subordinating, sexist and patriarchal male power.

- = For political organisations to fully guarantee the exercise of political rights free of violence against women, the first step is to **make violence against women visible and stop normalising the violence that occurs within their own ranks**; detecting and recognising it is the first step.
- = It is also necessary to **provide security measures to prevent violence against women in the formal political sphere**, identifying risks and patterns and, in parallel, supporting those who denounce such abuses by protecting their integrity and work. With the mapping of clear pathways, prevention and mitigation scenarios, guarantees of participation and commitment to a politics free of violence, we will move forward in building a peace that includes us all.