

Political Reintegration and the Continuation of the Struggle after War

Women ex-combatants in formal and informal politics

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1 Introduction

This report is the second issue in the Berghof Foundation Policy Insight Series on gender-inclusive conflict transformation.¹ 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 and 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 covers the political reconversion pathways that women² ex-combatants follow after the signing of a peace agreement. Throughout 2022 and 2023, we conducted focus group discussions, interviews and peer-learning workshops with more than 70 women ex-combatants from the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People's Army (FARC-EP) in Colombia, the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) in El Salvador and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) in the Philippines.³ In this publication, we present their testimonies and analyse their experiences on continuing the struggle after war by nonviolent means via formal and informal politics. We draw on these insights to conclude with a set of recommendations for the peacebuilding community on engaging with women ex-combatants during the post-agreement phase of peace processes.

¹ Gender-inclusive processes are those that take into consideration gender inequality, understood as a system of societal structures that give more power and privileges to the socially constructed male identities and the power systems and social structures that organise social life in hierarchical, mutually exclusive categories, which lead to relationships of sub/super ordination to one another (Confortini 2006: 335).

² This series focuses on the experiences of women ex-combatants and other women associated with RLMs, with whom we work closely within the framework of our project. However, we do acknowledge the need to extend these parameters to include non-binary identities in our analyses and thereby refrain from reducing gender issues solely to women's issues.

³ This would not have been possible without our partners on the ground, to whom we are extremely grateful: Cooperación Técnica Solidaria Makipura in Colombia, la Colectiva Feminista para el Desarrollo Local, the two associations of Women Veterans of the Civil War in El Salvador and the Moro Women Development and Cultural Center, Inc. in the Philippines.

2 Continuation of the Struggle

“I do not like to be called an ex-combatant or ex-guerrillera, because I am still a fighter, my struggle is not over, I just use other means, the political means.” – *Woman ex-combatant from FARC-EP, Workshop, November 2022*

“The position you occupy in politics is temporary, but the means of struggle is permanent, whether it is called a party, a civil society organisation or a women’s organisation.” – *Woman ex-combatant from FMLN, Workshop, September 2023*

The motivations for women to join armed resistance and liberation movements are diverse. Some women combatants are forcedly recruited. Others join guerrilla groups to eliminate the oppressive system, advance transformative change (Giri 2021) and fight against repression and discrimination (Pauls 2023). Other reasons are to escape poverty or domestic abuse (Trisko Darden, Henshaw and Szekely 2019: 65).

“I did not want to fight, I felt uncomfortable with a weapon, but the collective [the armed movement] protected me from many things, such as domestic violence.” – *Woman ex-combatant from FARC-EP, Workshop, September 2023*

“We had two options, staying and get killed, or going to war.” – *Woman ex-combatant from FMLN, Workshop, September 2023*

After the signing of a peace agreement, these demands are rarely met and women ex-combatants hence feel **the need to continue the struggle for gender emancipation by nonviolent means**. Gender inequality in society has hardly ever ended through the signing of a peace accord (Anctil Avoine 2021: 16); therefore, women who took up arms to fight for more equitable societies will most likely wish to remain politically active after the transition.

For example, after the signing of the peace agreement in **El Salvador** in 1992, the FMLN transformed itself into a political party. Many women ex-combatants felt that both the accord and the agenda of the political party had left a big gap when it came to advancing women’s rights.

“We agreed that we did not want more war, but the agreement did not reflect what we had fought for. The women’s struggle was missing.” – *Woman ex-combatant from FMLN, Workshop, September 2023*

“When the war ended, we did not achieve everything we wanted; many things were pending. The utopia had not been achieved.” – *Woman ex-combatant from FMLN, Workshop, September 2023*

The Havana Peace Agreement, signed by the Government of **Colombia** and the FARC-EP in 2016, included a strong gender component across its different chapters. This was the achievement of a collective effort by various actors, including women from the FARC-EP sitting at the negotiating table, but also women ex-combatants, e.g. from Guatemala, Honduras, Uruguay and Aceh, who travelled to Havana to share their own experiences with peace delegates. However, these women's contributions failed to be acknowledged, and despite their achievements, the implementation of the gender provisions is severely lagging behind.

“All the gender work was done outside the negotiating panels’ official working hours. We, the women, worked hard for the gender approach. We suffered a lot for it; we shed a lot of tears. When the international community celebrated the gender component of the Final Agreement, the male leaders came out, and not a single woman signed the agreement. We were invisible, our work was not seen. Therefore, we took the initiative, we woke up, we were reborn and we became [politically] organised women.” – *Woman ex-negotiator from FARC-EP, Workshop, September 2023*

Beyond the signing of the peace agreement, **post-war institutional reforms and combatant reintegration programmes tend to be gender-insensitive**, neglecting women's particular experiences during the conflict, their differentiated needs, agency and aspirations for political participation, and the challenges related to the continuation of violence after war, including gender-based violence and other gendered issues. Additionally, trainings offered to women as part of disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) processes tends to reproduce traditional gender roles and neglect their political aspirations. Instead of receiving capacity-building on leadership, public communication or electoral campaigning, women ex-combatants are usually offered training in sewing, soap-making or hairdressing (Cruz Almeida, Dudouet and Cochrane-Buchmüller 2022).

“There were two stories, the one from the Government and the one from the FMLN; the women's story was missing. The invisible pain of women.” – *Woman ex-combatant from FMLN, Workshop, September 2023*

“Public opinion and the media oppressed us. They said we were blind, poor guerrilla women, poor little victims, but we were social subjects with agency.” – *Woman ex-combatant from FARC-EP, Workshop, September 2023*

“After the war, what was going to happen to the women? We were not going to drop the rifle to pick up a broom.” – *Woman ex-combatant from FARC-EP, Workshop, September 2023*

“In the DDR [process], they gave all the women cooking utensils. We joked about it and talked about the demobilised pot.” – *Woman ex-combatant from FMLN, Workshop, September 2023*

“The transitional government should enable [as well] a transition into a gender-equal environment where active and equal participation of women is possible.” – *Woman ex-combatant from MILF, Workshop, July 2022*

Driven by their political agency and desire to transform power structures, many women ex-combatants find creative solutions to **continue⁴ their political struggle through re-mobilisation in formal and informal political spaces**. **Formal politics** involves the direct or indirect participation in political parties, either as an elected representative, member or cadre at the national, regional or local level. This form of participation also includes voting, campaigning and running for a political office (Giezendanner and Ingelaere 2021: 6). On the other hand, **informal politics** refers to forms of collective organising beyond party politics and within civil society activism, through participation in civil society organisations (CSOs), social movements or veterans’ associations, and engaging in various methods of extra-institutional nonviolent action (Dudouet and Cruz Almeida 2022). Choosing between formal and informal politics is not a straightforward process and it is influenced by the experiences within the armed group during the war, among other factors (Matfess 2022). The following section will present the experiences of women ex-combatants from Colombia, El Salvador and the Philippines and their decisions to engage in diverse political pathways.

3 Formal Politics

In Colombia, El Salvador and the Philippines, the transition from armed struggle to politics was specified in the peace agreement. The armed movement of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia became the political party of the Common Alternative Revolutionary Forces (later renamed Comunes) after the signing of the Havana Peace Agreement (2016). The MILF founded the United Bangsamoro Justice Party (UBJP) to prepare the transition to future elections in the newly autonomous region of Bangsamoro that was established by the 2014 Comprehensive Agreement on Bangsamoro (CAB). Along the same line, five leftist guerrilla organisations⁵ politically transformed under the coordination of the FMLN, which became a political party after the Chapultepec Peace Accords in 1992. In these three cases, most combatants who were part of the insurgency automatically became members of the political party. Therefore, **many women ex-combatants became politically active as a result of the collective transition via the signed peace agreement** (Hauge 2008).

However, many demobilised women combatants faced obstacles when they sought to put women’s interests at the top of their party’s political agenda. According to women veterans and politicians within the FMLN, **“the gender issues within the party were forgotten and resources were not allocated for these issues”**. For example, sexual and gender-based violence was not a priority for the party and patriarchal power structures prevailed. Many women ex-combatants stayed in the party structures, but those who succeeded in reaching positions of power were mostly active in local politics, where it was easier to

⁴ For some women ex-combatants, it is not a continuation of the struggle, but a reconfiguration, as they may not have pursued gender aspirations from the start. For these women, the challenges of civilian reintegration awoke them to the need to engage politically and socially for women’s rights.

⁵ These were the Farabundo Martí Popular Liberation Forces (FPL), the People’s Revolutionary Army (ERP), the National Resistance (RN), the Communist Party of El Salvador (PCS) and the Revolutionary Party of Central American Workers (PRTC).

overcome the patriarchal barriers to meaningful engagement in institutionalised politics. Despite their formal possibility to participate in party politics, they highlight a lack of **opportunities for promotion and access to key decision-making positions**.

“They did not want the mayor to be a woman, so we had to organise differently.” – *Woman ex-combatant from FMLN, Workshop, September 2023*

“The party abandoned us, they only offered us local positions, so I left the party.” – *Woman ex-combatant from FMLN, Workshop, September 2023*

“I joined feminist grass-roots organisations because of the vacuum left by the political militancy.” – *Woman ex-combatant from FMLN, Workshop, September 2023*

“Meaningful participation in the party was limited. The only chance they offered me was to be an observer for the election process. I had to resign because it went against my principles.” – *Woman ex-combatant from FMLN, Workshop, September 2023*

In the **Philippines**, many women served in the MILF movement, including through the Social Welfare Committee (SWC) and the Bangsamoro Women’s Auxiliary Brigade (BIWAB). Women from BIWAB see **party politics as an opportunity to wage the struggle in the institutional arena**, which comes with additional benefits such as access to government funding, childcare arrangements, recognition and legitimacy, as well as unified ideology and clear leadership. Women ex-combatants from Bangsamoro also consider political parties as an opportunity for highly educated women to be leaders and use their parliamentary representation to **formulate policies and laws that can advance women’s issues**.⁶

However, in recent discussions with BIWAB members, they have shared their difficulties in participating effectively in the formal political arena. In their view, there are prevailing misconceptions of religious beliefs and teachings that lead to women to think that they cannot participate, or that are used as an excuse for excluding women. Although the Bangsamoro Electoral Code includes a quota of 30 per cent for women’s representation on parties’ electoral nominee lists, various **structural barriers** impede their meaningful participation. Women are not usually placed at the top of the party’s electoral list but are included at the bottom, reducing their probability of being voted into Parliament. Despite the existing legal provisions, organisational support from the male leadership for women’s participation needs to be strengthened to ensure their full implementation. Additionally, the political climate in the Philippines is affected by clientelism and corruption, which on occasion leads to women politicians being appointed because of their prominent persona and not because of their skills, which limits how much they can deliver in the political arena. Many of the women political figures are either highly educated or relatives of male leaders. When it comes to resources, the Bangsamoro Organic Law stipulates that 5 per cent of the transition funds should

⁶ Testimonies from women ex-combatants from MILF, Workshop, November 2022.

be assigned to programmes on gender and development; however, this policy measure has not been implemented in practice.

“Being in politics is more difficult than war.” – *Woman ex-combatant from MILF, Workshop, October 2022*

“If women are not included in the political transition, the peace process will be incomplete.” – *Woman ex-combatant from MILF, Workshop, October 2022*

“Even if I wanted to be a politician, if no one supports me or encourages me, I could not.” – *Bangsamoro Woman Peacebuilder Practitioner, Interview, 2024*

“We need to engage men as allies [for women’s political participation].” – *Woman ex-combatant from MILF, Workshop, July 2022*

According to Giezendanner and Ingelaere (2021: 12), women who had personal, long-standing, close relations with their comrades will join together or follow them into the political party. For example, in the case of the FARC-EP, members of the guerrilla movement lived together as a family; their comrades were their brothers, sisters and partners, so opting out of the political party would be seen as abandoning one’s family.

However, the **lack of inclusivity and intersectionality of the party agenda can be a deal-breaker for ex-combatants** who have diverse identities, including members of the LGBTQI+ community, indigenous groups or the youth. Once in the political arena, women from the FARC-EP wanted to include the voices of the marginalised and bring forward those needs that had been forgotten. As they did not find space for this in formal politics, they decided to organise themselves in social organisations, which they perceive as more inclusive and intersectional:

“When we are doing grassroots work, it means that we go to the most remote community and territory, the most abandoned people, to work with them, and we cannot leave them behind.” – *Woman ex-combatant from FARC-EP, Interview, September 2021*

When it comes to transforming from an armed actor to a political activist, women from the MILF have also identified the need to develop new forms of leadership that suit an inclusive political project. Despite the UBJP’s efforts to hear the demands of the population located in the most peripheral areas of the Bangsamoro, women ex-combatants think that their political leaders are just “too busy” with governmental politics to ensure meaningful inclusive participation.

“Women in the central region receive a lot of support and capacity-building, while those from remote areas are receiving considerably less attention. There is a need to reach out to all women of the MILF to make sure that no one is left behind. [The support] needs to be expanded beyond core territory.” – *Woman ex-combatant from MILF, Workshop, July 2022.*

Although some women ex-combatants received political training while being part of the guerrilla movement, once they transition to civilian life, they have little experience with the bureaucratic procedures and regulations of party politics and **lack the required skills, support and financial resources** for electoral campaigning, strategic communication or law-making. After the war ended, many women combatants shared that they felt afraid because they did not know what their future would look like. Some of them were born and raised in the guerrilla movement, so for them, **civilian life was a new and unknown concept**. They shared that they did not know what was legal or illegal according to Colombian law, which hindered their participation in the formal political arena.

Additionally, women who participate in politics are often **unduly exposed to discrimination, stigmatisation, criticism and insults** from within the party, within Parliament, and from the population at large, which discourages them from exposing themselves in the public arena. Women politicians around the world are more likely to become targets of physical and psychological violence because of their gender identity. In post-war settings, the double stigmatisation of being a woman and an ex-combatant make it even more challenging to enter formal politics. In the Philippines, some women ex-combatants do not seek political careers because they do not want to be perceived as “aggressive”. In Colombia, Victoria Sandino Simanca Herrera, former combatant in the FARC-EP, negotiator of the Havana Peace Agreement and a former senator, has been a member of the Women in RLM Network for the past six years. Her experience and struggle for women’s rights and gender-inclusive peace processes are an inspiration and she is seen as a role model for many women from other RLMs. However, her political path was not free from continuous attacks to undermine her agency and capacity as a political subject. She has published her own report in this series, where she testifies on her own struggles to make the voices of women ex-combatants heard in the political space (Sandino Simanca Herrera 2024).

With shrinking spaces, no meaningful participation and little room for manoeuvre for transforming gender inequality, women ex-combatants tend to organise themselves outside of party politics. The following section addresses the experiences of these women in informal spaces.

4 Informal Politics

The majority of women ex-combatants active in the Women in RLM Network have pursued mobilisation pathways beyond party politics. After their leadership signed a peace agreement, women ex-combatants in **El Salvador** agreed that many issues failed to be included on the party’s agenda, such as maternity, carework, gender-based violence, sexual and reproductive rights and mental health. The specific demands of these women were not included; therefore, they decided to organise themselves in civil society organisations.

“We decided to create our new world, trying not to reproduce the patriarchal macho party method.” – Woman ex-combatant from FMLN, Workshop, September 2023

Many women ex-combatants who have left the protective umbrella of the party “took shelter in feminism” and some of them claimed that it “saved them from bitterness”. They created several CSOs that aimed to advance the struggle for gender rights with a feminist approach, such as *Las Dignas*, *Las Mélicas* and *La Colectiva Feminista para el Desarrollo Local*. **Feminist activism provided women ex-combatants with an opportunity to voice and pursue their political demands.** Women veterans from El Salvador consider that the civil society sphere allowed them to take stock of the past and plan for the future and to **forge an empowering space in which they were able to exert agency and influence.** This pathway was effective in advancing policy, as the women’s movement led by ex-combatants **managed to push through new legislation** on women’s rights, such as the Law of Equality, Fairness and Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (ICRW 2011) and the Special Law for a Life Free of Violence against Women. They learned how to cooperate with the formal political arena, as complementary spaces for the continuation of the struggle.

“Feminism is a pluralistic and diverse movement that grows and develops each day, it reflects a critical theory because it entails the transformation of society by nonviolent methods, it is a movement that does not exclude, and it embraces solidarity among different initiatives.” – *Morena Herrera, ex-combatant from FMLN and founder of Las Dignas and Colectiva Feminista para el Desarrollo Local, Online Workshop, May 2021*

Many women ex-combatants from the FARC-EP in **Colombia** followed a similar path outside party politics. They organised themselves in social movements, CSOs and local community platforms. In conversations with several of these women, they explained their decision to organise collectively because they identified a clear gap in the efforts to tackle the needs of women (ex-combatants and non-combatants alike). Mobilising through women-only spaces allowed them to **strengthen their knowledge of women’s rights and women’s choices in a post-war society.** Informal spaces also allowed them to **join forces with a diverse constituency**, including civilian women from Black, rural and Indigenous communities, and to forge alliances with other organisations working for women’s rights as well as peace and transformation. Such initiatives include the National Platform of Popular Women for Peace and Territory, which has been jointly driven by women ex-combatants and community leaders; and the National Coordination of Women (CONAMU), led by women members of the Comunes party. These platforms have managed to build bridges among women from different communities, create synergies and coordinate efforts to make the voices of women heard at regional, national and international levels (Sandino Simanca Herrera 2024). Finally, informal organising allows for **collective, democratic and participatory decision-making** processes, which help the women to feel involved and develop a greater sense of ownership. These platforms enable them to serve their community, and to work towards changing the history of the country for men, women, the youth and the LGBTQI+ community.

As in the case of El Salvador, FARC-EP ex-combatants have expressed the desire to use informal spaces to remain in direct interlocution with formal arenas – political parties and the government – and push their agendas into the electoral campaigns of various political parties.

“I arrived in a society where we no longer had equality, and in addition to that, some comrades returned to traditional gender roles and began to control women’s autonomy over their own decisions and bodies.” *Woman ex-combatant from FARC-EP, Interview, 2021*

“When you are a political leader, you have to govern for all the people, not just for us. We, the women, we include the marginalised, we remember those who were forgotten.” – *Woman ex-combatant from FARC-EP, Workshop, September 2023*

BIWAB members in the **Philippines** have also established their own women-led CSO, called the League of Moro Women Organization Inc. (LMWOI). LMWOI works as a platform to amplify the voices of women ex-combatants throughout the transition process. Through self-organising, movement members have been able to **gain the capacity and self-confidence for meaningful participation and community leadership**. They have chosen the path of informal politics as a means to empower themselves and keep alive the spirit of belonging and solidarity among former BIWAB members across the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region. As a registered CSO, LMWOI also allows women ex-combatants to be visible as autonomous agents vis-à-vis the MILF hierarchy and to **access international funding and institutionalised engagement** with the international community.

However, women from the MILF have also stressed that to ensure progress on women’s rights, they need to participate in formal political spaces, not just in civil society organisations. They recognise the advantages of informal organising, but also its limitations. In their view, these limitations include a fragmented ideology and leadership, a lack of recognition and access to state resources, and limited political power. CSOs can draft, campaign and advocate for policies and laws, but they do not have the agency or standing to enforce their adoption in formal parliamentary processes. That is why many **women ex-combatants remain attentive to party politics, either with the wish to become politicians in the future, or to forge strong alliances for pursuing structural change**.

5 Conclusions and Recommendations

Many women who have been part of RLMs and demobilised following a political settlement remain driven by political and social aspirations and a desire for collective agency. Far from leaving behind the struggle, they find their own ways to reconfigure it by nonviolent means. The root causes of violence, such as structural patterns of inequality, which drive armed insurgency, cannot be solely transformed through a peace agreement; they need to be addressed through top-down institutional reforms and bottom-up social activism. Therefore, ex-combatants – including women – need to be able to access, drive and influence politics and governance after the war. Based on the political journeys and gained experiences of women ex-combatants from Colombia, El Salvador and the Philippines, we have developed the following recommendations for international, national and regional peacebuilding actors involved in supporting and monitoring the design and implementation of peace agreements:

- = Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) programmes need to strengthen the political dimension of reintegration and **support armed groups’ transition to politics** as a key component

of conflict transformation. Peace agreements should also facilitate ex-combatants' access to democratic spaces so that their struggles can be pursued by nonviolent means.

- = Politics after war are gendered spaces; therefore, the transition from insurgency to party politics should **consider the particular political realities of women ex-combatants** and those with diverse gender identities through an **intersectional lens**. Specific measures could include the recommendation that (new and established) political parties introduce mandatory quotas – together with new forms of leadership and new **democratic structures⁷ that promote and guarantee women's rights and agendas**, and allow women to participate meaningfully in decision-making.
- = The peacebuilding community, including DDR practitioners, INGOs and political foundations, should provide tailored **capacity-building, training and resources** to strengthen women ex-combatants' knowledge, skills and self-confidence to participate in politics.
- = In parallel, there is a need to **work with male leaders** on deconstructing narratives around women's agency and ensure they become allies and champions for women's participation.
- = **Formal and informal politics** should not be seen as completely isolated paths, but rather as **complementary ways** to continue the struggle by nonviolent means. Both tracks complement each other and serve distinctive purposes.
- = Despite the advantages that informal spaces present for women ex-combatants to voice their needs, they **should not be confined to informal political tracks**, which could lead to formal politics becoming patriarchal spaces that are impenetrable for women and women's agenda. Civil society organisations and informal social movements/platforms need the support of political parties to devise and implement policy changes.
- = The complementarity of informal and formal politics needs to be approached holistically, **bridging the gap between both tracks**. While ensuring that women ex-combatants have spaces to voice their unique needs and preferences, the peacebuilding community should guarantee that there are also women prepared, equipped and empowered to enter the policy-making arena.
- = Finally, political reintegration will be more effective if accompanied by support measures for **psychosocial reintegration**, including programmes to assess the social and emotional impact of armed conflict on ex-combatants, their children and family members and to promote intergenerational dialogue, as a way of paying tribute to the past while building a joint future.

⁷ Some examples of specific mechanisms for ensuring women's participation are being implemented by RLM movements worldwide. One of these is the co-leadership system from the Kurdish movement, which mandates that for every man in a leadership position there must be a woman as well. This has allowed the movement to incorporate topics in the political agenda that were previously neglected by male leaders, such as the inclusion of minorities, or women's economic independence. Another example is the creation of women's wings within political parties to boost women's representation in Parliament.

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