

# Long-term reintegration challenges and opportunities for female ex-combatants. Insights from Aceh, Burundi, Colombia, Mindanao, Nepal and Uganda

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Berghof Policy Brief

November 2023

## What is the policy brief about?

The policy brief focuses on the long-term reintegration challenges and opportunities for female ex-combatants in conflict-affected regions, drawing insights from Aceh, Burundi, Colombia, Mindanao, Nepal, and Uganda. It aims to shed light on the often-neglected aspects of female combatant experiences after conflict and offers recommendations for policymakers, peacebuilders, and various stakeholders.

## Why is the topic relevant?

Long-term reintegration of female ex-combatants is frequently overlooked in post-conflict scenarios. Despite comprising a significant portion of armed groups worldwide, these women face unique challenges and opportunities that demand attention. Neglecting their specific needs during peacebuilding and reintegration processes can hinder sustainable peace and development.

## For whom is it important?

The policy is crucial for policymakers, peacebuilding organizations, international and local governments, civil society, and researchers. It emphasizes the importance of recognizing and addressing the diverse experiences of female combatants and provides recommendations tailored to various stakeholders involved in peace processes, reintegration efforts, and societal rebuilding.

## Key recommendations

The recommendations aim to enhance the inclusivity, support, and recognition of female ex-combatants, ultimately contributing to more effective and sustainable post-conflict reintegration processes.

- ≡ Ensure meaningful participation of diverse women's groups in peace processes
- ≡ Mainstream gender perspectives in all aspects of potential agreements.
- ≡ Guarantee continued funding for gender issues throughout implementation.
- ≡ Engage with female members of armed organizations to bridge gaps with the women's movement.
- ≡ Purposefully involve female ex-combatants, leveraging their unique skills for the benefit of other women.
- ≡ Assess the specific needs of the former combatant population regarding healthcare, education, employment, and marginalization.
- ≡ Consider conflict-related, long-lasting effects when dealing with emerging social issues.
- ≡ Conduct more research on the long-term reintegration of female combatants.
- ≡ Utilize participatory action research with female ex-combatants for contextually relevant findings.

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**Published by:** Berghof Foundation. November 2023.

This publication is part of the project ‘From female combatants to filmmakers – Expanding women’s agency in war and peace’, which is supported by the German development agency (GIZ) and is implemented in partnership with the GCRF Gender, Justice and Security Hub, based at the LSE Centre for Women, Peace and Security.

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Thank you to Beatrix Austin, Dagmar Nolden, Dalia Barsoum, Ramzi Merhej and Véronique Dudouet for their feedback and providing examples from their work.

**To cite this paper:** Pauls, Evelyn. 2023. Long-term reintegration challenges and opportunities for female ex-combatants. Insights from Aceh, Burundi, Colombia, Mindanao, Nepal and Uganda. Policy Brief. Berlin: Berghof Foundation.

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## Berghof Foundation

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# 1 Introduction

Over 60% of armed groups around the world have or had female members,<sup>1</sup> including in active combat and leadership positions, for example in Colombia, Burundi, Aceh/Indonesia, the Philippines, Nepal, Uganda and currently in Myanmar, Tigray/Ethiopia and Ukraine. In some groups, up to 40% of its members are women. Nevertheless, their participation in conflict is often overlooked or seen through a highly gendered lens, envisioning them either as gun-toting Amazons in the jungle or helpless victims. Their involvement in peace processes, either as formal negotiators or in more informal roles often remains limited, leading to specific needs being disregarded when implementing peace agreements and post-conflict peacebuilding programmes.

Academics and practitioners working on and with female ex-combatants mostly focus on their reasons for joining armed groups, how their participation affects the armed group (e.g. if it makes them more likely to win, less likely to commit sexual violence or recruit minors, or more likely to engage in peace processes). Another area of interest is how they reintegrate into civilian life immediately after the end of the conflict or once they leave the group. Yet, having been part of an armed group or movement has long-term effects on the lives of the women, their families and communities. However, once the guns are silent and the peace agreements have been signed and at least partially implemented, international and often also national attention moves away from the concerns of ex-combatants.

This policy brief thus takes this specific perspective and looks more closely at the long-term reintegration of female ex-combatants. It has three objectives:

- 1) Highlight the multitude of female combatant experiences before, during and after conflict which shape their long-term reintegration. This background needs to be taken into consideration by international, national and local policymakers and peacebuilders when planning interventions to support female ex-combatants in the long term.
- 2) Present both context-specific and general research findings based on five years of participatory action research with female ex-combatants from six countries.
- 3) Make recommendations for specific actors at different levels to support the long-term reintegration of female ex-combatants.

The insights presented in this brief are based on 66 peer-to-peer interviews conducted by eight female ex-combatant researchers with their former comrades as part of two participatory action research projects with the Berghof Foundation and five partner organisations between 2018 and 2023.<sup>2</sup> The researchers have been members of armed groups that demobilised between 7 and 27 years ago, in Aceh (Indonesia), Burundi, Colombia, Mindanao (Philippines), Nepal, and Uganda. Some of their experiences are featured in the two short films of the *I Have to Speak* series and excerpts from all of them can be found in the storytelling booklets accompanying the films.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Alexis Lianna Henshaw 2015: Where Women Rebel. Patterns of Women's Participation in Armed Rebel Groups 1990-2008. In: *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 18(1), 39-60. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14616742.2015.1007729?journalCode=rfjp20>

<sup>2</sup> Thank you to CEDAC in Burundi, the Kadtabanga Foundation for Peace and Development Advocates in Mindanao, the Nepal Peacebuilding Initiative, Makipura in Colombia, FOWAC in Uganda as well as Shadia Marhaban in Aceh. We also thank the Moro Women Development and Cultural Center (MWDECC) who have been part of a separate but related project resulting in the booklet "Asking my Sisters" (2021).

<sup>3</sup> See Resources and References section at the end of this publication.

## 2 Multitude of female combatant experiences before, during and after conflict

The women from each context come from very different backgrounds, from rural settings and cities, from different ethnic and educational backgrounds, and from different religious and ideological standpoints. They became members of the armed groups in very different ways, some joining out of political and ideological conviction, some to fight against repression and discrimination, some to escape poverty and lack of opportunity, some to follow in the footsteps of their families or partners. Some were abducted against their will.

Once women join armed movements, their first few weeks are often structured in much the same ways as those of male recruits: by military training. After this, roles diversify by context. In some contexts, such as Nepal or Colombia, women take on almost equal combat positions and some also become commanders (although at a much lower rate than men). In both Nepal and Colombia this is accompanied by a strong ideological framework that includes the liberation of women.<sup>4</sup> In other contexts, such as Mindanao or Aceh, female members of armed groups mostly take on so-called support roles which are at the same time often essential, including logistics, medical care and intelligence. In almost all, they are involved in bringing on new recruits.

Some experience sexual violence at the hands of the enemy or their own troops and almost all suffer some level of long-term physical or mental health consequences of their time in the conflict, such as chronic back or knee pain from carrying heavy loads, untreated bullet wounds, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and other trauma effects. Different armed groups also have very different policies regarding the possibility of having children whilst being part of the group. Some, like the PKK in Kurdistan and the FARC (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia*) in Colombia, are strongly opposed to this, at times forcibly removing children or forcing abortions.<sup>5</sup> In others, such as in the Maoists in Nepal or the GAM (*Gerakan Aceh Merdeka*) in Aceh, pregnancy was accepted and women left their child with a family member while they rejoined their fight. On the other side of the spectrum, groups like the LRA (*Lord's Resistance Army*) in Uganda have practised forced marriage and forced pregnancy after abducting young women and girls.

The women's experiences also differ vastly once they leave the armed group, either because the conflict ended and the group demobilised after a peace agreement or because they leave or escape from the group while the conflict continues. The Berghof Foundation Policy Insight Paper '*Gender-inclusive conflict transformation: Insights from female former combatants and women associated with resistance and liberation movements*'<sup>6</sup> provides a detailed overview of current policies and practices in peace negotiations and post-war transitions based on the testimonies by many of the women in these research projects.<sup>7</sup>

Providing benefits to (ex-)combatants and including provisions for their life post-demobilisation is usually informed and motivated primarily by wanting to minimize the risk of a return to violence or a re-recruitment of combatants by their former or another armed group. This is one of the reasons why female ex-combatant concerns are often lower on the list of priorities – they are less likely to be seen as a security concern in a post-conflict setting.

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<sup>4</sup> This also applies to other left-wing groups such as the Kurdish PKK (*Partiya Karkeran Kurdistan*) or the Sandinistas in Nicaragua.

<sup>5</sup> See "I Have to Speak." Colombia and Uganda – Female ex-combatants in their own voices. Edited by Evelyn Pauls with Beatrice Aciro, Grace Arach, Violeta Guetnamova and Isabelle Kawka. Berlin: Berghof Foundation. 2023. > I Have To Speak Colombia and Uganda - Berghof Foundation ([berghof-foundation.org](https://berghof-foundation.org))

<sup>6</sup> Claudia Cruz Almeida, Véronique Dudouet and Victoria Cochrane 2022: *Gender-inclusive conflict transformation: Insights from female former combatants and women associated with resistance and liberation movements*. Policy Insights Series No. 1. Berlin: Berghof Foundation. <https://berghof-foundation.org/library/gender-inclusive-conflict-transformation>

<sup>7</sup> See References and Resources section for a full list of projects and their outputs.

If there is a formal disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) program, female combatants are less likely to participate in it for various reasons. Some of these are technical, such as the requirement to surrender a weapon as proof of combatant status, which not all women can fulfil, or the absence of separate facilities such as sleeping quarters and bathrooms. Others are societally driven: It can be easier for women to reintegrate spontaneously by simply returning to their communities without undergoing a formal process. Communities are less likely to suspect women of having been combatants, allowing them to hide their combatant status (at least in the short term) and avoid being ostracised. While this might make community reintegration easier, it also precludes them from accessing any benefits or programmes for ex-combatants, e.g. skills training, employment opportunities or psychosocial care.

Female fighters who do engage in DDR programs sometimes encounter initiatives that appear to reinforce traditional gender roles, such as attempting to find them husbands or teaching them sewing skills. Consequently, DDR can serve as a means of perpetuating and reinforcing traditional gender norms. On the contrary, when reintegration processes offer the option of collective reintegration, as seen in cases like Guatemala, Nepal, and Colombia, the women who chose this path became more socially and politically active, including assuming leadership roles. Collective reintegration created a protective environment where progressive gender dynamics were preserved within these groups, resulting in more equitable sharing of domestic responsibilities, childcare arrangements, and reduced domestic violence.<sup>8</sup>

Another key determining factor in the long-term reintegration success of female combatants is the support of their family and community. If the family of the woman welcomes her back, either having been supportive, accepting or forgiving of her time in the armed group, connecting back to civilian life becomes much easier. Family support is not only important for the mental health of demobilised female combatants but also to alleviate material concerns around housing, employment and subsistence.

A supportive immediate family can also help manage community tensions, which can complicate long-term reintegration, especially in rural settings with tight-knit communities. This is particularly difficult in conflict-affected parts of the country where community members were directly affected by the conflict. Stigma against female combatants and their children born during their time in the group can be a long-lasting impediment to reintegration. Not only have they violated standards of femininity by taking up arms but returning with children that were born out of regular social structures contributes to further stigmatisation. This short overview of the multiple ways in which female combatants experience conflict and its aftermath highlights the importance of accounting for the diversity of experiences of female combatants. Long-term reintegration challenges are often the result of conflict or immediate post-conflict experiences which can differ drastically within and across contexts.

Women, who might have felt empowered during their time in the group but were then confronted with a post-conflict reality of unchanged gender relations, might continue to feel a sense of disillusionment and disengagement or they might continue fighting for the ideals they practised. Women who experienced a high level of victimisation

*“About family reunification, they always told us “Guerrilla, surrender, your family is waiting for you”. And it turned out that many of our families were not waiting for us. “You’ve been gone for many years”, “You don’t know what’s going on here”, “We don’t want you here anymore”. There are also families who don’t accept that you were in the guerrilla because a woman carrying a rifle is unforgivable.”*

Quote from a former female combatant from Colombia

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<sup>8</sup> Wenche Iren Hauge 2023: *Collective Reintegration: Social and Political Advantages for Female Ex-Combatants*. PRIO GPS Policy Brief. Oslo: PRIO Centre on Gender, Peace and Security. <https://reliefweb.int/report/colombia/collective-reintegration-social-and-political-advantages-female-ex-combatants>

during their time in the armed group might suffer long-term mental health problems related to trauma and PTSD which continues to impact their daily life and relationships. All of them might experience exclusion and stigma by the civilian population.

### 3 Key research findings

With a specific focus on long-term reintegration, there are a number of specific findings from across the different contexts:

- ≡ **Exclusion during the peace process has long-lasting consequences:** Issues that did not make it on the negotiating table during the peace process are extremely difficult to demand or put on the agenda later on. The lack of female negotiators, combatant and civilian, often also results in specific issues affecting women and female ex-combatants being absent from the text of the agreement. Among those are usually childcare, psychosocial support and the economic empowerment of women and marginalised groups.
- ≡ **Lack of funding:** Already during the initial phases of the implementation of a peace agreement, female combatant's concerns are not usually high on the priority funding list. This applies both to direct benefits, such as access to healthcare, housing, training and employment opportunities, but also to issues that may have been put on the agenda by female ex-combatants during the peace process, such as land reform.
- ≡ **Return to traditional gender roles:** The seemingly clear distinction between war and peace as demarcated by the signing of a peace agreement often leads to the expectation of a return to traditional gender roles once the exceptional state of war is declared over. This ignores the reality of the blurry line between conflict and peace with direct and structural violence preceding and continuing after officially declared wars. It also assumes that pre-conflict society is a desirable and 'normal' state to return to. Some women joined armed groups precisely to fight against traditional gender norms and experience a different reality.<sup>9</sup>
- ≡ **Fractionalisation of collective:** Whilst armed groups during the active phase of the conflict are usually characterised by a strictly hierarchical military structure, accompanied by a clear set of rules of conduct and often also an ideological framework, these structures tend to disintegrate quickly after demobilisation. At times, this is an expressed goal of the DDR programme, to avoid regrouping of armed factions. Even if the armed group transforms into a (governing) party, having the 'spoils of war' to distribute (be it government offices or international development money), often leads to competing interests and personal gain taking precedence over a shared purpose that united members during the conflict. This can also rupture the distinct benefits of the collective, for example collective care, or the sense of belonging to a supportive community.
- ≡ **Lack of economic opportunity and stigmatisation of female ex-combatants are interlinked and mutually reinforcing.** Many factors contribute to the lower economic status and lack of opportunity for female combatants, including lack of or interrupted education, lack of 'marketable' skills, lingering mental and physical health effects, and absence of community ties. This is compounded by the stigma faced by female ex-combatants, which in turn leads to even fewer economic opportunities and thus even more exclusion. The same applies to children born in captivity, who are stigmatised because of their lack of family ties, which severely reduces their economic opportunities, which might drive them to criminal activity, which then again causes more discrimination.

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<sup>9</sup> This is a larger problem with reintegration efforts, which presume that the pre-conflict state of society is a desirable one to return to and not one that significantly contributed to the outbreak of the conflict in the first place.

- ≡ **Peace agreements are never fully implemented within groups and by government counterparts.** There is a strong perception shared by most female ex-combatants across the contexts of these studies that peace agreements are unlikely to live up to the expectations they had of them, especially in terms of gender provisions. This relates both to broader societal changes and reconciliation and to concrete measures around security sector and legal reform, power sharing and participation of women.
- ≡ **Long-term reintegration support neglects important aspects, such as (mental) health concerns.** While many long-term reintegration programmes include livelihood activities and psychosocial counselling, the long-term physical health concerns of ex-combatants are rarely factored in. Some of these are present since their time in the group, e.g. bullet wounds, but others only emerge after many years, e.g. back or knee problems from carrying heavy loads at a young age.
- ≡ **Female ex-combatants' capacities to contribute to peacebuilding and reconciliation are often underutilised and undervalued.** Many female combatants have developed skills during their time in the group, e.g. managing conflict in a diverse group of people, building community in difficult circumstances, pushing for gender equality etc., which could be useful in a wider peacebuilding context. However, these experiences are rarely drawn upon by peacebuilding actors but could be crucial to building links between ex-combatant and civilian populations.

*“So many of us were aware that while we were signing these agreements, non-compliance was to be expected because history taught us so. History repeats itself. Of all the revolutionary groups that have signed agreements worldwide, or here in Latin America, there is not one revolutionary group that has fully implemented its agreement. On the contrary, they have always been betrayed.”*

Quote from a former female combatant from Colombia

## 4 Recommendations

- ≡ **For peacebuilding organisations and international organisations**
  - When involved in peace processes as facilitators, hosts, mediators or trainers: Ensure meaningful participation of a diversity of women's groups (female combatants, victims, indigenous groups, etc.) in all stages of the peace process.
  - Mainstream diverse gender perspectives through all aspects of potential agreement (DDR, land rights, economic opportunities, transitional justice, combatant benefits, housing, security sector and legal reform, etc.).
  - Guarantee continued funding for gender issues throughout the implementation process.
  - Continue exchange with marginalised groups of women also after an agreement is reached.
  - Continue to reassess dynamics within the ex-combatant community over time. Power dynamics are not fixed, especially in a highly volatile post-agreement period, and new lines of marginalisation are likely to appear.
  - Support self-organised groups of female ex-combatants, which are often best placed to respond to the changing needs of the ex-combatant population.
  - Work with a wide range of actors and community leaders to address stigmatisation and discrimination of people formerly associated with armed groups. This and all engagement should be driven by the needs of the affected populations.

≡ **For civil society**

- Seek engagement with female members of armed organisations to build bridges across feminist/women's movement.
- Purposefully engage female ex-combatants, building on their unique skills to benefit other women.

≡ **For local and regional governments**

- Continue assessing the needs of the former combatant population as a group with potential specific needs in terms of healthcare (mental and physical), education and employment opportunities, and marginalisation.
- When dealing with emerging and seemingly new social issues, consider conflict-related long-lasting effects as potential underlying causes.

≡ **For research and academia**

- Conduct more research on the long-term reintegration of female combatants, including the long-term effects of having been a female combatant, factors that encourage or hinder sustainable reintegration, etc.
- If possible, conduct participatory action research with female ex-combatants to make sure research questions and findings are relevant to the affected population and that research methods are appropriate to the context.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Evelyn Pauls 2023: *Participatory Methods in Peacebuilding Work*. Policy Brief. Berlin: Berghof Foundation. <https://berghof-foundation.org/library/participatory-methods-in-peacebuilding-work>



## 5 Resources and References

**Claudia Cruz Almeida, Véronique Dudouet and Victoria Cochrane.** 2022. *Gender-inclusive conflict transformation: Insights from female former combatants and women associated with resistance and liberation movements.* Policy Insights Series No. 1. Berlin: Berghof Foundation. <https://berghof-foundation.org/library/gender-inclusive-conflict-transformation>

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### I Have to Speak Film Series and Accompanying Booklets

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