“With this past, you'll never become free”

A qualitative interview study of female ex-combatants in Colombia

Anna Sjölander
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“With this past, you'll never become free”:
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Abstract
This thesis explores women's experiences from participation in armed groups, and their subsequent reintegration into civil society within the Colombian context. The study is based on two months of fieldwork, and nine interviews with female ex-combatants from the FARC, the ELN and the AUC currently enrolled in the reintegration process. Most research focus on women in specific armed groups, and tend to portray women in terms of either empowerment or oppression. This thesis criticizes such tendencies, through the exploration of the complex and gendered processes of de/militarization. The study shows that the women's lives have always - before, during and after their participation in armed groups - been marked by insecurity and exposure to violence. Sporadic incidents of direct physical violence were not always found as most distressing, rather daily stressors including factors like poverty and psychological stress, had larger impact on the women. Further, the women experienced liminality, both as members of an armed group and as participants in the reintegration program, which offered both possibilities and hindrances. In the armed groups established power hierarchies were altered and gendered norms were transgressed, at the same time as the women's reproductive rights were severely constrained. In their quest to become a part of civil society, conforming to conventional femininity became a central strategy for hiding their past. However, the burden of being the primary parent posed challenges for the process of reintegrating.

Key words: gender, DDR, reintegration, female ex-combatants, militarization, Colombia

Resumen
Esta tesis explora las experiencias de las mujeres en la participación en grupos armados, y su posterior reintegración a la sociedad civil en el contexto colombiano. El estudio se basa en dos meses de trabajo de campo, y nueve entrevistas con mujeres ex-combatientes de las FARC, el ELN y las AUC actualmente inscritas en el proceso de reintegración. La mayoría de la investigación existente se centra en mujeres de grupos armados específicos, y tiende a retratarlas, ya sea en términos de potenciación o de opresión. En esta tesis se critican tales tendencias, a través de la exploración de los procesos complejos y de género de de/militarización. El estudio muestra que la vida de las mujeres siempre ha estado - antes, durante y después de su participación en grupos armados - marcada por la inseguridad y la exposición a la violencia. Incidentes esporádicos de violencia física directa no han sido siempre los más angustiosos, sino que más bien han sido factores de estrés diarios, como la pobreza y el estrés psicológico, los que han tenido mayor impacto en las mujeres. Además, las mujeres experimentaron liminalidad, tanto como miembros de un grupo armado y como participantes en el programa de reintegración, que ofrecían tanto posibilidades y obstáculos. En los grupos armados las jerarquías de poder establecidas fueron alteradas y se transgredieron las normas de género, al mismo tiempo que los derechos reproductivos de las mujeres fueron severamente restringidos. En su intento de hacerse parte de la sociedad civil, una estrategia para esconder su pasado sería conformándose a la feminidad convencional. Sin embargo, la carga de ser el pariente principal impide el proceso de reintegración.

Palabras clave: género, DDR, reintegración, mujeres ex-combatientes, militarización, Colombia
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List of Acronyms

**ACR.** Agencia Colombiana para la Reintegración (Colombian Agency for Reintegration).

**AUC.** Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (United Self-defense Forces of Colombia).

**BACRIM.** Bandas Criminales Emergentes (Emerging Criminal Groups).

**DDR.** Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration.

**ELN.** Ejército de Liberación Nacional (National Liberation Army).

**EPL.** Ejército Popular de Liberación (People's Liberation Army).

**FARC.** Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia).

**IDP.** Internally Displaced Persons.

**PPR.** Personas en Proceso de Reintegración (Person undergoing a Reintegration Process).

**PRVC.** Programa para la Reincorporación de la Vida Civil (Program for Reincorporation to the Civil Life).

**SENA.** Servicio Nacional de Aprendizaje (National Service of Learning).

**UN.** United Nations.

Definitions

**Armed conflict:** A contested incompatibility that concerns government and/or territory where the use of armed force between two parties, of which at least one is the government of a state, results in at least 25 deaths in a year.

**Civil war:** Conflict between a government and a non-governmental party, with no interference from other countries.

**Armed (opposition) group:** A nongovernmental group engaged in armed struggle against the government and/or other rival forces or groups.

**Paramilitary:** A self-militarized force which is not part of the state's formal armed forces.

**One-sided violence:** The use of armed force, by the government of a state or by an armed group, against civilians which results in at least 25 deaths in a year.

**Gender:** Masculine and feminine roles and bodies, in all their aspects including biological and cultural structures, dynamics and scripts associated with each gender group.

**Gender equality:** Equality between men and women in respect to their treatment and opportunities, economic and social conditions.

**Discrimination:** The unjust or prejudicial treatment of different categories of people, e.g. on the grounds of sex, race, age or sexual orientation.
1. Introduction

In recent years, the notion that armed conflict affects men and women differently has been somewhat recognized. This is largely due to the United Nation's Resolution 1325 which incorporates a gender perspective into conflict prevention, solution and post-conflict reconstruction. The resolution, as well as researchers within the field of gender and conflict, has emphasized the importance of female participation in peace processes and the need for protection for women and girls affected by war.

However, it appears to be more problematic to include women into this perspective when studying topics of participation in armed conflict which traditionally, and still, is considered a male domain. Despite gender stereotypical beliefs, women are not only peacemakers, but also contribute to ongoing insecurity and violence during the phases of armed conflict (United Nations 2006: 2). Throughout history women have had important roles and key positions in warfare, but still constitute a marginal perspective in studies of armed conflict. In a contemporary cross-national study of 78 rebel groups, women were actively involved in 60 % and held leadership positions in 25 % of all groups (Henshaw 2013: 147). That said, that women are not only victims, but largely participants in armed conflicts appears to have been overlooked.

Despite women's high level of participation in armed conflict, they are rarely included in the planning or implementation of Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration processes. DDR is appointed to people who are most likely to be "spoilers", i.e. the primary threat to post-conflict security and risk to the state of peace. As the potential spoilers are due to gender beliefs presumed to be men, women are excluded from DDR processes (United Nations 2006: 1f). Substantial disparity exists between the numbers of women within armed forces and those entering a DDR program which calls into question the planning, implementation and success of DDR processes (McKay & Mazurana 2004: 100ff). Due to the low formal registration of women in DDR, non-assisted self-reintegration is by far the most common way for women to return to society from the armed forces. This leaves them without assistance on physical, material and psycho-social issues (ibid. 34). The lack of women integrated in DDR must be acknowledged as a failure and in fact poses a threat to durable peace, which highlights the need for further research on this phenomenon.

For over half a century Colombia has experienced war between the government and several guerrilla groups, making it the world today's longest lasting civil war (Uppsala Conflict Data

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1 Adopted by the UN Security Council in year 2000. The Resolution acknowledges women and children as a particularly vulnerable group increasingly used as targets in armed conflict.
2 DDR are strategies applied within peacekeeping operations in an attempt to prevent conflicts from recurring. The purpose of DDR is as implicated by the name to collect and destroy weapons, disband armed groups and reintegrate ex-combatants into civilian society.
Program 2015). In global comparison, Latin America in general, and Colombia in particular has a very high number of female participants in its armed conflict, where e.g in the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) women are expected to constitute up to 40 % of the group (Herrera & Porch 2008: 612). In the Colombian reintegration program, women constitute approximately 5000 persons or 16 % of the enrolled population (Agencia Colombiana para la Reintegración 2014: 4). In global comparison, this female enrollment is high, however, 16 % is not representative of the number of women who have taken part in the conflict. Thus, there are both lessons to be learned from Colombia's high female enrollment as well as possible improvements to be made in the reintegration program.

Women who join an armed group step away from traditional roles and may therefore rise in hierarchy, gain some influence and experience a sense of equality (Agencia Colombiana para la Reintegración 2014: 11). At the same time, female combatants in Colombia are subjected to gendered control through group policies on relationships, contraception and pregnancies, which creates a distinct female subject (Méndez 2012: 42). Further, when women are reintegrated into civil society, structured by gender hierarchies and discrimination, they may face challenges and perceive a loss of power (Agencia Colombiana para la Reintegración 2014: 11). There are deeply paradoxical gendered processes at work in the de/militarization of women, which deserves further attention.

In this thesis, I explore women's experiences from participation in armed groups and their subsequent reintegration into civil society. The study is based on two months of fieldwork in Barranquilla, Colombia, and nine interviews with female ex-combatants currently enrolled in the reintegration process. The fieldwork took place at Agencia Colombiana para la Reintegración (ACR), which is the Colombian authority responsible for the reintegration process.

**Purpose and research questions**

The overall purpose with this study is to impart understanding of the circumstances in which women participate in the armed conflict and reintegration process within the Colombian context. The aim was to explore the perspectives of women, both within armed groups and in the reintegration process, in order to inform a more comprehensive reintegration program that is cognizant of their specific needs. The research questions to be answered are therefore:

- How do women describe and reflect upon their experiences of war and the reintegration process?

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3 For instance in comparison with Sierra Leone where women constituted only 6 % of the population in the DDR process, even though they made up almost half of the armed opposition group (Mazurana & Carlson 2004: 2).

4 Combatant is a criticized term as it implies only one sort of militarized person, i.e. one who has been issued a gun. Hence, e.g. cooks, porters and forced "wives" are excluded (Enloe 2004: 96). In this thesis, the term is used in a broad sense, including association to an armed group regardless of role or rank.
What role does gender and its associated power dynamics play among participants in the reintegration process?

How do women construct their identities in the movement from war towards eventual peace? How do they make sense of their experiences and integrate them into a life of moving forward and away from the conflict?

**Background to the Colombian conflict**

The civil war dates back to the 1940s when Colombian politics was dominated by two parties; the liberals and the conservatives. After the liberal party leader Jorge Eliécer Gaitán was assassinated in 1948, riots and violence spread across the country. The following decade, the episode of Colombian history known as *La Violencia*, is named after the immense violence in which between 200,000 and 300,000 people were killed (Pettersson 2015). In 1958 the liberals and the conservatives reached an agreement on a coalition government, ending the violent decade. The agreement excluded other political actors, such as non-elites and marginal sectors, and during the 60s a number of left-wing groups started its armed struggle against the government (Méndez 2012: 64f).

The FARC was formed in 1966, and origins from rural self-defense groups. During *La Violencia*, the government launched attacks against peasant groups with the motive of fighting a communist threat, which made peasants in western Colombia to regroup with support from the Communist Party. FARC was based on a Marxist-Leninist ideology with the aim to bring down the regime, fight “U.S. Imperialism” and achieve a socio-economic reform. During the 80s the support base for the FARC started to broaden including urban students, intellectuals and workers, but the main support base remained foremost rural (Pettersson 2015).

At the same time the Ejército de Liberatión Nacional (ELN) was formed in northern Colombia, by members with foremost urban middle-class background. Their ideology was based on Marxism-Leninism and Liberation theology, a Catholic philosophy for social awareness and justice. Their activity was initially centered around urban centers, such as labor unions and student movements, but the ELN also had a significant number of members with peasant origins. In the 80s, the ELN grew stronger as oil was discovered in their operating area, where oil companies gave rent payments. Ransoms were another large income, as the ELN is the group responsible for more kidnappings than any other armed group in Colombia. In the late 90s, the ELN was in their strongest era with approximately 5000 members (Uppsala Conflict Data Program 2015). Women

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5 There have been a number of armed opposition groups involved in the Colombian conflict, and all have had female members. In this thesis I will only describe the ones of which my interview participants were part of: the FARC, the ELN and the AUC. These are also the largest and most influential non-governmental parties in the conflict. Guerrilla/s is used synonymously to the ELN and the FARC, while paramilitary refers to the AUC.

6 Peasants is a common term used in Latin America which refers to people who live rurally and are characterized as having low socio-economic standing.
were expected to constitute between 30 and 50% of the group members (Kunz & Sjöberg 2009: 8).

Drug trafficking, cartels and ransom kidnapping has characterized the conflict and been an important part of the country's violent history. Colombia has been one of the primary suppliers of marijuana, but foremost for cocaine, consumed in the US. During the 80s and 90s the drug lords grew more powerful and more violent where two largest drug cartels, the Medellín Cartel and the Cali Cartel, were fighting violent battles against each other. The cartels also fought against the government where thousands of people were killed during the battles (Pettersson 2015).

Between 1980-1995, the FARC experienced a period of modernization, military improvements and expansion due to its involvement in the drug trade, e.g. through providing security to drug traffickers and taxing coca growers (Méndez 2012: 75). FARC's campaigns were increasingly funded through the drug trade which, in combination with one-sided violence against civilians, kidnappings and extortions led to a loss of support among the civilian population (Pettersson 2015). The FARC has adopted a more elastic ideology including social protection for lower classes, agricultural reform and democratic participation. Instead of continuing to question the legitimacy of the government, they have increasingly critiqued the government's incompetence for dealing with social problems (Stanski 2006: 139). The organization is characterized by a relatively strong hierarchy and harsh discipline. In 2008, the FARC was estimated to have between 10 000 and 15 000 members (Uppsala Conflict Data Program 2015).

In an attempt to protect the narco-traffickers against the guerrillas, paramilitary groups were developed in the 80s, formed by large landowners and drug lords who bought their services. The paramilitaries' official objective was to defend civilians attacked by the guerrillas, but also to intimidate peasants from joining leftist organizations (Méndez 2012: 71ff). To some extent, the paramilitaries served in assisting the governmental forces as a counterforce against the guerrillas, but the exact link between the state and the paramilitaries is subject to debate (Pettersson 2015; Méndez 2012: 79). The paramilitaries also made attempts to influence government policies through attacks on government employees, in particular in relation to the threat on extraditing drug lords to the US. The umbrella organization Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC) was created in 1997, to which most paramilitary groups eventually joined. The organization grew rapidly due to its income from drug trafficking and gained presence almost over the whole country (Pettersson 2015). The organization was characterized by a fairly loose structure, and was thought to have connections to local military commanders as recruitment was common among former Colombian army soldiers (Uppsala Conflict Data Program 2015). The AUC was an important part of the conflict, and is responsible for large parts of the violence against civilians that occurred. When the AUC lost a battle against the FARC, they often sought revenge by massacring civilians in the areas that was
controlled by the guerrilla. In order to justify the violence, the AUC claimed that the civilians were collaborating with the guerrilla. The FARC claimed the opposite when attacking civilians in areas controlled by AUC (Pettersson 2015).

There have been several attempts to make peace agreements between the government and the fighting parties. The smaller guerrillas had a peace agreement with the government in the early 90s, but the conflict kept escalating as the FARC and the ELN were not part of the agreement (ibid.). An increasing number of Colombians demanded peace and a new president who would take a “heavy-handed” approach on the violence. In the presidential elections in 2002, Alvaro Uribe proved to be that man (Theidon 2007: 72). Under pressure to show positive results in the war against the guerrillas, Falsos Positivos (false positives) took place, which meant that the Colombian army routinely executed civilians. Soldiers and officers abducted or lured civilians to remote locations, where they were killed and weapons were placed on their bodies, so as to report them as guerrillas killed in actions. In 2008 these acts became known, resulting in a huge media scandal, which pushed to government to take measures to stop the crimes. Between 2002-2008, approximately 3000 people were killed as Falsos Positivos, which in 2015 still were being investigated by prosecutors (Human Rights Watch 2015). Simultaneously with the intensified struggle against the guerrilla, Uribe reached an agreement on a cease-fire with the AUC in 2002, which eventually resulted in the demobilization of the group. The demobilization process took place over three years where approximately 30 000 ex-combatants were disarmed, of which approximately 2000 were women (Pettersson 2015; Kunz & Sjöberg 2009: 7).

Apart from the battles between the government forces and the guerrillas, there were heavy battles between the AUC and the guerrillas. Smaller confrontations have also occurred between the guerrillas, such as the FARC and the ELN (Méndez 2012: 72ff). When the conflict was the most intense, thousands of people died each year in the battles, and all parties involved conducted numerous attacks against civilians (Uppsala Conflict Data Program 2015). Both the guerrillas and the paramilitaries have to a large extent used child soldiers, many of them recruited by force. The armed conflict has resulted in large flows of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), both within Colombia and to neighboring countries. Between 2002-2005, approximately 3 million people became IDPs. The armed conflict has left a deep wound in the psyche of the Colombian inhabitants, as many of the death victims were civilians (Pettersson 2015).

In 2012, President Juan Manuel Santos and the government went public with the once secret peace negotiations with the FARC. The deadline for the peace agreement was set to March 23 2016, but was postponed as the parties have not yet agreed on all parts of the agenda. When the agreement is signed, a referendum will be held where the Colombian citizens vote on whether they accept the
agreement or not (Sida 2016). The ELN has expressed willingness to negotiate with the
government, and initial talks on the agenda were discussed during 2014 and 2015 (Pettersson 2015).
At the moment of writing, the conflict is active but it has decreased in intensity since 2005
(Uppsala Conflict Data Program 2015). There are approximately 10 000 active combatants in the
guerrillas, and numerous drug cartels still operating (Méndez 2012: 1). Most paramilitaries were
demobilized during the presidency of Uribe (2002-2010), but a few small groups are still active
(Pettersson 2015).

**Previous research**

My research project relates to the field of gender, armed conflict and DDR in general, and to female
ex-combatants and reintegration within the Colombian context in particular. In approaching this
topic, I have been influenced by work in the area of feminist theory and international relations (see
Cynthia Enloe; Maria Stern; Brooke A. Ackerly) as well as women and girls' participation in armed
groups and DDR (see Chris Coulter; Susan McKay; Dyan Mazurana; Alexis Leanna Henshaw). Common for research in the field is to highlight the multiple roles women play in international
relations, the masculine culture of state defense, feminist anti-militarism as well as ontological and
epistemological critique to the masculine field of international relations itself. International
approaches to address issues of gender and armed conflict, such as the previously mentioned
Resolution 1325 and gender-responsive DDR, have further shaped my approach to the topic. My
background as a gender scholar has influenced the analytical approach through feminist theory, such
as queer theory (see Judith Butler; Jack Halberstam), theories on gender-based violence (Eva
Lundgren) and the relation between gender and the nation-state (Nira Yuval-Davis), which will be
further described in the theory section. These are the research fields I relate to as the topics are, to
varying extent, relevant for my study.

Traditionally, there has been resistance to integrate gender into the analysis of armed
conflict. In later years, there is a small but growing field of literature on female combatants in
armed opposition groups (Kunz & Sjöberg 2009: 2). Research on the topic covers various
perspectives, and come from different scientific disciplines including law, anthropology, gender
research and political science, to mention a few. The research field can basically be divided into
three main areas representing different phases of war: pre-conflict (e.g. recruitment strategies,
motives for joining), conflict dynamics (e.g. group dynamics, roles and ranks) and conflict
resolution (e.g. DDR and reconciliation). Research on the Colombian context often focus on women
in specific armed groups, primarily the FARC (see Keith Stanski; Natalia Herrera and Douglas
Porch; Rahel Kunz and Ann–Kristin Sjöberg), while others are comparative (see Andrea Méndez).
To my knowledge, there is no published research with focus on female combatants or gender relations in the ELN. Within the field of research, there has been a tendency to portray women in terms of either empowerment or oppression. On the one hand, female combatants are portrayed as empowered and liberated women. On the other, women's situation and the structure of the organization is portrayed as remarkably sexist (Kunz & Sjöberg 2009: 2). The dominant theoretical perspective regarding gender and the Colombian conflict is, to the best of my knowledge, militarized masculinity (see Kimberly Theidon; Diana López Castañeda and Henri Myrttinen).

Andrea Méndez's, political scientist, dissertation has been influential for my study as it addresses the militarization of women in the FARC and the AUC. According to Méndez, both groups have incorporated women into their ranks but the manner in which they construct, negotiate, challenge or reinforce gender roles is different. The female subject is differentially militarized in the groups, both in relation to male peers and women in other groups. The common denominator between the FARC and the AUC is that women's sexuality plays a central role in the militarization of female combatants, and that the militarization of gender has hyper-masculine characteristics (Méndez 2012: ii; 42).

In the AUC, women and men were required to perform outside their traditional roles, for instance by engaging in activities traditionally associated to the other gender, such as cooking for men and combat for women. The AUC had no formal commitment to gender equality and in addition payed salaries to its members - a combination which meant that there were ways to resist changes to traditional gender identities. For example, men could pay someone to do their cooking shifts, and women could become romantically involved with a superior in order to escape combat activities. Further, women were allowed to have children and were not directly forced to use contraception (ibid. 184ff). In the FARC, women were required to adopt behavior typically associated with male soldiers and military training. Their sexuality and reproductive rights were controlled by e.g. forced contraceptions and forced abortions, which created a clear distinction between men and women in the group. The organization's priorities departs from traditional conceptions of femaleness, thus they remove reproduction from the ideal female FARC member (ibid. 160). According to Méndez, women participate in the FARC and the AUC by having their femaleness militarized in a way that maintains clear boundaries and traditional conceptions of male and female genders. In the groups, women perform some roles traditionally seen as male, while some female values, such as motherhood is appropriated in a way that the group benefit from (ibid. 230).

7 I disagree with Méndez's use of the term gender identity, as it appears like she refers to gender norms and gender expressions. However, I will not change this terminology when referring to Méndez.
Rationale

The rationale for this study is two-fold, as there is both empirical and theoretical relevance. As previously mentioned, even though many armed groups have female participants they are rarely the focus of research. For instance, a review of research on child soldiers highlights gender blindness, virtually always referring to boys being interviewed or quoted (McKay & Mazurana 2000: 2). Further, many policy recommendations and reports focus solely on women as victims or peace promoters, and men as perpetrators of violence. The focus has to a large extent been one-dimensional only highlighting men and women in certain roles, and thus the interconnection between gender and conflict has not been sufficiently incorporated in analyses on gender and armed conflict (Stern & Nystrand 2006: 5f). The majority of armed combatants are men, but women do indeed support war, engage in conflict and commit violent and sexualized acts within war (ibid. 52ff). With this background, I will argue that there is an empirical gap where the experiences of female ex-combatants need to be brought to the forefront. As already mentioned, previous research has primarily focused on women in the FARC, while in my study women from different armed groups were chosen, in order to explore the similarities and differences experiences through crossing the unquestioned borders between the groups.

The Colombian civil war is perhaps one of the most well-researched and documented conflicts in the world. The research includes works from countless academics, hundreds of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and Colombian authorities (López Castañeda & Myrttinen 2014: 6). However, the Colombian DDR process is unique in the sense that it was implemented in a context of ongoing civil war, in contrast with other countries which are usually in the post-conflict phase. This means that the reintegration of ex-combatants takes place simultaneously with guerrillas recruiting new of members and continuing their fight against the government. In addition, some former ex-combatants from the AUC are re-mobilizing as criminal gangs, Bandas Criminales Emergentes (BACRIM), which call into question the success of the reintegration program (Méndez 2012: 2; 51). Lastly, if the government and the guerrillas succeed in reaching a peace agreement, there is a high number of women yet to demobilize, which highlights the need for more research on women and DDR within the context.

Women who have rejoined their communities can be an important asset in the process of reintegration, and their views are beneficial when re/designing the reintegration processes. Their experiences may help with the work of reintegrating former fighters, especially regarding issues of reconciliation and making communities more safe (United Nations 2006: 3). It is beyond the scope

8 The relationship between ex-combatants and BACRIM is subject to debate, as only 12 % of those arrested have been ex-combatants (López Castañeda & Myrttinen 2014: 13).
of this thesis to make comprehensive and direct recommendations to the ACR on how to develop their gender perspective on reintegration. Nevertheless, to illuminate the experiences, thoughts and feelings of female ex-combatants could make an important contribution both to the field of research and the reintegration process.

The second rationale for this study is the theoretical angle which is worth further examination concerning the dis/connection between women and political violence. The conventional wisdom of the connection between men, masculinity and war and hence the disconnection between women, femininity and war creates a theoretical conflict with the phenomenon of female combatants. It appears as it is not only easier to incorporate women in peace work than in the understanding of female combatants, but that the notion of female combatants becomes analytically unintelligible. In this aspect, to highlight how women make sense of their own experiences from conflict and DDR, and by applying alternative theoretical perspectives to the already established ones, may serve to further theoretical developments on the topic.

Gender inequality, as a societal and even global structure, raises the question of what a gender perspective on reintegration actually can do. How is it possible to measure successful outcomes of reintegration in a society that clearly disadvantage women? While a gender perspective on reintegration processes increases the understanding for female ex-combatants situation, societal structures are not easily altered, even though they are acknowledged. Theory development aims to make the surrounding world comprehensible, but also to challenge established structures through illuminating new possible solutions to inequality. By questioning what is taken for granted, and highlighting other aspects and perspectives of doing gender, it is possible to move closer to different approaches of challenging the gender inequality.
2. Theoretical framework

In this section, I will describe the theoretical framework. No single overall theory was chosen, since I found that no single theory could grasp or explain the women's stories in a comprehensive way. Instead, a matrix of theories: research results transferable from other contexts, theories from other academic disciplines and theories that succeeded to explain certain dynamics have guided the analysis. That said, the theoretical framework is not used for testing empirics, but rather as a way to create meaning of their individual stories. Some theories are interwoven in the analysis and are developed as they appear in the text, while the most fundamental ones are described in this section. Some are explicitly used, while others serve as an explanation to the use of certain concepts, and how I have approached the topic.

Gender dichotomies

In the feminist classic *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir describes androcentrism as the system that puts the man and the masculine perspective at the center of the world view. According to Beauvoir, the man is considered the norm and the woman “the Other”, defined and differentiated in relation to the man and not the other way around. This constitutes the basis in the dichotomy between men and women, where men as the norm are constructed as superior (Beauvoir 2002: 12f).

The public sphere, where the nation-building processes occur, is traditionally seen as male. The sphere consists of what is understood as masculine activities: e.g. political representation, defending of nations, and the productive activity of economy. The private sphere, referring to the household, is associated to women and what is understood as female activities. The private sphere includes caring for family, cultural traditions, subsistence agriculture and reproduction. Men's and women's connection to separate spheres have authorized unequal positions in society and made women particularly vulnerable to poverty and violence (Stern & Nystrand 2006: 45). Gender is a relationship of power, where masculinities and femininities are interlinked. The man as protector of nation is dependent on the other part of the dichotomy - the woman representing the body and the homeland (ibid. 37).

The notion of peaceful women and violent men runs deep within Western perceptions of war and gender, both within popular and scholarly writing, despite historical evidence of women’s support for, complicity in and collaboration with war (Utas 2005: 405f). Female violence and aggression violates cultural assumptions about women, where many researchers, reporters and the public at large are unable to reconcile female individuals with violent activities (Henshaw 2013: 132). Due to the conventional perception of men and women and their relation to war, women who kill are portrayed as anomalies demanding gender specific explanations. Men are understood as the
organizers of the heterosexual, male vigilantes defending the peaceful and honorable women and children from outside threats, thus women who turn to violence appears as an unintelligible paradox (Stern 2008).

**Violence as a continuum**

Caroline Moser, social anthropologist, disputes that war and political violence is categorized independently from other types of violence, and the tendency within research to focus on a single violence type. Dichotomous categorizations between violence in the public and private sphere, only focus on women in the arena of intra-familiar violence or household level. According to Moser, a more accurate and nuanced conceptualization is that violence exists along a continuum, which succeeds to identify violence from the private sphere to the public sphere. A gendered continuum of violence and conflict shows that different types of violence are closely interrelated and cannot be treated separately (Moser 2001: 31ff). To illustrate the continuum, Moser takes an example from women and men living in an area of armed conflict and political violence in Colombia. In this setting, political violence over land related to drug production, in turn created social conflict between neighbors, which in turn affected intra-household violence. The categories are not mutually exclusive, the interrelationship is complex, context-specific and multi-directional. The continuum is intended to view the causes and impacts of violence in a holistic way, and to move away from individual interventions to more integrated strategies (ibid. 34ff).

Shana Tabak, law scholar, argues that there is a false, gendered dichotomy between conflict and post-conflict, as war is often conceptualized as two different phases. There are no guarantees that the termination of a conflict automatically improves the lives of those affected by war. Transitional justice\(^9\) is an attempt to bring society back to “normal”, which may reassert patriarchy (Tabak 2011: 113ff). Instead of violence ending in the phase of post-conflict, it re-occupies its “normal” position, as intra-familiar and intra-communal in society (ibid. 139). Violence takes place on a continuum, which perhaps increases or decreases during conflict, but yet is perpetually present (ibid. 121).

The concept of violence as a continuum means that the manifestations: threats, violence and sexual abuse cannot be separated, but are characterized by fluid boundaries and actions that glide into each other. The concept connects more common, sometimes non-criminalized, expressions of sexism with criminalized acts. This means that all forms of gender-based violence is serious – the continuum should not be interpreted as a way to create distinctions between severe and less severe

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\(^9\) Transitional justice are methods to reconcile society after an armed conflict. It concerns e.g. overcoming past trauma and account for past injustice. Mechanisms include everything from prosecutions to amnesty, truth and reconciliation commissions to victim reparations (Tabak 2011: 107).
forms of violence. Rather, the concept is productive in analyses of the extension of different forms of gender-based violence (Lundgren 2001: 16f).

On a general level, violence and the threat of violence, works as a limitation to women's freedom of action. Women's freedom to move in the public sphere is limited by gender-based violence, where the fear has severe consequences for women's abilities to live independently. Fear is also about adjustment, and how women have to learn how to behave according to certain rules, both socially and physically. Hence, the threat of violence is not understood as an expression of individual women's experiences, but are related to larger societal power mechanisms, reproduced in a gender hierarchy (Wendt 2002: 10f).

**Militarized gender performativity**

In her dissertation, Méndez introduces the theoretical framework “militarized gender performativity”, as an attempt to theorize and conceptualize on the presence and experiences of women in armed groups. The theoretical framework draws on research on militarized masculinities, primarily by Cynthia Enloe, referring to a soldiering process where masculine identities become hyper-masculine. This notion is key to Méndez's concept as well, as it creates an “ideal soldier” which is aggressive, threatening, strong, loyal, rational and heterosexual and that represses perceived feminine qualities such as vulnerability, compassion and emotions (Méndez 2012: 31ff). Méndez also draws upon theories on gender performativity, primarily by Judith Butler. Butler rejects the idea that gender identity has specific boundaries that separates them from each other, as well as the notion that gender has an essence prior to the engendering processes. Gender is performative, a copy of a copy, which becomes naturalized through the repetition of gendered acts. That gender is performative does not mean that the subject possess free will to shape the performance, since the surrounding regulates and disciplines certain practices (ibid. 34f).

According to Méndez, women who join the FARC and the AUC disrupts traditional gender relations when entering the field of militarized gender relations. Gender transformation is pervasive in the groups where women have to adopt to certain aspects of a gender identity (ibid. 39). Her study shows that not only masculinity, but also femininity, become militarized in a complex manner. When women join an armed group they do not simply “become like men”, but go through different and contradicting processes affecting their feminine identity, in a context of militarization. According to Méndez, within Colombian armed groups the ideal of militarized femininity includes masculine and feminine ideals. Women have to relate to masculine ideals without losing their femininity completely (ibid. 32f).
**Female masculinity**

Jack Halberstam, literary scholar, argues that masculinity must not, cannot and should not be reduced to the male body and its effects. Even though there might be difficulties defining what masculinity is, it appears as society has little trouble in recognizing it (Halberstam 1998: 1). Halberstam questions what makes femininity so approximate and masculinity so precise, and why femininity is easily performed while masculinity appears as resilient to imitation (ibid. 28). Female masculinity is usually seen as the rejected scraps of dominant masculinity, or a pathological sign of misidentification and maladjustment, to make male masculinity appear as the real thing. According to Halberstam, masculinity becomes legible as masculinity when it leaves the white, male, middle-class body. Female masculinity is not an imitation of masculinity, rather it is a glimpse of how masculinity is constructed as masculinity. Excessive masculinity tend to focus on (male and female) black, latino/a and underclass bodies while insufficient masculinity often is figured on Asian or upper-class bodies. These stereotypical constructions is part of the process where masculinity becomes dominant in the sphere of white, middle-class maleness (ibid. 1ff, my italics). Because of the fact that white, male masculinity has obscured all other masculinities, Halberstam argues that we must turn away from this construction to highlight other, more mobile, forms of masculinity (ibid. 15f).

According to Halberstam, female masculinity can be used to explore a queer subject position that can challenge hegemonic models of gender conformity (ibid. 9). It is both helpful and important to contextualize a discussion of female masculinities in opposition to more generalized discussion of masculinity, that insists that masculinity remains the property of male bodies (ibid. 15f). To play among a variety of masculine identifications does not mean to be forced to become a man or appropriate his maleness, but one is already “just like” a man as masculinities exist on parallel plains. Female masculinity is not about creating another binary in gender variations, it is not the opposite of female femininity nor a female version of male masculinity. Rather, the unholy union of femaleness and masculinity can produce unpredictable results (ibid. 29ff).

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10 Formerly known as Judith.
3. Methodology

In this section, I will describe the data collection process, including methods and setting for the fieldwork and the interviews. Further, the section includes an account of the data analysis, including analytical method and the processing of data, and a discussion regarding reflexivity.

Research setting

The fieldwork took place during September and October 2015 at the ARC’s local office in Barranquilla, which is the largest city in the Atlantic region. The ACR has its administrative office in Bogotá, but is present all over Colombia divided into 32 different offices according to region. The mission of the ACR is to facilitate the return of the demobilized population to legal life in a sustainable manner. They manage the reintegration process of all adult, male and female, ex-combatants. The ACR is responsible for the coordination, advising and execution of the reintegration process which takes place in collaboration with other public and private entities. Further, the ACR is working towards the society and communities into which the PPRs are reintegrated, for instance by trying to reduce social stigma and develop collaborations with possible employers. The office personnel constitutes part of a team and are specialized in different areas, for instance psychology (Agencia Colombiana para la Reintegración 2015).

The persons undergoing a reintegration process (henceforth called PPRs) are demobilized people from organized armed groups: FARC, ELN, Ejército Popular de Liberación (EPL) and AUC. This means that people from e.g. criminal gangs, such as BACRIM, are not allowed to participate in the process. The reintegration process is offered by the Colombian State, through the ACR, to the PPRs willing to reintegrate into civil society. The PPRs have joined the process voluntarily, and have either demobilized collectively (as a result of a peace agreement) or individually (as a result of a personal decision). As long as they do not commit any crime after their demobilization, the Colombian State grants legal benefits for the political crimes and related offenses to the PPRs (ibid.).

In order to get access to the reintegration process, the demobilized person needs to be given a certificate by the Operational Committee for the Abandonment of Weapons (CODA), proving that they are a demobilized person. The way of getting the certificate can look different. People who demobilized collectively were passed along into the process. People who demobilize individually can go to a public authority, for instance a church or a police station, to declare themselves and are then passed into the process (oral information from meetings with the ACR, September 2015).

The reintegration process concerns the “R” in DDR, which takes place after disarmament

11 A different authority, Instituto Colombiana de Bienestar Familiar, is responsible for former child soldiers.
and demobilization. The ACR has a holistic approach to reintegration where each participant is
given an individual reintegration route based on their characteristics and needs, and includes
psycho-social, educational and economic assistance. The PPR's activity is verified on a monthly
basis, and after six months of inactivity they lose the right to program incentives. The assistance
also is offered to the PPR's partners and families, which should be seen as incentives to join and
stay in the program (ibid.).

The reintegration is, in general, a six and a half year long process. Psycho-social assistance
is normally provided for 30 months, or the whole process if needed. Health assistance and education
is provided for the PPR and its family. Normally, the PPR finishes bachillerato (corresponding high
school) or learns practical skills, e.g. to become electricians. Very few continue to university level.
Economic support is provided in terms of monthly payments, but can also concern a loan, e.g. to
buy a house. An economic introduction is also offered where the PPRs can design a business plan
and be given a loan to start their own business. The business plan, education and economic support
are mutually exclusive, thus the PPRs cannot receive support on all three areas. The PPRs are never
given cash, but have to account for where money is going and that they have attended the scheduled
activities, such as classes (ibid.).

Similarly to their approach to reintegration, the ACR implements a gendered strategy based
on the concerns of the individual. Some of their challenges and goals are to strengthen their work in
LGBT-issues, to transform unequal gender relations and to construct new, non-stereotypical,
masculinities (Agencia Colombiana para la Reintegración 2014: 17). According to the official
policy document on reintegration, special attention is given to prevent domestic violence and to
improve women's sexual and reproductive health. Ethnic minorities and disabled people are also
taken into consideration (Conpes 3554 2008: 58f). In addition, in recent negotiations with the
FARC, women are participating in the government's negotiating team in an attempt to strengthen
the gender perspective in the context of negotiations (Agencia Colombiana para la Reintegración
2014: 8).

At the time of the fieldwork, there were approximately 830 PPRs registered at the
reintegration program in Barranquilla. More or less half of the population had finished the process
and half were still active. In the region the vast majority, almost 700 of the PPRs, have participated
in the AUC. The second largest group is from the FARC, followed by some smaller guerrillas.
Women constituted approximately 12% of the PPRs in the region (unpublished document from the
ACR, September 2015).

12 LGBT is an initialism that stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender.
13 The policy document and a resolution constitutes the base for the current Colombian reintegration process.
Qualitative methods for exploratory research

While quantitative methods seek finding systematic and generalizable patterns, qualitative methods are more exploratory and thus crucial for seeking in-depth understanding of a phenomenon. The starting point of the study is that each phenomenon must be seen from its own unique standpoint without the ambition to generalize (Teorell & Svensson 2007: 10f). However, depending on the different contexts, findings can be transferable. Meta-theories and hypotheses are thus not the main driving force within the methodology. Instead these develop inductively, by working in an explorative manner and driven by the empirical data where the researcher has to remain open and creative during the whole process (Tjora 2012: 32). The unexpected is expected, hence the research design emerges over time in interaction with the data.

The individual is placed as the unit of analysis, where their storytelling increases understanding of the world from their point of view, and how they make sense of their experiences and situations. The methodology makes it possible to learn about a social phenomenon through the experiences of particular individuals (ibid. 21). The essence of this methodology is its rich descriptions of the lived experience and its context, thereby generating new knowledge on a social phenomenon.

Interviews provide in-depth information about participants' experiences and viewpoints on particular topics (Turner 2010: 754). In-depth semi-structured interviews can be described as relatively free conversations regarding a specific theme. They are neither regular everyday conversations, nor closed questionnaires. The method opens for probing questions, based on the responses to the pre-constructed questions in the interview guide. Depending on how the participant responds, questions alter or change which is productive when exploring individual experiences. The same general areas are dealt with in each interview, but still allow a degree of flexibility and adaptability in getting information from the participants (ibid: 755). The openness of the method gives the participant time and possibility to reflect over opinions, attitudes and experiences where research creates meaning and understanding of these (Tjora 2012: 81f).

Participatory observations refers to the observation of social behaviors within the study context which are carried out by the researcher who is immersed in said context. This practice is most valuable in that the researcher has direct access to social interactions and social processes, which can substantiate indirect knowledge collected through the interview process. In other words, during observations the researcher can observe what people do, and in interviews people tell what they do. Even a very limited number of observations can generate useful additional data, where interviews are the primary method (Tjora 2012: 34f).
Data collection: the interviews and participatory observations

In total, I conducted nine in-depth interviews with female PPRs. Additionally, I conducted one interview with a male PPR, and two interviews with ACR office personnel. The additional interviews were an enriching complement and gave broader understanding about the ACR and the reintegration program, but as the purpose of the study was to explore the experiences of female ex-combatants, the interviews with them constitute the primary material for the analysis. Each interview was conducted with assistance from an interpreter.  

Ten of the interviews were carried out at the local office in Barranquilla, in a small room at the center of the building. People were working in the corridor outside the office, but I consider the risk of people overhearing the interviews as very small. The interviews took place at a location they are well familiar with, and met with office personnel before and after the interviews. The amount of privacy provided, in combination with the support of the ACR, gave me the impression that the participants felt relaxed about the situation. Two of the interviews took place in a factory building, during one of my participatory observations, at a workshop arranged by the ACR. The setting was in a corridor and the workshop took place behind a wall. The environment was loud, to the extent that the recordings were so distorted that they could not be sufficiently transcribed, therefore I consider the risk of anyone overhearing our conversation as minimal.

Some of the participants mentioned that they had done interviews before, and were thus familiar with the situation of being interviewed. Initially, I presented myself and the project, followed by the informed consent agreement (see appendix 1). The interviews lasted between 30 minutes and two hours, the vast majority around 1.5 hours. None of the participants chose to end the interview, nor opted out on answering any specific questions. Nor have they refuted their testimonies, and have therefore agreed to me using the data in the thesis. The interview guide was revised on two occasions as I learned which type of questions that were productive, how the framing of the question affected the answers I got, and how the topic areas blurred together. Some of the interviews were shortened due to lack of time, e.g. if the PPR had a meeting to attend to, but all topic areas from the interview guide were discussed during each interview (see appendix 2).

I chose to work with a female interpreter since it might be easier for the participants to talk to other women about gender specific experiences, which is the focus of my study. During the interviews I got the impression that they did talk about e.g. pregnancies and abortions in a very open way, which supports my thoughts that a private room created freedom to speak. I also believe that the fact that my interpreter was Colombian, and a local, contributed to the participants' trust in us. I did notice somewhat more cautious answers to the questions regarding the reintegration

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14 The interpreter was paid an equivalent to 145 SEK per hour.
program, which was expected since the ACR were the ones arranging and hosting the interviews. This may have had some effect on the information shared. In the beginning the interpreter and I were far from synchronized, but over time and the more interviews and work we did together, our cooperation developed to be rather synchronous. The interpreter gave me important feedback, thus the product of the interviews is something that we did together. As the cooperation developed, the interpreter could ask follow-up questions without asking for my permission, as she was well informed of what type of questions I wanted to ask. We also agreed on the format of the interviews, i.e. that the participants should be able to talk quite freely about subjects they wanted to discuss or felt was important, and in order to "not break the magic" we just followed the participants' lead. At times this meant that long episodes, around 10 minutes, were not translated immediately and that their stories were much shortened. Since I have a basic understanding of Spanish I could follow what they were saying and choose suitable follow-up questions. Each interview except two were recorded and transcribed, and all attended by me, minimizing any loss of data despite translation challenges. During the fieldwork and thesis writing, the recordings were kept safe, always in my possession when not locked up.

Continuous participatory observations during the eight weeks of the fieldwork informed my understanding of the context. I have also been in Colombia before, approximately for two months, which has strengthened my understanding for the culture. Both formal and informal meetings took place with office personnel, and I have spent numerous hours at the office where I could observe the social interaction between personnel, guards and the PPRs. I was fortunate to attend a conference focused on the juridical aspects of the war and reintegration process, where lecturers with a background in law and personnel from the ACR participated. The conference was not aimed at the PPRs, but rather towards academics, where I got valuable information about the juridical aspects of the reintegration process. I also attended a workshop arranged by the ACR in collaboration with Servicio Nacional de Aprendizaje (SENA, a public education entity) and Coca Cola. The workshop was on the topic of economy, and is an example of how the ACR collaborate with both the public and private sector. During this time I interacted mostly with the PPRs, and many of them were eager to speak with me. The situation was different from the interviews I had conducted, where many of the participants were affected by the consequences of war through physical disabilities, drug or alcohol abuse or were having a very low level of education. This chance to observe in another context other than at the ACR was quite important as I also got to meet people who had not been as successful in the reintegration process, in contrast with most of the interview participants, and has given me a more realistic picture of the broader setting. The observations are sparingly referred to in the analysis, but have been an important complement to my interviews as they have increased my
background knowledge and understanding of the context, which in turn affects my interpretations and analyses. The interviews did not take place within a vacuum – the context is complex and interconnected with all other observations I did during the fieldwork. I have talked with IDPs, a former employee at the ACR and a psychologist who worked with ex-combatants in prisons, to mention a few. To not only speak with those who have participated in the war, but also those affected by the consequences from it, was an essential part of building my background knowledge. All in all, the observations have made me able to present a study informed of the broader context.

Recruitment of participants

The ACR collaborates with Colombian and international students and researchers interested in doing research on the reintegration process. Therefore, I was required to write a thorough research application to the ACR that included, among other things, my interview guide which was examined and approved. This was followed by signed agreements between me, the interpreter and the ACR, regarding confidentiality, the project plan and our respective obligations and commitments. In relation to the participants, our agreement was that the office personnel in Barranquilla would recruit them for me. In practice this meant that the personnel called the PPRs and asked if they wanted to come to the office to attend an interview.

Women with different backgrounds were chosen purposively (regarding armed group, age and type of demobilization). The purpose was to maximize diversity and therefore increase the possibility to encounter different experiences and testimonies from the female ex-combatants. Five of the interview participants had participated in the AUC, two in the FARC and two in the ELN. Approximately half of them grew up in rural areas and half in urban areas, and the majority joined the armed groups when they were underaged. The time they had participated in the armed groups ranged from 13 months to 11 years. Five of them had demobilized collectively, and four of them individually. At the time for the interviews, the participant's ages were between 23 to 39. All lived in estrato one or two, which are the lowest socioeconomic levels in the Colombian society. Each individual was at different stages in the reintegration process, and had been enrolled from three to nine years, where the latter therefore had finished the public process. A few of them had been enrolled in the program by Programa para la Reincorporación de la Vida Civil (PRVC) before the ACR was founded, and thus have experiences from both processes.

Measures have been taken to ensure the anonymity and security of the interview participants. First of all, the confidentiality agreement between me and the ACR meant that I was

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15 The Colombian society is divided into different socio-economic estratos. Those with more economic capacity pay more tax for public services, and contribute to the lower estratos. The scale is one to six, where one is the lowest.

16 PRVC was the precursor to the ACR, and was focused on short-term reinsertion. Reinsertion concerns assistance to ex-combatants, after demobilization but prior to reintegration (Méndez 2012: 98).
not allowed to ask for the participants name nor any contact information. Hence, the ACR has participated in the anonymization of the participants. All names used in the thesis are thus fictive. Our agreement was, that if the participants changed their mind and did not want me to use the data from the interviews, they would tell the ACR who in turn would inform me.

In relation to the anonymity, it is worth mentioning that the personnel at the ACR in Barranquilla are well aware of which people participated in the interviews. This was not possible to avoid, due to the fact that they were the ones granting me access to these individuals. This is the reason why I have only initially, under this section, described the background of the participants, while personal details are largely excluded in the analysis. However, I cannot guarantee that certain testimonies cannot be linked to certain people. This information is most likely connected to their time in the armed group or their family situation, which they might have shared with personnel at the ACR. In the most sensitive aspects, such as criticism towards the ACR or the reintegration process, measures are taken to anonymize the participants by removing their fictive names completely. Apart from this thesis, I will write a summary of the paper specifically to the ACR. This will be framed as suggestions to them, where no participant will be cited or referred to – hence it is my interpretation of the situation that will be the foundation of my recommendations.

My dependence on the ACR means that there is a possible risk of selection bias in the recruitment of interview participants, as they chose the people I interviewed. Even though they might not have had the intention of choosing specific persons (such as PPRs who are positive towards the ACR) there is a possibility that they, in order to help me, chose people they thought would be collaborative. The possible implications for my results with this in mind, is that the participants perhaps were geared more towards successful PPRs than towards problematic or difficult cases.

**Analysis method: thematic analysis**

The interviews have been transcribed into Spanish and English with assistance from a second interpreter. The two interviews which could not be transcribed more than partially due to inaudibility of the recordings, is a limitation of my material. These interviews are sparingly cited due to the lack of word by word translation, but the comprehensive pieces of data serve in informing the analysis. Quotes have been to some extent modified in order to make sense in English, but the core meaning is maintained. Some individuals might be more cited than others, but I have made an effort to include all participants and their testimonies into the analysis.

All transcripts and notes from the interviews have been analyzed through thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a useful research tool, by character flexible, which can provide rich, detailed
and complex accounts of data. It is a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns or themes within data (Braun & Clarke 2006: 78f). The method does not require the same level of detail as e.g. discourse analysis, but requires a rigorous and thorough reading and re-reading of the transcripts (ibid. 88). What is inevitably lost when working with transcriptions are the visual clues and information about the atmosphere or tone from the interviews. However, the detailed field notes I kept recording after and sometimes during each interview return some of that lost value.

The themes identified represent some level of patterned response or meaning in the data set. This does not necessarily mean that often recurring themes are the most crucial, nor something that participants gave considerable attention to, rather than a sentence or two. The key to the theme is whether it captures important aspects in relation to the research questions (ibid. 82). When analyzing the data, I have used an inductive approach, which means that the themes are strongly linked to the data itself. Coding of the data took place without trying to fit them into a pre-existing coding frame, i.e. the analysis is data-driven. This does not mean that the data was analyzed in a vacuum, but is still connected to my theoretical and epistemological commitment (ibid. 84). The analysis is a back and forth process, which began when I started to note patterns and issues of interest in the data. Even if these became more crystallized when working with the transcriptions, my analysis began already during the fieldwork. The analysis involves a constant moving back and forth between the data set, coded extracts and the data I am producing, i.e. writing (ibid. 86).

In thematic analysis there is semantic and latent levels. The semantic level means to not look for anything beyond what a participant has said, and was used in the initial phase of coding. The transcripts and notes was read quite “freely” and extracts was coded for as many themes as they fit into. The latent level, such as underlying ideas, assumptions or conceptualization has been more important during the interpretative stage as informing the semantic content of the data. The process has included both description and interpretation as a back and forth process, where the interpretation sought to theorize the patterns and their broader meanings in relation to previous research (ibid. 84).

The themes identified were analyzed to create larger main- and sub-themes. This meant that some information was deleted from the coding, by narrowing down the quotes to the most relevant parts, in relation to previous research. To follow Tabak's criticism against that war is conceptualized as separate phases, I have made an attempt to not present the results as a time line. Instead, I have identified patterns present throughout the process, which shows how my theoretical commitment is interactive in the analysis. The themes and primarily the sub-themes have been revised through a mapping process, thereby refined and defined on several occasions, as I recognized how they overlapped. The results are a product of a back and forth process, which however is based on a
systematic and rigorous analysis of the data.

While qualitative research rejects the idea of “one truth”, it is likely that participants could have an interest in e.g. concealing crimes they have committed. Even if individuals do not modify their memories strategically, the mere character of memories can be dim, fluid or clouded (Méndez 2012: 48). In this thesis, instead of questioning whether the participants “tell the truth”, I will argue that there is not one correct or true depiction of the truth. I will treat memories as constructions, likely affected by each individual's present day as well as their experiences, interests and loyalties. Even the descriptions of their current situation is an interpretation. Still, I do consider my interview participants as credible and reliable sources of knowledge. These women are, in fact, the only primary sources regarding their experiences from armed conflict and reintegration, and are therefore highly valuable. Their testimonies, which are rationalizations of past events, and how they make sense of their experiences, are of great importance.

Qualitative research in general and interviews in particular are often criticized for being subjective and unscientific. The objection against interview studies and different interpretations is based on the demand for objectivity, i.e. that one statement only has one correct and objective meaning (Kvale & Brinkmann 2014: 253f). I will argue that there is no such thing, but rather valid and legitimate diverse interpretations. By being transparent with the different perspectives applied to e.g. transcriptions, different interpretations is not a weakness, but rather a strength with interview research (ibid. 212). Further, in order to avoid a one-sided view the supervisor, teachers, other students and the interpreters have been involved in multiple discussions regarding the thesis. My ideas have been exposed to many people, where we have discussed which themes that were prevalent or that captured important aspects, as well as different perspectives and interpretations.

**Positionality and reflexivity**

During an interview with a staff member, her eyes began to water as she said “Sometimes when I meet the PPRs, I can't help but think – that could have been me. It could have been my son. I was just lucky. But they are judging themselves so hard”. During my fieldwork I was struggling with similar thoughts, however, this could not have been me. I grew up in a country that has not experienced war for over 200 years, with a tradition of peace, democracy, accountable institutions and in relative comparison greater gender equality. One of my concerns was, with my academic focus into this area of study – how does my knowledge and pre-understanding affect this study? This awareness is key; as we research “Others”, we must re-search ourselves and our own perspectives, thereby broadening possibilities to understand each other.

Feminism advocates giving voice to those who have historically been silenced, which raises
the question of how voice is given (Bhattacharya 2009: 114). Chandra Talpade Mohanty, post-colonial scholar, argues that feminist scholarship exists within relations of power, which can be countered, redefined or implicitly supported. In Western feminist discourse, “third-world women”17 are homogenized as a “powerless” group, often portrayed as victims of certain cultural or socio-economic systems. A homogeneous notion creates an image of an “average third-world woman”, who is ascribed characteristics as being poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domesticated and victimized. In contrast Western women are implicitly self-represented as educated, modern, having control over their bodies and sexualities, and with the “freedom” to make their own decisions (Mohanty 1988: 62ff).

Most armed conflicts, including the Colombian, takes place in developing countries. The analysis of female participants in armed groups and the context is made through a Western lens and a Western feminist point of view (Méndez 2012: 24). Even though my ambition is to “give voice” to the women who are marginalized within society as well as the field of research, the aspects I have highlighted, the quotes chosen and the interpretations made are inseparable from my Western feminist perspective. Efforts have been made, especially in relation to the theoretical framework, to avoid some of these pitfalls when researching “the Other”. For instance, to problematize the distinction between victim and perpetrator and to highlight agency even in a context where options are limited, are aspects central to my framework. In addition, I want to emphasize that the group of women should not be homogenized or interpreted as having the same needs and experiences, as they are not representative for the population of PPRs nor the population of women. My focus is on gender and the Colombian reintegration process, but the aspects identified might be transferable or relatable to other societies where former combatants are reintegrated into civil society. This does not imply that “one size fits all”, but whether the results are transferable are in the end up to the reader, where rich and detailed descriptions of the context are provided to guide that decision.

Being a feminist scholar researching the “Other women” occasionally put me in a split position. On the one hand, I feel strong loyalty toward the interview participants and want to honor them for sharing their stories, and on the other I have demands relating to university standards, highly affected by Western ideals defining credible knowledge. For instance, writing in English is in some sense problematic, since the study is conducted in and concerns a Spanish-speaking country. In addition, previous research and theories have been taken solely from sources in English, consequently some valuable by research Latin American scholars have been excluded, which further strengthens the perspective as Western. The thesis abstract is translated to Spanish, and the

17 Colombia is a middle income country and thus not seen as part of the “third-world”. However, the point I want to make here is that Colombian women are ”the Other” in relation to Western women.
previously mentioned recommendations to the ACR will be written in Spanish, meaning that non-
English speakers should be able to access a condensed version of the results.

The general lack of theoretical studies on female combatants in armed groups, in particular
within Colombia, means that the effects of non-state militarization and gender is under-theorized
(Méndez 2012: 238; 8). While this highlights the relevance for my study, it brings challenges for the
theoretical framework. According to Kakali Bhattacharya, educational psychologist, even though
there is a “will to know” one may not understand all information accessed, and sometimes the will
to know will have to be surrendered because the researchers way of understanding the world might
be incommensurable with the participants. To convey the messiness, the (mis)alignments, the
claims, questions and concerns are, according to Bhattacharya, the best we can do. Only then does
research become an interaction between process and product, with findings amidst contractions and
ambiguities (Bhattacharya 2009: 111ff). In this thesis, I have made an effort not to simplify, but to
admit the complexities and contradictions in the stories the women told me. This is one of the
reasons why a matrix of different intersecting theories was chosen to guide the analysis.

On one occasion during my participatory observations, a PPR approached me and asked
questions about me and the study. He picked up his wallet to show me a business card which he had
been given several years ago, when he was interviewed by Canadian researchers about his
experiences from being a member in the ELN. This touched me deeply, and I keep coming back to
this memory while writing this thesis. This man still kept the business card in his wallet, carrying it
everywhere, and when he showed it to me – I got the impression that he was not only proud, but
that these interviews had been important to him. A few of my interview participants said after the
interviews that it felt good to talk about their past experiences, since it is something they rarely do.
All in all, my experiences during the fieldwork have convinced me – these people who have been so
affected by war do have a need to talk and researchers must listen. The fact that my interview
participants and others like them are the subjects but not the actors has bothered me, in that they do
not actually get to take part in the academic discussions concerning themselves as individuals. It is
my hope that the research to which they contribute can potentially make a difference to the ACR
and the reintegration process, and thus improve their life situations. My genuine wish is to give
them something back for taking the time and strength to speak to me about their, oftentimes,
difficult past and very sensitive topics.

Science cannot be value-free or absent of politics, especially in the dimensions of research
that concerns “discovery”, such as identifying problems or elaborating key concepts. One's own
personal experiences, loyalties, privileges and belonging to groups will in one way or another affect
the research (Weldon 2006: 80). In my view, there is a difference between an acknowledged and a
non-acknowledged subjectivity. By being transparent, clearly making visible the choices I have made and the limitations of this study, it should be possible for other researchers to examine my results, agree or disagree with my interpretations, and/or to model future studies from what was learnt here.

Outline of results and analysis

As already mentioned, using thematic analysis as my analytical method, the data has therefore been organized into themes and sub-themes. For the ease of the reader they are listed below, but are elaborated as they appear later in the text. The results are not presented in a completely linear way: from before joining, to armed conflict, to reintegration. Some themes were more prevalent in the data related to certain phases, which might create the impression of a clear time line. However, certain themes recurred throughout the participants' stories - before, during and after armed conflict - which also complicates this picture. To avoid possible confusion to the reader I mention this. In essence, there is nothing orderly or logical about armed conflict and combined with individual's different time lines, they belie definitions such as pre- or post-conflict notwithstanding the conflict is ongoing. The chosen themes are simply patterns that pervade the entire material.

Insecurity and opportunity - reasons behind joining
  Human in/security
  A window of opportunity?
  Blurring gender roles
  Motivational change and unmet expectations

Control and discipline - gendered practices
  Reproductive traps
  Obey your master

“It becomes normal” - normalization in- and outside the group
  Fear and hardships
  Weapons as family, war as business
  The process of adaption

The window that closes - conforming strategies
  The role of the family - support or a risk?
  Silence and stigma
  Coping through gender conformity
4. Insecurity and opportunity – reasons behind joining

In this theme, I look at how the women ended up as members in an armed group: the reasons behind joining, what they were seeking and the motivational change from joining to staying in the group is central for the analysis. This theme evolved as the women's stories illustrated a picture of a vulnerable position before joining the group, related to social injustices such as class or gender. From this vulnerable position, an opportunity came up where the armed group could offer something that society could not. In the first sub-theme, Human in/security, the women's experiences of insecurity are discussed as part of the explanation behind how they ended up in an armed group. In the second sub-theme, A window of opportunity, the reasons for joining and what the women were seeking or offered in the group is presented. In the third sub-theme, Unmet expectations and motivational change, focus is on the promises that never were fulfilled after their recruitment, both in relation to the armed group and the reintegration program, which caused a shift in their motives.

Human in/security

In this sub-theme, the type of vulnerability the women experienced as part of the explanation behind how they ended up in an armed group is described. The field of international relations traditionally focused on perceived threats to security which revolved around the nation-state. However, the insecurity experienced by individuals, particularly women or marginalized ethnic groups, often does not fit within the prevailing security discourse. Hence, a shift in focus to human security is an attempt to emphasize people as referents of security (Stern 2006: 176ff). Instead of a singular focus on threats to national security, such as the defense of state borders, the human security approach adds experienced insecurity of individuals into the perspective.

When I started conducting the interviews, I was struck by the participants' similar socio-economic background. I went to Colombia to explore the experiences of women in armed conflict but my first impression was that their class, such as economical assets and level of education, was the primary factor that united them. Some of the participants used the word “normal” to describe their childhood. A normal childhood for them was understood as living with their parents and siblings, but also to being poor, as the quotes below illustrates.

My parents were peasants, working on the land, the normal. We were poor, we lived in a small village with little resources [...] We were many siblings, we were... ten. Many, so they didn't take care of us. I studied until I was 15 years old, then I left. I brought one of my sisters to the group, and after eight days she was killed by the national army. She was just a child, only 14 years old. (Marta)
I was thirteen years old when I went there. I was living on the countryside, with my grandparents [...] Economically it was fine, we always had rice. Over there, the guerrilla controls the region. They took me with them. I was only allowed to bring my underwear. (Elena)

Being “normal” or “economically fine” refers to a situation defined in terms of basic needs, like having food on the table and a roof over their head. In contrast, normal in this situation did not apply to for instance education or dreams about the future. Some of them grew up in rural areas, others in poor urban neighborhoods, but they shared a socio-economic vulnerability. According to Kimberly Theidon, medical anthropologist, militarized masculinity in Colombia reflects a broader class dynamic. The ex-combatants are products of limited life options and pervasive violence, where their bodily capital may be all they have to trade on the labor market (Theidon 2009: 23). Joining an armed group might appear as the only solution to address their economic vulnerability, as described in the quote below.

We didn't manage economically. We were both unemployed [...] We were living here in Barranquilla, and my husband was offered a job in a farm [...] He didn't know anything about the armed group. When he arrived they told him what it was about, and since he was unemployed he practically didn't have any choice [...] He had been there for more or less a year. He asked me to join, and I agreed. (Carmen)

As Carmen's story shows, the only way out of unemployment and poverty might be to trade their bodily capital in the war economy. Their testimonies paints a picture of their initial position before joining as marked by vulnerability, ranging from neglect from parents, to unemployment, to living in a region controlled by armed groups. This is part of the explanation of how they ended up where they did, whether it was a personal decision or a recruitment by force. The lack of security relates to larger societal and global structures, such as poverty, as well and direct and individual acts of violence, like abuse within the family. Their initial position, before getting directly involved in the armed conflict, was far from safe and peaceful, but marked by violence of different kinds.

According to Thomas Ohlson, peace and conflict researcher, background reasons constitute long-time enabling conditions for conflict, and are related to a weak state structure, with low capacity to govern and to deliver public goods to its citizens. People may be excluded from political participation in their access to political power or decision-making. In addition, economic systems can be discriminatory by denying access to economic development, which can be found in absolute levels of poverty or relative socioeconomic inequality, e.g. based on demography (Ohlson 2008: 136ff). There is need to look at the phenomenon of joining armed groups from a structural perspective, as young people are especially vulnerable to the benefits of war when being socially and economically excluded (Denissen 2010: 341). Moreover, women are doubly disadvantaged in
relation to the gender hierarchy.

According to Mats Utas, anthropologist, agency is manifest and deployed across the full range of women's wartime experiences. Agency is not something one possess or not, but something maintained in relation to a social field with other social actors. Self-representations of victimhood or empowerment alike represents “agency tactics” deployed under different circumstances and contexts by women in war zones. Women may alter their tactics when confronting different challenges and opportunities in the social navigation of war zones (Utas 2005: 406ff). The interview participant's testimonies are more obviously related to the victim/actor narratives depending on whether they joined “voluntarily” or were abducted. When I asked Juana how she ended up in an armed group, she answered: “One day I was bored, that's what happened. I contacted them and I entered”. Later on, she reflected around that there were few employment opportunities and a poor economy, but her immediate answer was unsentimental. Others, like Carolina in the quote below, emphasized that this was completely against their will, and that they had not even imagined joining before they were forced to do so.

I had separated with the father of the children because he was jealous, violent, he made my life very bad [...] I think that in revenge, he said that I was a guerrillera, which are the enemies of the Autodefensas. That's why I was taken. When they came, my mother cried, my father too. They took me, and I thought they were about to kill me, so I prayed to God that no, don't hurt me. (Carolina)

The abducted women resorted more to the victimhood narrative, which is a description I do not disregard. According to Coulter, it is important not to lose sight of the structural constraints circumscribing women's choices (Coulter 2008: 67). Being recruited by force, especially as a child, must be one of the most extreme forms of vulnerability in these circumstances.

It is important to problematize the dichotomy between victim and perpetrator, as their testimonies shows that the distinction is not clear-cut at all. According to Tabak, both men and women can identify as victims, or perpetrators, or may experience ambivalence between these positions. Women can be victims of human rights abuse, but still be perpetrators of abuses themselves (Tabak 2011: 128ff). Being a member of an armed group puts a person in the position of a perpetrator, either by the direct use of violence or the indirect support of the same. The membership however, does not eliminate their exposure to structural violence and social inequality. It appears as the confusion created by the notion of female combatants as victims or perpetrators is grounded in a singular level analysis of violence, i.e. the individual level. I suggest, in order to problematize the dichotomy and in order to grasp the women's experiences of insecurity that the structural and societal level must be included in the analysis as well. The human security
A window of opportunity

In this sub-theme, the opportunities that opened up contrasted to their initially vulnerable positions, where the armed group could offer something that society could not, are described. Marta framed it seeing new possibilities for herself: “We wanted to get out of the farm, we felt like we were far away from the society over there [...] I saw something, like a small benefit and... An option to live.” The potential benefits for joining, which in Marta's case was to get off the farm, appears like an opportunity to take action and do something, rather than remaining committed to a certain fate. Keith Stanski, international relations scholar, found that women who joined the FARC perceived that despite the dangers and uncertainties, joining offered more opportunities than staying in the home community (Stanski 2006: 141). Becoming combatants is often seen as the best alternative for poor people with few options, rather than idealism (Tabak 2011: 132).

Some women join as a way to escape hostility and abuse in the household to ensure their safety. The risks with joining might not compare to the constant violence at home (Stanski 2006: 152). This is relatable to Yuranis' childhood situation, which she described as extremely difficult, as she was exposed to violence and abuse.

For Yuranis, seeing “these things”, in other words the possibilities with entering the group, became a way to get away from the neglect of her mother and the people she described as disrespectful. She was not explicit about whether she had been subjected to sexual abuse, but mentioned a few times that she was forced to share bed with a man as a child, which in itself is a violation of her integrity.

Marta told us about a situation which shows that the group could grant her security in a violent context. She wanted to leave the group permanently which she, surprisingly, was allowed to by the group commanders. She left to the village of her husband's parents, and the same night an enemy group committed a massacre where 37 people were killed in a neighboring village. Even though she did not want to, the threat of violence and fear for former enemies made Marta return to the group. In a violent context, the group can offer the safety that the state fails to provide for its
citizens.

Entering an armed group does per se mean exposure to the risk of violence or even getting killed, but might appear more attractive than staying in a home constantly exposed to violence and abuse. This highlights the need for acknowledging violence as a continuum, but also to problematize the distinction between non-conflict and conflict-related violence. According to Tabak, transitional justice relies on a false dichotomy between the public and private sphere in relation to gender and armed conflict. There is nearly singular focus on conflict-related sexual violence, which means that non-conflict related violence in the private sphere is not prioritized. The dominant focus on sexual violence might also reflect the bias of addressing human rights as opposed to social and economic needs, which some women find more important on a daily basis (Tabak 2011: 118ff). According to Kenneth Miller and Andrew Rasmussen, psychology scholars, the impact of war exposure on mental health, such as direct exposure to violence and destruction of war, is over-emphasized while daily stressors such as social and material conditions are overlooked. Stressful conditions of everyday life such as poverty, displacement, intra-familiar violence, destruction of social networks and marginalization needs to be addressed in order to improve people's mental health in conflict settings (Miller & Rasmussen 2010: 7).

Most of the women acknowledged that they had positive experiences from the group. This could refer to friendship or respect between the companions, but foremost that they learned valuable lessons. The lack of opportunities in society in contrast with opportunities in the group is exemplified in the quotes below, where they described how they got to learn something new.

There were courses, depending on what you want to learn, one thing or another. Some of the companions were nurses and they taught us. The benefit is that I learned nursing when I was there. (Elena)

You learn many things, like how to defend yourself. You get many experiences, learn many lessons, you don't go back like the same, and it was good because of this. It's a life I didn't know of. And in the end, we were never treated badly. Or, they never took our things [...] Because of this, right now I don't feel any resentment against them. (Juana)

In contrast with their initial position, in the group they actually got to learn something, through access to training. Some of the women had almost no education, thus these practices became their first formal training. For Elena, who has continued studying nursing during the reintegration process, the group training was the first step to higher education. María, who before being recruited to the group had worked at a security company, continued to work with intelligence service in the group. For her, it was important that they recruited her specifically, as they knew that she was good at her job.
According to Natalia Herrera and Douglas Porch, security and defense scholars, neither women nor men described their reasons for enlistment as misguided. However, the FARC exploits the shortcomings in the rural Colombian society, such as social inequality, violence by the paramilitaries or lack of education. The combination of poverty, limited opportunity and lack of autonomy makes women in a patriarchal society particularly vulnerable to the recruitment strategies of the FARC (Herrera & Porch 2008: 610f). I would add that the groups exploits, or captures, not only societal shortcomings but the interests and dreams of the recruits, by offering more than society can provide for them. What the group in this context does, is to utilize the interests and knowledge of the group members, which creates a feeling of purpose. This feeling does not necessarily come with the membership itself, but through the type of activities they engage in. Elena was abducted, but the activities she engaged in and the knowledge she gained, clearly departs from what would have been her future if she had remained in the farm.

The women did not bring up political grievances or the ideologies of the groups as reasons for joining, however, they did occasionally mention these subject. In the quote below, Yuranis discussed what she perceived as broken promises from politicians. The difficulties with getting a job and an income, was something that could be addressed by joining the armed group.

If you don't have a high school degree, you don't get a job, right. So there [in the group] it's easier, they don't have any requirements, and they are going to pay you. Sometimes the government talks about the conflict, they talk about justice, it's... They promise things that they don't accomplish. You don't do it because you want to, but because they promise you a job and they give it to you, they keep the promise. There, you're certain to make progress. (Yuranis)

I am not the first to argue that motives are not mutually exclusive, but can overlap or even be contradictory. The women's testimonies show traces of economic grievance, political grievance and human security grievance. The state protection from attacks is clearly missing as people get abducted to armed groups, and supplying basic needs is unevenly distributed, primarily in rural areas where e.g. access to education is severely limited. Even the participants who stated that financial gains was the primary motive for joining, drew parallels to class differences and limited opportunities, thereby demonstrating how economic grievance and human security issues overlap. Their utterances, like the quote above, were nuanced with dissatisfaction with the state's attention to security, poverty and other political lacks, which is a sign of political grievance. This is important to bear in mind, as there is a tendency within research on female terrorists to “feminize” women's motives, by making them personal and private based on gendered stereotypes (Jacques & Taylor 18)

18 In this thesis, I do not use the term terrorist to describe members of armed groups. However, the FARC, the ELN and the AUC are sometimes classified as terrorist organizations.
2009: 204f). Political issues and social inequality was something the interview participant's both experienced and reflected around.

Within peace and conflict research, there are debates on whether rebel motives are driven more by greed than grievance (see Collier & Hoeffler: 2004). A dichotomous assumption of “greed versus grievance” is illustrated by “criminal” versus “political” motives or “activist” versus “opportunistic” insurgencies (Jonsson 2014: 37). Greed, such as the possibility to gain personal profit through looting, would make women more likely to rebel, as members of a lower economic class and due to gender discrimination (Henshaw 2013: 71f). All interview participants had low ranks in their groups, which is worth mentioning in relation to the motives for joining. Difference in rank translates into difference in earnings and responsibilities, and even though many ex-combatants blur the line between victim and perpetrator, they are not within the groups that are the actual beneficiaries of the war (Theidon 2007: 76). In addition, I think there is a difference between how greed is conceptualized and how searching for an income is essential in order to survive. Economic greed as a driving factor for war does not seem applicable to their testimonies, hence it is more fitting to refer to the term economic grievance.

Tabak asks the provocative question of whether women’s position in relation to society improves or worsens as a result of conflict (Tabak 2011: 115). Based on what the interview participants described, some women do in the phase of joining see participation in armed conflict as an improved position, compared to their position in the society, their families and households. Joining an armed group could be a way to escape violence, a chance to learn something new or to earn money. The aspect that brings the stories together, independent from the type of grief or insecurity the women have experienced, is that the membership could offer them something that life as a civilian could not. This highlights women’s agency in vulnerable positions, as they find strategies to improve their own lives and sometimes their families’ as well. Their vulnerable position and perceived insecurity does not indicate passivity or inaction.

**Blurring gender roles**

In this sub-theme, I point to how joining an armed group offered a degree of flexibility regarding gender roles. Hearing the women reflect upon gender and sex roles over time, gave the impression that conforming to traditional gender perceptions is less important in the armed groups than in society in general. When I asked Yuranis about the relation between men and women in the armed group, she answered: “We were the same. The same, there were no differences”. For Andrea, the equality was related to performing tasks traditionally coded as male or female, as explicated below.
Women are equal to men, if the men go searching for firewood, the women go too. If the women cook, the men cook, everything is... Equal. Women and men, everybody works together, women went to combat... Normal like men, it was all the same. (Andrea)

Andrea describes women as "normal like men", which signals how she conceptualize women in an androcentric way, giving the impression that men constitute the norm in this field (or society in general). There is no need to clarify that men go to combat, that is an assumption taken for granted. This is noteworthy, as she has internalized being the deviant Other, despite her experience of being equal to men. Being the Other in an armed group, also means being the Other in the reintegration program, as female actors within a masculine domain.

Previous research shows that demobilized women, and men, insists that women are not discriminated in the armed groups (Herrera & Porch 2008: 617f; Méndez 2012: 129; Theidon 2007: 81). One could presume that the group ideology, such as the FARC's official commitment to gender equality, where changing women's status in society is part of the struggle, has affected how the participants respond. In contrast, the AUC did not have this commitment (Méndez 2012: 161), but answers from the interview participants from the different groups were very similar, as explicated below.

We were all equal, because... In the group I was the only woman. So I was treated in the same way, everything was equal, there was no... Difference. The men didn't tell me to "do this", we did the same things. We were all equal. Everyone. We ate the same, we drank the same. I didn't have any advantage, I was treated as any other member. (Juana)

There is respect, and equality for all. For instance, if the group brings new underwear, they begin to distribute it among the combatants and the commanders are the last ones. In other words, they look much upon... Equality in this sense. The wives of the commanders were not treated better than any other woman in the group. (Marta)

Equality is primarily understood in relation to conducting the same tasks, but also in terms of material resources, such as food. Unequal treatment towards women, which is common in society, differed in the armed group, exemplified by Juana in that men were not telling her what to do. At the same time, she also recognized unequal treatment where it is an advantage in being a woman, as differed in the group. To not be treated like a woman in a stereotypical manner appears to have contributed to a feeling of being equal to men. In addition, Marta described what she perceived as equality between the commanders and the members of the group, which can be seen as equality between an authority and “ordinary people”, or even the blurring of class hierarchies. There was not
only no differences between men and women, but no difference within the group of women, regardless of rank. Rather the power hierarchy, in this example, is reversed where the people at the bottom of the hierarchy are prioritized or privileged. This way of distributing resources differs significantly from how power hierarchies works in societies in general, which might contribute to a perceived feeling of equality in the group. Within the armed group a certain space is created where the inequalities and injustices in society are contested, and marginalized people can enjoy benefits they are normally excluded from.

Liminality is a concept originally developed within cultural anthropology, referring to ubiquitous rites of passage, which can be described as a period of transition from one stage to another. The concept captures in-between situations where established structures are dislocated, hierarchies are reversed, and traditional settings of authority are possibly challenged (Mälksoo 2012: 481). Liminality is a formative experience, where the subject is provided with a new structure and a new set of rules. The transitions can be sudden, as with revolutions, or prolonged, as in wars or enduring political instability (ibid. 486ff). The women's initial position marked by gender and class hierarchies, is challenged or altered by their participation in the armed groups. The reversal of power hierarchies is in this context strictly limited to the armed groups, which could be a sign of liminality. Before and after the armed group, society is not static, but power hierarchies are not as radically altered. However, the women's identities change due to their experiences of liminality. Like Juana said - you don't go back like the same.

Noteworthy is that the one male PPR I interviewed had a different take on this. When I asked if there were any women in his group, he answered: “Yes, the commander had a wife” and that there were a few others, who foremost did the cooking. He also said that they did not carry much weight, but that the men had to carry what they could not. He talked at length about the group ideology but never mentioned gender equality, despite the group's commitment to it. For him, the group was not a place where men and women were completely equal. According to Theidon, there is a gendered double standard that belies the guerrillas discourse of equality. Male ex-combatants described how women in the group lost their femininity, by being sexually promiscuous and undisciplined. They were not interested in having a female ex-combatant as a partner because, in their words, “the female guerrilla is a real slut” (Theidon 2009: 29). That men do not perceive women as equal might have different explanations. First, men do not share women's experiences of gender in/equality, neither in society nor in the armed group, meaning that they do not have references to compare one situation to another. In other words, a person who has not been subjected to gender inequality might not be able to identify factors or situations as changing, due to lack of reference points. Second, it might be a way to safeguard masculinity as superior to femininity, for
instance by implying that women cannot be equal companions due to lack of physical strength. However, their interpretation of the situation deserves to be acknowledged, since the women's descriptions of being completely equal might not be an experience shared with male companions.

On the other hand, I do not want to ignore the women's experiences of what I refer to here as perceived gender equality. Frameworks for understanding and measuring gender equality are Western constructions, and their experiences of being equal to men appears to have contributed to a feeling of being valued, appreciated and respected. According to Henshaw, women are more frequently active in left-wing than right-wing movements. The creation of an environment where women have mobility in the rebel organization and are less restricted by gender roles, might be part of the explanation of women's motives to join (Henshaw 2013: 62). Since Latin America in global comparison has a very large number of women in their armed groups, and many of them are socialist movements where feminism is part of the struggle, the women's experiences of gender equality should not be dismissed. Radical feminism emphasizes the connectedness of women which could indicate that social movements are ideal sites for women to band together. Hence, women may be more attracted to movements with a higher level of women, creating a snowball effect among female recruits (ibid. 65). For instance, Marta mentioned that it was difficult in the beginning but that she “watched the other women”, which was part of the explanation of how she adapted. Women relating to other women might thus be part of the explanation behind the in-group bonding, as well as their high level of participation.

Motivational change and unmet expectations

In this sub-theme, I will describe how the women's expectations in joining the group were rarely met, which caused a shift in motives from joining to staying. Yessica joined the group when she was fifteen years old, as they had promised to support her family economically. The group was active where she lived, and they continuously recruited people in the area. This made it practically easy to join which in combination with the promise for economic support convinced her, but in the end this was a paper promise. Andrea described in the quote below how her expectations, that things would be easy and that she would earn money, were not met when joining the group.

Sometimes... One believes that things outside [the village] are more simple [...] I thought that I would make more money but that never happened, I never saw it, never received it. These things are painted out for you, that everything is nice and cool, but when one arrives there is nothing of this, the death, the war... I was sixteen years old and I thought it would be easy. But that's not the reality, now I know this. If I hadn't accepted, I would have had a very different life, but... You don't stay because you want to, but because there is no possibility to leave. There are many... Sad people there. (Andrea)
Andrea described how she more or less was misled to join and how she fell for the picture that was painted up to her. When faced by the realities of war, and the realization that she would never receive any money, it was too late to leave. Several others mentioned this motivational shift from joining to staying in the group. Michael Jonsson, political scientist, questions the notion that rebel motives are assumed to remain static over time, as motives sometimes seem to change dramatically. There are several possible drivers of motivational change over time. Among other things, Jonsson discusses broken promises as a factor of motivational change. A “loss of resonance of the ideology” can cause them to question their own membership (Jonsson 2014: 53f). The difficulty, and in some cases impossibility, to leave was the factor determining why they remained, rather than commitment to the group and its ideology. Ideological motives could have developed during the time spent there, due to e.g. in-group bonding or indoctrination, but do not appear as sufficient to maintain the women's commitment to the group. Instead, when their expectations with joining were not met, this developed to a will to leave the group. I interpret this as a sign of the women's agency, where when they find themselves in vulnerable positions, they constantly try to find ways to improve their lives. When the group could not live up to what they had promised they had to look for new possibilities, first, by taking big risks in leaving the group.

When reflecting around why they joined, a few mentioned their young age and that they were basically children. For instance, Juana was reflecting on how the “young mind” works, acting on impulse and making rapid decisions, and that this “mind” also affected how she acted within the group. She described how she just did things, like going to combat, without thinking too much about it. Marta said that “everything is normal as a child”, implying that a young person do not have the type of references to see that the situation in some senses is extreme. The age factor in relation to the motivational change appears as important, as the women now in retrospect say that the decision to join was naive.

The theme of unmet expectations recurred when the women became participants in the reintegration program. When I asked them if it was a difficult decision to join the program, they answered no. Primarily they referred to all the incentives offered, such as the possibility to study and economic support. Nevertheless, when I asked if there was anything that could be improved about the program, the theme of unmet expectations recurred. A few of them discussed the difficulties of managing financially and getting a job after the program. Many of them said that they had been promised assistance to get a permanent living situation, a promise that has not yet been fulfilled. One participant said: “I don't expect them to just give me a house, but that they could assist me in finding a living”. The same person showed some ambivalence, and perhaps guilt in relation to this, by saying that she is aware that she comes from an illegal group and that there are
many displaced people who are in even more urgent need to find a living. That said, I do not interpret their disappointment as mere complaints, but that they actually have been promised something they have not been given. This related both to the reintegration program, and the political system in general, as the quote below highlights.

They [politicians] are not accountable. They buy their votes [...] They don't help us. No, these men don't. Sometimes he says that he will help the demobilized, but we are fooled. They promise that they are going to help. That you will get a job [...] It's the reason we demobilized, how many people haven't returned to the group? How many people haven't gone back there, because the government... They promise things never accomplish, they have to be serious about it.

Mistrust for political institutions was occasionally brought up, which is noteworthy since the PPRs are actually part of the governmental reintegration process through a state agency. Problems with corruption is something I witnessed myself during the fieldwork. A municipal election took place and I spoke to several people who were quite open about that they would vote for the person who offered them most money. Further, this can be compared with the previous quote where Yuranis said “they promise you a job and they give it to you”, referring to the armed group. A question arises of who you can trust, and whose hands you can place your future in, in a militarized state with low capacity to govern. Could it be that an armed group is more accountable in this aspect? If that is the case, the breakdown between the state and the citizens is severe.

According to Marieke Denissen, cultural anthropologist, a common feeling among the Colombian ex-combatants is frustration and disillusionment with the DDR process. Some feel betrayed, left on their own and that their needs are not taken into account, or that the government does not protect them against the still-active guerrillas. This may lead to a loss of motivation to work or study, or of investing in good relationships with the communities, where criminality might appear as a more beneficial choice (Denissen 2010: 337). When the reintegration process does not live up to the demobilized combatants expectations, they may “go back to the mountains”, which is a serious threat to the peace process (ibid. 329). As the unmet expectations meant a motivational change when the women were in the groups, which developed to a will to leave it, there is a possibility that this pattern will repeat itself but in the reintegration program. According to Enloe, militarization does not happen automatically. What had been militarized can be demilitarized, and what has been demilitarized can be remilitarized (Enloe 2000: 291). The participant in the quote is well aware of the problem that people are leaving the reintegration program, and draws parallels to the promises given as reasons for their demobilization. That demobilized ex-combatants return to their former groups or criminality shows the limited repertoire of “choices” in these circumstances.
As previously mentioned, I did notice some cautiousness among participants when discussing the reintegration program; they may have felt limited in bringing up any criticism. However, the vast majority expressed that they were positive towards the reintegration process, and acknowledged that they have received a lot of valuable assistance. The ones who had been enrolled in the program by the PRVC before the establishment of the ACR said that the change was a big improvement. The prior program basically gave them financial support, where the ACR's holistic approach appears both appreciated and helpful. Further, despite their difficult past, the women were very optimistic about their future. They told with enthusiasm about their plans to start their own business, to buy their own house or letting their children go to university. This optimism is a valuable trait which can be built upon in the phase of reintegration. That said, the ACR are in a good position to bridge between the ex-combatants and state institutions, as the PPRs appears to have trust in them. It is a big responsibility, but an opportunity that should not be missed as it might be the only chance there is to build trust between the PPRs and the state.

**Theme summary**

In this theme I have described the experienced insecurity of the interview participants which contributed to how they ended up as members in an armed group. While their primary reason behind joining ranged from abduction to poverty to domestic violence, the common aspect about their testimonies is their vulnerable position. The predominate issue that their stories relates to concerns lacking human security, which supports the findings of previous research. I want to emphasize the need for focus on the lack of human security and the need to conceptualize violence as a continuum. The women's motives for joining showed traces of human security grievance, economic grievance and political grievance – motives that are not mutually exclusive. Joining an armed group did not mean that the women became invulnerable, but the situation clearly differed. For some, it became an improved life situation. Distance was created to daily stressors such as domestic violence or poverty, but the transition meant an exposure to direct violence and the risk of being killed. In one sense, they moved away from problems of structural violence to a position more marked by direct violence. Possibilities, such as receiving formal training, were something they were not offered as civilians. In addition, the women perceived themselves as equal to men in the group, which appears to have contributed to a feeling of being appreciated. Their expectations with joining were rarely met, causing a motivational shift and a will to abandon the group. The unmet expectations was a pattern that recurred during the reintegration process, which is a serious problem, as it might cause a motivational shift for participation in the reintegration process as well.

The reasons behind women's participation in armed groups important aspects to illuminate,
both in relation to conflict prevention and to the reintegration program. As for the government, to take up the “work” that the armed group conducted by targeting young women's plight, could be one way to prevent further recruitment to armed groups. To eliminate domestic violence should not only be prioritized by the ACR, but within state politics as domestic violence is part of a larger societal structure. For the reintegration process, that daily stressors were found most distressing in their everyday lives as civilians, is valuable information. To reduce the impact of daily stressors in the reintegration process could make the women perceive an improved situation, which in turn would be a motive for staying in the program.
5. Control and discipline – gendered practices

In this theme, I look to the women's experiences of group dynamics, focused on rules and disciplinary actions. The theme came from the persistent idea that rules, orders and punishments was shaping the women's time in the armed groups. Despite their experiences of gender equality, the women came into subjects concerning gendered disciplinary practices, without necessarily interpreting it as gender inequality or unequal treatment. These practices refers both to certain disciplinary actions directed to women's bodies, such as control over reproduction, but also to women as moral beings who are responsible for the moral order. Thus, the control and disciplinary actions were gendered, both in a direct and symbolic way. The first sub-theme is called Reproductive traps, and refers to women's experiences of pregnancies and abortions in the group. The second, Obey your master, concerns the demand for obedience and to work in hierarchies, where the commander had a central role in how discipline became gendered.

Reproductive traps

This sub-theme concerns the women's experiences of pregnancies and motherhood as central to the rules of conduct. Women in all parts of society inevitably get pregnant, including armed groups. However, when the women entered the armed groups, societal laws and values were left behind, and the group took control over their reproductive rights. The manner in which the different groups dealt with women's reproductive bodies was nevertheless different. As described in the quote below, Marta got pregnant and could, despite one commander's disapproval, have the baby.

Three months after I joined the group, I got pregnant […] There was a commander who didn't want me to have the baby. He wanted all women who entered the group to have sex with him before they could have sex with others, and I didn't do that, so he was angry at me and wanted me to abort the baby. Usually that's something the commanders don't do, it's in their policies that they don't force people to have an abortion. Another commander accepted that women had babies, so I went to that front. I went to the village of my husband's parents, had the baby, and after eight months I had to return. They told me, “eight months and after that you have to return”, so I did. The village was inside their zone, they constantly went in and out of it, so it was easy for them to monitor me. (Marta)

Women may join an armed group in order to escape violence in civil society, to encounter similar manifestations in the group itself. Power dynamics between commanders and members can replicate other unequal power relations in society (Stanski 2006: 147). Marta's description of women having to have sex with the commander, is a gendered pattern replicating inequality between men and women, specifically men's access to women's bodies. The commander, being in a
position of power, could demand access to female member's bodies, and as the analysis will show later on, obeying the orders of the commander was not optional. Thus, being subjected to sexual violence could not escaped by joining the group. Marta's testimony also shows that women could make resistance to this unequal power relation, as she did by denying the commander sex and going to a different front, but the resistance meant putting oneself at risk. In this case, the risk was to be forced or persuaded to get an abortion. In Andrea's group, forced abortions were routine when women got pregnant.

For example, if a woman had a partner... She couldn't get pregnant. She had to abort [...] But sometimes...
Many women were already like six months pregnant, but they had to work like normal, they didn't let them rest. They had to do everything as normal. Like if they were not pregnant. After the nine months, she had like three days with the baby, left it with the family and then had to return to work. (Andrea)

Andrea and Marta have different experiences of how their groups dealt with pregnancies and abortions. According to Méndez, there are significant differences between how the FARC and the AUC have incorporated women into the organizations. FARC’s incorporation of women is characterized by strict control over relationships, sexuality and the demand placed on women's bodies (Méndez 2012: 129). In contrast, in the AUC, women were allowed to have children and were not directly forced to use contraception (ibid. 184). Therefore, Andrea's and Marta's testimonies might appear as mere reflections of the group policies on pregnancies, but their stories contest this in several ways. First, as Andrea's testimony highlights, even though forced abortions were the standard practice there were also exceptions. When women hid the pregnancy until it was advanced, they were normally punished by carrying out harsh physical activity during the pregnancy, and by abandoning the baby after giving birth (ibid. 155ff). Andrea described it as: "It was like getting a penalty before returning to the group". Second, the group policies depended much upon the commander and whether this person actually enforced the policies or not. Supreme leaders may have limited ability to monitor the foot-soldiers, and thus have to rely on mid-level commanders to enforce the organization's rules of conduct. However, the allegiance between mid-level commanders and the leadership is far from a given (Jonsson 2014: 59). As Marta's testimony shows, even different commanders within the same group could have different approaches to whether women could have children or not. Third, according to Méndez, the women who had children in the AUC chose to return (Méndez 2012: 184), something that Marta's story contests as she was strictly monitored and ordered to return. In her specific case, leaving the group after having the baby was not an option. Hence, how the armed groups handled pregnancies and abortions cannot be answered solely by the group policy on the issue.
Marta's primary responsibility in the group was nursing care, and she was responsible for the medical equipment. She was sometimes sent to buy medicine that she presumed was for abortions. The medical team assisted the women during the abortions and took care of them afterwards, and Marta mentioned that a few women got so ill that the leaders had to send them to hospital. This shows how the women's altered position is still marked by vulnerability. Limited access to health care put the women's lives at risk during unsafe abortions, and their bodily and reproductive integrity is severely attacked due to the forced abortions. Violence in terms of constrained reproductive rights and lack of bodily integrity therefore increased during their membership.

Pregnancies and motherhood in this context is perceived as problematic, demanding special rules as disciplinary actions on the issue. Motherhood does not have the high status in armed groups as it does in society, in fact, its status is quite the opposite. There was an absolute ban to abortion in Colombia until 2006, when it then became permitted in cases of threat to the woman's life or health, fetal abnormality, rape or incest. Despite the ruling, the majority of abortions remain clandestine due to barriers in accessing legal abortions (Guttmacher Institute 2013). In society, abortion is difficult to access while in some armed groups it is standard practice, which creates an interesting conflict regarding the way abortion is conceptualized within the armed groups and society in general. In combination with motherhood perceived as highly valued versus highly problematic, this could relate to the liminality that is created in the armed groups where not only hierarchies, but also values are altered. The Catholic church and its prevailing anti-abortion laws in civil society were absent in this liminal world of armed groups.

María was allowed to stay with her child the whole time during her membership in the armed group. Among my participants, she was the only one who was not separated from her children which can likely be explained due to the character of their work, i.e. that María could conduct the work from her home and did not have to be at site, as described below.

I didn't belong to the group, I belonged to the urban part. I could be in the city permanently, I stayed with my family in my house, in my block. I brought information, I went there and returned […] A double life...
It was elegant, cool. [laughter] If I said "ah no, I can't go tomorrow”, they said "well, that's OK". Everything was valid, as long as I did what I had promised. If I said “I'm going tomorrow”, I had to go.
(María)

As the quote implies, even though Maria was given some flexibility in comparison with the women who lived with the group, it was strongly connected to discipline, trust and that she did what she had promised. If she had not committed to the things she was ordered within the set time frame, it is possible that the degree of flexibility could have decreased.
According to Stanski, by controlling pregnancies the leaders are allowed to control the actions and decisions of the group members. Instead of recognizing women's capacity to make informed decisions, the FARC pre-empts the issue to maintain the idea of equality within the movement (Stanski 2006: 148). According to Méndez, in her reference to Enloe, the reasons for forced contraception and abortion are based on the notion that motherhood is incompatible with armed struggle. Hence, equality is defined from a male-dominated perspective where women's reproductive choices are seen as an obstruction to equality (Méndez 2012: 154f). The controlled reproduction is perhaps the most obvious example of how gender equality is conditional in the groups. Women are equal to men as long as their own interests are favoring the group interest. Learning nursing care is something that the group benefits from, or actually are dependent on, but pregnant women and mothers means less manpower and possibly a shift in priority or loyalty to the group. This relates to what Méndez describes as how particular female values, such as motherhood, are appropriated in a way which the group benefits from (ibid. 230). Marta explained their group policy as: “One had to apply for having a baby”. In other words, one had to plan the pregnancy, and argue for the reasons to the commanders.

You could say that “I want to have a baby, I've been here for this-and-this long, I'm a responsible woman” and they would accept it. But there were a few who were seen as irresponsible, like... Careless, so they decided that she wouldn't continue the pregnancy, so the child wouldn't suffer. Some aborted and some didn't […] When a woman decided to abort, it was up to her. (Marta)

Noteworthy about Marta's testimony are the women described as “irresponsible”, and how they were even more disciplined than “responsible” women. Marta argued that ultimately, it was up to the woman if she wanted to abort or not. However, since one actually had to make a case and apply for having a baby, even if abortion “was against the policies”, this type of pressure implies a severely limited choice. That abortion is for the sake of the baby appears odd, as it is an argument frequently used to argue for the opposite, e.g. by anti-abortion movements. However, it signals how Marta and perhaps others made sense of this practice. It is also likely that forced abortion would create anger, whereby appealing to the woman to make this decision for the sake of the baby and not her own, could be a way to take the edge of a forced abortion.

Nira Yuval-Davis, ethnicity and gender researcher, argues that as women are the biological “producers” of children, women are also “bearers of the collective”. Women's positioning and obligations to their ethnic and national collectivities, as well as the state they reside in, affect and sometimes override their reproductive rights. Women are sometimes forced to have, or not have, children depending on the hegemonic discourses constructing nationalist projects at specific
historical moments (Yuval-Davis 1997: 26ff). Differential policies of dis/encouragement for childbearing towards different segments of the population exists in many countries, and is often based on class, race and ethnicity. What is considered “appropriate” behavior and not exerts control over women who are constructed as “deviants”. Controlling the reproductive rights of women signals the treatment of women as state property (ibid. 32ff). Even though Yuval-Davis' analysis concerns the relation between the state and women's bodies, it might be applicable to the relation between the armed group as an organization and women's bodies. If women are seen as “bearers of the collective”, unwanted behavior, described by Marta as irresponsibility, can be eliminated by removing certain women's reproductive rights. What differs significantly is that the children born are left outside the group, and thus are not the aspiring combatants of the group. Attacking women's bodily integrity rather appears as an attempt to discipline these “irresponsible” women, whereby they can change their behavior to the “appropriate” and perhaps regain their integrity. Further, to control women's reproduction appears as a way to keep the combatants focused on the armed conflict. It may be implicit in the commanders disciplinary actions, that mothering will potentially “soften” the women, and steal their focus from the armed group and their duties. That said, the practice of applying to have children, seems to be an arbitrary, and/or disciplinary act and not solely related to the group policy on the issue.

There are many different dynamics at work in how the armed groups handle women's reproduction, where some appear related to the relationship between the state, the national army and its gendered citizens assuming certain roles. Other dynamics: that children are left outside the group, that arguments normally used to oppose abortions are used to favor the same, and that abortion in the Colombian society is difficult to access while it in some armed groups is standard practice, creates theoretical contractions to the framework. A national army and an armed opposition group fighting against the state are two, in some senses, very different organizations. First, a national army is institutionalized, i.e. economically, socially and culturally supported through the militarization of society. An armed group does not have that type of status as the militarization does not take place through the state apparatus. An armed group and a state army are not measured by the same yardstick, not by society nor at international level, as the former is not sanctioned and legitimized through the state.

That said, there are similarities of the militarizing processes, but also differences which should be acknowledged. This specifically relates to gender and the role women play in the different organizations. Patriotic mothering is a national activity and a vital contribution to the nation's war effort, where women are encouraged to see maternal duty as public duty and release their children for a higher good (Enloe 2000: 11, italics in original). Women in armed groups are not
part of the national project where women have a certain role as mothers, due to the fact that the family as a national project does not exist in this setting. Their participation opposes the construction of women in the nation: the national embodiment, the military womb, the wife and the mother. It is not a question of men going to war in order to protect the peaceful and honorable women and children, but men and women are fighting alike. Nor is it based on the systematic recruitment of men serving their country, or an institution of turning boys into men, but women and men are recruited and transformed similarly. What is similar between the militarization of the nation and the militarization within armed groups is that masculinity is privileged, as men's reproductive rights are not the ones becoming restricted. The male privilege might be connected to militarized masculinity, the gender hierarchy, or both, but the mechanisms and dynamics at work to reproduce masculinity as superior differs within the armed groups and society in general. This is where I believe that the concept of liminality, with a twist, could serve a purpose for a richer understanding of the gendered militarization processes in armed groups. The armed groups are not part of the society but neither completely detached from it. The arguments, practices and control share similarities, but there is a different logic at work.

**Obey your master**

In this sub-theme, I will describe the women's experiences of group discipline, as strongly connected to the commanders' orders and their companions' obedience. When I asked what types of rules they had to follow, Andrea answered: “There are many rules, but one of the most common is that one cannot disobey the orders from the commander”. War depends on various and complex social interactions both between and within groups. Bonding, ability to work in hierarchies, in-group and out-group psychology are some of the central interactions creating gendered war roles (Goldstein 2001: 183). According to Joshua Goldstein, international relations scholar, the hierarchical organization of participants is central to group dynamics in warfare. To be able to mobilize and coordinate masses, the subordination of the individual to the group is crucial, where effective command requires the soldier's obedience (ibid. 203).

Marta had her husband in the group, and she told us that even though they were not allowed to, they did sometimes argue. It appears as fights between couples did occur, but that foremost women were sanctioned responsible for this behavior. Sometimes the punishment was to separate the couple by sending the woman to a different front. Marta said: “They did not accept for a woman to be angry at her partner”, hence the commanders set an example by separating the couple. Marta said that her husband was a big support to her while she was in the group, where the threat of being separated was a way to discipline in-group conflicts. According to Stanski, the commander's
overseeing of relationships serves as a median between the combatants as revolutionaries and the combatants as individuals. The overseeing assures that relationships does not detract from the combatants' involvement in the struggle (Stanski 2006: 146). In other words, a dominance system serves to channel and contain in-group conflicts as a way to increase the survival prospects of the group (Goldstein 2001: 210). Further, this is an example of what Méndez described as discipline enforced in a gendered manner. Women are held responsible for (perceived) faults, even though the fault is technically the responsibility of a couple, which in turn implies different expectations when it comes to women's sexuality. According to Méndez, women are held responsible for the moral order inside the organization (Méndez 2012: 144f). Controlling couples by minimizing conflicts within the group, appears related to what Stanski describes as regarding individuals and combatants. Yuranis mentioned that arguments between companions in the group were also not allowed, thus the minimization of conflicts or friction within the group was a way to remain in control over the group members, and to keep them focused on the group struggle. However, that women to a larger extent than men were punished for these perceived faults, appears more specifically related to women as “bearers of the collective” and the moral order.

In the FARC, death penalties are enforced for the offenses considered most serious, such as desertion, through what is known as consejo de guerra (war council). Normally the commanders are informed of the offense, and depending of the seriousness of the crime they can make a case for consejo de guerra, where the front gathers and votes on whether the accused deserves death penalty (Méndez 2012: 139). This is what happened to Andrea. She and a friend had been in the group for a long while and wanted to escape, which they told another companion who they thought wanted to leave as well. However, this person informed the commander so Andrea and her friend were brought to consejo de guerra. Approximately 300 people participated, but only two people wanted them executed, so instead they were punished by extra physical work and by getting sent to different fronts. Andrea got away, but as described below, sometimes her friends became executed.

Sometimes when people are sad, if they don't carry out their work or if it's poorly done, they shoot them. The same companions. If someone misbehaves, they go on the same.... The same consejo. It's horrible. My companions for example, if they didn't fulfill the orders, they were shot. They didn't do it in front of us, but we knew someone would get shot. Four or six people were ordered to make the hole where they would be thrown... So they saw [the execution]. (Andrea)

The character of a council could give the impression that this is a “democratic” organization where the members have a say. However, it is also a very effective way of collective disciplining by gathering all group members to remind them that death awaits them if they disobey the orders. As
Andrea's quote illustrates, just knowing that someone would get shot instilled fear. The male interview participant told us that there were civilians collaborating with the group, and that sometimes even these became executed. Foremost, it was women who had given information about the group to the police. These women were ordered to leave the region within one day, or they would be brought to *consejo de guerra*. The gendered disciplining is thus not limited to the group members, but also includes civilian women, which is a sign of the militarized society.

The AUC had a similar way to discipline its members, called *muerte súbita* (sudden death). The difference was that the commander took the decision, with no rooms for appeals (Méndez 2012: 176). Abductees were normally executed, as explicated in the quote below.

> Most people that the Autodefensas abducted were killed in the end. They don't let them go because they have a lot of information […] At this moment, it was only me [who was abducted]. They took two people the day after. One of them, a man, was a guerrillero. If you give them information, and he did... So they didn't kill him, information about the guerrilla was valuable to them. (Carolina)

What this highlights is the strict demand on unconditional loyalty to the group, and the understanding that the abductees are risks in this aspect, particularly so if they had been members of an enemy group. Carolina was for instance not allowed to visit her family, which her companions were. The abductees were even more under surveillance, and even more disciplined than “ordinary” group members. Milfrid Tonheim, political scientist, did a study of girls formerly associated to armed groups in Congo. According to Tonheim the manner in which girls are recruited affects how they are treated in the group. Abducted girls are kept as slaves with guards watching over their every movement, while those who have joined voluntarily appears to enjoy greater freedom, e.g. by visiting their families (Tonheim 2012: 291). For Andrea, joining the group was a life-long commitment, and she was informed of the consequences if she was to leave.

> They tell that you don't leave from here, to leave means death […] When you enter, you don't know what you will do. The rules and rights and all that... It's not voluntary, for instance, one is not allowed to believe in God. You do it because you have to, not because you like it. If I hadn't done the things they told me, they would have killed me […] It depends on the type of offense, the penalty. We learned not to fight, we learned the rules and norms, learned that we had to show respect. And if you fight, there were a few people that fought, you get punished, like to look for firewood. (Andrea)

It is noteworthy that the group members are not allowed to be religious, in contrast with Catholicism's strong position in the Colombian society. It is logical that the commanders and leadership must “remove” other authorities, who could challenge the members obedience or commitment to the group struggle, by prohibiting religion. What is interesting, is that it strengthens
the idea of being a member in an armed group as a liminal position, where societal structures are radically altered and traditional settings of authority are dislocated. In this liminal position, God is not the master, but the commander is. The rules and the demands for obedience could also be challenged. The most serious crime was to desert from the group, which almost half of them did. The women were well aware of the risks that this meant for them, and it took rigorous planning, secrecy and knowledge in order to do so. That said, the women also showed a resistance to the hierarchical system, which is another evidence of their agency in vulnerable situations.

Learning how to show respect and to be responsible was brought up by other participants as a cornerstone for the in-group discipline. Yuranis said: “The rules were to be very responsible with the things they gave you, not to damage them. To be responsible on your own, but they tell you what to do, they order you. Also, we couldn't drink alcohol or do drugs”. Marta understood respect as part of the group ideology, as described below.

The ideology, it's to defend the interests of the poor […] It's part of the values, there is respect between... I have never experienced disrespect between the companions […] Sometimes, we were all called to these gatherings, to see which ones were behaving well and not. Only those who had misbehaved got a punishment, not the whole group. They could for example make them read books and do summaries. It was like, not such a bad punishment. (Marta)

All in all, the testimonies create an image of the ideal group member as loyal, disciplined and responsible – characteristics which could be seen as traditionally masculine. However, these are also traditional qualities of motherhood, which creates an interesting contradiction. Masculine qualities are not only flexible but also contain significant tensions. For instance, being unemotional, rational and calculating appears contradictory to being chivalrous, protective and courageous (Hutchings 2008: 391f). That said, I do believe that women can perform masculinity in order to live up to the picture of the ideal member, as the women did not express any difficulties for them to perform according to the ideal. Actually, more commonly the women constructed themselves as “good rebels” and emphasized that they did a good job in the group. As Halberstam argues, to play among a variety of masculine identifications does not mean to be forced to become a man or appropriate his maleness (Halberstam 1998: 32). Masculinity is something that women can both perform and feel comfortable in.

**Theme summary**

In this theme, control and discipline as gendered practices have been described. The analysis highlights the discrepancy between that women and men were completely equal, and that some
treatment and practices within the group were gender specific and tied to women's bodies. Méndez has made an important contribution to the field, by showing that there are differences in how the FARC and the AUC have dealt with issues like pregnancies and thereby the complex manner in which gender becomes militarized. Even if I can see the patterns in my data, there are variances and overlappings both between and within the groups. My interview participants referred to group policies, but foremost to the commander, as determinant in how relationships and pregnancies are dealt with within each front. The commander's position replicates an unequal hierarchy where the control of group members, and in particular women, is central for the group discipline. That women to a larger extent than men were punished, both group members and civilians, appears related to expectations of women as bearers of the collective. Further, I have described the liminality that is created within armed groups, where values regarding motherhood and the societal anti-abortion discourse are radically altered. The Catholic church and God is replaced by the commander in this setting, where arguments and logics normally used to oppose abortions are used to favor the same.

It is a simplification to presume that women in the FARC have been subjected to forced abortions and that women in the AUC have not, which is important to take into account when treating female ex-combatants in the reintegration process. The individual approach to reintegration should be beneficial in this aspect, where their personal experiences shape the type of treatment and support they receive. The women's reproductive rights have been severely attacked during their time in the armed groups, and as will be described in the following section, extreme situation do become normalized. That said, the women should preferably be given support and assistance to restore and reinforce their bodily integrity, for instance through information about sexual and reproductive rights.
6. “It becomes normal” – normalization in- and outside the group

In this theme, I will refer to the normalizing processes that took place in relation to the armed conflict, which have affected the women's lives, as members of an armed group as well as a citizen. The theme came out of the observation that the women were so often reverting to the fact that war is normal, although their stories signaled contradictions and some awareness that it is not. The first sub-theme, *Fear and hardships*, refers to this contradiction and how some things which initially scared them became normalized, but also to the parts of war that they in a sense never became used to. The second, *Weapons as family, war as business*, relates to how the tools of war became something very dear to the women, and how war practices were understood as any other kind of work. The third, *The process of adaption*, concerns how certain practices and habits achieved during their time in the armed groups continued to affect them in the process of reintegrating.

**Fear and hardships**

In this sub-theme, I will describe the fear the women initially felt when joining the armed groups, including the parts that did and the parts that did not become normalized. According to Goldstein, with some rare exceptions, soldiers who participate in combat find it extremely unnatural and horrible. Contrary to the belief that war thrills, research indicates that war is something that society imposes, which people resist but yet are dragged into, constantly brainwashed and disciplined while there, then rewarded and honored afterwards. The harsh discipline, such as the death penalty for desertion, is a proof for the difficulty of getting soldiers to fight (Goldstein 2001: 253). Under these extreme or unnatural conditions, normalization is a central coping strategy. Even though most of the women described their time in the armed groups as difficult, they more or less agreed on that life “there” became normal. Elena said: “When they took me there, I was crying because of the things I had to do. But I got used to it and then it was normal”. The Colombian society is militarized, but the quote captures that war does not come naturally, not even for those who participate in the war.

A few of the participants never went to combat, but remained in the camp when they occurred. Marta described how people came back injured and that some “were missing”, which was hard. For Juana however, the combats became normal.

Well, we didn't have many, it was like four or five. In the beginning it was hard but one... Gets used to it. It becomes normal. But the first time... I was afraid, because the first time we were in the middle of a mountain, it always happens in the mountains, and it's only you and your companions, and you're always like... Afraid that the other group is going to get you. Yes, I was afraid for the first month, and then... As I said, I've gotten used to it, you have to get used to it, because when you get there you cannot withdraw [...] Yes, I got used to it, and it was an essential thing, it was like natural these things. (Juana)
Juana acknowledged that the change of life was difficult, but kept coming back to the idea that she
got used to it. Normalization in this context does not appear as effortless, but more as a necessary
strategy for survival. As Juana said – it was an essential thing. The women gave few descriptions
about how they got used to it, but referred to the time spent there, and that the fear disappears over
time, as described in the quote below.

When I started, it was difficult, I didn't know what it was, I was afraid of everything. I was a child and I
didn't know how to do anything. I stayed for a long time, I watched the other women, but in the beginning
it was hard, very hard. And with the time... I adapted. (Marta)

The descriptions of that it was hard, horrible and difficult implies that the women were, and still are,
aware that these conditions in fact are nothing but normal. In order to combat the fear it became
necessary to normalize their situation, by telling themselves that war is normal over and over again.
“Normal” was a word used repetitively during the interviews. It could signal that this adaptive
process is still ongoing, and an attempt to reconcile their past. Yuranis described in the quote below
that combats were “necessary” as that they had to protect their territory.

We had combats but my block didn't get involved. We were in conflict with the guerrilla, so when that
[combats] happened we had to watch [...] They didn't attack us, we attacked them, because it was our
territory, so we couldn't let them go there. If we would have let them, they would have attacked us, so we
attacked them instead. (Yuranis)

The quote illustrates how Yuranis made sense of and justified the combats. It appears as the
reasoning is “better to kill than get killed”, where the risk of getting attacked made the combats both
understandable and acceptable. The in-group psychology, creating a we versus them, normalized
violence and killings. According to Enloe, militarization is never simply about joining the army. It
is a far more subtle process that sprawls over the gendered social landscape. Militarization is a
step-by-step process where a person gradually becomes controlled by the military, or becomes
dependent on militaristic ideas for its wellbeing. People can become militarized in their thinking, in
how they live their everyday life or in what they aspire for - it is a pervasive process difficult to
uproot. The more militarization transforms an individual or a society, the more military needs and
militaristic presumptions become not only valued but normal (Enloe 2000: 1ff, my italics). The
women became dependent on the armed groups, the weapons and the violent practices as the one
thing that could grant them safety, which is an indication of how they as individuals became
militarized.

When I started conducting the interviews I imagined that the women would bring up the
combats, i.e. direct physical violence and death, as the hardest part. However, when I asked what was most difficult about being in the armed groups, other things came up. The psychological stress due to lack of sleep and constantly being chased by the army and other armed groups was a topic that recurred during the interviews, as described in the quotes below.

The ugliest part is the walking, it's the worst. You had to walk in the darkness, without a lantern. You didn't know if you would fall, or if there were wild animals. Only God is your company, because there is no... Light, when the moon is bright, there is light, it's the only way because... We couldn't use lanterns, because they could find us, kill us or take us as prisoners. (Yuranis)

Sometimes we were sleeping, and a fight burst out, so we had to leave running in the middle of the night. You just had to grab everything and go... Any night the army could find us, yes, sleeping. They told me to wake up, shocked me with that [...] You never knew if something would happen or not. (Andrea)

Some aspects, like the lack of sleep and running away from the army, were tenuous and in a sense never got normalized. For Yessica, that she was so tired, was one of the main reasons why she decided to desert from the group. The physical demands and the psychological stress, in combination with the basic needs not getting fulfilled clearly affected the participants. “Combat fatigue” is the cumulative effect of horrors of fighting, sleep deprivation and extreme psychological stress. This is a short-term effect, in comparison with the long-term post-traumatic stress disorder (Goldstein 2001: 261f). While combats were rare, the other conditions mentioned affected them on a daily basis. This connects back to the daily stressors as more challenging than rare incidents of direct physical violence, similarly to their situation before joining the armed groups. In low intensity warfare, such as the Colombian conflict, violence is episodic rather than constant where the daily stressors represent something more proximate and immediate. Specific acts of political violence are highly distressing, but rare, and thus less psychologically salient (Miller & Rasmussen 2010: 12). This highlights the need to problematize the tendency to focus on a single violence type. In the women's descriptions, the psychological violence and stress experienced appears to have affected them to a larger extent than physical violence.

**Weapons as family, war as business**

In this sub-theme, the way women normalized weapons and their tasks as part of an ongoing war, is described. As previously mentioned, all women had low ranks in their groups, but their roles and responsibilities were very different. Elena and Marta became specialized in nursing care, as it demanded training and sometimes even formal courses. Yessica's primary responsibility was to cultivate a coca plantation, while Juana's and Yuranis' responsibility was to patrol. Some engaged in
what usually is described as supporting activities, which meant that they actually did not have to be located in the group, but could conduct their work from outside. That was the case for Carmen, who did the laundry and nursing activities in a village close to the group's zone. Others had various tasks, they did what the commander asked them to that specific day, as described in the quote below.

We didn't have specific responsibilities, it was more like they ordered us “today you're going to cook, you're going to search for firewood, you are going to search for money...” Yes. The commander gave the orders, he was in charge. For example, in a company there is a boss that oversees and gives the orders, “you are going to do this, you are going to do that”. It's like being an employee. (Andrea)

Despite their differences, the common denominator is that the women were ordered what to do. The reference to working in an enterprise as an employee where the boss gives the orders, recurred in several interviews. A few of the participants referred to their time in the group as “work” or “when I was working”, signaling how they made sense of their time there. Hence, the tasks conducted within the group: patrolling, cultivating coca plants or searching for firewood were no different from being an employee. This might connect to the type of responsibility the women consider themselves having had, related to their low rank, but also how they normalized that the tasks they were conducting was part of an ongoing war.

What deserves to be highlighted in relation to this is the Colombian DDR program's success with incorporating ex-combatants regardless of their role in the groups. Traditionally, women who mobilize to serve the military are stereotyped as camp followers, and as dispensable, regardless of their professionality or formal position. Soldier's wives, cooks, provisioners, laundresses and nurses performs tasks that any large military force needs, but is ideologically peripheral to its combat function (Enloe 2000: 40). This in turn has consequences for DDR processes. Chris Coulter, anthropologist, argues that as the DDR process in Sierra Leone was focused on disarming male combatants, where the classification of “bush wives” effectively excluded women from the DDR process, despite the fact that many of them wanted to disarm (Coulter 2009: 158). My interview participants' stories regarding their roles and ranks shows how the Colombian process has succeeded to avoid this, by not letting the type of activity they engaged in define who is legible for the process and not. This is a very important aspect, and an example of how to avoid the gendered pitfall in DDR processes with deeming activities coded as feminine as a non-threat to peace and stability.

Not only were their tasks normalized, but also the weapons as tools of war. Becoming a group member involved technical practice in handling and using weapons. For instance, Yuranis had
to go through thirteen months of tough military training before she was allowed to enter the group. It also included an “emotional training” where they learned that the weapon was thought of as family to them, as described below.

It's like a mother [the weapon], so you have to take care of it [...] I never had a mother, so I took care of it. It was like a good thing, because we had to defend ourselves with this, so we took care of it like it was something personal of ours, that we had to love, that we couldn't abandon, that we always kept close to us [...] We took care of what protected us from the bad things that could happen. (Yuranis)

For Yuranis who before joining did not have a family to take care of her, the relationship to the weapon became a valuable one. She took care of the weapon, as the weapon would take care of her if she ended up in a battle. Juana told a similar story, that the weapon in a way was her mother, her father, her family, and that she came to a point where she loved the weapon. By convincing the group members to feel empathy and a need to protect the weapon, the commanders succeeded to normalize arms and the use of arms. According to Henri Myrttinen, conflict resolution and peace scholar, soldiers are taught to feminize the tools of war, to view guns as brides or as female beings, which they are expected to take care of. Thus, the weapon becomes the female lover, bride or mother of the male soldier. Myrttinen acknowledges that the female sexualized metaphors are ambiguous, and that traditional gender roles are transformed through combat. Women do take part in combat, not only on a symbolic level as “female” guns (Myrttinen 2003: 40). I would add to this ambiguity, based on the women's responses, that women relate to these caring practices of weapons without being the traditional male defendants of the nation and women. Once more, this illustrates the conflictual dynamics which both relates to and departs from the physical and symbolical role of the woman in the nation. Juana mentioned that the weapon was “her mother, her father” which signals that women are not conceptualized as the ones protected, nor that men do the protecting. It is part of a gender neutralizing process, at least for women when becoming militarized. Perhaps, there is a possibility that men in this process relate more to the traditional narrative as defendants of the nation, while women relate to a more gender neutral and/or equal narrative.

At the same time as the weapon was something dear to them which granted them safety, Juana was well aware of how people outside the group perceive weapons. She mentioned that the publicity was a problem during the demobilization.

When we demobilized, it was collective, and it was public. Many people were gathered, there were reporters and news agencies, making interviews and taking our photos. We didn't like that. We didn't want everyone in the country to see us with weapons on our shoulders, for the news to spread the word that we belonged to the Autodefensas. (Juana)
Her story creates an image of a conflictual relationship to the weapon, as it in one way represents safety, protection and even love, and on the other danger, insecurity and violence. The weapons became normalized, but being seen with a weapon on her shoulder is an image that made her uncomfortable. Perhaps, because she is well aware of how that image is perceived in civil society. According to Butler, the subject does not possess free will to perform gender, but is limited by political regulations and disciplinary actions from the surrounding (Butler 1990: 173f). The subversive potential of gender performativity limits the actor through cultural norms, but also through the reception of an audience that renders the performance as legible or illegible. Thus, the performer's agency is tied to its audience (Butler 2004: 32). The surrounding in this example shifts from companions to the society in general, where a demobilized woman with a weapon likely would not pass unnoticed, perhaps due to the perceived connection between men and weapons. Shifting context and shifting audience, meant not only to break the relationship to their companions but also to their weapons.

Weapons can also be power markers for disenfranchised individuals. According to Theidon, justice and security is privatized in Colombia as the state had failed in providing it. Guns are therefore both a threat and a source of security in a highly violent environment. In DDR, to surrender guns means to trust the police for protection, and at the same time to diminish the own capacity to self-protection (Theidon 2009: 19f). To submit weapons is a symbolic gesture where the combatants are giving back the monopoly on violence to the state. For the women, who experienced mistrust for political institutions and the juridical system, this also meant exposing themselves to vulnerability. One participant whose parents went to the police station when she was abducted, discovered that the police were allied with the armed group, and therefore did not pay attention to her case. Another participant thought about the falsos positivos when she handed herself in to the police. A third participant described that she was captured by the army when she tried to desert, and that she initially lied about her connection to the group. Their stories show evidence of the mistrust the PPRs experience against political institutions and juridical system that they have to encounter in the DDR process. The occasions when the state and the system have let them down are difficult to forget.

In Colombia, armed guards are commonly employed in everything from entrances to apartment buildings to shopping malls, and the police and army are present in many different settings where they carry their weapons publicly. The strong military presence in Colombia is understandable. It is not much more than ten years ago that the conflict was as most intense where thousands of people died each year in battles, massacres, bombings and kidnappings. This is fresh in memory amongst Colombians. However, to ask the demobilized population to hand in their
weapons to the authorities who are still relying so heavily on the same is somewhat contradictive. It highlights the complexities with the DDR process taking place in a country still so militarized and at war. According to Myrttinen, the public display, the threat or actual use of weapons is part of the militarized models of masculinity, where manliness is equated with the sanctioned use of aggression, force and violence. Weapons can be used as status symbols or as a tool to achieve economic or social gains, where the public display underline the “manly” bearer. The specific “message” sent by the display and use of weapons however depends on the context (Myrttinen 2003: 37f). We talked to one of the guards working at the ACR's office about their role. Among other things, they were there in case the PPRs got aggressive. It is reasonable and important to not endanger the safety of the office personnel, however, there is also a risk for signaling to the PPRs that the authority who is asking for their trust does not trust them in return. That said, the situation is understandable, but not unproblematic, as the PPRs during reintegration have to encounter and try to overcome their mistrust for political institutions. The “message” sent in this context appears to be that violence is still legitimate depending on who performs it.

The process of adaption

In this sub-theme, certain habits and practices that became normalized and continued to affect the women during the reintegration, is described. For Juana, it was difficult to get used to a more sedentary life during the reintegration, she described feeling restless and misses being physically active. For other participants patrolling was the most difficult part, but Juana said that she felt free when walking. In addition, she misses the other members in the group with whom she had many things in common.

The customs. I had gotten used to being a guard, to patrol one day for three hours, four hours... I was always active there, now I can no longer be locked inside my house. Going out, like having lots of space... I miss walking and this [...] We're accustomed to many things, that these are my family, my life, my mum. One has other kinds of conversations. I cannot speak like that, about these things, with a friend of mine. Actually, I had nothing to talk about with my friends, nor with my mum. It's strange. We spoke about many things... It's difficult when you're used to the other... The civil life and all. (Juana)

For Juana, the type of conversations she had with the companions appears impossible to have with others. The group belonging and the “camaraderie” was something that Marta brought up as well, in relation to the reintegration: “I was surprised how people treat each other, badly. When I was in the group everyone were treated well, even though we were not a family, we were treated like a family”. The sense of fellowship that was created within the armed group is unequaled in society,
and Marta was struck by how people in society treat each other when she returned from the group. Combat veterans frequently claim that they did not primarily fight for patriotism, but for their close buddies. Some argue that male bonding is central within this group dynamic, however, research has shown that bonding in war also apply to women (Goldstein 2001: 196ff). In addition, traumatized people often cannot share their experiences with others. Even if others want to hear their stories, they are not truly understandable without having been there. Going home means to break a lifeline and the in-group bonding (ibid. 262). This should not be underestimated since it brings a certain degree of isolation to the PPRs.

I asked Elena, who said that she was alone and that the ACR was her only support, if she ever met with other PPRs. She did occasionally, for instance at workshops, but it did not come out as important relationships to her. When I asked about friends or any other type of support, she answered: “I’m not very talkative”, which might signal the type of isolation the PPRs experience. Their membership in the armed groups has social consequences, where the difficulty to share past experiences is a hindrance to create new relationships with people outside the groups. According to the office personnel at the ACR, the PPRs rarely interact with each other. Partly, this is a strategy from the ACR, as e.g. the ex-combatants from the AUC share a collective identity which they are trying to deconstruct. In order to prevent the PPRs from relapsing into criminal activities, interaction between them is avoided. Their strategy adds to the type of vacuum that is created when the PPRs break old bonds and have not yet created new ones. The only ones who can possibly understand what they have been and are going through are other people in the same situation, but they are kept apart. Their past is keeping them apart from other PPRs, and at the same time hindering the possibility to create new social networks.

The difficulties of navigating between life as a civilian and life in the armed group was further described by Juana. She was given furlough on a regular basis during her time in the group, where she went to visit her mother and her friends. She described this as living a “double life”, which is explained in the following quote.

Sometimes it was hard because one gets used to other things, after many years of living there [...] I felt like I was in another life, I had to change to the maximum, and it was difficult. To change the system one has become used to [...] The life there is difficult, it's a difficult system, how to be, where to go, always being along those lines, all things. No laughter, no dance, nothing of that, and then the change when you go out, there was a party, rumba, dancing, laughing, we go here, we go there... Sometimes I was with my friends they told me that I had changed. It was very strange [...] It has cost me a lot of work getting used to the humble life again. (Juana)

Even though this episode took place when Juana was still in the armed group, she describes the
difficulties with adapting to a completely different life. It appears to have caused some friction when she tried to integrate her past from the armed group into a functioning identity in civil society. A staff member at the ACR said that the PPRs have during their time in the armed groups become used to authorities, to the extent that it today is difficult for them to make own decisions and take own responsibility. Juana hints something similar when she discuss the hard life and strict rules in contrast with the freedom in society, which creates confusion. The difficulties to relate to her relatives, and even the freedom to just have fun and enjoy herself, becomes difficult with her past and has cost her a lot of work to reconcile.

Theme summary
In this theme, normalization processes that took place while the women participated in the armed groups, many times as a survival strategy, has been discussed. It appears as the women are, still, repeatedly telling themselves that war is normal although their stories signal the opposite. Combats were indeed horrible, but in order to cope, normalization was essential. However, what the women found most difficult were daily stressors such as lack of sleep, which relates to how daily stressors were most challenging in their life before joining as well. Further, how the tools and practices of war became normalized has been analyzed, where weapons became thought of as family members, and their tasks as “any other work”. This result partly contradicts previous research by Myrttinen who argues that weapons are feminized tools of war, as the women also related to these caring practices of weapons without being the traditional male defendants of the nation. The things that became normalized during their time in the armed groups continued to affect the women, and adapting took a lot of effort in order to redefine “normal” during the reintegration process.

Leaving the armed groups meant breaking bonds, both to weapons as a source of protection and to companions as a source of support. Breaking the bonds to former companions leaves the ex-combatant without a meaningful collective in which to reside. Their current situation appears as a social vacuum, where old relationships are left behind and new ones have not yet been established. These aspects should be taken into account if the ACR evaluate their strategy of keeping PPRs apart from each other. Further, that the militarized society to a large extent still relies on weapons as a source of security, while at the same time asking the ex-combatants to submit their weapons, illuminates a relationship marked by distrust in the DDR process, which should preferably also be given some thoughts.
7. The window that closes – conforming strategies

In this theme, I look at the strategies the women turned to during reintegration in their quest to become a part of civil society. The theme emerged from hearing the women reflect upon gender and sex roles over time, which gave the impression that the importance of gender conformity is more pronounced in society. The armed group offered some flexibility regarding gender variations, while civil society did not. Hence, the opportunity to go beyond conventional femininity is the window that closes during reintegration. In the first sub-theme, *The role of the family – support or a risk?*, the women's roles in relation to the family, household and reintegration is discussed. The second, *Silence and stigma*, concerns their strategy of remaining silent as a way to cover up their past, in fear for reprisals and to avoid stigmatization. The third, *Coping through gender conformity*, relates to the heightened importance of being a feminine woman, including practices, appearance and behaviors.

The role of the family – support or a risk?

In this sub-theme, I will describe the women's traditional role in relation to the family, which could be a hindrance in the reintegration process. All women but one had children, and when I asked about their current role at home, it became obvious that the woman is the one with primary responsibility over the household. Carolina described how she tried to balance taking care of the children with her school attendance, which she did simultaneously, as her husband only shared that responsibility when he was at home.

It was more difficult before... I had my child, was studying and in the evenings I was working as a maid.
Now, I sometimes leave my son with the neighbors [...] Sometimes I have to bring them to the courses, to the school. Whenever my husband is home the children is with him. (Carolina)

Combining the life as the primary parent with the life as a PPR proved difficult for some of the participants. Yessica studied earlier in the process but her school was far away from her home, which she brought up as a problem. She did not want to leave the children home alone, and was therefore not able to continue her studies, which in turn meant that she had to deviate from the path of reintegration. In post-conflict periods women are usually relegated to narrowly defined roles in society (Myrttinen 2003: 42f). Even though it appears as female combatants have crossed the boundary of public/private, in times of reintegration it becomes visible that the boundary was only temporarily or superficially transgressed (Tabak 2011: 142). According to Theidon, the Colombian DDR program reinforces a patriarchal “family unit”, marked by a division of labor. Men participate
in various program requirements, while the women take care of the children (Theidon 2009: 31). The lack of childcare provision complicates the women's obligations as PPRs, for instance in school attendance. The PPRs have to attend at least 90% of the activities scheduled by the ACR in order to receive the program incentives (Agencia Colombiana para la Reintegración 2015). Hence, to deviate from the path means that they can lose e.g. the financial support, which puts the women in an economically vulnerable position. Further, one participant mentioned that if they deviate from the path, the ACR might suspect that they are engaging in criminal activities, which could undermine the trust between them. The PPRs appear to have a lot to prove in order to be trusted, where their personal life as the primary parent complicates the reintegration process. That said, the fact that women step back to gendered conventions might not be problematic per se, but when it has consequences for their progress in the reintegration program it is a serious issue.

Apart from childcare provision, this is an important issue where it is possible to work with masculinities and men in the reintegration program. According to Theidon, her interview participants explained that joining the AUC made them feel like “a big man in the streets of their barrios” where they could “go out with the prettiest young women” and “dress well” (Theidon 2007: 76). If this is the case, one can question which role the family, household and children has in this image – they might be ideals difficult to reconcile. One staff member said that it is difficult to work with the ACR's gender perspective since there are few women in the program. Gender is easily, but incorrectly, equaled to women and in the issue of women as primary parents and responsible for the household – I consider alternative masculinities, such as present fathers, as crucial for women's possibilities to successful reintegration. The reintegration process should not mean that they are given program incentives solely based on how they perform in the public sphere, through education and work, but also in the private sphere, as through taking care of their own children. Otherwise, the result is that male PPRs are privileged on the expense of female PPRs, by reproducing the labored division and the devaluation of feminine practices and the private sphere.

In Theidon's research on male ex-combatants, the family was a key theme during the interviews, which could be part of the explanation of why they joined the armed group, but also a key incentive to remaining a civilian (Theidon 2009: 30f). Many of her participants deserted for family-related reasons, as they had spent many years away from their families. The family was essential in connecting their life in the armed group with their memories of civilian life, which made them remember that they were still human beings, even in the armed group (Theidon 2007:

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19 When I discussed the gender perspective with office personnel, the knowledge about it was sometimes much higher than in this case. ACR's gender perspective clearly states that gender issues concerns both men and women (Agencia Colombiana para la Reintegración 2014: 6). However, most of them expressed difficulties with incorporating it into their work.
That said, increased responsibility for the family and children might not only help female PPRs, but also the men themselves in “disarming the masculinity”.

However, I also want to problematize the implied responsibility placed on women, in their roles as wives and mothers, in the reintegration program. For instance, Goldstein argues that women serve to facilitate men's militarized masculinity by nurturing men as warriors (Goldstein 2001: 306). According to Theidon, women seek out these “big men” for them to provide security (Theidon 2009: 18). Further, Denissen argues that women can grant their husbands success of reintegration, by convincing them to stay at home instead of “fighting in the mountains” (Denissen 2010: 341). All in all, this illustrates a tendency in research and policy recommendation which implies that women's primary purpose is to disarm militarized masculinities and to facilitate men's reintegration. I find this type of reasoning highly problematic. First of all, as previously mentioned, that men have an equally shared responsibility for granting women's success in the reintegration process through sharing the burden of childcare, has not been equally emphasized. Second, instead of shaming women for finding strategies for increased security, it might be worth to shift focus to the fact that security is privatized and that the state has failed in providing it for its (gendered) citizens. Third, the women have a responsibility for themselves and their own lives, which should be given priority instead of granting their husbands success and progress. Despite the growing awareness about women's participation in armed groups, they are often ignored in conflict analyses. Apart from being analytically problematic, it has adverse policy implications for DDR, as being directed to men framed as the actors of war (Kunz & Sjöberg 2009: 6). This type of reasoning among academics risks reproducing the construction that militarized men are the primary threat to peace and security, and that militarized women can remain not prioritized.

In fact, for women there are risks with reuniting families during the reintegration process. Returning to one's partner and children often results in a “domestication of violence” which results in an increase in domestic violence (Theidon 2009: 21). A Colombian survey estimates that domestic violence occurs in 70 % of the households where the male partner was a demobilized person (El Tiempo 2008). The number is strikingly high, but research shows that high rates of domestic violence are often related to returning ex-combatants during DDR in various contexts (United Nations 2001: 2). That said, even though the family can be a big support for the individual PPR, the construction of the family as the emotional relief for female PPRs is a distorted picture. As previously mentioned, the problem with intra-familiar violence is well known by the ACR who gives special attention to the issue. In relation to this, it is important to problematize the emphasis

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20 A national survey from 2010 estimates that 37 % of the female population are subjected to domestic violence (Human Rights Watch 2012).
put on the (nuclear) family, and to acknowledge and work with other family constellations, as with alternative masculinities. This is particularly important in relation to the risk of women being economically dependent on their husbands, as their own economic incentive can be withheld in cases of deviating from the reintegration path.

Some gendered perceptions are also discerned in the reintegration process itself. The business plan offered as an incentive concerns a limited amount of money, which in practice means that the opening of a business takes place in the house of the PPRs. In the quote below Carmen discussed the business plan and the gendered labor division.

Some are given the Plan Semilla... Sometimes the man gives it to the woman. Then, he needs an employment […] It's always like that, because the man doesn't like to be in his home, he wants to be employed. (Carmen)

The situation she describes relates to the perception of women belonging in the private sphere, and men belonging in the public. Thus, men working in the private sphere appears as an emasculating practice, perhaps particularly so after going through the “emasculating process of disarmament”. For men, to resort to conventional masculinity can be a way to safeguard the same, in going through a process where they perceive a loss of power. That gendered perceptions regarding men and women belonging in separate spheres are present among PPRs in the reintegration program, further shows the need to work with alternative masculinities, if the program incentives should not reproduce the gendered labor division.

**Silence and stigma**

In this sub-theme, how the women managed hiding their past, specifically by not ever talking about it, is presented. The man we interviewed was the only one who tried to be open about his past, as he hoped that it would increase the society's understanding about PPRs. This is not a comparative study, and the limited sample of participants is not representative for the population of PPRs. However, his answer differed from the stories the women told me, where silence was a central strategy when adapting to civil society. Elena said: “We don't talk about this. For me it's a thing I will stop talking about, it's important that I leave it behind”. As the quote below illustrates, as a PPR, one way to reconcile the past with the present is to put a lid on the past, and hope that the truth will not leak out.

Now, when I live in Barranquilla, no one knows but I. I'm in my house. Normal, like any other person [...] My children doesn't know, they have to get older [...] It's because this is something sad for me. I want to erase this. It's a process, but... It affects me. (Andrea)
Some have told their children, neighbors or other relatives but the subject itself is something they avoid. Yessica said that this is personal. Carolina described the past as a sensitive thing. Maria drew connections to people's reactions: “There are people that don't accept the PPRs. They don't believe that people can change”. The wish to erase this chapter from their lives seems connected to fear of how people might react and possible stigmatization. This does not appear as an imagined threat, but an actual one, which can be exemplified with the following quote when Carolina told her partner about her past.

My husband is from here, he was not part of the group. He kept asking me ”where are you going all the time?” when I went to the ACR. So I had to tell him about it, have confidence in him and tell him. It was difficult, like... At first he didn't want to stay with me because he knew that the Autodefensas had done many... Bad things. He acted... Strange, like if I was dangerous. I felt bad, I started crying. I didn't expect that from him. (Carolina)

Ultimately, they ended up together again, but his strong reaction shows the difficulties with creating relationships with civilian people. Among the women who were married at the time of the interview, all but Carolina had a husband who was also a PPR. According to Tonheim, her participants found that it was difficult to get married if the husband himself had not been a soldier, and that boys had been scared away because of their past (Tonheim 2012: 288f). Carolina's husband demonstrated a similar behavior, when he acted like she was dangerous. The society has clear ideas, knowledge and prejudices about what the groups have done, and consequently what the PPRs have done, which in turn affects the characteristics that are attributed to them.

A few times when I told people in Colombia about my study, they said something in line with “You know that these are bad people, don't you? You know what they have done?”. That the PPRs are “bad people that never change”, appears to be part of the perceptions there are about them in the Colombian society. This can be compared with the previously mentioned notion that “the female guerrilla is a real slut”, as it paints a picture of the perceptions surrounding female PPRs. All reactions were not this explicitly negative, but more subtle. A few mentioned that people for instance could give them a strange look, as described below.

They treat me good, more or less. I don't feel like, discriminated... But I don't know what they say when I'm not there. Sometimes, back in the village, I've felt that people look at me strangely. Yes, that never seems to change. But I'm used to it, right, it's something natural. (Juana)

For Juana, these subtle reactions became normalized as well. Nevertheless, subtle or explicit stigmatization works to remind the PPRs that they are not perceived as “normal”. According to
Theidon, there is a deep mutual fear between the ex-combatants and the host community. Members of the communities find themselves living with former killers, and ex-combatants worry enormously about their security, where the failure to involve the broader community leads to a cycle of suspicion and fear (Theidon 2007: 83). In relation to this, it is understandable that the women may have interest in not being public about their past. When we went through the informed consent agreement before starting the interview, one participant wanted to make sure that it would not be published in a newspaper, which was a sign of the fear about the word getting around and that their background would become known to the public. It is also possible that some of the women are traumatized after their time in the group, where there can be a purpose of putting things behind so as not to tear up old wounds. Nevertheless, the mere amount of time they have spent in the groups, for some up to eleven years, cannot easily be erased. Rather, I interpret this as a strategy which the women are using for reducing possible stigma. According to Tonheim, the most common reaction to stigmatization and to avoid disputes is to remain silent. The majority of her participants found that silence and withdrawal was a more effective reaction to insults than verbally defending themselves (Tonheim 2012: 288). While Tonheim's results are based on the direct reaction to stigmatization, I will argue that silence also can be a way to prevent the possible stigma. Silence and withdrawal might not only be a way to manage direct insults and stigmatization, but to avoid the situation of getting stigmatized completely.

Women experience double stigma for not only transgressing the societal norm of joining an armed group, but also for transgressing the gendered perception of women belonging in the private sphere (Tabak 2011: 139). Further, the gendered stigma might be related to the notion of women as “bearers of the collective”. As women are held as representatives of honor, reveling their past could not only put their own reputation at risk, but also their families'. Could it be that, as men are individualized and women are collectivized, that women experience triple stigma for crossing the lines of what is seen as appropriate? Could it be that women are not only held responsible for the moral order inside the group, but also within the family? Different expectations for feminine and masculine behaviors, as exemplified in the stereotypes of peaceful women and violent men, likely have consequences for how women with a violent past are perceived and un/welcomed into civil society.

The resistance in revealing their past is not only related to the society's reaction, but the fear that their former armed group would become aware of their location and capture them. This was particularly the case of the women who had demobilized individually. In the quote below, Andrea described how difficult it is to forget the threat of getting killed.
They tell you that if you submit us to the police or the army, you'll get killed […] You don't feel calm. It's difficult to forget this chapter […] I'm afraid that they are going to find me, because they send people, and are in all parts of the country, so... I look around myself. Sometimes when I go out, I'm afraid that someone will recognize me, that someone is observing me, but I continue as normal. With this past, you'll never become free. It has been many years. We try to leave this chapter behind and go out again. But sometimes I... Think about going to another country. (Andrea)

Andrea tries to leave her past behind, but is afraid to the extent that she considers leaving the country, where no one knows her. She told us about one occasion when she met a former member of her group that recognized her. When Andrea was approached she denied her name and her former participation, as she is aware of the group's use of spies and feared that this person would pass on information to them. Whether this threat is actual or imagined is not relevant, since the fear of retaliation for their past is something that most likely affects the women and their ability to establish relationships, social networks and their ability to trust people. In addition, as Andrea's encounter with a former companion actually proves, these encounters are neither imagined nor unrealistic. The fear is also related to the conflicts between the groups, as described in the quote below.

My mother lives in the village where they took me, so I'm afraid to go there... When I walk around there, the people know that they took me from the village. And, there are still guerrilleros there, so I'm afraid of them. But I do go, like once a year. (Carolina)

I asked Carmen, who is originally from Barranquilla, if she ever considered going to another part of the country for the reintegration process. She did not, but acknowledged that she never knows who might be enemies of her group, which did create some cautiousness when she met with new people. To return to home regions and the family might provide economic and social support, but many women resettle far from their families to avoid reprisals from former fellow combatants (Tabak 2011: 150). These testimonies illustrate a situation, where living in civil society is far from experienced as safe, but rather that there are possible threats just around the corner. The threat of violence is part of the continuum of violence, and an example of psychological stress that the women experience. Most likely, the threat of violence works as a limitation to women's freedom of action, in their ability to move freely in the public sphere, and in their ability to create valuable relationships. New social bonds with people who do not share their past could help the women to create new, non-violent, identities but is hindered by their experienced insecurity. The reintegration program can grant them some protection in these aspects, but Carolina felt nervous about the day it would be over.
You come here, enter the process, and feel protected at the time, but you know when you leave, you'll walk on a dangerous road [...] I found that... The protection is... Here, they give you support, with studies, health, it's like I have everything. (Carolina)

Carolina recognizes that she will not always have this support, and protection, and that when the process is finished – she is all by herself. According to Méndez, all members of the DDR program enter a gray zone where they are no longer part of an armed group, but nor are civilians. This is connected to the stigma surrounding their identity and rejection from recipient communities (Méndez 2012: 195). Once again, the PPRs are experiencing liminality as an in-between situation. The women try to live their lives as normal, but are well aware that as PPRs they are not considered “normal”, where hiding their past becomes a central strategy to conform to society. In their wish to become normal, the easiest solution is to try to erase, or at least conceal their past.

The ACR publicly acknowledge that reducing the stigma from the Colombian society towards the demobilized population is one of their greatest challenges (Agencia Colombiana para la Reintegración 2015). One office personnel said that the PPRs feel rejected by the society. Partly, this can be an identity created during the in-group bonding, but she also emphasized that many of them are truly being rejected. She mentioned several different strategies from the ACR involving collaborations of different kinds, for instance with academia, media and different enterprises. Creating relationships between e.g. an employee and a company, is one strategy to reduce the stigma. In addition, Barranquilla has an annual carnival, where PPRs are encouraged to participate. She described it as: “We have to show that the PPRs are human too”, and drew parallels to how her own perceptions have changed, as her insight to the lives of the PPRs has increased. Creating personal bonds is an interesting strategy which definitely is important. However, the fear the PPRs experience must also be taken into account, where the burden of reducing societal stigma cannot be placed only on individuals and on the interpersonal level.

**Coping through gender conformity**

In this sub-theme, how the women changed during reintegration to conform to gendered norms, including appearance and behavior, is presented. Juana was an interview participant who stood out from the others. At the moment she joined the group she was a housewife, married and with the primary responsibility to take care of the children. In other words, her initial position conformed to gendered norms. She entered the group with a male name and had her hair cut off, so the group commander realized that she was a woman first after two months. Juana said: “But I was equal, I was working like a couple of men, so he decided to let me enter. They don't accept underaged people, so if you're there, it's because you want it”. In other words, that she was an adult was
perceived as joining voluntarily. Juana kept coming back to that she worked very hard, and that it is not something that all women could do, as described in the quote below.

I got there, but that's hard, it's for men. I know that I'm tough because I got in. To walk for four-five hours, without a shower or bathe... It's hard. I think that being a female police, it's difficult, much more difficult. Because of this, we might not see many women climbing up and down the mountain. (Juana)

When Juana was talking about the female police, she was referring to how it is to be a woman in a male domain. She was also referring to the physical demands, which were very tough. In this way, Juana creates a distinction between her and “ordinary women”, or feminine women, as this work is actually “for men”. As a woman to enter this domain, she is thus an exception. The ideal according to Juana's description is foremost to be physically strong, but also to refrain from good hygiene, which could be interpreted as “staying pretty” or conventional feminine beauty.

According to Méndez, most women in her study were in line with militarized femininity, by performing like women imitating a hyper-masculinized identity, while yet displaying some traditional feminine characteristics. In contrast, those who conformed to militarized masculinity from a female perspective, gave up female signifiers and adopted a militarized hyper-masculinity as primary identity (Méndez 2012: 202f). Juana did, in line with Méndez's description, perform militarized masculinity. According to Méndez, the notion of “women being like men” is useful in the analysis of militarized gender performativity, as it highlights the performative aspects of gender in women's participation in armed groups (ibid. 199). I will argue, by integrating female masculinity into the theoretical perspective, that femininity and masculinity does not have to be interpreted as clearly distinct, nor connected to specific bodies. Femininity in itself has subversive potential, and can stretch and transform without necessarily meaning that masculinity is imposed upon them. Instead of seeing male masculinity as “the real deal”, the female masculinity that Juana performs is equally masculine “despite” her female body. This does not mean that men and women transgressing borders of conventional masculinity and femininity are not treated differently, because they are - due to how they are interpreted by their surroundings gaze. However, the performative aspects of gender do not have to be understood in an androcentric way, in relation to male bodies.

It is important to problematize the strong connection between masculinity and war as it, apart from being analytically incorrect, has consequences for how female ex-combatants are perceived and received by the communities they are reintegrated into. The mere presence of women in armed groups, the one that in Colombia and Latin America is strikingly high, should make us question whether this connection really is valid, or if it is an artificial truth, uncritically reproduced as it is being told again and again. Kimberley Hutchings, politics and international relations
researcher, has studied the connection between masculinity and war, and argues that the link is neither casual nor constitutive. However, masculinity provides a framework through which war becomes intelligible and acceptable as social practice and institution. The formal properties of masculinity as a relational concept: the logic of contrast (between different masculinities) and contradiction (between masculinity and femininity) is the basis of this framework (Hutchings 2008: 389ff). The fact that women to a significant extent join armed groups, participate in war, and use violence contradicts that women are inherently more peaceful than men. Further, there are pitfalls with labeling certain male behavior as “manly or masculine”, as it risks reinforcing the same models we seek to deconstruct, by claiming that men are essentially violent warriors or protectors drawn to weapons (Myrttinen 2003: 43). In the same way, labeling certain behavior or actions as feminine, reproduce women as non-threats to peace and stability, where they can remain unprioritized both in DDR and conflict prevention. Is not the construction of peaceful women and violent men part of the militaristic discourse itself, and thus something worth to problematize? Perhaps the confusion arises when gender and sex are equaled, and therefore conceptualized as a link between men and war and not masculinity and war. As I suggest in the analysis of my interview material, women are perfectly capable of performing masculinity, and can feel comfortable in that position.

Once again, during the reintegration process, Juana's life changed to conform to gender norms. At the moment she is studying to become a cosmetologist and is working extra as a maid. The choice of work is interesting, as she previously described that she misses being physically active, which cosmetology does not really reflect. Her children are not living with her in Barranquilla, but she sends them money every month, and considers them as her primary support in life. Her appearance, in contrast with how she described her time in the armed group, is very feminine with long highlighted hair, tasteful make-up, manicured nails and accessories.

Even though Juana in some senses stood out, the pattern was discerned in the other women's stories as well. In their ambition to become a member of civil society, giving up their less conventional gender expressions became a strategy in order to blend in. In the quote below, Yuranis described how she more or less isolates herself from social interaction.

The people in Barranquilla, I don't get along with them. I like to be alone. My husband goes to work and I close the door. The children go to school and I close it, because I don't like... To gossip. I don't like it, so I don't have this relationship with my neighbors. Where I grew up, people are different. Here, they gossip about how you walk, what you wear... They are sitting in a corner, staring. I don't like these things. (Yuranis)

On a different occasion, Yuranis mentioned that she “don't have elegance” which in combination
with the concerns of “what to wear” signals consciousness about her (lacking) cultural capital, which could be a trace of her former participation in the armed group. In this example, Yuranis’ strategy of coping with other people in society is exemplified by closing the door. Others like Andrea, chose a different strategy of creating good relationships, for them to be treated well in return. Andrea puts high value on being punctual, correct, polite and to get along with people. María just tries to be a normal person in the neighborhood. What brings their stories together is that they conform to conventional ideals of femininity. Their strategies are different, Yuranis locks her door and Andrea creates good relationships – but all avoid minimal friction or potential conflicts. These conflicts could for example stem from performing unacceptable femininity, such as Yuranis confronting her gossiping neighbors or Andrea being impolite. Tonheim found that the girls in her study were assumed to have a “military spirit” which caused unacceptable and uncivilized behavior. To conform to decent female behavior including being polite, avoiding conflict and remaining silent when ill-treated thus became a way to reduce stigmatization (Tonheim 2012: 293). This clearly goes in line with conventional femininity and how a woman is expected to be, act, and perform, where conforming to feminine behavior and expressions appears to be related to avoiding stigmatization. Hence, trying to be a “normal” person in the neighborhood became very important.

The shift from hyper-masculinity to hyper-femininity, appears strongly associated to their position in the armed group relative to their position in civil society. Even though this shift is legitimate, a person does not have to remain stable in neither gender identity nor gender expression, it highlights that the importance of gender and its associated power hierarchies are stronger or more pronounced in society. According to Kunz and Sjöberg, the transgressed gender roles are assumed to pose a threat to peace and post-conflict reconstruction. Hence, post-conflict society encourages difference between the genders, where women become re-marginalized (Kunz & Sjöberg 2009: 6). Women are often required to carry the “burden of representation”, constructed as the symbolic bearers of the collectivity's identity and honor, as individuals as well as a collective. Women signify the collectivity's boundaries by their “proper” behavior and “proper” clothing (Yuval-Davis 1997: 45f). If the women had continued performing female masculinity, as some sort of societal gender deviance, it could possibly have revealed something about their past. Therefore, in the process of re-integrating, the women went from “good rebels” to become “good women”.

According to Theidon, militarized masculinity includes a corporal technique. She describes the “war mask” that explicitly seeks to inspire terror in others, as a trace from their participation in an armed group (Theidon 2009: 23f). One of her participants told that a store owner asked him to leave the store as he “had the face of a demobilized combatant” (Theidon 2007: 80). In this way, their own body could betray them and reveal their past. During my interview with Juana, on one
occasion she laughed and said that people are sometimes afraid of her, and that she could take advantage of that. However, I did not get the impression that this was a sincere laughter or that she was particularly happy over her “advantage”. According to Butler, coherence is desired, wished for and idealized in society. Words, acts, gestures and desire are inscribed on the surface of the body, through corporeal signs (Butler 1990: 173). The women are marked in different ways, by their participation in the armed groups. Some marks can be covered, but some are also visibly inscribed on their bodies, such as scars or tattoos. This has made me think about the “war mask”, and how their bodies and faces can be a trace from their participation. With this in mind, it appears even more important to conform to conventional femininity, and to give up other corporal or attribute related signifiers, since it could reveal their past and expose them to stigma or rejection.

Theme summary
In this theme I have presented conforming strategies that the women turned to during reintegration. Overall, being a feminine woman: by taking care of the children, looking pretty and avoiding disputes became a central strategy in order to blend in and cover up their violent past. Conforming to gendered norms, such as taking on the role as the primary parent, had consequences for the women's obligations as PPRs, where some had to deviate from the reintegration path. The fear of stigmatization, and of retaliation, for their past made silence a coping strategy. This silence should be set in relation to the previous theme regarding normalization, and how some of the women described missing their former companions, as it illustrates a somewhat lonely situation where there is no one to talk to about these things. While gender roles were blurred in the armed group, returning to society meant that the women had to stop performing female masculinity, as it could reveal their past. All themes identified and discussed, relates to strategies where hiding ones past is the way of moving forward and away from conflict.

Why is the wish to go back to “normal”, a very prevalent theme of the interviews, so central in the aftermath of armed conflict? Is there not a possibility that war can be a change agent, instead of hiding in the past? Instead of a domestication of violence, women going back to the private sphere, remaining silent about their past and not creating new relationships, perhaps the experiences of war could be acknowledged and the issues addressed. Instead of men and women going back to gender stereotypical roles and behaviors, their experiences of liminality and gender transgression could be taken as an advantage in the reintegration process. For instance, the women have experiences of actively participating in the public sphere, which should continue to be encouraged in the reintegration process. Men have experiences of performing tasks traditionally coded as feminine, which should also be encouraged, as to become equal partners in their households.
8. Conclusion

Leaving Barranquilla, the fieldwork and primarily all the people I met and returning back to Sweden made me realize that while the women shook me to the core, I was just a quick visitor in their lives. What has happened since I left? Was Elena able to finish her studies? Did Yessica finally find a permanent living? Did Andrea dare to tell someone about her past? Their lives have evolved since I left, but during the glimpse of insight I was given about their experiences of armed conflict and reintegration, some patterns and themes were especially noteworthy, which will be summarized in this conclusion.

This thesis set out to answer the research question of how the women describe and reflect upon their experiences of armed conflict and reintegration. As I have argued in the analysis, even though the women have different backgrounds, roles, and coping strategies both in the armed groups and the reintegration process – there are certain aspects that bring them together. Violence has been present throughout their lives, sometimes more and less pronounced, but yet perpetually present. Their lives have always been related to different kinds of human security issues, where living in civil society does not mean that violence or the threat of violence is absent. Daily stressors were often found more challenging than sporadic occasions of direct physical violence, which in turn problematizes the distinction between conflict-related and non-conflict related violence. My findings supports the theory of violence as a continuum, and highlights that different acts of violence cannot be treated separately. It also supports the notion that conflict and post-conflict are not two distinctly separate phases, and that violence does not automatically decrease when the women leave the armed groups. The threat of violence is part of the continuum and should be taken seriously, as it has consequences for the women's experiences of insecurity which in turn disciplines the women to adapt to certain behavior.

Further, the thesis set out to answer what role gender play among the participants in the reintegration program, where the analysis shows that the importance of gender conformity increased in society during reintegration. Liminality as a recurring in-between position, where the women were neither a member of civil society nor completely detached from the same, could offer both possibilities and hindrances regarding gendered norms. In the armed groups established power hierarchies could be altered and gender norms could be transgressed, while during reintegration the same hierarchies and norms rather became emphasized. While traditional gendered perceptions were challenged in the armed groups, they reoccupied their normal position in society as a hierarchical and disciplinary system that demands gender coherence. Thus, gender conformity became a central strategy to move away from the liminality in their quest to become a “normal”
person.

Lastly, the thesis set out to answer the question of how the women construct their identities and integrate their past experiences into their current life and situation. In the movement away from the conflict, the women are largely attempting to hide their past. Their strategy to cover up their past was primarily done by remaining silent about it, which is connected to fear of stigmatization and retaliation, but also by not performing unacceptable femininity, i.e. female masculinity. The women went from constructing themselves as “good rebels” which was made possible through performing female masculinity, to “good women” by adapting to behavior, appearance and roles in line with conventional femininity. Traditional perceptions of men and women in a hierarchical gender dichotomy, portrays men and the norm and women as “the Other”. Due to the stereotypical notion of peaceful women and violent men, the women are both perceived and perceive themselves as the deviants within a masculine field. Thus, performing conventional femininity was central to their identity construction in the movement from armed conflict to civil society.

All in all, the analysis shows that the de/militarization of women is based on complex, contradictory and gendered processes. In the armed groups, the women felt equal to men at the same time as they were subjected to gendered reproductive control, which is a contradictory image that highlights how women militarize in a complex manner. During reintegration, the women were not subjected to this control, but the burden of being the primary parent posed challenges for fulfilling requirements of the reintegration process. Further, my study challenges the conventional wisdom of the connection between masculinity, violence and war, through showing how women can perform masculinity and feel comfortable in doing so. The women partake in, for instance, caring practices of weapons without being the traditional male defendants of the nation, which challenges theories such as militarized masculinity, which are based on women's role in the nation. Thus, my findings highlights how the militarization of women within an armed group has differences with the militarization of women in relation to the national army. Liminality, and female masculinity is theoretically useful in the analysis on female combatants, as it moves away from the traditional perceptions which have negative consequences for how female ex-combatants perceive themselves and are perceived by others. To problematize the notion of women as inherently more peaceful than men is key, so that women do not remain unprioritized within conflict prevention and DDR.

The themes identified and the findings presented complicate simplifying dichotomies in relation to women and gender in the different stages of armed conflict. Through the exploration of these women's experiences of armed conflict and reintegration I hope to contribute to illuminating women's multiple roles and their realities of war, and to problematize the gendered distinctions of victim and perpetrator, non-conflict and conflict and the public and the private.
It is beyond the scope of this thesis to make comprehensive recommendations to the ACR on how to develop their gender perspective on reintegration. Nevertheless, I hope that the aspects identified can inform the work of practitioners. This relates in particular to reducing the impact of daily stressors, by not making promises that cannot be kept, and to prioritize their work regarding alternative masculinities and family constellations. Men's and women's experiences of liminality and gender transgressions could be taken as an advantage in the reintegration process, as they have performed practices and behaviors typically associated with the opposite gender. Going back to “normal” should not be the ultimate goal, but to assist women to become full and active members of civil society, with all the rights and responsibilities it involves. Further, I hope that the ACR will give some thought to the possible consequences of their strategy of keeping PPRs apart from each other, and what the presence of guards at the office, as representatives for the authorized use of violence, signals to the PPRs.

Looking ahead, suggestions for future research would be to look at women who did not join or who have left the reintegration program, and their reasoning behind this decision. Further, to look closer at the recipient communities and their perceptions about female ex-combatants would better inform which type of perceptions need to be challenged. The conceptualization of women, gender and armed conflict is subject to debate and I believe there is still much work needed to be done here, both in order to develop theories on the subject and to increase understanding for the individuals going through militarization processes in armed groups. To incorporate female ex-combatants as co-creators in the research and policy recommendations, through participatory action research, would also be beneficial. These individuals should have a say in questions that concerns their own lives, and not only be the subjects but also the actors in the knowledge creating processes. My study underscores that these women have much to say and possess valuable knowledge concerning their own reintegration processes.

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Appendix 1

Informed consent agreement

My name is Anna Sjölander and I am master student at Uppsala University in Sweden. I have a bachelor's degree in peace and conflict studies, and is currently studying the master's program in gender studies. During my studies I have focused on women's participation in armed conflicts, and for me Colombia is an interesting country for its large proportion of female combatants. I am here in Colombia to conduct a study of female ex-combatants, and their experiences of armed conflict and reintegration into civil society. I will conduct interviews with female ex-combatants who are participating in the ACR's reintegration process. The project will be the foundation of my master's thesis with focus on gender issues.

Hopefully, this study can highlight new interesting connections, such as the specific needs of a female ex-combatant or gendered dynamics present in the reintegration process, which can only be told by women who are going through this process. Thus, your experiences and opinions are very important and I am very grateful for your participation.

Your participation is voluntary, and you may end it at any time of the project. If there is any question you do not want to answer, you are free to do so. You will not receive any remuneration for your participation, as agreed with the ACR. During the interview an interpreter will participate to facilitate our communication. The interviews will be recorded, if you agree to, and the recordings will only be accessed by me and the interpreter. We have both signed a confidentiality agreement. The recordings will only be used for research purposes. The material will only be published as research, such as the thesis but not in newspapers. In the thesis I will use fictive names for you to be anonymous. I will not receive any personal information about you from the ACR, so you can choose how much you want to share.

All participants have the right to take note of this document to ensure their informed consent before interviews.

Anna Sjölander, September 2015
Appendix 2

Interview guide

Introductory questions
Where are you from, and where do you live?
How old are you?
What is your level of education?
Which armed group were you a part of, and for how long?
When did you join the reintegration program?

Socio-economic position
How do you manage expenses in your everyday life?
What kind of occupation did you have before joining the armed group? Was it sufficient to manage economically?
Your current income; is it enough to support yourself and your (if you have any) family?
How has your education served you?
What happens if you get sick or need health care?

Experiences of armed conflict
Can you tell me a bit about the time you spent in the armed group?
What was your main responsibility in the group?
How come you did join the armed group?
Your fellow companions, who were they? How did you get along with them?
What was it like to be in combat?
Which were the most positive or beneficial experiences from the group?
Do you have any thoughts about your position in the group? Which are the factors determining the positions?
How is the relationship between men and women?
Would you like to tell me how you left the armed group?
How did you hear about this program and decide to join it? Did you enter the program immediately
when you left the group or did you do something else in the meanwhile?

Would you like to tell me what was most difficult about being in the group?

**Family situation and social network**

What or who do you consider to be important supports in your life?

Do you have any important relationships you would like to tell me about?

How is your family situation? Do you have a family or partner? If so, would you like to tell me about them?

Can you describe your role at home? What is it that you do? What is your main responsibility within the household?

Your partner, was s/he a participant of the group?

Have you been able to tell your partner or family about your experiences from the group? How do you feel about telling a future partner/children about your past?

Did you stay in contact with your family/friends during your time in the armed group?

Is there any other information about your personal relationships or family that you would like to tell me?

**Experiences of the reintegration program**

How do you experience the reintegration process?

Has your life changed, now that you are a part of the reintegration program? In which way?

What has been helpful about the program? What has been less helpful?

Have you faced any challenges or obstacles during your time in the reintegration process?

What kind of job/education do you wish to have after this program?

Can you tell me about your relationship to the personnel at the agency?

If it was possible to improve or change anything with the program, what would that be?

**Future and concluding remarks**

What do you wish for your future?

Do you have any specific dreams or goals?

Do you have any role models or people you look up to?

Is there something you would like to add or discuss further?