Sailing on a ship that doesn't exist: gender and affectivity in the experiences of Colombian ex-guerrilla women[1]

Navegar en un barco que no existe: género y afectividad en la experiencia de exguerrilleras colombianas

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Abstract

The objective of the study was to analyses narratives about the return to civilian life of Colombian ex-guerrillas, focusing on the gender and affective experience of the process. The methodological design was qualitative, in-depth interviews were conducted with 6 women, who deserted to the FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia; in Spanish: Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia) or ELN (National Liberation Army; in Spanish: Ejército de Liberación Nacional) guerrillas. The data were analyzed with the support of Atlas-ti software for qualitative data analysis. As a result, three categories guided the analysis: ties to the guerrillas; desertion; and disassociation from the armed group. The narratives indicate that emotions motivate decisions and determine the trajectory from the armed group to the civil life. In this process, the relief associated with freedom from the departure of the armed group contrasts, opposes with the sadness for the losses after desertion. The tranquillity of coming out of the war is confronted with insecurity, uncertainty and anguish towards the unknown and civic responsibilities. It

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is concluded that emotional experiences inside and outside of the armed group were influenced by gender and power dynamics.

Keywords: narratives, gender, emotions, armed conflict, guerrillas.

Resumen

El objetivo del estudio fue analizar las narrativas sobre el retorno a la vida civil de mujeres exguerrilleras colombianas, enfoque de género de la experiencia afectiva del proceso. El diseño metodológico fue cualitativo, fueron realizadas entrevistas en profundidad con 6 mujeres que desertaron de las guerrillas de las FARC o del ELN. Las narrativas fueron analizadas con el apoyo del programa Atlas-ti para análisis de datos cualitativos. Como resultado, tres categorías orientaron el análisis: la vinculación a la guerrilla, la deserción y la desvinculación del grupo armado. Las narrativas indican que la dimensión emocional determina la trayectoria de vida de las participantes. En ellas se oponen sentimientos de felicidad y alivio, asociados a la libertad que la salida del grupo armado proporciona, por un lado; a la tristeza por las pérdidas tras la deserción, por el otro. Se confrontan, también, la tranquilidad de estar fuera de la guerra, con la inseguridad y la angustia hacia lo desconocido en la vida urbana y las responsabilidades ciudadanas. Se concluye que las experiencias emocionales dentro y fuera del grupo armado están influidas por las dinámicas de género y de poder.

Palabras clave: narrativas, género, emociones, conflicto armado, guerrillas.

Introduction

Within the Colombian armed conflict between paramilitaries, guerrillas and the State, the decade of 2000 marked the intensification of military actions against the guerrilla and the implementation of public policies aimed at encouraging the abandonment of illegal armed groups (Grajales, 2011; Lair, 2004). These two strategies partially explain the individual desertions and collective demobilization of 70,021 people from the armed groups, including 11,432 women, which took place between 2003 and 2021 (Agencia para la Incorporación y Regulación la Nacional, 2021; Universidad Nacional de Colombia, 2017). Among the negotiation processes, the Havana agreement with the FARC-EP stands out.

In this article we analyse the narratives concerning the entry, permanence, and return to civilian life of former young women guerrilla members, focusing on the emotional dimension of their experience and considering a gender perspective.

The gender perspective adopted here does not portray women to a homogeneous group, nor does it treat men and women as universal subjects. We understand gender as "a constitutive element of social relations based on perceived differences between the sexes and a primary way of giving meaning to power relations[4]" (Scott, 2019, p. 67). Therefore, gender construction is a psychosocial process intertwined with identity and one's relationship with their body.

Furthermore, we begin with the premise that incorporating a gender perspective as a category of analysis within studies on armed conflict should take into account that:

> if gender refers to the construction of sex and the social place that individuals occupy, depending on the way their genitals, physical characteristics and hormonal and genetic components are understood, in specific contexts, any study on gender in war must ask about the experiences of all of them in their dimensions of victims, aggressors, armed actors and bystanders[5] (Céspedes Báez, 2018, p. 104).

The presence of women or a gender approach within studies on violence in Colombia is recent and has primarily focused on analysing their experiences as victims. The classic study *La violencia en Colombia* (Guzmán et al., 2005), focuses on the peasant population and presents one of the earliest references to sexual abuse of women within the context of Colombian violence. However,

> it is only in the 1980s decade that researchers demonstrate how the violence in Colombia is not only focused on peasants, - in spite of them being the most affected population – but also on the African heritage, indigenous, young, leftist activist and female populations, among other social groups[6]. (Arroyave Álvarez, 2017, p. 120)

Women have been the main victims of violence in the Colombian armed conflict, experiencing its effects in two main ways: first, as fighters within the armed groups, subjected to the same practices of domination and violence characteristic of gender power relations; and second, as residents of regions contested by competing armed groups (Céspedes Báez, 2018). The regimes of

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domination implemented by the armed groups extended beyond political and economic dimensions, encompassing control over subjectivities, affective relationships, social roles, gender identities, and sexual orientations, among other individual and collective characteristics or behaviours, perceived as threating to the order they intended to impose (Arroyave Álvarez, 2017). For example, in Rincón del Mar (Córdoba), rape became a violent and well-known method of punishing women who did not comply with the gender norms imposed by paramilitary groups (Céspedes Báez, 2018). These practices included the regulation of interpersonal relationships within the armed groups, often resulting in women being placed in subordinate positions relative to men (Patiño & Patiño, 2012).

In Colombia, during the initial decades of the FARC's formation, women's participation in the guerrilla was limited to tasks such as cooking, washing, and sewing uniforms. Despite FARC regulations advocating for equal conditions between men and women, few women attained positions that enabled them to make decisions and give orders, with subordinate roles prevailing predominantly (González & Maldonado, 2017). The explanation for this contradiction between guidelines and practice is rooted in the sexist culture, summarized in the words of Victoria Sandino, who became a prominent voice during the Colombian government's peace process.:

> If a *guerrillera* fell in love, she would stop thinking about her political development and would go away with her man, instead. Because that is how peasant men and women were raised. People understand that the woman depends on the man. That was the excuse given by many commanders to not promote women[7] (Semana, 2016, p. 1).

This situation of inequality in rights and duties between men and women guerrillas, along with the ruling over their affective dimension, is accentuated in the sexual sphere. Various human rights organizations have documented instances where women guerrillas were prohibited from changing partners, coerced into planning, or subjected to sexual slavery by the commanders (Castrillón Pulido, 2015).

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In summary, gender relations and the affective dimension play significant roles throughout the trajectory of former guerrilla women. Joining an armed group generally implies being separated from family during childhood or adolescence, since most people join at a very young age, and even young women might see it as a choice. For many young women joining an armed group offers a chance to escape from the conditions of violence and sexual abuse experienced at home. On the other hand, an affective and sexual relation might lead to pregnancy and motherhood; events that, given their forbiddance by the guerrilla, can lead to internal conflicts when assuming the role of a mother while being a guerrilla member (Leliévre Aussel et al., 2004; Niño Vega, 2016; Patiño & Patiño, 2012; Sánchez-Blake, 2012).

Despite the fact that the affective dimension has not been sufficiently addressed in studies on the armed conflict, some research points to it as determinant for the action of women within the armed group, for example, in relation to the happiness of pursuing the revolutionary ideal (Nieto-Valdivieso, 2017). This paper seeks to explore how affectivity, gender, and power relations influence decisions related to the desertion process of women members of guerrilla.

Theoretical and Methodological Basis

The growing interest in studying emotions within the humanity and social sciences is known as "the affective turn", encompassing research in politics, popular movements, social exclusion practices, and phenomena of violence, among other areas (Arfuch, 2015; Thompson & Hoggett, 2012). Contemporary approaches emphasize that emotions are social manifestations directed or configured in relationships with others challenging conceptions of emotions as individual processes belonging to the private sphere.

In this context, Koury (2009) argues that the social approach to emotions goes beyond their individual and private conception and considers the sociocultural aspects of emotional experiences. Emotions, therefore, constitute a communicative system integrating expressive, physiological, and behavioural elements in a cultural construction process. Consequently, affections and social emotions play crucial roles in both personal and social spheres, as they

shape the dynamics and structures of society at different levels (Ahmed, 2014; Koury, 2009).

The social dimension of emotions is also highlighted by Eva Illouz (2011), who defines them as:

> the side of the action that is "loaded with energy" (p. 9), and that it is understood to imply cognition, affection, evaluation, motivation, and body, simultaneously. "Far from being pre-social or pre-cultural, affections are social meanings and social relationships inseparably compressed and this is what gives them their ability to energize action[8]. (Illouz, 2011, p. 9).

Starting from the premise that emotions are motivators of action our primary interest lies in exploring how the emotional experiences of ex-guerrilla women relate to those as combatants, within the contexts of power dynamic, gender relations, and the transition to civilian life. Rather than adhering to the classical view of emotions as purely individual, biological and internal phenomena, we aim to analyse the narratives built around these emotional states and understand how they are culturally conditioned.

We will approach the emotional histories of ex-guerrillas through the study of their narrations, a strategy that has attracted interest from different fields, including cultural theorists, sociologists, psychologists, and anthropologists. They recognize the pivotal role played by the act of telling stories in shaping social phenomena (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2013).

Narrations are common ways of conveying experiences. According to Jovchelovitch and Bauer (2013), they are interpretations of the world marked by the historical context, where evidence or judgment is not required. Narrative interviews allow for the reconstruction of life stories, providing insights into the contexts in which these biographies were formed and the factors behind the actions of their participants, including emotional factors (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2013).

For Gibbs (2012), narratives can help restore a certain subjective order, based on the meaning individuals assign to their experience. Within these narratives, the emotional dimension of the experience is expressed through language figures such as metaphors and metonymies (Gibbs, 2012).

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This perspective on narratives forms the foundation and rationale for the methodological approach to studying the emotional trajectories of former guerrilla women. Specifically, in this article we focus on analysing the narratives of six women who deserted the FARC or ELN guerrilla groups. We used in-depth interviews as the primary research technique, aiming to delve deeply into a specific thematic and explore it comprehensively, based on "the assumption that each social actor has their own meaning that is made explicit through discourse[9]" (Galeano Marín, 2004, p. 189). Each participant was interviewed twice, with each session lasting approximately an hour and a half. These interviews were initially conducted in 2008, with the goal of describing identity transformations during the process of reintegrating into civilian life. At the time of the interviews, all participants had served as foot soldiers within their respective armed organization, and were between 18 and 25 years old, although they had been linked to the armed group since they were minors. The participants were part of a Reference and Opportunities Center (CRO), located in Medellín, an institution that supported their transition to civilian life. This analysis offers a new perspective on the process of reintegration into civilian life of former guerrilla women, a process that many still undergo amidst ongoing conflict.

To describe the emotional trajectories of the participants, the analysis and categorization of the interviews were structured around the identification of emotional meanings, including predominant emotions and associated affectional bonds, cross three key moments: first, the bonding and experience within the armed group; second, the emotional journey towards desertion; and, finally, the return to civilian life. All the analysis was carried out in a hermeneutic unit within the ATLAS.ti qualitative analysis program.

Throughout the entire research process ethical considerations such as confidentiality and anonymity were maintained. All participants were fully informed about the objectives of the investigation, gave consent for the interviews to be recorded, and signed an informed consent form. To ensure anonymity, participant's names were replaced. The narratives originally in Spanish have been translated into English.

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Outcomes and analysis

The experience of former young guerrilla women in their return to civilian life

In this section we first focus on the connections and the experience of re-signification of events within the guerrilla, considering that new dynamics of relationships prompt a re-evaluation of life within the armed group. The second moment analyses the emotional dimension associated with the decision to desert the guerrilla group. And the third moment will delve into the experiences of detachment from the guerrilla and the reincorporation into civilian life, including the construction of new affective bonds and the participation of social roles never experienced before. The analysis of these three moments will carefully consider two main aspects: gender specificities that have an impact on this process; and emotional aspects that condition and constitute the subjective experience highlighted in the narratives of the participating women.

*Bonding and emotional experience in the armed group***.** The reasons young women narrated for joining the armed groups were strongly influenced by their affective relations. According to the testimonies from Nuli and Yesi, it is possible to identify that both the desire to escape an abusive relationship and the influence of a sister already involved in an armed group, play significant roles in their decisions[10].

> I would see those who lived (…) long lives, and I was living with someone and was unhappy, I went to live with him when I was 13 and he never gave me the support I needed and would mistreat me a lot. He did provide food, but not care, and the moment came when I became bored, and I felt bored all the time, I grew tired of him and decided to move elsewhere and asked them if I could join (Nuli).
>
> [my sister and I] we've always been on our own since we were very young. We made a promise that we would never be apart, which is why I followed her. At that moment… I didn't know what was best, all I knew was that I didn't want to be separated from her… It was the only thing, and I felt lonely without her company, so that's why I went to this place…they became my family, at least they seemed to be more united (Yesi).

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[10] Modifications to participant's narratives were made trying to keep the original version as much as possible.

Affectionate relationships also appear as determinant factors for the permanence of certain women within the armed group. The time spent there can also be related to intense emotional bonds fulfilling their need for affection.

> (...) people there became my family. When I was a girl my dad was hardly ever at home. He would come and stay for three or four months and then leave; when he had problems with my mom he would leave us again and this continued throughout his life. (Yesi)

In this case, joining the guerrilla is linked to maintaining a fundamental affective bond: Yesi decides to join the guerrilla to remain by her sister, who ends up being murdered days after joining the organization. Despite this loss, new significant relationships are forged within the armed group, helping replace the broken affective ties with family. Since the majority of guerrillas are sent to fight in remote regions far from their hometowns and are forbidden to visit or communicate with their loved ones for years, it is with their fellow members of the armed group that they create bonds to the point of forming a new family.

The dissolution of pre-existing affectionate relationships among members of the armed groups before joining the guerrilla is important for the organization as it facilitates the adoption of new norms, ideals, values and behavioural guidelines. Consequently, the armed group endeavours to control the love experiences of its members. While such control is not explicitly stated in the regulations, it is exercised in the daily interpersonal dynamics.

In this new context, which can significantly dissolve previously acquired identifications during primary socialization, a subjective transformation takes place through the incorporation of new norms and identification processes with members of the armed group, who become significant new others (Berger & Luckman, 2009). In this way, individuals may adhere to radically different ideals, motivating them to risk their lives in combat. The centrality of affectivity within the armed group is observed, for example, in the rule of prohibiting guerrillas from engaging in romantic relationships with civilians as a way of preventing potential betrayals of the organization.

Fear is an emotion intricately woven into the life stories of ex-guerrilla members: while some women guerrillas gained renown for their active par-

ticipation in warfare, even rising to command positions, others feared and avoided warlike confrontations (Castrillón Pulido, 2015):

> they never sent me to fight because I was afraid of it, so they never sent me to combat situations, or to handle hostages (…). They called me Gladis, who was a girl who enjoyed fighting, and they thought I should be like her… they were shocked because I was never like her, she enjoyed fighting, and would ask for it, but not me. I was afraid. (Nuli)

Furthermore, according to some researchers, the experience of women guerrillas is conditioned by gender relations (Céspedes Báez, 2018). Various studies highlight the sexual harassment and abuse that women endure within the guerrilla (Niño Vega, 2016; González & Maldonado, 2017).

> he made me a proposal to be his girl and I said no, he told me he would send me to the first shift, from 6 to 8, so we would meet, and I said no, because at the time I lived with another guy and I said I wouldn't fuck things up because of him, so he decided to call a meeting, because they call meetings for those who refuse and if they decide to punish, they do it, so they said I was very disobedient and they made me split firewood like for 50 days (Nuli)

Nuli recounts how her refusal to engage in sexual relations with a commander led to her court-martial and being accused of disobeying orders. Thus, war councils can operate as power mechanisms aimed at coercing female bodies and behaviours within the armed group (Laurentis, 2019; Scott, 2019).

The guerrilla women's bodies are tightly controlled, subjected to intense and different governmental strategies within the armed group. As warrior bodies they are encouraged to embody courage, fearlessness, bravery, and combat skills- However, as sexualized bodies, they become objects of repression, regulation, or exploitation.

Women were not only expected to comply with daily orders but were forced to plan or undergo abortions in case of pregnancy. At the same time, their affective-sexual relationships were strictly controlled and regulated by commanders according to ideals and cultural values that objectify women. Within these power dynamics, pregnancy can be seen as a form of resistance against the invading government.

> (…) so it got loose [the intrauterine device] and I didn't want to tell him, I didn't want to tell him as I could become pregnant, and I was almost sure I would become pregnant, but I didn't say anything because they would make me use the device again, and six months later I became pregnant (Bianca).

Hence, the female body embodies the most visible form of gender oppression experienced by women in armed groups. Becoming a mother constitutes, at the same time, a way of resistance against this control and a possibility to start over, with a life outside the armed group. Motherhood thus becomes a central element defining identity, which conflicts with remaining in the war. The option to leave the armed group means liberation from the intense control exerted by the guerrilla over her body. Therefore, choosing a sexual partner, becoming pregnant, or even taking a walk down the street are experiences of autonomy in relation to one's own body.

The experiences of women in armed groups are marked by strategies of control directed at their bodies. Teresa de Laurentis (2019) examines gender technology, which is produced through discourses, practices, and theories, and its role in shaping gendered spaces, that is, spaces marked by gender differences. The author emphasizes the role of gender in shaping the identities of men and women and how it is intimately tied to subjectivity, asserting that "the construction of gender is the product and process of both representation and self-representation"[11] (2019, p. 131).

By relating subjectivity and gender, Laurentis (2019) introduces the idea of experience into the debate. According to the author, experience constitutes the foundation upon which subjectivity is formed for all individuals within society. The author defines experience as "a collection of effects, habits, dispositions, associations, and significant perceptions that result from the semiotic interaction between the self and the external world[12]" (Laurentis, 2019, p. 142). She further posits that experience is continuously reshaped and redefined by each individual's engagement with social reality, including gender relations, as evidenced in the lives of guerrilla women throughout their trajectories.

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Nuli and Yesi's decisions to join the guerrillas were driven by loving and fraternal affective bonds, as well as a search for belonging and care. The idealization of what life could be like within the armed group perceiving it as a shelter amidst the lack of nurturing affective relationships, propelled their choice. However, the reality experienced brought out fear in both; fear of combat and fear of the controlling technologies of the female body in guerrilla warfare.

The crossing towards desertion. In the experience of the interviewed women a pivotal moment occurs when they come across a sense of "void" in their daily lives within the armed group. The void stems from the absence of autonomy, the impossibility to act on their own desires, and being subject to daily domination and control by the organization. The development of a life marked by the impossibility of being with loved ones appears to shape significantly how participants in this research end up with a perception of life as meaningless.

> [Being in the guerrilla] is like losing a chunk of life there, or losing life itself, because… because one thinks that it will never be possible to return to the civilian life, to have children and be with family, one believes that staying there will be forever. (Moni)
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> (…) when one gets to this point there is eventually this feeling of time being wasted and there is this deep longing for something. (Luz)

For some women, life within the guerrilla was a lost and irretrievable time marked by the submission of autonomy and desire to the organization's rules. During this time, they were unable to share with family, attend parties, or go for a walk. That is what the word "*amalayar*[13]" means: the longing for something that does not exist within the reality of guerrilla life, constrained by strict norms amid armed conflict.

> [the time in the guerrilla was] like sailing on a boat that did not exist, … I put myself to think about it and it is as if I had boarded a boat and gone off to sail, to sail… but without having been on the boat, that is, as if I had fought for nothing. (Nuli)

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[13] Unable to find a suitable translation into English, we chose to keep the term in Spanish "amalayar". Its centrality in the discourse of the participants encapsulates an emotional experience that serves as a motivator for desertion. According to the Royal Spanish Academy dictionary, 'amalayar' means: "To ardently desire something that is longed for." (Real Academia Española, 2014).

The metaphor of sailing on a non-existent *boat* r is used to express the nonsense of the guerrilla experience, where the idealized journey leads to no harbour: outside the armed group, actions, norms, and reasons for struggle lose their significance. The sense of purpose found in guerrilla militancy dissipates in civilian life, where the guerrilla past takes on a ghostly air. This loss of meaning underscores that identities thrive only in intersubjective contexts that confer meaning. Consequently, post-desertion, the identity as a guerrilla dissolves amidst new contexts of relationships devoid of previous routines and social roles.

Not finding meaning in staying in guerrilla life is tightly linked to another feeling, often related to reasons for desertion:

> … you lose morale… you somehow get bored. Everything seems like (…) some kind of void, you no longer see the point in paying a price for it; in other words, you get totally bored… you give up, and stop caring … about what they say or what they do… and many people died there, because they would face a court martial and they would leave… they would leave in a coffin, because the gravest offense there is to disobey orders or lose morale. (Luz)

Losing morale entails a deep experience of sadness and retreat, wherein the world loses all allure, and orders go unheeded despite the awareness that disobedience can result in death. In this state, guerrilla life loses its significance, creating a threatening, symptom within the organization, for even the fear of death fails to motivate a combatant who has lost morale. Hence, it is deemed the gravest offense, as displaying such apathy publicly means contempt and rejection of the organization.

The reasons cited for losing morale vary. One of the most important is the unfulfilled desire to be with one's family; other reasons include strenuous physical work and no salary. Before joining the armed group, many young women believe that guerrilla members did not engage in physical labour, thinking "it is good that they do not have to work". In consequence, joining the guerrilla becomes an appealing option considering how hard peasant work is.

> (…) you get there and then you crash, because one sees them, well, sees them well dressed, with good food, money, but when you get there, after three days I asked them to let me go back home, but at the place where I joined they already sent me

to take training and the training consisted of seven months getting wet at night, feeling hungry, so it was very hard. (Nuli)

These stories present an ambivalent perspective on the experience within the armed group. While some testimonies depict it as a period of lost time and a void of meaning, where individual subjectivity is subordinated to the ideal of being a guerrilla fighter, others highlight the group as a space for socialization with the possibility to cultivate values, form meaningful relationships, and undergo identity transformations based on ideals related to war, such as aspiring to heroism. As previously detailed, losing morale means a waning interest in guerrilla life, to the point of disregarding orders and preferring death over remaining there. This feeling is related to the motivation and decision of deserting. For the armed organisation, however, this poses a challenge that threatens its cohesion and success.

Returning to civilian life.

(…) because that is where one came from, the place that was left behind … for example, if you decide to leave, they can kill you or you can be saved, but if you leave it is like being born again… as it is not easy to leave, but if you stay you also suffer… so it is like being born again… (Bianca)

Leaving the armed group by means of desertion implies risking one's life, and for this reason it is understood as a "rebirth". Most times, women who desert are in rural settings where they have to cross jungle areas or zones controlled by the guerrillas, while being pursued by their former partners. If caught before finding refuge, they are killed. Therefore, desertion is a decision fraught with the constant fear of death.

Moreover, desertion represents a rebirth for significant others rediscovered after a prolonged absence. It means to be reborn for the family that was left behind when their member joined the armed group, and that had already come to believe that their loved one had died.

I will tell you one thing about who I am … it is like when a baby is born… you are waiting for his birth, but now he is born and everybody is happy, and that is how it is when you come back from there, everybody wants to see you, to hug you. (Bianca)

Sometimes leaving the armed group leads to closer ties with the family, fostering stronger relationships and shifting roles However, rebirth in the context of desertion from the armed group is not solely about familiar reconnection.

Guerrilla regulations prohibit women from becoming pregnant and mandate abortion if pregnancy occurs. For that reason, in a culture where female identity is closely tied to motherhood, the prospect or mere fantasy of pregnancy can serve as a trigger for desertion and also, a form of resistance against the control exerted over their bodies.

> they made me take the pregnancy test and told me right there that I was pregnant, and when they told me I was happy and also unhappy, as I thought they would make me have an abortion, and wouldn't let me have the baby (Bianca)

> so I left and it took me eight days to arrive where my mom was, and I was tested again, they were happy because they thought I was pregnant, but the test came back negative the next day I had my period, so it was not a miscarriage, and only God knows, because I used to say that if I got pregnant, I would leave and I even had a three-month delay, but when I got home to my mom my period came regularly and I was not pregnant (Estrella)

Estrella believes she is pregnant due to her delayed period, prompting her decision to desert. However, upon reuniting with her family and feeling safer, she discovers she is not pregnant after all. In this case, the delayed menstruation metaphorically symbolizes and validates the desire to leave the armed group, a decision that might not have been otherwise carried out.

Motherhood enables new interpretations of the roles, whether as a mother or daughter, stemming from the deep feelings of filial love that come with this new position

> I am very happy with my daughter; it was an experience for my mom… I made my mom suffer because they would not see me at home. If they didn't see me for two or three months, it was a lot, and I would come back after getting bored. I wouldn't go to work. Even when I went for a walk, I would get bored the next day and want to leave again. My mom suffered a lot, and I suffer when I see her ill or when I have to leave her to study, so it is has now become a beautiful experience (Nuli)

Among the positive outcomes attributed to deserting, is often reported the feeling of tranquillity upon leaving the armed group, experienced by being out of the war and free from the control of the organization.

> (…) so I came from that place and I already have a home; I live happily and worry about nothing. No one gives me orders, and there we would live under orders, I wouldn't do as I pleased, whereas here I do, I want to finish high school and honour this chance I am being given so I can move forward (…) many times we go to the marketplace or for a walk, and the family has enjoyed that above all, and they like him very much, because the other guy wouldn't care nor would he take me out, whereas Yeiner does, he cares for us very much (Nubia)

The new life outside the armed group opens up possibilities for envisioning the future, embracing personal desires, and enjoying the freedom that comes from no longer being subject to constant orders within a rigid structure.

However, not all interpretations of leaving the guerrilla is positive. Returning from the armed group also entails a painful separation from significant others with whom they maintained relationships of fraternal or sexual love.

> I wanted to go back because of my partner and others, because you get used to people, and I missed them. I missed seeing them, specially my partner, but also the others, because there are good people there who helped me on occasion… you end up caring for them, but there's no longer a reason to go back because many of my brothers have already come and that was my concern, but not anymore, so let's move ahead. (Estrella)
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> (...) I miss it… I miss all that… and that is why I haven't gotten used to this new life… I miss life over there very much, but I know I can't leave, so I need to get used to life here. (Estrella)

Desertion can also be experienced under affective ambivalence. On one hand, there is sadness in leaving behind the friendships forged with fellow guerrilla members (males), while, at the same time, there is joy upon reuniting with family again. Moreover, the routines and lifestyle of peasant life, now turned into urban settings, are missed, leading to a sense of mourning for leaving behind the armed group.

Additionally, deserting can be associated with the idea of cowardice and betrayal towards colleagues and the organization's ideals.

> I felt bad after coming here, because despite it being justified due to the fight, (silence) I feel like a coward for having come here (…), for not having been able to keep on fighting there… For not having kept fighting for those rights… and I know everyone there will talk about me and will always do so … and they will say I am a coward because I was not able to keep going (Estrella)

Moreover, life outside the armed group is frequently plagued by feelings of fear and mistrust. There is fear of the army and the police prior to surrendering to the authorities, as well as fear of reprisal from the former guerrilla group for desertion. This fear disrupts daily life and must be overcome to achieve a certain degree of autonomy.

> At first I wouldn't go downtown because I was afraid, I would see the police and think they might catch me for being a guerrilla member, but not now, I walk everywhere fearlessly, I fear nothing, and there are people who can track where you are, but I no longer fear that, I feel safe (Nuli)

Leaving the armed group, even voluntarily and at great personal risk, is far from trivial or a straightforward decision in terms of its significance. It is a complex act that confronts the guerrillas with contradictory and conflicting feelings that contrast the relief from surviving guerrilla persecution, and the fear and distrust of the army. Women face the happiness of reuniting with their families but also the sadness of abandoning friends or partners in the armed group. Furthermore, the sense of tranquillity and freedom gained from escaping the armed organization's control over daily life contrasts sharply with the anguish of having to take responsibility for one's own decisions. These contradictions constitute states of affective ambiguity, which characterize their emotional journey.

The transition to civilian life is seen as an opportunity to attain autonomy, to become an independent individual, a concept that aligns with the ideal of modern identity. In modernity, the prevailing notion of identity emphasizes traits such as independence, self-sufficiency, and autonomy, as crucial for sustaining democratic societies in Western countries. According to Pujal i Llombart (2004, p. 135) "the self is closely tied to the dominant ideology, which governs the ideas of individuality, autonomy and freedom as central and necessary values for democracy". This autonomy is understood in simple actions of daily life such as participating in social events, having financial freedom, spend as one wishes, or exercising control over one's bodily needs. These freedoms stem partly from the exercise of citizenship, whereas remaining in the guerrilla entails adherence to its rules and statutes, which on many occasions conflict with personal desires. However, the possibility of being au-

tonomous after leaving the armed group also brings a degree of anxiety about the uncertain and unknown, as responsibilities that were previously managed by others are now their own.

Within the armed group, some participants do not feel responsible for their own decisions because daily life revolves around following orders mandated by the military organization. Nevertheless, leaving the armed group confronts the individual with the opportunity to make choices such as whether to pursue education, seek employment, establish a home, and make a host of other decisions: *"one goes from following orders to depending on oneself" (Estrella).*

Leaving the armed group entails a shift in norms, and for demobilized young women, adapting to these new norms is a gradual process. While some norms are explicitly regulated by the Reintegration Program, others form part of an implicit social pact that evolves through interaction with others. This transition not only changes the roles that individuals play but also the dynamics of their relationships.

Therefore, demobilization is not the same as disengagement. Demobilization refers to the act of surrendering arms, whether done individually through desertion or collectively through agreements between parties. On the other hand, disengagement is a longer process that involves grappling with grief, given that leaving the armed group implies abandoning affective relationships, changing habits, relinquishing ideals, and more.

After leaving the armed group, demobilized women often re-establish old relationships, particularly with their families, which are perceived as more supportive and fraternal. This reconnection has significant effects on their identity, allowing them to resume roles as daughter, sister, or mother for instance. Moreover, leaving the armed group opens up new possibilities, including forming and being part of a family, making new friends, pursuing education, and engaging in employment.

Nevertheless, the new role of motherhood is often experienced with ambivalence, because it involves assuming social responsibilities that were not previously held, specially at a young age. It is important to acknowledge that motherhood is highly valued in the social and cultural contexts where rural women are situated. However, the discovery of pregnancy can serve as a turn-

ing point in their lives; for women who have left the armed groups, it marks a reconstitution of family affective bonds and the assumption of a new social position as a mother.

The freedom to decide to become a mother and exert control over her own body, previously subjected to domination technologies within the armed group, now represents a new responsibility. This is particularly significant for women who, in a traditionally patriarchal society, shoulder greater caregiving responsibilities, both for their children and their husbands. As a result, this role takes on two meanings simultaneously: it is viewed as a privilege and as an additional obligation.

In summary, the life journey of each female guerrilla from joining the armed group, through the decision to desert, and subsequently building a new life outside the organization- constitutes a process where subjectivity evolves. This evolution includesrelatively stable aspects that undergo transformation over time, often through radical ruptures occurring across different dimensions of their lives.

Life after desertion is marked by ambiguous feelings for ex-combatants. On one hand, the decision to leave and the possibility of reconnecting with everything left behind, evoke positive emotions such as love, a sense of freedom, the ability to exercise autonomy, and the desire to forge a new life. However, this fresh start also stirs emotions like fear of repercussions from their past in the guerrillas, sadness due to the absence of former comrades and the communal life experienced, alongside anxiety about the challenges of starting anew in unfamiliar urban environments.

Final considerations

Throughout this process, the emotional experience plays a pivotal and determining role. While the affective dimension is subject to practices of domination, it also influences the decisions made by young guerrillas, from their initial connection and experiences within the group, through to the decision to desert and the subsequent construction of a life outside the armed organization. Emotions serve as motivators and provide the energy that drives their actions and behaviour. This emotional trajectory is paradoxical and contradic-

tory. It juxtaposes feelings of happiness and tranquillity stemming from the freedom gained by leaving the armed group against the mourning that accompanies leaving behind everything associated with guerrilla life. Similarly, the satisfaction and peace of being out of the war are countered by the insecurity and anxiety towards the unfamiliar aspects of life in a large city. The experience of losing morale within the armed group stands out in this analysis of the emotional trajectories as a motivator for the decision to desert. Each former guerrilla woman risked her life in making this decision.

Emotions cannot be reduced to their physiological manifestations. While acknowledging their biological basis, we emphasize that emotions are felt and interpreted in different ways, influenced by subjective and cultural frameworks. For instance, , during armed combat, a racing heart and tense body might be part of a moment of pleasure for one combatant, yet evoke terror for another. . In addition, the meanings assigned to emotions impact our subjective experience of them. These meanings are constructed within specific sociocultural contexts that shape emotions (Watt Smith, 2022). Through the term "amalayar", some of these young women define their emotional experience during their time as guerrillas, experiences that ultimately motivated their decision to leave the armed group.

In the experience of the ex-guerrilla women we interviewed, we found that the emotional experience within the armed group is greatly influenced by gender and power dynamics, which determine social roles and relationships.

In their experiences, the female body is described as the locus where (largely male) control over women in the armed group manifests, highlighting deep gender inequalities derived from the denial of sexual and reproductive rights for female fighters. Consequently, the decision to conceive a child can also be seen as a way of resistance against this control imposed upon women.

This act is not merely a matter of surrendering to the army; rather, it signifies the beginning of a new life path, where the reconstruction and formation of new affectional bonds play a key role as motivators for actions outside the guerrilla. Despite often being overlooked, the emotional dimension holds central importance for every individual involved in the demobilization process from armed groups. It is deeply ingrained in the literary metaphors young

women use to symbolize their experiences, as they strive to make sense and articulate their time there as sailing on a ship that doesn't exist.

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