

## THE PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN ARMED CONFLICTS

### For a new approach to the active combatant

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### ABSTRACT

This research paper proposes new approaches to considering the female combatant experience. Focusing on the participation of women in non-state armed groups after the Second World War, with particular emphasis on the Latin American experience, the paper discusses two aspects of the subject. First, it formulates the hypothesis of emancipation through armed struggle, examines the various aspects of women's engagement in armed insurrections in a context of the break-up of colonial empires and the emergence of movements of "national liberation," and shows that this participation by women is influenced by the emergence of feminist theories during the same period. Second, the paper examines the consequences of the engagement of women in armed conflicts for their overall life journey, posing the question of their reinsertion in civilian life. Generally, the end of conflict is accompanied by the injunction to female combatants to return to their traditional role in the domestic sphere. Finally, the paper situates the analysis of female combatant experience in the context of the study of contemporary armed conflicts.

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## WOMEN AND ARMED VIOLENCE: BETWEEN DISRUPTION AND CONTINUITY

The field represented by studies of war and armed conflicts has traditionally been founded on a separation between men and women.<sup>1</sup> Historically, representations of the world of war reserve the role of combatants to men, while women remain in charge of support activities far from the front line. This division is rarely called into question, to the extent that it appears to flow *naturally* from the differences between the sexes. According to a widely shared idea, women are not as inclined to exercise warrior violence as men, due to their reproductive and maternal functions.<sup>2</sup>

However, women have frequently been present on the battlefield. From the famous warriors of the Kingdom of Dahomey in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the hundreds of thousands of women enlisted in the Soviet army during the Second World War, there have been numerous occasions in history when women have been able – and obliged – to bear arms.<sup>3</sup> However, this female contribution has been considered anecdotal and has been relegated to the historiographic margins of wars and conflicts, as shown by Svetlana Alexievitch in her book, first published in the early 1980s, *The Unwomanly Face of War*.<sup>4</sup> Bringing together many accounts from women who took part in “The Great Patriotic War” of the Russian army on the Eastern Front during the Second World War, this book gives voice to a feminine narrative of war that has often been silenced. In fact, from the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in Sri Lanka to the Irish Republican Army (IRA) in Northern Ireland<sup>5</sup> by way of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC),<sup>6</sup> many armed opposition movements have accorded a combat role to women. Although the degree of women’s participation in the fighting can vary from group to group, each of these movements has been able to rely on a considerable corps of female militants, who were assigned activities of propaganda, intelligence, liaison with civilian populations, logistics support etc. Examination of the participation of women in armed conflicts should prompt us to change the way we traditionally look at the figure of the combatant and to contemplate it in its full complexity. This implies breaking the taboo posed by feminine violence, since this taboo is a founding element in the stereotype that identifies women as agents of pacification and not warriors.<sup>7</sup>

The experience of the female combatant is generally studied from two distinct approaches. The first approach analyzes the enlistment of women in armed struggles as the expression of a dual dissent, both feminist and revolutionary, against the established social order. The second approach considers armed struggle as a space where the forms of domination between the sexes are reproduced, with the access of women to combat roles conditioned primarily by respect for a martial discipline that has been established in a traditionally masculine perspective. These two – complementary – approaches are necessary for a complete analysis of the experience of the woman combatant, in order to understand its heterogeneous and contradictory character.

This research paper aims to propose new approaches to studying the female combatant experience since the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with particular reference to the Latin American experience. Rather than presenting a comprehensive panorama of the participation of women in wars and armed conflicts, this text aims, in a more limited way, to approach the female combatant experience as a category of analysis of the situations of war and armed conflicts. Our reflections here will focus on the question of the integration of women in non-state armed groups engaged in a movement of insurrection and opposition to the power in place, in a context of the break-up of colonial empires and the emergence of guerrillas and armed movements for “national liberation.” By examining the historic context, we will investigate the possible specificity of the female combat experience, both in terms of modes of participation and the daily life of the armed struggle or, finally, the return to civilian life.<sup>8</sup>

1. Cynthia Enloe, “All the men are in the militias, all the women are victims: the politics of masculinity and femininity in nationalist wars,” in Lori Ann Lorentzen & Jennifer Turpin eds., *The women and war reader*, New York University Press, 1998, p. 52.

2. Andrea Aragón Alvarez, “Los hombres son guerreros y las mujeres pacifistas? La estereotipación de género en el ámbito de la seguridad internacional,” *Prismasocial*, No. 7, 2001, p. 12.

3. Joshua Goldstein, *War and gender. How gender shapes the war system and vice versa*, Cambridge University Press, 2001, p. 61.

4. Svetlana Alexievitch, *The Unwomanly Face of War*, Random House, 2018.

5. Miranda Alison, “Women as agents of political violence: gendering security,” *Security Dialogue*, Vol. 35, No. 4, p. 447-463.

6. Mana Emma Wills, “Mujeres en armas: avance ciudadano o subyugación femenina,” *Análisis Política*, Vol. 18, No. 54, 2005, p. 63-80.

7. Coline Cardi & Geneviève Pruvost, “La violence des femmes : occultations et mises en récit,” *Champ pénal: Penal Field*, Vol. 8, 2011, <https://journals.openedition.org/champpenal/8039#quotation>, accessed 31/01/18.

8. This paper will not attempt to tackle the question of the integration of women into regular armies or their increasing implication in jihadist organizations. However, both of these subjects can be considered essential aspects of the female combatant experience, observable during these early years of the 21st century. These questions will be studied in subsequent papers.

# 1. THE HYPOTHESIS OF EMANCIPATION BY ARMED STRUGGLE

## The contribution of women to independence struggles

The phenomena of decolonialization and the proliferation of non-conventional wars after the Second World War proved to be particularly favourable to the participation of women in the national liberation struggles that characterized the break-up of colonial empires. For example, during the Algerian War, women represented up to 3.1% of the National Liberation Army (FLN) and of the Civil Organization of the National Liberation Front.<sup>9</sup> Although this figure might appear low, we should emphasize that this participation of women was sufficiently strong to be considered a threat by the French officers in charge of counter-subversion. This is evidenced by the request submitted in 1958 by General Lorillot, the commander-in-chief of the French forces in Algeria, to recruit more female personnel to help search Muslim women suspected of being FLN militants.<sup>10</sup>

Women played an active part in the struggles for independence that led to the wearing down of colonial administrations. However, they have usually been consigned to the shadows of history, as in the case of the infantry battalion exclusively comprised of women from the Indian diaspora formed by Indian nationalist Subhas Chandra Bose in Singapore in 1943.<sup>11</sup> In West Africa, women were involved in the political movements established in opposition to the colonial authorities. This was the case of militants such as Aoua Keita, a member of the Sudanese Union – African Democratic Assembly (US-RDA – Union Soudanaise du Rassemblement Démocratique Africain), who played a key role in the independence process.<sup>12</sup> Women were also active participants in the Vietnam wars.<sup>13</sup> For example, young women accounted for up to 70% of certain organizations, such as the Young Volunteers Association (Thanh Niên Xung Phong), which between 1965 and 1975 performed numerous tasks and services directly linked to combat operations.<sup>14</sup>

These examples, which are by no means exhaustive, testify to the strong implication of women in the independence movements constituted after the end of the Second World War. However, while women actively participated in the wars of national liberation, relatively little space is devoted to the study of women in the literature on decolonialization, despite the increasing number of works on the subject over the last few years. Part of the reason may be the symbolic relation between access to independence and the reconquest of a masculinity that had been devalued by the establishment of colonial power. For example, some works have demonstrated that the female body, being at the intersection of a collection of measures aimed at the expansion of colonial administrations, represents a symbolic space for the constitution of the power in place.<sup>15</sup> So, this period is presented as a “key moment in the redefinition of masculinities” through the relations of domination between the colonizers and the colonized.<sup>16</sup> In this respect, national liberation movements incarnated the reconquest of a masculinity that had been destroyed by the colonial power. This partly explains the lack of visibility accorded to the contribution of women in independence struggles, and the low importance attached to the question of women’s emancipation in armed insurrection movements.

Women had mobilized and continued to mobilize mainly in the name of the fight for independence, without necessarily demanding equality between the sexes as a necessary condition for national liberation. This may have led to a certain number of contradictions between the increasing power of women in armed struggles and their effective recognition in the organizations and political parties of the independence movement. However, at both the symbolic and operational level, the support of women for the armed struggle was vital to the insurrection, while their participation was presented as a tactical advantage in the framework of the asymmetrical wars that characterized the process of decolonialization. In some cases, women combatants, aware of the central role they were playing in the independence movement, demanded equality of treatment in the armed group and may in some cases have conducted a dual struggle, both against the colonial order and against their own companions in arms. Although not always explicitly assumed, this idea of the dual struggle can be found in most contexts where women have succeeded to impose themselves as

9. Djamila Amarane, “Les combattantes de la guerre d’Algérie,” *Matériaux pour l’histoire de notre temps*, No. 26, 1992, p. 59.

10. Raphaëlle Branche, “Des viols pendant la guerre d’Algérie,” *Vingtième Siècle. Revue d’histoire*, No. 3, 2002, p. 126.

11. Vera Hildebrand, *Women at War: Subhas Chandra Bose and the Rani of Jhansi Regiment*, Naval Institute Press, 2018, 340 p.

12. Vincent Joly, “Femmes et décolonisation en Afrique occidentale française. Autour de la marche des femmes de Grand-Bassam (décembre 1949),” in Marc Bergère et Luc Capdevila (dir.), *Genre et événement. Du masculin et du féminin en histoire des crises et conflits*, Rennes, PUR, 2006, p. 105-117.

13. Sandra C. Taylor, *Vietnamese women at war: fighting for Ho Chi Minh and the Revolution*, University Press of Kansas, 1999, 170 p.

14. François Guillemot, *Des Vietnamiennes dans la guerre civile. L’autre moitié de la guerre*, Les Indes savantes, 2014, p. 13.

15. Martine Spensky (dir.), *Le Contrôle du corps des femmes dans les Empires coloniaux*, Karthala, 2015, 264 p.

16. Pascale Barthélémy, Luc Capdevila, Michelle Zancarini-Fournelle, “Femmes, genre et colonisation,” *Clio*, No. 33, 2011, p. 17.

officers and leaders at both military and political level. This complementarity, which illustrates the increasing participation of women in armed insurrection movements, was also presented as a legitimizing strategy for the revolutionary movement. So, gradually, the question of sexual equality became an increasingly explicit aspect in independence movements. This was particularly the case of the Mozambique Liberation Front (FRELIMO),<sup>17</sup> or the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF),<sup>18</sup> where the progressive recognition of the link between the emancipation of women and national liberation was evident.

## When feminism invites itself to the armed struggle

The Cuban revolution of 1959 appeared to be a turning point in the participation of women in armed opposition movements, especially in Latin America. Although women were still only a small minority of the guerrillas mobilized alongside Fidel Castro, this did not prevent fighters such as Celia Sanchez from acting as figurehead for all the active Marxist guerrilla movements during the 1960s and 1970s. The manual published by Ernesto Che Guevara in 1960 on the strategies of guerrilla warfare contains a section dedicated to “the role of women.”<sup>19</sup> Without drastically calling into question the idea that the roles attributed to each person during the war correspond to the “predispositions” of each sex, the manual nevertheless recognizes the capability of women to handle weapons as well as men and affirms that their contribution to the revolution is crucial, in particular for the tasks of support and communication.<sup>20</sup>

Consequently, several guerrilla movements that formed during the ensuing years incorporated the question of the emancipation of women into their revolutionary platform. This was notably the case of the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN), which explicitly discussed the question, presenting it as one of the thirteen points of its “historic programme” unveiled in 1969.<sup>21</sup> This programme meant that the FLSN was one of the first Latin American guerrilla movements to explicitly integrate the question of women's emancipation into its ideology. This evolution was presented as the reflection of an increasing political mobilization of women and also as a strategic choice of the guerrillas, who had understood the various advantages represented by women's militancy. Women, both as fighters and for their abilities to organize together to conduct collective actions, became strategic agents for the FSLN, which used women's groups for civil defence.<sup>22</sup> By embodying the role of the social link between the different members of their community, women became seen as key agents in the popular struggle of the Sandinistas. Conversely, a not-insignificant number of women also mobilized in the *contras*, the counter-revolutionary armed groups opposed to the FSLN.<sup>23</sup> Against the image of the heroic guerrilla fighter conveyed by the Sandinista movement, the women of the *contras* presented more traditional images as mothers, widows or victims, which did not preclude them from assuming a degree of leadership in the reconstruction of their community after the end of the conflict.<sup>24</sup>

Besides the FSLN, other armed opposition movements took up the cause of women, such as the Communist Party of Peru – Shining Path (PCP-SL). Founded at the end of the 1960s and launched into armed struggle at the start of the 1980s, the PCP-SL set up departments specifically for the recruitment and mobilization of women as part of its party structure, including the Movimiento Femenino Popular (Women's Popular Movement). So, the PCPL-SL developed a full strategy for co-opting women's militancy, by showing that it was capable of addressing women from the various sectors of Peruvian society.<sup>25</sup>

However, in some cases, debates on the emancipation of women only emerged at the end of the conflict, at the moment of reconversion of the guerrilla movement into a political party. So, while women had even come to represent more than 30% of the fighting force of the Frente Farabundo Marti para la Liberacion Nacional (FMLN) in El Salvador, it was only after the peace accords in 1992 that feminism openly entered the political debate. Moreover, whereas

17. Allen Isaacman & Barbara Isaacman, “The role of women in the Liberation of Mozambique,” *Ufahamu: a journal of African studies*, Vol. 13, No. 2-3, 1984, p. 129.

18. Victoria Bernal, “From Warriors to Wives: Contradictions of Liberation and Development in Eritrea,” *Northeast African Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 3, 2001, p. 134.

19. Ernesto Guevara, *Guerrilla Warfare*, CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform 2013 (1<sup>st</sup> edition in Spanish, 1960), 56 p.

20. *Ibid.*

21. Karen Kampwirth, *Women and guerrilla movements: Nicaragua, El Salvador, Chiapas, Cuba*, Pennsylvania University Press, 2002, 194 p.

22. Gema Palazon Saez, “Antes, durante y después de la revolución... la lucha continua. Movimiento feminista en Nicaragua,” *Lectora*, No. 13, p. 122.

23. Julie Cupples, “Counter-revolutionary women: gender and reconciliation in post-war Nicaragua,” *Gender and Development*, Vol. 12, No. 3, 2004, p. 10.

24. Julie Cupples, “Between maternalism and feminism: women in Nicaragua's counter-revolutionary forces,” *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, Vol. 25, No. 1, 2006, p. 96.

25. Roa Mavila León, “Presente y futuro de las mujeres en la guerra,” *Quehacer*, No. 79, 1992, p. 47.

at the beginning of 1992 the vast majority of women's organizations in El Salvador stemmed from the revolutionary movement,<sup>26</sup> these organizations rapidly turned to criticizing the FMLN and claiming a feminist militant logic beyond their party-political identity. Some of these groups, such as Mujeres por la Dignidad y la Vida (Women for Dignity and Life) transformed into veritable promoters of feminism in the country.<sup>27</sup> More recently, the women fighters of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) stepped into the spotlight with the peace accord signed between the oldest Marxist guerrilla movement of the contemporary period with the Colombian government. The sub-committee on gender that was established as part of the peace negotiations represented a strategic space for the former female guerrillas of the FARC movement in the framework of their political reconversion. They became militants for an "insurgent feminism," presented as one of the guiding principles of the political party recently formed by the former guerrillas.<sup>28</sup>

However, Latin American guerrillas have not remained the exclusive purveyors of women's emancipation through armed struggle. Sexual equality was notably a political aim of the "people's war" waged in Nepal by the People's Liberation Army (PLA) between 1996 and 2006. The participation of women was largely encouraged by female militants who had become senior party officials, such as Hsil Yami.<sup>29</sup> The end of the patriarchy was one of the forty demands of the Communist Party of Nepal when it took up arms in 1996.<sup>30</sup> In other armed groups, such as the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), battalions composed exclusively of women have been established, enabling Kurdish women fighters to define their political militancy free of masculine pressure.<sup>31</sup> In Sri Lanka, specifically female combat units were created in the early 1980s in the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), which had been fighting the Sinhalese authority since the early 1970s.<sup>32</sup> Suicide attacks by women were a significant strategy for the LTTE,<sup>33</sup> which from the early 1980s had set up a special section for women called Vittutalaip Pulikal Makalir Munnari (Women's Front of the Liberation Tigers).<sup>34</sup>

## 2. THE COST OF THE ARMED STRUGGLE FOR THE LIFE-JOURNEY OF FEMALE COMBATANTS

### Difficult alliance of feminism with the martial values of armed struggle

While the question of the emancipation of women can be a genuine guiding principle in the preparation for armed struggle, it nevertheless tends to take a back seat as soon as the action starts. This type of phenomenon can be observed with the PCP-SL in Peru, which, after devoting considerable time to the recruitment and training of its female militants, ended up leaving aside the Marxist-feminist theories that had inspired it and concentrating essentially on the class struggle. In the final analysis, the "Senderista" ideology considered that the emancipation of women could never be a substitute for the emancipation of the peasant and working classes that the party saw as its base. In fact, although women represented up to 40% of the fighting force and attained positions of command, they remained subordinate to the vertical organization of power relations that characterized the party structures of the PCP-SL, reinforced by the relations of dependence that militants of both sexes had towards their leader, Abimael Guzman.<sup>35</sup>

26. Jules Falquet, "Les Salvadoriennes et la guerre civile révolutionnaire. 'Grâce à la guerre, nous sommes sorties des cuisines'... Mais pour quoi faire ?," *Clio*, No. 5, 1997, <https://journals.openedition.org/cli/411?amp%3Bamp%3Bid=411>, accessed 22/05/2018, § 14.

27. David Garibay, "Un partido de izquierda radical frente a las reivindicaciones de género: entre el estancamiento de los números y la afirmación de la radicalidad," *Política*, No. 46, 2006, p. 148.

28. <https://theconversation.com/colombian-militants-have-a-new-plan-for-the-country-and-its-called-insurgent-feminism-77148>.

29. Rita Machanda, "Maoist insurgency in Nepal. Radicalizing gender narrative," *Cultural Dynamics*, Vol. 16, No. 2-3, 2004, p. 241.

30. Judith Petigrew, Sara Shneiderman, "Women and the Maobadi: ideology and agency in Nepal's Maoist movement," *Himal Southasian*, Vol. 17, No. 1, 2004, p. 22.

31. Sarah Guillemet, "S'organiser au maquis comme à la ville. Les femmes kurdes au Comité des révolutionnaires du Kurdistan Iranié (Komala) et au Parti des travailleurs du Kurdistan (PKK)," *Confluences Méditerranée*, No. 103, 2017, p. 66.

32. Alisa Stack-O'Connor, "Lions, Tigers, and Freedom Birds: how and why the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam employs women," *Terrorism and political violence*, Vol. 19, No. 1, 2007, p. 46.

33. Neloufer De Mel, "Body politics: (recognising the female suicide bomber in Sri Lanka)," *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*, Vol. 11, No. 1, 2004, p. 75.

34. Peter Schalk, "Women fighters of the Liberation Tigers in Tamil Ilam. The martial feminism of Atël Pälacinkam," *South Asia Research*, Vol. 14, No. 2, 1994, p. 168.

35. Isabel Coral, "Mujeres en la guerra: impacto y respuestas," in Steve J. Stern (dir.), *Los senderos insólitos del Perú. Guerra y sociedad 1980-1995*, IEP-UNSHC, 1999, p. 343.



A relatively similar logic characterized the PLA in Nepal, where the considerable participation of women in the armed struggle became the object of a form of utilitarian instrumentalization, instead of appearing as a genuine opportunity for social transformation. In truth, women were considered as strategic agents in the conflict due to their role in the domestic sphere and their ability to mobilize the masses and to smooth the way for Maoist militants to access the members of their family.<sup>36</sup> A certain inequality characterizes the careers of women combatants, which were generally much shorter than those of their male counterparts. While men could remain mobilized after the age of 40, it was rare for women to continue in active combat beyond the age of 25.<sup>37</sup> Additionally, the PLA exercised control over the sexuality of its combatants: without entirely prohibiting sexual relations and the formation of couples in its ranks, it attempted to regulate the sexual practices and affective lives of its combatants, so that they did not turn away from the armed struggle.<sup>38</sup>

Although women can be led to participate directly in conflicts, the sphere of combat is generally organized according to masculine martial values. In this sense, the ability of women fighters to appropriate these values for themselves, and not transform them, is the goal. So, the armed struggle respects the sexual division of labour and traditionally assigns to women the tasks considered better suited to their “nature,” as cooks, nurses, radio operators or in charge of supplies and intelligence. As has been emphasized by Jules Falquet in the case of the FMLN in El Salvador, this sexual division of labour<sup>39</sup> in the armed struggle largely explains why women did not gain the same benefits from the struggle as their male companions in arms on returning to civilian life.<sup>40</sup> While only a handful of women occupy positions of command, the end of conflict in most cases signifies a call for women to return to the kitchen and to leave men to handle the task of managing the reconversion of the insurrection into a political party.

Also, the participation of women in armed conflicts is generally rendered persistently invisible, both by the armed groups themselves and by the other organizations intervening in the transition to peace and the “post-conflict” phase.<sup>41</sup> In particular, the international experts called upon to implement the programmes of demobilization, disarmament and reintegration (DDR) of former combatants tend to underestimate the roles played by women in armed groups, considering them above all as “followers” or “dependents” of the male combatants. In certain cases, as in Sierra Leone, this underestimation has led to an under-representation of women in DDR programmes, which has had the effect of reproducing the risk situations to which women were already exposed during the conflict.<sup>42</sup>

It is generally only through their own efforts that women combatants manage to write their names in the history of the armed insurrection and in historic memory. Over the last few years, we have seen a wave of new initiatives to write the history of the female combatant. In 2006, in Guatemala, 28 indigenous women who had joined the Guerrilla Army of the Poor (EGP) during the 1980s and 1990s began a collective writing project, with the aim of constructing their own narrative of the war, resituating their commitment in the context of their individual life stories. This work, published in 2008, is one of a series of initiatives aimed at throwing light on female accounts of war.<sup>43</sup> The publication of testimonies and autobiographies of female combatants such as María Eugenia Vasquez Pedromo,<sup>44</sup> a militant in the M-19 guerrillas in Colombia, or Mirna Paiz Carcamo, a member of the Guatemalan EGP,<sup>45</sup> has contributed to providing new interpretations of the armed struggle and restoring the place of female participation in a history of social and political dissent. However, these initiatives remain relatively anecdotal and are not enough to deconstruct the traditional social imaginary, which reduces women to the status of passive victims of wars and conflicts. Such representations are all the more difficult to challenge when the post-conflict period often signifies a reaffirmation of patriarchal values, which tend to deny or devalue the participation of women in the armed struggle.

36. María Vilellas Ariño, “Nepal: a gender view of the armed conflict and the peace process,” *Quaderns de Construcció de Pau*, No. 4, 2008, p. 9.

37. Hsila Yami, *People's war and women's liberation in Nepal*, Purvaiya Prakashan, 2006, p. 27.

38. Laurent Gayer, “Faire l’amour et la guerre. Le problème des ‘relations physiques’ au sein de la People’s Liberation Army du Népal”, *Politix*, Vol. 107, No. 3, 2014, p. 95.

39. The concept of the sexual division of labour emphasizes the logics of distinction, differentiation and hierarchization between the social tasks carried out by men and those carried out by women. For a fuller definition, see Danièle Kergoat, “Division sexuelle du travail et rapports sociaux de sexe,” in Françoise Laborie, Hélène Le Doaré, Danièle Senotier et Helena Hirata (dir.), *Dictionnaire critique du féminisme*, 2000, p. 34-44.

40. Jules Falquet, “Division sexuelle du travail révolutionnaire : réflexions à partir de l’expérience salvadorienne (1970-1994),” *Cahiers des Amériques latines*, No. 40, 2002, p. 118.

41. The “post-conflict” period in these cases is approached as a space of social construction, defined above all by the intervention of specific people, discourses and practices (for example international experts, traditional justice procedures etc.)

42. Megan MacKenzie, “Securitization and desecuritization: female soliders and the reconstruction of women in post-conflict Sierra Leone,” *Security Studies*, Vol. 18, 2009, p. 243.

43. La Cuerda, *Memorias rebeldes contra el olvido: Experiencias de 28 mujeres combatientes del área Ixil/Pasantzila Txumb'al Ti'Sotzeb'al K'ul*, Magna Terra Editores, 2008, 122 p.

44. María Eugenia Vásquez Pedromo, *Escribo para no morir. Bitácora de una militancia*, ILSA Ministerio de la Cultura, 2001, 490 p.

45. Mirna Paiz Cárcamo, *Rosa María, una mujer en la insurgencia. Relatos de la insurgencia guatemalteca en los años sesenta*, UNAM, 2015, 202 p.

## National reconstruction and the reaffirmation of the patriarchal order

The end of a conflict, whether negotiated or after the defeat or victory of the armed opposition groups, is generally accompanied by a restoration of traditional gender relations and patriarchal values. In cases where the guerrillas have transformed themselves into political parties, the reaffirmation of masculine domination appears to be inconsistent with the revolutionary platforms of the armed insurrection. In Nicaragua, a clear contradiction can be observed between the explicit commitment of the FSLN to the struggle against violence to women<sup>46</sup> and its position in favour of the criminalization of abortion.<sup>47</sup> This paradox can be explained in part by the need for the former guerrillas to negotiate with the other parties in power, including the Catholic right wing. By denouncing violence against women, the FSLN does not seriously challenge the Christian and conservative values that underlie male authority in Nicaraguan society, whereas the legalization of abortion is presented as a grave threat to the dominant moral order, which is unthinkable for the groups in power.<sup>48</sup>

Women, and in particular women combatants, are therefore at the heart of the national reconstruction efforts that follow armed conflict. The return to civilian life is regularly accompanied by a call to the former female combatants to “rebecome” women, in other words to return to their place in traditional gender relations: women combatants are expected to start a family and to reappropriate the traditional values associated with femininity and motherhood.

For example, in Colombia, the National Council on Economic and Social Policy (CONPES), which has various functions, including the definition of public policies for the reinsertion of former combatants, considers that the role of the “demobilized woman” is to “found and perpetuate a family” and to ensure that her husband remains within the law if he too was a former combatant.<sup>49</sup> So, the women who have followed the process of reintegration into civilian life after their desertion of the armed group that they had joined, are faced with numerous difficulties as soon as they attempt to start vocational training and to develop their own life-project. The routes to civilian reintegration proposed to women generally do not take any account of their marital status (married, childless, single mother etc.) or their experience of the armed struggle, or the ideological orientations of the group from which they have demobilized (FARC guerrillas, ELN or paramilitaries) or even their plans for their future on returning to civilian life. Most demobilized women do not have access to the training of their choice and must fall back on the “typically” feminine domains of activity, such as cosmetics, or find employment as domestic workers. This phenomenon is evidenced by programmes such as *Belleza por un futuro* (Beauty for the future), run jointly by L’Oréal and the Colombian Reincorporation and Normalization Agency (ARN), intended, among others, to train former female combatants to train them in the cosmetic professions.

The return to civilian life is all the more difficult if the armed insurrection has been militarily defeated. In a context of this kind, the reassignment of women to traditional roles represents a dual goal of national reconstruction and control of dissenting movements. In Peru, for example, subversive female militants have been the targets of repression, involving a spectrum of specifically sexual practices (rape, torture and sexual humiliations), with the dual aim of restoring traditional patriarchal norms and casting discredit on the armed groups. This approach is part of the construction of a collective “memory of conflict,” where the State is presented as the “saviour of the nation,” even though the state security forces have been recognized as responsible for one third of the approximately 70.000 deaths during the Peruvian conflict.<sup>50</sup> The targeted repression against Peruvian female ex-combatants is accompanied by a media narrative that tends to interpret the engagement of women in the armed struggle as the expression of the supreme threat posed by the PCP-SL. Female *senderista* militants are depicted as women of dysfunctional sexuality, either sex-craving sex addicts, or sexually frustrated.<sup>51</sup> These observations mirror the comments formulated by Laura Sjoberg and Caron Gentry, in their analysis of the discourse on women’s violence in the context of the “war on terror,” where the authors show in particular that the western media systematically look at the violence of women through the lens of sexuality.<sup>52</sup>

46. Delphine Lecombe, “Visibilité et occultation des violences masculines envers les femmes au Nicaragua (1979-1996),” *Problèmes d’Amérique latine*, Vol. 84, No. 2, 2012, p. 13-39.

47. Nadine Jubb, “Love, family, values and reconciliation for all, but what about rights, justice and citizenship for women? The FSLN, the women’s movement, and violence against women in Nicaragua,” *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, Vol. 33, No. 3, p. 290.

48. *Ibid.*

49. CONPES 3554, *Política nacional de reintegración social y económica para personas y grupos armados ilegales*, 2008-2017.

50. See the general conclusions of the final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission published in 2003: <http://www.cverdad.org.pe/ifinal/index.php>.

51. Camille Boutron, “Women at war, war on women. Reconciliation and patriarchy in Peru,” in Seema Shekhawat Ed., *Female combatant in conflict and peace. Challenging gender in violence and post-conflict réintégration*, Palgrave MacMillan, 2015, p. 155.

52. Laura Sjoberg & Caron Gentry, “Reduced to bad sex: narratives of violent women in the bible to the war on terror,” *International Relations*, Vol. 22, No. 1, p. 66.

However, it would seem that the increasing attention paid to female combatants in the western media has contributed to a shift in their representation. The female Kurdish militants mobilized in the war against Islamic State after the siege of Kobane inspired countless articles and reports highlighting their commitment in confronting the terrorism of Islamic State. This change in representation was evidenced in the selection of the French film *Les Filles du soleil* (Girls of the Sun) by Eva Husson for the official competition at the Cannes Festival. This film looks at the relations of women – including a French journalist and a Kurdish fighter – to war. However, we can legitimately ask whether this new passion of the general public for female combatants does not also contribute to reinforcing gender stereotypes. After all, the narratives highlighting women combatants focus in particular on the affective dimensions of their engagement (defending their children, joining their lover, revenging their family etc.) to the detriment of their motivations as militants. Whether depicted as monsters or heroines, these women fighters are above all seen through the prism of the emotions, whether the emotions that we project on them or the emotions that they inspire, with the consequence of depoliticizing their commitment and reproducing a classic and somewhat outdated vision of war and armed conflicts.

## CONCLUSION

From Latin America to Asia, by way of the Middle East, the visibility of the engagement of women in the armed insurrections of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is currently increasing. Whether or not the enlistment of women was explicitly part of the revolutionary platforms of the guerrillas, this participation of women in combat is presented as the reflection of the profound changes in contemporary society after 1945.

The female combat experience provides a lens through which to take a new look at the conflicts of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and to discern new perspectives in the contemporary historiography of wars and armed conflicts, by highlighting innovative problem-fields, in particular concerning the different ways in which the private and political sphere interact. By investigating the various aspects of the engagement of women in the armed struggle, their participation in combat activities and the conditions marking their return to civilian life, we are prompted to look again at the importance of affective relations and the “politics of friendship”<sup>53</sup> that characterize the inter-subjective relations during armed struggle. The perspective of gender provides a valuable analysis category for understanding the emerging role of “illicit economies” in the reconfiguration and reactivation of current conflicts and merits its place in the current debates on the “new wars.”<sup>54</sup>

The category of “women combatants” forces us to reconsider the definition of combatant and its associated stereotypes. Is a combatant forcibly a man in arms? Must he necessarily be enlisted in an organizational structure invested with a political or defensive mission? Are other repertoires of action than the use of arms necessary for political violence? While the analysis of the female combatant experience cannot alone answer these questions, it nevertheless sheds new light on them. It provides an opportunity to rethink the logics of production of the combatant sphere and the political economics of the armed struggle, by incorporating a domestic and affective dimension that has too often been neglected. It thereby achieves the “return to private life,” which Bruno Cabanes and Guillaume Piketty recommend in the aftermath of conflict, in their work on French soldiers returning from the two world wars.<sup>55</sup>

The analysis of the different forms of female combatant experience also enables us to question the way in which the private sphere can be mobilized in the context of an armed confrontation and to insist on the importance of publicizing the affects and emotions in the conduct of war. Since women are traditionally charged with reproductive tasks that imply taking care of the members of their family and their community, they occupy a preponderant place in the moral economy of wars and conflicts.

53. To quote the expression of Alfonso Pérez Agote in his article “Prophétie auto-réalisée et deuil non résolu. La violence politique basque au XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle,” in Xavier Crettiez & Laurent Mucchiello, *Les Violences politiques en Europe. Un état des lieux*, La Découverte, 2010, p. 109.

54. V. Spike Peterson, “New wars and gendered economies,” *Feminist Review*, Vol. 88, No. 1, 2008, p. 8-9.

55. Bruno Cabanes & Guillaume Piketty (dir.), *Retour à l'intime au sortir de la guerre*, Tallandier, 2009, 310 p.



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