



COUNTERING VIOLENT EXTREMISM:

Developing an evidence-base for policy
and practice

EDITED BY SARA ZEIGER & ANNE ALY

ISSN: 2205-7013

The Evolving Identities of Former Child Soldiers in Colombia

Ines Marchand, *Agape for Colombia*

Myriam Denov, *McGill University*

KEYWORDS: *child soldiers, Colombia, identity, reintegration*

For the last fifty years, Colombia has suffered the effects of violent guerrilla warfare, making it Latin America's longest running armed conflict. Inequality and injustice in the appropriation of land ownership and other economic resources are said to be important factors in the development and prolongation of the conflict. Drug trafficking and the lack of political and socio-economic opportunities are also key contributing factors (Basta ya, 2012).

In its study of Colombia's armed conflict, the *Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica* (National Centre for Historical Memory) has identified four critical periods in the conflict's evolution. The first period, from 1958 to 1982, marked the transition from bipartisan violence to subversive violence, alongside the proliferation of guerrilla groups. (Basta ya, 2012). The second period, between 1982 and 1996, saw the political projection and military growth of the guerrillas, the emergence of paramilitary groups, as well the proliferation of conflict-related drug trafficking. This period also marked the creation of a new constitution in 1991, alongside several failed peace agreement attempts. The third period, from 1996 to 2005, was one of the bloodiest due to the growth and strengthening of the illegal armed groups and the radicalization of political views in favor of a military solution to the armed conflict. The fourth period, from 2005 to the present, has been marked by a resurgence of a strong military offensive on the part of the Colombian government military, significantly debilitating illegal armed groups. This period has also seen peace negotiations with FARC, which remain ongoing.

At the early stages of Colombia's armed conflict, there was very little evidence to suggest that children were used in hostilities. However, as the armed conflict has progressed, paramilitary and guerrilla groups began to adopt new recruitment strategies that included the mobilization of children. Due to the perceived benefits in using the young, vulnerable, and obedient, the recruitment of children became endemic in the 1990s. By 2003, Human Rights Watch (2003) estimated that there were at least 11,000 children recruited into armed groups in the country. Children are now said to compose 30% of all members of armed groups in Colombia, while over 60% of those in urban militias are believed to be children (Burgess, 2009).

The challenges that children and youth face in the context of armed groups and armed violence are significant and undeniable, including multiple forms of physical, psychological and sexual violence, exploitation, deprivation and other gross human rights violations. These challenges do not abruptly end upon exiting an armed group, but instead change shape (Jones & Denov, 2015). The difficult and complex transition from a militarized life in an armed group to a civilian life has been well documented (Helmus & Glenn 2004; Marlowe, 2001). Given the extended periods of time that children and youth are often associated with an armed group, upon exiting, they are faced with the need to be reintegrated into norms and institu-

tions from which they had been isolated, often for years. To assist with child soldier reintegration, since 1999, the Colombian Family Welfare Institute (ICBF) has provided assistance to former child soldiers (those under the age of 18) from all armed groups who have been captured by the Colombian army or have deserted and handed themselves in to the authorities. Known as the “Attention Program for Children and Adolescents”, a total of 4,811 children were assisted through this program between 1999 and 2011, of which 72% were boys and 28% were girls (Watchlist, 2012). For a child who has been demobilized from an armed group, the care aspect of ICBF programming involves support and protection. Family reunification is a priority. However, for security reasons it is not always possible for the child to return to his or her family of origin. Such children may be placed within an institutional or foster family setting. In these cases, the Attention Program focuses on psychosocial care, education, job training, and support for productive initiatives. When the child becomes an adult s/he may join the reintegration program for former adult combatants where s/he can continue to receive support, as needed.

Given the challenges of reintegration post-demobilization, this paper traces the realities and experiences of 22 former Colombian child soldiers regarding their perspectives of reintegration, particularly as it relates to identity. Drawing on their own voices, this paper explores the process of identity construction in child soldiers both during and following their involvement in an armed group, exploring issues of identity transformation, gender, and reflections on reintegration and reconciliation.

Methodology

This study, funded by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), has examined the reintegration experiences of a group of demobilized youth who had been associated with various armed groups during the course of an armed conflict. A qualitative research design was employed because it is particularly conducive to garnering young people’s direct experiences of and perspectives on reintegration. A key aim of the fieldwork was to gain not only an understanding of the youth’s experiences following demobilization, but as well their reflections and interpretations of these experiences, as well as their psychosocial effects.

To explore participants’ experiences of reintegration, in 2010, the authors conducted semi-structured interviews in Spanish with 22 respondents who had been formerly associated with an armed group in Colombia — twelve male and ten female. At the time of the interviews, all respondents were over 18 (ranging from 19-27 years) and living in an urban context in the province of Quindio. The in-depth interviews were audio-recorded with permission and subsequently transcribed and trans-

lated into English. All our respondents had been recruited by an armed group when they were under 18 (ranging between 8 and 16 years old) and had remained with the group for an extended period of time (ranging from 3 months to 8 years). All 22 participants had been displaced from their communities of origin, had received support from ICBF and were living in an urban context.

As with all self-report data, the interviews with participants were invariably affected by their willingness to divulge personal information and experiences. The potential fear of stigmatization and recrimination may have prevented some participants from openly disclosing some of their experiences, while it may have led others to alter aspects of their stories. The potential flaws of self-disclosure must therefore be taken into account when considering participants’ stories. Moreover, given the small sample size, the findings of the study can in no way be generalized to the larger population of former child soldiers in Colombia.

Evolving Identities: The Making and Unmaking of a Warrior

The notion of identity is vital to understanding the conflict and post-conflict realities of former child soldiers as they transition from civilian life to military life (as in the case of military recruitment), and then once again as they transition from military life to a civilian existence (during demobilization and reintegration). In this paper, we refer to the concept of identity as it is presented in Colombia's Attention Program. Identity is understood as "the versions or theories that we build about ourselves in the conversations with others and in different cultural family or social contexts" ("Support Modules," 2007, p. 25). Accordingly, the concept of identity is multidimensional: "it is possible to be a victim of the armed conflict, and at the same time be a student, and a demobilized person." (Support modules 1, 2007, p. 25). Identity, therefore, changes and alters over time and through diverse experiences and social realities. In this sense, identity is not singular - most people learn to have multiple identities. One can be a mother and a physician, or an athlete and a community leader. However, the identity that becomes prominent depends largely on the context (Wessels 2006, p. 82). In addition, the relational aspect of identity is significant: identity is not "an essence, an attribute or an intrinsic property of the subject, but has a relational character and it emerges and is confirmed only in the confrontation with other identities (Gimenez, 2002, p. 4).

Alongside the notion of identity, the concept of social representations is also significant to understanding the reality of former child soldiers. "Belonging to a group implies sharing to some degree the core of the social representations that characterizes and defines that group." These representations "serve and frame the perceptions and interpretations of reality and provide guidelines for behaviors and social practices" (Gimenez, 2002, p. 7).

To explore and understand the realities of identity

construction and transformation among Colombian former child soldiers, in the following section we highlight the voices and perspectives of our study participants. In particular, we explore identity as it relates to military recruitment or becoming a warrior, identity, war and gender, as well as identity construction following demobilization or becoming a civilian.

Militarized Identities: Becoming a Warrior

The day they took me and kept me, was very difficult because ... I began to cry, I was only twelve years old. ... I missed my mother...but everything takes practice, and one gets used to it ... I got used to it and I forgot everything [about my past] (male child soldier, March 2010).

Many of our participants were abducted by armed groups and coercively made to participate in armed conflict. Others, however, made the decision to join. For participants who reported joining an armed group, several factors were reported as paramount in their decision to join. These included: conflict in their family of origin, lack of education and job opportunities, the presence of armed groups in the area, poverty and promises of financial rewards, a search for power, and self-worth. The glamour associated with armed groups was also enticing. As this participant explained:

I was not forced to leave my family ... We didn't have much money and we would see that my friend's brother had a great life, he went to the city, bought a car, had money and he made us dream about it ... so we joined the group. But when we got there, it was all the opposite (male child soldier, 2010).

Importantly, whether joining the group by force or non-force, participants did not enter the armed groups with a militarized identity. Rather, this developed over time and was linked to multiple factors. As the quotes below illustrate, these factors included military and ideological indoctrination, radicalization, fear and threats, a search for power, and promises of benefits - all of which - came

early in the recruitment and training process:

The first combat that I had was very hard. A partner would yell at me: if you don't fight, if you don't calm down and start firing they will kill you... Do it for your daughter, remember that you have a daughter, then one loses fear and gets used to it but ... they start killing partners beside you and they ask you for help and you cannot help them because if you do, then they kill you (female child soldier, 2010).

With a uniform and after four months I was the second operator of the machine gun... If you show that you are courageous, that you are a warrior, you gain certain benefits (male child soldier, 2010).

In one year one learns how to participate in combat ... they tell you that the government is your enemy (male child soldier, 2010).

A guerrillero doctor examines you, she undresses you and looks at everything... to make sure you don't have any venereal disease. Then comes the training, to learn how to move forward on the ground, learn how to walk without making noise, without breaking branches. After a year, they make you pass a life or death test, they set up barbed wire ...with explosives and light them up. They make you go under without touching that, I have the marks... then they give you a rifle, a gun, the uniform and they tell you that you are a normal guerrilla man (male child soldier, 2010).

There is a book in the guerrilla, a book that is called 'The Four Corners' and that book lists all the things a guerrillero can do, ... the rights and obligations, it is a book like the ones the government has about the rights and obligations (male child soldier, 2010).

I liked it, when I entered the FARC, I was in love with it ...even if they took me by force...by being there, being able to manipulate the weapons, to have the power... and it makes you feel good (male child soldier, 2010).

The training participants received, the uniform, the use of arms, and the use of indoctrination into a militarized world vision that identified violence

as justified, all conveyed an identity - a feeling of belonging, power and pride that was - for many - attractive and enticing. Over time, through a complex and powerful mix of coercion and individual agency, many former child soldiers became immersed in and ultimately adopted a militarized identity and, in their words, "became a warrior."

Gender, Femininity and Identity

Participation in an armed group often disrupted gender norms, roles and responsibilities for many young women coming from traditional Colombian households. Within armed groups, many female participants reported being treated as 'equals' with their male counterparts. Within the wartime context of hyper-masculinity, this meant an abandonment of traditionally feminine qualities and roles:

When one goes over there [to war], one does men things and does not have women's intimacy. It gets lost. You do men things and you are with men. ... The punishments are equal. We have to open trenches, go through the same training and wear the same camouflage. Everything, everything. ... One acts the same and gets used to it, and loses the feeling of being a woman (female child soldier, 2010).

This participant explained how her feminine identity was suppressed within the armed group:

I did not value myself, I felt like I was not a woman but a man. I would dress like a man. I would act as a man...and I did not feel the difference because they do not let you feel the difference (female child soldier, 2010).

Moreover, expressing one's femininity after leaving the armed group was described as both challenging and satisfying:

[After demobilization] Now...I can wear a skirt, I can fix my hair, I can dye it, I can wear makeup...I can be more like myself...I had no idea what would look nice on me, what I could wear and slowly I got used to it. The adaptation was very difficult (female child soldier, 2010).

For some female participants, entering motherhood following demobilization jolted them back in touch with their femininity, restoring a sense of purpose:

When I got pregnant, I was very happy from the first time that I found out until the end...my baby. When I found out, it brought me such happiness, such an internal satisfaction just to know that I was going to take care of a little person for whom I would live. That made me feel many things and in a way I feel that my son is the final touch in feeling like a woman and a good one. I felt that (female child soldier, 2010).

For this participant, becoming a mother reportedly gave her more confidence and certainty over who she was:

It gave more security, I would walk on the streets and feel safer, safer about what I could say or affirm as a woman (female child soldier, 2010).

Becoming a mother also represented hope for a new start during a difficult period in their lives. For many, the journey from war to civil society was bitter and lonely. Many participants did not return to their families and their communities, but were forced to relocate, due to fear of retaliation by armed groups. Becoming a mother offered some female participants the chance to redefine themselves with renewed hope and purpose:

It was a unique experience, an experience that emanates a lot of tenderness. A lot of hope, one feels that one has someone to fight for; someone who will accompany you, part of you that will start living, a hope (female child soldier, 2010).

Given the hyper-masculinity associated with the armed groups, some females reported that notions of identity, femininity and accepted gender roles had to be relearned in the post-demobilization context. Pregnancy for some was the ultimate confirmation of femininity.

Reflections on Recruitment and Demobilization: The Unmaking of a Warrior

Within the logic and context of war, extreme violence and killing often became normalized and even - at the extreme - acts deserving of recognition and praise. However, in the aftermath of violence and in the context of social reintegration, young people's awareness of the ethical implications and the consequences of their violent actions as warriors become evident. Participants' narratives not only demonstrate their capacity to reflect on the consequences of their violent past, but also their profound implications:

I did forgive myself, but there are many things about my past, knowing that one has killed another person is...sad even though one knows ...that it was that person [killed] or oneself. It does hurt... (female child soldier, 2010).

On one hand, to have that experience is good...I am capable to know what is good and bad... when I am going to do something, I think about it a lot.... But on the bad side of it, I lost my family because of it and I can't forgive myself for that. To lose your family for something that is not worth three pesos (male child soldier, 2010).

Consequences in the sense that I cannot live safely in any community or village or city ...One remains very reactive, very alert, on the defensive (female child soldier, 2013).

You cannot forget so easily so there are nightmares. If I am sleeping while it rains and there is lightening, it is horrible for me because I wake up disturbed, I think of things that are not related. I feel paranoid (female child soldier, 2010).

The experiences of recruitment, of life in the armed groups, and of demobilization, left a powerful imprint on the minds of our participants. Moreover, during the process of reintegration and through the Attention Program they had the opportunity to reflect on their wartime actions and to confront their former and current view of

themselves, their worldview and the consequences of their actions. Participants asserted that despite the horrors they experienced and participated in, their participation in war provided important life lessons that will remain with them:

One has sequels ... you learn something...if you do something and if you like it you keep doing it ... like killing someone, I liked it, I used to like it ... when I left (the group) some people made me change... (Now) I would not do it, not even for money (male child soldier, 2010).

I think everything in life teaches you, in a more personal way, in a profound way, a lesson. Everything that I have learned there I will not repeat. I can choose because now I know... it was personal growth, a learning process. I think that it has been a unique experience (female child soldier, 2010).

Reconciliation & Former Child Soldiers

There are an array of societal reactions to child participation in armed conflict, as well as their reintegration into civil society. Societal and community reactions in Colombia have tended to vary on a continuum from outright social stigma and rejection to full support for their plight. These participants discussed the stigma that they experienced and its implications:

People in the community knew who we were [that we were former child soldiers]. So one would ask to talk to someone and they would reject you. One would go to the store to buy something and people would look at you as if you were the worst thing... So we were getting tired of that because we would be rejected everywhere. Where they didn't reject us, they would give us the things while staring at us ... it was hard for the identity of the person... When we arrived, after a month [of experiencing rejection], everyone wanted to leave [and return to the armed groups] (male child soldier, 2010).

One needs to get used to it, life here is very hard. One goes out in the street and [people] look at you and say: 'Look at the guerrillero' [guerilla boy] even though you don't look like that anymore ... people who know [that I was

in an armed group] treat me badly and say that I will be a terrorist, a guerrillero (male child soldier, 2010).

In response to the varied reactions, children and youth appeared to develop strategies to cope and manage the reactions. In many cases, respondents made efforts to conceal their past in order to prevent physical harm to themselves or their families, and to avoid blame and rejection:

Society can help. I think they are already helping....trying to defend us and providing us with support because if you come from there, it is very hard to find employment but they do help us and train us (female child soldier, 2010).

Maybe I don't talk about it because of what people think ...people know that you are a killer and they are mean and people think you are mean. They don't give a job to someone like me (male child soldier, 2010).

I came here today camouflaged, I brought this small hat and these glasses (male child soldier, 2010).

Importantly, former child soldiers in our sample were not trying to obliterate, negate or deny their violent past. However, they made attempts to hide their former identities as child soldiers in order to protect themselves. They made efforts to adjust to civilian life and to see themselves as good citizens, and they also wanted to be perceived as such. Participants viewed their lives within the illegal armed groups as part of a learning experience that they did not wish to repeat. However, they realized that their "biographical past as unchangeable and inalienable" (Gimenez, 2002, p.5).

Given the realities of stigma and rejection in the post-conflict lives of former child soldiers, processes of reconciliation are vital. *Agape por Colombia*, is a reconciliation program run by volunteers (many of them victims of the armed conflict themselves) and involves the participation of former child soldiers and other war victims, including victims of forced displacement, refugees, people who suffered kidnappings, as well as members of civil

society. Within the context of this reconciliation program, these diverse groups meet for three days, during which they are encouraged to share their wartime experiences in a secure environment. Contact among the former child-soldiers, other victims and members of the civil society takes place in a supportive atmosphere that invites dialogue capable of changing perceptions and mutual stereotypes.

The presence of former child soldiers in the reconciliation process is essential to the program, as it contributes to the increased awareness in the Colombian community with regards to the realities of child recruitment. Through their contributions, the former child-soldiers are no longer passive subjects of institutional attention: they actively contribute to enhance the Colombian social fabric and help other participants to reflect collectively on the impact of the war on everyone's lives. In this sense, former child soldiers become active agents and promoters of reconciliation. Their life stories and their experiences give invaluable testimony of the complexities and damages caused by the armed conflict. Their input is crucial in the exchange dynamics that is established between the former child-soldiers, other victims and members of civil society.

Furthermore, former child soldiers have often never had the opportunity to personally meet those who have been direct victims of the armed groups. Former child soldiers have often never before heard the stories and perspectives, of civilians and the impact of the war on their lives. Getting to know first-hand the ravages caused by the illegal

armed groups has, in our experience, repeatedly provoked instances of spontaneous reconciliation initiated by former child soldiers, who have asked for - and have often been granted - forgiveness. Significantly, Agape has reported and documented these spontaneous reconciliation experiences in virtually every reconciliation gathering.

The presence of civil society has proven to be crucial as, for the most part, victims share their experiences among other victims. The presence of civil society can lead to an awareness on the part of those participants for whom the war has not touched their lives directly. In many cases they have come to realize that in one way or another, all citizens are in some way responsible for the ongoing armed conflict in a society that is characterized by profound social and economic inequality. Members of civil society can also bear witness and lend support to the plight of the victims, facilitating the restoring of victims' dignity through recognition and support and also through the relationships established through Agape's program.

The reconciliation gatherings present an opportunity for all to clarify concepts, and experience the benefits of forgiveness and reconciliation. Important networks have also been established through the Agape's reconciliation gatherings and the relationships established have continued through time. Ultimately, these experiences further illustrate the evolving character of the identities of former child soldiers and the enormous possibilities to overcome adversity and to become healthy and productive members of society.

Conclusion

This paper has highlighted the complex and often painful realities of former child soldiers and their courageous struggle to determine who they were during recruitment, who they have become, and how they are perceived as they adjust to civilian life, alone and far away from their families. Our work supports the idea that these youth have the capacity for reflexivity and the ability to examine themselves, their actions, their options for the future and to make choices that reflect the lessons learned through recruitment, demobilization and reintegration.

Through the narratives of these youth, we can see how the idea of “who I am” and “how I am perceived” evolves in multiple contexts. Values learned during training and becoming a warrior, as well as through demobilization and reintegration are learned and unlearned. Throughout their stories and experiences, we get a glimpse of the reality of the “making” and “unmaking” of child soldiers and the many aspects of their lives that have been impacted by the horrors of war (Denov, 2010).

While former child soldiers appear to make no effort to negate their past, they do conceal it in order to protect themselves from the stigma associated with their former affiliations. Moreover, they appear to reconstruct their identities as civilians and worthy members of society, precisely because of their past experience during the recruitment and in opposition to it.

There are valuable lessons to be learned through the demobilization experiences of Colombian former child soldiers. It is particularly important to understand the conditions that make possible not only their reintegration but also their de-radicalization. Besides well designed government reintegration programs, one of the key ingredients of de-radicalization is the presence and help of a supportive community, that allows children and youth to reflect on their identities and social representations that are different to the ones they had acquired during recruitment.

References

- Basta ya, Colombia: memorias de guerra y dignidad* (2012). Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica.
- Burgess, R. (2009). Colombia's children at risk of recruitment into armed groups: Exploring a community-based, psychosocial pedagogy. *Journal of Education for International Development*, 4 (1): 1-11.
- Support modules for demobilized children and adolescents (2007). *Corporación Vínculos*. Modules 1. Bogotá: Vínculos ICBF, OIM.
- Denov, M. (2010) *Child Soldiers: Sierra Leone's Revolutionary United Front*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gimenez, G. (2003). Materiales para una teoria de las indentidades sociales. *Frontera Norte*, 9(18). Julio-Diciembre 1997
- Helmus, T.C. & Glenn, R.W. (2004). *Steeling the Mind: Combat stress reactions and their implications for urban warfare*. (RAND MG-191-A). Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation.
- Human Rights Watch. (2003). *You'll Learn Not to Cry: Child Combatants in Colombia*.
- Jones, L., & Denov, M. (2015). Mothering in the Context of Isolation and Insecurity: Young Women Formerly Associated with Armed Groups in Colombia. In Takseva, T. (eds.) *Mothering Under Fire*. Halifax: Fernwood Press.
- Marlowe, D. (2001). *Psychological and Psychosocial Consequences of Combat and Deployment*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation.
- Watchlist (2004). *Colombia's War on Children*. Retrieved on September 10, 2011 from <http://watchlist.org/reports/files/colombia.report.php>.
- Watchlist (2012). *No one to trust: Children and armed conflict in Colombia*. New York.
- Wessells M. (2006). *Child soldiers from violence to protection*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

This volume reports on the range of papers presented at the Annual Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) Research Conference 2014 from 7-8 December 2014 in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates. The Conference, hosted by Hedayah, Curtin University and People against Violent Extremism (PaVE), provided a platform for researchers, policymakers and practitioners to discuss and disseminate cutting-edge research on countering violent extremism (CVE). The resulting publication begins to fill a gap in the literature related to CVE by providing insights into some of the local push and pull factors that lead to radicalization and recruitment in different contexts, and suggest some policy and programming recommendations to better counter these factors. The essays in this volume also highlight existing programs in countering the narrative of violent extremists, deconstruct programs related to disengagement, deradicalization and reintegration of former violent extremists, and provide case examples of CVE programming at the community level.



Hedayah



Curtin University

hedayah.ae | curtin.edu.au

ISSN: 2205-7013