Framing and Contesting a Revolution:
Identity Construction, Gender, and Rebel Group Cohesion in Colombia

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Abstract

The literature on rebel group cohesion and desertion from armed groups offers a variety of explanations for patterns of disengagement from armed violence, including government pressure, in-group violence, disillusionment in the group's cause, networks, and trauma. But most of the disengagement literature focuses on men who have deserted their groups, with much less information on those who stay until ordered to disarm—and almost no analysis on women who disarm. The lack of comparative analysis between deserters and loyalists limits what we understand or can predict about rebel group cohesion. In addition, this literature has failed to adequately explore the role of gender norms, even though hyper-masculinity, narratives of brotherhood, and feminization of the enemy are well-established mechanisms for increasing troop cohesion in militaristic groups.

Based on over 100 in-depth interviews with former guerrillas and paramilitaries in Colombia, this dissertation argues that framing contests and related identity constructions are critical in insurgencies and civil war, and that the outcome of these contests influences individual decisions to disengage from violence and the experiences of ex-combatants after demobilization. Second, I argue that how these competing frames operationalize gender norms influences not only troop cohesion but also the way combatants calculate their investments in the group and possible alternatives. As a result, even recruits that are not fully committed may stay for lack of alternatives. Conversely, recruits may desert their group only to face the stigmatizing consequences of government narratives in civilian life. This study examines what variables produce these outcomes, emphasizing the role of framing contests and arguing that ignoring gender in rebel group cohesion has left a significant gap in our understanding of both desertion and post-conflict reintegration.

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List of Acronyms

ACCU	Campesino ¹ Self-Defence Forces of Córdoba and Urabá
ACR	Colombian Reintegration Agency
ARN	Agency for Reincorporation and Normalization
AUC	United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia
BACRIM	Criminal Band (generally refers to paramilitary successor organizations)
CLAV	Local Centre for Victim Attention
CODA	Operational Committee for Disarmament
COL	Colombian peso
CONPES	Council on Economic and Social Policy
DDR	Disarmament, Disengagement and Reintegration
ELN	National Liberation Army
EPL	Popular Liberation Army
ETA	Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (“Basque Homeland and Liberty”)
ETCR	Territorial Spaces for Training and Reincorporation
FARC-EP	Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People’s Army
GAHD	Group for Humanitarian Attention to the Demobilized
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
IR	International Relations
JEP	Special Jurisdiction for Peace
LGBTI	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex
LTTE	Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam
M-19	19 th of April Movement
NGO	Non-governmental organization
OXFAM	Oxford Committee for Famine Relief
PRVC	Reincorporation Program into Civilian Life
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations Children’s Fund
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
UP	Patriotic Union
US	United States of America
USD	United States Dollar

¹ Often translated as “Peasant Self-Defence Forces”; see page 7 (footnote) and Chapter Six for further explanation of the retention of the Spanish word “campesino” instead of “peasant” throughout this dissertation.

Chapter One: Linking Organizational and Individual Factors of Rebel Group Cohesion

Why rebel groups and other military organizations thrive or disintegrate has long been a puzzle in political science and has been approached from many different angles and levels of analysis. The civil war and insurgency literature has primarily addressed this puzzle at the organizational level, examining how different types of groups (e.g., ideological, ethnic, rent-seeking) maintain cohesion² or not (Bearman 1991; Costa and Kahn 2010; Gutiérrez Sanín 2018; Gutiérrez Sanín and Wood 2014; Kalyvas 2008; Koehler, Ohl, and Albrecht 2016; McLauchlin and Pearlman 2012; McLauchlin 2015; Mironova 2019; Staniland 2012). While some of this literature does look at individual members' choices and motivations (e.g., McLauchlin 2014; Oppenheim et al. 2015; Ohl 2016), this individual-level analysis is much more common in the terrorism literature, largely due to the emphasis on psychological processes of radicalization and “deradicalization” (Altier, Horgan, and Thoroughgood 2012; Altier, Thoroughgood, and Horgan 2014; Altier et al. 2017; Bjørge 2009; Chernov Hwang 2018; Ferguson, Burgess, and Hollywood 2015; Horgan 2009; Jacobson 2010). In addition, these two bodies of literature rarely speak to each other, leaving questions about how organizational factors might affect these psychological processes—and vice versa.

What is clear from these analyses is that there are myriad reasons why armed groups lose recruits and why individual recruits choose to desert³ their groups. What is far less

² Cohesion is defined here as how effective an armed group is at retaining recruits and preventing dissent or desertion. King (2006) further distinguishes between “social cohesion” (i.e., personal bonds between recruits) and “task cohesion” (i.e., coordination troops moving toward the same goal). This dissertation examines both of these elements.

³ Demobilization or disarmament is defined as the laying down of arms, while disengagement is defined as a departure from an armed group and cessation of the use of armed violence. Desertion refers to leaving a

clear is how organizational and individual variables interact to strengthen—or weaken—rebel group cohesion. And, despite the current global trend of government “counter-narratives” to deter people from joining extremist or insurgent groups and to encourage them to leave, there is little evaluative evidence on whether these approaches have any effect at all, and this knowledge gap is especially glaring for women recruits (Altermark and Nilsson 2018; Gielen 2018; Glazzard 2017; Schmid 2014). Indeed, none of the literature above addresses gender norms and expectations, even though hyper-masculinity, as well as narratives of brotherhood and feminization of the enemy, are well-established mechanisms for increasing troop cohesion in militaristic groups (Dietrich 2017; Enloe 2000; Goldstein 2001). Finally, it remains unclear how these different exit pathways might affect the reintegration experiences—and potential recidivism—of ex-combatants.

In short, while there is a growing understanding of certain individual and organizational variables that may increase or decrease rebel group cohesion, questions remain on the links between these variables, and on the efficacy of government narratives that encourage disengagement and how rebel groups and their members resist this messaging. While the focus of this dissertation is on why some people leave armed groups while others stay, it is important to examine how the amnesty and benefit programs offered by the government are set up in order to understand whether these programs have any influence in decisions to stay or go—and/or whether shortcomings in these programs may be pushing some ex-combatants to avoid (or drop out of) reintegration programs. This dissertation thus seeks to answer the following question: What are the key variables driving decisions to desert non-state armed groups? Given the gaps identified above, two sub-

group without the permission of commanding officers, whereas disengagement could occur by desertion or by being ordered to disarm by commanders.

questions emerge: 1) How do gender norms affect decisions to leave an armed group or stay within it? And, 2) How do framing contests amidst armed conflict affect desertion decisions and reintegration experiences?

The literature on rebel group cohesion and desertion from armed groups (both state and non-state) already offers some explanations for patterns of desertion, including government pressure, in-group violence, disillusionment in the group's cause, networks, and trauma, among other factors. But most of the desertion literature that tries to explain why people disengage from armed groups is based on interviews or data from men who have deserted, with much less information on those who stay in their groups until ordered to demobilize—and almost no information on women who disengage from armed groups through either pathway. Clearly there is a significant difference between abandoning a group versus being loyal until ordered to disarm, but a comparison of these two groups and an understanding of the variables affecting these different exit pathways remains a gap in the disengagement literature. This research aims to address that gap, and Colombia offers the ideal case in which to examine both.

1.1 The Argument: Framing Contests, Rebel Group Cohesion, and Gender Norms

In this dissertation, I argue that the ways rebel groups frame their project or mission—and the identities and labels constructed within these frames—are critical to individual decisions to leave an armed group or stay within it. I also argue that the way the government (often with assistance from the media) frames armed groups can be counter-productive to State efforts to encourage desertion and turn ex-combatants into law-abiding civilians. While social movement theory has contributed to our understanding of why people join

rebellions, the importance of framing—and the identities constructed within those frames, including gendered identities and norms—has received far less attention, especially in terms of why people might *leave* rebellions. First, I contend that framing contests and related identity constructions are essential in insurgencies and civil war, and that the outcome of these contests influences individual commitment to an armed group and the experiences of ex-combatants after demobilization. Second, I argue that how these competing frames operationalize gender norms—including narratives of brotherhood and masculinity, of women as victims, and of gender equality—influence not only troop cohesion but also the way combatants perceive their investments and possible alternatives. As a result, depending on the outcome of the contests, even recruits that are not fully committed may see no possible alternative to their membership in the group. Conversely, recruits may buy into the government narrative and attempt to leave, only to face the stigmatizing consequences of that government narrative in civilian life. This study examines what variables produce these and other possible outcomes, emphasizing how ignoring gender in the examination of rebel group cohesion has left a blind spot in our understandings of both desertion and post-conflict reintegration.

1.2 Defining Gender Norms and Gender-Based Analysis

While a more detailed exploration of gender norms and frames in armed conflict is provided in subsequent chapters, some definitional clarity is warranted here, particularly as the various framing contests under examination operationalize gender norms in different ways. Gender norms in this dissertation are defined as characteristics and expectations typically ascribed to men and women; for example, physical strength, aggression,

dominance, and decisiveness are often associated with masculinity, while domesticity, passivity, weakness, and cooperation are often ascribed to femininity. “Traditional” or patriarchal gender norms—still highly prevalent in Colombia—are constructed frames in and of themselves that situate men as the heads of households, politics, business, and war, whereas women are designated as caregivers, child bearers, and supporting actors (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Cohn 1999; Scott-Samuel 2008). This patriarchal framing justifies the subordination of women, with the result that women are frequently excluded from decision-making and devalued in general. While gender norms certainly vary in different cultures, they are always socially constructed, are frequently contested, and affect the distribution of power in a given society; in addition, patriarchal gender norms are often exacerbated by armed conflict (Bouta, Bannon, and Frerks 2005; Cohn 2013a; Cheldelin and Eliatamby 2011; Gentry and Sjoberg 2015; Goldstein 2001). Gender-based analysis, then, looks at how socially-constructed gender norms interact with other factors, and how they affect and organize personal, political, and intellectual life, especially in terms of power structures (Cohn 2013a; Dietrich 2017; Enloe 2000; Mendez 2012). In particular, Enloe (1990) argues that ignoring the effect of gender norms in security studies means that researchers will misunderstand who wields power, why, and to what end. Indeed, security and war scholars who use gender analysis argue that a failure to properly ask questions related to gender undermines the discipline’s understandings of war and conflict, as well as the construction of post-conflict societies (Carpenter 2002; Ferree, Ewig, and Tripp 2013; Gentry and Sjoberg 2015; Goldstein 2001; Sjoberg and Gentry 2011; Tripp 2010).

1.3 Structure of the Dissertation

The main objective of this dissertation is to better understand how rebel groups and their individual members organize their experiences and identities (including gendered identities), and how this organization of experiences helps armed groups maintain cohesion—or not. The dissertation also examines how governments and other opposing forces compete with rebel group framing in an attempt to weaken these groups and gain public support. To achieve this objective, this dissertation examines the perspectives of loyalists (i.e., those that have remained in the group until ordered to demobilize), deserters, government officials, and opposing forces (i.e., right-wing versus left-wing groups). In the following chapter, I will more thoroughly examine the literature on armed group cohesion and desertion, bringing in research from social movement theory, sociology, and criminology to supplement the gaps left in the international relations and political science literature. Specifically, I outline framing theory (derived from social theory and sociology) in terms of how the examinations of contested social constructions can add to our understanding of rebel group desertion and cohesion. I also explain the importance of gender-based analysis and the problems of conflating “gender” with “women”, which has devalued the analytical contribution that gender-based analysis brings to the question of rebel group cohesion. Chapter Three provides a background to the Colombian conflict, including an overview of gender norms in Colombia and brief descriptions of the three main armed groups under examination—the FARC-EP (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia-People’s Army), the ELN (National Liberation Army), and the AUC (Self-Defence Forces of Colombia). Chapter Four outlines the research design, the various research sites, the demographics of the sample, and the ethical considerations of fieldwork amidst ongoing conflict. In Chapter Five, I describe the various demobilization programs

implemented in Colombia, looking at how the government has addressed (or failed to address) the guerrillas' emphasis on gender equality and how the framing of women as victims has affected women's perceived alternatives and their reintegration experiences.

The next three chapters analyze three key framing contests that affect rebel group cohesion and decisions to desert. Specifically, these chapters look at how these contests affect: 1) decisions to desert or demobilize; and 2) reintegration processes. In Chapter Six, I introduce the first framing contest, that of "Victims versus Perpetrators". In this contest, the guerrillas construct a frame of victimhood, relying heavily on their rural, "campesino"⁴ identity and the construction of the government as the "real terrorists". The government rejects this victimhood frame, often conflating campesinos with guerrillas and painting the guerrillas as perpetrators of violence against their own troops—emphasizing forced abortions and violence against women guerrillas in particular. In Chapter Seven, I examine the contest of "Revolutionaries versus Narco-Terrorists", in which the guerrillas—and particularly the FARC—have framed their revolution as something they are doing both in self-defence and "for the people", with an emphasis on identities as revolutionaries and "insurgent feminists". In contrast, the government has long framed the guerrillas as narco-terrorists, which not only affects the government's policy approach but also affects combatants' perceived alternatives and their post-conflict experiences. In Chapter Eight, I introduce the last framing contest, that of "Deserters versus Loyalists". Unlike the other two contests, this one is not between the government and the armed groups but between the various armed groups and types of ex-combatants, including deserters, loyalists, and

⁴ While "campesino" generally translates to the English "peasant", I choose to retain the Spanish word throughout this dissertation, as the word "peasant" is both pejorative and does not adequately capture the unique racial and cultural history of Colombia's *campesino* population (Burnyeat 2018; Courtheyn 2018).

“would-be” deserters. This chapter explores how the FARC in particular has framed deserters from their group as liars, traitors, and spies and discusses the highly gendered nature of this framing. The chapter then looks at how deserters contest this framing and try to portray themselves as courageous and noble for making the decision to abandon violence. Finally, the dissertation concludes with a summary of the core findings and identifies several hypotheses that this research generates about how and why framing contests and their outcomes affect disengagement decisions and reintegration experiences. I then discuss the policy implications of these findings, in addition to identifying next steps for a more-inclusive and gender-aware research agenda on rebel group cohesion.

Chapter Two: Group Cohesion, Framing Processes, and Gender Norms in Armed Conflict

This chapter aims to review several bodies of literature related to disengagement from non-state armed groups. First, the chapter looks at studies on rebel group cohesion, which primarily focus on the characteristics and motivations of rebel groups that make them more or less likely to lose members. Next, the chapter looks at the literature on desertion and disengagement, which is focused more at the individual level and predominantly analyzes people's psychological motivations to leave their groups. In this section, I introduce some key literature on framing theory, arguing that employing this theoretical approach can bridge the organizational-level analysis of rebel cohesion and the individual-level analysis of desertion. After identifying a clear gap in all of this literature—that is, the near total absence of any consideration of women or gender—the chapter then discusses how and why gender norms are often ignored in mainstream war studies and why they are critical to understanding the structure and function of armed groups and the nature of armed conflict. The chapter examines how and why gender norms determine the way female perpetrators of violence are often portrayed and perceived by researchers, the media, and policymakers, noting that these perceptions and related gender norms have affected what research is done (or not done) on women involved in armed conflict. Finally, the chapter looks at women in demobilization, disarmament and reintegration (DDR) programs, highlighting the ongoing underrepresentation of women in these programs and illustrating how DDR programs can often reinforce gender stereotypes and harmful power hierarchies.

2.1 Rebel Group Cohesion

The question of what motivates people to fight in rebellions has long been a key question in studies on civil war; or, at least, scholars have long asked what motivates *men* to fight (Collier and Hoeffler 2004; Costa and Kahn 2010; Gurr 1970; Humphreys and Weinstein 2008; Lichbach 1995; Peters and Richards 1998; Wimmer, Cederman, and Min 2009) and a rapidly growing body of literature is now asking similar questions about women's participation in political violence (Bloom 2011; Ní Aoláin, Haynes, and Cahn 2011; Cohn 2013b; Gentry and Sjoberg 2015; Gutiérrez Sanín and Carranza Franco 2017; Henshaw 2016a, 2016b; Wood and Thomas 2017; Sjoberg and Gentry 2011). Equally important to understanding the length and persistence of modern armed conflict is examining what keeps recruits in armed groups and what motivates them to stay—or not (McLauchlin 2015). If armed groups cannot keep their troops, even if they quickly replace them, they are unlikely to survive, much less win; thus, preventing desertion is presumably a high priority for most organizations (Chenoweth and Stephan 2011; Connable and Libicki 2010; McLauchlin 2015; Russell 1974). But desertion, of course, has two sides: the organization that is trying to prevent it, and the individual members who make decisions to stay or flee. And there are often many factors influencing both sides: network ties both inside and outside the group, strong group identities, ethnic ties, ties or claims to land, ideological commitment, resource management, and so on. As Staniland notes: “Insurgent movements have a complex, messy, and often violent internal political life that demands more fine-grained, systematic study” (2012, 18).

Some scholarship suggests that recruits' motivations for joining, or the method of recruitment, will influence commitment levels—and much of this literature downplays

ideology in favour of emphasizing resources and geographical control. Weinstein, for example, argues that the use of economic incentives in recruitment minimizes the importance of trust and that resource-rich groups will have low commitment recruits and higher rates of desertion (2007). Resource-poor groups, he posits, use information gathering, costly induction, and vouching in order to gauge the commitment of recruits and thus will have less desertion. But evidence shows that group behaviour varies strongly even when all groups have massive access to economic resources (Gutiérrez Sanín and Giustozzi 2010). Weinstein's theory also does not distinguish between male or female recruits, or minors, and cannot readily explain why, in the same conflict, some armed groups have high numbers of women and children combatants while others do not.

Kalyvas (2006) agrees that paid militia are more likely to desert because they will work for the highest bidder. However, he argues that ideological beliefs in civil wars are not as important as they seem, stating that “most ‘ordinary’ people appear to display a combination of weak preferences and opportunism” (2006, 103). McLauchlin finds that unit composition affects norms of cooperation and overall group cohesion (2015), and he also finds that geography matters, arguing that desertion is easier in rough terrain and that rebel group cohesion depends on control not just in contested territory but also “behind the lines” (2014). Arjona and Kalyvas, in a survey study of demobilized combatants in Colombia, similarly suggest that ideology does not matter, finding that patterns of recruitment into different groups simply reflect armed groups' presence and control (Arjona and Kalyvas 2011). However, Arjona and Kalyvas do not gender-disaggregate their findings, despite their study being on Colombia, where women have historically made

up 20-40 percent of guerrilla groups but have had far less presence in paramilitary groups (Dietrich 2017; Gutiérrez Sanín 2008; Gutiérrez Sanín and Carranza Franco 2017).

It is arguably very difficult to explain this gendered variation without considering ideological differences between the groups. Indeed, Gutierrez and Wood find that ideology is “fundamental for the internal life of armed groups”, explaining that all armed groups engage in forms of political violence and that some ideologies prescribe certain strategies and institutions (2014, 213–14). They argue that ideologies matter not only because many armed groups adopt them genuinely, but also because they “adopt them instrumentally”—and if a rebel group cannot socialize its members around some basic values, it will not be able to organize around high risk collective action (Gutiérrez Sanín and Wood 2014, 214). They note that earlier works on civil war did not consider ideology because rebel groups were viewed as single, unitary actors (e.g., Collier and Hoeffler 2004; Cramer 2002; Fearon and Laitin 2003), but that when studying group cohesion, discipline, and identity, the role of ideology becomes critical. Indeed, as these authors note, studies on terrorism demonstrate that ideology matters a great deal in explaining variations in patterns of violence, recruitment methods, and operational choices across different terrorist groups (Bloom 2011; Hegghammer 2013). Other scholars have demonstrated that ideology appears to be a key variable in the types of violence a group uses, particularly in terms of violence against civilians and the use of rape as a weapon of war (Cohen 2016). While few scholars look at the impact of gender norms on rebel group cohesion, Cohen (2016) argues that gang rape during civil war can strengthen groups with weak internal cohesion, and Humphreys and Weinstein (2004) find that promises of women were a key recruitment and retention strategy for male fighters in Sierra Leone. But, while some State militaries have

claimed that women in combat roles threaten military cohesion, Mackenzie (2015) finds no association between women's integration and diminished troop cohesion.

Besides these few exceptions, the literature on rebel group cohesion does little to address gender, women's participation, or how a group's ideology might utilize—or fight against—gender norms. This is a striking omission, given that norms of patriarchy, brotherhood and hyper-masculinity (including feminization of the enemy) are well-known elements used by militaries to boost troop morale and cohesion—and that many armed groups enforce specific gender norms as a form of social control (Enloe 2000; Goldstein 2001; King 2015). In addition, political ideology is often directly linked to contested gender norms, where leftist ideologies frequently adopt discourses of gender equality while rightist and/or conservative ideologies are more likely to support patriarchal norms and institutions. This difference is also evident in armed group recruitment patterns: in quantitative cross-national comparisons, leftist rebellions attract the largest numbers of female combatants, while fundamentalist Islamist groups are the least likely to allow women on the frontlines (Henshaw 2016a, 2016b).

2.2 Disengagement and Desertion

While setting a divide between the rebel cohesion literature and the desertion literature is perhaps a false division—as some of this literature certainly moves across both categories—for analytical clarity, I have separated the rebel cohesion literature as generally looking at the structure and function of groups at the organizational level, and the disengagement/desertion literature as studying what motivates individual people (usually men) to leave armed groups. In their edited volume on patterns of disengagement from terrorist groups, Horgan and Bjørge (2009) suggest that terrorists are more likely to

disengage if: they feel that they are losing; they are disillusioned with the group and/or its methods; they are disillusioned with the radical ideology; they disagree with the high level of violence and/or they were a victim of this violence. But because their research does not compare deserters to “loyalists” (i.e., people who stayed with their groups) or discuss women or gender at all, it is unclear when these reasons to disengage can overcome potential barriers to exit, or if there are variances between men and women. Similarly, Lafree and Miller’s (2008) overview of the criminology literature on desistance predicts that desistance from crime is more likely when: 1) there are high costs associated with punishment or credible threats of punishment from the State (rational choice); 2) the individual retains social connections to law-abiding people (social learning, networks); 3) the person has a low level of life strain, or effective and lawful mechanisms for dealing with strain (grievances); 4) the opportunities for engaging in crime are rare; 5) inequality and conflict between groups is low; and 6) legal systems are perceived as legitimate. In an in-depth study on Indonesian militants, Chernov Hwang (2018) finds that four key factors drive disengagement from terrorist violence: disillusionment with the group’s tactics and leaders; realization that the costs of continued action outweigh the benefits; new relationships outside the jihadist circle; and changing personal and professional priorities.

Again, as with the rebel cohesion literature discussed above, these theories focus on men, contain no gender analysis, and they do not systematically compare deserters and loyalists. Indeed, most of the disengagement literature selects on the dependent variable and only looks at male fighters who have left their groups. Only a small number of studies examine women’s desistance from crime—discussed below—and not from insurgent groups. However, studies on criminal groups, where there is rarely an overarching ideology

or religion (with some exceptions), may be limited in what they can explain about other types of armed groups involved in insurgencies and terrorism.

What appears consistent across all the disciplines reviewed here is that most types of role exit emerge from a combination of push and pull factors, which may be unique to each individual. Nevertheless, and despite the absence of gender analysis in most of this research, there are some notable patterns, and several reoccurring variables appear to be critical in influencing disengagement decisions across cases: types of commitment, ideology, identity, networks, and the costs/benefits of membership. Of course, there is a great deal of overlap in these categories, as ideology and networks influence identity as well as commitment, and all three likely affect an individual's calculation of the costs and benefits of membership. And while the rebel cohesion literature suggests that there are different patterns of disengagement across different types of armed groups, to my knowledge there are few, if any, studies that compare men's and women's disengagement from political violence or how gender norms and expectations might affect decisions to disengage.

2.2.1 Types of Commitment

Many armed groups go to great lengths to test or ensure commitment in their new recruits, often through costly induction methods (such as gang hazing, being forced to commit an act of violence, getting tattoos, etc.) or through intense indoctrination (Oppenheim et al. 2015; Speckhard and Yayla 2016; Weinstein 2007). Drawing from Rusbult's investment model in psychology (Rusbult, Agnew, and Arriaga 2012), where:

$$\text{Commitment} = \text{Satisfaction} - \text{Alternatives} + \text{Investments}$$

Altier, Thoroughgood and Horgan (2014) argue that terrorists who gain high rewards and low costs are likely to be highly satisfied (and thus less likely to disengage). This investment model also incorporates the role of emotions: high emotional costs may provoke a desire to exit, whereas positive emotions increase at least some forms of commitment. However, low satisfaction might not necessarily result in exit depending on the available alternatives and the level of sunk costs in the organization. This is likely even more true for women, who generally have less ability to exit an organization under strict (and violent) male control and often face a higher level of stigma when they return to their own societies (Azm 2015; Londoño and Nieto 2006; Nieto-Valdivieso 2017). In war-torn or post-conflict societies, women's alternatives will almost always be lower than men's, and if they have babies with members of the group, their investments are even higher—not only does having a child bond a woman to the group, it also becomes logistically more difficult to leave. Women's added care burden for children and the elderly also makes it more difficult to participate in post-conflict politics.

An important addition to the investment model comes from social psychology research on membership in (and departure from) social movements, where commitment is subdivided into moral commitment, affective commitment, and continuance commitment (Klandermans 1997; van Stekelenburg and Klandermans 2013). Moral commitment is defined as an attachment to the group's ideology—a belief in the cause and desire to work for change attached to that belief. Affective commitment is an attachment to the group itself and not necessarily the ideology—admiration for the leaders or their activities, romantic or familial ties to the group, or the sense of belonging or identity that one gets from the group. Continuance commitment is related to the life circumstances of members

and the economic or survival benefits of being in the group—such as food, shelter, and protection from other armed groups. However, these categories do not fully capture the high degree of overlap in these types of commitment, nor do they explore how types of commitment can shift over time, as roles in the group change or the costs/benefits of membership change. While gender is not explicitly incorporated into this theory, all of these forms of commitment arguably affect women differently than men, largely due to the influence of gender norms in armed conflict. For moral commitment, women in leftist groups are often fighting to change gender norms, where the stakes of changing the status quo are arguably higher for them than they are for men. Also, in many armed groups, women achieve a higher status if they are romantically involved with a high-ranking man (the reverse is rarely true), which would not only increase a woman's affective commitment but also her continuance commitment if she is then entitled to better food, shelter, and protection. Women in many conflict zones are also highly vulnerable to sexual assault from armed groups as a tactic of war; thus, attaching to one group can sometimes be a woman's best chance of protection and sustenance—even if she might be risking assault from within her own group.

In a study on members of extremist groups in the Netherlands from a range of ideologies (a leftist squatter group, a radical Islamist group, a nationalist group and a right-wing group), researchers investigated whether different types of commitment were more important in different types of groups (Demant et al. 2008). The researchers found—in their limited sample—that broken normative (ideological) commitments were most important in disengagement from religious and nationalist groups, whereas affective commitments were most important in the left- and right-wing groups. However, they do

not discuss how much overlap occurs in these types of commitments, nor do they adequately unpack the difficulties in isolating or operationalizing a person's "type" of commitment. Finally, the authors suggest that broken continuance commitments are only important in desertion when one of the other two forms of commitment is already broken. This supports theories derived from the Rusbult model that dissatisfaction must be combined with a consideration of alternatives and investments in order to motivate exit (Altier, Thoroughgood, and Horgan 2014; Rusbult, Agnew, and Arriaga 2012). While Demant et al. only interviewed a maximum of five people in each group, presenting significant validity and generalizability issues, this research is one of the few studies on terrorist disengagement that compares reasons for leaving, and forms of commitment, across different types of violent groups. While the sample includes a small number of women, the authors do not explicitly analyze the role or impact of gender.

In another example, Reinares (2011) studied the ETA in Spain and found different patterns of disengagement in just one group, which he categorized as structural (related to militants' perception of political or social changes), organizational (altered opinion of the leaders or group), or personal (primarily, a change in life circumstances). These fit fairly neatly into Klandermans' normative, affective, and continuance forms of commitment but could challenge the theory that certain forms of commitment are more salient in different groups, since Reinares found significant variation in only one group. Again, the potential overlap of these patterns is insufficiently addressed, nor is there a comparison with recruits who did *not* disengage, and gender norms and/or a consideration of women's roles and motivations are completely absent.

In Colombia, one study that examined 12,480 demobilization interview transcripts, found that the primary reason most combatants (40 percent) cited as their reason for leaving was a rather vague and all-encompassing “desire for a change in life” (Rosenau et al. 2014). However, the military transcripts used for this study only code one reason for exit, and the study does not consider validity issues in terms of what ex-combatants will or will not truthfully disclose to military officials when they are afraid of being prosecuted for war crimes. The other primary reasons for leaving cited in this study were mistreatment by the group and absence from family, pressure from military operations, and being demoralized about the armed struggle. Without further exploration into these transcripts or information from in-depth interviews, it is difficult to determine the push and pull factors leading up to the choice to desert an armed group. The researchers in this study also do not provide sex-disaggregated data, nor do they discuss possible differences between men and women or the role of gender norms in recruitment and disengagement, despite the high level of women involved in Colombia’s armed groups and the gender equality discourse embraced by the guerrillas.

2.2.2 Ideology

If ideology, as stated above, is important to understand group cohesion, then logically it must have some influence on individual decisions to stay or go. As mentioned earlier, ideology appears to influence how and when an armed group employs women, with leftist groups more likely to have women on the front lines and as leaders (Henshaw 2016a). Support for a group’s ideology is a frequently cited reason for both men and women who join political violence, but even when they join for other reasons, many armed groups go to great lengths to ideologically indoctrinate their recruits in order to prevent desertion and

to create group cohesion (Azm 2015; Henshaw 2016a; Speckhard and Yayla 2015; Weinstein 2007). Yet, as noted above, this can work against group cohesion if the recruits see that leaders are not following their own professed ideology. For example, deserters from radical jihadist groups have frequently cited disillusionment with the group's interpretation of Islam as a key reason for leaving, and many deserters from ISIS and other jihadist extremist groups have accused their leaders of being corrupt and "un-Islamic" (Demant et al. 2008; Husain 2007; Neumann 2015; Speckhard and Yayla 2016). But once recruits are deeply indoctrinated, ideas or opinions that contradict the group must meet a very high threshold to be accepted, and when these contradictory ideas are present, recruits will likely avoid situations or information that increase such cognitive dissonance (Festinger 1957, 1964).

In their research on why combatants leave (or switch sides) among Colombian armed groups, Oppenheim, Steele, Vargas and Weintraub (2015) found strong evidence that ideologically-motivated combatants are less likely than economically-motivated recruits to switch sides. They also found that ideological indoctrination of economically motivated recruits will decrease the likelihood of side-switching, but that ideologically motivated recruits will side-switch or desert when the group permits looting. However, when examining the conflicts in Kashmir and Sri Lanka, Staniland (2012) found that the relationship between *ex ante* ideology and defection was weak, suggesting that further research is required to determine when ideology matters for desertion and when it does not.

In addition, these studies do not address women's experiences at all, despite the large numbers of female combatants in both the Colombian and Sri Lankan conflicts. In the Colombian study, the authors derive their hypotheses almost exclusively from

international relations theories of why men join armed violence, not including literature from other disciplines on disengagement or desistance, and completely ignoring the fact that women might have different experiences. Yet their own evidence illustrates this disparity: their sample was 25 percent female, and they found that the male variable in their quantitative analysis was positively and significantly correlated to both desertion and side-switching. They offer no attempt to explain or analyze this finding, nor do they offer any sex-disaggregated findings. Are women less likely to desert than men, as their findings seem to suggest? Or are women deserters simply less visible? The data clearly offer the potential to use gender-based analysis, but the researchers do not address this.

2.2.3 Identity

As Rapoport (1994) points out, creating distinctive categories of “us” versus “them” is a helpful tool for contending power elites, and it also allows followers to justify their acts of violence. Violent groups as well as religious sects or cults often go to great lengths to transform the identity of new recruits into that of a committed member—through initiation rituals, the recruit leaves behind his or her old life and becomes a new person. Social identity theory posits that people benefit from positive social identities associated with groups, and that the more people identify with a group, the more likely they are to protest on behalf of that group (van Stekelenburg and Klandermans 2013). Terrorist groups also often rely on histories of past grievances to motivate recruits, and women are integral in passing down historical grievances to the next generation (Speckhard 2008; Vertigans 2011). Indeed, Cronin (2006) argues that failure to pass down the legacy to subsequent generations is a common reason for terrorist groups to decline, but she overlooks any consideration of women’s roles in passing down these narratives.

To instill these new identities, child soldiers in multiple different conflicts have been given new names after performing acts of violence that force them to cut ties with their communities (Singer 2006). In gangs, initiation can also take the form of committing violence, but in some cases young women can also be “sexed in”—where a young woman must have sex with one or multiple gang members (Miller 2001). Individuals joining ISIS in Syria usually gave up their passports when they arrived and many severed family ties; some also take on new names (Erelle 2015; Speckhard and Yayla 2016). Indeed, the concept of “the ummah”—a global community of Muslims that transcends any other identity—became very prominent in ISIS recruitment, where messages of guilt for not being a “true” Muslim and responsibility to one’s faith are common on social media (Saltman and Smith 2015; Huey and Peladeau 2016).

Recruitment propaganda aimed at young women sometimes plays heavily on romantic notions of marrying fighters, and these messages are highly gendered in both directions (Koehler 2017a). In addition, in both jihadi and neo-Nazi groups in Europe, women have sometimes shamed men for not fulfilling their “male” roles (Koehler 2017a). Women also provide a foil against which men can identify themselves, a tool that many different armed groups (both state and non-state) effectively use to build a cohesive identity of “brotherhood” (Enloe 2000; Goldstein 2001). Examples like the ISIS “sisterhood” or the FARC women’s committee can work similarly in bonding female recruits, with some Islamist recruiters building on notions of purity by using narratives of Western promiscuity, while leftist groups often use discourses of feminism and gender equality (Engel 2015; FARC-EP 2017; Huey and Peladeau 2016; Mietz 2016; Saltman and Smith 2015).

Yet when recruits' expectations of the group are not met, a shift in identity can begin to form. Militant groups and social movements tend to emphasize one single identity that masks the possibility of competing identities (van Stekelenburg and Klandermans 2013), and Bubolz and Simi (2015) use identity theory to argue that unmet identity expectations in gang members can cause anger towards the group and thus facilitate exit. Social identity theory predicts that if people are in a low-status group they will try to leave, but if they cannot, they will participate in collective action to raise the status of the entire group—especially if they believe that this low status is illegitimate (van Stekelenburg and Klandermans 2013).

Ebaugh's study of role exit (1988) discusses a linear process that begins with initial doubts and an assessment of costs and benefits (discussed below), but she notes that in the "post-exit" phase, individuals must construct a new identity while facing people and institutions that might still view them according to their old identity. This may require attaching to or constructing new "plausibility structures" (i.e., groups, churches, organizations) that reinforce this new identity (Berger 1967). Concrete exit processes are likely more dynamic and less linear than Ebaugh's stage-based exit process describes, but her theory provides a useful roadmap of exit pathways, reinforcing the idea that role exit is a gradual process with multiple stages in which individuals must revisit decisions and weigh their options (Altier, Thoroughgood, and Horgan 2014). Although Ebaugh was not studying criminals or terrorists specifically, this post-exit identity shift could be particularly difficult for women who have violated multiple societal norms by participating in male-dominated, illegal, and violent groups.

Kalyvas (2008) places a constructivist lens on ethnic war to examine ethnic defection—distinguishing between identity shift (e.g., an immigrant taking on the identity of his or her new country) and “ethnic defection” (e.g., switching to the side that is expressly fighting one’s own ethnic group). He finds that once war begins, new incentives appear that may lead people to collaborate with organizations hostile to their ethnic groups. Second, he finds that ethnic defection can be demand driven, generated by an organization’s need for collaborators. That is, he finds that war itself changes incentives and identities, in addition to the possibility that incentives and identities influence war. And another study on ethnic defection generates a theory of “fratricidal flipping”—where insurgents defect to the opposition as the only way to gain protection from their own ethnic group (Staniland 2012). Using the case of Sunni defectors joining sides with the United States in Iraq, Staniland found that state control and policies were rarely direct triggers for defection, but that insurgent fratricide was an important motivator for switching sides, noting that internal conflicts within insurgent organizations and coalitions require further study. Both this finding and that of Kalyvas suggest that attachment to specific groups is fluid, particularly in war, and violence from within a group could be motivation to abandon even a group with which the person strongly identifies.

Neither of the above studies mention women or gender, but research suggests that due to gender norms and related social expectations of behaviour, women’s identities in armed groups—and once they exit—are especially complicated. In military cultures that are often highly patriarchal, feminine traits and women more generally are often devalued and objectified, meaning that women face competing demands to act tough or “macho” to earn respect while also facing gendered expectations of submissiveness and domesticity.

King's (2015) example of the “slut-bitch” binary, and of women adopting masculine traits to become “honorary men” in the American military, is a perfect illustration of this gendering. In Colombia, women in the FARC who get pregnant must leave their babies behind if they want to stay in the group and maintain their identity as a revolutionary, but because of this their society often shuns them, accusing them of loving their guns “more than their babies” (Mendez 2012, 157). Also, in interviews with male ex-combatants in Colombia, Theidon (2009) found that many male guerrillas said they would not take a female ex-guerrilla as a partner because of the perception that they were whores or sluts, and DDR staff indicated that women in the demobilization centres were more “problematic” than the men.⁵

Indeed, women who have had leadership roles in armed groups, or who have experienced some form of empowerment or enjoyment from their roles in political violence, have indicated that civilian life is difficult—or for some, simply boring or disappointing—when their expectations of transformed gender roles do not align with societal expectations (Alpert 2016; Azm 2015; Casey 2016; Dahal 2015; Mendez 2012). And both men and women ex-guerrillas in Colombia have expressed that compared to life in the guerrilla ranks, the slow pace of civilian life can be painful and boring (Castro and Díaz 1997). Some FARC women going through the current peace process demobilization have also claimed that they are not demobilizing but rather are mobilizing politically for women's rights (Stallone and Zulver 2017). At the same time, since the peace process, there was an initial baby boom within the camps where FARC guerrillas were waiting to enter DDR programs

⁵ Without further research, it is difficult to know why male guerrillas thought this about their female counterparts, or what DDR staff meant by “problematic”. The present study did not find similar responses from male ex-combatants.

(Cosoy 2017). Researchers and policymakers alike must be very cautious in placing all women in non-state armed groups into the same identity category, or in assuming that they all want the same thing.

2.2.4 Networks

While deciding to join or leave a group may seem like an individual process, many psychological processes result from commitment within a group, and people acquire “shared cognitions” whereby they determine the validity of ideas or values based on whether these ideals are anchored in the group (van Stekelenburg and Klandermans 2013). As noted above, terrorist organizations, rebel groups, criminal syndicates and religious cults all share the commonality that they often require members to break all of their former ties with existing social networks (Altier, Thoroughgood, and Horgan 2014; Bovenkerk 2011). Indeed, research on right-wing extremist groups suggests that the strong social support provided by the group is a key reason for joining and that young people will not leave until a replacement for this network is found (Bjørge 2009). FARC ex-guerrillas have lamented the lack of comradeship and solidarity in civilian life, saying: “You can’t find the solidarity that we had in the guerrillas here...no one thinks about anyone else...[whereas] there you would give your life for a companion that you had just met...” (Castro and Díaz 1997, 65). In ISIS recruitment, the idea of “the ummah” creates a sense of unity and belonging that some potential recruits might not have had before (Saltman and Smith 2015), and even those who are not physically part of a sect, unit or cell can benefit from this sense of belonging.

McLauchlin (2015), for example, emphasizes that relationships amongst combatants play a prominent role in whether combatants defect, arguing that norms of

cooperation and military unit composition are just as important as individual characteristics in predicting defection. Yet his research does not consider how gender and ideals of masculinity might play a role in this cohesion and cooperation, nor does he consider how these inter-group relations might affect women combatants quite differently. Similarly, in research on soldiers in Jordan, Iraq, Bahrain and Syria, Ohl (2016) finds that both persuasive and coercive factors interact to determine whether a soldier fights or flees—but she does not consider the role of gender norms in increasing (or not) group cohesion and shaping identity. In research on the Syrian conflict, Koehler, Ohl and Albrecht (2016) find that network ties and the ability to interpret information help to predict whether an individual will defect. Again, they offer no analysis or consideration of how gender might affect these network ties and information assessment abilities, nor any consideration of women members of these forces.

Criminology literature also indicates that networks, and specifically relationships with individuals who support non-deviant behaviour and government legitimacy, are critical to facilitating an exit from violent groups (LaFree and Miller 2008). In a study on disengagement from gangs in two American cities, researchers found no significant differences in why or how male or females exited gangs, but they found that family, followed by employment, played the largest role in encouraging disengagement for both men and women (O’Neal et al. 2016). Indeed, other criminology research finds that marriage and employment are stable predictors of criminal and gang desistance, because social bonds create a sense of obligation and also due to “aging out” of gang life—but these studies are almost exclusively focused on men and also do not incorporate the ideological

or normative aspects that often come with membership in a politically violent group (Vigil 1988; Laub, Nagin, and Sampson 1998; Pyrooz and Decker 2011).

Some research indicates that women desist from crime for the same reasons as men but that women's departure is more abrupt as they move into adulthood, while for men it is a more gradual process; there is also evidence that pregnancy could be a particularly motivating factor for women to exit gangs (Laub and Sampson 2001; O'Neal et al. 2016). However, in some insurgent groups, having a baby with a male fighter could further bond the woman to the group. For example, anecdotal evidence from women trying to flee ISIS suggests that some women are told they can leave but their children must stay, or that when escaping across borders, women have been unable to get adequate papers for their babies because the father is absent, forcing them to return (Chowdhury Fink 2017; Speckhard and Yayla 2016).

Research on deserters from terrorism and insurgencies also indicates that families are often crucial in helping a member to disengage, both psychologically and practically (Jacobson 2010; Speckhard and Yayla 2016). Indeed, Mendez (2012) asked the 19 men and 13 women ex-combatants in her Colombian study why they demobilized and found that most of her respondents cited reuniting with their family as their reason for leaving, but her research is not focused on the decision to disengage, so the differences between men and women in that process are not clear. It is certainly questionable whether marriage is as strong a predictor for female disengagement or desistance as it is for men. Reports suggest that young women joining ISIS are often drawn to romantic notions of marrying fighters, and many of them do get married shortly upon arriving in ISIS territory (Henley and Dodd 2016; Mietz 2016; Saltman and Smith 2015). Romantic pull factors have also

been cited by young women recruited into Colombian non-state armed groups, as well as in gang research (Miller 2001; Schmidt 2007). Marriage might be a strong predictor for male desistance from crime, but it is unclear if the same holds true for women, especially when marriage or romance is a pathway *into* armed groups in many circumstances.

2.2.5 The Costs and Benefits of Membership

Rational choice models of crime predict that individuals maximize satisfaction by choosing among a set of alternatives, each with specific costs and benefits (LaFree and Miller 2008). When it comes to exiting a non-state armed group, a person's exit could be due to the fact that their desired outcome no longer seems possible (even if still valuable), or if government repression has made the costs of participation too high (Tilly 1978; van Stekelenburg and Klandermans 2013). However, repressive measures that increase the cost of participation will not always encourage disengagement—the opposite could also be true in that perceived prosecution of one's "group" inspires even deeper commitment to the cause, which is certainly evident in many ISIS social media posts (Huey and Peladeau 2016; Saltman and Smith 2015). Vicarious trauma—such as witnessing a traumatic event or viewing pictures or videos of violence against one's "group"—has been reported as both a motivation for joining an armed group (out of duty or revenge) and also for leaving (Bloom 2011; Ferguson, Burgess, and Hollywood 2015; Speckhard and Ahkmedova 2006; Speckhard and Yayla 2016). But these issues often overlap with others. For example, in survey responses from 682 Colombian ex-combatants Villegas de Posada (2009) found that the six most important variables influencing demobilization decisions were survival, physical–psychological safety, civilian safety, justice, self-determination, and belongingness. However, this study does not consider differences between men and women,

or between deserters and loyalists, nor does it provide sex-disaggregated results. Theidon's (2007b) qualitative research in Colombia found that more than half of her sample—which was almost exclusively male—were simply tired of fighting.

In some cases, however, exit from the group occurs when the threat comes from inside the group (similar to the “fratricidal flipping” discussed earlier), or when the dangers of membership simply become too high. For example, based on survey replies from 316 Colombian guerrillas, Pinto, Vergara and Lahuerta (2002) found mistreatment from the group to be the top reason to desert (37 percent), followed by lack of remuneration and false promises. As McLauchlin points out, reliable comrades can lower the costs of fighting (2015), and for women in highly masculine settings of armed violence and patterns of gender-based violence, it is possible that their male fellow combatants are not necessarily reliable nor trustworthy. Indeed, in a study on American women who left their military careers prematurely, Dichter and True (2015) found that gendered experiences—particularly interpersonal violence and harassment, but also caregiving needs—were the strongest predictors of whether a woman would leave the military. Sexual assault and harassment have also been noted as key factors for women leaving the Canadian military (O'Hara 1998). American women also have shorter military services and report less satisfaction in their military careers compared to men (D'Amico and Weinstein 1999). While the research on women's departure from state or non-state armed groups is small, facing threats from within one's own group seems to be a common motivating factor across these cases.

Returning to Rusbult's commitment model, discomfort or fear for one's safety will not necessarily translate into desertion or disengagement if there are no other alternatives,

or if one is deeply committed to the group's cause, identity, and/or the ideology. For young men and women in certain neighbourhoods, it is often safer (or appears to be safer) to be in a gang than not, and several studies have found that domestic violence, sexual abuse and parental separation are key factors in girls' gang membership (Deschenes and Esbensen 1999; Miller 2001). Similarly, research on female child soldiers indicates that many girls join armed groups at least in part to escape abusive situations at home (Denov 2008; McKay and Mazurana 2004; Schmidt 2007). For example, in Colombia, 50 percent of girl child soldiers interviewed for a UNICEF report (2006) said that they had been abused or mistreated at home, compared to 26 percent of boys who reported the same.

People may also stay in an armed group and rationalize their membership if they simply cannot see an alternative. Colombian ex-guerrillas have noted that guerrilla life gave them protection through anonymity, which is stripped away if they demobilize (Castro and Díaz 1997; Londoño and Nieto 2006). As one ex-FARC member said: "Hiding protected me, but now to appear on a reintegration list I feel like everyone is looking at me... I'm afraid something will happen to me..." (Castro and Díaz 1997, 61). In addition, civilian life in many conflict-affected countries is underscored by high levels of violence, corruption, impunity, and vigilante justice, where laying down weapons and agreeing to "peace" can make ex-combatants feel extremely vulnerable (Castro and Díaz 1997). In a patriarchal culture with high levels of both civilian and police/military violence against women, such as Colombia, this vulnerability arguably affects women differently than it does men.

Rapoport notes that many instances of rationalization can be explained as attempts to reduce cognitive dissonance "by inventing reasons why the decision that was made (and

can't be reversed) was the right decision after all" (1994, 86). Indeed, there have been many hints in social media accounts of Western women complaining about the harsh conditions of life under ISIS, posting concerns about medical care, language barriers, and airstrikes, but these posts are often lost amidst the widely disseminated propaganda (Hoyle, Bradford, and Frenett 2015; Saltman and Smith 2015). And with no viable alternatives in a violently male-dominated environment, the costs of exiting may simply be too great. As one British woman who left ISIS warned: "You can't just come into ISIS territory and then expect that you can just leave again easily. There is no personal autonomy there at all" (Adam 2015). Both male and female deserters from a wide range of armed groups have reported that witnessing extreme violence within the group, or being a victim of this violence, motivated them to leave. In fact, several studies have noted the importance of a triggering or traumatic event that creates enough cognitive dissonance to start or complete the process of disengagement (Demant et al. 2008; Ferguson, Burgess, and Hollywood 2015; Jacobson 2010; Speckhard and Yayla 2016). And in terms of sexual and other gender-based violence, women in armed groups (whether state or non-state) are more likely than men to be victims of abuse from their own comrades (Jeffreys 2007; Weitz 2015).

Finally, the Colombian Ministry of Defence (2017), states that approximately 30 percent of individually demobilized FARC and 32 percent of ELN combatants between 2002-2017 reported that they left their groups due to mistreatment. These same statistics indicate that another third of these ex-combatants say that they left the group because they wanted to change their lives—a vague statement with many possible interpretations. The remaining ex-combatants cited pressure from the state armed forces and missing their families. Using the same database with interviews up to 2011, Rosenau et al. (2014) found

similar results but noted that due to inconsistent coding and the fact that only one reason for desertion is recorded for each ex-combatant, the nuances of each person's disengagement process are likely lost in these large numbers. Also, as noted earlier, considering that deserters are giving these statements to military intelligence officers, there may be high incentives to mispresent their motives. These motives to desert as published publicly⁶ are also not sex disaggregated, leaving large gaps in what we understand about possible differences in men and women's disengagement.

Although this desertion literature is disjointed and often contradictory, types of commitment, ideology, identity, networks, and costs of membership clearly emerge across the disciplines as important variables. In addition, gender norms appear to affect each of these variables in different and often intersectional ways. However, the literature does not systematically investigate the cross-cutting effect of gender norms, nor is there substantial investigation on whether the presence of an individual demobilization program (or other types of amnesty options) plays a role in combatant decision-making when it comes to individual disengagement.

2.3 DDR and Offers of Amnesty

Finally, while there is substantial peacebuilding and transitional justice literature on the problems with amnesty agreements and the related "peace versus justice" debate (e.g., Barkan 2016; Clark 2014; De Greiff, Waldorf, and Patel 2009; Freeman 2009; Mendeloff 2004; Sriram and Herman 2009; Taylor 2015), this literature generally does not consider individual-level decisions to disengage, nor does it consider framing theory or framing

⁶ Because every officially demobilized combatant is recorded in the Ministry of Defence database, sex-disaggregated data presumably exists on motives to desert, but this information is not publicly accessible.

contests that arguably influence how individual combatants interpret their amnesty options. But given that political and activist groups demanding justice (and opposing “peace at any cost”) often heighten the societal stigmatization of ex-combatants by emphasizing combatants’ crimes against the civilian population, it would not be surprising if such social controversy affected individual combatant decisions to disengage—or at least affected their calculation of potential outcomes; to my knowledge, this hypothesis is not well-explored in the DDR literature. Nonetheless, some of this literature does note that cash payments are one of the most controversial aspects of DDR processes, while other studies address the significant influence of mistrust between militant groups and government on the effectiveness of amnesty agreements and argue that amnesty programs that essentially “buy off” combatants are unlikely to contribute to lasting peace (Knight and Özerdem 2004; Agbiboa 2015). Considering the amount of resources that various governments—including Colombia—put into encouraging combatants to lay down their arms, the influence of government campaigns encouraging disengagement and promising amnesty in the midst of ongoing hostilities requires further exploration, especially an examination of government narratives and framing in opposition to armed group framing.

2.4 Frame Analysis and the Organization of Experiences

While frame analysis is prolific in the study of social movements, it has been far less influential in the rebel cohesion and disengagement literature. Yet, if ideology is important to group cohesion, and disillusionment in a group’s ideology can lead to desertion, as the above literature suggests, then the way the group frames the ideology and goals of the movement—and the way potential alternatives are framed and understood—are arguably

critical to our understanding of why some recruits stay committed while others leave. A credible and highly resonant frame might effectively retain recruits even in the face of significant cognitive dissonance, but a weak frame, especially if the frame-makers lose credibility, could threaten the entire movement. Indeed, as Gutierrez Sanín and Wood (2014) argue, a deeper examination of ideology and its relationship to group strategy and institutions is warranted to understand variation in patterns of violence. I argue that it is also warranted to understand variations in desertion patterns.

Utilizing the concept of frames focuses the analysis on how people and groups organize and interpret knowledge (Autesserre 2009; Benford and Snow 2000; Goffman 1974). Frames are social objects that are both inside people's minds and embedded in social routines, discourses, practices and institutions; they can involve ideologies, assumptions, paradigms and shared definitions (Autesserre 2009; Jervis 2006; Weick 1995). In political science, scholars have used frame analysis to investigate and explain development and humanitarian interventions, refugee policy, peacekeeping action, and human rights strategies, among others (Autesserre 2009; Barnett et al. 2007; Barnett and Finnemore 2004; Keck and Sikkink 1998; Shaw 2007). Frames can pre-exist a movement (such as the historic discrimination of a marginalized group) or they can emerge from practice (such as specific group norms, including gender norms, rules, and behavioural expectations) (Autesserre 2009). Perhaps most critical, the literature on frames illustrates that problems have to be socially constructed; that is, frames shape whether or not people view something as a problem, and they also determine what events are noticed and how they are interpreted (Barnett and Finnemore 2004; Weick 1995). To illustrate, whether gender-based violence is considered an urgent social problem needing political intervention depends highly on

how it is framed (i.e., as a “private” issue or a “public” problem), and who is framing it. Power also matters here, especially in emerging frames—the influence of the frame-makers will affect how robust and convincing the frame becomes. For example, as discussed below, framing women in armed groups as camp followers, bush wives, or combatants affects what disengagement options are available to them and whether or not political actors consider them to be important in peace negotiations. Similarly, government and media framing of a rebel group as an insurgency, a criminal organization, or a terrorist faction affects the policy options available to a government and to the international community.

The social movement literature identifies four key characteristics to frames: 1) flexibility and rigidity (i.e., frames vary in terms of their elasticity and the number of themes/ideas they incorporate); 2) inclusivity and exclusivity (i.e., what is the inclusion criteria for who is part of the frame); 3) variation in interpretive scope and influence (i.e., frames can be very broad, such as a “master frame”, or the scope can be quite narrow), and 4) resonance (i.e., the consistency and credibility of the frame) (Benford and Snow 2000). This last factor has received the least amount of research in social movement theory—particularly in the study of armed rebel movements—and is one of the core analytical components in this dissertation. In addition, few studies have systematically studied frame failure (Benford and Snow 2000; Heitlinger 1996).

The resonance of a frame depends on its credibility and its salience (Benford and Snow 2000). Overall credibility comes from three sources: frame consistency, empirical credibility (i.e., the evidence-base for the frame), and the credibility or reputation of the frame-makers themselves. Salience relies on how essential the beliefs, values and ideas of the frame are to the target population (Snow and Benford 1988). Salience also relies on

whether the frame resonates with the daily lives of the population, and, finally, whether the frame resonates with cultural narratives or “myths” (Benford and Snow 2000; Heitlinger 1996; Gouldner 1970). This resonance is also critical to the identity formation that is a key feature of many constructed frames. Framing not only links individuals with their groups ideologically, but it also creates and embellishes identities ranging from collaborative to conflictual (Hunt and Benford 1994). Arguably, this identity construction is a critical factor in rebel group cohesion, and in militant structures these identities are often built along both ideological and gendered lines (Enloe 2000; Goldstein 2001; King 2015).

Finally, framing is always a contested process, and frames are products of the social, economic, and political structures they are in. Benford and Snow (2000) identify three main challenges to frame construction: 1) counter-framing by opponents, bystanders, and the media; 2) frame disputes within the movement; and 3) the tension between the frame and actual events. All three of these challenges are illustrated in the Colombian case and, I argue, improve our understanding rebel group cohesion or disintegration. Framing contests that happen internally are essentially in-group “disputes over reality” (Benford and Snow 2000, 626) and, for cohesion in an armed movement, can perhaps be the most damaging. Frames, then, are critical to understanding how rebel leaders indoctrinate and educate their troops, and how those troops interpret their experiences. In addition, they are important in terms of how governments contest rebellions, especially if both sides are waging a propaganda war. Indeed, Theobald argues that applying framing to studies of civil war is the “missing link” between understanding context factors at the macro-level and individual choices to participate in rebellion (2015, 184).

Recent studies have looked at framing in the context of rebellion and terrorism (Bray, Shriver, and Adams 2019; Drissel 2015; Shesterinina 2016; Theobald 2015), have studied how authoritarian governments use framing to legitimize repression (Edel and Josua 2018), and have examined how informal discursive practices contribute to armed group maintenance and cohesion (Parkinson 2016). Shesterinina's compelling case study of the Georgian-Abkhaz war shows how social structures collectively frame threats in civil war, and she argues that decisions to fight or flee depend on how the threat is perceived (2016). However, even though she discusses the roles of norms and collective history in the framing of these threats, and examines both fighters and non-fighters (categories which she confirms follow a gendered pattern of men as fighters and women as supporters), she does not address the role of gender in framing threats or informing decisions to fight or flee, nor does she address the fact that women may perceive and interpret threats differently than men. In fact, most of this work on framing and discourse in civil war and rebellion—and most work on civil war and rebellion in general—presents itself as entirely gender-neutral without acknowledging that the data being analyzed is primarily collected from men and about men. The absence of gender considerations is a particularly striking omission in Drissel's study, who looks at the discourse of the Taliban on Twitter—a discourse which is highly gendered and relies heavily on protesting Western practices, particularly in relation to gender norms dictating women's clothing and promiscuity.

2.5 Gender Norms in War and Security Studies

Once we ask where the women are in security studies, it becomes abundantly clear that war is built on gendered narratives dependent on particular ideals of masculine and feminine (Cohn 2013a). Nonetheless, as shown above, mainstream research on war and conflict

remains overwhelmingly gender blind while often claiming gender “neutrality” (Cohn 2013a; Sjoberg 2013). But theories of war and rebellion are incomplete without a consideration of the gender norms that structure militaristic groups and the nature of war itself.

If “a discipline’s silences are often its most significant features” (Smith 1995, 14), then the lack of gender-based analysis, or even a consideration of gender, in mainstream IR is a significant feature indeed. There is ongoing debate as to why this gap exists: some feminist scholars contend that engaging in mainstream IR debates, whose foundations lie in the logic of masculinity, is counter to feminism’s political aims (Brown 1988; Zalewski 2007). Others argue that trying to make a feminist contribution to the non-feminist field of IR can distort scholars’ questions and is often a waste of time (Cohn 2011). However, numerous scholars (both feminist and not), including myself, argue that the only way to challenge and transform the mainstream is to engage with it (Carpenter 2003; Tickner 2004; Sjoberg 2013)—a difficult aim in a masculine field where misconceptions about the terms “feminism” and “gender” have been widespread (Tickner 1997). One primary source of this confusion is the ongoing conflation of “gender” with “women” (Sjoberg 2013). As noted in the preceding chapter, “gender” is defined here as the social construction of characteristics typically associated with masculinity and femininity, and the values attached to these constructions, especially in terms of power relations and inequality. Thus, studies that focus only on men cannot be considered “gender neutral”.

Sjoberg (2013) notes that much of the initial work on gender and security emphasized women’s peace movements and women as war’s “other”, focusing on women’s inherent interest and critical role in peace—often due to their role as mothers

(e.g., Brock-Utne 1989). However, Elshtain (1987) examined the complex gendered identities in (and produced by) war, specifically critiquing the persistent myths of men as “just warriors” (violent combatants) and women as “beautiful souls” (peaceful non-combatants). Enloe (1990) built on this early feminist work, arguing that ideas and values related to masculinity and femininity shape global politics, including the war system.

While gender analysis has its roots in feminist IR, scholars that do not identify as feminist have also used gender analysis, without the feminist normative objective of gender equality. Goldstein, for example, in his influential book *War and Gender* (2001), studied how militarism relies on masculinity to function, arguing that this masculinity depends on the subjugation of the feminine. Carpenter has argued that feminist work has overemphasized women as war’s main victims and has failed to consider the role of masculinity and the targeting of men and boys in war (2002, 2005). These scholars make it clear that to understand conflict, we must consider how gender norms arrange, control, and restrict political and personal choices both during and after war (Alison 2009; Cheldelin and Eliatamby 2011; Cragin and Daly 2009; Dahal 2015; Wood and Thomas 2017).

2.6 Framing Women’s Participation in Violence

Attention on women’s involvement in armed violence depends on how groups and their members are framed and on how gender norms affect the ways in which women are valued (or not) in armed conflict. In most cases of conflict, men and women have vastly unequal access to resources, power, and decision-making, in addition to expectations mandated by traditional gender roles, making their experiences both during war and in post-conflict

reconstruction very different (Carpenter 2005; Goldstein 2001; Shekhawat 2015; Theidon 2007a).

But, unless women are specifically documented as *combatants*, many of the scholars cited above examining tactics, cohesion, demobilization, and recruitment in rebel groups do not consider women at all, writing them off as camp followers, fan girls, supporters, or wives; or more commonly, they do not mention women at all, as if they do not exist (e.g., Arjona and Kalyvas 2011; de Vries and Wiegink 2011; Humphreys and Weinstein 2007; Kalyvas 2008; Muggah 2010; Oppenheim et al. 2015). Yet, when men are coordinating logistics, shipping in food and medical supplies, hiding and building weapons, or recruiting teenagers and children, scholars and law enforcement actors have shown little hesitation in treating them as “real” combatants.

In addition, a general societal reluctance still exists in accepting that women can (and do) make calculated decisions to be an active part of violent groups (Gentry and Sjoberg 2015). Placing women into categories where their participation in violence is not calculated, and certainly not political, is another way of invalidating their participation: men make the choices, and women are the pawns or the prey. As a result, there is both widespread revulsion and intense fascination with women who break this stereotype, and leaders of rebel or terrorist groups are increasingly aware of this fact (Bloom 2011; Cragin and Daly 2009; Gentry and Sjoberg 2015; Sjoberg and Gentry 2011; Speckhard 2008). It appears easier for many people to believe that women are manipulated, coerced, mentally ill, unintelligent, or otherwise defective; women who strategically *choose* violence to achieve political goals do not fit into the “mothers, monsters, or whores” narratives that the media prefer, where violent women are framed either as mothers ferociously protecting

their young, monsters who have betrayed their gender, or sexually deviant and therefore untrustworthy women (Gentry and Sjoberg 2015).

Yet when women *are* recognized as perpetrators or supporters of violence, or even if they are members of legitimate armed forces, they often face very strict narratives and highly gendered stereotypes about which they have little choice. For example, King (2015) finds that in Western militaries—where women are increasingly integrated into combat roles—men have created a “slut-bitch” binary to categorize their female peers. “Sluts” are sexually available, whereas “bitches” are not, and King argues that this binary has become so institutionalized that women can do very little to change how they are classified—whatever they do, they are defined by this symbolic and highly sexual coding. Indeed, women in rebel or terrorist groups often appear in the media as overly sexual (the “whore/slut” narrative), or due to the very nature of the group they are in, they are stigmatized by the assumption that they have been raped at some point—making them damaged goods (the “victim” narrative) (Gentry and Sjoberg 2015).

In addition, when women participate in non-state armed groups—especially if the group’s violence is aimed at civilians—they have violated two sets of norms, making it even more difficult to reintegrate back into society. Utilizing violence against civilians is one offence against society but using violence against civilians as a *woman* is another offence entirely. Thus, upon desertion from a non-state armed group or after the cessation of hostilities, some women have later been rejected by their former comrades—because they are too sexual or have been raped, or because they’ve taken on “masculine” qualities—and by their former communities because they are perpetrators of violence (Ancil Avoine and Bolívar Durán 2018; Azm 2015; Dahal 2015; Mendez 2012; Theidon 2009).

Thus, while some women may join armed groups to improve women's status in society (or simply their own personal status), they often find that entrenched gender norms determine how they are treated both within the ranks and after they leave. Examinations of women's varied participation in political violence across the globe show that we must consider women's agency and assumptions of emancipation or equality much more carefully, and that there is a dearth of empirical information on what women do in armed groups and how they themselves view these experiences (Gentry and Sjoberg 2015; Alison 2009; Cragin and Daly 2009; Shekhawat 2015; Cheldelin and Eliatamby 2011; Wood and Thomas 2017).

2.6.1 Women's Roles in Non-State Armed Groups

The cohesion of non-state armed groups has a significant impact in sustaining both terrorism and civil war (Kenny 2010; Oppenheim et al. 2015), and the gender-based cohesion in militant factions (whether state or non-state) often depends on the subjugation and domination of women, where men place women into narrowly defined and often sexual roles, and exclude women to retain their "brotherhood"—even in Western societies where women have relatively higher levels of gender equity (Enloe 2000; Goldstein 2001; King 2015). For example, King (2015) found that while a select few women who earned the respect of their male peers in Western militaries were given "honorary man" status, many of these women admitted to adopting masculine gestures, body language, haircuts and clothing in order to be accepted as "one of the guys". Thus, these women are only accepted (or *think* they will only be accepted) if they can get as close to the male stereotype as possible, as their femininity is a disruption to the group. To be accepted as equals, women cannot be women—they have to be men (King 2015). Arguably, this relegation of women

to a lower status reflects the culture in which the state or non-state armed groups function—and the frames they use to organize men and women’s behavior.

Gender norms are framed and operationalized in all social groups and serve as a form of social control and organization, and armed groups also use gendered frames to give their groups legitimacy. This is particularly evident in the ISIS attempt to establish a caliphate and their aggressive online recruitment of women from all over the world to be wives and mothers to sustain and expand the “state”, as well as the FARC claims of fighting for gender equality (Erelle 2015; FARC-EP 2017; Gutiérrez Sanín 2008; Huey and Peladeau 2016; Mietz 2016). But as Henshaw notes, “there is a tension in many rebellions between a rebel group’s need or desire to mobilize women and its interest in fully recognizing and valuing their work” (2016b, 51). This tension arguably applies to counter-insurgency policy and research as well—governments and researchers that are reluctant to recognize women as important players, or to mobilize women in counter-insurgency roles and peace negotiations, risk misunderstanding a key piece of the puzzle and may end up perpetuating norms of gender-based discrimination and violence.

As Jacques and Taylor (2013) point out in their discussion on the myths around female terrorism, much of the existing research on women’s involvement in armed violence does not empirically test the characteristics of women who join, leaving large gaps in what we understand about women in terrorist and insurgent groups. But the growing literature on women engaged in political violence cite motivations very similar to documented motivations from men, such as social and political grievances, revenge, defending their ethnic group, seeking power, money, status or adventure, and familial and romantic ties (Azm 2015; Bloom 2011; Gentry and Sjoberg 2015; Henshaw 2016a; Huey and Peladeau

2016; Londoño and Nieto 2006; Ní Aoláin, Haynes, and Cahn 2011; Nieto-Valdivieso 2017; Stenger and True 2019).

Nonetheless, women may have *different* social and political grievances than men, especially in highly patriarchal societies. For example, in some leftist militant groups women have stated that they joined at least partly to raise the status of women or to achieve gender equality (Alison 2003; Henshaw 2016a), and female terrorists on average have higher education than their male counterparts and are less likely to have prior activist or criminal connections, suggesting that their social grievances may also be different (Jacques and Taylor 2013). Insurgent groups claiming leftist ideologies, such as the FARC in Colombia and the LTTE in Sri Lanka are more likely to have women on the front lines, for tactical and political reasons; these groups are also likely more attractive to some women if they espouse egalitarian rhetoric (Gutiérrez Sanín and Carranza Franco 2017; Henshaw 2016a, 2016b; Wood and Thomas 2017). Women in leftist groups in particular may join to improve gender equity and/or protect women's rights, but in most conflict contexts women are rarely allowed to take on leadership positions, and they often face sexual assault, harassment, and other forms of abuse from within their own ranks (Anctil Avoine and Tillman 2015; McKay and Mazurana 2004; Mendez 2012; Miller 2001; Speckhard and Yayla 2016). Indeed, Betancourt (2010) observed that the female guerrillas in the FARC were expected to sleep with the men as their "revolutionary duty" and were accused of not supporting the cause if they refused. In addition, women who have non-combat roles such as messengers, cooks, porters, recruiters, and logisticians are regularly undervalued for their contribution, which negates their critical roles in group functioning (Enloe 2000; Mendez 2012).

The LTTE, for example, had high numbers of female combatants—as high as 30-40 percent—and often played on gender stereotypes to use women to get into places that men could not go; the group also had among the highest documented numbers of female suicide bombers in history (Alison 2003, 2004, 2009; Hellmann-Rajanayagam 2008; Speckhard 2008; Wang 2011). However, the female combatants had their own separate unit and were never fully integrated into the main faction (Alison 2003). The FARC had similarly high numbers of female combatants, and the group claims to be dedicated to women's rights. Yet, as this research will also show, the actual treatment of women within the ranks often does not match these egalitarian proclamations, with reports of sexual abuse and forced abortions, among other forms of gender-based violence (Ancil Avoine and Tillman 2015; Betancourt 2010; Mendez 2012; Orth 2018). These varying experiences of women in armed groups illustrate the extremely complex roles, reputations, and identities that women must navigate within armed groups and when leaving them—some women may fight against entrenched gender norms and frames, while others may actively employ them.

Other types of armed groups employ women more covertly in order to evade detection, hide weapons, and smuggle drugs, recruiting women specifically for this purpose because they are less likely to be searched by law enforcement (Alison 2004; Bloom 2011; Miller 2001; Speckhard 2008). But when their roles are hidden in this way, it contributes to a lack of recognition of their contribution and/or importance when they disengage. Militant jihadist groups such as Al-Qaeda and ISIS, for example, have used women in increasing numbers to get past checkpoints, playing on cultural and religious restrictions, as well as the fact that women's clothing allows them to hide weapons and explosives (Bloom 2011; Speckhard 2008; Speckhard and Yayla 2016). Girls and women in armed groups also

employ traditional gender frames to avoid detection, such as strapping bombs onto their bellies so that they look pregnant, hiding weapons in baby carriages, and flirting with authorities to get past check points (Speckhard 2008; Bloom 2011; Alison 2004). Interestingly, Theidon (2009) found that some male ex-combatants mentioned the important roles of wives and girlfriends behind the scenes in Colombian urban militias, explaining that women often determined where violence would take place and whether it would be lethal, implying a significant amount of power that is rarely acknowledged.⁷

Women also recruit and police other women, allowing some women to take on leadership and decision-making roles without disrupting male domination. For example, defectors from ISIS have reported that many Western women (the *muhajirat*) who join the terrorist group are specifically assigned to recruiting other women online, and some reports also indicate that Western women in Raqqa openly carry weapons and are not required to have male escorts in the way that Syrian women are (Speckhard and Yayla 2016). And, after outrage from civilians that men in ISIS-controlled territory were physically and publicly punishing women for transgressing strict clothing and conduct rules, leaders created an all-female *Al-Khannssa* Brigade to police women—creating a highly constrained leadership role for women at the bottom rung of the male-dominated hierarchy (Peresin and Cervone 2015; Speckhard and Yayla 2016).

Indeed, an increased use of female recruits does not necessarily mean that the male leaders respect the women or have any real interest in improving gender equality. Using women as suicide bombers generally avoids future empowerment issues because the women die (Peresin and Cervone 2015), though other women might feel emboldened by

⁷ If this is indeed true, women had far more strategic power in these groups than most researchers and policymakers allow for. As Theidon notes, more research is needed on this topic.

these martyrs to take on more active roles. Indeed, some studies on girls in American gangs have found that despite female members' frequent arguments that they have achieved gender equality, male gang members consistently hold negative views of female members and continue to physically abuse them (Joe and Chesney-Lind 1995; Miller 2001). In some dominant Mexican drug cartels, women are so valuable in their roles as informants that leaders have waged open war to prevent their extradition, and yet women are notoriously exploited, assaulted, and trafficked by these same groups (Lakhani 2016; Slater 2016). While women may be challenging gender norms by being involved in these violent groups, the actual behaviour of many armed groups toward women shows that traditional gender norms, in most cases, have not changed.

In addition, women who join armed movements in order to improve gender equality in their societies have historically been excluded from peace negotiations, and women in Nepal, Colombia, and Sri Lanka have expressed disappointment in being expected to return to traditional gender roles post-conflict (Alpert 2016; Azm 2015; Dahal 2015; Mendez 2012). While some literature points to women's involvement in conflict (both in state groups and in non-state groups) as an illustration of shifting gender norms, or that women in combat roles marks a significant shift toward gender equality, these gender norms appear to be far less malleable than is often described. Indeed, a comprehensive database of peace agreements between 1990-2010 found that only 16 percent of these 585 agreements contained specific references to women (including even nominal mentions); only seven of these (1 percent) included attention on specific needs of women and girls in DDR processes (Bell and O'Rourke 2010). Another study on 31 peace processes between 1992-2011 found that only 9 percent of peace negotiators were women (Castillo Diaz and Tordjman 2012).

Peace agreement references to women have increased quantitatively since the adoption of UN Security Resolution 1325 on women, peace, and security, most markedly in agreements where the UN had a third party role; qualitatively, however, those references have rarely addressed the issues raised in UNSC 1325 in any systematic way (Bell and O'Rourke 2010).

What does this exclusion mean for women exiting armed groups who have navigated dramatically different gender roles (i.e., as fighters, leaders, etc.) during conflict? In active conflict situations, women deserters may face severe social stigma in addition to threats from their former group and from state forces, and they may find themselves in a worse situation than they were in before the conflict. In post-conflict situations, many practitioners and scholars in the international community expect opportunities for change and an improved society in terms of rights and equality and gender equity. But if the role of traditional masculine and feminine ideals in perpetuating conflict are ignored or even reinforced by DDR programming, navigating these norms after disengagement from an armed group can involve risks and obstacles for women that are very different than the ones faced by men.

2.6.2 Women and DDR

While most DDR programs are associated with post-conflict environments, there have been ongoing DDR programs in certain protracted conflicts, such as Colombia and Uganda, that are used to draw combatants out of armed groups during active conflict and/or to help escapees. In a similar vein, deradicalization programs are now proliferating globally with the aim of drawing terrorists out of actively violent groups. Thus, while DDR is traditionally associated with post-conflict environments, similar programs are increasingly

used to encourage desertion and to draw insurgents and terrorists out of active conflict. While many programming principles are the same, it is important not to conflate the two.

The United Nations Inter-Agency Working Group on Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (n.d.) has listed various potential obstacles to female participation in DDR. This list includes: commanders of armed groups holding females back or hiding them; the failure of DDR programs to assess the numbers of female combatants, supporters, or dependents; the perception that a weapon is needed to enter a DDR program; lack of female access to communication sources; fear of stigma for being associated with an armed group; security concerns and/or fear of exposure or re-exposure to sexual violence or gender-based violence. Few of these issues, however, have been the focus of systematic study—aside from sexual violence against women in war, which has garnered significant attention in human rights and humanitarian circles.

Since the early 1990s, DDR interventions worldwide have shifted from a narrow focus on ex-combatants and reductions in national military spending to increased emphasis on consolidating peace and promoting reconstruction and development (Muggah 2010). Because one intended consequence of DDR programming is to restore the monopoly of violence to the state, DDR is an inherently political and politicizing process (Muggah 2010). It is also a highly gendered process, though that aspect of DDR has received less research and policy attention. Indeed, in Muggah's extensive overview of the evolution of DDR for the Small Arms Survey (2010), he does not mention gender at all and only briefly mentions women (primarily as "vulnerable persons"). Considering the significance and implications

of militarized masculinity⁸ and the gender norms that both men and women navigate both within the ranks and after demobilizing, this omission of gender is particularly revealing of the dominant DDR frame, which has historically accepted and perpetuated traditional gender norms of men as leaders and breadwinners and women as subordinate caregivers. Jennings (2009) argues that the gendered assumption in many DDR programs that men's "idleness" (i.e., their lack of employment and inability to access opportunities) leads to instability means that, for policymakers, keeping men occupied with job retraining and other reintegration programs is a much higher priority than keeping women occupied; embedded in this is the assumption that women are not security threats because they are rarely "idle" (e.g., due to childcare and household responsibilities), or if they are idle, that it leads to prostitution and not violence. That is, the traditional and highly durable DDR frame does not identify women as a "problem".

In addition, if DDR, as Muggah states, is "firmly wedded to the logic of stabilization, reconstruction and ultimately reconstituting effective states and state-civil society bargaining" (2010, 5), then the absence of women reflects how little policymakers—and the analysts on whom they rely—consider women to be key actors in these processes. Indeed, evidence from Colombia suggests that women ex-combatants disproportionately demobilize without government support compared to men (Anctil Avoine and Tillman 2015). In Sierra Leone, out of 6,787 children demobilized, only 506 were girls, largely because the demobilization process was a "cash for weapons" program and the girls did not have their own weapons; in addition, women and girls in Sierra Leone

⁸ Defined here as an exaggerated form of masculinity that prioritizes *machismo*, male aggression, bravado, and the use of organized armed violence to dominate others (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Connell 2016).

were only eligible for benefits if they registered together with their “husbands”—who were often their captors (Denov 2008). Even where women and girls have been able to register, reintegration programs are often not designed for them (Hauge 2008). In Angola, for example, the DDR program was specifically planned for male combatants only, and while Mozambique’s DDR program did include some girls and young women, the packages given to them contained men’s clothing and were not designed around their unique needs (Mann 2015; Mazurana and Carlson 2004). These DDR programs appear to have added women as an afterthought and did nothing to challenge gender norms; rather, the programming reinforced stereotypes about male and female roles and arguably made it more difficult for women to challenge these norms post-conflict.

DDR narratives about “restoring” society also imply going back to how things were—which often means reinforcing previously existing gendered hierarchies and keeping women in subordinate, traditional gender roles (Jennings 2009). Indeed, MacKenzie found that the DDR process in Sierra Leone, while initially described as an empowerment project for women, actually transmitted “implicit, gendered and disciplining messages about appropriate social behaviour” (2009, 199). In Prieto’s study on the peaceful co-existence of ex-combatants and victims in Colombia, he found that transitional justice measures such as reconciliation and truth-telling had far less impact than nonviolent contact, interpersonal relations, and “the gradual adaptation of ‘newcomers’ (IDPs or ex-combatants, in particular) to basic norms, values and codes of behaviour accepted by others in their communities” (2012, 544). But what does this “adaptation to basic norms” mean for women in terms of navigating “acceptable” gender roles? Prieto does not discuss specifically what basic norms he means, nor does he discuss gender or offer sex-

disaggregated data. But if women ex-combatants are expected to return to traditional gender roles (as they often are), it is clear where tensions could arise. For example, post-conflict Eritrea saw extremely high rates of divorce, which some researchers attributed to women not wanting to return to traditional gender roles after the war (Kingma 2001). Creating truly inclusive security means that fundamental changes are required in post-conflict societies (Swanee Hunt and Posa 2001), but some DDR programs may be preventing such changes or even dissuading women from disengaging at all.

Despite the lack of implementation, there is a general consensus at the United Nations and in many government and organizational policy documents that more women should be included in DDR programs, but comparative data on whether women who complete these programs have better reintegration outcomes is scarce. It is also unclear how (or if) improved access to DDR might influence women's decisions to disengage. In fact, some scholars posit that it is easier for women to lie about their involvement in combat (e.g., that they were coerced, that they were “only” cooks, messengers, followers, not violent, etc.) and that many women prefer to blend back into society anonymously rather than participate in formal reintegration, often going to urban centres for this reason; this pattern has been documented in Sri Lanka, Colombia and Nepal (Anctil Avoine and Tillman 2015; Azm 2015; Dahal 2015). Yet it is difficult to know if women deliberately choose this anonymity because they do not want to be recognized for their roles, or if they simply do not see any other option because DDR or other types of reintegration programming is not open to (or designed for) them.

2.7 Conclusion

The above literature indicates a multitude of variables for why insurgents might leave armed groups; in fact, the explanations presented by the rebel cohesion and desertion literature are so varied and across so many disciplines—even without considering gender norms—that it has, to date, made theory-building challenging. While some of the above research suggests that reasons for joining armed violence are tied to motivations for leaving (i.e., economically motivated recruits are more likely to desert), other research indicates that the two are independent of each other. While several key variables emerge in the literature in terms of influencing disengagement decisions—types of commitment, identity, ideology, networks, and costs/benefits of membership—it remains unclear how these variables interact and in what circumstances (and under what conditions) these variables can overcome the significant costs of desertion to inspire a risky exit. In addition, quantitative studies on desertion have frequently failed to account for the significant overlap of these variables or for potential variance in men and women's reasons to desert, and there is also almost no analysis on how gender norms and/or ideological and organizational frames may influence desertion.

What is clear, however, is that ideology matters a great deal in terms of how women are recruited (or not) and utilized in a rebel group. And the literature above indicates that the way women—and gender roles more generally—are framed affects group cohesion and troop behaviour. The way gender norms are framed within a group's ideology also appears to influence cohesion, particularly in regard to members' individual cost/benefit calculations; indeed, women's cost/benefit calculations may be considerably different than men's due to how gender norms affect their perceived alternatives. This research aims to explore that supposition.

With the global emergence of using counter-narratives to fight recruitment into terrorist groups, framing is assumed to matter—indeed, both governments and rebel groups have invested considerable effort in discursive battles to win support. Yet we actually know very little about how or if framing contests work in terms of drawing men and women out of armed groups. As a result, this research proceeds on the above supposition that framing does matter in disengagement patterns, without presuming *how* it matters, with the aim of building a theory around framing contests, gender, and rebel group cohesion. Thus, this research aims to systematically explain how and under what conditions framing contests influence individual decisions to disengage from violence.

Chapter Three: A History of (Gendered) Violence – Background to the Colombian Conflict

Colombia's history is replete with a complex network of armed groups, multiple attempts at peace negotiations, and many different forms of demobilization agreements and programs, all of which are heavily gendered. First, this chapter provides a brief overview of gender norms in Colombia and explains how these norms are reproduced and exacerbated by the armed conflict. Then the chapter discusses the history of the Colombian conflict from the 1960s onward, as well as an overview of previously attempted peace negotiations with various armed groups. The historical overview will show various different causes for deteriorating public trust in the Colombian government, including political and military scandals that have yet to be fully resolved. The chapter then provides an overview of the three primary non-state armed groups under consideration in this study, including how each group utilizes gender norms and/or exploits women's roles. Next, the chapter reviews the Colombian government's various attempts at peace negotiations and demobilization programs and provides an overview of the total numbers of demobilized combatants in Colombia. Finally, the chapter discusses the "gender ideology" controversy surrounding the 2016 peace plebiscite, and how these normative debates affect the reintegration experiences of women ex-combatants.

3.1 Gender Norms in Colombia

The overall attitude in Colombian society towards gender equality, women's rights, and patriarchal (or "traditional") gender norms must be taken into consideration when examining the demobilization and reintegration of both men and women ex-combatants. In

Colombia, there are two predominant and interrelated Latin American traditions of gender norms: *machismo*, which emphasizes the masculine warrior/protector/provider and the dominance of men (patriarchy), and *marianismo* for women, which emphasizes fertility, domesticity, subordination, and self-sacrifice (Chant and Craske 2003). Women in Colombia have, historically and currently, faced both social and political exclusion, with intersecting factors such as race, class, and geographical location exacerbating these inequalities. The country also has a history of marketing Colombian women's beauty as a key national symbol, with the accompanying *machismo* that privileges male power—particularly militant male power—and a strong tradition of Catholicism which emphasizes patriarchal gender norms where men are the breadwinners and heads of the family and women are caretakers and child bearers (Bouvier 2016; Stanfield 2013). Due to the long history of armed conflict in Colombia, militarized masculinity, which prioritizes *machismo*, male aggression, bravado, and the use of organized armed violence to dominate others (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Connell 2016), is particularly prevalent.

Colombia has made significant strides in terms of women's presence in the work force and in higher education, and the government has taken many steps—in terms of official laws—to protect women's rights, gender equality, and the LGBTI community. Indeed, progressive legislation, judicial rulings, and executive decrees all exist to support women's rights and to address gender-based violence (Bouvier 2016). However, the reality for many Colombian women—especially indigenous and Afro-descendant women in rural areas—is very different. For example, women who do hold political office and other positions of power generally all come from the same elite social circles; at the local political levels women remain vastly underrepresented (Bouvier 2016). Intimate partner violence—

including marital rape—is particularly widespread: 33.33 percent of Colombian women report having experienced physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence over their lifetime (UN Women 2020). Access to justice and health care for victims of sexual violence continues to be a challenge, especially for women and LGBTI persons in rural areas—where many Indigenous and other ethnic minority populations live (Guterres 2019a). Sexual abuse against children (most commonly female children) is also widespread: in the last twenty years, according to the Medical Examiner’s office, official rates of rape have tripled, and 83 percent of those cases were children under 15 (Alsema 2019). Considering that sexual violence is generally underreported, often due to fear of stigma or retribution, it is likely that the actual rates of sexual assault in Colombia are much higher⁹ (Salazar and Araujo Herrera 2015). Relatedly, while the country’s rate of adolescent pregnancy has been going down overall, these rates are higher among rural adolescents (22.2 percent compared to 13.8 percent), and fertility rates of male adolescents are much lower than those of female adolescents, indicating that many adolescent pregnancies are fathered by adult men (Alzate 2014).

Feminism in Colombia remains quite contentious in some circles and historically the term has been used derisively by men and women alike, with girls who want (or try) to be equal with boys having been labelled by their own peers as “crazy” or lesbian (Escobar et al. 2003; Schmidt 2007). Indeed, the complexities of Colombia’s armed conflict have reinforced gender norms of militarized masculinity and exacerbated this systemic violence against women and sexual minorities. For example, opposing armed groups have targeted

⁹ For example, in 2018, the National Victims Unit registered 97,916 victims of the armed conflict overall, and only 254 registered specifically as victims of sexual violence (Guterres 2019a).

women for being relatives of the “other” side, and right-wing paramilitaries in particular have used rape to terrorize the civilian population; in addition, forced contraception, sterilization, forced prostitution, and sexual enslavement have all been reported during the armed conflict (Guterres 2019a; Grupo de Memoria Histórica 2016). The history of Colombia’s peace negotiations also reflects an overall dominance of men and a related devaluation of women—a classic illustration of hegemonic masculinity, which emphasizes ruthless competition and legitimizes men’s dominance in society, justifying the subordination of women and other forms of masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). This male dominance continues to reproduce multiple gender inequalities throughout Colombia (see Figure 1) and is a critical element to understanding the armed conflict and the “post-conflict” lives of men and women ex-combatants.

Image source: Alex Scott-Samuel, “Patriarchy, masculinities and health inequalities” (2008).

It is also important to clarify that not all people in Colombia (or elsewhere) who advocate for women’s equality are also supportive of LGBTI rights—even though the two

are often conflated under “gender issues”. Evidence also indicates that, despite many protective laws, a large segment of the Colombian population is still fairly homophobic, and all sides—including the State—have perpetrated violence against the LGBTI community (Grupo de Memoria Histórica 2016). Indeed, as the above statistics indicate, violence against women and the LGBTI community—especially sexual violence—has been normalized in many parts of the country (Grupo de Memoria Histórica 2016). In paramilitary-held territories in particular, traditional gender roles have been enforced with violence (Bouvier 2016; Schmidt 2007), and several informants in this study said that homosexual relationships were strictly forbidden in the FARC. Indeed, the paramilitary manipulation of gender norms and violence against homosexuals and transgender persons—continued by many of their successor organizations—has made many communities complicit in the ongoing prejudice and violence against LGBTI people (Bouvier 2016). Underpinning this emphasis on patriarchal gender norms is the widespread influence of conservative Christianity, as Colombia remains a majority Catholic country with rising numbers of Pentecostal congregations.¹⁰

3.2 False Promises and Deteriorating Trust

Despite the historic peace deal signed with the FARC-EP in 2016, there are still thousands of armed actors operating throughout Colombia, including the ELN and dissidents from two formerly demobilized groups: the FARC-EP and the EPL (Popular Liberation Army) (B12, B19, Semana 2018). As recent surveys and the massive failure of FARC politicians in congressional elections demonstrate, stigma against ex-combatants continues to be high

¹⁰ For example, according to the Pew Research Center, 92 percent of Colombians say they were raised Catholic and 79 percent currently identify as Catholic (2014).

in Colombian society (Galvis et al. 2016; Semana 2018b). In addition, due to massive publicity over political corruption in recent years—including multiple members of Congress being indicted for colluding with paramilitary death squads, and thousands of extrajudicial executions of civilians by the military—overall trust in the government is low, especially among poor populations and, as this study found, among ex-combatants (Ávila 2016; Semana 2009). Compounding the problem are Mexican drug cartels that are reportedly taking advantage of the power vacuum left by the FARC’s absence by moving into prime coca-growing regions, clashing with FARC dissidents and ELN factions for control of territory (El Tiempo 2018).

Figure 2
Map of Colombia

The complex history of political conflict in Colombia dates back over one hundred years, but the recent cycle of violence began in the mid-1960s with the emergence of several leftist guerrilla movements, the most prominent being the FARC-EP, the ELN, M-19, and the EPL. These guerrilla movements rose up largely in reaction to extreme inequality, sectarian violence, and the domination of land ownership in the hands of a few wealthy families. Communists had been organizing with peasant families since the 1930s to occupy public lands or *haciendas* where landlords were absent, where they would set up militias to protect themselves from eviction (Livingstone 2004). During the onslaught of sectarian violence between Liberals and Conservatives in 1950-53, Communist and Liberal guerrilla-militias once again formed these “resistance communities” as a method of self-defence, to which Liberal peasants from other areas migrated (Livingstone 2004). Over the years, more organized guerrilla armies emerged from these resistance communities. Since that time, many different guerrilla and paramilitary organizations have formed and fought against each other and against the government, and decades of conflict have left millions of victims of forced displacement, homicide, sexual violence, threats, and kidnapping, including 340,000 refugees that have fled to neighbouring countries, and more than 7.7 million internally displaced persons (IDPs)—the largest IDP population in the world (Centro Nacional de Memoria Historia 2018; Human Rights Watch 2018; UARIV 2018; UNHCR 2018).

In the 1980s, the rise and consolidation of drug trafficking cartels and coca production contributed to the territorial presence and resources of the guerrilla groups. At this time, President Belisario Betancur initiated a peace agreement with the FARC (discussed in more detail below), and the political party “Unión Patriótica” (Patriotic Union

or UP) was then co-founded by the FARC and the country's Communist Party (Schemo 1997). However, many members of the UP were violently attacked and assassinated by narco-traffickers and paramilitaries, with many of the survivors returning to armed conflict or going into hiding. After these murders, the FARC distanced itself from politics and returned to violent tactics (Rojas 2009). This history of FARC political members being targeted and murdered would later have a significant impact on future peace agreements and trust between the government and the guerrillas. Betancur's agreement with the FARC failed, and during the next two decades, the FARC increased its membership to nearly 20,000¹¹ (Reyes le Paliscot 2015). But right-wing paramilitary forces also increased rapidly: by 2002, the paramilitaries outnumbered the guerrillas at an estimated 27,000 (Rojas 2009).

Indeed, many of the country's elites—primarily landowners and elite drug traffickers—opposed Betancur's efforts to make peace with the guerrillas and began their own formation of civilian “autodefensas” (self-defence groups) to defend themselves against guerrillas who were “taxing” land, shipping routes, and crops (Romero 2003; Simons 2004). Many ex-paramilitaries in this study still prefer the term “autodefensas”, resenting the term “paramilitary”, which some felt implied they were somehow working for the military. The rise and consolidation of these paramilitary groups marked a notable shift and further complexity in the Colombian war, with the founding of the ACCU (Autodefensas Campesinas de Córdoba y Urabá) in 1994, which merged into the AUC (Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia) in 1997. Despite admitted connections to drug trafficking and other illegal business, the AUC generally eschewed political motivations

¹¹ This number does not include significant numbers of urban militia forces nor “reserves”.

and its commanders repeatedly insisted that their original role was to fill security gaps left by the state (Mancuso 2004). The rise of these often brutal forces—known for large massacres, widespread sexual violence, and for attacking anyone suspected of supporting leftist ideals associated with the guerrillas—quickly polarized the country and further deteriorated trust in the State (Romero 2003). The Colombian police and military became increasingly involved in paramilitary activities, using these unofficial forces when they needed additional numbers, or to do things the military could not do (Human Rights Watch 2000, 2001; Rojas Bolaños and Benavides 2017). While the government was publicly “against” the vigilante violence of the paramilitaries, multiple paramilitary respondents in this study stated that they often fought alongside the Colombian army, and never against them (except by mistake). Indeed, mounting accusations of government collusion with paramilitary forces—which would become official indictments in 2006—further damaged already weak civilian trust in the State (Brodzinsky 2008; Nussio 2011).

In 1999, President Andrés Pastrana once again attempted to negotiate a peace agreement with the FARC, yet both the State and the FARC increased their military capacity during the negotiations, forcing a stalemate (Celis 2008). Alvaro Uribe won the subsequent elections with the opposite promise—to abandon any talk of compromise and toughen the fight against the FARC. The professionalization and fortification of Colombia’s military continued throughout this period with the financial support of the United States through a program called “Plan Colombia”. This American funding also helped to prove the links between drug trafficking and FARC leadership (Castrillón Riascos and Guerra Molina 2017). Despite the persistent lack of transparency, Uribe’s combination of demobilization and military pressure was still relatively effective in

reducing overall violence in the country and diminishing FARC military capacity and territorial presence—government estimates indicate that FARC troops diminished from 20,000 to about 7,000 by 2015 in a combination of combat deaths and desertions (Castrillón Riascos and Guerra Molina 2017; Reyes le Paliscot 2015). During this period, however, there were numerous claims of repeated human rights violations—committed by all sides—including forced displacement, sexual assault, kidnapping, and extrajudicial executions by the military. Indeed, the numbers of FARC deaths and desertions must be interpreted with caution, as they are derived from official numbers of the Colombian Armed Forces General Command. Given the use of “false positives” to increase the appearance of battle deaths during this same period (discussed below), it is questionable as to whether the reduction in FARC numbers was as great as the military claims. Indeed, by August 2017 the FARC had submitted a list of over 14,000 former members for demobilization benefits, and by December of that year the Office of the High Commissioner for Peace had verified approximately 11,900 members on that list (Guterres 2018a).

During the early 2000s, further information began to surface on deep ties between politicians—primarily in the Uribe administration—and paramilitaries. Uribe began talks around demobilization with AUC commanders in 2003 and the demobilization was officially completed by 2006. However, the legitimacy of this process remains contested, because many former AUC combatants have simply rearmed and regrouped under different names, with their criminal networks intact (Nussio 2011; Human Rights Watch 2005, 2010; Sontag 2016). At the same time, indictments were starting to arrive for high-ranking politicians in relation to illegal AUC activities, which was dubbed the “para-política” scandal. When Uribe’s own cousin was indicted, along with Uribe’s director of intelligence

and his foreign relations minister, many people in Colombia and abroad openly mused about Uribe himself having direct ties to the paramilitaries (Brodzinsky 2008). While in other circumstances such allegations may have further deteriorated public trust in the president, many Colombians saw Uribe's hardline policies as the key to defeating the guerrillas—this view was perhaps bolstered by Uribe's claim before the election that Colombia was facing a terrorist threat and not an armed conflict or insurgency (Semana 2005). He was re-elected in 2006 in a landslide and continued his offensive against the guerrillas (BBC 2006). Indeed, many FARC respondents in this study spoke of this “Uribe offensive” as one of heightened violence and constant attacks, with the loss of many friends and comrades. During this same period, new criminal groups were already emerging in territories previously controlled by the AUC, dubbed “BACRIMS” (“bandas criminales emergentes” or emerging criminal groups)—a term widely used by the government that strategically omits the ties of these emerging groups to demobilized AUC paramilitaries (Human Rights Watch 2010).

But the “para-política” indictments that emerged in 2006 were not the only scandal to hit the Uribe administration. In 2008 news broke that the Colombian military and national police had been involved in thousands of extrajudicial executions of civilians, in what were dubbed “falsos positivos” or false positives (Rojas Bolaños and Benavides 2017). These executions also had a highly gendered element, as they often took the form of luring young men into the countryside with promises of jobs, where the men and teenage boys would be executed and dressed in guerrilla fatigues to be presented and logged as combat deaths.¹² Officers—who were also almost entirely men—would receive bonuses,

¹² I was in Soacha in 2006 conducting MA fieldwork at the height of these executions, before this information hit the media. At the time, mothers were protesting in the main square of Soacha with photos of their sons

vacations, and promotions for these increased body counts (Rojas Bolaños and Benavides 2017; Semana 2008b, 2009). Evidence now shows that paramilitaries were also sometimes involved in these executions in that they would hand over bodies from civilian massacres to the army, and the army would then dress the bodies in camouflage fatigues and present them as combat deaths (Rojas Bolaños and Benavides 2017). This practice was not simply a few “bad apples” as military commanders originally claimed; in fact, investigations now reveal that the practice was widespread throughout the military and police up to the highest levels of command and also included the prosecutor’s office, judges and magistrates, and politicians (Rojas Bolaños and Benavides 2017). These high body counts were also presented as evidence that Uribe was “winning” the war and used to justify additional American aid (Rojas Bolaños and Benavides 2017). While the Colombian public is arguably used to a certain level of corruption in its politicians, and research shows that Colombian citizens are less likely to claim their political rights than they are to obey leaders in exchange for protection (Rojas 2009), this proof of public forces deliberately killing civilians for their own enrichment still sent shockwaves through the public.

In 2010, Juan Manuel Santos, Uribe’s former Minister of Defence who led the military offensive against the FARC, won the presidential election on the public’s expectation that he would continue the hardline direction of his predecessor against the guerrillas. Santos emerged unscathed from the “para-política” scandal, and it is unclear whether he knew of the extrajudicial executions that were happening in the military under

who had gone missing, or who had been presented as guerrillas when the families knew this was not the case. At this time, an NGO working in the area had a list of over 400 boys and young men who had been taken from Soacha and executed, but they had no idea what to do with the list, as there was no one they could trust with the information without risking being targeted themselves. Testimonies from officers now show that Soacha was indeed one of the main areas where the military pulled out boys and young men to execute for these so-called “false positives” (Rojas Bolaños and Benavides 2017).

his watch—no hard evidence emerged to confirm or deny his involvement. In August 2012 Santos announced the start of peace negotiations with the FARC. Despite extensive controversy, including Uribe’s very public and effective campaign against the accord and a failed public plebiscite on the process, the two sides put a final peace agreement in place in 2016 (Alto Comisionado para la Paz 2016; El Universal 2013), and Santos later won the Nobel Peace Prize.

As the sections below will illustrate, however, this agreement polarized the country and is an ongoing source of discontent among the Colombian public. The failure to follow through on key aspects of the accord also appears to have heightened public distrust in the government, especially among rural citizens and ex-combatants from all groups. The implementation of transitional justice processes such as truth-telling and reparations amidst ongoing armed conflict also raises myriad security concerns, especially of witnesses and victims being targeted (Taylor 2015). Research also shows that violence against women frequently goes up after a peace agreement—which some scholars have argued is due to war’s disruption of gender norms (Bouta, Bannon, and Frerks 2005). Indeed, one study reported that women in particular had far *less* safety and security when demobilized paramilitary combatants returned to their communities (Taylor 2015). In addition, civilian life in Colombia—and indeed in most conflict-affected countries—is underscored by violence, corruption, impunity, and vigilante justice, making ex-combatants feel extremely vulnerable when they relinquish their weapons (Castro and Díaz 1997). And many ex-combatants are justifiably nervous: as of March 2020, 190 FARC ex-combatants had been murdered (with the killings largely attributed to illegal armed groups), in addition to 13 disappearances and 39 attempted homicides, with 2019 being the most violent year since

the agreement was signed (Guterres 2019b, 2020). In addition, OHCHR has verified 303 killings of social leaders, with 86 of these occurring in 2019 (Guterres 2019b). This number does not account for the deserters of various armed groups that have gone through the demobilization process and were subsequently tracked down and killed by their former groups.¹³ In addition, while 92 percent of families that received substitution benefits have voluntarily eradicated their coca crops, the UN Office on Drugs and Crime reported that areas under coca cultivation in Colombia had hit an all-time high by the end of 2017 (Guterres 2018b; UNODC 2018). Clearly, Colombia's "peace" continues to face complex implementation challenges and its standing as a "post-conflict" country remains in question.

3.3 Overview of the Armed Groups Under Study

3.3.1 Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia—Ejército del Pueblo (FARC-EP)

Officially founded in 1966 and now in an ongoing demobilization and reintegration process after signing a peace agreement with the Colombian government in 2016, the FARC (or FARC-EP) is one of the oldest and most powerful guerrilla armies in the world. The precursor of this rebel group began in 1964 with 46 men and two women intent on overthrowing the government to radically restructure society (Simons 2004). As stated above, the original FARC recruits came primarily from rural areas, where poor campesino farmers were fleeing sectarian violence and forming self-defence groups. After their official formation, the FARC consolidated power and legitimacy in rural areas by offering

¹³ Deserters in this study repeatedly stated that they were being hunted down and killed by their former groups (or by dissidents) and that the government was not doing anything about it. See chapters six to eight for further discussion on this.

protection to campesino farmers in return for a tax on their coca crop earnings (Livingstone 2004). The pull of rising profits from Colombia's thriving drug trade, as well as funding shortages brought on by the end of the Cold War, drew the group into increasing involvement in coca production and cocaine trafficking to fund their rebellion (Monblatt 2004; Rabasa and Chalk 2001). In the early 2000s, in a move away from previous practices, the FARC threatened, kidnapped, and killed political candidates in order to "free" certain areas from politics (Rojas 2009). While the FARC's highest levels of command have repeatedly condemned the drug trade as one of the Colombia's greatest ills, the links of the FARC to narco-trafficking have long been established (Castrillón Riascos and Guerra Molina 2017), and several ex-FARC respondents in this study provided detailed information on how they trafficked narcotics on behalf of the group. In addition, while the FARC claimed to be fighting on behalf of Colombian campesinos—and later, also on behalf of Indigenous rights—interviews in this study suggest that treatment of civilians and relationships with Indigenous peoples varied significantly depending on the commanders. As subsequent chapters will show, misinformation, propaganda, and mistrust on all sides have been key characteristics of Colombia's conflict.

The FARC was significantly more regimented and "army-like" than the paramilitaries, with a high percentage of both campesinos and women in its forces, and its troops were younger and less educated overall when compared to the main paramilitary faction discussed below, whose recruits were often older and commonly had military experience (Gutiérrez Sanín 2008). Historically, FARC recruits were never paid directly (though there is certainly evidence of personal enrichment at higher levels of command) and most recruits received ideological training to ensure their commitment to the "cause"

(Betancourt 2010), though interviews in this study indicate that not all recruits received the same level of indoctrination—especially urban militia members. FARC members in this study and others have cited a wide range of reasons for joining the ranks, from being fascinated with weapons to following romantic partners (both men and women) to being inspired by the FARC’s fight against injustice. As will be discussed in subsequent chapters, some women also cited fear of sexual violence from the military and paramilitaries as a reason for joining. As part of the recruitment process, FARC recruits took on aliases and rarely used their real names (Betancourt 2010), which helped to emphasize collective identity over individual identities and to avoid criminal prosecution.

In terms of female membership, estimates of women in the FARC guerrilla forces, including FARC commanders’ claims, range widely from 20-50 percent, though most estimates land between 30-40 percent (Gutiérrez Sanín 2008; Human Rights Watch 2003). The FARC has long claimed a platform of gender equality in a direct and explicit challenge to Colombia’s patriarchal norms, and their website (www.farc-ep.co) links to a separate page created by the women of the FARC in 2013 (www.mujerfariana.org), which contains feminist manifestos and proclamations about women’s rights and gender equality. When considering the group’s utilization of women as a political tool, the timing of this website is important, as it went up approximately one year after the peace talks started in 2012. Indeed, despite evidence and testimony of gender-based violence, sexual exploitation of minors, and forced abortions in the ranks, the public face of the FARC was (and still is) overtly egalitarian. Rape and other forms of sexual violence were strictly forbidden in FARC regulations, and unlike their paramilitary opponents, the FARC did not use sexual violence as a strategy to control territory (Bouvier 2016). There are some reports that

FARC troops may have used sexual violence to forcibly recruit women and girls, and reports exist of opportunistic sexual violence by FARC troops, but in general sexual violence was not used by the FARC as a war strategy and forced recruitment by the FARC was rare (Bouvier 2016; Grupo de Memoria Histórica 2016). And, as subsequent chapters will demonstrate, despite these reports of sexual violence, many female ex-combatants in this study proclaimed a staunch commitment to women's rights and gratitude to the FARC for their experiences.

Thousands of male and female FARC fighters have deserted and demobilized over the last few decades as part of an individual demobilization program offered by the Colombian government (discussed further in subsequent chapters). Based on informants in this study, there are also many hundreds (if not thousands) of ex-combatants who deserted the group but did not seek any form of government assistance for reintegration; virtually no data exists for this hidden population. The DDR programs in Colombia have been criticized for not taking women's unique needs into account, and some female ex-combatants have admitted to leaving the reintegration program because it was not suited to their needs (Anctil Avoine and Tillman 2015). The FARC political party now has a Gender Committee, which co-hosted a workshop with the UN Mission in 2018 to ensure a gender-sensitive approach in reintegration projects (Guterres 2018a). The successes of these efforts are still unclear, with many female ex-combatants in this study reporting that gender equality in the guerrilla ranks was better than in Colombian society.

While an estimated 14,000 FARC-EP combatants demobilized collectively after the 2016 peace agreement, thousands have since left the demobilization and reintegration sites, known by their Spanish acronym, ETCRs (Territories for Training and

Reincorporation), and many of these departing ex-combatants are not being adequately tracked, leaving unanswered questions about the efficacy of the program and the likelihood of recidivism (Guterres 2018a; Guterres 2018b). Indeed, in late 2019, amidst dual accusations that neither side was fulfilling the peace agreement, three of the key FARC negotiators of the peace accord—Jesús Santrich, Iván Márquez¹⁴ and Hernán Darío Velázquez (aka “El Paisa”)—reappeared in a video announcing that they were returning to arms, and possibly partnering with the ELN, due to the government’s failure to implement its promises (EFE 2019).

3.3.2 Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC)

As stated above, the AUC formally organized in 1997 out of small groups of “self-defence forces” composed of landowners and elite drug cartels (Romero 2003). Paramilitary forces in Colombia are infamous for being particularly brutal, using gender-based violence against LGBTI peoples and women as a specific form of social control (Bouvier 2016). During fieldwork for this study, this reputation was readily apparent: respondents would discuss and name the FARC quite openly, but when discussions moved to the AUC, most respondents would lower their voices or use euphemisms rather than the groups’ actual name. In this study, the paramilitaries always referred to themselves as “*autodefensas*” and would sometimes cringe at the term “*paramilitares*” due to the implications of violence attached to that title. Indeed, data from the Colombian Victims’ Unit confirms that paramilitaries were responsible for more massacres and direct attacks on civilians than the

¹⁴ Márquez (aka Luciano Marín) led the FARC’s negotiating team during the four-year peace talks; he resigned his seat in the Colombian Senate and went into hiding shortly after Santrich was arrested. He later reappeared in a video saying that the FARC had made a critical error in laying down their weapons too early before establishing clear guarantees (BBC 2019).

FARC, while the FARC was more likely to use landmines, kidnappings, and to cause forced displacement (C13; Sanín 2008). The AUC was known for using sexual violence as a tactic, including specifically targeting pregnant women and killing fetuses to spread terror (Rojas 2009). The AUC used sexual violence to control territory, to punish and humiliate opposing forces by assaulting the wives and girlfriends of commanders, to stigmatize women suspected of being associated with guerrillas, and to build troop cohesion around a shared identity of violent masculinity (Grupo de Memoria Histórica 2016). Indeed, some segments of the Colombian public—particularly ones displaced by paramilitary violence—saw the guerrillas as more “humane” and less “*machista*” than the paramilitaries (Arias 2003; Schmidt 2007), and trading macabre stories of paramilitary violence was rampant during my fieldwork. One respondent in this current study told me several times about a pond of alligators near his childhood home into which the paramilitary used to throw their victims, and a popular story often recounted was that of AUC combatants playing soccer with the heads of their victims. Whether true or not, these stories all served the purpose of breeding fear in the population, often in a highly gendered manner.

While the FARC, ELN (discussed below), and the AUC all benefitted or continue to benefit from the drug trade, the paramilitaries differed from the guerrillas in that they were very open about their source of profits. One of the group’s founders, Carlos Castaño, stated in a television interview that 70 percent of the group’s revenue was from the drug trade, but in an open letter to Congress he also stated that the group was supported by national and international businesses (Reuters 2000). The group officially demobilized in 2003-2006 as part of an agreement with the Colombian government, but this “peace” process was largely criticized by human rights actors as being too lenient and not

adequately dismantling paramilitary power and networks (Human Rights Watch 2005). Many citizens, especially those displaced by paramilitary violence, felt that the government's conditional amnesty was prioritizing the ex-combatants over their victims (Arvelo 2006). Indeed, these programmatic weaknesses helped lead to the emergence of "BACRIMs", now considered a key threat to security and to the ongoing peace process (Ávila 2016). Groups that grew out of "demobilized" paramilitaries such as the Black Eagles and the *Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia* (also known as the Gulf Clan) are now some of the leading drug cartels in Colombia, with known ties to Mexican drug traffickers such as the Sinaloa cartel (El Tiempo 2018; Meléndez 2018). These groups have clashed with the ELN and dissidents from the FARC in some areas, while collaborating with them in others (Valencia and Avila 2018). In fact, many ex-paramilitaries in this study said they personally knew demobilized AUC members who had returned to armed activities and that they themselves had received multiple offers to work with these groups. The pull for these ex-combatants to return to illegal activity, whether through peer pressure or financial incentives, remains very high.

Estimates of women active in the AUC ranks are low, with several databases showing averages of less than 1 percent (Gutiérrez Sanín 2008), while others claim as high as 10 percent (Bouvier 2016). The lack of female presence can be partly attributed to the fact that the AUC was working to maintain the status quo in a highly *machista* society against a leftist (and purportedly feminist) guerrilla army that was trying to disrupt the status quo—women combatants would clearly disrupt the patriarchal structures they were trying to maintain. Indeed, several participants in this study told me that the AUC wanted men with military experience and generally avoided recruiting women and children. One

told me that he threatened to quit if the group ever put women in command positions. The AUC also enforced highly gendered codes of conduct in areas under their control, such as not allowing men to have long or dyed hair or earrings, insisting that women have male partners, and determining behaviours that differentiated “decent” and “indecent” women—with severe punishments for women who deviated (Bouvier 2016; Schmidt 2007). AUC “social cleansing” raids (i.e., executions of neighbourhood “undesirables” such as street kids, drug addicts, and prostitutes) also violently targeted homosexuals in particular (Grupo de Memoria Histórica 2016; Schmidt 2007; Simons 2004).

Nonetheless, the low estimates of female AUC members do not usually take into consideration women living in paramilitary zones and/or with male paramilitary fighters who may have assisted with storing weapons, moving drugs, contributing intelligence, and other critical support operations. In fact, some female ex-paramilitaries in this study noted that many more women were involved than official numbers indicate, such as women who were sent to join the guerrillas and become spies (B87; B99). Notably, the wives of ex-paramilitaries in the collective compounds where I conducted interviews declined to participate in this study on the grounds that they were never combatants, despite reassurances that this designation did not matter and that anyone “involved” in the group in any capacity was welcome to participate in the study.

In terms of recruitment, the AUC openly recruited members through flyers and public gatherings and paid their recruits fairly well—a key aspect of their rapid membership growth given that the country’s unemployment rates reached record highs in the late 1990s—and they were also successful at recruiting ex-guerrillas whose families had suffered due to FARC activities (Livingstone 2004). Indeed, several participants in this

study were members of multiple groups, with some switching from guerrillas to paramilitaries, or vice versa. While some paramilitaries demobilized individually, allowing an examination of deserter motivations, the majority in this study—and in general—did so through the obligatory group demobilization process in 2003-2006. But, as this demobilization process illustrates, failing to adequately address an armed group's underlying criminal networks, political ties, and financial assets can lead to the reconstitution of armed groups under different names in future years.

3.3.3 Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN)

Due to their lack of territory, size, power, and impact, much less research has been conducted on the ELN compared to the other two groups listed here. Nonetheless, they remain an active guerrilla faction that is potentially recruiting ex-combatants from other groups and is certainly clashing with dissidents of the FARC in some areas while collaborating with them in others (Méndez 2018).

The ELN formed in 1964 and was originally made up of middle class students, Catholic radicals, and leftist intellectuals inspired by Che Guevara and Catholic liberation theology (Livingstone 2004). However, after decades of eschewing the drug trade, by the late 1990s the group began taxing trafficking routes to finance its operations (Mapping Militants Project 2015). In 1998 the government attempted to negotiate a peace agreement with the ELN but controversy erupted when the government refused to set up a second demilitarized zone for the ELN similar to the one created for the FARC, and the ELN responded with a series of mass kidnappings (Livingstone 2004). In 2009, the ELN and FARC negotiated a cease-fire agreement and even allegedly cooperated in military

operations (InSight Crime 2017). Colombia has also accused Venezuela of harbouring ELN combatants and funding their operations (Semana 2018a), and several ex-combatants from the ELN in this study admitted that they had gone back and forth between the two countries.

In 2016 the government and the ELN announced that they would begin peace negotiations again (Human Rights Watch 2017), but at the time of writing this process had been called off due to increasing violence and kidnappings on behalf of the ELN. In fact, in February 2018, the ELN reportedly signed an agreement with FARC dissidents to fight the Colombian armed forces in the department of Arauca in order to maintain joint control of the Venezuelan border in that area (Méndez 2018). In early 2019, the ELN shocked Colombians by detonating a car bomb at a police academy in Bogotá, killing 21 people (mostly police cadets) and injuring dozens more—the first such attack in many years (El Tiempo 2019a). The ELN claimed that the bombing was in retaliation for the government breaking the cease fire and bombing one of their camps on December 25, 2018, and that the police academy was a military institution and thus a legitimate target in the war (ELN 2019). The government labelled the bombing a terrorist attack based on the fact that most of the victims were civilian cadets in training and were not yet official police officers (El Tiempo 2019a). Up until this point, the ELN had been in tumultuous peace negotiations with the government, but the bombing renewed governmental condemnation of the group and destroyed any hope that the Colombian public might have had in another peace accord in the near future.

While the ELN has been less overtly feminist compared to the FARC in terms of public declarations and propaganda, some estimates put the group at one quarter to one

third women (Bouvier 2016), though these estimates are difficult to verify. The group's official website has statements around a "gender focus", one of which ties capitalism to *machismo* and discusses the importance of creating a new Colombia where divisive identities such as man, woman, black, white, or Indigenous do not matter (ELN 2016). This same publication discusses how it is not only women's responsibilities to fight for gender equality, while admitting that very few women are commanders and some guerrilla roles are more "suitable" for women (ELN 2016). Indeed, many ex-ELN participants in this study repeatedly stated that everyone was treated "equally" in terms of roles and responsibilities, regardless of gender. However, as subsequent chapters will show, the guerrilla concept of what constitutes gender equality is often utilitarian and can be quite limited in scope.

3.4 Colombia's Repeated Attempts at Peace

Many different administrations in Colombia have attempted peace with various armed groups, with consistent prioritization of disarmament and demobilization. This focus has often been at the expense of effective and sustainable reintegration, which has left many ex-combatants and civilians disillusioned, resentful, and at risk. For example, of the total 52,315 combatants that have entered the government's formal reintegration program (i.e., demobilized AUC members and guerrilla deserters), 3,209 (6 percent) have since been murdered, 5,778 (11 percent) have been registered as "at risk" (i.e., credible threats against them) and 6,833 (13 percent) are known to have returned to an armed group (ARN 2019b).¹⁵ That is a total 30 percent of registered ex-combatants who have either been

¹⁵ These figures are from the latest ARN update on 30 November 2019.

murdered, are living in situations of serious threat, or have returned to armed activity—and these statistics do not, of course, include the deaths and recidivism that the government does not know about. In fact, independent research has estimated recidivism rates closer to 24 percent (FIP 2014).

In addition, receiving communities have historically not been adequately consulted before ex-combatants return, contributing to distrust and insecurity in these areas, with some civilians resentful of the benefits that ex-combatants receive (Mendez 2012; Taylor 2015). Many ex-combatants in this study, particularly ex-paramilitaries, said that once an employer found out they were ex-combatants, they would immediately lose their jobs—for some, insecurity and the need to hide their past continued to follow them over a decade after disarming. Also, as the demobilization and reintegration programs are largely funded by taxpayer dollars, they remain fairly controversial among the Colombian public, fuelling public resentment towards ex-combatants and overall polarization in Colombian society (Galvis et al. 2016; C07). There is also tension between the FARC's demands for collective reintegration projects that retain the group's ideology and political cohesion, and the government's preference for (and experience with) individual reintegration (Felbab-Brown 2018; C01). These tensions began with the Santos administration and are likely to increase with President Duque's intentions to revise the peace accord.

Since 2001, the government reports that 61,637 combatants (13 percent women) have officially demobilized and that 52,315 of these combatants (14 percent women) have entered a government reintegration program—not including the collectively demobilized FARC (25 percent women) (ARN 2019b; Colombian Ministry of Defence 2017). However, the government's history of guerrilla and paramilitary demobilizations actually goes back

to 1989, when the guerrilla group M-19 became a legal party after reaching a peace agreement with the government (BBC 2018a). Many M-19 guerrillas disagreed with this process and abandoned the demobilization, with some joining the FARC or the dissident group led by M-19 commander Jaime Bateman Cayón (B01). In this same period, Liberal and UP presidential candidates were murdered, along with thousands of other UP members, allegedly on the command of drug cartels (BBC 2018a).

In the early 1990s, the government embarked on peace talks with three guerrilla groups: the FARC, and ELN, and the EPL, who were operating jointly under an umbrella organization called the Simon Bolivar Guerrilla Coordinator (Kline 2002). The EPL officially signed a peace agreement with the government in 1991 along with several smaller guerrilla groups; however, many of its members remain active and as recently as 2014 the group's leader, "Megateo", declared his intention to enter into peace talks (Escobar 2014).

With this background of failed peace talks, Ernesto Samper came to office in 1994 with declarations that he would pursue peace with the rebels; however, Samper accomplished little in this regard as his presidency was plagued by Pastrana's accusation that Samper had received donations from the Cali cartel (Simons 2004). During Samper's administration, the FARC took advantage of internal political unrest and mounted major offensives against the military that allowed the group to consolidate territory and dramatically increase troop size; by 1998 the FARC had reached the peak of its power and the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency warned that the group could defeat the Colombian military within five years (Leech 2011).

In that same year, Andres Pastrana was elected and began discussions with the FARC, where he granted the group a large safe haven of territory that was off-limits to the

military (BBC 2018a; Wilson 2001). But after three years of stop and go peace talks, where Pastrana repeatedly extended the safe haven, the president ordered the FARC out of the demilitarized zone after they hijacked a plane. In response, the FARC stepped up attacks and the government subsequently declared a war zone in the south of the country, closing any further discussion of peace at that time (BBC 2018a). In the middle of these conflicts, U.S. President Bill Clinton announced “Plan Colombia”: nearly USD\$1 billion in aid primarily focused on the military and earmarked specifically to fight drug-trafficking (BBC 2018a; Castrillón Riascos and Guerra Molina 2017).

Alvaro Uribe was then elected in 2002 on promises to crack down on the rebels. However, in 2003 Uribe began peace negotiations with the right-wing AUC paramilitaries, and in 2005 the government began exploratory peace talks with the ELN in Cuba (BBC 2018a). As part of these negotiations, the government introduced the highly controversial Law 975, known as the “Justice and Peace Law”, which some critics later quipped should have been called the “Impunity for Mass Murderers, Terrorists, and Major Cocaine Traffickers Law” (New York Times 2005). This law established sentences of five to eight years in prison for ex-combatants in exchange for their commitment to the truth and reparation of the victims; while it was originally implemented for AUC commanders, it was later extended to include demobilized guerrillas as well (Art. 29) (Congreso de la Republica de Colombia 2005). Thus, some former AUC commanders have since completed their sentences for serious crimes—including civilian massacres and child recruitment—and are now free (Bluradio 2016). During this time the government also created an agency to assist in the reintegration of ex-combatants, now called the Agency for Reincorporation

and Normalization (ARN), which will be further discussed in subsequent chapters.¹⁶ Although Uribe hailed the AUC demobilization as a success, in 2006 the “para-política” investigation began on high-ranking politicians, and in late 2006, detained paramilitary leaders announced that they would pull out of peace talks (Roa 2007). In addition, many human rights groups and analysts were skeptical of the AUC demobilization plan as it failed to dismantle paramilitary financial resources, political ties, and criminal networks (Human Rights Watch 2005, 2010; Nussio 2011; Sontag 2016).

In 2007, Uribe released dozens of FARC prisoners in the hopes that the FARC would reciprocate by releasing hostages. Instead, the rebels demanded a new demilitarized zone, and later that year, Venezuelan leader Hugo Chavez stepped in as a mediator, eventually able to secure the release of two high profile political hostages (BBC 2018a). In 2009, Uribe finally offered peace talks to the FARC in exchange for a cease fire and the cessation of all criminal activities. But at the end of this same year, the FARC and ELN declared that they would stop fighting each other and would focus only on fighting the armed forces (BBC 2018a). Indeed, only a few months after Juan Manuel Santos succeeded Uribe in 2010, the FARC increased violent attacks. In 2011, Uribe’s close ally and former chief of intelligence, Jorge Noguera, was sentenced to 25 years in prison for collaborating with paramilitary death squads (BBC 2018a; Semana 2008a). This, along with multiple subsequent convictions of high-ranking politicians also linked to the paramilitaries, seriously damaged the government’s credibility in terms of potential peace deals with the guerrillas. Nonetheless, only one year later, the FARC announced a ceasefire as peace talks with the Santos administration began in Cuba. After four years of negotiations and a public

¹⁶ The current office under this name was officially created in 2011; however, its predecessor agencies date back to 2003-2005.

referendum that failed by a very close margin (50.21 percent voted no, but only 37.4 percent of eligible voters cast a ballot), the FARC and the Colombian government finally signed a revised peace deal, and in June 2017 the FARC formally ended its existence as an armed group after more than fifty years of insurgency (BBC 2018a; El Tiempo 2016). But, as subsequent chapters in this dissertation will show, the reintegration aspect of this latest demobilization process continues to face significant challenges that threaten a lasting peace.

3.5 The Battle over “Gender Ideology” in the 2016 Peace Plebiscite

In the peace negotiations between the Colombian government with various different armed groups between 1990-1994, only one woman was a signatory—including among all the witnesses, guarantors, and negotiators (Londoño and Nieto 2006). Unsurprisingly, there were no women present in the negotiations with the AUC (Bouvier 2016). In the four sets of peace negotiations with the FARC, the small number of women that were present on both sides used their position to make issues of gender inequality more visible and push for more female representation (Bouvier 2016). But it would be a mistake to assume that the significant gender focus in the 2016 peace agreement was due to the FARC’s leftist ideology. At the beginning of negotiations in 2012, despite initial promises from the guerrillas and the government to include women in the process, there were no women involved on either side and there was no mention of gender or women’s participation in the framework agreement (Salvesen and Nylander 2017). During the next round of talks in Cuba, only one negotiator was a woman: Tanja Nimeijer, a Dutch national who joined the FARC in 2002 and has been a leading figurehead for the group. Arguably, Nimeijer’s

position at the table—as a European FARC “celebrity”—was not representative of the average Colombian woman guerrilla.

Nevertheless, from the inception of the agreement, women’s groups in Colombia had been insisting on their inclusion, and in 2013 these groups organized a summit on women and peace, which was the beginning of sustained pressure from civil society and international bodies to include women’s rights and a gender focus in the agreement (Salvesen and Nylander 2017). Throughout the negotiations, various coalitions of civil society organizations attempted to include the concerns of a wide range of people in the peace accord, emphasizing the fact that the conflict affected people differentially depending on gender, age, race, social class, and sexual orientation, among other factors (Bouvier 2016; Grupo de Memoria Histórica 2016). For example, men and boys make up the majority of both combatants and non-combatants killed in the internal conflict and are much more likely to be kidnapped, tortured, arbitrarily detained, and/or forcibly recruited by various armed actors (Bouvier 2016). Women and girls, on the other hand, are more likely to suffer from sexual violence, forced displacement, forced prostitution, forced abortions, and enslavement—in addition to relying on health services more than men do (Bouvier 2016). As their sons, husbands, and other male family members are killed or wounded, women are also more likely to be caregivers of those disabled by war and to be single heads of households—often facing extreme poverty, displacement, gender-based violence, and loss of family members all at the same time (Arias 2003; Bouvier 2016).

The concerted effort from Colombian women’s civil society groups around these issues lobbied international allies such as UN-Women, OXFAM, Norway and Spain, and pushed the Colombian government to appoint two women negotiators and to increase focus

on women's human rights; by 2015, the FARC delegation in Havana was approximately 40 percent women—a much more accurate representation of the gender composition of the FARC itself (Bouvier 2016). Yet despite this apparent success, the lead negotiating teams remained overwhelmingly male, and the ex-FARC commanders now holding political positions or other positions of influence are also predominantly male. The FARC Secretariat is also entirely male and still seems to hold a significant amount of control over its members, especially over those that remain in the collective reincorporation zones.

Despite increasingly strong laws to protect minorities, a large segment of the Colombian Christian population (Catholic or otherwise) has made it very clear that it does not agree with government initiatives that aim to protect the LGBTI community. One event in particular influenced the public vote on the FARC peace accord. In 2015, in response to the suicide of a homosexual student, the Constitutional Court ruled that Colombia's schools had to implement measures to strengthen students' human, sexual, and reproductive rights (2015). When the Ministry of Education released a manual on gender diversity and sexual orientation, aiming to respond to this ruling and reduce discrimination in schools, massive crowds—roused primarily by Pentecostal and Catholic leaders—took to the streets in protest (Beltrán and Creely 2018). Protest leaders accused the Minister of Education, an open lesbian, of trying to dissolve families and corrupt children (Beltrán and Creely 2018). These leaders adopted the term “gender ideology”, a derisive term which has been used increasingly by conservative religious leaders to stir up a form of moral panic that links gender equality with social deterioration (Beltrán and Creely 2018; Viveros Vigoya and Rondón Rodríguez 2017). Indeed, as Beltrán and Creely note, using the words “gender” and “ideology” together taints all feminist and queer scholarship with the insinuation of

falsehood and/or indoctrination, allowing its users to depreciate gender studies (2018). It is an effective and convincing frame for a large portion of the population. In fact, the protests and discourse around this gender ideology framing were so effective that the government eventually pulled the manual from the curriculum (de la Calle 2016).

In that same year, the Constitutional Court had legalized same-sex marriage (Sentence SU 214) despite the views of religious conservatives, and amidst all of this political controversy, the final peace agreement arrived with a substantial section on gender, women's rights, and LGBTI rights. The stated purpose of the gender focus in the agreement was to recognize the disproportionate effect the conflict had on women, especially in terms of sexual violence, and on the LGBTI community (Beltrán and Creely 2018; de la Calle 2016). This gender focus in terms of reparations was also supposed to recognize and address the fact that women were less likely to hold land titles and to address the historical political exclusion of both women and people in the LGBTI community (Beltrán and Creely 2018; de la Calle 2016). But the leaders who had rallied against the Ministry of Education also rallied against the peace accord, quickly labelling the agreement's language of LGBTI rights as "gender ideology" that would directly threaten traditional families and put Colombia at risk of "homosexual colonization", despite the fact that the agreement did not discuss same-sex marriage at all (Beltrán and Creely 2018; de la Calle 2016). Many Pentecostal leaders argued that the LGBTI community was using the peace agreement as a political platform to advance their interests (Beltrán and Creely 2018). Notably, some Protestant denominations did support the "Yes" campaign and disagreed with the mischaracterization of the gender focus, but these leaders had far fewer followers (Beltrán and Creely 2018). In the end, the FARC negotiators and government representatives met

with religious leaders and agreed to revise the section on gender in order to finalize the accord (El Espectador 2016). The final text of the agreement explicitly mentions the traditional family as the “fundamental nucleus of society” (Alto Comisionado para la Paz 2016). Also, many references to gender were removed; for example, in terms of political participation, instead of “gender equity” the accord now refers to the “equitable participation between men and women”, and similar changes are found in the land restitution section (Salvesen and Nylander 2017).

Another issue influencing this “gender discord” was that some Colombians felt that any discussion of gender was linked to international discourses and politics, as the UN had played a role in the earlier gender manual for schools (Beltrán and Creely 2018). This feeling was not unfounded: the creation of a gender sub-commission in 2014 during the peace negotiations was largely due to pressure from civil society, UN bodies, and guarantor countries such as Norway, which had identified gender as one of its three key priorities from the outset of the negotiations (Salvesen and Nylander 2017). When the gender sub-commission was formed, Cuba and Norway each provided a gender expert and Norway also supplied an international gender expert (Salvesen and Nylander 2017). While Colombians have a moderate level of trust in international human rights organizations, their view of the UN is slightly less positive (Golden et al. 2014), and this assumption of foreign influence allowed some religious leaders to play into anti-colonial anxieties by claiming that the gender focus in the peace accord was something foreign that did not reflect Colombian values (Beltrán and Creely 2018). This angle, however, obscures the fact that while Norway and other countries and international organizations certainly did play a role, the gender focus largely arose out of a concerted grassroots effort of Colombian

women and LGBTI groups to be included in the process (Salvesen and Nylander 2017; Beltrán and Creely 2018).

Another key sticking point in the public referendum was the concept and mechanisms of transitional justice, and the Special Jurisdiction for the Peace (JEP) was perhaps the most confusing and controversial. The JEP was the judicial entity created to administer the restorative justice clauses in the agreement; however, it quickly became central to the referendum debate. The JEP was highly technical and difficult to explain, and many Colombians assumed it would create a general amnesty for guerrilla crimes considered especially serious, such as child recruitment and sexual exploitation (Schmidt and Tovar, n.d.). It was also unclear with the creation of the JEP if it would apply to other actors beyond ex-FARC combatants in the collective demobilization (indeed, guerrilla deserters in this study were often very unclear on these details). Finally, some critics argued that Colombia had sufficient justice mechanisms to handle the peace agreement and did not need a special new judiciary (Schmidt and Tovar, n.d.).

These controversies, and particularly the fury around gender discourse and stigmatization against ex-combatants, profoundly affected the environment into which ex-combatants—and especially women ex-combatants—are trying to reintegrate. Women ex-guerrillas are demobilizing into a highly conservative and patriarchal environment from a group in which many of them had agency, respect, and some level of equality—even if their true equality with men in the groups remains debatable. In addition, there is a broadly shared perception in Colombia (and beyond) that women in the guerrilla and paramilitary groups were and are sexually abused. This stigma—whether true or not—follows demobilized women when they leave and can have particularly profound effects in rural,

conservative communities (Mendez 2012). Nonetheless, some Colombian women ex-combatants have expressed that they enjoyed their militancy and do not regret their actions (Londoño and Nieto 2006; Nieto-Valdivieso 2017), and many female ex-combatants in this study expressed similar sentiments and vehemently denied that there was ever sexual abuse in the FARC ranks. Many women ex-combatants have, however, voiced concerns that they will be expected to return to traditional gender roles once they demobilize (Alpert 2016; Anctil Avoine and Tillman 2015; Dietrich 2017; Mendez 2012), and as subsequent chapters show, many female respondents in this study voiced the same concerns.

3.6 Conclusion

Any peace process is fraught with challenges—in that regard Colombia is not unique. But this agreement marked the end of over fifty years of insurgency, brought with it a Nobel Peace Prize for President Santos, and perhaps raised national and international hopes a bit too high. Now some rural Colombians in former FARC strongholds are facing more violence than they were before the peace deal (Daniels 2019), and most ex-combatants in this study said they continue to live in constant fear, facing both physical and economic insecurity. In addition, vast swathes of the population are suffering from high levels of trauma and inadequate access to resources in order to deal with what they have done, experienced, or witnessed. In many cases, the lines between victim and perpetrator are blurred, with most ex-combatants in this study also being a victim of the conflict or of abuse, neglect, or poverty in their childhood.

This chapter also illustrates how the historical and current processes of Colombia's peace negotiations and demobilization programs are both highly complex and highly gendered. While the Colombian government has lauded its successes in demobilization and

wants to share those lessons with the world,¹⁷ the rates of recidivism, high reintegration dropout rates, alongside government corruption, falsified statistics, and ongoing criminal activity of various armed groups, make those successes much less clear. Stigmatization against ex-combatants remains high in Colombian society, and a large segment of the population still ascribes to patriarchal values that a women's place is in the home—an extremely difficult climate for many women ex-combatants to “reintegrate” into. In addition, as subsequent chapters will illustrate, the high rates of informal employment in Colombia and the lack of economic projects for FARC ex-combatants have put the entire reintegration aspect of the peace process into jeopardy.

While this overview paints a somewhat bleak picture of Colombia's “post-conflict” situation, many respondents in this study (though not all) still argued that life is better than it was during the war, and many ex-combatants from the FARC said that their decades-long struggle had been worth it. But the situation on the ground continues to change rapidly and is rife with tension, especially with the massive influx of Venezuelan refugees over the last year (The Guardian 2018). In fact, several ex-combatants in the ETCRs, still waiting for their promised government benefits, expressed resentment that Venezuelan refugees had received expedited work permits and their children had been fast-tracked into school, when as Colombians they still did not have the work promised to them in 2016, nor good quality schools or daycares for their children. In addition, while some aspects of Colombian life may be better than they were before, the drug trade is still thriving and social leaders remain at risk, with more and more small groups clashing with each other in prime coca-growing regions (Daniels 2019). The country is not yet in a post-conflict era, and if the

¹⁷ This goal was expressed to me multiple times by government officials during this fieldwork.

government does not quickly address ex-combatants' growing unrest and resentment, it may never get there.

Chapter Four: Methodology

Because disengagement from armed violence (and role-exit more generally) crosses multiple disciplines, I began this research by exploring several categories of relevant literature discussed in Chapter Two: the political science and international relations (IR) literature on gender in armed conflict, women in war, rebel group cohesion, and disengagement/desertion. Because the political science literature on disengagement from violence is still emerging, I also examined criminology literature on men and women leaving crime and armed violence, as well as social movement/social psychology literature on role-exit and in-groups/out-groups, in addition to literature on people who join and leave social movements. Through this combination of disciplines, I identified several common themes and research questions, outlined below.

First, this chapter discusses the research question, the overall research design, case selection, and tentative hypotheses. Then, I will describe the various settings where interviews took place and the challenges in accessing these sites. I then discuss my own positionality as a foreign, woman researcher, analyzing how my identity potentially affected my data collection and ability to build trust. Finally, I describe data collection and analysis procedures, including confidentiality protocols and the challenges in combining deductive and inductive coding approaches.

4.1 Research Questions

Based on the gaps in the literature identified in Chapter Two, the primary research question, and the two related sub-questions, are as follows:

1. What are the most important variables that drive decisions to desert a non-state armed group?

- 1.1 How and why do gender norms affect decisions to desert an armed group or stay within it?
- 1.2 How do framing contests amidst armed conflict affect desertion decisions and reintegration experiences?

4.2 Theoretical Framework

As stated in the literature review, this project is structured around framing theory to study how organizations and their members understand, organize, and convey information in order to encourage group cohesion. Framing processes are now widely regarded as a central component in our understanding of social movements, alongside resource mobilization and political processes, and as such have gained traction in sociology in particular (Benford and Snow 2000). Specifically, studying frames helps us to understand the “generation, diffusion, and functionality of mobilizing and countermobilizing ideas and meaning” (Benford and Snow 2000, 610). The concept of framing and its use in organizing experiences and knowledge originated with Goffman (1974), and framing is an active process implying agency and contention in the construction of reality (Benford and Snow 2000). These frames are constructed as members of a social movement negotiate a shared definition of whatever problem they are seeking to address, which Snow and Benford (1988) refer to as diagnostic framing (identifying the problem), prognostic framing (identifying potential solutions), and motivational framing (moving people into action). Social movement theory has identified “injustice frames” as particularly prolific in building movements and gaining adherents, where protagonists and antagonists are constructed and often delineated into “good” and “evil” (Benford and Snow 2000; Gamson 1995). But the resonance of any frame depends on consistency, empirical credibility, and the credibility

of the frame-makers (Benford and Snow 2000), and these components form the core of the analysis presented here. What happens in rebellions when the consistency and credibility of the frame breaks down? What happens if various counter-frames becomes more credible, or when recruits identify credibility issues in the frame or with the frame-makers? And how do gender norms influence both the construction of the frames and the interpretation of them? Exploring the effects of framing contests and challenges to frame credibility among the various armed groups in Colombia—and how they may or may not affect troop cohesion—is the foundation for this study.

Although framing theory structures this dissertation, I have grounded my inquiry in gender-based analysis (as discussed in Chapter Two), as a quickly growing scholarship suggests that gendered norms and identities are key issues in men and women's demobilization and reintegration, and in the restructuring of post-conflict societies, yet these issues have not been systematically explored in studies of desertion (Dietrich 2017; MacKenzie 2009a; Mendez 2012; Shekhawat 2015; Stapleton and Wilson 2013; Theidon 2009; Tarnaala 2018). Indeed, gender norms themselves are a robust and durable frame that also inform other frames. Using a constructivist lens to argue that identity and resulting levels of discrimination are socially and historically constructed, this project studies gender as a social construction of—and values attached to—gender norms of masculinity and femininity, particularly in relation to power structures and socio-economic inequality.

Thus, a gender-based analysis goes beyond simple differences between men and women and looks at how these constructed norms interact with other factors, and how they affect power structures and organize personal, political, and intellectual life and choices (Cohn 2013a; Crenshaw 1989; Dietrich 2017; Enloe 2000; Mendez 2012). Framing in

social movements often employs social norms, narratives and even myths—and gender norms are frequently employed in this frame construction, whether it is deliberate or not. In addition, gendered identities and norms often influence—and are influenced by—other forms of identity and oppression; this research thus takes an intersectional approach in its frame analysis to consider interacting variables such as race, social class, geography, religion, and age (Crenshaw 1989).

These two theoretical frameworks combined suggest that frame construction and the gendered norms operationalized within these frames may affect men and women's disengagement decisions differently, specifically by limiting their alternatives and affecting their cost-benefit calculations in gender-specific ways.

4.3 Research Design

Due to the lack of adequate theorizing around gender norms in disengagement and desertion, rigorous theory testing in this topic is not yet feasible. However, as noted above, applying framing theory and gender-based analysis does suggest that framing contests and their outcomes may affect decisions to desert by limiting alternatives. Thus, this work aims to be a theory-generating “plausibility probe” case study—a type of case study meant to explore generally untested theories and hypotheses and “to determine whether more intensive and laborious testing is warranted” (George and Bennett 2005, 75; Gräbner and Eisenhardt 2007). Colombia was chosen as an ideal case in which to generate and explore theories around framing and gender norms in desertion decisions, as tens of thousands of men and women have disengaged from various non-state armed groups or demobilized collectively during Colombia's long history of conflict. As a result, the ability to compare

men and women's disengagement processes, and to compare differences between deserters and non-deserters, are both highly feasible in the Colombian case. While case studies within a single country can be limited in terms of generalizability, the range of armed actors in Colombia and the varied demobilization programs, as well as the high number of female combatants, offer rich narratives from which to generate theories that can then be tested in other cases.

The main dependent variable to be explained in this case is the decision to desert. That is, what variables explain why some combatants desert their armed groups while others remain loyal? As noted in the literature review, an inability to study non-deserters as a comparison has long been a limiting factor in studies on desertion from armed groups. The literature provides a list of reasons for why people might leave, but why, especially in the face of in-group violence and severe government pressures, do other people stay? In Colombia it is possible to study both groups and thus overcome this particular research limitation. The study compares differences between men and women's motivations to desert their groups and their exit strategies, as well as differences in desertion patterns between left-wing and right-wing groups (see Table 1).

Table 1
Categories of Respondents

Deserters: individual demobilization	Loyalists: collective demobilization	Other
Women/men from FARC	Women/men from FARC	Friends/family members of deserters and non-deserters
Women/men from AUC	Women/men from AUC	Expert witnesses/key informants
Women/men from ELN	--	--

Coding was based on the five variables of interest generated from the literature review (see Chapter Two), but given the lack of understanding on how these variables interact, and the absence of gender-based analysis in relation to these variables, this research did not attempt to “test” the effect of independent variables on a dependent variable. Indeed, the five “variables” below each contain many interacting variables within them; testing the effect of “identity” on desertion for example, would arguably be a futile endeavour without specifying the types of identity and examining where that identity came from, who constructed it, and why. Rather, these variables were considered as a launch point for coding and analysis. Codes were also added inductively as patterns emerged, to ensure that variables based on men’s desertion were not obscuring factors specific to women or power dynamics related to gender norms. As a result, this project is a blend of both inductive and deductive reasoning. A further description of the coding process is found below.

Building on the research cited in the preceding literature review, five key variables affecting desertion were identified, understood as follows:

- *Type of commitment*:¹⁸ Three forms of commitment are of particular interest here: affective commitment (attachment to leaders or specific people), normative commitment (attachment to goals or ideology), and continuance commitment (attachment to material or economic aspects of membership).¹⁹ Note that this last form of commitment is distinct from the cost/benefits of membership below, in that a member's cost/benefit calculation often goes beyond only material aspects.
- *Ideology*: The publicly stated belief system of the armed group—which may or may not match the actual practices of the group. This is measured by coding type of ideology, level of professed and demonstrated commitment to this ideology, and a member's overall understanding of the group's goals.
- *Identity*: An ex-combatant's personal identity as he or she defines it, including gender, race, age, rank, marital status, parenthood, etc. This is measured not only by demographics but also by coding statements such as “I am a fighter” or “I have always been a rebel” or “we are insurgent feminists”.
- *Networks*: Personal and/or professional relationships that the respondent identifies as important. This is measured by coding the person's inside and/or outside relationships and the people identified as influential in his/her life.
- *Costs/Benefits of Membership (and Non-Membership)*: How respondents calculate the costs/benefits of membership and the costs/benefits of desertion. This is measured by coding both the actual and perceived costs of desertion or collective demobilization (i.e., loss of status, loss of weapons, insecurity due to being

¹⁸ This is not necessarily the same as why someone joined the group (e.g., someone could join for money but then stay because of a romantic relationship or because of fear).

¹⁹ See Klandermans (1997) for a detailed discussion on these three types of commitment.

targeted by former group, stigmatization, etc.) as well as the real and perceived benefits (i.e., access to monthly allowance, educational programs, being able to have children, etc.)

In addition to these five variables, this research examines a sixth: official government publicity about the demobilization program and amnesty options. This is measured by asking whether respondents knew about the individual demobilization program, how they learned about it, what they thought about it, and whether it influenced their decisions to stay with or leave the group. Given the Colombian government's massive investment in campaigns that offer amnesty and attempt to convince combatants to demobilize, and the overall lack of evaluations on such "counter-narrative" (framing) programs, it is necessary to assess how these programs affect desertion decisions, if at all.

Gender was not coded as a single variable, which would obscure a great deal of complexity involved in the construction and contestation of gender norms, and in the interaction of these norms with other variables such as ideology and identity. Rather, codes related to gender were applied in multiple sub-nodes, such as gender-based violence, insurgent feminism, militarized masculinity, pregnancy/birth control, motherhood, and women's rights.

Returning briefly to Rusbult's model (Rusbult, Agnew, and Arriaga 2012) from the literature review (i.e., $\text{Commitment} = \text{Satisfaction} - \text{Alternatives} + \text{Investments}$), it is important to acknowledge that in situations of armed conflict, women have vastly different access to resources than men do, which will affect both investments and alternatives. Yet scholars who regularly use this model to study desertion have not explored gender or adapted the model to account for gender differences, even though the model certainly

allows for this. In addition, while identity is clearly an important aspect of group commitment, it is not readily apparent where identity fits into the Rusbult model, and in what form(s). Nonetheless, due to gender norms and social expectations in Colombia, it is likely that women combatants may have fewer alternatives and higher investments in armed group membership (due to the specific risks involved in challenging accepted gender norms), which will affect their satisfaction in the armed group—and thus their commitment—in different ways than men.

To explore these variables and suppositions, this project used qualitative, in-depth life history interviews in Spanish with men and women ex-combatants from the FARC, the ELN, and the AUC.²⁰ As this is a vulnerable, hard-to-reach population (especially in the case of deserters, who often wish to remain hidden), in-depth, face-to-face interviews provide more reliable research data than broad, impersonal questionnaires conducted by multiple researchers that may obscure important nuances and, due to power imbalances and male gatekeepers, may not reach women in certain contexts. In addition, as noted in the literature review, quantitative analysis on desertion and disengagement has often obscured the interaction of key variables by only coding one reason for exit, when the reality of leaving violence is far more complex and usually involves a process of several interacting factors.

For the interviews, participants were located primarily through referral chain (“snowball”) sampling. The first two points of contact with ex-combatants for two distinct snowballs were obtained from 1) a cold contact to an ex-FARC commander located online; and 2) a contact at the Ministry of Defence who facilitated permission to enter the

²⁰ For a breakdown of these participants, see section 4.6 in this chapter and Appendix A.

safehouses for individually demobilized ex-combatants. From these two points, the sample was increased through referrals, and I was able to introduce independent starting points for several additional snowballs (i.e., with paramilitary and ELN ex-combatants) during my fieldwork. For referrals, the referring participant would always check in advance with the new person they were hoping to refer, and only after that person agreed to meet with me would their contact information be passed to me for follow up. While staying in the FARC reintegration camps and visiting the government safehouses, I also recorded detailed observations of behaviour, meetings, and activities in my fieldnotes. For further details, see section 4.7 in this chapter (data collection).

Once complete, the 114 interviews were transcribed by a team that included me and three contracted transcribers, all of whom signed confidentiality agreements and were thoroughly vetted through references. The interviews ranged from 30 minutes to three hours, with an average of approximately 58 minutes, resulting in over 100 hours of audio and hundreds of pages of transcriptions. I coded all the transcriptions in Spanish using NVivo, a coding software program (see section 4.9). I then translated key quotes for this dissertation into English. For certain translation issues (e.g., the guerrillas have a specific vocabulary and expressions that sometimes even my Colombian transcribers did not understand), I consulted with two ex-combatants with whom I remain in contact, to ensure accuracy in translation.²¹ All of the names of research participants in this dissertation are pseudonyms.

²¹ To protect the confidentiality of respondents, when I was confirming a translation, I would only send a single sentence from the transcript, explaining the context if necessary, when asking for clarification. No information on the particular respondent was provided to the assistants and they did not have access to the recordings or transcripts.

4.4 Interview Settings

Studies on civil war have long been plagued by an “urban bias”—often due to issues of security and access—even though armed conflict usually takes place in rural areas (Kalyvas 2006, 38–48). This study aims to at least partially circumvent this urban bias by deliberately seeking out interviews in both urban and rural areas, including areas with ongoing armed violence. Overall, interviews took place in seven different departments of Colombia: Cundinamarca, La Guajira, Meta, Putumayo, Quindío, Tolima, and Valle de Cauca.

What participants share is often influenced by the setting in which the interview takes place; thus, understanding the interview settings places the material within the context of how and where that material was collected. The first individual interview took place over WhatsApp in December 2017. The first set of fieldwork interviews took place in two government safehouses in undisclosed locations in Colombia in February 2018. The second set of field interviews commenced in Bogotá in October 2018, and all interviews were completed by December 23, 2018—though some informal conversations with ex-combatants continued long after this point. In addition to the safehouses, interviews took place in the following locations: two paramilitary reintegration compounds in rural areas, three FARC reincorporation camps (Territorial Spaces for Training and Reincorporation, or “ETCRs”) in rural areas, as well as urban locations such as cafés, government offices, hotel lobbies, and participants’ homes in several different cities. The three ETCRs were in southern, central, and northern Colombia, in areas still facing violent conflict and the presence of multiple armed groups. The two paramilitary compounds were in central Colombia, in two different departments also containing active armed groups. The

safehouses are described in more detail in the following chapter on Colombia's DDR programs. In addition to interviews, I took extensive fieldwork notes based on informal conversations and observations. I was able to observe community meetings and school lessons in two of the three ETCRs, including one meeting on women's rights led by women in the FARC, and I took part in meals and activities with the ex-combatants in all three. Due to security concerns of the participants and promises of confidentiality, the exact locations of these safe houses, compounds, and reincorporation camps will not be disclosed.²²

After my first visit to an ETCR, the leaders in that camp called ahead to another ETCR to provide a referral and recommend that I be allowed to enter this second camp. Even so, my assistant travelled a few days ahead of me to speak to the leaders there, and on my first day I still had to go through the same lengthy verification process with commanders. The leaders at this ETCR then gave us a referral to a third camp. In this third camp, we arrived with a UN representative, who introduced us to the main leader (a top-level commander), where I once again explained my study, shared the documentation, and received permission to return the next day to begin interviews.

It is important to clarify that these three camps were extremely different, not only in region, climate, and accessibility, but also in terms of resources, organization and overall atmosphere. The first camp was in a region with significant ongoing armed activity. Accessing the camp was extremely difficult—in total over a two-hour journey over rough terrain. There were police officers stationed at the entry to the camp, checking everyone who went in. Unsurprisingly, the atmosphere in this camp was one of high tension and,

²² For example, in some departments there is only one ETCR, and respondents expressed concern that they could be identified simply by linking their interview to a specific department.

initially, a great deal of suspicion towards me and my assistant. The women in particular were very reluctant to speak to me, as they said they had given media interviews before and felt that journalists had repeatedly misrepresented them. Over time, with repeated interactions, the women's attitudes toward me changed considerably.

This first camp was very well organized, with four commanders representing four different fronts, and the camp's living quarters organized accordingly. The command structure of the armed group, and the division of the different units, was retained in this camp. Nonetheless, the camp was largely empty because hundreds of ex-combatants had already left due to both physical and financial insecurity. The quality of the housing structures was very poor, and access to emergency health care was expensive and precarious, depending heavily on the condition of the river. In the three days we stayed there, we never saw a UN representative, even though they are supposed to visit every day, and we met with an ARN representative once.

The second camp was also very remote, with the nearest town being nearly two hours away, on steep and rough terrain accessible only by truck or motorcycle. This camp was quite different from the first, as all the commanders had left, and the lack of a clear command structure was apparent in the lackadaisical atmosphere. While the women were generally busy with cooking and childcare (although some men did participate in these tasks), many of the men were often idle. Indeed, in the first two camps, men were much more willing to talk to me than women, partly because the women were too busy with housework and childcare—an interesting contrast to the gender equality that they purported to have. In this second camp, there were very few economic projects (and none large enough to occupy more than a few people), and many of the housing units were empty.

Again, access to emergency health care was precarious and expensive. In the four days we stayed there, I saw a UN representative once, and I never saw anyone from the ARN.

The third camp was again very different. Two top-level commanders were still living there, as well as many mid- to high-level commanders. The camp was very well organized, with two successfully functioning economic projects (a farm and a sewing cooperative). While we were there, the UN and the ARN visited every day, and a group of artists came to run several workshops. The commanders told me that no ex-combatants had left this camp, and it did indeed seem much more populated than the other two. It was also far less isolated from the community and the nearest towns. Inequality, however, was very apparent in terms of the better living conditions of the top commanders compared to the other ex-combatants. Although there was a daycare on site, many mothers complained of poor access to healthcare, lack of childcare for children over five years old, and poor education options for their children.

The two paramilitary compounds were unique in that most paramilitaries who collectively demobilized as part of the government process between 2003-2006 either went home or individually relocated to cities (and/or continued to operate illegal activities). However, a few groups organized themselves and negotiated with the government for access to land for farming and residence. I visited two of these sites, housed on land that the government had expropriated from drug traffickers. In one site, the residents lived in the run-down former mansion of a drug lord, with old, unused pools and buildings in various states of disrepair. In the other site, the residents had built new houses, some of which were in very good condition and quite modern. While I did not sleep in these sites as I did in the FARC camps, I visited every day for several days to eat with the residents,

play with their children, explore the grounds and, eventually, conduct interviews. While most of the residents at this camp were working rural jobs (specifically, farming, construction, and artisanal gold mining), several did tell me that quite a few residents in these two sites were still involved with illicit activities, such as smuggling and drug trafficking.

4.5 Positionality

Applying reflexivity, or being “methodologically self-conscious”, in qualitative work is extremely important to maintain the validity of the data, especially in complicated contexts of ongoing armed violence (Blair 2016; Lynch 2000). I am acutely aware that who I am as a researcher undoubtedly affected my data collection, research experience, and data analysis. As an obvious foreigner, female, tall, with blonde hair and blue eyes, Colombians were curious about me wherever I went—especially in rural areas where foreigners are still very rare. In some ways, this identity helped make connections, as most people wanted to talk to me, at the very least to find out where I was from. It was also helpful in overcoming suspicion and mistrust, because as an obvious foreigner it was unlikely that I was working with an opposing armed group, dissidents, or the Colombian government. Being Canadian also helped, as ex-combatants were wary when they thought I was American (anti-American sentiment is high among ex-combatants, particularly among the FARC loyalists) and their attitude changed completely when they discovered I was from Canada (e.g., “Canada! We love Canada!”). I did encounter some resistance in the first ETCR, as the leaders in that camp were very concerned that I was a journalist posing as a student. I had to show them all of my university documentation, as well as my official letter of permission from the Ministry of Defence, and they questioned me for an hour about my research before

they would grant permission to enter the camp. Even then, I was only permitted to stay for three days.

In the paramilitary sites, I heard many stories of how the government had sent in agents pretending to be someone else and had tricked them into signing papers they did not understand. Several participants explained that this, combined with their experiences in the AUC ranks, has caused them to distrust everyone. They explained that they were more comfortable talking to me because my obvious foreigner status made it clear to them that I was not working for the Colombian government. They were less certain of my Colombian assistant, but he was not permitted to be present during interviews, and I explained that he was not permitted to listen to the recordings or view transcripts, nor did I ever discuss interview content with him.

Because there is a clear imbalance of power in this type of interview situation (i.e., a foreign, highly educated researcher with the implied economic resources), I tried to find ways to give more power to the participants. It was always clear that all questions were optional, that they could stop the interview at any time, and that the recorder was optional. I positioned myself not as an “expert” but as someone ignorant of the realities of their lives, so that they could teach me what they knew. I also used the fact that my Spanish was not perfect to put participants at ease. For example, I asked them to teach me new words, especially “guerrilla vocabulary” or Colombian slang; we would laugh when I would mispronounce something or when they could not understand me, and I would admit when I could not find the right word for something.

However, I do recognize that because I was giving small gifts or cash in thanks for these interviews, there was still an imbalance of power. But because several participants

commented that they had felt exploited or misrepresented by researchers and/or journalists, I felt that it was necessary to compensate participants for their time—especially as, since the peace process, there has been a massive influx of researchers into Colombia, and quite a few ex-combatants commented with resentment about how they get little out of these studies. In the ETCRs where women often stated they were too busy to participate, this offering of compensation was sometimes critical, and it was always received with immense gratitude. The rare exception was that some potential participants in one ETCR asked for large sums of money for their interviews, which I could not agree to, and these people then refused to participate. This did not happen often, however, and many participants agreed to be interviewed without knowing in advance that they were going to receive compensation.

Finally, the fact that I am a mother myself helped immensely in speaking with women ex-combatants—most of whom now have children. While the women were always more wary of me initially than the men, once I showed them pictures of my own children, they warmed quickly as we swapped stories of pregnancy and motherhood. I am sure that this identity—woman, foreigner, doctoral student, mother—affected the answers that I received, and another researcher speaking to the very same people might obtain different responses. However, I took all measures possible to build trust with participants, to give them power over the interviews, to give them space to ask questions, and to respect their roles and choices. I also asked every participant at the end of each interview if there was something that they wanted to talk about that I did not ask—and many (especially the loyalists) had a lot to add at that point.

4.6 Participants

4.6.1 Participant Overview

In total, this study includes personal interviews with 99 ex-combatants and 15 Colombian DDR experts (i.e., psychologists, ARN officers, soldiers, police officers, social workers, researchers, etc.), for a total of 114 interviews.²³ Over the course of the fieldwork, I also had sustained and repeated conversations with five of the participants (two deserters from the ELN, and three deserters from the FARC), who provided substantial information about their experiences through the DDR processes, as well as information about the two guerrilla groups' operations, rules, and strategies.²⁴ This sample includes 37 women and 62 men from the FARC, the ELN, and the AUC, and ex-combatant respondents originated from 25 out of 32 departments, with one from Venezuela.²⁵ Within this breakdown are 60 non-deserters ("loyalists") of the FARC and AUC, 35 deserters from the FARC and the ELN, and four ex-combatants who were in both categories (i.e., they deserted one group and then stayed with another until ordered to demobilize). Some had switched sides to join another group, and some had deserted from more than one group. Ages of enlistment ranged from ten to 45, with an average enlistment age of 19.5 (median: 17). In addition, 37 of the 99 respondents joined at age 15 or younger, with 13 that joined between ages 16-17; thus, over 50 percent of the sample joined as minors, and most of these underage recruits were FARC and ELN. Participants were invited to self-identify their ethnicity through this question:

²³ Appendix A contains further details on these participants while protecting their identities.

²⁴ These conversations took place after the initial interviews with these participants—usually over meals or coffee—and were not recorded nor remunerated.

²⁵ The aim was to have at least 50 percent women, but this became impossible within the paramilitary population due to the difficulty in locating ex-AUC women who were willing to speak. See Appendix A for anonymized lists of interviewees.

“Do you identify with any type of ethnicity or race?”²⁶ Sometimes participants did not understand this question, in which case I provided examples such as Indigenous, Afro-descendant, mestizo, mulatto, etc. Seven participants identified as Afro-descendant, 18 identified as Indigenous, one as Creole, and one as mulatto.²⁷ The rest identified as *mestizo* or did not identify with any ethnicity.

The overall average time spent in the group was 12.72 years (median: 10 years). Deserters’ time ranged from six months to 25 years, with an average of 8.8 years (median: 6.5 years). In this category, four respondents did not know (or did not want to disclose) the amount of time in the group. The time loyalists spent in the group also ranged widely, from four months to 47 years, with an average of 15 years (median: 11 years).²⁸ In this category, at least four paramilitary respondents reported a duration that was significantly shorter than their actual time in the group, so the average and median for this category is likely higher.²⁹ Ranks in both groups ranged from basic foot soldier to top-level commander, including one member of the FARC Secretariat in the loyalist sample. In addition, 31 percent of this sample had reached some level of command (from the first rank of squad commander—commanding 12 people—to the top rank of Secretariat). While broad, this sample does not claim to be statistically representative of the entire demobilized population.

²⁶ Self-identification has become standard practice for collecting racial and ethnic data, and is the primary criterion for counting indigenous people per Convention 169 of International Labor Organization (ILO) (Telles 2014).

²⁷ For statistical purposes, in the demographic tables below the percentage of Afro-descendants includes the mulatto and Creole respondents.

²⁸ As discussed below, some respondents, particularly AUC respondents, openly lied about the length of time they had been in the group to stay consistent with what they had told the government. Some later disclosed the truth.

²⁹ Respondents either disclosed a short time in the group (e.g., six months) but then shared stories and experiences that did not correspond to this time frame, or another respondent’s information indicated that the person had spent far more time in the group than they disclosed. For example, one respondent reported being recruited by a friend, who turned out to be a person that I had interviewed the day before. This second person said that they had spent five years in the group, while the person who had joined earlier and had recruited him said he only spent 18 months in the group—yet they both demobilized at the same time.

Table 2
Ex-Combatant Sample - Demographic Information

Female	37%
Deserted at least one group	39%
Indigenous ³⁰	18%
Afro-descendant	9%
Average age at recruitment	19.5*
Joined as a minor (age 17 or younger)	50%
Average time (years) in armed group	13
Median time (years) in armed group	10
Minimum time in armed group	4 months
Maximum time in armed group	47 years
Married or common-law	35%
One or more living children	66%
Attained some formal secondary education (i.e., above sixth grade) <i>before</i> demobilization	3%
Served time in prison	14%
Forcibly recruited	5%
Membership in more than one armed group	13%
Reached a commander rank (mid to high)	31%
Militia (urban operative)	10%

* Minimum enlistment age: 10. Maximum enlistment age: 45. Standard deviation: 8.

Table 3
Demographic Breakdown by Gender

	Women	Men
Indigenous	22%	15%
Afro-descendant	5%	15%
Joined as a minor	54%	45%
Average time (years) in armed group	12	13.2
Median time (years) in armed group	7	10
One or more living children	70%	63%
Reached a commander rank of any kind	19%	42%
Advanced beyond lowest level of command	3%	21%
Militia	16%	8%

³⁰ Indigenous peoples make up approximately 3.4 percent of Colombia's population while Afro-descendants make up 10.4 percent (DANE 2005).

4.6.2 Inclusion Criteria

Despite the implied semantics of the word “combatant”, being a frontline fighter is not required to meet the UN DDR standard for this designation—simply being a member of a state army or irregular military is sufficient.³¹ This research thus counts men and women as members of an armed group if they self-identify as such, regardless of their participation in direct combat. This approach circumvents the gap created in many DDR studies and/or programs that narrowly define membership in an armed group to fighters only. While this self-identification raises a small risk that some people may have claimed to be ex-combatants when they were not, due to the nature of the interview sites and referral chains, as well as specific information about groups and their divisions, and how the reintegration program works, I was able to verify the membership of most participants through triangulating the participant responses with secondary information and verification from government agencies.³² In addition, due to the stigma attached to ex-combatants in Colombia, and the fact that many respondents (especially women) tried to downplay their role in the armed group, the risk that non-combatants would claim to be combatants is very small.

³¹ Based on the UN Integrated DDR Standards (IDDRS 2006), a combatant is defined as one of the following:

1. a member of a national army or an irregular military organization; or
2. is actively participating in military activities and hostilities;
3. is involved in recruiting or training military personnel;
4. holds a command or decision-making position within a national army or an armed organization;
5. arrived in a host country carrying arms or in military uniform or as part of a military structure;
6. having arrived in a host country as an ordinary civilian, thereafter assumes, or shows determination to assume, any of the above attributes.

³² For example, in the safe houses, ECTRs, and paramilitary compounds, membership was easy to verify. With individual interviews, membership could be fairly easily confirmed by asking for the information of their reintegration officer at the ARN, or simply by the details they were able to produce in their interviews, combined with the referral from a government source or an already verified ex-combatant. While some participants certainly lied in some interviews about their rank and role(s), there were no indications that participants were lying about their membership in an armed group. In fact, due to stigmatization of ex-combatants in Colombian society, the opposite is more likely.

4.7 Data Collection

4.7.1 *Primary Sources*

The semi-structured interview questions were loosely arranged around the six variables of interest noted earlier. Participation in these interviews was voluntary, and participants received a small monetary donation (equivalent to approximately USD\$6) where permitted, or small gifts where monetary payment was not allowed or where gatekeepers advised against it. For example, in the government safe houses, the military general in charge of the program prohibited monetary compensation but allowed small gifts, such as books, toiletries, food, etc.; in the first ETCR, the commanders with whom we first met suggested small gifts of food and drink, rather than money—we discovered later that this was because some residents in that camp had been demanding large sums of money for media interviews and it had been causing inter-personal conflict within the camp. Sampling was primarily referral-based as noted above, with multiple referral chains (“snowballs”) running simultaneously in various regions. Participants were read a letter of consent prior to the interview and gave verbal consent but were not asked to sign anything, and full names were never recorded. Interviews were audio-recorded when permitted by the participant; only three respondents declined to be recorded, while two others asked for the recording to stop at a certain point before continuing the conversation. I provided all respondents with my local cell phone number and email address, as well as the contact information of the university (and my Spanish-speaking supervisor), should they have questions or choose to withdraw from the study. All participants were given until December 31, 2018 to withdraw

and were clearly informed that they could keep the compensation (where applicable) even if they withdrew their information. None chose to do so.

In addition to the interviews, I also took detailed fieldnotes from my interactions with participant populations. In fact, in this type of complicated environment, where building trust is critical to collecting quality information, engaging in community activities such as children's games, group meals, cooking, washing dishes, sitting in on community meetings and group classes, drinking beer and coffee, listening to poetry, taking guided walks, and playing billiards were all key activities in building trust. In many of the interview sites, well before I requested interviews, I simply walked around or sat in a gathering place to talk to the locals, or asked for a tour of the camp or farm, and curious residents (often their children first) would stop to chat with me and ask where I was from. In this manner, I had far more than 114 conversations, many with people who did not formally participate in interviews (such as servers, street vendors, bus passengers, and Uber drivers) but were eager to share their expertise or opinions about the conflict, the reintegration process, and/or the government. All of this observation and informal conversation provided an increased understanding of local views that I may not have had if I had relied strictly on interviews alone.

Immediately upon returning to a secure internet location after the interviews, all recordings were uploaded and encrypted in cloud storage and were erased from the recorder. I took all my fieldnotes in English, never using names of people or locations, to reduce the chance that the notes could be easily read if someone were to steal my bag in transit to or from the interview sites. I had a different set of notebooks for each distinct location (i.e., one for the safehouses, one for the ETCRs, and one for the paramilitary sites), to avoid

bringing in any notes that could be connected to opposing groups. That said, I was very transparent with all participants that I was interviewing ex-combatants from all three groups noted above—and, perhaps surprisingly, most liked this idea of a comparative study. To my knowledge, no incident occurred that jeopardized the data or the identity of the participants.

4.7.2 Secondary Sources

To get a broader picture of the demobilization and reintegration process in Colombia, this study also makes use of secondary sources, particularly statistics on demobilization, reintegration, and victimization in Colombia. While some of this information is sourced directly from the Ministry of Defence and the ARN, other information comes from polling data, media reports, UN Mission quarterly reports, and NGO investigations. The data was cross-referenced with participant responses and also compared with information collected by other researchers looking at disengagement and reintegration in Colombia (e.g., Dietrich 2017; Londoño F. and Nieto V. 2006; Oppenheim et al. 2015; Mendez 2012; Rosenau et al. 2014), in order to provide the most accurate picture possible.

4.8 Misinformation and Lies

With several of the research participants, I was able to maintain contact and have repeated conversations in person and through WhatsApp over the course of 2018 and into 2019. During these conversations, I received admissions that some respondents had lied in their initial interviews. For example, after several extended conversations, one participant that I had interviewed in February 2018 later admitted to me that he had lied to me about his low

rank because he felt that his answer had to match the answer he gave to the government when he demobilized, where he had downplayed his high rank to avoid legal repercussions. Another woman in a FARC ETCR was evasive when I asked her what she had done in the group. She finally told me that she had been a cook for a member of the Secretariat—for nearly twenty years. This does not match testimony from the majority of FARC ex-combatants who said that everyone shared in cooking, standing guard, cleaning, laundry, and so on. This woman later admitted that she had been a member of that commander's personal bodyguard squad ("esquema"). Several other women told me that, despite being in the FARC for over twenty years, they had never once been in combat—possible, but highly unlikely.

In the paramilitary interviews, many of the respondents openly lied about their rank and time in the group, saying for example that they had only spent one year in the AUC but then sharing stories and details that did not match this brief experience. One participant first told me he had spent 18 months in the group, then later admitted it was actually five years, and told me that most paramilitaries lied to the government about their time in the group to avoid prison sentences. One female ex-paramilitary told me that no one from the AUC would tell me the full truth, while others said that they desperately wanted to tell the truth because they had not been able to tell anyone else.

With all these instances of lying, despite my various efforts to build trust, I had to question the validity of my research data. How many times had people lied to me, and why? I have previous fieldwork experience, and it is often not difficult to spot a lie—hesitation and avoiding eye contact when answering, or information during an interview will contradict previous information a person shared, or other people will say things about them

that do not match what they said. While it is impossible to know with certainty if people are telling the truth, it was equally important to listen to what respondents were saying as well as how they said it. What they shared was how they wanted to represent themselves, and what people lie about reveals as much as what they are truthful about. Indeed, when lies can be identified, they add information and understanding to the topic under discussion. The fact that so many respondents lied to downplay their rank indicates, for instance, that even though my sample is 31 percent mid- to high-ranking commanders, this is likely not because some people claimed to be commanders when they were not. It suggests that commanders were heavily represented—and possibly over-represented—in the sample. In fact, it is possible that the percentage of commanders is even higher than presented here because of the observed tendency of respondents to lie to downgrade actual ranks—especially among women and paramilitaries. So few women in the sample claimed to be commanders that at first I questioned whether they were lying to downplay their roles in violence (which for some may be true, like the woman who lied about being a bodyguard); however, many ex-combatants confirmed that even though women commanders did exist, especially in the FARC ranks, it was still relatively rare.

One important note is that when a person asks a question, and how that question is phrased, influences the type of answer a researcher will get, and this was a critical part of my interview strategy. For example, instead of asking *why* a participant left, I asked: “When did you start thinking about leaving?” to get a better sense of the process leading up to the decision. But this question came well into the conversation, when rapport had been established and the respondent was more comfortable. Then, because participants had likely rehearsed and repeated why they had left in many military interviews, instead of

asking them why, I asked *how* they left. Because this is a process-oriented question—rather than asking about motivations sometimes years or even decades after the fact—it is less likely to be rehearsed but still sheds critical insights as to the motives, networks, and resources around that person’s disengagement.³³ It can also present a much longer story, with richer information, than a motivation-oriented explanation. For example, in my first conversation with one FARC ex-commander, he told me that he had deserted because he was “tired of war”. But, after several conversations, when we finally had our official interview, I asked him *how* he had deserted, and he proceeded to give me a detailed account about discovering that one of his comrades was a government informant, and he became scared for his life after hearing about a plot to kill him. He then made a plan and escaped at night while everyone else was having a Christmas party. This is indeed a very different answer than simply being “tired of war”.

Overall, however, respondents appeared grateful for the experience to share their expertise and experiences, and whenever possible—especially when deceit was suspected about verifiable information like rank—I worked to triangulate this information with other sources. Many acknowledged when they could not or would not tell me something (e.g., what they did in the group), but were happy to talk about other subjects, while others were quite proud to share their experiences. Many respondents became emotional while recounting their stories, and the majority thanked me for allowing them to share their experiences and insight. Several told me that I was the first person in their lives who had ever just sat and listened to them. Thus, while it is certainly possible that there were other

³³ I am indebted to Dr. Katherine Brown (University of Birmingham) for this advice on asking “how” rather than “why” in my interviews.

lies that I did not detect, for the most part I believe that the majority of participants were truthful and in fact quite keen to tell their stories.

4.9 Data Analysis

As noted above, given the lack of developed theory on gender norms in rebel group cohesion and on women's disengagement from armed violence (through both desertion and collective demobilization), this project is necessarily a blend of inductive and deductive reasoning. There are two main approaches to coding in qualitative research: 1) emergent coding that inductively arises from the text, and 2) *a priori* coding, where the researcher creates codes ahead of time and then applies them to the text (Stemler 2001). Because there is a lack of established theory in this area, but also because I did not want to ignore the emerging body of work on disengagement from armed violence, this research uses both forms of coding. That is, to code the immense data contained in the 114 transcripts, I first prioritized six basic coding categories based on the variables most prominent in the literature and the one I added (i.e., types of commitment, ideology, identity, networks, costs/benefits of membership, and government propaganda). However, I quickly found other emergent and repeating themes such as regrets, future hopes, and false promises. Using NVivo, these coding categories, or "nodes", initially ballooned to over 30 in total, and I then worked to collapse nodes into similar categories, while simultaneously creating new ones as I saw patterns emerge. For example, "identity" emerged early on as a key independent variable, but there was clearly more than one form of identity, so I soon separated "identity" into three types: the fighter-revolutionary identity, the campesino identity, and the insurgent feminist identity. This of course necessitated going back to

recode some interviews. While passages coded as “gender-based violence” or “commanders’ women” were categorized under the node “gender”, passages were often coded under multiple nodes. For example, a passage about gender-based violence would be coded under “gender” but might also be coded under “group rules/norms” or “fear and insecurity”, depending on the content of the passage. I was the only person coding, so there was no need for checks on inter-rater reliability. However, it was possible to check for intra-rater reliability (i.e., to see if the same coder gets the same results on a different try) by going through the randomly selected transcripts a second time and re-coding, to check if the codes would be the same the second time through (Stemler 2001). While time-consuming, this process helped to increase reliability of the coding process, and I continued to fine-tune the coding throughout the writing process. Results from the coding were triangulated with secondary sources where possible, as a further check on the results.

4.10 Limitations

There is, of course, no perfect research design, and every choice made here required trade-offs in another area. As noted above, Colombia was chosen as an ideal case for theory generation, but that does not mean these results will necessarily be generalizable to other cases. However, it is highly plausible that the issues facing women in demobilization and reintegration in this case could provide insights to improving reintegration outcomes in other cases—or at the very least, could provide warnings about the consequences of failing to incorporate gender considerations in DDR and in studies on insurgency and civil war.

In addition, while a sample size of 99 ex-combatants is considered more than adequate for a qualitative study, it is of course small for any type of quantitative analysis. What this project loses in breadth, however, it gains in the depth and richness of the

interview data. And, as noted, a large survey-type questionnaire with this population often only reaches certain types of ex-combatants, and may disproportionately leave out women's answers, depending on the biases or blind spots of the gatekeepers in question (who are almost always men) and/or the researchers. While this study includes participants from 25 of 32 departments, there are still segments of the ex-combatant population that were not included here for reasons of feasibility and security. For example, the portion of the ex-combatant population who demobilized without any government assistance is not represented here (with a few exceptions), as they are extremely difficult to locate. For security reasons, the dissident and actively armed populations of various groups like the AUC and FARC are not included here, nor are active members of the ELN. Indeed, a full account of the desertion puzzle would ideally include data on dissidents who refused to demobilize and continued fighting, but at present accessing that population is not logistically possible and/or involves unreasonable risks.

4.11 Ethical Considerations

Even though this research project was approved by the Carleton Ethics Review Board (#106973), that does not absolve the researcher from considering the range of ethical implications of this work, given the reliance on interviews with a highly vulnerable population—many of whom are still afraid of being tracked down and killed. These considerations include (but are not limited to): re-traumatizing people by asking them to recount their life histories, exposing ex-combatants to unwanted attention, putting both myself and the participant in danger if the purpose of our conversation is misunderstood

by others, and/or inadvertently reinforcing harmful gender dynamics by working through primarily male gatekeepers.

While I have tried to address all of these considerations, the dynamic of a white Western researcher and a Colombian participant with limited education and resources does give rise to power dynamics that are difficult to avoid, even with the best of intentions for participatory research. For example, one outcome of giving small sums of money to compensate research participants for their time is that it left the impression that I was immensely wealthy (despite my repeated explanations that the money for the interviews was not my own). As a result, some participants continued to contact me for months afterward, asking for money for their children, for sick relatives, or for whatever crisis had arisen. Many asked for my help in obtaining a visa to come to Canada, and others asked for help in improving their security situation because they were receiving death threats. Obviously, none of these requests were within my power to grant, but they did raise the question of how, or even if, this research had the ability to improve the lives of those who made it possible. It also raised the question, for me, of whether helping participants once a study is over is unethical, or if it is more unethical *not* to help. This dissertation does not purport to answer that question, but it is one worth raising for other researchers doing similar work.

In terms of re-traumatizing participants, this was an ongoing concern as many participants shared violent and traumatic stories, and some became quite emotional during the interviews. In my former therapeutic work in the cancer and brain injury communities, I have been trained to work with people recovering from trauma, including what types of language to use and what to avoid, and how to provide a safe and non-judgemental space

when people are sharing intimate and/or traumatic details of their lives, in order to avoid re-traumatizing people. Participants were reminded throughout the interview that all questions were optional, that they did not have to share stories that were emotionally difficult, and that they were free to end the interview at any time. While some said that their participation had been cathartic, it is difficult to know without ongoing contact what the later effects of this sharing may have been. While all participants had access through the ARN to psychologists and social workers, many of them felt that this assistance was wholly inadequate, while others were not interested in accessing such help.

4.12 Conclusion

Given the gaps in understanding this topic, and the tendency for quantitative analysis on disengagement to ignore gender and/or underemphasize intersecting motives to exit violence, in-depth qualitative interviews provide an information-rich pathway to understanding deserters' complex exit pathways and the gendered nature of their experiences. Using the single case study of Colombia allows for access to both deserters and loyalists, given the two decades of collective and individual demobilization processes in that country. While this may limit the generalizability of the case, some results have broader external validity than others, and in a plausibility probe this aspect is of less concern, as the aim is to generate new ideas and theories to be tested in future cases.

In addition, due to the sensitive nature of the subject matter, and the critical need to build trust with participants, a large-N quantitative survey on this topic presents significant risks for imperfect information and even deliberate misinformation. As stated above, it was only with long and repeated conversations with respondents that I started to uncover and understand certain patterns of misrepresentation. Spending time in community activities

allowed me to watch some dynamics unfold between men and women in different stages of disengagement, providing a more nuanced understanding of gender roles in the ex-combatant population that did not always surface in the interviews. This information, too, would likely not have been captured in a large survey study.

Finally, as with all research involving human subjects, there was a degree of risk to both the participants and to myself in this research, but I took all precautions to minimize this risk as much as possible and to allow the participants to guide the subject of the conversations. Nonetheless, there is still much improvement in this field that researchers can make to ensure their projects are not exploitative and instead become truly participatory.

Chapter Five: The Evolution of Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration Programming in Colombia

Disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) in Colombia has been happening for decades in various forms, but the Ministry of Defence celebrated its fifteenth anniversary of formal demobilization programming in 2017, calling it “fifteen years of transforming histories” (Colombian Ministry of Defence 2017). Colombia therefore presents a unique study of DDR due to the ongoing efforts to demobilize and reintegrate combatants in the face of continuing armed conflict and recruitment into armed groups. As noted above, while the focus of this dissertation is on why some people leave armed groups while others stay, it is important to examine how the government disengagement programs are set up in order to understand whether these programs influence decisions to stay or go—and/or whether the shortcomings in these programs may be impeding reintegration and/or influencing recidivism.

Indeed, this chapter will demonstrate that, while tens of thousands of combatants have entered Colombia’s various reintegration programs, large numbers of ex-combatants regularly leave these programs without completing them, while some ex-combatants choose not to enter them at all. In addition, unlike other DDR programs which are usually run by third (neutral) parties, deserters’ participation in government demobilization programs in Colombia implies cooperation with the enemy. Thus, this cooperation—and the implications of treason against one’s former group—affects the perceived alternatives for those considering desertion, as participation in these programs comes with life-threatening costs.

This chapter begins with an overview of the evolution of DDR in Colombia, including the introduction of different programs and the evolution of gender considerations

in reintegration programming. Then the chapter gives a detailed explanation of the individual demobilization program, including where deserters go, how much protection they receive (or are promised), and what the allotted benefits are. After this, the chapter describes the two collective demobilization programs: the AUC collective demobilization (2003-2006) and the FARC demobilization program that began in 2016 with the signing of the peace accord.

5.1 The Evolution of DDR in Colombia

5.1.1 From Ad Hoc Demobilization to Formalized DDR

While the Colombian government has been repeatedly criticized for prioritizing disarmament and demobilization over long-term, sustainable reintegration (Anctil Avoine and Tillman 2015; Bouvier 2016; Dietrich 2017), the ongoing conflict and constantly evolving dynamics into which ex-combatants demobilize create myriad programmatic challenges. In the Colombian reintegration agency's institutional review of 2016, the agency lists the four stages of DDR as: 1) disarmament (collecting weapons), 2) demobilization (bringing disarmed actors into secure areas of concentration), 3) reinsertion (the preliminary phase of reintegration, where ex-combatants receive assistance packets, clothes, shelter, healthcare, and training), and 4) reintegration, which encompasses both the initial reinsertion phase and long-term reintegration (ACR 2016). But after the 2016 peace process was finalized, the reintegration agency split into two distinct programs: 1) "reintegration" for ex-combatants who demobilized individually (i.e., deserters) as well as AUC ex-combatants who demobilized collectively, and 2) "reincorporation" for FARC ex-combatants who demobilized collectively. The reintegration side, however, actually

contains two separate streams: one for deserters and one for the collectively demobilized AUC. The latter of these streams is considered complete because the benefits timeframe has terminated—not necessarily because ex-combatants have reintegrated successfully. Each of these three streams (i.e., deserters, collective AUC, and collective FARC) offers different benefits and different forms of amnesty, and when reading through the legal documents, it becomes clear that many of the benefits are highly complex and would be difficult for someone with marginal literacy to understand. Within each of these streams, however, each ex-combatant receives the same monthly stipend and access to the same benefits as others in the same programming stream—in theory. However, as this chapter will show, being able to access these benefits depends heavily on a person’s existing skillset, literacy and numeracy, willingness and ability to study, existing social support, and number of dependents. By attempting to be non-discriminatory, the program has actually created blind-spots where more vulnerable people—particularly those with low literacy skills and/or multiple dependents—lack the additional assistance they need in order to successfully transition to civilian life.

Table 4
The Evolution of Colombia's Demobilization Processes

Year	Process	Agency/Ministry	Focus	Armed Group
Late 1980s, early 1990s	Individual deserters are accepted by the government M19 group demobilization (1989) EPL group demobilization (1991)	Ministry of Interior CODA (Operational Committee for Disarmament)	Disarmament & Demobilization M19 & EPL both convert into political parties (no known reintegration strategy at this time)	Various, mostly guerrilla (EPL, M-19, FARC, ELN) M19 & EPL dissidents persist
2003	Reincorporation Program into Civilian Life (PRVC) begins	Ministry of Interior and Justice	Short-term reinsertion only; no focus on long-term reintegration	Primarily guerrilla deserters
2006	Mass demobilization of paramilitaries requires a more official process	ACR (High Presidential Council for Reintegration)	Reinsertion and reintegration	Collectively demobilized AUC paramilitaries Ongoing demobilization of guerrilla deserters
2011	Official reintegration agency (ACR) is formed and given permanent status GAHD is formed within Ministry of Defence to accept deserters	GAHD (Group for Humanitarian Attention to the Demobilized) ACR (Colombian Agency for Reintegration)	Demobilization & Reinsertion (GAHD) Reintegration (ACR)	Primarily deserters from ELN and FARC, but also other smaller guerrilla factions & "BACRIMS" (criminal bands with paramilitary origins)
2017	ACR is split into two streams: reintegration and reincorporation	ARN (Agency for Normalization and Reintegration)	Demobilization (GAHD) Reinsertion & Reintegration (ARN)	Primarily collectively demobilized FARC Ongoing desertions from active groups

As shown below (Table 5), as of December 2019, a total of 61,637 combatants (13 percent women) have officially demobilized (ARN 2019b). Of this total, 28,530 (7 percent

women) are recorded as collectively demobilized paramilitaries of the AUC. This total demobilized figure does not include the collectively demobilized FARC, where 13,202 combatants were accredited in 2017-2018 and of these, 12,948 (25 percent women) are enrolled in the reincorporation program (ARN 2019c). In sum, if these statistics are accurate, 74,839 individual people have been registered as officially demobilized combatants in Colombia over the last 18 years. This figure does not, of course, include combatants who may have demobilized and abandoned their groups without reporting to the government, nor does it include combatants who demobilized while still minors, who are tracked and reintegrated separately.

Table 5
Total Registered Ex-Combatants

Type of Program	Number of Registered Ex-Combatants	% Women
Collective AUC program	28,530	7%
Individual program (deserters)	23,785	21%
Collective FARC program	12,948	25%
Confirmed demobilized; not in any program	9,576	unknown
Total Confirmed Demobilized	74,839	unknown

As illustrated by Table 4 (above), the ARN and its related programs have gone through many reinventions over the years to deal with these large numbers of ex-combatants, starting with the Program for Reincorporation into Civilian Life (PRVC), formed as part of the Ministry of Interior and of Justice in 2003 (ARN 2019d). The PRVC

was only a short-term “reinsertion” program, and because the initial size of the demobilized population was fairly small, this approach was not viewed as problematic at the time (ARN 2019d). However, during the mass demobilization of the AUC in 2003-2006, government officials needed something much larger for long-term planning, so they created the High Presidential Council for Reintegration to confront the complexities of running a demobilization program alongside an ongoing conflict (ARN 2019d). For this reason, many ex-paramilitaries in this sample said they considered themselves the “pilot project” in Colombia’s DDR programming—often with some resentment. Indeed, because of the ongoing violence, the Colombian government has long been running two or more types of DDR simultaneously—the collective demobilization of groups that have made an agreement with the government and are primarily combatants who have been ordered by superiors to demobilize, and the individual demobilization and reintegration of people who have decided, for various reasons, to abandon their groups.

In 2011, under President Santos, the High Council—which had been designated as a “special administrative unit”—was transformed into the Colombian Reintegration Agency (ACR) and given more permanent status within the administration (ARN 2019d). In 2017, the ACR was given a leading role in implementing the peace agreement with the FARC, and the agency was re-named the Agency for Reincorporation and Normalization (ARN)—in large part due to the FARC’s insistence that they not be included in the same programming category as deserters and paramilitaries.³⁴ Since then, representatives of the ARN have emphasized the differences between “reintegration” (which involves the prior AUC collective demobilization process, plus all individually demobilized people past and

³⁴ Information obtained during meetings with ARN officials, Bogotá, October 2018.

present) and “reincorporation” (which exclusively refers to the FARC collective demobilization process). These differences are more than just labels, which subsequent chapters will discuss in depth. The terms used for each process, and what each demobilized group of people calls themselves, are an important study in an “us versus them”—or “othering”—mentality surrounding the negotiation of amnesty deals and demobilization benefits. Indeed, because different streams have varying benefits available to ex-combatants, and because word-of-mouth amongst ex-combatant networks has distorted the appearance of inequality in these benefits (i.e., information shared about benefits that “the others” are receiving has often been inaccurate), there is some tension between the ex-combatants in different streams. As one example, several ex-guerrillas in the individual demobilization program told me, with significant resentment, that ex-paramilitaries received two million Colombian pesos per month (approximately USD\$615) as part of their demobilization agreement. This information was false—that figure was a one-time payment of start-up capital for a small business, not a monthly payment—but the misunderstanding was indicative of how rumours and misinformation spread quickly. However, despite some evidence of tension between ex-combatant groups, evidence from this study indicates that most of the resentment about varying benefits has been directed towards the government, and not towards other demobilized combatants. Indeed, in this research I encountered many ex-combatants from different armed groups interacting amicably, while sharing the opinion that the government had failed them all.

5.1.2 Incorporating Gender into Colombia’s DDR

For at least the last fifteen years, various scholars have documented the shortcomings of gender-blind DDR programs in various conflicts, some of which have further marginalized

women (Aristizábal Farah 2013; Dietrich 2017; Esguerra Rezk 2013; Lelièvre Aussel, Moreno Echavarría, and Ortiz Pérez 2004; Londoño and Nieto 2006). As already noted, women have historically made up 30-40 percent of Colombian guerrilla movements (Dietrich 2017; Londoño and Nieto 2006; Gutiérrez Sanín and Carranza Franco 2017). In Colombia and elsewhere in Latin America, women ex-combatants have reportedly declined to participate in formal DDR, particularly when reintegration sites or camps were not deemed safe for them or their children (Dietrich 2017). In Colombia in particular, some women ex-guerrillas have stated that the stigma attached to being a known ex-combatant was simply not worth the meagre benefits offered by DDR programs (Dietrich 2017; Schwitalla and Dietrich 2007).

Scholars have noted that the early demobilizations in Colombia in the 1990s were particularly problematic, as female participation in armed groups at this time was approximately 20-30 percent, but international discourse on gender in conflict had not yet fully emerged³⁵ and women's participation in armed conflict was only minimally recognized—mostly in minor supporting roles or as wives and girlfriends (Dietrich 2017). These early programs failed to recognize women's specific needs such as sexual and reproductive healthcare, pre- or post-natal care, and menstrual hygiene products, nor did they provide proper legal, psycho-social or health support for victims of gender-based violence (Dietrich 2017). DDR practitioners also had—and some continue to have—stereotypical assumptions around men's and women's roles in society. For example, in the early demobilizations, couples were jointly registered for benefits deposited into a bank account in the man's name only (Dietrich 2017). This practice also ignored the high

³⁵ For example, the landmark UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on women in armed conflict was created in 2000.

separation rates in ex-combatant populations that have resulted in women having disproportionate responsibility for children and the elderly, but often with only one income (Dietrich 2017).

As noted earlier (see Table 2), women have made up 7 percent of AUC demobilizations, and 21-25 percent of guerrilla demobilizations (ARN 2019b). Gender was officially recognized as an important issue in a CONPES report from the Department of National Planning in 2008 (DNP 2008). However, while the importance of gender in DDR—at least, in terms of addressing women’s needs—was on Colombia’s radar by at least 2008, the ARN only began actively incorporating gender concerns into its programs in 2013 (Alpert 2016; DNP 2008). Nonetheless, during this study several ARN officials insisted that the agency already had a very good grasp of gendered needs and analysis in reintegration programming—strongly implying that further research on this topic was not necessary. One ARN representative told me in no uncertain terms that they already knew why people deserted.³⁶ Officials repeatedly conflated gender with women in these conversations and did not mention any gender issues related to men’s desertion or reintegration. In addition, evidence suggests that what is on paper at the agency is still not translating into practice: statements from the ARN’s General Director have been contradictory in terms of offering women the same work as men, and encouraging women to regain the “feminine features” that they lost during their guerrilla experiences (Alpert 2016). Indeed, like many programs worldwide on disengagement from violence, gender now appears as a key element in ARN documents, but in practice “women” are often treated

³⁶ Indeed, even though I had come to an official agreement and had signed all the relevant paperwork with the ARN in October 2019 to receive assistance in locating ex-paramilitary respondents, that assistance never materialized.

as one homogenous category without considering intersecting identities such as age, race, class, and number of dependents.

In addition, some scholars have noted that overemphasizing women's special needs as victims in post-conflict processes can contribute to their marginalization by taking away their agency (Ní Aoláin, Haynes, and Cahn 2011; Hafner-Burton and Pollack 2002; Dietrich 2017). That is, by treating women only as victims, they are not taken seriously as key players in the conflict. In addition and perhaps conversely, researchers have repeatedly criticized DDR programs in Colombia for not taking women's unique needs into account, or for paying lip-service to gender policy without implementing it (Anctil Avoine and Tillman 2015; Dietrich 2017). In fact, while more women than men who enrol in reintegration actually complete the program, evidence indicates that women ex-combatants disproportionately reintegrate without government support compared to men, suggesting that many either do not want to be in these programs or they do not feel welcome, or both (Anctil Avoine and Tillman 2015). Overall, the evidence of gender being taken seriously in Colombia's DDR programming is mixed at best, and there is no evidence that gender concerns in the ARN incorporate any issues regarding harmful masculinities in terms of men's reintegration.

5.2 The Individual Demobilization Process

Throughout Colombia's later attempts at peace, discussed in previous chapters, the government was running an individual demobilization program for guerrilla and paramilitary combatants who wished to abandon their groups, as a strategy to weaken rebel forces. While combatants had been demobilizing in small numbers since the 1990s, the campaigns to actively encourage desertion began in earnest in 2007, when the government

started running radio announcements—often narrated by ex-guerrillas themselves—that guerrilla combatants could surrender and receive amnesty and reintegration benefits (Mance 2008). These campaigns included radio programs that often included testimony from demobilized combatants, dropping leaflets from planes into the jungle, and, in 2010, sending little plastic lights down rivers with messages inside, and decorating trees for Christmas along known guerrilla pathways (Colombian Ministry of Defence 2010). While many guerrillas did not trust the government’s messages—for valid reasons, given the proven collusion between politicians and paramilitaries—thousands of others did indeed turn themselves in during this time (Colombian Ministry of Defence 2017). Between 2007-2010, the government states that 10,978 individual combatants deserted from various groups, mostly guerrillas (ARN 2019b). But, President Uribe was also running an intense U.S.-backed military offensive (“Plan Patriota”) against the FARC in this same period, which was largely credited for significantly weakening the guerrilla group (Porch and Rasmussen 2008). It is thus unclear whether combatants were surrendering because they were convinced by the government propaganda, or simply because they were afraid to die, or both (see Chapter Eight for further discussion of this).

The Colombian Ministry of Defence (2017) claims that between 2002 and 2017, a total of 32,433³⁷ combatants (80 percent men, 20 percent women) went through their demobilization program—a sum that includes members from the ELN, FARC and other guerrilla groups, as well as the AUC and other paramilitaries, but *not* the collectively demobilized FARC (see Table 5). Not all of these combatants entered the reintegration program, however. In fact, the ARN reports that an estimated 14.5 percent of individually

³⁷ This figure does not include combatants who demobilized as part of a group process.

demobilized combatants did not enter the reintegration program at all, and this does not account for those who entered the program but dropped out (ARN 2019b). Of the total demobilized population that have registered with the government to date (i.e., all ex-combatants *except* the collectively demobilized FARC), 23,785 have been deserters that demobilized individually (ARN 2019b).

Among these deserters, 90 percent surrender to the army (C01), after which they are directed to a division of the Ministry of Defence called the GAHD (Group for Humanitarian Attention to the Demobilized), which was set up in 2011. This does not mean, however, that all deserters surrender to the army immediately after leaving their groups; in fact, responses from this study indicate that many spend months and even years in hiding before something triggers their official demobilization. After handing in weapons (if applicable), a deserter has several interviews with military intelligence to confirm membership in the armed group, and then s/he enters one of two safe houses (*Hogares de Paz*)³⁸ in the country and must share intelligence with military officers over a series of interviews (C01, C05). In fact, receiving amnesty and demobilization benefits is contingent on sharing this intelligence; several deserters said they were warned that if they did not cooperate, they would go to prison—and some captured guerrillas indeed accepted this fate rather than betray their group (B38, B41, B55, B58, B59). Demobilized combatants from all groups stay in these GAHD compounds for two to three months, and while ex-combatants used to be gender segregated, the safe houses are now fully mixed, with many demobilized combatants housed with their spouses and children in an effort to replicate civilian life (C01, C02). There is daycare and school on site for these children, allowing

³⁸ There used to be many more of these houses, but due to the FARC peace agreement, the demand is lower and the government has closed all but two (C01).

both parents (where applicable) to take classes. The demobilized combatants are paid \$8,000 Colombian pesos (COL\$) per day (slightly less than USD\$3) and are encouraged to save this money while their living expenses are fully paid in the safe house (C01, C02); however, many spent this small amount on mobile phone plans so that they could communicate with each other and friends and family outside the compound. Most participants in this study felt that it was laughable to try to save anything out of COL\$8,000 per day. Inside these compounds, demobilized combatants are supposed to have access to psychologists, and they receive classes in topics from basic literacy to how to send an email, open a bank account, and read a bus schedule (C01, C02). However, several respondents told me that they had never once spoken to a psychologist and said that only people with obvious psychological issues were referred to these services. As these programs are funded by taxpayer dollars, they remain fairly controversial among the Colombian public and some sources suggest that these benefits fuel public resentment towards ex-combatants (Galvis et al. 2016, C07).

Once these individually demobilized combatants have finished their two to three months at a safe house, they are released into the reintegration program, run by the ARN, where they can access anywhere from six months to six years of benefits—including a small monthly stipend—depending on what career and course of study they pursue; these decisions are made by the ex-combatant with recommendations and guidance from ARN staff and each ex-combatant's designated reintegration officers (C01, C02, C03). But these choices are often highly constrained by a participant's existing skill set, security risks, literacy level, access to resources, programming constraints, and lack of childcare; research suggests that single mothers have a particularly difficult time meeting the program

requirements (Mendez 2012). Some respondents indicated that one's reintegration pathways often depended heavily on individual reintegration officers. Participants' responses in this study also suggest that the supervisors in each safehouse—who had very different approaches to the people under their care—had a high degree of influence on what a demobilized person chose to do upon leaving the safehouse, including whether they returned to armed activity or not (B17, B18, B63). Participants in the reintegration program also receive no form of protection once they have left the safehouse. ARN staffers advise them to change their phone numbers regularly, and some in this study had been issued bullet-proof vests by the agency in the case of credible threats, but they are not provided with any real form of security. Making matters worse, some researchers who have conducted interviews at these safehouses have subsequently published their locations.

While the approach to reintegration benefits aims to be fair across the board by giving everyone the same treatment and approaching each person on a case-by-case basis, in reality this approach significantly disadvantages parents—and single mothers in particular. For example, a single mother ex-combatant supporting two or three children receives half as much as a married couple of two ex-combatants with no children. And a young man or woman with no dependents has a much greater ability to take advantage of the program's educational offerings compared to an ex-combatant with two or three small children to support. In addition, a person who joined an armed group at age ten and deserted after 30 years in the group receives the exact same benefits as someone who joined as an adult and spent four months in the group. Yet these two people clearly have different needs—not only in terms of psychological support but also in terms of learning general life skills. One psychologist working in the safe houses agreed that high-ranking deserters

needed a very different approach than rank-and-file combatants, but this is generally not possible within the constraints of the program (C01).

To remain eligible in the program, ex-combatants with children must demonstrate that they are financially supporting *all* of their children (as required by law), including ones not living with them, which is often a significant financial challenge given the lack of employment options and the fact that many ex-combatants have children with multiple partners (C01). There is also, theoretically, financial assistance to obtain a house and property (ARN 2016), but the requirements to access these benefits are complex and difficult for many in the demobilized population to understand, given that many only have basic literacy and numeracy skills. Or, the conditions are impossible to fulfill given this population's level of income relative to expenses. In fact, some participants in this study claimed that the government had promised them a house and were angry that this never happened, when in reality the benefits around obtaining housing are much more complex than the government simply "giving" them a house. Others had no idea that housing benefits even existed. This confusion applied to education benefits as well, as many respondents in this study believed that they could only receive education benefits up to a high school education—when on paper the program offers access to technical training and higher education under certain conditions. In addition, demobilized combatants are entitled to up to eight million pesos (approximately USD\$2,500) to start or acquire a business (Resolutions 1391/2011 and 754/2013). While this is a much larger sum than was given to the ex-AUC combatants (a fact noted with resentment by many ex-paramilitaries in this study), inflation must be considered, and the higher number was likely adjusted because the small sum given to AUC members was clearly insufficient to start a viable business (in

fact, most ex-AUC respondents in this study told stories of how they used this money but their business failed). However, while most participants in this study knew about this benefit, they did not adequately understand the conditions for claiming these funds and many said they felt robbed that they never received this money. Indeed, an ARN representative acknowledged that the majority of demobilized combatants did not claim their start-up funds because they failed to meet the detailed and complex conditions (C15).

As of December 2019, 48 percent of the ex-combatants that enrolled in the ARN program had completed the process and 11.5 percent were still in the process, which suggests a very high drop-out rate of 40.5 percent, and there is little data available for these ex-combatants who have dropped out. Separated by gender, 62 percent of women who entered reintegration finished the program, while only 45 percent of the men have done so. These statistics—if accurate—challenge prior scholarship indicating that women drop out of these programs at higher rates than men. There are several possible reasons for this gender imbalance: as some research shows that women demobilize without government assistance disproportionately more than men do (Ancil Avoine and Tillman 2015), it is possible that there is a self-selection effect and that women who did enroll in the program were the ones most likely to complete it. There is likely also something specific to men's challenges in reintegration that is preventing them from completing the program, but little research exists on this issue. However, research on recidivism shows that having a child makes recidivism less likely (Kaplan and Nussio 2018), and given the gender norms discussed earlier, men are less likely to be the primary caregivers of children, and are expected to be the breadwinners. Given the lack of employment options during and upon graduation of the program, these could be some of the driving factors causing men to drop

out at high rates. Among the ex-combatants who are in the program or completed it, 70 percent are employed—but due to Colombia’s large informal sector and the stigma that ex-combatants face (paired with low literacy, and lack of education and/or training), 74 percent of these are working in the informal sector, while only 26 percent are working in the formal sector (ARN 2019b). Arguably, these bleak employment prospects make re-enlistment into armed groups or criminal organizations more likely—particularly for men under pressure to provide for their families.

5.3 The Collective Demobilization Process – AUC Paramilitaries

Between 2003-2006, approximately 30,000 members of the AUC demobilized—or at least participated in demobilization ceremonies (Nussio 2011). This process was the Colombian government’s first attempt to demobilize a massive number of combatants all at once. As such, it was in many ways a “pilot” project from which the government and the ex-combatant population have learned many lessons—though these lessons have not always materialized in programmatic changes. Many critics within and outside Colombia say that this demobilization was not as a peace process at all (which suggests an agreement between enemies) but rather it was an agreement between allies—especially as the links between Uribe’s administration and the AUC became more clear (Nussio 2011). Indeed, as subsequent chapters will show, many (if not most) AUC members in this study saw the Colombian army as unquestionable allies and rarely as enemies. As noted in the preceding chapter, the overall legitimacy of these demobilizations has long been contested, and many emerging armed groups have ties to supposedly demobilized paramilitaries who received

government benefits and “completed” the reintegration process (Nussio 2011; Human Rights Watch 2005, 2010; Sontag 2016).

Before the demobilization process occurred, the AUC had estimated that approximately 15,000 troops would demobilize, but this number nearly doubled by the time disarmament took place, causing many critics to suggest that civilians were pretending to be AUC members to claim benefits (Nussio 2011). But respondents in this study pointed out that official troop counts often do not count people in support roles (especially women), or sex workers, urban militias, and informants, which may explain at least part of this discrepancy. Also, the high levels of stigma against AUC ex-combatants to this day, and the fact that many ex-paramilitaries hide their AUC past, suggest that there would be a significant social cost to falsely claiming AUC status—especially for women (B82, B87, B99). Nonetheless, there is sufficient evidence to suggest that a) some non-paramilitaries were indeed able to access DDR benefits due to lax eligibility criteria (though the exact number is not clear), and b) many actual paramilitaries never demobilized (Nussio 2011).

There were no women involved in the AUC negotiations; nonetheless, official records show that approximately 7 percent of the collectively demobilized paramilitaries were women (ARN 2019b). Lack of gender considerations or proper consultations with receiving communities also meant that for some women in areas with high levels of returning ex-paramilitaries, gender-based violence and overall insecurity went up; on the other hand, some communities reported more security as demobilized combatants took charge of community organizing (Tarnaala 2018). Testimonies in this study suggest that many women within the AUC were subjective to highly exploitative conditions and systematized rape, and many were single mothers both when they joined and when they

demobilized; however, there was little to nothing in the DDR program that addressed these special needs (B82, B87, B99). Indeed, both men and women ex-AUC members in this study derided the psycho-social support they received as “useless” or lamented the fact that they did not receive more assistance to deal with their trauma.

The financial benefits package that demobilizing paramilitaries received was similar to those for deserters in individual reintegration, but the amount of seed money they received was substantially smaller (two million Colombian pesos, or approximately USD \$615) and based on responses in this study, it was handed out with far fewer conditions attached. For example, several of the paramilitaries in this study said that they did receive start-up funds, but that the businesses they started failed quickly due a lack of proper training or business knowledge. Others said the amount was laughable in terms of what one would actually need to start a successful business. In addition, several said that they were tricked by higher ranking paramilitaries into handing over their funds for “collective” income-generating projects, but then those commanders simply left with all of the money.

Amnesty agreements were very controversial in this process, with many high-ranking officers receiving light sentences, if any. As part of the agreement, commanders and higher ranking officers responsible for crimes against humanity purportedly served reduced prison sentences as part of the aforementioned Law 975, or the “Justice and Peace Law” (New York Times 2005; Nussio 2011). However, participant responses in this study suggest that many commanders lied about their rank or how many years they had spent in the group in order to avoid prison time. Others never really disarmed at all but still collected benefits. And because of the resurgence of AUC-connected armed groups under different names, many communities continue to use the term “paramilitaries” because they do not

see the difference (Nussio 2011), which arguably makes reintegration for ex-paramilitaries who legitimately want to be law-abiding civilians very difficult. Indeed, the ex-AUC members in this study never used the word “*paramilitares*”, instead choosing to identify as “*autodefensas*” (self-defence forces), because of the stigma and confusion attached to the former term (discussed further in subsequent chapters).

While most ex-paramilitaries dispersed and went home after demobilization—or simply re-emerged as different armed groups—some organized themselves and negotiated with the government to settle in collective farming communities. At least two of these communities were established on large farming properties that had been expropriated by the government from drug traffickers, as mentioned in Chapter Four, although in general the communities around these farms are largely unaware that the residents are former members of the AUC (B76, B86, B87).³⁹

5.4 The Collective Demobilization Process – FARC-EP

The peace negotiations with the FARC that began in 2012 led to a necessary review of existing mechanisms for reintegration, as well as peace and justice mechanisms. Chapter Five of the final peace agreement defines an “Integral System of Truth, Justice, Reparation and Non-repetition” (Alto Comisionado para la Paz 2016), which includes three components: 1) an independent and non-judicial Truth Commission; 2) a special unit to search for missing persons; and 3) the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP)—the judicial entity in charge of administering the restorative justice mechanisms in the peace agreement. This controversial chapter was central in the public referendum on the peace accord. First,

³⁹ For this reason, and to respect the confidentiality of all participants, I have chosen not to disclose the locations of these communities.

the JEP is complex with highly technical elements, and some lower ranking ex-combatants have admitted to either being completely unaware of the JEP and other details on amnesty, or of not understanding it properly (B18).⁴⁰ Voters on the “No” side argued that the JEP was far too lenient on the guerrillas for serious crimes such as drug trafficking and child recruitment (Schmidt and Tovar, n.d.). Second, it was not clear if the JEP would apply to other actors in the armed conflict beyond the collectively demobilized FARC guerrillas. Third, some critics argued that Colombia already has a complex justice system that could handle issues around the armed conflict, thus making the JEP unnecessary (Schmidt and Tovar, n.d.). While FARC commanders responsible for crimes against humanity are technically supposed to—as with the AUC—serve reduced sentences in prison, the peace deal with the FARC has caused much discontent in Colombian society because most of the top leaders (aside from Jesús Santrich, who was arrested but then released, and has now re-armed) have been allowed to run for office without serving any prison time (BBC 2018b).

Further complicating matters, President Duque sent the JEP back to the legislature in March 2019, reopening a legal issue already decided by Congress, and receiving much international criticism for doing so (El Tiempo 2019b; The Economist 2019). Ex-guerrillas expressed heightened fears that this move undermined the peace accord, especially regarding the possibility that they could be arrested from within the protected reincorporation camps if the government reneged on portions of the agreement (The Economist 2019). And as noted earlier, compounding this sense of insecurity are the

⁴⁰For example, during the first round of fieldwork interviews in February 2018, several ex-combatants in a GAHD safe house became very agitated when police came to the compound and arrested one of their friends. They angrily confronted one of the supervisors because, in their view, they all had immunity for their crimes and their friend had been unjustly arrested. The supervisor had to repeatedly explain to them that they only had immunity for crimes committed in the context of the armed conflict. Their friend had been arrested for femicide, allegedly committed after he demobilized. This group of men was still enraged when I visited the next day, as they felt they had been misled about their immunity benefits.

verified 190 homicides, 13 disappearances and 39 attempted homicides of former FARC members—figures that do not include attacks, disappearances, and homicides of FARC deserters (Guterres 2019b, 2020). The FARC has also submitted 276 cases of missing persons to the government (Guterres 2019d). This targeting of FARC members—along with the historical memory of thousands of UP members being executed decades earlier—has made demobilized FARC combatants extremely fearful for their safety, and many in this study said that they do not trust the government to sufficiently protect them.

The collective demobilization program originally housed the FARC ex-combatants in 26 ETCRs (Territorial Spaces for Training and Reincorporation)—originally called “zonas veredales”—across the country, mostly in areas where the FARC traditionally had a strong presence. Each ex-combatant receives COP\$700,000 (approximately USD\$215) monthly, which is 90 percent of the current Colombian minimum wage. They also receive a biweekly allotment of non-perishable food (any fresh items they must purchase themselves) and rent-free housing. The higher monthly benefit and free housing and food—while still insufficient, given the poor housing conditions and limited access to healthcare—has generated significant resentment from other groups of ex-combatants, especially deserters. Like ex-combatants in the individual program, if collectively demobilized FARC combatants meet the conditions, they too are each eligible for eight million pesos (approximately USD\$2,500) of start-up funds. However, the FARC command structure has been pushing for collective projects, and most of the currently functioning collective projects have been funded through individual ex-combatants’ benefit funds, rather than the promised project funding from the government (Guterres 2019c). As of March 2020, 49 collective projects had been approved and 43 had received

funding (Guterres 2020). However, because land tenure for many of the ETCRs is uncertain, it is not clear what will happen to the collective projects that have been established on rented land if the government does not extend or permanently secure tenure. During fieldwork for this project, it was also unclear whether the benefits, due to expire in August 2019, would be extended again—and this was causing much anxiety amongst ETCR residents. When the legal status of the ETCRs expired on August 15, 2019, the government announced that there would be a two-year “transition period” during which the provision of services, food, health care and security would be extended (Guterres 2019d). However, the basic monthly allowance was only extended until December 2019.

The ETCRs are protected by two security perimeters—the outer perimeter is the Colombian military while the inner perimeter is operated by the National Police. However, during this fieldwork, while I certainly passed through these security perimeters, in my repeated comings and goings I was stopped and questioned by the police only once when entering a camp, and only once while leaving a different one. Otherwise my Colombian assistant and I passed in and out without question. I also observed many cars and motorcycles passing back and forth with no security checks. Indeed, many ex-combatants in this study did not feel that the security provided was keeping them safe in any substantive way. The one camp that had members of the Secretariat present had several armed bodyguards that immediately greeted any unknown people entering the camp (myself included, until they began to recognize me). Many of these camps are also extremely isolated and far from urban centres, calling into question how “integrated” the ex-combatants really are with Colombian society. Most lack proper access roads or adequate services to maintain profitable economic projects (Segura 2019). For example, in one

ETCR that I visited in southern Colombia, access to the nearest main town was only possible if the river was low and ferry crossing was possible, as there was no bridge. If the river was too high, residents had to take a lengthy detour, putting children and other vulnerable individuals at great risk if they needed to access emergency medical services. This also made importing agricultural goods to market very burdensome and expensive. Thousands of ex-FARC members have since left the transition zones—with approximately 9,225 now living outside the ETCRs—largely due to disillusionment with government promises and the lack of economic opportunities (ARN 2019c; Felbab-Brown 2018; Guterres 2018c). While the ARN statistics claim that only 739 ex-FARC members are classified as “whereabouts unknown”, UN reports suggest that this number is much larger (ARN 2019c; Guterres 2019b).

Fieldwork for this study also revealed drastic differences in the quality of the ETCRs depending on who was living there and where the ETCR was located. For example, in one ETCR in northern Colombia, there were several top-level commanders, and in this camp the UN and ARN visited daily, multiple NGOs came in to conduct activities with the ex-combatants, and several productive projects were running. However, in an ETCR in central Colombia, there were no high-level commanders left, there was no clear command structure or person in authority, and as a result there were few economic projects, poor living conditions, and an overall sense of idleness—along with heavy drinking by many of the younger men. In another ETCR in southern Colombia, the space was very well organized due to a clear command structure, with several economic projects running, but the camp was a veritable ghost town due to how many ex-combatants had left due to legitimate security concerns: an armed gunman had managed to enter the camp and non-

fatally shoot an ex-combatant living there only one month before my fieldwork visit took place. At the time of my visit, there were police officers stationed at the entry to this camp checking everyone who entered—which was not the case at the other ETCRs. In early 2019, overall maintenance on ETCR infrastructure had slowed even though two camps needed urgent improvements in order to prevent serious health risks to at least 400 ex-combatants (Guterres 2019c).

5.5 Tensions between Collective and Individual Demobilization

Another area of tension in Colombia's DDR has been between the government's preference and experience with individual demobilizations versus the FARC leadership's insistence on a collective process. These clashes arose during the Santos administration's negotiations with the FARC and increased with Duque's attempts to revise the peace accord, especially as funding is an ongoing issue. Rather than ex-combatants going home (or to another location) individually, the FARC guerrillas were initially housed collectively in the ETCRs with the aim of creating cooperative income-generating projects. However, as noted, the majority of collectively demobilized FARC members have left the ETCRs, and sustainability of these projects and lack of adequate training and infrastructure also remain as significant concerns. The ex-combatants remaining in the ETCRs continue to live in temporary housing (originally intended for only six months of use), which has become a source of great resentment, and the UN has cited housing for ex-combatants as an urgent concern (Guterres 2019d). The FARC itself has identified 70 new settlements, outside of ETCRs, where FARC members are carrying out their collective reintegration. In addition, larger numbers of these FARC members are moving to major cities, including Bogota (655),

Villavicencio (211), Cali (206) and Medellín (202), further dismantling the collective strength and hierarchy of the group (Guterres 2019d). Compounding these tensions, during the peace negotiations some FARC members opted to enter the individual demobilization rather than the collective one because, they claimed, the FARC leadership was demanding a significant portion of their monthly reintegration allowances in order to fund the FARC political party (B02, B47, C01); high-level commanders in this study disputed this allegation.

The additional difference between beneficiaries in these two streams (individual vs. collective) is that the majority of people in the individual process are deserters from various groups—that is, they left the group because they wanted a different life and took great risks to escape. They are then intentionally housed with a mix of ex-combatants from other groups, to encourage them to release their guerrilla/fighter/criminal identity and transition to a civilian identity. All ranks are treated the same, so someone who was a commander does not get different treatment than a foot soldier—again, an attempt to transition to civilian life and to replace combatant identities. Guerrillas in the collective process obviously have a higher percentage of committed combatants (though this study indicates that some deserters were still ideologically committed to their groups, while some loyalists were not) and in many ways retain their group identity and group hierarchy. For example, in the ETCRs visited for this study, it was clear that rank in the group continued to matter significantly after demobilization, but the maintenance of the group's military structure appeared to be impeding reintegration. Reintegration experts that I talked to in Colombia also stated that ex-combatants in collective (i.e., mandatory) demobilization processes, whether guerrillas or paramilitaries, have a much harder time reintegrating than those in

the individual process (C01, C03). While to date very little systematic comparison has been done on the reintegration experiences of deserters versus loyalists, one potential reason for the difference—highlighted by an ARN staff member—is that those in the individual programs have stronger internal motivations to make civilian life work for them (C03). In addition, those in the collective process who have remained in the ETCRs tend to stay within their FARC networks, while deserters are forced to make new networks once they have left the group—which likely also affects their reintegration experiences. This same staff member noted that many ex-combatants in group demobilization processes (i.e., AUC in 2003-2006 and FARC in 2016) did not want to demobilize but were ordered to—raising the risks of dissident groups and recidivism, which is indeed a pressing issue in Colombia. In addition, a staff member at the GAHD noted that some ex-FARC combatants have come to them and asked to leave the collective process and join the individual process instead (C01). But this has also gone the other way, with ex-FARC combatants who were in the individual stream asking commanders in the ETCRs if they could join the collective process—with mixed results (discussed in subsequent chapters). The difficulties that reintegration staff members appear to be having with collectively demobilized combatants also help to explain the government’s preference for individual demobilizations. These tensions indicate that, when studying demobilization and reintegration, it is crucial to systematically distinguish between deserters who demobilized willingly and combatants who only did so because they were following orders.

5.6 Conclusion

As this chapter demonstrates, over the last two decades in particular, Colombia has incorporated many changes and attempts at improvement in its approaches to

demobilization and reintegration. But several major challenges remain. First, there continue to be tensions between the government's preference for (and experience with) individual demobilization and the FARC leaders' preference for collective demobilization—whether the lack of government funds for collective projects is a deliberate response to this tension is unclear, but it does appear that the government is not fulfilling its promises to deliver productive, collective economic projects for FARC ex-combatants. Some of these ex-combatants feel that the government's recalcitrance in this regard is yet another deliberate political strategy to disperse and weaken the group.

Second, DDR in Colombia still often pays lip service to gender without meaningful changes that directly address the specific challenges that women ex-combatants face—or the challenges that many men ex-combatants face when shifting to civilian life in a society where violent, armed men are often the ones with power and status. As seen in the previous chapter, progressive laws are not enough: to truly challenge gender norms in Colombia is to go up against the influential conservative religious components of Colombian society. As a result, gender is still entirely conflated with women in the reintegration process, and even then, there are significant gaps that block women from fully participating in reintegration programs, especially in terms of the lack of childcare for single mothers. However, the fact that women complete the reintegration program at higher rates than men suggests there is something else impeding men's reintegration—or at least, their completion of official programs—that is understudied and inadequately addressed. But this too requires a gender-based analysis.

Third, confusion around what benefits ex-combatants are entitled to remains a problem, with many appearing to be unclear on what they need to do to access higher

education options or capital to start businesses. This confusion extends to their psycho-social assistance benefits, with many ex-combatants only vaguely understanding that they were expected to use part of their monthly stipend for this, and with little knowledge on how to make this happen or awareness that such assistance would actually help them. Because of this confusion, there is much ongoing resentment from ex-combatants toward the government, with many saying that the government continued to make false promises with no intention of delivering anything. Some participants in this study entered the demobilization program after deserting because they had heard from friends that the promises were real and that the benefits were good, while others felt disillusioned by the failure of those promises and had told other ex-combatants that it was not worth enrolling. Also, some reintegration officials expressed concern to me that the ELN would be watching the FARC reincorporation process quite closely, and if the government failed to deliver, a peace agreement with the ELN seemed far less likely. Because the Colombian government is using their individual demobilization program in part to encourage desertion, it is critical for the government to convey through actual practice that these benefits are real and that the program is not a scam. Included in this is assurance that ex-combatants will be protected and that they will not be exposed as ex-guerrillas or ex-paramilitaries by enrolling in the program—as some feel they have been.

Chapter Six: Competing Frames of Victimhood

As noted in the literature review, the study of frames looks at how individuals organize and make sense of their experiences (Goffman 1974). While some frames are used strategically and deliberately to achieve certain goals, other frames can emerge organically (Autesserre 2009; Benford and Snow 2000). These frames use labels, narratives and identities to construct and reinforce meaning and—in situations of social movements or armed rebellion—these frames can help both to recruit and retain membership. However, when frames of rebel groups are contested by the government, opposing groups, or civilians, what determines which frame wins, and what are the effects of that outcome? What happens when frame-makers lose credibility and/or when frame resonance breaks down?

Of all the various frames used by the government and non-state armed groups in Colombia, the frame of victimhood is particularly durable—but it is one of the most highly contested. As Krystalli notes, “Victimhood does not merely describe an experience of harm; it is also a political status and identity that invites particular performances from the state, human rights actors, and conflict-affected individuals” (2019, ii). Indeed, in the last ten years in Colombia, victimhood itself has become highly politicized and often contested, creating a hierarchy of victims with far-reaching implications for lasting peace. For example, in 2008, a Victims’ Rights Act was approved by the Colombian Senate but then encountered opposition from President Uribe’s administration, who argued that victims of State forces should not be included, as this would morally equate the Colombian Armed Forces with illegal groups (Ghilarducci 2018; Isaacson 2008; Mora Lemus 2010). Clearly, discriminating amongst victims based on their victimizer is highly problematic in terms of

transitional justice and international law, and this is an argument that many ex-combatants in this study adopted to varying degrees.

In 2011, a Victims' Law was put formally into place to recognize the rights and reparations due to victims, cited by some scholars as the "most ambitious reparations law in its history" (Summers 2012, 219), and in 2014, the High Commissioner for Peace in Colombia declared an "era of the victims" (Krystalli 2019).⁴¹ Being officially recognized as a victim is, of course, critical, because that recognition influences who gets compensation and in what form, and who can participate in public policy forums (Isaacson 2008; Krystalli 2019). And the four year peace process with the FARC included several mechanisms through which officially recognized victims could participate in the proceedings (Bouvier 2016; Krystalli 2019). But not all officially recognized victims receive reparations, and very few actually get to participate in public forums.⁴²

In this work, following the analysis of Krystalli, I use "victim" not as a simple synonym to describe someone who has experienced harm, but as a "political status and category that different actors vie for, reject, wield, or contest" (Krystalli 2019, 10). And in this research, many ex-combatants self-identified as victims but cannot (and likely will not) ever be officially recognized by the State or the transitional justice process as victims. Indeed, the distinction between perpetrators and victims is often so reified in post-conflict situations that to be considered a "true" victim, one must be completely innocent, even though in most conflict situations this distinction is rarely so simple (McEvoy and McConnachie 2012). Research shows that the way victimhood is constructed and

⁴¹ While a comprehensive overview of the Colombian Victims' Movement is beyond the scope of this work, for an excellent analysis of civilian victim hierarchies in Colombia, see Krystalli 2019.

⁴² For example, approximately one million of the nine million officially recognized victims in Colombia have received reparations to date (Krystalli 2019).

reproduced in transitional justice—often heavily reliant on this prerequisite of innocence—can be highly problematic for lasting peace in situations where victims may have also committed human rights abuses (McEvoy and McConnachie 2012).

Victimhood, then, is symbolic, hierarchical, political, and contested—it is a carefully constructed and strategically utilized frame. While claiming victimhood can certainly have negative connotations in certain contexts (e.g., “playing the victim”), victimhood can also be a source of empowerment, resistance, and collective action. Indeed, “injustice frames” are one of the most common frames utilized by social movement leaders to inspire collective action (Benford and Snow 2000). Not only do the FARC and ELN guerrillas use victimhood frames to justify taking up arms and using violence to challenge the government, but they also frequently invoke the narrative that they were only acting in self-defence due to this victimization, pointing to the government as the “real terrorist”. However, this frame of victimhood was challenged by deserters, paramilitaries, and the government, in different ways.

The most common reason to desert armed groups, for both men and women in this sample, was fear of violence, witnessing violence, or being a victim of violence from within their own group (including the fear of forced abortion): 18 of the 38 deserters, or 47 percent (five women, 13 men) emphasized this as their main reason for leaving (B01, B02, B03, B06, B08, B11, B16, B17, B18, B19, B20, B31, B36, B63, B66, B73, B74, B75). Second, 11 of the 24 ex-paramilitaries (46 percent) said that they too wanted to desert—and some even tried and were recaptured—but they were too scared of what the group would do to their families; many of them also used language of victimhood to justify why they stayed in the group (B77-B80, B87, B88, B91, B93, B99). Some deserters in this study had also

tried to claim benefits through the Colombian Victims' Unit—because they had joined the armed group as minors (but deserted as adults) and considered themselves to be, above all else, victims of the armed conflict. This key finding indicates that victimhood can work both ways—to either keep recruits in or push them out—depending on the components of the frame and who is creating it. It suggests that the cost-benefit calculations, or at least, the costs of group membership versus the costs of leaving, are very important in desertion decisions but that these calculations depend on the structure, patterns of violence, and ideology of the group.

This chapter begins with a description of the victimhood frame as utilized by the guerrillas—and especially the FARC—to recruit and retain members, and to build legitimacy. Then the chapter examines how this frame has been contested by government and paramilitary actors, and deserters, analyzing the effects of these contests. In particular, the chapter will examine how the government uses gendered victim narratives—portraying women guerrillas as victims of their own male comrades—as a challenge to the FARC's collective claim of victimhood and declarations of protecting women's rights. Finally, the chapter looks at what happens when these victim and self-defence frames break down—or when guerrillas accept the government frame over their own.

6.1 The Guerrilla Frame of Victimhood

This section explores three key components of the guerrilla frame of victimhood: the campesino identity, the gendered dimensions of victimhood, and the claim of acting in self-defence. While, as noted above, victimhood amongst civilians in Colombia is highly contested and hierarchical, I examine this framing contest between the armed groups and the government as separate from—but still influenced by—the civilian debate on what

makes a “good” victim (Krystalli 2019). In the coding process, themes of victimhood, self-defence, trauma, and discrimination came up repeatedly across all respondent categories. For example, passages among ex-combatant interviews referring to campesinos, either identifying as a campesino or talking about defending campesinos or being persecuted due to the campesino identity, were coded 197 times. Passages related to gender-based violence were coded 108 times, and passages related to fear and insecurity appeared 325 times, including 75 coded passages about threats from within the group. In addition, I coded 54 passages where respondents directly self-identified as victims, and another 113 passages discussing the psychological trauma they had experienced.

6.1.1 The Campesino Identity

One of the key determinants of frame resonance with constituents of a social movement is the “extent to which the frame taps into existing cultural values, beliefs, narratives, [and] folk wisdom” (Benford and Snow 2000, 624), and this aspect of the guerrillas’ frame construction is particularly clear in the history of campesino neglect and victimization by the State. While the war in Colombia may not technically fit the definition of an “ethnic conflict”, there are strong racialized⁴³ aspects to the ongoing armed violence. Armed conflict and disputes over territory have been particularly intense in regions with high levels of Indigenous and Afro-descendant populations, and both of these groups have often been recruited by armed actors in numbers disproportionate to their overall proportion of the population (Watts 2017). But the key divide in the conflict—based more on class and skin colour than specific ethnicities—is that between urban dwellers, rich landowners, and

⁴³ Following Courtheyn, I use “racialization” to describe a socially constructed process “through which people are *made* or *marked* ‘other’” (2018, 2645, original emphasis).

rural campesinos. Importantly, while “campesino” is a non-ethnic designation in Latin America and is typically translated to “peasant” or “small-scale farmer” in English, this translation is problematic due to the pejorative connotations of the former and lack of cultural identity in the latter (Burnyeat 2018). Thus, this chapter uses the term campesino to describe a “social identity category of someone whose customs, beliefs, lifestyle and social, economic political and cultural practices are linked to rural land and economy” (López 2019, 250). As this chapter will show, in Colombia this campesino identity is strongly linked not only to rural land, but also to victimhood, resistance, displacement, and persecution by the State.

As noted earlier, the Colombian conflict has affected rural areas to a much greater degree than urban centres, due to coca production, low presence of State forces and/or State infrastructure, guerrilla and paramilitary control of territory, and the protection of drug trafficking routes, among other factors (Idler 2019; Ramírez 2011). As a result, rural residents—predominantly campesinos, Indigenous people, and Afro-descendants—have been internally displaced at alarming rates, with well over seven million internally displaced people (IDPs) since 1985 (UNHCR 2017). Of these, UNHCR estimates suggest that 2.5 percent are Indigenous, and 10.5 percent are Afro-descendant (UNHCR 2017).⁴⁴ Research also suggests that about 90 percent of displaced campesinos resettle in urban areas (Albuja and Ceballos 2010), which necessitates an abrupt change of livelihood options and an increased dependence on the State for services. Campesinos are generally not considered Indigenous or Afro-descendant, and they usually self-identify (or are

⁴⁴ While the 2005 census says that Afro-descendants make up 10 percent of Colombia’s population, these numbers have been disputed by some Afro-descendant leaders, who argue that this number is far higher (Minority Rights 2019).

categorized by the State) as “mestizo” or mixed race (Courtheyn 2018; Lederach 2017; López 2019). However, even though the race lexicon separates campesinos from the distinct ethnicities of Indigenous and Afro-descendant populations, these farmers remain racialized in Colombia and face high levels of discrimination, often viewed as “less than human” by the upper classes (Courtheyn 2018). And, across Latin America, skin colour—rather than a specific ethnicity—is often a determinant of ethnic inequality and discrimination, with what Telles calls a “pigmentocracy” that places lighter skinned people at the top of the ethnic hierarchy and darker skinned people at the bottom (2014).

All of this discrimination, inequality, and racism creates the foundation from which the FARC (and, to a lesser extent, the ELN) have been able to build their strong frame of victimhood. The campesino identity is a critical component of this frame. For most rural campesinos, insurgent or otherwise, their identity is inextricably linked to the State as a perpetrator of violence against them, which has enabled the FARC to frame themselves a campesino army (army of “the people”) that has been forced to take up arms due to State actions. For example, four of the FARC loyalists in this sample had grown up with parents who were members of the Unión Patriótica (the FARC political party in the 1980s) and had either witnessed their parents being assassinated or remembered being constantly displaced due to violent threats (B28, B36, B46, B58). Indeed, most guerrilla respondents in this study said that those who rule Colombia are rich oligarchs who do not care about the campesinos—and Colombia’s history indicates that they have foundations for this claim. Some civilian campesinos have claimed that the war is a deliberate effort to get rid of them entirely, while others have said that the State sees them as trash, not truly part of Colombian society, and thus has fully abandoned them (Courtheyn 2018; Ramírez 2011). Indeed, even

after decades in cities, displaced campesinos continue to be excluded both politically and socio-economically (López 2019). Since the peace process, there has also been considerable debate on whose experiences of victimization warrant the most attention, giving rise to a “hierarchy of suffering” (Krystalli 2019).

In addition, while Indigenous and Afro-descendant populations can make legal or ethnic claims to land (even if not often successful), campesinos without a specific ethnic heritage cannot make these claims and thus formulate political strategies around land based on the language of belonging and victimhood (López 2019)—language that has become key in the FARC’s victimhood frame. For example, one FARC loyalist woman explained that these disputes over land were why, in her view, most campesinos supported the FARC:

In our case, with the Government of Uribe with the famous “democratic security”... the “democratic security”, well, it consists of all possible forms of war to end the Organization and the foundations of our Organization. And for them, who was the foundation of the Organization? Campesinos, those who supported us... The campesinos. The ones who helped us. It is because they are human beings and if one arrives in the region and shares with them ... these are regions where there is no government present... where there are no roads, where there is no energy, where there are no means, and the only possible force is the Organization that arrives there. So, then people become very close friends with us. But they are not to blame that they are abandoned by the State. Because of course they will give you support. (*Mari*, B58)

Some loyalist FARC respondents also framed their campesino identity in terms of pride that they—despite victimization at the hands of the Colombian government and its military assistance from the United States—had been able to resist for decades:

Look how the organization FARC-EP was the only organization that voluntarily resisted and confronted the Colombian government, and not only the Colombian government, but also the government of the United States. Because it was not only

here in Colombia but with all of their high-end technology, they fought us, men and women campesinos, many of whom did not know how to write nor read, but who had the capacity and the clarity to say: this is the only road we have left, to achieve change in this country one day. (*Reina*, B40)

While it might seem like pride does not fit within the victimhood framing, this sense of pride was rooted directly in the narrative that *despite* the oppression and neglect they had experienced, they had been able to resist. This sense of pride arising out of victimhood was compounded by the explanation that the only reason they took up arms was because of the government's treatment of them. Indeed, the low levels of education of most respondents had led them to believe that they had few alternatives besides farming or fighting—which created resonance with this sense of victimhood and lack of options.

For many rural residents of Colombia, the most significant role the State has played in their lives has been through its absence (Londoño and Nieto 2006; Nieto-Valdivieso 2017; Ramírez 2011). Indeed, many respondents discussed how, as children, the only “government” they had ever seen was the guerrillas or the paramilitaries. Alternatively, for some, the only State presence they had ever seen were male soldiers; that is, in many rural areas, particularly borderlands with high levels of drug trafficking, the government had a patriarchal and aggressive security presence, but nothing else—no social services, clinics, schools, or proper infrastructure (Idler 2019; Ramírez 2011). For others, the State presence most influential in their lives was in the aerial fumigation of coca crops—fumigation that also killed any other crops that farmers were growing (Ramírez 2011). In these rural, highly neglected areas of Colombia where non-state armed groups held (and often still hold) power, civilian relationships with the State have been complex and often violent, which has strengthened the victimhood frame's resonance.

While Indigenous and Afro-descendant respondents did not label themselves as campesinos—reflecting the ethnic dimension of this supposedly “non-ethnic” identity—they often placed themselves in solidarity with the campesinos in terms of facing the same poverty and government neglect. Similarly, some campesino respondents said that they had always identified strongly with Indigenous communities, while many emphasized that everyone was equal in the FARC and that skin colour or ethnicity did not matter. In fact, many respondents seemed confused by my ethnicity question and were not sure how to answer. When I asked about racism, most respondents (from all three of the armed groups) agreed that Colombian society was very racist against Afro-descendants, but the answers were more diverse about discrimination against Indigenous peoples. Some Indigenous respondents did not feel that there was necessarily racism against them in Colombian society, stating that the discrimination for being an ex-combatant was far worse. But when asked, most Indigenous and Afro-descendant respondents agreed that racism was much worse in Colombian society than within FARC or ELN ranks—where they insisted it did not exist. Indeed, “racism” was sometimes used by respondents to mean any kind of discrimination based on identity, and several respondents spoke of facing compounded discrimination due to gender, race, and class:

You mean, in the life from there [in the armed group] compared to coming here, is there racism? Oh, of course! Racism not just for your colour or race, but just for the fact that you are poor. Those in power discriminate against us for being poor, for the fact that we are poor, and no more... now imagine if I'm Indigenous and I am poor, well, I face a double discrimination, just for being Indigenous and poor...and for being a woman. And for being a woman. So now: for being Indigenous, for being a woman, for being poor, and for having belonged to the FARC. (*Paula*, B24)

As most of the respondents in the ETCRs pointed to their campesino backgrounds and/or living amidst poverty and unpredictable violence as their main reasons for taking up arms, a shared sense of being simultaneously abandoned and exploited by the State became a strong and cohesive force, a collective victimhood:

Then FARC enters with this work, no? ... to wake up the campesino from that [ignorance], that we had equal rights like any citizen living in Bogotá, in the big cities, because the government has never been interested in the development of the campesino...”. (*Mafe*, B29)

6.1.2 Gendered Victimhood

As stated in previous chapters, Colombia’s war has long been highly gendered. War is never gender neutral, of course, as men’s and women’s experiences can be vastly different: men and boys are more likely to be executed or targeted for recruitment, and women and girls are more likely to be sexually assaulted, enslaved, widowed, displaced, and/or murdered as retaliation against another armed group—though these categories often overlap (Carpenter 2006). In Colombia, the war has been gendered even further by the rhetoric and actions of the armed groups and the State. Because the leftist guerrillas adopted a discourse of gender equality, and then actively recruited women in order to demonstrate their commitment to fighting against the country’s dominant *machismo*, those defending the status quo (i.e., the government and the paramilitaries) stood against those values and thus protected entrenched gender norms. And while the Colombian State actually has very robust laws about women’s rights and gender equality, rural areas in particular still ascribe to very traditional gender norms. Indeed, for many campesino communities, this *machismo* is very prevalent and the reality for women in terms of gender inequality is much more challenging than it is in urban centres, where women attend university in high numbers,

hold key government positions, and run for office, among other professions (Ramírez 2011). Within their victimhood frame, the guerrillas utilize language of gender equality and a mission of fighting harmful gender norms to create resonance—particularly among its women members. This gendered element of the frame also specifically affects and is affected by how the victimhood frame is contested by the government (discussed further below).

Loyalist men in the FARC, for example, often described their victimhood in terms of the loss of land and/or inability to obtain land, or in terms of the general government neglect of rural areas. Men in the ETCRs were especially frustrated with not having land that they could farm, frequently expressing the sentiment that “a campesino without land is nothing”. There was a functioning farming collective at one ETCR, but it could only provide enough work for a few men in the fields, and a few women who ran the shop and kitchen for the farm—sources said that 25 people in total worked there.⁴⁵ One man recalled a play that the guerrillas would put on during their cultural hour (before demobilization) called “Juan Without Land”, which depicted a male campesino that “invaded land”, presumably belonging to elites, in order to be able to work and live with his family (B59). Another man explained why getting land from the government was more important than any other part of the peace deal: “I was a campesino, I’ve worked the land since I was little... we campesinos, we don’t need riches, but we need to be able to work the land, every day” (*Vesino*, B23). Indeed, when I asked ex-combatants in the ETCRs about future jobs and aspirations, almost all of them expressed a desire to stay in the country, but men in particular emphasized that they needed to farm, saying that urban life was far too

⁴⁵ I was told that about 20-25 people worked and lived at the farm. When we visited, six men were working the fields and there were three women in the kitchen.

stressful and strange for them. Several male respondents were only marginally literate and quite self-conscious of this fact (whereas the women were more likely to proudly state that they could read and write and never indicated any embarrassment about levels of literacy). Many respondents even felt that the city was dangerous—a unique perspective given the millions of Colombians that have fled to urban centres due to the armed conflict in the countryside. To illustrate this fear, one man said:

I, as a campesino, never thought of leaving the countryside. The city is another world for us, the campesino. And in the city, one is exposed daily to near death, because you do not know if you go out and ... and a cycle, a motorcycle, a taxi, a truck will run you over, or someone will simply come out with a knife [and say]: "Well, give me what you have". (*Vesino*, B23)

Thus, the campesino identity for men in particular was formulated around this sense of being rural farmers who were resilient and hard-working, victimized by the State, and simply could not function in urban life. This identity was clearly informed by gender norms of men as providers and protectors. Indeed, many men in the ETCRs did not feel like there were any other options for them aside from working the land as small-scale farmers, saying that the land was the main thing they had been fighting for all these years. Now that the fighting was over, and they still did not have land, many respondents felt resentful, and some lower-ranking guerrilla men felt that their educated and well-connected leaders had been prepared for politics and (urban) civilian life, whereas they had had no preparation at all.

The other strong component of male guerrilla victimhood that helped to build resonance of the overall victimhood frame was the recounting of the false positives scandal. As noted in previous chapters, the Colombian military (and, to a lesser extent, the National Police) was responsible for thousands of civilian extrajudicial executions between 2002-

2010, where the victims were dressed up in military fatigues and counted as guerrilla “battle deaths”—and these “false positives” were overwhelmingly boys and men (Rojas Bolaños and Benavides 2017). Even the widely adopted euphemism of “false positives”—as opposed to calling the deaths what they were: extrajudicial executions of civilians—was seen by respondents as a government attempt to diminish the significance of these crimes. Several respondents pointed to this scandal as evidence that the military was systemically eliminating campesinos, and particularly men, whether they were actually guerrillas or not:

This is the bourgeois army: they get paid to kill us; to kill campesinos. Because of that they killed civilians, they passed them off... as guerrillas, they put camouflage on them. And this is how it is: the government asks for results, and [soldiers] don't give results, they don't kill a guerrilla, they don't kill anyone. They kill a civilian and they say he's a guerrilla. (*Adrián*, B44).\

Several deserters also mentioned the false positives scandal, as evidence of the government's ongoing persecution of campesinos:

For example, in the Álvaro Uribe government, all the false positives. They found boys, and just like that, they took them and bang—they killed them. Moreover, they took campesinos and shot them in the back and then said they were guerrillas killed in combat. (*Andrés*, B18)

Indeed, this narrative of victimhood with the government killing campesino men and boys—and thus forcing them to take up arms as their only option for survival—was repeated in many interviews and informal conversations:

All the minors at that time—because I was a child too—they put us there to starve,⁴⁶ under an orange bush, and the others, well, they took them over there. We heard the screams, from where we were, we heard the screams... they killed 17. There they

⁴⁶ He used the phrase “comer pasto” (to eat grass) here, which is a metaphorical expression used amongst the guerrillas to signify being forced to endure extreme hunger.

killed two brothers of mine... and they killed my dad and they killed one of my grandfathers.

[Me: The army?]

Yes, the army. And that lasted ... we lived with that fear for about a month. And then the guerrillas began to appear more frequently. They began, the FARC, began to come there, to appear more frequently, to talk to us, to ask what we thought [of the situation]. To look at what they were, what the army was, what the police were.

(Philippe, FARC, B27)

Women FARC loyalists, however, expressed a different version of campesino victimhood in relation to State forces than the men, largely due to their experiences of gender-based violence and sexual assault perpetrated by the military and paramilitary forces. These experiences of gendered victimhood gave rise to the “insurgent feminism” that many FARC women have since claimed—discussed in depth in the next chapter. The choice to use “insurgent feminism” encapsulates the combative/insurgent stance of wanting to change society (and/or overthrow the government) combined with the primacy of women’s rights and gender equality, largely inspired by the systemic discrimination and victimization that the women have experienced. Thus, while the insurgent feminist identity primarily reinforces the revolution frame (Chapter Seven), it is also important in building resonance in the victimhood frame. For women guerrillas, the very valid fear of being raped by military or paramilitary groups (which many of them saw as one and the same) was a strong motivator to join the FARC or the ELN, which in general did not use sexual assault against civilians as a tactic⁴⁷ (C10, C13, Grupo de Memoria Histórica 2016)). As noted earlier, the paramilitaries used sexual violence to control territory, to punish opposing

⁴⁷ Previous chapters have outlined the prevalence of gender-based violence in Colombia, and a lawyer with the Colombian Victim’s Unit confirmed that most registered cases of sexual violence in the armed conflict had been perpetrated by the paramilitaries (C13). Some reports suggest, however, that sexual violence perpetrated by guerrillas was prevalent but much more hidden (Grupo de Memoria Histórica 2016).

forces by assaulting wives and girlfriends of guerrilla commanders, and to humiliate and stigmatize women thought to be associated with guerrillas (Grupo de Memoria Histórica 2016). Indeed, many respondents (male and female) noted proudly that their large numbers of women showed that they were clearly different from what they saw as the ruthless paramilitaries and the corrupt military. One woman explained how this fear of sexual violence from other armed groups, combined with a lack of alternative options, drove her to join the FARC at age 12:

I studied for six months, four months, in a school and I left and never got the diploma. So, for me that was a setback. And second, with all those massacres that people were doing, the paramilitaries, I was very afraid of that, and more so because I was a woman. Because, well, they also tortured the men, but they did worse things to the women. (*Valen*, B52)

Indeed, while like the men this violence from the State was often given by women respondents as a reason for taking up arms, the type of victimhood was different. Men emphasized the lack of land and the State murders of boys and men, while women emphasized sexual violence and the fear and insecurity that resulted from losing men in their communities. For example, one woman said:

So, we the women, our mothers, our grandmothers, our women ancestors, have been the ones who have suffered most in this war, and that have suffered most because we are widows. Here there are widows, women who lost their parents, women without children, because their children were killed, women victims of displacement, human rights violations, rape, total psychological violation...you cannot be peaceful due to the fact that you are a woman because, because you know that the time could return where a husband has to watch how they raped his wife and he could not do anything, his mother raped, his daughters, and the mother too, and no. I mean, that is something crazy, and I mean, I say that no, no, no, no one resists. (*Mafe*, B29)

Many FARC women (including deserters) in this study were also frustrated about the insistence of the government and Colombian media to portray them as victims of their own group (see section 6.2.1), particularly around themes of sexual violence. (Notably, ELN deserters were less reticent to describe themselves as victims of their commanders and comrades). Many FARC women strongly contested this government frame because it did not resonate with their own experiences, and because they saw the frame-makers (i.e., politicians and the mainstream media) as having no credibility. The women spoke at length about how women were raped, abused, and murdered all over Colombia with total impunity, using this to illustrate that the government did not care about women at all, and to explain why they needed their insurgent feminism. Most of these loyalist women said that they felt safer once inside the guerrilla organization than they did as civilians:

In a certain way there was trust and that respect between the guerrillas, but do we already have that here [in civilian life]? No. First, because of this bad opinion of all women and second, because there is no respect, yes?...Meanwhile there [in the guerrilla] it was different, there it was, many times there were 50 men and four women and well, you were never scared of anything because you knew that inside the organization there was respect. But already one here—and there were no vices [there], there wasn't anything—and a women here for example goes out in the middle of ten or five men, knowing that there is lots of [social] decay, that the one who doesn't smoke marijuana is a rapist, or [wondering] which one is a rapist like that, you know? Yes, you have bad thoughts. (*Reina*, B40)

Some women loyalists felt that, due to the government neglect, the FARC was the only organization in Colombia doing anything to help women in need. Others cited military violence against themselves or other women as a reason for joining the guerrillas:

Many times, the military and the police came to the houses and pushed campesinos around. They took away the things that we had, they raped the women when they found them alone. (*Mafe*, B29)

And, like the men, the women loyalists also expressed fears of going into the city because of violence, but the women's fears were more specific to gender-based violence and rape, whereas the men were more likely to talk about general crime and lawlessness.

Several women in the ETCRs also mentioned that they felt less safe without their weapons because they had nothing to defend themselves. This was linked to the repeated belief amongst both men and women FARC loyalists that women guerrillas could not be raped or otherwise sexually abused if they were armed:

At no point was anyone restrained, that because she was a woman, she couldn't take a rifle and go, or that the women were simply dedicated—like the media always says—that we came into the ranks to prostitute ourselves. This is not true! At least, a person who has all his senses in his head [would understand] that they give a rifle to me to fight the enemy, and the commander is going to grab me and is going to rape me, and I'm not going to use this rifle? (*Laughs*) I mean, I don't understand in what head of what person this makes sense, and the media, I mean, they say they have done that analysis. Could it be that I am going to let them rape me, I am going to let them abuse me, if I am fighting for those changes [against such violence] and if I can confront a soldier? I mean, this is where the question remains that people have to discuss: Is it possible that the women were raped *and* venerated in this manner there? (*Mari*, B58)

This trope that women in military organizations cannot be raped because they are armed is not supported by evidence and does not consider the massive power imbalances that occur in these militarized structures, often along gendered lines (Jeffreys 2007; King 2015; O'Hara 1998; Weitz 2015). To suggest that women soldiers cannot be abused by their comrades because they have weapons implies, by extension, that no subordinates can be abused if they are armed—which military history proves to be wholly untrue. It also implies—perhaps unintentionally—that without their weapons, there was a possibility that

women guerrillas could be raped. While a small number of loyalists agreed that it was possible that mistreatment might have happened in the FARC, it always happened “in other units” and never their own. The vast majority of FARC loyalists, men and women, were adamant that the idea of any armed woman guerrilla being raped or otherwise abused by a comrade was a lie meant to discredit their true victimhood claims: “They want to make us [women] look like victims. We are not victims of the FARC, we are victims of the State” (*Mari*, B58). That is, despite evidence indicating there was some truth in the government’s victimhood frame (i.e., that some FARC women were indeed victims of their own group), the resonance of the FARC’s victimhood frame was so strong for many loyalists that they held to it, despite some serious challenges to its validity.

But within this gendered victimhood there is also a hierarchy of victims, with FARC women presenting themselves as victimized by the State but enlightened by the FARC, and portraying campesino civilian women as the most victimized of all. In fact, FARC loyalist women often said they were proud of their campesino heritage and felt responsible for the wellbeing and education of civilian campesino women, who they saw as even greater victims of the State than themselves. For example, FARC loyalist women often referred to civilian campesino women as submissive, traditional, ignorant, and/or needing their help. For FARC women, the campesino identity was inextricably linked to gendered hierarchies of power, where civilian campesino men dominate and were often labelled as abusers of their women:

It is a difficult thing to see women in those ... And there are many, many! In the countryside most of the campesino women live in that life that they have no freedom, that they cannot express themselves, where they go to a Community Action Meeting, to a community meeting, and they ask her a question and she first looks at the husband to see if she can talk, and then with a gesture [the husband]

tells her if she can or cannot... We were forced to go to war, because we did not have the conditions to live with dignity in this country the way a Colombian woman deserves. The Colombian people⁴⁸ are victims, the Colombian people. The women that are abused, that are mistreated, by their own partners, they are victims due to their own State that has not been capable of organizing, to influence, in order for women to get ahead ...and this is the job of the State. The women, yes, they are victims, they are mistreated, they are abused, and no one says anything (*Mari*, B58).

In addition, many of these women expressed gratitude that the FARC had given them opportunities outside traditional patriarchal structures and said that without the FARC, they would be trapped in abusive relationships just like the other campesino women:

That is why I tell you now, if I had not come to this organization, I would be on whatever ranch, I would be under whatever conditions, and under a man that mistreated me. However, now I am not. I have been fortunate (*Mari*, B58).

These depictions rely on stereotypes of civilian campesinos as uneducated, lawless, and backward—with the civilian campesino men depicted as “barbaric” and violent (unlike campesino guerrilla men) and the civilian campesino women as ignorant and submissive (unlike campesino guerrilla women). Ironically, these are many of the very same stereotypes that the government has used to marginalize campesinos and justify armed incursions and land grabs in rural areas.

Indeed, loyalist women refuted any suggestion of rape or exploitation within the ranks (a key government challenge to their victimhood frame) by comparing themselves against civilian women, particularly campesino women, who they saw as mistreated, abused, and systemically victimized by men. This perception was, in large part, informed

⁴⁸ This respondent used the term “pueblo Colombiano”, which directly translate means “Colombian people”; however, “pueblo” is generally used to refer to poor, rural residents in Colombia, usually campesinos.

by their own experiences before becoming guerrillas, though not all spoke openly about this:

When you have a weapon in your hand, the single fact of having a weapon, for me, gives me a lot ... how do you say, it puts me in another position. A woman in normal life, they grab her in the road, unarmed, without training and without anything, and they will rape her. They will grab her, and they will return her [like] nothing. Here, no. (*Mari*, B58)

This positioning against the vulnerable, victimized, less educated “other” (i.e., campesino women) was important for the loyalist women to prove that they were more enlightened and that claims of mistreatment in the ranks were false. The women loyalists cannot allow the possibility that some women were facing the same gender-based violence inside the ranks that they were fighting against outside the ranks. To accept this, even if maintaining that these abuses are exceptions and not systemic, acknowledges some truth to the government’s counter-frame and weakens the entire premise of insurgent feminism and, in turn, of the victimhood frame.

As a result, the respondents in the ETCRs (both men and women) placed a lot of emphasis on infiltrators and deserters as the source of what they felt were false stories of abuse (discussed further in the next chapter). After repeatedly emphasizing that the FARC rules prohibit rape, and that everyone obviously followed the rules, and that women claiming abuses were all paid to lie, one respondent finally said in exasperation: “Well, why do you think we are still here? Because we *like* being raped? ... The people who believe this tale that we are raped and mistreated in the FARC, no, it’s not true” (*Paula*, B24). And for these respondents, it may very well not be true. But few could even admit that it may have happened to other people, in other units, because admitting that puts the entire mission of insurgent feminism at risk. And in addition to being wary of women

infiltrators, women loyalists in particular felt scapegoated and misrepresented by the government. In fact, in the first ETCR, several women initially refused to speak to me because they felt that government-sponsored journalists had maligned and/or misquoted them, and they did not initially trust that I was not a journalist.⁴⁹

Clearly, taking gender into consideration sharpens our understanding of the victimhood frame and sheds light on an important hierarchy of victims: while all campesinos are encompassed in the FARC's utilization of the victimhood frame due to the neglect and persecution of the State, women campesinos are doubly victimized in this frame because of the FARC women's emphasis that these women are abused by their own partners. This victimhood framing is particularly effective in convincing FARC combatants that they have nowhere else to go, because within the ranks is the only place where they will be safe. From the women guerrillas' perspective, the perpetrators are not only the State and the paramilitaries, but also campesino men, and women infiltrators. And if they dare to leave, they too will be accused of being infiltrators and lying traitors. Where, then, are women guerrillas safe if they demobilize? The link to the variable of cost-benefit calculation is clear here, but I argue that this calculation—and particularly the assessment of alternatives—is directly influenced by frame resonance and the gendered identities within the frame. One loyalist woman, who said that she “retired” from the FARC when she became pregnant⁵⁰ (but then returned to an ETCR after the peace agreement), clearly

⁴⁹ By the third day at this ETCR, I had managed to overcome these suspicions for the most part, largely by showing photos of my children and telling stories about Canada. But there were still a few women who remained wary of me, or who demanded large amounts of money for an interview (which I did not pay).

⁵⁰ While this seems to have been very rare, two respondents in this study claim to have “retired” with FARC permission.

explained this rationale during a discussion of why there were conflicting accounts of abuse in the ranks:

Well, I don't know, one ... one thinks, the women chose this life because of how happy they are ... But, nevertheless, they told sad stories, but they still said no, that they would not leave. Then one would say, why? That is, if there is so much suffering [in the group], why don't they leave? Even I once asked this question of a former female guerrilla, and she told me, 'Do you not see what happens? If one leaves, suddenly the army takes her, they put her in jail.... Even if we don't leave in that way, even if we leave without anyone noticing, they can still kill us, the same guerrillas.' So, the women would say that they had chosen that life, so they had to deal with it and finish it.

(Me: So, many women stayed because they were afraid?)

Yes. *(Tiann, B37)*

Not only does this quote illustrate the concept of investments influencing commitment (“they had chosen that life so they had to deal with it and finish it”), it also illustrates the powerful effect of sunk costs combined with lack of alternatives. This aspect of the victimhood frame is a powerful but often overlooked retention tool for women combatants in particular: if they are convinced and can in turn convince other women that the safest place for them is inside the group—and that men outside the group are mostly thugs and rapists just waiting to attack or arrest them (which again, is a hierarchical framing of different types of masculinity)—why would they leave? As one loyalist woman said: “No, I never thought of leaving, because where would I go?” *(Sofia, B53)*.

6.1.3 The “Original Autodefensas”

Contributing to the strong resonance of the victimhood frame amongst guerrilla loyalists was the functionality of this frame in justifying the use of violence. The FARC victimhood

frame and related campesino identity helped guerrilla loyalist members (and many deserters too) to justify their armed violence as self-defence, as something the government forced them to do, and something they were doing on behalf of all campesinos:

We had armed ourselves because there was an injustice against campesinos, that the people wanted to take away their lands, [remove] the campesinos, to build their cities, to build their fifth houses, their mansions, and the campesinos are the ones who cultivated the land (*Rob*, B01).

Because before...they had killed many people; [there was] a lot of violence, state violence. And then it was not useful for people to protest, to make political claims, because they were massacred. That was when the first Farianas⁵¹ decided to take up arms to be able to claim but defend themselves (*Vesino*, B23).

But this idea of self-defence against both the government and the paramilitaries is not only important in framing themselves as victims—the guerrillas also used it to discredit the paramilitary claims of self-defence:

I am going to explain this situation to you: the FARC, before taking up arms, always had the symbol and the will to have peace, because they were organized campesinos, right? And that, that was the root of collecting some small weapons, but to create a few self-defence groups, not to hurt anyone. Only for that, that is why they call it that – “to defend oneself”...Just to watch over the campesinos, for the campesino movement of the region, against the thieves, the rustlers, the ones that caused harm, or the same “pajaros”⁵² at that time (*Elias*, B59).

As this quote indicates, the guerrillas often used “parajos” or “paracos”⁵³ to refer to the paramilitaries and did not use the paramilitary-preferred term of “autodefensas”, as that is

⁵¹ “Farianas” is a term that many loyalists used to describe themselves—it indicates an ideologically committed FARC member. I have seen some researchers and journalists use term to specifically mean female FARC members, but both men and women FARC members used this label for themselves.

⁵² “Pajaros” translates directly to “birds” but is common slang for the paramilitaries.

⁵³ Notably, when I used the term “paracos” in a busy mall in Bogota, my research assistant shushed me and then looked around nervously. The fear of paramilitaries persists, and these labels have power and mythology attached to them.

what the original guerrillas also called themselves, before they consolidated and became the FARC (LaRosa and Mejía 2012; Livingstone 2004). Indeed, the guerrillas' victimhood frame is reinforced by the narrative of being the "original" self-defence forces, as opposed to the paramilitaries who, in the guerrilla view, have exploited this claim to self-defence to legitimize their violence and involvement in the drug trade. This idea of acting only in self-defence, of themselves and of campesinos in general, is integral to the guerrillas' carefully constructed victimhood frame that depicts an honest, hard-working army of labourers—and certainly *not* drug traffickers, murderers, or rapists—that are only fighting back because they are victims of the State.

In many conversations with FARC ex-combatants in the reincorporation zones, both during formal interviews and informally, the ex-combatants described themselves as protectors of—and role models for—the people. And the FARC clearly went to great lengths to reinforce this (sometimes false) narrative of protection. For example, one ex-militia commander explained how he had been ordered to kill two civilians at night, and then his Front commander (who had ordered the murders) came into town the next day blaming the paramilitaries for the deaths, promising to protect the community from then on (B18).⁵⁴ The FARC loyalists frequently repeated narratives of being forced to take up arms to protect the campesino population, and, often, as being the "real" government in areas essentially abandoned by the State. In fact, the FARC's depiction of the Colombian State as the "real terrorist"—and the State's support of the paramilitaries—is critical to their victimhood frame and to their claims of self-defence. This depiction was often

⁵⁴ This story was not told in our initial interview, but only after repeated interactions over several months. He gave permission to cite this story.

juxtaposed against the identity of fighting in self-defence to protect themselves and other rural residents from State violence and neglect:

The origin of the causes, of those struggles, the State could be more remorseful, because it could have solved the problems of these farmers, and not forced us to take up arms and become a powerful army against the State. Because the whole time, we were resisting [the State]. (*Rafael*, B46)

In addition, these FARC loyalists saw themselves not only as victims but also as the clear “good guys” amidst a sea of corrupt and evil forces, positioning themselves as reluctant armed self-defence forces that were more humane and just compared to other violent actors operating in Colombia. Consider this highly gendered image, invoking the need for a “protector”:

The bad ones are the one who kill a child, who dismember or kill a pregnant woman and take out the baby, the ones who hurt others repeatedly. *This* is terrorism and this applies in Colombia to the government and the paramilitaries. (*Luciana*, B54)

In sum, the victimhood frame—with its campesino identity, challenges to harmful gender norms, and self-defence components—was a strong cohesive factor for loyalist respondents. Framing themselves as poor campesinos rising up against a corrupt and wealthy oligarchy is an important origin story with a high level of resonance for both the FARC and the ELN. The lack of specific ethnicity in the campesino identity has also allowed the group to draw Indigenous and Afro-descendant members into their cause, with claims of fighting for Indigenous land rights⁵⁵ and for the rights of the poor (“el pueblo”) in general. And the strategically gendered aspects of the frame are highly effective in the recruitment and retention of women combatants without threatening the recruitment and

⁵⁵ While beyond the scope of this study, many Indigenous communities have also long contested the FARC’s claims of victimhood and their claims of representing Indigenous concerns.

retention of combatant men. The overall guerrilla victimhood frame is thus very durable, adopted by loyalists and deserters alike—for the latter, not only to justify their involvement in joining armed groups but also to justify their abandonment of the group. But this does not mean that the frame is not contested.

6.2 Contesting the Victimhood Frame

While durable, the FARC and ELN depiction of themselves as victims of the government and the State-supported paramilitaries certainly does not go unchallenged. Multiple Colombian governments have systematically contested the guerrillas' victimhood frame, particularly in regard to the campesino and gendered components. In addition, while some deserters fully adopted the victimhood frame, others challenged this frame by claiming an identity as rule-breakers who would not be victimized or stay silent—or by accepting the government's version of events that they truly were victims of the FARC. Some FARC deserters also claimed to be the “real victims” after the peace agreement because, they felt, everyone had forgotten about them—again, invoking a certain hierarchy of victimhood. Finally, paramilitaries co-opted the self-defence component of the victim frame, repeatedly portraying the guerrillas as the real perpetrators and themselves as the real defenders of the people.

6.2.1 Government Contestations of the Victimhood Frame

As part of the Colombian State's decades-long fight against the guerrillas, campesinos have not only been dehumanized but also became engulfed by the categorization of “internal enemies” that were legitimate targets: guerrillas, political dissidents, union members, social leaders, radical intellectuals, and campesino movements (Courtheyn 2018). But the

limited amount of scholarship on discrimination against campesinos and on the racialization of “non-ethnic” groups suggests that the lack of a specific ethnic identity precludes racism and violence (Courtheyn 2018). In Colombia, this is clearly not the case, and understanding the underpinnings of the government’s counter-frame to the guerrillas’ campesino victimhood is key to understanding why this counter-frame does not resonate with so many ex-combatants.

From a historical perspective, Latin American elites in the late nineteenth to early twentieth century became concerned that their large non-white populations would “imperil national development” and relegate their countries to second-class status on the global stage (Telles 2014, 17). However, by the 1930s, having fallen well short of their goals to attract European immigrants, elites and leading thinkers introduced the nation-building theory of “mestizaje”, which, they claimed, signalled racial harmony and placed them as “morally superior to a racially segregated United States” (Telles 2014, 19). Thus, mestizaje ideologies presented racial mixture as essential to Latin American nations, with elites creating (false) visions of their nations as homogenous, with mestizo identities replacing previous ethno-racial identities (Telles 2014). Colombia explicitly embraced the mestizaje vision as a tool to move the population toward whiteness, simultaneously solidifying the exclusion of Indigenous and Afro-descendant populations while hiding systemic discrimination and violence against “mixed-race” populations (Courtheyn 2018; Wade 1993).

For non-ethnic campesinos, then, their cultural identity is tied to land far more than to skin colour or ethnic composition (Courtheyn 2018), and campesino Colombians have long demanded territory and resisted extractive projects—often alongside Indigenous and

Afro-descendant populations—placing them in direct conflict with the State’s neoliberal mega-projects that are often set up in the name of economic development (Courtheyn 2018; Mesias Garcia 2009). As a result, campesinos have caused many problems for Colombia’s government as a poor, non-ethnic yet racialized segment of the population that has fought against mining projects and petroleum extraction, has put a strain on urban centres with mass internal displacement and informal shanty towns at city margins, and has made up the majority of rebel group members.

The combination of these elements has put all campesinos in danger, as the State has deliberately framed them not only as poor, second-class troublemakers, but also as guerrilla sympathizers, combatants, and/or drug producers—thus, legitimate targets (Ramírez 2011). This is a direct contestation of the guerrillas’ victimhood frame, as the government places the blame for the violence squarely on the guerrillas—and by extension the campesinos. Also, a form of environmental determinism means that many campesinos have been classified by the State and elites as “barbaric”, “backward”, and often “lawless” simply based on where they are located, despite the fact that the conditions in which they live are often due to State neglect and/or aggressive fumigations and military violence (Courtheyn 2018; Ramírez 2011; Wade 1993). In fact, these areas of high violence and low infrastructure—such as Putumayo, Urabá, Chocó, and other primarily rural departments—have often been labelled by the State as “empty”, “savage”, or the “land of nobody”, signalling a colonialist understanding that without private property and state institutions, there is simply “no one there” (Courtheyn 2018; Idler 2019; Ramírez 2011). Thus, the government actions that the guerrillas point to as causing their victimhood—exploitation by multinational extractive industries, coca fumigation, neglect, lack of infrastructure—

can all be justified or at least explained away by the government if “no one” lives in these areas. Compounding this issue is that the vast majority of displaced rural Colombians settle in urban areas and often “auto-construct” neighbourhoods on the mountainous peripheries of major cities, which the State sees as a nuisance and elites label as neighbourhoods of invasion and contamination (López 2019; Roldán 2002).

Conversely, *all* of the armed actors in Colombia—including the State military and allied paramilitary forces—have at some point justified their actions through the narrative of defending the civilian campesino population. In addition, most soldiers come from campesino backgrounds, as do most paramilitary and guerrilla members. Military service is mandatory for men in Colombia upon reaching age 18: those with a high school diploma only have to serve one year, while those without have to serve 18-24 months. Once men complete this service, they are issued a military card (*libreta militar*), which they need to own property, graduate from university, receive professional contracts, or run for office (Finn 2014). However, members of the Colombian elite buy these cards—a process so common it is often assumed to be legal when it is not (Finn 2014). The result is a system where the vast majority of soldiers are from campesino and racialized communities, fighting at the behest of urban elites against the same campesino and racialized communities that make up guerrilla factions and paramilitary groups. Civilian campesinos who do not belong to any of these groups are then caught in the construction of being both “victims” in need of protection used to justify armed incursions and “enemies” due to suspected ties with any of the competing armed groups. But how or when they are labelled depends on the military objectives and territorial situation of each group, and rarely on the actions of campesinos themselves.

Moving to the gender component of the frame, it is clear that the government has gone to great lengths to contest the guerrillas' portrayals of women as the victims of the government, instead portraying women guerrillas as victims of their own group. In both international and national rhetoric, women have been repeatedly portrayed as the main victims of Colombia's conflict—but importantly, these narratives show women as victims of the non-state armed groups and the conflict in general, not specifically as victims of the State. In addition, studies on child soldiers have drawn special attention to the plight of young girls, often emphasizing their vulnerable status as victims of sexual abuse (Denov 2008; Human Rights Watch 2003; McKay and Mazurana 2004). Indeed, humanitarian rhetoric worldwide has long emphasized the plight of “women and children” in order to get civilian needs in war onto the international agenda—another key aspect of resonance for the women-as-victims framing on both sides—but at the same time this practice infantilizes women by conflating them with children while also minimizing violence against civilian men and teenage boys (Carpenter 2005). As noted earlier, while international resolutions on women in armed conflict⁵⁶—especially regarding rape as a weapon of war—were a significant step in acknowledging women and girls' unique experiences in war, the dominant narrative entrenched misconceptions that all (or most) women in conflict environments are rape victims (Ní Aoláin, Haynes, and Cahn 2011). Compounding this imagery is the misconception that victims of violence—particularly female victims—have no agency, even though in many circumstances this is untrue (Coulter 2008; Ní Aoláin, Haynes, and Cahn 2011).

⁵⁶ See UNSC resolutions on Women, Peace and Security, available here: <http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/un-documents/women-peace-and-security/>

While in some circumstances this victim categorization makes it easy for armed groups to purposefully exploit gender stereotypes of victimhood to allow women insurgents and gang members to go undetected, in Colombia the government has been particularly strategic in using gendered narratives to discredit the FARC and to contest the FARC's victimhood frame. For example, women ex-combatant testimonies of forced abortions and sexual abuse in the guerrilla ranks are prolific in the Colombian media and have also been issued in statements from the Colombian military and on radio programs encouraging desertion (C01, Orth 2018). These stories of abuse against women and girls are much more widespread than stories of violence against men and boys, making them particularly powerful in damaging the FARC's proclamations of being an egalitarian organization that fights for women's rights. In some interviews with military and ARN staffers, the gender equality in the FARC was described as a reintegration challenge—not as a challenge that the DDR program must address but a challenge for the women in terms of adapting to existing social norms:

All of this [demobilization and reintegration] is more difficult for women. Because women in the guerrilla structure, the treatment is equal for the men and women. If the man can carry something of [a certain] weight, they say to the women, do it. So, when they come to the safe houses, they say: "Men and women are equal." But society says: "No, you can't do this because you're a woman." So, there's a change... in the group you were treated equal, [but now] they say, a woman can't study to become a mechanic, and so this creates a crisis of conflict in the woman (psychologist, GAHD, C01).

In addition, some stories from former guerrilla members and kidnap victims have portrayed FARC women as unpaid prostitutes who are obligated to have sex with their male comrades as a "revolutionary duty" (B31, B63, Betancourt 2010). One military respondent also told me that many young recruits in rural areas, especially girls and young

women, were enticed by promises of money, drugs, and technology; but he did not address why these young people were so vulnerable to recruitment in the first place: “I don’t want to victimize the [ex-combatant] population, but lots of this population were victims before they converted into predators” (C01). In the context of this conversation, however, he meant that they were victims of the guerrillas’ predatory recruitment tactics, not victims of State neglect or violence.

Several government officials also told me in meetings that the guerrillas had no birth control in the ranks, and that is why there were so many abortions, but interviews with both deserter and loyalist women shows this claim to be categorically untrue. Government officials also emphasized the FARC’s use of forced contraception, without acknowledging that most guerrilla women actually wanted contraception. While there certainly were abortions in the ranks, all ex-combatants in this study stated that women in both the ELN and FARC had regular access to birth control—both pills and injections. While this was indeed mandatory, many of the guerrilla women I spoke to were incredibly careful about this, because they did not want to be pregnant while in the ranks. But the government’s insistence on portraying women guerrillas as uneducated victims that either a) have no control over their own bodies, or b) willingly abort or abandon their babies, has been very effective in further demonizing both the FARC and ELN in the eyes of the public. This strategy also aligns with the portrayals of campesinos in general as barbaric and ignorant, as noted above. While the government actively tries to encourage combatants to desert, the effect of this counter-frame is the creation of an environment in which women know they will be both pitied and vilified if they demobilize.

In addition, the forced abortion narrative resonates with the majority Catholic population and not only portrays women guerrillas as victims of the FARC, but the State as the saviour for these victims—a strong challenge to the guerrilla victimhood frame. This saviour positioning serves a double purpose in that it masks the State’s role in victimizing and displacing rural women, disregards the abject poverty that prevents many campesino women from accessing reliable birth control and/or family planning education, and ignores the sexual violence against women perpetrated by government forces and state-sponsored paramilitaries.

For the self-defence component of the frame, the government has tried to counter this claim in several ways. First, by allowing the AUC to move into guerrilla territory and take control over other areas of Colombia, and then supporting AUC operations against the guerrillas, the government tacitly accepted the paramilitary co-optation of the “autodefensa” (self-defence) label. Second, by portraying the FARC and the ELN as criminals, terrorists, and attackers of their own women (especially in the case of the FARC), the government not only set up the expected narrative of the guerrillas as the main perpetrators, but also created the frame that they are perpetrators not only against Colombian society but also against their own recruits.

Finally, many deserters told me that they were constantly harassed and monitored by police (or at least thought they were) even after they had demobilized and cooperated with authorities, which further perpetuates the criminal-perpetrator-terrorist frame. For example, halfway through one interview in a quiet hotel lobby, one demobilized combatant became very nervous as he was certain that two plainclothes police officers had walked in and were sitting near us and listening (even though the men he pointed out were too far

away to hear anything, and we were not discussing anything illegal), so we paused the interview and relocated. Two other respondents told me that police repeatedly stopped them in the street for no reason and demanded to see all of their papers, when it was not reasonable in their opinion to carry all of their demobilization papers at all times. Another was arrested two years after he demobilized and charged with a crime he had committed during his time in the armed group—for which he was certain he had amnesty due to his participation in DDR and because of the JEP. He remained in prison awaiting trial at the time of writing. Indeed, there was ongoing fear and confusion amongst many ex-combatants not only about being pursued by their former groups, but also about the possibility that the government could renege on its promises and arrest them at any time.

6.2.2 Paramilitary contestations of the frame

While many of the paramilitary respondents utilized the victimhood frame—especially in regard to being victims of government neglect—they presented a very particular challenge to the guerrillas’ narrative of self-defence. While only a few described themselves as “campesinos”, almost all of them pointed to poverty and a lack of work for the main reason they joined the group. Many of them were self-conscious of their low literacy abilities, and several told stories of being tricked to sign paperwork that they did not understand, and/or having commanders trick them out of their reintegration money. From the very first paramilitary interview in this study, victimhood stood out as a prominent theme.

Like the FARC loyalists, the ex-paramilitaries in this sample were very particular about language. In my first interaction explaining my study to a former AUC commander, I used the word “paramilitar” (as that was the word everyone in Colombia had used with me, up until that point). I was immediately and forcefully reprimanded by this commander

that they were *not* paramilitaries—only “autodefensas” (self-defence forces). He said he hated the word paramilitary, because in his mind it meant they worked for the military (“para” in Spanish means “for”, so he understood the word to mean “for the military”), and he was very clear that while they might have worked *with* the military, they never worked *for* the military (B81). Other respondents did not like the word because of the brutal violence and civilian massacres associated with it; some visibly winced when I used it (which I quickly stopped doing in their presence). Because many demobilized AUC members went back to drug trafficking and other illicit activities after the official demobilization process, most Colombians continue to use the word paramilitaries to describe these groups (though the government prefers “BACRIMs” to avoid the uncomfortable fact that most of these criminal groups are paramilitary descendants). Thus, since the word paramilitary is associated with both brutal violence and ongoing criminality, none of the ex-AUC members in this sample wanted to be associated with it.

As with the guerrillas, this insistence on being “autodefensas” implies being non-aggressive and not liable. And if those people are also acting in the defence of others, then they are protectors and heroes. Indeed, this self-defence/protector narrative is one that many ex-paramilitaries adopted for themselves, directly challenging guerrilla claims of being self-defence forces and victims of paramilitary violence. Rather than fighting for a political cause—as many paramilitary respondents admitted that the AUC had no cause except drug trafficking—the ideological frame that the paramilitaries had adopted was that of protecting the campesinos (and themselves) from the guerrillas. One respondent said that “the people” liked them because they brought money and help to the community (B95). Others said they had to step in to fight against the guerrillas because the government was

absent and that, essentially, they were forced to arm themselves for protection—the exact same reasoning given by FARC members for taking up arms, and a direct contestation of the FARC victimhood frame.

Some, of course, admitted that they only joined the AUC because the group paid well (though, as discussed below, this was not always true), but even this they framed as a noble action—or at least justifiable—of providing for their families. One respondent said that he knew that the group was bad before he joined, but he needed the money, while another said: “I can’t think of peace when my child is going hungry” (*Lucas*, B81). Another paramilitary respondent described himself as someone “fighting for his salary” in order to provide for his three children—thus the fight was justifiable (*Siete*, B78). One paramilitary woman—after describing some of the brutal punishments and violence she witnessed—said she knew that if she left the group, life would be even worse. Then she said, with a shrug: “My children never went hungry, and I was never involved in any violence” (*Nell*, B87). Some male respondents felt that being in the AUC was essentially the same as their military experience—and the fact that they often worked with the military gave their roles legitimacy. And even when they acknowledged being paid mercenaries, some ex-paramilitaries exhibited a sense of pride that they had defended Colombia from the guerrillas. As one respondent said: “...if we had not existed, the country would not be like this, it would be even worse, it would be worse because we were the ones who sought out the guerrillas to attack them, to prevent them from shooting up the villages” (*Pedro*, B77).

Like the guerrillas, this self-defence narrative was a key component in the paramilitary’s victimhood frame, positioning all other armed actors as worse and more violent than they were. Several of the AUC respondents pointed out that the FARC

guerrillas were not holding up their end of the peace deal, or that guerrillas in general were still kidnapping and killing people—with little acknowledgement (at first) that their former comrades were doing the same. One ex-combatant said that, unlike the guerrillas, it was a lie that the AUC ever kidnapped people (B86), even though another respondent had already told me how he had been trained to use kidnappings to finance the group (B78). Another said that the main thing the commanders taught him were “human values” and how to respect people (B89). One ex-AUC member told me that his commanders always told them that their fight “was about defending the poor, to give a person what he deserved. So, the *autodefensas*, many times, fought a lot for, for the campesino. And so, it was not how, how for example the guerrillas come and go, and...don’t return [to the community]” (*Mateo*, B76). Another respondent explained that they were fighting at the behest of ranchers and campesinos to get rid of the guerrillas:

The reason for our fight was to get rid of the guerrillas...the Colombian guerrillas, because at that time there were a lot of guerrillas, and the guerrillas were ripping off the ranchers, and they took land from the campesinos. For example, our department was very rich in livestock, and farmers complained a lot and paid a lot, a lot of money to get rid of the guerrillas. (*Gello*, B80)

Several respondents also pointed out that the AUC commanders did not like recruiting minors or women “like the guerrillas did”, because they only wanted adult recruits with military experience. This seemed an important point for them, to show that they were: a) not so desperate for recruits that they would settle for women and children, and b) not “radical” in that they would disrupt gender norms and put women on the front lines. In fact, one respondent openly expressed dismay that any women wanted to join the AUC, saying that women could find jobs easier than men could, and thus did not need to join armed groups (B81).

There was also notable resentment that the collectively demobilized FARC combatants were getting better benefits than the AUC had received—with some complaining that the FARC was capitalizing on the lessons learned from the government’s DDR experiment with the paramilitaries: “We were a true pilot program, and they made many mistakes with us” (*Nell* B87). Indeed, this theme of being the “pilot project”—suffering the mistakes from which thousands of other ex-combatants benefitted—was common and reinforced the sense of victimhood from AUC respondents. One respondent—who had been sentenced to five years in prison but only served two and half—asked me how it was possible that no FARC leaders went to jail but many AUC leaders did (B95). And, in fact, an ARN representative confirmed that the FARC had learned from the AUC process and in their negotiations demanded guarantees that certain juridical changes that happened during the AUC reintegration—which threatened more ex-combatants with jail time and essentially caused mass recidivism—would not happen to them (C15). This outrage that no top FARC commanders had gone to jail (with the exception of Santrich, as noted earlier) was consistent throughout the paramilitary interviews. Like the deserters discussed below, AUC respondents claimed that they were the “true victims” because everyone had forgotten about them:

So, we feel like, like we were abandoned by the State, and it makes one feel like, like bad from this because the [AUC] bosses, bosses, bosses left with money and are in the United States and we are left here, tossed aside. So, for me, for me I feel uncomfortable with the government, do you understand? (*Pedro*, B77)

For many AUC respondents, a key component of their victimhood frame was being victimized and tricked by their own commanders. As the quote above demonstrates, in addition to being abandoned by the State, they felt abandoned and exploited by higher

ranking paramilitary members. Often, these respondents would start out with a lot of bravado and then open up later in the conversation, admitting to being tricked or feeling regretful.⁵⁷ For example, one respondent first proudly said he was fighting for his salary and then later said he regretted that he had hurt so many people (B78). And the respondent who initially declared that the country would have been worse without the AUC, told me twenty minutes later:

[F]irst, one is ignorant, you don't know. You think you are doing something for the country, and you are not doing it for the country, you are doing it for another. You are doing it for the commander. You aren't doing anything for the country there.
(*Pedro*, B77)

This sense of exploitation was intensified by a frequently expressed fear that someone was always trying to trick them. In informal conversations over meals and coffee (where I was not recording or taking notes), the respondents were often more candid, and several told me stories of how government officials had come into their compound pretending to be other people, and had on occasion brought complicated papers for them to sign, sometimes tricking them into forfeiting certain benefits. Others told me stories of higher ranking commanders who would convince their former subordinates to pool together their seed money (i.e., the DDR money they were entitled to for starting a business) to start a joint business project, but then the commander would disappear with all the money. This story of being tricked out of their money was repeated, in different forms, by several different paramilitary respondents. Some also spoke about journalists who had misrepresented themselves in order to get information from them. While some of this information was

⁵⁷Again, this points the benefits of in-depth interviews in these complex environments, many of which were done after the second, third, or fourth contact with a person. This often resulted in a much more comfortable conversation and more genuine responses.

impossible to verify, there is no disputing that the ex-paramilitaries in this sample felt abused and exploited by a government that they felt they had tried to help.

In addition, while there was only one successful AUC deserter in this sample, there were many “would-be” deserters. Returning to the types of commitment identified earlier, these recruits were primarily attached through continuance commitment (i.e., economic and other survival benefits). Rebel cohesion theories predict that these economically motivated recruits should be the most likely to desert (Oppenheim et al. 2015; Kalyvas 2006; Weinstein 2007), but this study and other data on desertion flows in Colombia actually indicate the opposite (Gutiérrez Sanín 2018). Here is where the term “loyalist” and predictions based on “types” of commitment are somewhat problematic: nearly half of the paramilitary respondents in this study said that they had wanted to desert the group but were too scared to do so. Others said they had asked to leave but the commanders had refused. One had tried to escape twice but had been caught both times and brought back. The one who did successfully escape said he left because the group had promised to pay a salary and did not, and then the group had started to kill his friends, so he felt he was next (B73). But he did not demobilize to the army; instead, he fled to the FARC for protection. In fact, nearly all the ex-paramilitary respondents agreed that most people in the AUC did not dare desert because of the consequences. This is the reverse of what many guerrilla deserters said—that they had fled out of fear that their own group would harm them, or because their group had harmed them or their love ones. Indeed, there is evidence to suggest that most of the desertion flows went one way—from the FARC to the AUC, and rarely the other way around (Gutiérrez Sanín 2018). In the AUC case, threats of harm from within the group served to keep people *in* the ranks, not to drive them out—and reinforced

an overall sense of helplessness and victimhood. Some said that they had no friends, that they could not trust anyone, or that they had lost all their friends as a result of their membership in the group.

In fact, the ex-paramilitaries talked significantly more about trauma than the ex-guerrillas did, even when including guerrilla deserters. These stories of trauma were often related to the rules of the organization and related punishments. And while this fear and trauma suggest that the costs of membership were very high and thus, combined with only continuance commitment, should inspire desertion, fear seems to have had the opposite effect. Guerrilla loyalists spoke of the importance of rules, and guerrilla deserters often talked about rebelling against the rules, but most ex-AUC respondents spoke about the rules with fear: the rules were a reason to stay in the group, even if you did not agree with them, because violating the rules was far too dangerous. The one successful AUC deserter explained how the rules were quite different in the paramilitaries, compared to his subsequent experience in the FARC:

Because they [the FARC] respected the lives of others. If you did not commit a mistake that you could not escape from, they [the FARC] drew your attention to it, they did not kill you, but the paras did. The paras, if you did something one time they would kill you, they would not draw your attention to it. And there [in the FARC] they drew your attention, they sanctioned you, like: ‘Well, we are going to sanction you because you did this wrong.’ Do you understand me? (*Diego*, B73)

Many AUC respondents became very emotional, often telling stories of brutal punishments (without my asking for them). One of the women respondents—who was a single mother of three children—said that she had gone for six months without a salary, so had finally gone home to seek other work. But when the woman and her friends went back because they still needed work, all of their former commanders had been killed—apparently on

orders from the high command (“estado mayor”) because those commanders had been withholding salaries (B99).

There were many such stories of in-group violence. One man said that the AUC treated people like animals, but they could never say anything or show any emotion at all, for risk of being punished: “I could never cry for the death of a friend” (*Matias*, B90). Another man said he did not want to return to the past and that there was no way anyone in the compound was telling me the truth, because it was simply too awful. He recalled being sent to kill his own friends and said, in tears: “Now I have no friends” (*Cocinero*, B94). When I asked why he did not leave rather than kill his own friends, he said that he “had to get something” out of the experience, that he could not possibly return to his family empty-handed. This rationale for staying in the ranks was shared by several other respondents. The costs of membership were high, but for many respondents in this study, the costs of leaving were much higher. Going back to the Rusbult commitment model, this is evidence of a deep investment in the group: some of these combatants had committed crimes and acts of violence that they deeply regretted, but they also saw these as significant investments for which they had to get something back, or it would all be for nothing—despite deep dissatisfaction with the group.

Overall, the victimhood frame was very durable amongst the paramilitary population in this sample, and it was still informing their choices and world view nearly fifteen years post-demobilization. While the AUC respondents did not speak much of their own identity as campesinos during the conflict (rather, they positioned themselves as defending campesinos), some spoke of wanting to be regular campesinos in their demobilized life, and how that was very challenging because of stigma:

Because we were no longer patrolling and we were going to be people, for example, campesinos, civilians; we no longer had to be hidden there... We were going to be different people, without conflicts, without anything. But people refused [to let us]. Many people rejected us ... for being paramilitaries. (*Gello*, B80)

Thus, the identity of being self-defence forces was perhaps even more critical to the paramilitaries compared to the guerrillas: self-defence was not part of their ideology, it was their entire ideology. And it allowed the paramilitaries to justify membership in a group known for its brutality against civilians—by claiming that they were forced to do so. But their experiences of stigma and discrimination due to their membership in the AUC illustrate the challenges of constructing an identity within a frame that is contested by so many different actors.

6.2.3 Deserter contestations of the frame

In this study, many deserters utilized two competing victimhood frames—that of being victims of the government, and that of being victims of their own group (the government's counter-frame). Within this framing contest, it is important to examine three aspects of demobilization and reintegration that have been understudied by rebel cohesion and desertion literature, and often obscured by reintegration statistics: 1) how age at recruitment affects later desertion decisions and reintegration experiences; 2) the differences in alternative options between urban and rural armed group members; and 3) the gendered aspects of DDR and related decisions. Instead, studies and reintegration programs tend to homogenize all ex-combatants from the same group, sometimes not even disaggregating by gender, and certainly not disaggregating between urban and rural. This failure to

disaggregate a very diverse population obscures important details about desertion decisions and does not fully explain how ex-combatants organize and justify their experiences.

First, deserters in this sample were much less likely to identify specifically as campesinos, compared to guerrilla loyalists. Higher level commanders were the most likely deserters to invoke the campesino identity in relation to victimhood, but they often framed this in different ways. For example, one ELN mid-level commander, who was still ideologically committed to his group, said: “This war, son of a bitch, well, we’re killing ourselves, between soldiers and guerrillas...a soldier is the son of whom? The same campesino” (*Junior*, B17). He saw himself, alongside other guerrillas from different groups as well as soldiers, locked in a futile battle, all victims of the conflict. However, a FARC high-level commander who deserted but was still ideologically committed to the cause, had a more straightforward view, saying that he had been fighting “for the struggle for land, the defence of campesinos, the defence of the working class, for the people who are suffering and being exploited by capitalism” (*Rob*, B01). Notably, both of these respondents joined as very young children (under 12).

Overall, however, while men and women guerrilla deserters framed their victimhood in relation to State neglect, they did not use the campesino identifier to the same extent as loyalists. However, it is difficult to determine whether this is because they never bought into the campesino victimhood frame in the first place, or because they changed their interpretation of the frame *after* desertion to make sense of their life choices. Because the vast majority of deserters relocate to urban centres—for employment as well as anonymity—it may simply be impractical or even dangerous to cling to a campesino identity that is so strongly attached to rural life and farming and stigmatized in the city.

These deserters expressed a desire to blend into the urban population, and most did not want to be associated with anything that could mark them as former guerrillas. Indeed, some deserters spoke of the campesino identity itself as dangerous, due to the conflation of campesinos with guerrillas. However, while all of the deserters said they could not return to their rural communities due to security risks, many expressed fears and anxieties about city life similar to the guerrilla loyalists, invoking an overall sense of victimhood that the reintegration program was not helping them enough, and that the benefits were insufficient:

For me, in the city, how to live! For example, for one to live here in the city is very hard. There are times you don't have [anything] for the rent and all of that, for the food and all of that. So, for me, to live here in the city is very hard. And the day that I have a partner, [if] I work and my partner also, then we will live well, no? But for one to be without work and alone, that's very hard for me... (*Alena*, B64)

Like the paramilitaries, guerrilla deserters also complained consistently that the FARC loyalists were getting better benefits than they were. In addition, in some informal conversations, both ARN staffers and ex-combatants expressed frustration that the DDR model was set up to reinforce this sense of victimhood and dependency on the government. Several respondents stated that would much rather have a job than continue to receive the meagre monthly reintegration allowance. A notable difference, though, was that when the loyalists expressed these frustrations, they often followed with complaints that the government was not providing enough help—or that the commanders were far more prepared for the transition to civilian life than the rank-and-file. In contrast, when the deserters talked about these concerns, many of them immediately expressed a resolve to figure it out. For example, one woman from the FARC said:

It's not easy to return to civilian life when for a while you were over there [in the armed group]...well, there are many things you don't know. For example, I've

never been in a city so big. I don't know [this city]. And...everything is already very different. Well, the liberty is beautiful, but ...you have to learn how to live. (*Claudia*, B14)

A former ELN commander—who was about to leave the safe house—had similar concerns, and a similar resolve:

It feels strange. It feels different and strange and scary...it's a different life. It's another world. I've never paid rent, I've never paid... I've never paid for electricity, I've never paid for water, I've never had to buy my own clothes, right? I've never had to take care of myself, because the guerrillas take care of you. Now I have to work, I have to study...because the ARN says you have to study, so I have to work, study, pay rent, pay for electricity, pay for water... and I have a daughter, I have to take care of my daughter. Well, it's frustrating, I am frustrated, but I have to do it...we have to face it and push forward. (*Junior*, B17)⁵⁸

Another interesting variation on the victimhood frame was a stratification between urban militia and rural guerrillas. Some rural guerrillas, for example, did not consider militia members to be “real” guerrillas: “The people who complain about the food here [in the safehouse], about whatever, those people weren't really guerrillas...because the people who were *real* guerrillas suffered a lot” (*Michael*, ELN, B08). This view again reinforces the idea of a hierarchy of victimhood. Indeed, like the paramilitaries, some deserters maintained that they were the “real victims” of the conflict because, since the peace process, everyone was paying attention to the guerrillas in the ETCRs and had forgotten all about the deserters.

⁵⁸ This is where considering age is important, but the Colombian reintegration programs do not account for the vast differences and reintegration needs of someone who joined at age 11, such as “Junior” cited above, and someone who joined at age 25. They only consider age-based needs if the person is still a minor at the time of demobilization.

Conversely, some militia members sometimes portrayed themselves as more educated and more sophisticated than their rural counterparts:

I do come from campesino parents, but I was a very urban child... [in the] FARC, most of my comrades were campesinos, by that I mean, many were illiterate. And coming here to this city, of course, for me, that was all very new, but we all had opportunities. It is understandable that there are great differences [in experiences] because not all the guerrillas were guerrilla fighters. There was a large component of [urban] collaborators and militia, and that has been a significant issue in demobilization. (*Caleb*, B68)

Indeed, having connections in the city (i.e., networks with law-abiding citizens), and at the very least, having the ability to read and write, to understand the demobilization process and its benefits, and especially to understand the forms that one is signing, all appear to be critical aspects of deciding whether to desert an armed group or not, and they seem to affect ex-combatants' sense of victimhood as well. This effect is connected to both the network and identity variables. That is, combatants who identify as "country folk", and/or as farmers who could not possibly function in the city, appear to have more inhibitions about deserting, and certainly a greater sense of victimhood and lack of options, than those with urban connections who could feasibly obtain a job in the city or at least have someone to help them. While many guerrilla loyalists expressed gratitude that the FARC had taught them to read and write, the literacy of many of these respondents was rudimentary at best—exhibited in difficulty writing down phone numbers, for example, or their requests for me to send voice messages rather than written messages on WhatsApp. With FARC militia deserters, this problem was rare, and in fact many of them were proud of their prior education and their ability (whether old or recently acquired) to use computers or work with numbers.

In fact, some deserters distinctly did *not* want to be labelled campesinos or victims for this very reason—a direct rejection of the victimhood frame. These respondents were resentful of the ARN’s apparent assumption that they were all ignorant campesinos who knew nothing, especially the ones who had some secondary education before they joined an armed group. As one FARC deserter said:

At the ARN they are always in the position that they are ones who know. I think these guys [in the ARN] end up getting very comfortable because they earn good money, and so it’s worth almost nothing...whether they learn [from us] or don’t learn. Simply, ‘You are a brute, a campesino, and you will learn what I teach you’ (*Caleb*, B68).

Militia deserters were more likely to tell me about their education and to be proud of their role in certain illegal operations that required a higher level of knowledge and ability than the average campesino. For example, one FARC ex-militia commander said:

I worked as a financier: that is, I helped buy drugs. I was the one who went out to the river to wait for all the farm [deliveries]. I visited communities, I organized meetings, because of my education (*Andres*, B18).

In later, informal conversations, this same participant explained to me that he had already earned his high school diploma before joining the FARC, but because he could not produce the certificate, the ARN had him taking the same classes as everyone else—a source of significant resentment for him.

Notably, in contrast to the loyalist FARC members who emphasized the importance of rule following and the chain of command, some deserters identified themselves as rebels, as independent thinkers, as people who refused to blindly obey, while often labelling the loyalist guerrilla members as submissive people who did not think for themselves. This sense of a “rebel” identity, of being someone who did not submit, was an important factor

in some deserters' decisions to abandon their groups, especially when paired with experiencing or witnessing mistreatment, or fearing threats of harm from within the group—that is, a combination of the identity variable with cost-benefit calculations. For example, one woman who deserted from the FARC expressed dismay at how they were treated in the safehouses, because it was exactly what she had been trying to escape:

I did not like it [at the safehouse], that treatment, in the sense of shouting. I thought that, well, that's why many of us deserted, right? Because of the treatment, in the way they talked to us, we had to submit to someone else's orders, whether we liked it or not. And if I am going to demobilize and if I make that decision, it is because I am sick of this regime. (*Lina*, B63)

This same woman felt that women who remained in the FARC were actually more submissive than civilian women—a direct contrast to the loyalist depiction of the feminist insurgents as superior to submissive, abused civilian campesino women:

I have always said that those that are, those that were in the, on the mountain, the [base-rank] female guerrillas submitted, always submitted. Submissive, submissive. That's why [gender equality] a lie. All I can say is that to survive there and to have a little bit of, of respect...we had to screw them, as they say vulgarly, to fall in love with the highest ranks, that is one way to survive in there (*Lina*, B63).

However, even though some deserter women portrayed themselves as more enlightened than the FARC loyalist women, and other deserters said that they had learned a lot and did not regret their guerrilla experiences, several women deserters talked about mistreatment from their own commanders. As noted above, this has been perhaps the biggest challenge to the FARC's victimhood frame, as the government has utilized these stories repeatedly. These stories are specifically damaging to the credibility of the guerrilla victimhood frame—which decreases the overall resonance of the frame. It is thus quite clear why so many loyalists said that the women who told stories of abuse and exploitation

were infiltrators. When I asked a female deserter from the FARC why I was hearing conflicting accounts of mistreatment, and why women in the ETCRs told me that they were always treated well, she scoffed:

Lies. Women were always an, an object, a sexual object. The women always were. The voice of the woman was not, that is, you had to have a lot of influence to be able to have a rank within the FARC, influence with your word. The women who had influence, that is, who had respect, was because they studied, because they were educated...The rest, no, the rest, we were all sexual objects. (*Linda*, B63)

Comparing the testimonies of loyalists and deserters, there was a significant amount of disagreement over the mistreatment of women (discussed further in the next chapter)—some deserters told me that they never saw any abuse of women and they were treated well.

In summary, while many deserters still utilized the victimhood frame in terms of being victims of the government, they presented two main contestations: first, some deserters did not want to be portrayed or labelled as victims and in fact were eager to portray themselves as educated and capable. Second, other deserters, and especially the women, also utilized the government framing that they were victims of the FARC, while retaining the guerrilla frame that they were victims of government. This appeared to be a strategic use of frames and their narratives depending on the situation at hand, and not necessarily on the resonance, credibility or salience of the frame. Thus, while frame resonance is partly built upon the identity constructions that strengthen rebel group cohesion, there is evidence here to suggest that this resonance might break down if another frame becomes useful for survival and/or necessary to adapt to new circumstances—such as fleeing an armed group and needing protection from another source.

6.3 Conclusion

The evidence presented here suggests the importance of the combined influence of identity, networks, and cost-benefit calculations in desertion decisions—all of which, I argue, are affected by the framing contests. The testimonies of paramilitaries indicate that “type” of commitment may be less important in group cohesion than perceived alternatives and the costs of leaving. Overall, while the victimhood frame was strong in encouraging cohesion through a shared identity within the guerrilla ranks, and especially within the FARC, it was not a strong enough frame on its own to prevent desertion. The FARC and ELN may portray the government as the “real terrorist”—with sufficient evidence to support their claims—but this frame will not resonate with civilians who have borne the brunt of guerrilla violence (because the frame does not match their lived experience), or those in the cities that have seen hardly any armed conflict at all (because the frame is not essential to them). The government also has sufficient evidence for its narco-terrorist framing, but evidence—empirical credibility—is not the sole factor in determining who adopts which frame and how they use it. Indeed, as noted earlier, empirical credibility is only one aspect of frame resonance—credibility also depends on frame consistency as well as the reputation and credibility of the frame-makers—and this chapter shows that both the guerrillas and the government have lost their credibility in various ways.

How, then, does the victimhood frame—or its counter-frame—affect decisions to disengage? First, combatants who were most strongly tied to the collective campesino identity as a component of this victimhood appear less likely to entertain the thought of deserting, much less to actually do it. While there is evidence to suggest that some deserters downplayed their campesino identity after demobilization in order to survive in the city, overall, deserters seemed to have far less attachment to this identity, even when talking

about their childhoods.⁵⁹ Despite serious challenges to frame credibility (i.e., women guerrillas voicing accusations of abuse), loyalist respondents found ways to explain or reject these challenges in order to reduce cognitive dissonance and maintain the frame. In addition to having high consistency and empirical credibility, the campesino victimhood frame is also essential to these combatants' beliefs and values (salience) and resonates with their daily lives and cultural narratives. They are committed to protecting their social group and improving their collective lives. As noted in the literature review, social identity theory predicts that if people are in a low-status group they will try to leave; however, if they cannot leave, these low-status people will participate in collective action to raise the group's status—especially if they believe that their low status is illegitimate (van Stekelenburg and Klandermans 2013). The victimhood frame is thus reinforced by the sense that the campesino's poverty and loss of land is due to illegitimate and repressive actions of the government and the paramilitaries.

Second, having connections in the city, and at the very least, being literate enough to understand the demobilization process, appear to be critical aspects of deciding whether to desert an armed group or not, or at least whether to enter the demobilization program—especially in terms of cost/benefit calculations. Thus, the network and identity variables interact here with the cost-benefit variable to inspire desertion—or to prevent it. That is, for many combatants (but not all), a willingness to take the risk and leave the group was clearly influenced by perceived alternatives: combatants who saw themselves as uneducated victims, as simple “country folk”, as farmers who could not possibly function in the city, seemed most likely to have inhibitions about deserting compared to those that

⁵⁹ It is, of course, difficult to tell with retrospective accounts if that lack of attachment to the campesino identity occurred before desertion, or if it was an adaptation to the demands of post-demobilization life.

had urban connections and could feasibly obtain a job in the city, especially if that job required good literacy skills.

Networks appear to have a key role in calculating alternatives, in that many (but not all) deserters reached out to family members or other contacts prior to deserting or immediately afterward. And while deserters often left alone, many in this sample planned their escape with friends or with a romantic partner. Clearly, when one person starts to see cracks in the frame, and then another person validates that perception, it becomes much harder to reduce the cognitive dissonance. But for women, restrictions presented by traditional gender norms were also a key part of this calculation—many of them did not see any feasible alternative to guerrilla membership, and some felt that in the group was the safest place that they could be.

Third, as noted above, the most common reason that deserters gave for leaving their group was due to threats or perceived threats from their own comrades—including the threat of forced abortion. The cost-benefit calculation clearly matters, but it is affected by perceptions of reality and threat, networks, and identity. Recalling that frame resonance depends on the credibility and salience of the frame, it appears that with a serious enough threat to the frame's validity (i.e., realizing that the FARC could not always protect them), the frame may begin to lose salience; that is, it may no longer be essential to these deserters and/or it may no longer resonate with their lived experiences. If threats to their safety are large enough, combatants may start to accept the government frame that they are, in fact, victims of their own group and that they need to leave. And when the risk to one's life was big enough—such as the ELN commander who lost a large sum of money and felt he would be hunted down—some combatants deserted seemingly without any calculation of these

alternatives and then found themselves at a loss in terms of what to do next. In fact, some respondents in this situation ended up so panicked about what to do that they immediately joined another armed group for protection.

Clearly, there is significant tension within the victimhood frame. Although it is unclear if directed government campaigns to encourage desertion had any effect (as no one in the deserter category cited these as a motivator to leave the group), many deserters had at some point accepted a shift in framing from being victims of the government to being victims of their group. However, utilizing the government frame to justify choices does not require fully abandoning the guerrilla frame, and many ex-combatants used them both strategically. That is, deserters may leave the group and adopt the government framing for protection and survival, but most of them still organized their experiences within the frame that their entire trajectory in the armed group had happened because they were victims of the State. While some deserters utilized both versions of the frame, acknowledging that they had been victimized by both their former group *and* by the State, not all deserters did this—in fact, several FARC deserters expressed gratitude for their guerrilla experiences.

Overall, amongst the FARC and ELN ex-combatant population, the frame of victimhood was much more dominant than the government's counter-frame, even amongst deserters and former paramilitaries. This frame appears to have high resonance even when the frame-makers lose credibility (i.e., when recruits realize that their ideological leaders are also trafficking drugs), or when the frame loses some salience in terms of connection to lived experiences (i.e., when recruits are victimized by their own comrades). Arguably, this enduring resonance is due to the fact that the victimhood frame is strongly connected to cultural narratives of campesinos and historical neglect of the State in rural areas. In

addition, this victimhood framing was repeatedly paired with—or resisted by—a narrative of agency and resilience. That is, the guerrillas were victims, but they rose up against their oppressors. Deserters were victims, and reintegration was hard, but they were making the best of their new lives. Paramilitaries were victims but they bravely took up arms to defend themselves and their communities. While there are, of course, issues of empirical credibility with these narratives, the overall framing of victimhood had a strong cohesive effect of making each group feel proud of their collective resistance.

Chapter Seven: Framing and Contesting a Revolution

Colombia's guerrillas have long clashed with the Colombian government about how their revolution is framed—a version of the classic “freedom fighter” versus “terrorist” debate. While the victimhood frame and associated contests discussed in the preceding chapter are clearly important for desertion decisions and reintegration experiences, the revolution frame is the one most vehemently contested by the government and plays a powerful role in rebel group cohesion and the stigmatization of ex-combatants. But this is not solely an ideological competition—many ex-combatants in this study did not fully understand their group's ideology, especially respondents from the ELN. Rather, this competition is about the narratives, labels, and identities used to construct meaning around what it means to wage a revolution, and what it means to fight one. Indeed, the government—with significant assistance from the Colombian media—has run a long campaign of portraying the FARC and the ELN as nothing but criminals, thugs, and drug lords. The effect of this contest has entrenched each side in their own narratives: the FARC and ELN accusing the State of waging a dirty propaganda war against them, and the government asserting that the frame of revolution is simply a smokescreen to cover up myriad illicit activities.

In fact, the Colombian labelling of the guerrillas—particularly the FARC—as terrorists, and then later, as “narco-terrorists”, has been a deliberate and strategic effort to discredit a group that survived for over fifty years partly due to a large amount of campesino support (Courtheyn 2018; Idler 2019; Ramírez 2011). While a great deal of this support was due to government neglect of campesino areas, the government framing of the group as “narco-terrorists” placed the guerrillas at the level of criminals and drug traffickers, erasing any legitimate grievances, and by extension criminalizing the

campesinos who supported them or even simply lived in areas under guerrilla control (Ramírez 2011; Vargas 1996). Of course, most of the FARC loyalists in this project were emphatic about the fact that they were not terrorists; convincing me of this and explaining the government's "dirty war"—and asking me to share this with the world—was very important to them. Paramilitaries also unsurprisingly rejected the terrorist label or any history suggesting that they were bad or inherently violent people. Respondents in all ex-combatant categories saw themselves as fighters, or revolutionaries for justice and defenders of the people.

In addition, while the frame of "revolution" implies major societal change and a redistribution of power, the "fighter" identity that fits inside this frame is not necessarily tied to violence or to revolution—and that is critical to understanding desertion decisions. Disarming as a group, or deserting as an individual, does not necessarily remove one's sense of being a fighter—and a demobilization program that demands ex-combatants drop this powerful identity could be counterproductive. This challenge is especially true for women ex-combatants who are demobilizing into a patriarchal and still very violent society—for example, women who see themselves as fighters for justice and gender equality may have a particularly difficult time reintegrating into rural areas that may still ascribe to harmful gender norms and thus reject their feminist aspirations. Dropping the fighter identity has also been problematic for paramilitaries, many of whom saw themselves as fighting to help the government only to find themselves in a revisionist version of history that erased government involvement and placed paramilitary violence into the narco-criminal-terrorist frame as well.

This chapter explores this contest between the guerrillas' revolution frame—where the government is the “real terrorist”—and the government's frame of the guerrillas as narco-terrorists, into which the government later subsumes the paramilitaries. In turn, the paramilitaries contest both of these frames by asserting themselves as self-defence forces and protectors of the people. The chapter begins with a discussion of the utility and primacy of the revolution frame for the guerrillas, including their identity as fighters, and a more recent emphasis on the FARC's insurgent feminism and the challenges that this presents to their militarized masculinity. Then, the chapter discusses the counter-frame of the State where the guerrillas are labelled terrorists—and later, narco-terrorists—which helped the Colombian government gain more U.S. support to fight the guerrillas while also delegitimizing the guerrilla cause. This longstanding framing of the guerrillas as terrorists has informed disengagement and reintegration policy, where ex-combatants who have deserted their groups are encouraged to abandon their fighter identity in order to become law-abiding citizens once again. The chapter then examines how ex-paramilitaries challenge these frames and position themselves as protectors of the people and wrongly maligned allies in the government's counterinsurgency. Finally, the chapter concludes with an analysis of what this framing contest means for disengagement decisions and what it predicts about reintegration, arguing that ignoring the strong commitment of many ex-combatants to a fighter identity and the revolutionary frame—even when they have willingly disarmed—is impeding effective reintegration.

7.1 The Guerrilla Framing of the Revolution

So, we first have to arm the brain, the head, the thoughts and everything towards where we are going. And there, yes, we use weapons when we need them. Of course,

weapons are a mere continuation of politics by other means, according to Clausewitz, no? One of the war classics. But this signifies that in the context of the fight, in the context of the war, the fundamental ideology is much more important than the weapons. (*Rafael*, FARC loyalist, B46)

As with any rebellion or social uprising, leaders must frame their movement to get and keep recruits: as a cause, as a fight for justice, for redistribution of resources, or in some cases as a purely income-generating endeavour. Indeed, to construct any sort of collective action frame is to suggest that there is a real opportunity to affect social change, and that movement members can be a part of that change (Benford and Snow 2000). In Colombia, the guerrilla framing of a legitimate fight for justice is particularly crucial when placed against the government's counter-frame that the guerrillas are nothing more than criminals and drug traffickers. With the FARC in particular, there are three key components to the revolution frame: 1) the fighter identity; 2) militarized masculinity; and 3) insurgent feminism. This section aims to explore the construction, meaning, and impact of these three components in terms of group cohesion and disengagement decisions.

It is important to note that while the ELN also use components of this frame, responses in this study suggest that the group's indoctrination and propaganda strategy is far less centralized and less successful overall. That is, while some ELN respondents could articulate a revolution frame, many admitted that they had no idea why they were fighting—this admission was almost non-existent amongst FARC respondents, including deserters, suggesting that the FARC's frame was much more resonant with its recruits compared to the ELN.

7.1.1 Fighters for Justice against the “Real Terrorists”

Identity construction is an inherent part of the framing process, in part because it facilitates alignment between personal and collective identities and suggests specific relationships and lines of action (Benford and Snow 2000). A key component of the guerrillas’ revolution frame is the construction of the fighter identity—specifically, a fighter for justice. Considering ideology alone here is insufficient, because group cohesion is not just about the overarching group ideology. While scholars have shown that ideology clearly matters to rebel group cohesion (Gutiérrez Sanín and Wood 2014), what is just as critical is how leaders “sell” the ideology to their members and how leaders and members together carefully construct identities within this ideology that build group cohesion—and for this purpose, simple frames are more effective than complex ones. Indeed, many ex-combatants in this sample only had a very rudimentary idea of the Marxist ideology claimed by both the FARC and ELN—although this lack of knowledge was more pronounced with the ELN respondents. What was more important than granular ideological details for most of the respondents here (both guerrilla and paramilitary) was the sense that their fight mattered—and by extension, that *they* mattered. Indeed, for many ex-combatants in this sample, the importance of “being someone” was a clear pattern, and many (especially men) got this sense of importance from being a fighter—especially one of higher rank. In addition, this fighter identity was not something that combatants dropped after demobilization, not even amongst deserters. As this chapter will show, the fighter identity constructed within the revolution frame was highly durable across all respondent categories—but the revolution frame itself was subject to many intra-movement disputes and faced an overall decline of resonance amidst the daily challenges of post-demobilization civilian life.

Given the FARC's rebranding of its original acronym after signing the peace accord⁶⁰—and particularly the retention of the words “revolutionary” and “force” within it—many ex-combatants in the reincorporation camps still saw themselves as revolutionaries, positioning themselves against the State as the corrupt enemy. In fact, many insisted that they had not demobilized at all—they had merely disarmed. Most of these individuals had not dropped their sense of being fighters, revolutionaries and/or defenders of justice just because they had demobilized. Similarly, not all deserters demobilize because they have renounced their group or its goals—in fact, this study shows that many do not. The majority of these respondents articulated that they still had something to fight against: they agreed that, above all, the government was the greatest enemy, liar, and manipulator in this conflict. And most of them, including the paramilitaries, saw themselves as continuing to be fighters against injustice. As one FARC loyalist said:

Well, we're not going to say that we are civilians, because on the day that the government truly says to us, 'We've fulfilled [the peace accord]'... then [we can say] we *were* guerrillas. Now I still say: 'We *are* guerrillas' because for us they have not fulfilled anything. (*Adrián*, B44)

Indeed, less than a year after that interview, three top FARC commanders publicly echoed this sentiment about the government's failure to fulfill the peace deal and announced their return to arms (EFE 2019). In fact, many ex-combatants in this sample emphasized that the government was still fighting a dirty war against them, and the arrest of Jesús Santrich on drug trafficking charges soon after the peace deal created significant

⁶⁰ The political party named itself “Fuerza Alternativa Revolucionaria del Común” (Common Alternative Revolutionary Force).

insecurity within FARC ranks that President Duque would not honour the JEP, and that they could all be subject to arrests or threats of extradition:

We don't have any security... we don't have any of that, none of that. I mean that we don't, no, nobody is safe in that tomorrow, or later, I could have a warrant and go to jail. Because it has already happened with comrades ... [for example], the Santrich case: Jesús Santrich was one of those who was in the peace process, who was insisting on the peace process, the one, one of the people who was convinced of the peace process, who was convinced that peace was the best. He was convinced that with peace many things could be achieved, and what the government did with Santrich was a set-up, and [now] Santrich is imprisoned. (*Ana*, B50)

As Santrich is a fighter, he is an intellectual character, a character who debates, defends, who is pressing for compliance, so of course, they could not have him there, he had to ... He was going to be, to represent us there in the House of Representatives, because there they fight hard in Congress. Boom! Iván Márquez too, another good fighter. Boom! The old man had to hide. But the old man is not a dissident, no, he is hiding because there is no security. (*Salvador*, B55)

This repeated insistence that Santrich's arrest was a set-up—and that Santrich himself continued to be a fighter—reinforces the revolutionary frame where the guerrillas are fighters against injustice and that the government is the “real terrorist”. And this position of the State as the instigator of the violence was a highly durable component of the frame that many deserters and paramilitary ex-combatants had also adopted. For example, one ELN deserter was particularly upset about the government narrative that the guerrillas were all terrorists when he saw the government as just as complicit in the violence:

The government says, “the guerrillas are terrorists”, because they kill one or two people. And so, if the guerrillas are terrorists, when we were bombarded and [the army] killed 15, 16, and 17 people, or 18, 20 to 30 people, they aren't terrorists? So, what are they? Good guys? They say, Colombian justice says: if you kill a

person, you must pay, so then what of those people who bomb [us]? Because they don't pay for all of the guerrillas they kill. If they kill 12, 20, 30, 40, it's because there is no justice. (*Junior*, B17)

And one loyalist FARC woman spent a great deal of time describing her arrest, imprisonment and escape, portraying herself as the loyal, unwavering prisoner of conscience held by a manipulative government:

What happens is that at the time of arriving...in order to begin to start a normal life, [you have] to meet with the police, with the justice department. The first thing they put in your hands—it's that I also was imprisoned—and the first thing they put in your hands, the justice department, is the following: on the table they can put 200, 300 million pesos.⁶¹ And they say, "You want to leave freely right now?" Knowing that's not going to happen because there are laws already instituted, [criminal] codes that say that, for rebellion, you have to pay many years in prison, for murder you have to pay many years, but nonetheless they trick the people and offer money. Or they do not offer money, they show a package and say, "Well, you will collaborate. You will tell me who is the commander, what the commander does, who are the contacts, and in this package that we will give you, we have a house in Europe, you will have private security, we will pay you monthly... ." (*Mari*, B58)

The theme of loyalty, rules and obeying commanders was also critical to the fighter identity within the ETCRs. Group rules and norms came up frequently in interviews with both loyalists and deserters of all three groups, though each category of ex-combatants approached this topic differently. Loyalists spoke about the importance of the rules and how deserters often incorrectly viewed sanctions as "mistreatment" when sanctions were simply a fair consequence of breaking the rules. This idea of being a rule follower and always respecting the chain of command was deeply ingrained in loyalist respondents—as opposed to many deserters who insisted on being rule-breakers and independent thinkers,

⁶¹ Roughly equivalent to USD\$58,000-87,000. As this is an incredibly large sum, it may have been an exaggeration.

and sometimes criticized FARC or ELN ideology as hypocritical. Many loyalists had internalized a rule-following mentality from a young age, even before joining the FARC, saying that they had no trouble following rules in the organization because they had already learned this at home. AUC respondents, on the other hand, spoke about the rules with fear and memories of trauma—to them, rules were followed not out of loyalty or devotion to the cause, but because of the terrifying consequences of breaking them.

Another critical component in the construction of the fighter identity, especially in the FARC, was separation from the civilian population. Wearing uniforms, living in camps, a strict daily routine, being discouraged (and in some cases prohibited) from romantic relationships with civilians—all of these aspects fostered a very specific fighter identity to help maintain cohesion (Gutiérrez Sanín 2018). The separation from civilians also kept some rank-and-file guerrillas siloed from criminal activities that happened largely in the cities. This is not to say that basic guerrillas “en el monte”⁶² were unaware of the FARC’s involvement in cocaine production and drug trafficking, but very few of them talked openly about it, likely because those activities are inconsistent with the revolutionary frame and only reinforce the government’s narco-terrorist counter-frame. However, several FARC militia deserters, especially those of high ranks, spoke at length and sometimes proudly about their duties of buying and selling drugs for the group. In addition, for some base-level guerrillas in certain units, especially ones that rarely travelled (e.g., the protection units for Secretariat members), it is possible that they would never have witnessed (or been

⁶² This phrase “en el monte” (on the mountain) or “al monte” (to the mountain) referred to being in or returning to the jungle or mountains, or general rural areas with the guerrillas, regardless of the presence of actual mountains. It was also used to distinguish themselves from guerrilla militia members, who were operatives in towns and cities, and—some felt—not “real” guerrillas (though certainly not all ex-combatants felt this way). Thus, most guerrilla ex-combatants referred to their time in the group as time “en el monte”, whereas some militia members would specify that they had never gone “al monte”.

informed of) income-generating criminal activities performed for the FARC. In fact, after hearing many stories from loyalists denying any involvement in the drug trade (without my asking about it), I asked one of the FARC militia commanders, who had given me in-depth details on the group's drug trafficking operations, if it were possible that base-level guerrillas in the camps would be completely unaware of the group's drug trafficking activities. He laughed and said it was definitely possible, and then said that "people see what they want to see" (B31). Indeed, reducing cognitive dissonance by wilfully ignoring certain activities, or by keeping certain troops siloed from criminal activities, is an effective way to maintain cohesion and strengthen the salience, resonance, and credibility of the frame.

Keeping rank-and-file guerrilla fighters separate from civilians also controls the networks of the fighters, especially as recruits were discouraged (and sometimes forbidden) from contacting their family members, which they explained to me as being necessary for the security of their families. In addition, being known as a committed rule follower affected one's social network within the group. That is, most of the loyalist respondents who were proud of their adherence to the rules and norms of the groups also reported that they had never heard anyone talking about wanting to desert. One FARC loyalist woman laughed at this question, saying: "No one would ever say that to me. They know who I am" (*Mari*, B58). For this type of respondent, a committed revolutionary who has signalled this clearly to the group, no one ever talked about wanting to desert—it was something a person did on his/her own, in secret, because the risks were so great. In this case, the respondent's identity affected who was in her network of confidantes, and this network then reinforced the frame for her with a feedback loop that reduced any cognitive dissonance that might

have occurred with open discussions of desertion. But testimonies of deserters challenge the view that no one talked about desertion, as many reported leaving in pairs, or groups of three, or one would leave and the other would follow a few days or weeks later. Desertion *was* something that combatants talked about and planned with each other, but only in certain social groups. Thus, while networks may influence desertion, a person's level of commitment to the revolution frame clearly influenced who was in their networks and what type of information was shared. In other words, combatants who were staunch rule followers and outspokenly committed to the group's ideological goals were much less likely to have heard other people discussing possible desertion—and thus more likely to believe that everyone around them was equally committed.

Many ex-combatants talked about wanting to “be someone”—and being a fighter had given them exactly that. In fact, for men in particular, an important aspect of the fighter identity is the issue of rank. Throughout the demobilization process, the FARC has maintained a level of rank and hierarchy in the ETCRs, with higher ranking members usually having more authority in economic and political projects, and more engagement with community leaders. This is in distinct contrast to the individual demobilization programs, where everyone is treated exactly the same regardless of prior status in the group. The departure of many commanders from the ETCRs has thrown this hierarchy into some disarray, but generally, chains of command were still respected, with the next in line taking charge.

But the outcome of rank in the reincorporation camps contradicted the ideological rhetoric of the group that everyone is equal, which many respondents resented—even ones who stated that they had never wanted to be commanders. Responses in this study indicate

that while the importance of military ranks was clearly understood and (generally) accepted when the organization had a military structure, many ex-combatants in the ETCRs did not agree with the continuance of rank privileges as civilians. This represents one of several “frame resonance disputes” discussed in this chapter: while frame disputes are intra-movement disagreements over reality, “frame resonance disputes” are disagreements within the movement about how reality should be represented (Benford and Snow 2000, 626). For example, in the ETCRs, high-level commanders often had better quality housing, travelled with armed bodyguards, and in my observation they all had more valuable belongings (e.g., armoured vehicles, flat-screen TVs, modems, laptops) than rank-and-file guerrillas and low-level commanders—despite everyone purportedly receiving the same level of monthly government benefits. This discrepancy clearly did not represent the anti-capitalist, egalitarian ideology of the FARC. One woman who left an ETCR to join the individual program said that part of her motivation to leave the camp was that the commanders were demanding that all subordinates “donate” a portion of their monthly reintegration allowance to the political cause (B02). While the high-level FARC commanders that I interviewed categorically denied this requirement, several ARN officials and other researchers confirmed that they had also heard these stories. And stories like these, whether true or not, contribute to the breakdown of the revolution frame and weaken group cohesion.

In fact, in addition to growing resentment about unequal benefits, another sign of frame breakdown was the intense nostalgia that many respondents had for their guerrilla life “en el monte”. This was not an internal resonance dispute or even a frame dispute but was instead a loss of frame salience: the revolution frame was becoming harder and harder

to connect to their daily lives in the face of civilian challenges such as buying food, clothing, and medicine and the hard reality of continued government neglect. A key component of being a fighter for lower ranking respondents was that they felt safer inside the group than outside of it, while others said that life seemed easier on “the mountain” compared to civilian life, because as basic guerrillas they never had to worry about where food or toiletries or medicine would be coming from:

Yes, it was a very abrupt change because...first we entered the FARC very young and we never had independence or knew how to become independent, and we got to the organization and there too they gave us everything, and we did nothing but comply and we had everything that we needed there. But when they released us [after the peace agreement], it was like, “Uuff!” It was like someone slapped you and you said, “Oh, son of a mother!”⁶³ Civilian life is hard. One always says that, that, it is better [in civilian life], you see, but in this case, personally, I say that we maintained... life was better on the mountain than, than right now. Of course, one has like, like more freedom, but one has far, far fewer resources. (*Reina*, B40)

Respondents from all groups also mourned the loss of purpose that they felt after demobilizing—regardless of whether they decided to desert or had been ordered to disarm. This loss of purpose indicates a breakdown—or at least weakening—of the fighter portion of the revolution frame, which FARC commanders were trying but often failing to prevent. For many of the loyalists, adjusting to the idea of being responsible for themselves, and finding a new identity as a self-sufficient civilian who could not rely on commanders to provide decisions and supplies and orders, was very difficult:

[There] the commander solved everything, right? ...You got used to it. Everything always got there, right? And here you already find yourself with a different picture, right? That one practically has to depend on oneself, because here that basic rent that

⁶³ The slang expression used here is unique to Colombia: “juemadre” (roughly, son of a mother), used as a softer version of “jueputa” or “hijo de puta” (son of a bitch).

they give us is very little. You know that it is not enough to buy one what one needs daily, much less for medications if you are sick. In my case, because I arrived here ill, most of that income has been to buy drugs [medicine]. Buy drugs and buy drugs, right? (*Roberto*, B25).

Those of lower ranks (i.e., squad commanders and base-level guerrillas) were more likely to complain about the challenges of managing and acquiring daily necessities; those at higher levels of command already had experience obtaining supplies for their subordinates and knew how to manage budgets and other logistics. Also, militia members who had remained at home while working for the guerrillas were much less likely to complain about these things—as they were the people responsible for acquiring most goods (at the behest of commanders) in the first place and also had to continue managing their own household budgets. Several FARC ex-combatants also pointed out the discrepancy between the ability of high commanders to disengage and become political leaders, and the inability of rank-and-file guerrillas or lower level commanders to do the same:

The commanders were immediately prepared to arrive and be part of the political leaders in Congress, in whatever political [party], NGO, or political rank in the structure of the government. But the base guerrillas are not prepared, so it is very hard, very hard because, because when one is not prepared and one needs medicine or to be treated in the hospital it is already... in the organization when one was sick, they treated you right away or they operated immediately and there was no red tape, paperwork, that's how it happened. Because of this, many people do not have a mentality, a goal, a project to follow. (*Jaime*, B36)

This lack of purpose—which was related to a very real lack of economic options—was cited by respondents as a key factor influencing large numbers of loyalists to leave the ETCRs. FARC political leaders have tried to transform their revolutionary frame from armed insurgency to politics, but for many FARC ex-combatants who are not directly involved in political positions, this frame no longer resonates. In fact, those still in the

ETCRs reported that disillusionment with the peace process had caused many ex-combatants to drop out of or avoid any reintegration program altogether—and this, arguably, is not only a failure of the DDR process, it is also a critical loss of resonance of the revolutionary frame and a failure of frame transformation. While one ARN representative assured me that the agency is still in contact with everyone who had left the ETCRs, another representative from the same agency declined to answer when I asked her to verify that claim. Indeed, multiple UN reports have stated that there is little knowledge as to where many ex-combatants have gone after leaving the ETCRs (Guterres 2019c, 2018b, 2018d). And while having ex-combatants abandon the process may initially be cheaper for the government if those people fully drop out of the DDR program, it only reinforces what many ex-combatants already think about the complacency of the State towards their needs. And it increases the risk that ex-combatants will return to arms and/or engage in criminal activity:

Well, what I have to say that the world does not know: we are here in a fight, dealing with all the difficulties that exist in these transition zones, that is, not only in this one but in all of them, to the national level. We remain here, all the time, with the expectation of this commitment we made to leave our weapons and not pick them up again. Because we are here with many difficulties, with many. Here [we have], like I have said for a while now: insecurity (*Ricardo*, FARC, B26).

In fact, some loyalists even commented on how the government was deliberately not fulfilling the peace deal in order to disperse and then destroy the group:

In other words, they put us here [in the ETCRs] to waste time. Here, there are some comrades who are responsible for the reincorporation; we have the cooperative already set up, but they go to meeting after meeting and nothing ever gets agreed, and they wait ... In this way [government officials] are using development strategies so that we will get bored and leave... And then, divided and alone, it's easier for them to fuck us (*Rafael*, B44).

If the government's strategy was in fact to weaken the fighter identity and overall revolution frame by way of neglect, for some ex-combatants this has been successful, while for others it has backfired. Rather than accept their civilian roles with resigned humility, several key FARC commanders and troops loyal to them have returned to arms, others continue fighting as dissidents, and those committed to peace feel vindicated in their suspicions that the reincorporation benefits were a lie all along.

7.1.2 Militarized Masculinity

As noted earlier, in Colombia, the two predominant traditions of gender norms are *machismo* (emphasizing the masculine warrior/protector/provider) and *marianismo* (emphasizing feminine fertility, domesticity, and self-sacrifice) (Chant and Craske 2003). Particularly important when looking at armed groups is understanding that *machismo* can be used to structure power relationships between men, not just between men and women (Chant and Craske 2003). And, in the FARC in particular, *machismo* appears to structure some relationships between women as well. In militarized masculinity, violence is unavoidably intertwined with power and patriarchal hierarchies where the “most macho” members get promoted, which has particular implications for demobilization and predictions for reintegration (Theidon 2009)—especially, I argue, for demobilized men of higher ranks. Enloe (2000) argues that militaries must control images of women to emphasize traditional narratives of masculinity such as physical strength and bravado that encourage young men to sign up. In contrast, feminization of the enemy is a key factor in militarized masculinity, where the enemy is portrayed as something to be conquered, penetrated, and ruled over and the use of feminine terms is commonly derogatory (Goldstein 2001). While this aspect of feminization of the enemy was more prominent in

the AUC, who rarely recruited women (and almost never in frontline roles), it was also evident when FARC loyalists discussed infiltrators and informants.

The adoption of an army-like organization in the early 1980s had profound implications for the gendered nature of the FARC. Until this point, there were very few women in combatant roles in the group (Gutiérrez Sanín and Carranza Franco 2017). When the FARC made the explicit decision to become an army-like structure, they created a hierarchy that mirrored the army's ranking system (Gutiérrez Sanín 2018)—and with that, they reinforced promotion practices that rewarded values related to *machismo*. That is, in most armies and army-like structures, gendered identities frequently follow a militarized masculinity that becomes essential for holding armed groups together (Goldstein 2001; Theidon 2009).

For example, male and female respondents in this research told many stories of women infiltrators and women traitors, even as they lauded the women in their group for being dedicated to the cause. Many respondents said that all of the armed groups, including the State military, used women as infiltrators and informants, which created an effect in which all sides were somewhat wary of women. This narrative reinforced a militarized masculinity which devalues the feminine, and the fear of duplicitous women generated some particularly wild stories:

“We also have an enemy, and the enemy sent many, many people. They sent them to work, to enroll in the FARC and whatever, and suddenly they come with some mission that, that, well, their mission was to be that, to cause damage there in the organization ... to infiltrate there... to do a job, well, to collect information at least, sometimes, the majority of the time it happened... one time we had an experience where they [the army] sent 100 women to Caquetá... with AIDS, infected with AIDS, to infiltrate the organization and infect the entire guerrilla with AIDS. So, in this, in this, in this dynamic many people came to cause harm” (*Ana*, FARC, B50).

These types of stories, especially of women infiltrators sent by the State, were rampant in the FARC ETCRs, which—intentionally or not—reinforced an image of women as untrustworthy and duplicitous. They also were a method to counter the State framing of FARC women, by insisting that the women deserting the FARC and telling stories of abuse were not really FARC women at all. Indeed, several other respondents in the ETCRs told me stories of how the army had sent countless young girls to join the FARC as spies:

Then [the girls] got there and at once the psychological work and everything started. They are the ones that have talking about how the guerrillas mistreated them, that they raped them, that they entered as a girl. And it turns out that those 14, 15 year old girls were sent by the army, who previously trained them in battalions and corrupted them, prostituted them, and they were sent to the guerrillas to generate internal decay, to sleep with one, with another, with everyone, to steal, to harm, to cut tarps, things like that, to do damage, to waste ammunition, to let go of shots while on guard or on site, things like that” (*Bernardo*, B47).

While the State army using teenage girls as spies seems implausible, such stories are not totally impossible: several ex-AUC members told me that their group had sent “many women” to infiltrate the FARC over the years. And since the FARC members generally equated the paramilitaries with the military—and evidence noted earlier shows that the military used the paramilitaries to do things they could not do—these rumours had just enough truth in them to get significant traction in the FARC camps. The effect was that when there was evidence of betrayal, women were often suspected first.

As noted in the previous chapter on victimhood, these accusations of women infiltrators effectively suppressed stories of sexual abuse or harassment in the ranks by discrediting anyone who told such stories—a systematic silencing of victims of anyone who dared speak out. One woman, for example, had left the group due to the threat of a forced abortion after already having had multiple abortions, but she had been convinced by

a relative to return to an ETCR with her children to claim reincorporation benefits (she had never demobilized in the government program, and thus was not seen as a “traitor”). She admitted to me quietly that she did not want to be there, describing the sexual abuse by her much older partner, and then explaining why she could never speak out:

But those who were commanders were not sanctioned. Never... nothing happened, that is, nothing corrective for this, we say, for a female comrade that was subjected to [abuse] by the other. There was nothing corrective, yes? ... because he was a commander... We say every six months there is an assembly... where one can speak up [about mistreatment]. And I was one of the ones who spoke up: ‘Okay, comrade, what happened is this and this; there is a lot of mistreatment against this woman, there is...’ ‘That’s a lie! That, I don’t know what...’ and so they cover each other’s backs. And she stood there like a single little bird who could not do anything. And ... if someone said to them what I am telling you clearly, they would mark that person as an infiltrator. So, you could not, that is, you shut up. If one said, ‘Look, comrade, this is happening.’ ‘You are an infiltrator!’ And then they would start to come after you. I saw four girls killed for that...And they branded them as infiltrators and shut them up. I saw them, I saw... and then it is your turn to keep quiet. I learned from the first one, who always spoke up. And they shot her. They *shot* her. And so, these are things that stay hidden there, you see? So that no one is aware of anything. (*Diana*, B42)

This respondent was very aware of the consequences for sharing such information, as she said this in very low tones, constantly watching to make sure that no one was listening. She also reiterated many times that she had never given any sort of intelligence to the military (even though I did not ask about this). And she was not the only one who told such stories. Another woman, who deserted the FARC during the peace process, told me that she had been in a relationship with a physically abusive commander: “I lived many, many, many things where it is always better to shut up than to say them” (B02). However, even though she kept quiet about the abuse, the group turned on her anyway:

I started to think about leaving the group when they started to accuse me of being an infiltrator, because things started to look like assaults, houses were seized, guerrillas were captured and killed, and so they started to suspect me (*Carmen*, B02).

And then there is the story of “Karina” (aka Elda Neyis Mosquera)—the only recorded female Front commander in the FARC’s history (in charge of approximately 250 combatants) who surrendered to the army in 2008 (Orth 2018). Several men mentioned her by name as a “lying traitor” who helped craft false stories of sexual abuse in the ranks. While government statistics indicate that there are far more male commanders who deserted to the army and gave harmful intelligence than female ones—due to the fact that there were far more male commanders in general—Karina was the only one of these “lying traitors” who came up by name. This singling out was undoubtedly influenced by the fact that she was the only female Front commander—her betrayal was a convenient confirmation, based on a sample of one, of gendered expectations that women were not fit to be commanders and also could not be trusted. While militarized masculinity certainly plays against guerrilla claims of gender equality, it was a central factor in organizing the experiences of all combatants—including the guerrillas. And, in the FARC, it sets bounds around the women’s insurgent feminism and creates a “guerrilla glass ceiling” that maintains patriarchal gender norms of men in leadership and women as subordinates.

Other scholars have written about the importance of FARC’s adoption of a “militaristic blueprint” as key to its battle successes and control over large swaths of territory and people, and some have argued that it was only when FARC adopted this army-like structure that it began to recruit large numbers of women (Gutiérrez Sanín 2018; Gutiérrez Sanín and Carranza Franco 2017). But what is missing from this discussion is the importance of highly gendered identities in militaristic control, and the fact that both

men and women often adopt a militarized masculinity in order to be taken seriously and especially to be promoted in army-like structures (King 2015). Indeed, both the FARC and the ELN used the language of women's rights while relying on these militarized and sometimes misogynistic gender norms in order to keep troops in check and to achieve operational goals. Of course, whether militarized masculinity is actually necessary to achieving military goals—or is simply entrenched in military culture and thus *perceived* as necessary—is hotly contested, especially in Western militaries where women are starting to take up more frontline roles (Goldstein 2001; King 2015).

While the women FARC loyalists spoke of gender equality at length, one of the most interesting aspects of these discussions were the women who had essentially adopted masculine traits in order to survive and thrive in the group—something that women in State militaries have also done (King 2015). Indeed, several of the women told me that there were “no women” in the FARC, because they were all treated like men:

[The fight] wasn't, how do you say, it wasn't for many, only for machos. It wasn't for many, only for machos, because they [female recruits] were going to face regulations, a regimen, what is it called? A regimen. Because there were strict rules, strict, strict.
(Laidy, B34)

For these women, the fact that they could do what men did, and be treated like men in the ranks, was a source of pride. What was left unsaid was that they were not equal as women—they were only equal if they could be as similar to men as possible. And when it came to promotions, they did not appear to be equal at all: as shown earlier, while 19 percent of the women in this sample had reached a command level of any kind, 42 percent of the men had done so. In addition, only 3 percent of the women respondents had reached a rank beyond squad commander (the lowest level of command, in charge of twelve combatants), while 21 percent of men had done so. And the women who had gone past squad commander

had only reached the next level (commanding 26 combatants), while men in this sample occupied all available ranks, from squad commander all the way up to the Secretariat. In-depth discussions on rank and promotion with respondents indicated that these proportions were not an anomaly of the non-representative sample, but rather represented a fairly standard pattern in the guerrilla ranks where women were simply not promoted. Of course, this makes sense if women were trusted less and masculine traits were valued more. Despite proclamations of gender equality and insurgent feminism, women simply did not reach high FARC ranks in any substantive way. There is even less evidence for female promotion in the ELN.

This line of questioning about women commanders in the FARC visibly made some loyalist respondents uncomfortable (i.e., shifting in their seats, avoiding eye contact, changing the subject or repeatedly pausing before answering), particularly the men. These respondents seemed well aware that their answers about the lack of women in command positions often clashed with their prior claims of complete gender equality in the ranks. As noted in Chapter Two, once recruits are deeply indoctrinated, they are more likely to avoid situations or information that contradict the group (and the group's frame) in order to decrease cognitive dissonance (Festinger 1957, 1964). Similarly, while frame resonance is partly reliant on empirical credibility, there is case study evidence from social movements to suggest that this credibility is largely "in the eyes of the beholder" (Benford and Snow 2000; Jasper and Poulsen 1995, 496). In a telling illustration of this assertion, to reconcile the lack of women as commanders with the FARC's gender equality claims, men and even several women loyalists claimed that most women did not want to be commanders, while pointing to new leadership positions that women had taken up since the peace process—

such as the newly formed FARC gender commission and the female FARC senator who was in charge of it (Victoria Sandino, aka Judith Simanca Herrera). Some said that women were taking more of a leadership role now that the group had disarmed. This was directly observable in some cases: for example, women were in charge of the FARC eco-tourism project in one of the ETCRs, in charge of communication projects in another, and in one camp, FARC women leaders convened a large meeting on women's rights with women community members from the area. Several women in the northern ETCR pointed to the fact that a man was leading the sewing collective as a sign of gender equality and the shifting of gender norms (though he happened to be the only man working in the sewing collective and he was the manager of the entire project).⁶⁴

Some men also pointed to women's involvement in battle—even if they were not commanders—as being a very important motivator for men. One man said: “There is no revolution in the world that can succeed without the participation of women” (*Luis*, B21), while another said that if he felt scared but saw a woman ready to fight, it helped him:

Why? Because one looks at an armed female comrade, equipped to confront the same situation that you suddenly have to face at a certain moment, that is very beautiful.

And that fills you with motivation, with reasons [to fight], right? (*Roberto*, B25).

However, those brave women appear to be bound within the confines of the group's masculinity, so as not to threaten hierarchies of power. For example, when I asked why there had never been any women in the Central Command or Secretariat of the FARC, most men again pointed to the fact that there was now a woman FARC senator as evidence

⁶⁴ Notably, during this fieldwork, there were several political meetings between high commanders and community leaders that were made up entirely of men. Also, all of the gatekeepers in positions of authority (e.g., people who gave me permission to enter the camps) were men, with only one exception—and in this one case it was because nearly all the male commanders had left that particular camp. When it came to hospitality issues (meals, beds, access to bathrooms/showers, etc.), I was always referred to women.

that women could rise to the top levels. This, however, is further evidence of the strength of the FARC's militarized masculinity: women were only able to rise to top levels once the group reinvented itself as a civilian organization. Even Sandino herself has argued that in the early days of the organization, women FARC members marginalized themselves by getting pregnant, and then they could not reach equality with the men because they had chosen motherhood over leadership and decision-making roles (Orth 2018). Yet, when birth control quickly became mandatory in FARC ranks, there was little acknowledgement that men were also responsible for unwanted pregnancies, and women bore the entire burden of forbidden pregnancies if their birth control failed. For example, one loyalist respondent told me how she had been sanctioned with extra chores for getting pregnant and seemed surprised when I asked if her partner had also been punished; he had not (B51).

In addition, the men's concept of equality was similar to many of the loyalist women in that it was fairly limited to equal duties. For example, many men pointed to the fact that men and women all had the same tasks (i.e., everyone had to march, cook, stand guard, do laundry, etc.), and while they insisted that women had the same opportunities to advance in the ranks, the evidence suggests otherwise. Several men explained that there were a lot of female guerrillas who did not have the capacity, or did not prepare properly, to be commanders. Consider this explanation from a top-level commander, who was visibly uncomfortable at the question of why there was not even one woman in the Secretariat:

Almost, almost, usually, in all irregular armies, where that [few women at the top] has happened, that phenomenon has been a problem of machismo. It has not been a problem of revenge, of discrimination, but because the guerrilla struggle has been very hard, very hard, because the first thing that has to be done, the first thing to bear is a large backpack here on the back, a large backpack with books, with food, with medicine, with clothes, with the tent for shelter, water, that is to say, with your entire

house on your back... And for that then you had to be in very good physical condition. Although that said, there were even women who were stronger to carry the backpacks than we were, to carry the rifle also, than many men, much stronger. But...in our case undoubtedly there was not, there was not like a, like a generation of women who could last as long as we managed to endure, for many reasons, for many reasons. Sometimes their appearance, their physical conditions were deteriorating faster due to the same circumstances of war, of the hard way of life...And then that also meant that they had to leave...to leave them with the lightest jobs, in the lightest tasks of everyday life, such as communications, medicine, the relationship with the civilian population.
(Bernardo, B47)

This commander later said that the other reason for the lack of women was because there were very few women in the ranks in the early years of the FARC, and thus there were not many women who had enough decades of experience to be considered for top positions. But this does not explain why many men told me they reached mid-level (or higher) command posts within a few short years, while women who had been in the ranks for twenty to thirty years never made it past squad commander.

Many women loyalists seemed to have internalized these explanations. One woman, for example, blamed women themselves for their inability to promote, based on highly stereotypical gendered assumptions:

No, because what happened was that a woman focuses more, I mean, she finds her companion and she focuses more on staying by his side... meanwhile, for one to get ahead there you have to be detached from someone. You have to be focused on the fight that we have. So, the women they put, some of them, not because it's an obligation but...to keep her husband's clothes clean, to have everything ready only for her companion. Meanwhile if one wants to be someone you have to spend your time studying. I mean, to demonstrate that you are capable and that you are not only... that if I am going to be a boss and then they give me troops, but because of always waiting on my husband I am going to neglect the troops. So, yes, the bosses see that

in a woman and then they hardly give them a chance to be part of the big picture. But there are some outstanding women in the fight. (*Paula*, B24)

Other FARC loyalists reiterated versions of this opinion—that women were not commanders because they did not want to be or because they were not capable. Two loyalists (one man, one woman) told me separately how, even if women were nominated for a promotion, they would often decline and recommend someone else (usually a man) that they thought was more competent. A few men said that women were simply afraid to be commanders or afraid of responsibility. The loyalists had clearly adopted a narrative that justified the overwhelming dominance of men at higher ranks. And this narrative allowed the women to be “insurgent feminists” in a way that did not disrupt the militarized masculinity of the group, thus strengthening the overall frame.

However, there were two notable deviations of this opinion from older loyalist women who had served 43 and 30 years, respectively, in the FARC. These women were both highly critical of the FARC’s claims of gender equality, while still committed to equal rights and to the group overall. One of these women explained how the way that members of the Central Command were chosen was inherently discriminatory against women. She felt that even though they all had to vote on promotions, all the guerrillas came out of a very “machista” society and that even the women were “machista”—that is, when voting, “masculine” qualities like aggression, battle success, and dominance were valued over qualities labelled as feminine, like cooperation, caregiving, and empathy (B51). In addition, she said, if a woman had had romantic relationships with four or five men, that was the first thing that was brought up, whereas the reverse would not be an issue for male candidates. This focus on women’s promiscuity is undoubtedly linked to fears of women infiltrators sent into the group to cause “decay” and chaos. While this particular respondent

did not mention the group's harsh punishments for women's promiscuity, many deserters did. But as someone dedicated to the goals of the organization, who had always wanted to be in the Secretariat, she found the overall gender discrimination very frustrating:

Because of this [discrimination] there was never one woman in the Central Command, and I criticized them harshly for this. Because how is it possible, that there was not one woman? And there were women capable of going to combat, women capable of completing many, many missions, including many male comrades that were in the Central Command who were not capable of completing them. Not everyone in the Central Command went to combat and there were women who went. We began from zero. But if only they didn't see [the men] in favour of a woman in the Central Command...and what a shame for them because now here I am, I am still making this criticism. (*Rosa*, B51)

The other woman was less directly critical of the group's promotion policies but still frustrated, because she felt that the requirements for women to move up in the ranks were unclear and inconsistent. She had a difficult time explaining why she did not advance very far in the ranks, but she placed her lack of advancement in terms of not being capable, rather than in the language of gender discrimination (B61). Clearly, she had internalized the predominant group narrative that women were simply not as capable of military leadership. However, when I asked further questions on the lack of female commanders, she changed course quite quickly:

Well, we women play a role very important in the guerrilla, because it's the only military entity that has women and that, and that went to fight. The FARC and the ELN, and those [types]. But in the government, no. In the government, yes there are women soldiers, but the women soldiers are in the office. In comparison to us? No. We fight body to body with the enemy and we were the women, the women in the guerrilla. (*Magdalena*, B61)

Indeed, the presence of women in general was embraced by men and women as one of the things that set them apart from the paramilitaries and the army, a clear illustration

for them that they were fighting for a just cause and that *their* army was different. While men still retained dominance over the group, allowing women to be present and to have some leadership roles that were not military commands (usually in communications, logistics, and community relations) permitted the men to reinvent a form of masculinity that tolerated women in traditionally men's roles and, in some areas at least, championed women's rights. But perhaps more importantly, the high numbers of women allowed them to claim superiority over the State military and paramilitaries that have been frequently associated with misogynist violence—while still keeping their army-like, male-dominated structure firmly intact.

However, despite these claims of superiority over other military organizations, women's bodies were still highly controlled by male commanders: women were forbidden from having relationships with civilian men, whereas FARC men were “discouraged” from relationships with civilian women (Gutiérrez Sanín and Carranza Franco 2017). Several loyalist men in this study pointed out that without women in the group, male FARC members would be forced to seek romantic and/or sexual relationships in the civilian population, which would threaten the group's overall security and control of information (Gutiérrez Sanín and Carranza Franco 2017). Women, then, were brought in at least partially to make the FARC a completely self-contained unit that did not need to interact with the civilian population (Gutiérrez Sanín and Carranza Franco 2017). But when the FARC realized that couples had a tendency to desert together (something that this study also found), it began to physically separate partners by sending them to different Fronts or to mobile units (Gutiérrez Sanín and Carranza Franco 2017)—a practice that several of my loyalist respondents discussed as being particularly difficult because it made monogamous

relationships impossible (and then women were punished for being too promiscuous). A government respondent also confirmed that separation and divorce rates were very high in the ex-combatant population (C01). Of course, having babies and pregnant women in the ranks would be disastrous to military operations, so birth control quickly became mandatory, forced abortions did take place, and many FARC women left babies with relatives or community members (B31, B42, B48, B62, B63). In my sample, the only respondents who had had long-term relationships were either couples that had deserted together or couples where the man was a commander; and the only woman in this sample who had been permitted to keep her baby while in the ranks was the wife of a top-level commander. While she said this exception was because the baby had been born in 2012 when the peace talks had already started, other women guerrillas in this sample had also been pregnant between 2012-2016 and had certainly not been permitted to keep their babies.

In addition, some respondents indicated that commanders often staffed their protection units with young women, although the exact reasons for this were unclear. One loyalist respondent proudly described how she was selected at age 17 to join the protection unit of a member of the Secretariat. When I asked if it was unusual for top commanders to choose teenage girls to protect them, she said that it was actually fairly common (B62). And while Colombian military intelligence has reported that the protection rings of Alfonso Cano (a top FARC commander) were almost entirely women because he “trusted them more” (Gutiérrez Sanín and Carranza Franco 2017), this contradicts the repeated stories from loyalists about women informants and infiltrators that suggested that FARC members (and in fact, all armed groups) generally trusted women *less*. Also, to staff a protection ring with teenage girls is an unusual decision from a security perspective and suggests other

motives. And, in fact, when I visited the ETCR that housed two members of the Secretariat, all of their active, armed guards were what one would stereotypically expect for personal protection: very large, very intimidating men.

While several women guerrilla deserters agreed with the loyalists that they had never seen nor experienced sexual violence in the guerrilla ranks, it became clearer in these conversations that certain types of behaviour that outside observers may categorize as sexual violence, or at least sexual exploitation, were not necessarily categorized that way by the guerrillas. One loyalist woman told me that any FARC women who were abused had low self-esteem and wanted to be mistreated (B34). Another told me that the women who were abused by men in the ranks were masochists and wanted to be treated poorly (B51). I was also warned by both men and women loyalists not to misinterpret consensual relationships between older men and younger women as abuse or exploitation:

So, be careful: if one is 30 years old, if one is 30 years old and you get a girl of 15 years in the guerrilla, of 16 years, to you they are going to say...they are going to say to you that this is rape. But for the guerrillas, that was the age of majority.
(*Adrian*, B44)

A FARC deserter also emphasized this: “Well, it was normal if a man of 40 years old was with a girl of 16, 17, 18 years old. Normal!” (B68). While the loyalist men often discussed how critical women were to the cause, some also directly mentioned the importance of having women for sexual partnership in the ranks. For example:

Women are important everywhere and much more so in that type of army. Because they gave us talks about that, because they told us: “How would it be to have an army here, of pure men, in this jungle?” Right? Will one endure for 20, 30 years, 40 years? I do not believe so; I do not believe. Or, one would transgress, because in our rules there were policies that one could not mess with a civilian. So, then what? If there were no women there, then the men would break the rules and then

they were going to be sanctioned. But no, it was beautiful because a lot of women entered the organization, and they still played the normal role that any man played. (*Manuel*, B32)

Indeed, in one deserter's explanation of her romantic relationships, it became clear that the guerrillas' ideals of gender equality (and what counted as exploitation or abuse) were highly constrained:

Yes, I have heard these stories [of abuse] on television and I still, no, that is, I say no, because it's that I had... or in other units, in other units possibly. But in the unit I was in, in my company, that never happened. Never there. For example, I don't deny this: I was with the commander for a better life, to win points, but voluntarily. That is, no one obliged me there, like 'You have to sleep with me'. No. It's what *you* want. That [was] simply to improve my life in the guerrilla. (*Keli*, B11)

In fact, this claim that being romantically involved with a commander brought benefits was a source of much disagreement between respondents—as it was clearly damaging to the revolution frame as a whole and specifically to insurgent feminism—but those who admitted they received benefits for partnering with male commanders were illustrating a form of sexual exploitation and social stratification based on rank and gender roles, even if they did not mean to. Most loyalists staunchly denied that this beneficial treatment was possible, as everyone was equal and preferential treatment was against the rules—but a few acknowledged that it did happen occasionally with some commanders.

In contrast, several female deserters from both the FARC and ELN explained (often with resentment) that wives or partners of commanders consistently received considerably more benefits than other women, further illustrating the incentives for women to partner with higher-ranking men: “The wives of the commanders are not normal guerrillas. They can do whatever they want, get good food, they don't have to carry bags—nothing” (*Sofia*, ELN, B03). As one FARC woman put it: “Everything is equal, but there is also

discrimination” (*Carmen*, B02). The reported benefits ranged from better brands of shampoo to being exempt from battles, guard duty, intelligence or other types of more dangerous tasks (B04, B11, B21, B60, B63). The female FARC ex-combatant above, who admitted being with a commander to “earn points”, explained:

To live well in the guerrillas, we women often ‘hook’ a commander. Or we are, that is, we are looking for a commander, like that of a squadron, and that [helps] women live well. Because there, a woman’s life with a commander is super. That is, it is the best there can be. It is the best life. So sometimes we women would arrive and ‘make eyes’ at a commander, to be able to live well: have amenities, permissions... (*Keli*, B11)

One male FARC militia ex-commander went so far as to claim that the only way a woman in the group could avoid being sexually pressured or prostituted out for intelligence purposes (which he claimed was common in the militias) was to attach herself to a commander, where she would be protected (B31). Another FARC militia woman shared this opinion, saying that this exact scenario had happened to her (B63). And one FARC deserter said that it was very common for women and girls to join the ranks in search of a male protector, often due to abuse in the home (B68). Thus, several deserters painted this picture of women competing for commanders’ attention—implying that male commanders clearly had their choice of women. In fact, a few lower-ranking young men mentioned with some resentment that the female guerrillas were only interested in commanders. Clearly, there were rewards for both men and women combatants when they stayed within the bounds of this patriarchal hierarchy.

The evidence presented in this section indicates that militarized masculinity was critical to the overall hierarchy and army-like operations of the FARC—or, at least, the male leaders deemed it to be critical. Despite its feminist discourse and policies in place

that seemingly empowered women, the FARC still reflected and reinforced problematic gender norms in Colombian society. Controlling FARC women, including control over their bodies and relationships, was in fact a key factor in maintaining cohesion in the group's military structure. But this male control over women does not reflect well on the stated Marxist, socialist goals of the group and their purported revolutionary goals of gender equality—which are critical to the overall revolution frame. While militarized masculinity serves the purposes of the organization, it threatens the credibility of the frame. Other scholars have noted that various guerrilla groups in Colombia have “muted” gender in order to give primacy to class struggles (Dietrich 2012), but in the FARC there is an obvious tension in the reinforcement of hegemonic masculinity on an operational level while ideologically emphasizing the women's fight for equality. As a result, to solidify the revolution frame for women but still keep militarized masculinity and male control firmly in place, the group needed to create a different kind of feminism.

7.1.3 Insurgent Feminism

If the guerrillas rely on militant masculinity for troop cohesion and clearly value a patriarchal chain of command, what is the role of the FARC's insurgent feminism function in the revolution frame? How do women assert their feminist identity while negotiating militant masculinity? And does this clash of gendered narratives have any influence on combatants' decisions to leave the ranks? This section will show that the presence of women and their insurgent feminism is integral to group cohesion and the overall construction of the revolutionary frame, even while staying within the bounds of militarized masculinity.

Both the insurgent feminist identity and the concept of militarized masculinity overlap with the fighter-revolutionary to build the revolution frame, but with important distinctions. For example, a person can be a fighter for rights, a fighter for the people, a fighter for his or her family, a fighter against capitalism, and so on. But the fighter-revolutionary identity does not presuppose particular gender roles, nor does it require that someone believe in gender equality or women's rights. In the insurgent feminist identity, however, both men⁶⁵ and women who adopt this narrative are fighting to change gender norms in Colombian society—or at least claim to be. Indeed, this image of fighting against the status quo and working to change gender norms is critical to the revolution frame and the image of being a “people's army”.

As noted earlier, it is not entirely clear when the term “insurgent feminism” was adopted. One FARC deserter who left in 2005 said that during his time in the group (mostly in the 1990s) none of them used the term “feminism” (B68). Indeed, the concept of insurgent feminism appears to be a relatively new invention corresponding with the creation of the Mujer Fariana website shortly after peace talks started (2012-2013)—not even my respondents were entirely sure of the term's origins. But one woman, who had spent several decades in the FARC, explained why the FARC needed their own form of feminism:

So that has been a lifelong struggle, to put us on equal terms with men, and we as guerrillas of the FARC never wanted to be part of “true” feminism, because what is called feminism is the struggle to do everything apart from men, that is, a fight against men, and that is not the case [for us]. It has to be a fight for equal rights, that both men are exploited and we are exploited, men are discriminated

⁶⁵ As will be discussed below, while no men explicitly called themselves “feminists” in this study, the FARC loyalist men—and many of the male deserters as well—espoused ideals of gender equality that fit within this framing.

against as we are. So that is why our struggle has always been for equal rights; that if he is able to go to combat, I am also able to go to combat, if he is able to carry a rifle, why would I not be able to carry a rifle? (*Rosa*, B51)

While there are conflicting explanations for why the FARC began recruiting women in large numbers, what is not disputed is how the presence of women contribute to the revolution frame. The FARC started recruiting significant numbers of women when the organization shifted from a “campesino self-defence organization” into a “people’s army” in 1982, and some scholars argue that the “feminization” of the FARC that occurred through mass recruitment of women was necessary to implement this people’s army project (Gutiérrez Sanín and Carranza Franco 2017). Before this shift to a people’s army, the guerrillas had largely been a male fighting force, and Manuel Marulanda (aka “Tirofijo”), the FARC’s main leader at the time, had spoken against recruiting women, arguing that women did not have the capacity or resilience to participate in war—a theme echoed above in male responses about female commanders (Marulanda 2015). Some scholars have argued that the FARC simply could not have reached its peak size with an all-male force, implying that the recruitment of women was primarily a numbers issue (Gutiérrez Sanín and Carranza Franco 2017). But organizational demands alone are unsatisfactory explanations when comparing the FARC to other insurgent groups that have not recruited large numbers of women combatants. Marulanda later said, in a reversal of his earlier views, that their expansion of recruitment demographics was a deliberate decision so that “many men, women, students and campesinos see in the FARC an organization that represents their class interests and that will contribute to finding solutions to their serious problems” (Arango 1984, 105). At this time the FARC also began to massively recruit minors (Gutiérrez Sanín and Carranza Franco 2017). The explanation that recruitment shifts were

about representing multiple interests, whether true or not, certainly contributes more to the revolution frame than admitting that the FARC's life-time membership requirements and rules against relationships with civilians were creating a serious cohesion problem (Gutiérrez Sanín 2018).

More recently, the head of the FARC's national commission on women and gender explained the term "insurgent feminism" in a media interview after the peace accord was finalized: "We realized that to construct a feminism that represented us, we had to form our own theory. Our feminism is called insurgent because we changed the type of fight, but we did not renounce the fight to transform society. We are continuing our insurrection but without weapons" (Hayon 2019). Thus, the choice to use "insurgent feminism" encapsulates the insurgent stance of wanting to change society (and/or overthrow the government) combined with the primacy of women's rights and gender equality. Arguably, it also carefully contains the women combatants' feminism within the structure of militarized masculinity, so as not to upend carefully constructed gender hierarchies. Indeed, the insurgent feminist identity within the revolution frame does not appear as durable as that of the "fighter-revolutionary" because it was contested by loyalists and deserters alike.

Of course, the women in the FARC reincorporation camps were the most staunchly feminist respondents in the three groups of ex-combatants discussed in this chapter—or, at least, within the bounds of their insurgent feminism. These women spoke of gender equality at length, as did their male counterparts. Most women loyalist respondents maintained that not being commanders did not bother them, and that this was a choice. One woman, in an informal conversation over coffee, became visibly frustrated with my questions about the lack of female commanders and pointed out that their feminism did not

mean that women had to be commanders or had to take on “male” roles—it meant that they could choose what they wanted to do, and if women chose not to be commanders, that was still feminism. But this seemed to contradict women’s descriptions above of how they were “all men” in the FARC and that the war was “only for machos”.

Indeed, even though many women said that there were “no women” in the FARC, they would also discuss how integral women were to the mission of the FARC, specifically because they were women. They did not seem to have difficulty with this apparent contradiction. In fact, their conversations illustrated that the presence of women in the FARC is very utilitarian: not only do women create a fully self-contained army where men need not look elsewhere for female companionship, but the group places women front and centre as symbols of a humane, community-focused, rights-focused “army of the people”. The presence of women also helps to counter government accusations that the FARC men are rapists and child molesters. Several respondents said that women were always sent with units who did community relations, because they were less threatening and more able to talk to other women in the community. But women’s roles were clearly constrained, not only in terms of the “glass ceiling” of rank noted above, but also with evidence of a clearly gendered division of labour. For example, women in this sample most commonly said that they were nurses, “economas” (i.e., in charge of distribution and managing food and supplies), and radio operators, while men would discuss roles as commanders, military trainers, political leaders, spies, explosives specialists, and so on. But by justifying these gendered roles as choices, the women could maintain their insurgent feminism even within these confines. Again, this is an effective form of dissonance reduction.

And while the men realized that transitioning to civilian life would be particularly difficult for their female comrades, they often placed the responsibility for changing societal gender norms directly on the women:

I think that there will be woman comrades, who will go to get their companions, who hopefully do not eat their words and then end up being newly enslaved in *machismo*. And that can happen. Or to the others who go and get, for example, a civilian ... [who] is going to directly subject them to machismo because he does not know everything that they were taught. But I think that more than that, it is they [the women] who have to be valued. Support them as well, but they have to value themselves and along the way defend themselves and... not to allow themselves to submit to that place. And the women know, they know why they learned, yes? What they were taught. (*Rafael*, B46)

In turn, many women loyalists embraced this responsibility, explaining how, now that they had disarmed, it was their responsibility to teach campesino women about their rights, and to protect these women from spousal and State abuse. In fact, I was invited to observe a meeting of women FARC leaders at one of the ETCRs, where they had gathered dozens of women from the surrounding communities and spoke at length about women's rights, the importance of women in politics, and how to organize and improve women's lives. For these ex-combatants, being insurgent feminists was not merely a catchphrase. They saw themselves as responsible for changing gender norms in rural Colombia. As noted in the previous chapter, they often expressed concern that most campesino women were uneducated and old-fashioned in this regard, and that it was their responsibility as insurgent feminists to change the misogynist culture:

If we do not organize, we won't accomplish [change]. Because it's like the saying goes: "one swallow alone does not bring rain, you need to have many."⁶⁶ This is our message. And with the women it's the same. The women submit to the husbands, to the beatings, and those you see most among the campesinos, because it is a culture that we have brought from many years ago. It's a culture, well, here I don't want to lay blame, whether it's the mother or the father, no. It's a culture that came from long ago. (*Mafe*, B29)

Some of these women, however, did express concern about reincorporating into a civilian society that would not necessarily accept these values. A few acknowledged that they would need to be strategic and tread carefully when educating civilian women about their rights. Others worried that their awareness of—and insistence on—gender equality might present new challenges:

Well, on the one hand, it's beneficial for us, the women, to have this liberty because, well, one had to submit to the... to the rules and to follow orders every day. But on the other hand, now we, we've already emerged with this conviction and that, that knowledge that the man has to learn to participate, as much in the house with the children and with the housework. (*Laidy*, B34)

This view that gender equality was primarily about men doing housework was common among both men and women loyalists. There was little discussion about equal opportunities for women, aside from the few exceptions noted earlier.

Nonetheless, with this firm belief that their group was fighting for gender equality and women's rights, most of the FARC loyalists, and quite a few of the deserters as well, found the media stories of sexual abuse in the FARC to be preposterous, with many women saying their relationships with male comrades were very supportive and that the men were

⁶⁶ The English equivalent to this Spanish saying is: "One swallow does not make a summer"—meaning that the return of many swallows signal the beginning of warmer weather (or, in Colombia, of rainy season), and metaphorically that you need more than one person to make real change.

quite protective of the women guerrillas. Several women deserters from the FARC and the ELN also spoke this way, embracing the language of gender equality and expressing disappointment that gender equality was better inside the guerrilla groups than in civilian life. One woman in a safehouse, when asked what she would change about the demobilization process, said:

If it was here like it was in the guerrillas, where the women would be equal to the men...I want everyone to understand that we are all equal. That was the first thing I noticed in the ranks, in the guerillas, we were all equal, women weren't less...in civilian life we are not all equal, the men have power...the women do everything in the house and the men work and drink and drink (*Sara*, ELN, B04).

Overall, however, women deserters were much less likely to invoke the term insurgent feminism and less likely to agree with the type of gender equality they saw in the guerrilla groups:

In the armed group there are no women, we are all men...[but] there is no sympathy for anyone...in civilian life, there is compassion for women...but the reality is, [in the group] they treat you very badly (*Natalia*, FARC, B12).

[T]hey should take better care with women, because although we, as men say there, we are very, very integral [to the group], and although we want to help or to be better, we cannot because, practically speaking, we are women, and we do not have the same strength and the same capacity as a man (*Valentina*, ELN, B07).

However, female deserters who talk publicly about abusive experiences are a serious threat to the FARC's carefully constructed insurgent feminism and the credibility of the overall revolution frame of both the ELN and the FARC; as a result, these women are met with forceful dissonance reduction strategies. When I asked the FARC women about the widespread media coverage about violence against women within the ranks,⁶⁷ nearly all of

⁶⁷ Recognizing the sensitivity of these issues and the fact that many ex-combatants suffer from PTSD, I did not ask any women directly if they had had an abortion or if they had been sexually abused; rather, we spoke

them denied that this happened, claiming that the women who told those stories had been paid by the government to lie:

For me, it's that they paid [the women] to say that. That's one thing. And the other, for me, is that those women are not ex-guerrillas...I cannot go and say, or have the luxury to say, that they obliged me [to have sex] in the guerrilla or that they mistreated me...and I'm carrying a rifle, how am I not capable of defending myself? So, that is a great slander that they invented in order to discredit us as guerrillas (*Paula*, B24).

This idea that women who told stories of sexual violence in the FARC were paid by the government was common, and sometimes repeated nearly verbatim, in interviews in the ETCRs. It was a forceful dissonance reduction strategy in the face of clear threats to the frame. But whether they truly believed this or were trained to give this answer, or a combination of both, is not clear. As with the accusations described above where women reporting abuse by commanders would be discredited, several respondents said that women who told these stories of abuse were government infiltrators whose job was to enlist in the FARC and then desert to tell stories of invented mistreatment. To further address the cognitive dissonance—and challenges to the overall credibility of the revolution frame—that abuse stories generated, some loyalists also claimed that *if* the women were not infiltrators, then they were weak-minded and had been brainwashed:

Well, this follows the falsehoods that the police have created with relation to [sexual abuse]. Because there was a number of women who demobilized and the first ones who helped them were the armed forces. So, well, they have always had their ways to create falsehoods, right? You know about the false positives and all those things. So, one time they give you a letter saying what you had to tell the media. And they put that in your head. And if [the women] would not say that, then [the army] would not give them the help that they supposedly provided, the guarantees. And there are people

about their children and their families, and these topics sometimes arose organically. I did, however, ask women directly what they thought about the media stories painting them as victims of their own group.

that are easily brainwashed. So, many, many, many women that left [the FARC] to say things was because, in some way, they were brainwashed (*Roberto*, B25).

Notably, this accusation of being brainwashed went both ways. One woman, who had fled the FARC to avoid an abortion, but then returned to an ETCR with her two children, said that her female relative had been completely brainwashed by the FARC, and several other deserters also used this term in reference to the loyalist guerrillas.⁶⁸

Another primary tension in the insurgent feminist identity is around the topic of pregnancy. While many loyalist women discussed how careful they were about birth control because they did not want children while in the group, pregnancy was the leading reason that women deserters cited for leaving both the FARC and the ELN, which has also been identified by other researchers as a key motivator for women's desertion from the FARC (Gutiérrez Sanín and Carranza Franco 2017). In addition, several male deserters cited the pregnancy of a partner as their reason to leave the group, and as noted earlier, couples often deserted together. Several woman loyalists mentioned that they had had pregnancies while in the group, or that they had given birth or had abortions, but some made it very clear that they were not willing to discuss this. Others, however, showed visible sorrow when they discussed having to give up their babies, even while saying that they did not regret any choices they had made. Two loyalist women told me how, after demobilization, they had been reunited with their teenage sons, whom they had given to other families as infants, and they described how difficult and volatile those reunions had been: "He told me that I was the worst thing that had ever happened to him" (*Tea*, B56). Clearly, the insurgent feminist identity is difficult to reconcile with motherhood. Even after

⁶⁸ These labelling wars between the loyalists and deserters are discussed further in the next chapter.

the peace agreement, several loyalist women discussed how difficult it was to take advantage of the DDR programs when they did not have adequate childcare, or because they wanted to spend time with their children instead (often, they said, in an attempted “do-over” to make up for having abandoned their other children). As one loyalist woman said: “I do not [study here], for example. Here they come to teach and all that stuff, and I have never gotten into studying stuff here because I said, ‘No, I’m going to spend time with my daughter’” (*Tea*, B56). Another woman said (in an informal discussion) that she was simply too tired from taking care of her children to be involved in politics the same way as she used to be. With the introduction of pregnancy and children into the group, and the increased demands this placed on women (many of whom were single mothers), this partial return to traditional gender norms was clearly weakening the insurgent feminist identity for some women, resulting in reduced frame resonance.

Overall, the men’s support of feminist insurgents within the clear hierarchies of male masculinity was both intriguing and problematic. The men used the presence of insurgent feminists as evidence that they were not like the misogynistic military and paramilitary organizations—they portrayed themselves as enlightened, modern men who saw women as equals and also pitched in with cooking, laundry, and other domestic tasks. Indeed, as other research has found in different Latin American guerrilla groups, the gender equality narrative opens space for men to exercise different forms of masculinity outside the confines of *machismo* (Dietrich 2012). They spoke reverently of the women in their group and of the importance of gender equality. They pointed out with pride—and repeatedly—how they would never balk from cooking duty or ask a female comrade to do their laundry. On the other hand, they had seemingly convinced themselves that equal duties were

sufficient, using explanations like “capacity” and women not wanting to promote as reasons why more women were not in leadership. The insurgent feminism embraced by the FARC does not really challenge male dominance within the group where it matters, but it allows the men to claim a form of masculinity that is counter to their rivals—and it convinces women to embrace the revolution frame as their own because a critical part of the revolution is about valuing women and overturning harmful gender norms. The combined effect is that both men and women loyalists felt that the group supported their goals and identities, which strengthened their overall commitment to the group.

7.2 The Counter-Frame: Narco-Terrorists and Criminal Bands

While the previous chapter showed how the government uses a gendered frame of victimhood against the guerrillas’ claims of being victims of the State, the government has also long used a framing of guerrillas as criminals and terrorists to discredit any legitimate political grievances that they may have had. And the State has discredited these grievances even further by placing successor paramilitary groups into the same narco-terrorist frame. Despite the aforementioned collusion between high-level politicians and paramilitaries, and the later discovery that the Colombian military enacted thousands of extrajudicial executions on civilian men and boys, the government has held fast to this framing of the guerrillas (and later, paramilitaries) as criminals and terrorists, even during the peace negotiations and immediate aftermath.

7.2.1 Narco-Terrorists

We're not witnessing the birth of a new guerrilla army, but rather the criminal threats of a band of narco-terrorists who have the protection and support of Nicolás Maduro's dictatorship...We won't fall into the trap of those pretending to shield themselves behind false ideological clothing to sustain their criminal structure.

-Iván Duque, President of Colombia (Goodman 2019).

Former President Alvaro Uribe once made a now infamous comment that Colombia did not have a civil war but had only “narco-terrorists” (Semana 2005). Not only did this statement allow him to dismiss calls for unwanted international intervention in terms of peacemaking or peacekeeping, but it also allowed for increased assistance from the United States in terms of massive counter-narcotics and counterterrorism military funding (Castrillón Riascos and Guerra Molina 2017). But this was not the first such statement that the Colombian State had made to completely dismiss any legitimate grievances the various guerrilla armies in Colombia may have had. In fact, the State's longstanding refusal to acknowledge that the guerrillas had any legitimate grievances contributed to the environment in many Colombian departments of government absence, lawlessness, and insecurity in which the guerrillas could grow—especially the FARC (Ramírez 2011).

A key component in the government framing of the FARC and other guerrilla groups came when the term “narco-guerrillas” was coined in the 1980s by a U.S. ambassador to Colombia (Arrieta et al. 1990). This term was quickly adopted by the Colombian government, as it implied that the FARC, ELN and other guerrilla groups did not have ideological goals or legitimate grievances and were merely drug-dealing criminals (Arrieta et al. 1990). It also subsumed all the guerrilla groups under the same label, despite clear differences in their strategies, organizational structure, and combat success. While

there is certainly substantial evidence of guerrilla involvement in the drug trade to fund their operations, the political implications of this label were immense: the terminology deliberately conflated Colombia's internal armed conflict with international organized crime, allowing the State to receive military counterinsurgency assistance from the U.S. in the name of the "War on Drugs" (Arrieta et al. 1990). In addition, in heavy coca-producing departments, such as Putumayo, the State deliberately framed coca cultivation not as a social problem and/or a lack of government presence, but as a narco-guerrilla problem (Ramírez 2011). This framing is still evident today with President Duque's stated intention to bring back coca fumigation, and the near total impunity for the execution of social leaders who are often killed by paramilitaries or drug traffickers for suspected ties to the guerrillas (El Tiempo 2019c; Felbab-Brown 2018). That is, if the government frame maintains that the guerrillas (and by extension, their supporters) are all criminals, then they can justify ignoring calls for accountability if the violence is confined to criminals killing each other.

Notably, Uribe's shift from "narco-guerrillas" to "narco-terrorists" is an important labelling mechanism for this frame—replacing the word "guerrillas" with "terrorists" further erases any potential link to a legitimate cause and heightens the public outrage that occurs with any use of the word "terrorism". Of course, this over-simplification ignores the core reasons why campesinos and racialized individuals primarily from impoverished areas—most of whom certainly do not see themselves as criminals—became guerrilla and paramilitary combatants in the first place. The criminal-terrorist frame also does not require that the government address the fact that thousands of ex-guerrillas joined as minors. In fact, conflating everyone "undesirable" into this criminal frame is a convenient way to

justify very specific policy choices (i.e., security, policing, repression) over community development, reintegration, and psycho-social assistance. And for many guerrilla ex-combatants in this study, the State effort to frame them as narco-terrorists only reinforced their suspicions that the government was fighting a dirty war against them, solidifying their convictions that they were fighting the “good fight” against a corrupt and lying State.

While the State could no longer publicly call the FARC “narco-terrorists” once the peace agreement was signed, the arrest and detention of Jesús Santrich (aka Seuxis Paucias Hernández)—one of the key negotiators of the peace accord—for drug trafficking *after* the peace agreement, was arguably another method to do just that. When the Special Jurisdiction for the Peace (JEP) ruled that there was insufficient evidence to extradite Santrich to the U.S., and that he should be freed and subsequently judged in Colombia, Colombia’s Attorney-General stepped down in protest, maintaining that there was “conclusive, unequivocal” evidence of Santrich’s guilt (BBC News 2019a). Upon release, Santrich disappeared and Colombia’s Supreme Court issued a new arrest warrant for his capture (BBC News 2019b). Shortly thereafter, Santrich and two of the key leaders of the FARC publicly announced that they were returning to arms.

This return to arms by two of the lead negotiators of the peace accord (Santrich and Iván Marquez) and their alleged partnership with the ELN—who had, earlier that same year, bombed a police academy in Bogota and killed 21 people—vindicated anyone who claimed that the FARC was always, and would continue to be, a group of narco-guerrillas, no different from any of the other guerrillas. Indeed, Colombia’s ambassador to the United States almost immediately said that the combatants who returned to arms were “just a miniscule element—more the ones who are involved in drug trafficking, who’ve got their

hands in the cookie jar. And that's why they decided to jump the ship. And they will be treated as such, as criminals" (Gawel 2019).

One FARC militia ex-commander supported this claim, explaining to me that the split between the FARC commanders who returned to arms and the ones who stayed in the Senate and the ETCRs perfectly illustrated the intra-group dispute that had always existed. That is, according to this informant, Santrich, Marquez, and Velázquez had always been the commanders primarily involved in drug trafficking, while the ones remaining in their political seats had been the ideologues (B31). This split also places ex-combatants who genuinely want to continue with the peace process in a very precarious position. The State immediately dismissed the commanders' accusations that the government had not fulfilled the peace deal (accusations supported by substantial evidence) and mounted a full military offensive to pursue the three commanders and their followers (BBC News Mundo 2019). Now, all ex-combatants from the FARC will be suspect as potential criminals, as the State cannot be sure which ex-combatants are loyal to the now re-armed commanders and which ones are dedicated to peace. Thus, the narco-terrorist frame remains intact, the military offensive can continue, and counter-narcotics funding can keep coming.

Finally, in the reintegration process, there is psychological counselling that—while inconsistent across the demobilized population—attempts to help ex-combatants shed their combatant identity and reinvent themselves as civilians (C01, C02). However, as noted above, this emphasis on reinvention emphasizes ex-combatants' criminal background and does not take into account valuable skills that they may have learned in the armed group. In fact, for some ex-combatants, the program can be somewhat infantilizing as it places, for example, 18-year-olds, who may have only spent six months in an armed group, in the

same classes and programs as 45-year-olds who may have been high-ranking commanders with a wealth of knowledge and skills. These are deliberate choices made by the government that arguably reinforce the criminal framing and social stigma of ex-combatants.

7.2.2 BACRIMs

The government framing of the paramilitaries—and their successor groups—has been more complex than with the guerrillas and rife with corruption and controversy. First, despite concerted efforts to obscure or ignore paramilitary-government connections, it has been well established that the Colombian military and the National Police assisted and funded the paramilitaries and worked with them on counter-insurgency and, in some cases, drug trafficking operations (Human Rights Watch 2000, 2005, 2010; Sontag 2016). The “para-politics” scandal made it very clear that high-ranking politicians were also involved in AUC operations, and the “false positives” scandal revealed that the paramilitaries had assisted the military in their efforts to present civilian deaths as guerrilla combat deaths (Roa 2007; Rojas Bolaños and Benavides 2017; Semana 2009). Thus, even though the AUC was a pro-State, politician-supported force, upon demobilization and amidst widespread condemnation and evidence of mass atrocities, the government needed to distance itself from the reputation of the group.

Because the AUC demobilization agreement did not require the dismantling of criminal networks or surrendering of assets, there were few obstacles to the resurgence of many paramilitary successor groups—and the Colombian government was widely condemned for this oversight (García 2017; Porch and Rasmussen 2008; Sontag 2016). The government thus made a concerted effort to avoid all blame and distance itself from

these criminal groups—and any connection they had to the former AUC—by calling them “criminal bands” or BACRIMs (Ávila 2016; El Espectador 2012; García 2017). The easiest way to do this, given that the Colombian public already had a poor opinion of AUC combatants, was to place the paramilitaries into the same narco-terrorist frame as the guerrillas. This was a deliberate and strategic labelling choice, as the term BACRIM places the paramilitaries and guerrillas under the same criminal label, making them all legitimate military targets. This labelling also obscures former government ties to paramilitary violence as well as absolving the government of responsibility for the failed demobilization process. Given the international condemnation and related investigations of the AUC, along with the government’s demobilization agreement with the group—which included top leaders serving prison sentences (albeit short ones)—the government was largely successful through this demobilization process and afterward in placing the paramilitaries into the “narco-terrorist” frame.

But many of the paramilitary respondents in this sample contested this framing, noting how important they had been to the government’s fight against the guerrillas and discussing how the government had betrayed them, pointing to the guerrillas as the “real bad guys”. Several paramilitary respondents refused to accept blame for Colombia’s violence and pointed out that the State was the main driver of the conflict. For example, one ex-AUC combatant said: “The State, directly, indirectly, obligates one to kill, like, to provoke wars, do you understand? ... It is the State that in these moments is provoking wars” (*Diego*, B73). Thus, while many of the paramilitaries in this sample used the government’s “narco-terrorist” label when discussing their fight against the guerrillas, they rejected this framing for themselves—even while admitting to having been involved (and

in some cases, still involved) with drug trafficking. Indeed, previous research in Colombia shows that a sense of having lost status or power is highly correlated with recidivism in male paramilitaries (Kaplan and Nussio 2018). But even this ongoing criminal activity they blamed on the government, who in their view was too incompetent to notice their illegal operations and did not care to help them find legitimate work. As one ex-paramilitary respondent said, in reference to the illegal activity happening in the ex-AUC community we were in at the time: “The government still doesn’t know what’s going on” (*Leo*, B97).

7.3 Conclusion

Understanding the frame of revolution as reliant on the identity of “fighters for justice”—and recognizing the tensions within this frame—is critical when analyzing why some people leave non-state armed groups while others stay, and how these decisions affect reintegration. Not only is the fighter identity strong inside the guerrilla groups, but it also extends across respondent categories and often persists long after disarmament and demobilization. Those that have convinced themselves that this is a fight worth fighting can endure painful, traumatic, and contradictory experiences if they can organize or at least justify these experiences inside the revolution frame. This does not mean, however, that deserters are weak, as many loyalists paint them to be. On the contrary, to speak out against violence, and/or to leave an armed group to save your own life or that of someone else, is an act that takes a great deal of courage. While these people may have fled their groups, they too see themselves as fighters—as fighters for justice, for peace, for their families. What this predicts for reintegration is that those who still see themselves as fighters may be more resistant to traditional DDR programming and may struggle more with the transition to civilian life—especially if they are expected to go back to their former life of

as poor, disregarded, disrespected campesinos. Or, for women, if they are expected to drop their fight for equality and return to patriarchal gender roles. Indeed, the resilient aspect of both the fighter and insurgent feminist identities is often under-valued in DDR programs where some (though certainly not all) government representatives treat ex-combatants as ignorant, uneducated, manipulative, and criminal. In its eagerness to erase their combatant identity and transform them into civilians—and to treat everyone from all groups, ages, ranks, gender, and ethnicities the same—the State is failing to capitalize on the skills, knowledge, and passion that many ex-combatants have to offer. And in fact, many ex-combatants expressed frustration with the lack of acknowledgement of the skills and knowledge they had acquired in the group—such as medical training, communications expertise, business acumen, and organizational skills, among others. And many perceived the certificates that they received as part of the reintegration education programs as “useless”.

Of course, not all ex-combatants cling to their fighter or insurgent feminist status, but finding a way to reconcile their new identities as civilians with their identity as revolutionaries (rather than obliterate the old identity) appears to be important. As one FARC woman said: “Of course... we said the fight was the revolution, that we were revolutionaries. We are still revolutionaries, but [now] we are also civilians” (*Jasbleidi*, B30).

In addition, the tensions between insurgent feminism and militarized masculinity within the revolutionary frame appear to have at least two distinct outcomes in terms of desertion decisions: 1) those that can organize their insurgent feminism within the structure of militarized masculinity (i.e., by reducing cognitive dissonance through narratives that

women did not want to be commanders, and/or that all stories of sexual abuse or exploitation came from infiltrators) were much more likely to stay committed to the group—or, at least, to feel like it was the safest place for them to be; and 2) those who could not reconcile insurgent feminism—or any aspect of the revolution frame—with the abuses and exploitation they experienced or witnessed inside the group were much more likely to leave. But why was it more difficult for some women to reconcile these tensions? First, militia women seem to have had more exposure to the guerrillas' criminal income-generating activities, which affected their perception of the group as a whole and weakened the empirical credibility of the revolution frame and the overall credibility of the framemakers. Second, women who could not reconcile the revolution frame with the abuses they witnessed (obvious and irrefutable credibility issues) were more likely to reach out to sympathetic networks both inside and outside the group—which often helped them to escape. As in the previous chapter, there is substantial evidence to suggest that the interaction of different variables is important here: while pregnancy was the most commonly cited motivator for women deserters, it was rarely a sufficient condition on its own. Instead, in successful desertion cases, pregnancy was often paired with a traumatic event—or, conversely, boredom—as well as networks, perceived alternatives (costs-benefit calculation), and/or a strong sense of being on the “wrong path” (identity).

In the individual disengagement and reintegration efforts, the government tries to capitalize on this sense of being on the wrong path or wanting to be a different person. The programming attempts to “break” ex-combatants of their identity as fighters and/or revolutionaries is deliberate and overt—all ex-combatants in the individual reintegration programs receive the same benefits regardless of group, rank, age, or gender, and in the

safehouses, ex-combatants of various groups are all housed together in order to re-socialize them as civilians and not combatants (C01, C02, C03, C14, C15). But the terrorist-criminal label is very sticky and makes it difficult for ex-combatants to obtain work, which in turn keeps them dependent on government benefits and contributes to their overall stigmatization in society.

But the reasons that deserters give to the government about their decision to disengage (e.g., “I was tired of war” being the most common, according to the Ministry of Defence) do not reflect the complex reality of this decision, nor do they capture the difficulty of abandoning the “fighter” identity and the status that often comes with it. Thus, when ex-combatants feel that the government made false promises, or that the DDR program has failed them, this may inadvertently reinforce a “fighter” identity due to the perceived injustice and the confirmation (for ex-combatants) that their organization was right and that the government really was the enemy all along.

Indeed, the tensions between the revolution frame and the government’s narco-terrorist frame continue to persist years after the peace agreement. It was very important for loyalist respondents to reiterate that they were not what the media had portrayed them to be, that they were not terrorists (emphasized repeatedly), that people should not be afraid of them, and that they were normal people who had feelings. They were very preoccupied with combating false stories about them—especially stories about terrorism or sexual violence. In contrast, when the FARC delegation took up their five seats in Congress and five seats in the House of Representatives, Sen. María Fernanda Cabal of the Democratic Center Party said publicly: “Well, I can’t feel happy with rapists of children here, obviously, coming to lecture about peace” (Cartaya 2018). And all ex-combatants felt this stigma.

The government's individualized approach to DDR has also clashed with the FARC insistence on collective reintegration, which deliberately retains the revolution frame and a sense of being fighters against the State. In the collective reintegration efforts with the FARC, the State has had much less success in erasing the fighter-revolutionary identity, and some of its efforts to do so have backfired. The FARC has insisted that their "reincorporation" (to distinguish it from "reintegration" in the individual program) be done differently compared to prior DDR efforts. And the related re-naming of the Colombian Reintegration Agency (ACR) to the Agency for Reincorporation and Normalization (ARN) is an interesting outcome of two different framing contests: first, the contest between the revolution frame and the government's narco-terrorist frame, which the FARC loyalists appear to have partially won in this case of re-naming the ACR; and second, the framing contest between loyalists and deserters, which will be further discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter Eight: Deserters versus Loyalists – Framing Traitors to the Cause

While the main framing competitions in the prior two chapters were between combatants and the government, this last contest is largely between different categories of combatants, specifically the deserters and the loyalists. As is clear from the preceding chapters, guerrilla deserters and their stories are critical to the credibility of the government's counter-frames, making it imperative for the loyalists to challenge and discredit those deserters. In this contest, language and labelling are especially important, as these components both create stigma and help ex-combatants fight against it. While ex-AUC respondents eschewed their paramilitary label and instead called themselves “autodefensas” (self-defence forces) and “desmovilizados” (demobilized), the deserters generally called themselves “desmovilizados” (but never “desertores”). And while I was warned by reintegration officials not to use the Spanish term “desertor” because of the negative stigma, it was not until I visited a FARC ETCR that I learned that the loyalists were adamantly against the use of the word “desmovilizado” to refer to themselves. Indeed, FARC loyalist emphatically insisted that they were *not* “desmovilizados” but were, instead, “reincorporados” (reincorporated). However, while I avoided using the term “deserter” in the interviews, for analytical clarity I chose to use the term “deserter” throughout this dissertation to refer to any person who has left their armed group without permission—with modifications or explanations added where necessary.

In fact, as mentioned previously, the FARC loyalists were so insistent that they not be subsumed in reintegration programming designed for, in their view, “traitors and criminals” (i.e., deserters and paramilitaries) that they negotiated with the government to

call their program something else: reincorporation.⁶⁹ Thus, after peace negotiations were complete, the ACR (Colombian Reintegration Agency) was re-named the ARN (Agency for Reincorporation and Normalization), with two distinct streams: reintegration for the individually demobilized combatants and paramilitaries, and reincorporation for the collectively demobilized FARC. This distinction was critically important for the loyalists, and the differences were apparent. For example, some reintegration staff, expressed the opinion that combatants who were ordered to demobilized collectively were much more “difficult” (i.e., less cooperative with authorities) than those who had deserted their groups (C01, C03). This result is, of course, logical: combatants who have taken great risks to flee their groups and have faced significant military pressure to cooperate clearly have greater motives to reintegrate through the government model compared to combatants who were ordered to disarm and—as previous chapters have shown—may still adhere to a frame that positions the government as the enemy.

This chapter examines the identity construction and related stigmatization within the framing contest of “desmovilizados” versus “reincorporados”. While this contest is primarily amongst the ex-combatants themselves, the government also plays a role not only by encouraging desertion, but also by contesting both sides, grouping all ex-combatants into the same category and attempting to make any frame constructed by combatants and/or ex-combatants illegitimate. First, this chapter begins by discussing the elements of the FARC framing of deserters, examining how this frame limits the perceived alternatives of members within the group and also determines which deserters are permitted to return to ETCRs. While this frame is very robust and resonant within the loyalist respondents of this

⁶⁹ Information obtained during a background meeting with ARN officials in October 2018, Bogotá.

sample, it is highly contested by combatants who left their groups, and it may weaken further as more loyalists are leaving ETCRs and begin to interact with deserters as civilians. Then, the chapter moves to an examination of how guerrilla deserters have contested this frame by positioning themselves as nobler, more educated, or in some way “better” than the loyalist members—not only by sharing stories of abuse and hypocrisy in the ranks but also by constructing new identities for themselves, sometimes even by helping the State. Finally, the chapter looks at how the government attempts to encourage desertion and dismantle the frames of both loyalists and deserters, which contributes to the overall stigmatization of ex-combatants in Colombia.

It would be meaningless to note how many times “desertion” was coded, as the interview questions were all structured around this overall theme. What was more important was how often respondents constructed their own post-conflict identities largely in relation to what they were not. And all categories of ex-combatants did this: the loyalists were not cowards, the deserters were not brainwashed or traitors, and the paramilitaries were not terrorists.

8.1 The Deserter Frame

The FARC framing of deserters depends heavily on three key factors: labels, othering, and gender. As deserters have been some of the key detractors to the credibility of the FARC and ELN’s revolutionary frames, it has been important for the groups to discredit deserters and, in some cases, to hunt them down. Not only do the individual FARC loyalists use forceful reduction strategies to address the cognitive dissonance presented by deserters’ stories, but they also produce counter-information and in some cases physically remove the threats to the frame’s credibility. This loyalist narrative thus requires a carefully

constructed frame that deserters are cowards, liars, and informants—in other words, in this frame, deserters were never “true guerrillas” from the start. This framing clearly contradicts the empirical evidence presented throughout this dissertation, which highlights the existence of internal threats that push combatants out of their groups and the importance of intra-group disputes about reality.

8.1.1 Labels: “Desmovilizados” and “Reincorporados”

In my first round of fieldwork with deserters in the military safe houses, the government staff, and the guerrilla ex-combatants themselves (FARC and ELN), referred to all demobilized combatants as “desmovilizados” (i.e., demobilized people), so I adopted the same terminology. While they distinguished between the two ARN programmatic streams (i.e., reintegration and reincorporation), they still referred to “desmovilizados” in the individual programs and “desmovilizados” in the collective programs. Later, in my first AUC interview, that respondent also referred to himself as a “desmovilizado”. However, in the first FARC reintegration compound (ETCR) that I visited, when I said to the commanders that my study was comparing collectively demobilized combatants with individually demobilized combatants, using the term “desmovilizados”, one of the commanders became visibly agitated. He then loudly and emphatically told me that they (i.e., the FARC in the ETCRs) were *not* “desmovilizados” but were instead “reincorporados” (reincorporated). This was a tense moment in the fieldwork, because he was so affronted by my accidental transgression that it was not clear whether I would be permitted to stay. One loyalist later explained the problem, emphasizing that he did not consider the demobilized as having ever been true guerrillas:

The “demobilized” ... the “demobilized” is what: that which is a harmful, a pig, a degenerate. That, yes, is an infiltrator sent by the enemy to do damage. The infiltrator does what: he kills guerrillas in fights; he damages the pots or breaks them so that water passes through; he kills people in their beds. That is the infiltrator, that comes from there to “sap” the civilians, those who support our economy, to get them put in jail. They go with their faces covered and walk around hurting the poor peasants who have soothed our hunger. So that's why, here we are fed up; they made us kill guerrillas, [in the] bombings. That's why I don't agree with them being here. Because no, because if we were at war, they were not with us, and as we are not at war right now, that is, this is over according to the Government. Yet they [the demobilized] are here and they take benefits as though they are guerrillas, and I don't know what. Lies; for me they are nothing, for me they are civilians. And that [word] pains me, because I am *not* demobilized. (*Adrian*, B44)

Similarly, a top FARC commander explained why the term “demobilized” could not be applied to them. For the FARC loyalists, to demobilize is to abandon the political project and/or to dismantle the group. Or, in the case of the paramilitaries, it was evidence that there was no political project in the first place:

Demobilization was a program that the government drew up when some groups of paramilitaries broke up. Fine. Then, there they classified it as “demobilization”. So, we said no, we did not, we are not demobilized, because demobilizing is to disintegrate. But we did not disintegrate, we left there, from a stage of struggle, and we settle here to another stage of struggle, in other conditions that are already in political conditions, [but] not with weapons in hand. (*Bernardo*, B47)

While this distinction had not been signalled to me by any of the military or government contacts that I had interacted with up to that point—clearly, the military did not make this distinction between types of ex-combatants—this labelling was very important to the FARC loyalists. It seems unlikely, however, that government officials were completely unaware of this difference in terminology, given their claim that many

FARC members from the ETCR had been switching to the individual program, in addition to the enormous emphasis that all of the ex-combatants in this study put on these labels. More likely, it appeared to be a deliberate choice to reject the labels chosen by the loyalist guerrillas and to continue to place all ex-combatants in the same category. However, when I signalled my knowledge of this distinction in subsequent interactions with the FARC (i.e., describing my study as a comparison of the disengagement experiences of “desmovilizados” and “reincorporados”) the loyalist commanders voiced their appreciation that I knew and acknowledged the difference. This small change in terminology made an immediate and noticeable difference in establishing trust.

Indeed, FARC ex-combatants in the ETCRs went to great lengths to discuss how, for them, the term “desmovilizados” also referred to the AUC paramilitaries that demobilized in an agreement with (in their view) the same government who had paid them to fight in the first place. These committed combatants saw the paramilitary demobilization as a farce and argued that the term is problematic because many “demobilized” AUC combatants never actually demobilized. The FARC ex-combatants in the ETCRs also applied this label of “desmovilizados” to deserters who turned themselves in to the military, but *not* to deserters who simply left the group and went back home.⁷⁰ Indeed, FARC loyalists were quite clear that combatants who left the group but did not demobilize via the military and otherwise did not harm the organization (i.e., by sharing intelligence or handing in weapons) were not considered “desmovilizados”. These were simply combatants who left the group and did not have a particular label attached to them—some were even referred to as having “retired”, though it was unclear under what circumstances

⁷⁰ This is similar to some of the disengagement literature that distinguishes between desertion, understood as simply leaving the group, and defection, which is going to “the other side”.

this was permitted. In fact, despite the insistence of government staff that I not use the term “deserter” in the safehouses, due to the stigma attached to that word, one loyalist respondent explained that, in his mind, deserters were just people who left the group, and they were very different from “desmovilizados”:

Infiltrators. Look, for me, all the demobilized, for me, are infiltrators. They are our enemy. For this reason, I am not in agreement with deserters nor the infiltrators. Nor the demobilized. Yet the deserter, the deserter is very different than the demobilized because there are deserters that left the organization, they got tired, they didn't want to know anything about the fight, they were frustrated with it. They left and they left to work. (*Adrian*, B44)

Similarly, one high-level commander said that the group was careful to distinguish between people who just left for work and people who left and surrendered to the enemy. He said that they would find the person who left and perhaps give them a small sanction, for theft or another similar crime, and “then it was time to talk, submit them to that, to that education, to preparation so that they did not repeat the fact, that was what happened” (*Bernardo*, B47). Another respondent agreed that this distinction was important, but he specifically used female pronouns (e.g., *la/ella*) in this passage to emphasize female deserters (even though I had not asked about women in particular):

Of course, there was a terrible difference. First because one [woman], she might have gone because was wasn't capable to adapt to the fight. And the other [woman], that she left because “I'm not capable either” but she also left for her weak ideology in service to the enemy. So, that person, well yes, her degree of crime is worse. (*Rafael*, B46)

In addition, according to a member of the Secretariat, there was a process of appeal where one could ask to leave the group, or to “retire”, and these people were not considered deserters; in fact, several loyalists told me that there was an established process in which

members could request to leave and that no one was ever forced to stay. For example, one loyalist said, about a female recruit who had wanted to leave:

It was a lot for her, and she wanted to go. Once, she told me, “Look, I want to go.” And so, I respected her, and I said, “Love, here no one is going to force you. If you want to go, then go.” That is what I told her, “If you want to go, then go.” And yes, this girl, she left. (*Ricardo*, B26)

These portrayals of the group as benevolent towards dissatisfied recruits is critical to the overall deserter frame, as they emphasize that members simply had to ask permission to leave; thus, desertion was not only traitorous but also unnecessary. But several deserters in this sample shared stories of asking permission multiple times, saying that those requests were never granted.

Clearly, a lackadaisical attitude toward desertion does not match the official FARC statutes, where the group demands lifetime membership and the official punishment for desertion is death. But this contradiction was framed as benevolence on the part of the loyalists. Some loyalist respondents said that if they met a deserter now, in civilian life, they would just ignore them (e.g., “I would pretend they had never existed” [*Manuel*, B32]), and others said that they did not harbour any ill feelings toward deserters. For example:

There was no anger or anything. In my case because I can usually go, right, in my case I can usually go talk to them and I can share with them normally. And here I have met some of them. In [nearby city] I met two guys who were deserters who were from here, and no, well, we hugged each other well, said how are you... we had no coldness, that because they are deserters, no.... No, there is no point. (*Philippe*, B27)

Despite this insistence on benevolence, several respondents said that some former members who had officially demobilized (i.e., entered the government program), had tried

to come back and it was very clear that this type of deserter was not welcome. As one respondent said:

Well... it depends on how they leave, right? ... If a person leaves without anything and doesn't take anything from the organization and is not going to present himself to the army to betray us, and he is just working normally, [then] nothing happened.... If [a deserter] had taken something from the organization, then I would feel rage, because those are things that we had obtained in the collective, for everyone. Because if a person took a rifle, and that rifle had just been recovered in combat, and two or three people had died to recover that rifle, and then for another to come and take it away? So, you get angry with a person like that. (*Paula*, B24)

While there may not have been total agreement on labelling ex-combatants within the loyalist respondents, there was a general agreement that there were different types of deserters: “desmovilizados” who surrendered to the army were the worst kind, and no loyalist wanted to be associated with that term. In this frame, deserters who surrendered to the army were traitors, “sapos” (informants), cowards, and liars. Since the loyalists were neither paramilitaries nor traitors nor cowards, they needed a different term to indicate their disarmed status, which as noted above partly influenced the definitional split between Colombia’s “reintegration” and “reincorporation” programs and the related re-naming of the ARN during the peace negotiations. As one FARC loyalist said, “That is why we never took part in ‘demobilization’, because demobilization is giving up the principles we were fighting for” (*Roberto*, B25).

8.1.2 Othering

The deserter frame—and its reinforcement of the revolutionary frame—is much stronger if the loyalists can portray deserters as weak, lazy people who could not handle the revolution, or as evil people who betrayed the cause, while portraying themselves as tough

and dedicated but also benevolent. While labelling is certainly a component of the “othering” process, the maligning of deserters (and the contrast of the loyalists as benevolent) went far beyond labels. While a small number of loyalist FARC members admitted that the group had made some mistakes, most said that they had no regrets and that their time in the group—and all the violence, death, loss, and displacement involved—had been worth it. Indeed, this commitment to the group—and to the maintenance of the frame—was so strong among some loyalist respondents that they blamed any mistakes the groups made, and any mistreatment by commanders, on the work of infiltrators:

Yes, the group made mistakes... mistakes where they killed people who they shouldn't have killed, but like I was saying, all that was done by infiltrators in order to harm [the group]. (*Magdalena*, B61)

Indeed, denigrating the character of deserters, while portraying themselves as forgiving and loyal individuals, was a recurring pattern in the loyalist interviews. These respondents would say that people left because they were not committed to the cause, because they were weak-minded, because they were afraid of sanctions, because they misinterpreted sanctions as mistreatment, and because they were military or paramilitary infiltrators who had joined only to sow discontent in the ranks and then desert. Multiple respondents told me that any commanders who mistreated their subordinates were clearly military informants who had joined the group to demoralize members and inspire desertion. And even though several deserters expressed ongoing commitment to the guerrilla cause and said they had only left because of threats to their lives, loyalist respondents often said that people joined for the wrong reasons, framing the people who deserted as those who were never truly committed to the cause. For example:

The people who enter, how do I say, were not, they came in, but with another thought, not saying “I’m going to achieve something.” They thought that entering FARC was to shoot and no more. That is, there is a conception and a political ideology in that struggle that those lives and those dead were for something, that is, it was not because they wanted to die. But then they went and committed outrages against the communities or against, well things like that...there was not a real political conception in these people, and because of that they decided not to accept that or those laws, they decided to get out of the movement. (*Mafe*, B29)

Another respondent echoed this opinion, adding that deserters were people who tried to avoid hard work:

They came to the guerrillas because they didn’t like to work, yes? They didn’t want to help their dad; they didn’t like to help their mom. Do you see? So, these people came to the FARC and in a short time they deserted. (*Ricardo*, B41)

Other respondents told me about the significant fear and inconvenience that came when someone deserted:

Oh, we were upset because we would have to move. For example, say you are here, quiet, in the downpour, in your bunk, and you are relaxed, and then you hear the news: ‘A guy left.’ Rain or not, you pack and ‘ciao’. Because you don’t know what the person was thinking, right? If he deserted and decided to be caught or whatever, the army comes here tomorrow and finds us, and in many cases that happened. So, it was always a pain, change the plans, things we were going to do, if a person deserted. So, yes... it interrupted all the tranquility and all the plans, so it was a very, very complicated component [of guerrilla life]. (*Reina*, B40)

However, even though the loyalists had significant resentment and specific labels for deserters that had entered the government demobilization programs, they were also careful to make distinctions between deserters who had simply left to go home and had not, in their words, “caused damage to the organization”. This definitional clarification was a clear pattern throughout all three ETCRs. In fact, in my sample, there were several deserters who had left the group for various reasons—for two of the women, it was pregnancy—but they

had been welcomed back into the ETCRs with their children as members entitled to benefits. While there were incidences of both men and women being welcomed back, most of the stories that loyalists told about their benevolence were related to women—even though many of the stories of betrayals and infiltration were also related to women.

And while many of the loyalists said that desertion was inconvenient, they maintained that it was perfectly normal in any armed group. For example, one respondent said:

For me it was hard because, not because they had left, but because of the knowledge that a person who left had. For another man who arrived, it was going to much harder. For example, a man who already had four or five years, he had a lot of experience. Do you understand? That's what was hard, that I had to teach people all over again...that's what was hard. But was it hard because they left? No, normal.

(Carlos, B22)

Indeed, despite the vehement rejection of deserters by some loyalist FARC respondents, and deserters' obvious and legitimate fear of being killed, many loyalists maintained that desertion was fairly normal, that it happened in all armies, and that it was not really a critical issue. Of course, this relaxed view about desertion directly contradicts the strategic and concerted efforts that the FARC leadership made to prevent desertion—such as bringing in more women recruits to create a self-contained fighting unit (i.e., removing the need for relationships with civilian women), forcefully reducing cognitive dissonance by silencing stories of abuse, and physically separating couples because they tended to desert together. And while this sanguine response also stood in contrast to some respondents' articulated rage at deserters, it was hard to determine if the attitude was practiced or genuine. There was an obvious tension in the loyalist interviews in that they wanted to portray themselves as both victims and as noble, benevolent fighters for justice, but they knew that

telling the truth about what often happened to deserters was a threat to the credibility of these frames.

Another FARC loyalist echoed this sentiment that desertion was not a significant issue: “The war is like getting on an urban bus: in one block someone gets on, and in another block someone else gets off, and the bus keeps going, full of people” (*Vesino*, B23). As with blaming violence against women on infiltrators and liars, this response about the bus was repeated so often in different variations that it seemed like a rehearsed script. And despite the high level of fear amongst most deserters in this study about being hunted down (and, in fact, I heard stories of people who had indeed been found and executed by both the FARC and ELN) when I asked some loyalists about this, they said that sometimes they looked for deserters but often they did not. For example, one loyalist said:

Yes, I heard, I heard that yes, that people said: “Well, I’m going home”, or: “I’m going to hurt the organization.” Well, that’s it, they’re gone, it’s normal. But if they did not hurt us then why would we hurt that person? Because it was not our idea to kill people (*David*, B43).

But stories about sometimes applying the rules and sometimes not did not match these same respondents’ emphasis on how important it was to follow the rules. In fact, they would go to great lengths to explain to me that deserters often left because they could not handle the rules. And nearly all the loyalist FARC respondents skirted around the fact that the punishment for desertion was death—listed clearly in the organization’s own rulebook—even when asked about this directly. In fact, that question made many respondents visibly uncomfortable—because it directly threatened the benevolence narrative—and they insisted that this was a discretionary policy that was not always applied. But this discrepancy between emphasizing the importance of rules and then insisting that some rules were inconsistently applied was obscured by the deserter frame, where it was

much more important to portray the deserters as distinctly inferior to the dedicated recruits. There were, however, a few exceptions: some loyalists discussed the punishment for desertion when explaining why they had never heard anyone talk about leaving. For example:

No, in our organization the regulation said that whoever left, the punishment was ugly. So, then a person never talked about it. It's like, a person would arrive when it was already getting dark and then it was his turn to guard. He would stand guard, then discard [his weapon] and leave. But I never heard anything [about it], like, "Listen, soon, I am going to leave". (*Jhon*, B35)

In addition, a few loyalist respondents also gave slightly different variations on deserters, admitting that they had friends who had left, and saying that they felt sad, felt a vacancy when someone left: "One felt the emptiness left by that person. At least if a person left who was a hard worker, then one missed her, felt the emptiness there" (*Jasbleidi*, B30).

Similarly, another loyalist said:

A person left, one left, the emptiness remained. The emptiness remained because, because we were already accustomed to these people; the sharing, the way of being, the treatment, yes? And, well, we all worked together with that force to move forward, everyone, and that was beautiful. To feel the emptiness.... (*Lady*, B34)

Another loyalist admitted that often desertion was a surprise, because people they did not suspect would leave so suddenly: "No, they thought about it and when they left, one was shocked, one said 'He was a guy that I never imagined would leave'" (*Ernesto*, B39). These admissions that good people—and not just liars, traitors, and cowards—also deserted were important, as they challenge the dominant frame that all deserters were military infiltrators, weak cowards, people who liked violence, or people not dedicated to the cause. These stories also allow for the possibility that "good" people might have had legitimate reasons for leaving. This contradiction indicates a weak spot in frame resonance—more

specifically, an obvious problem with empirical credibility—as clearly not all loyalists agreed that deserters were uniformly bad or incompetent people. However, that inconsistency was at least partially reduced by insisting that the group was benevolent towards certain deserters (i.e., the “good” ones who did not harm the group)—which also implied a moral superiority of loyalists over deserters.

8.2.2 Gender

The previous chapter discussed how women deserters were labelled by loyalists as brainwashed and deceitful for telling stories about sexual abuse, and how this narrative allowed the group to uphold the militarized masculinity and insurgent feminism within the revolution frame. But this discourse also serves the deserter frame in reinforcing that all deserters were traitors and liars, and that the women were especially bad. When loyalists spoke about desertion in general, it was always in terms of whether the person had done harm to the organization by, for example, giving up their location or taking weapons or money with them. But when they spoke specifically about female deserters, they almost always discussed the lies that women deserters told.

There was also disagreement about whether men or women deserted more frequently, even though this was not a question I ever asked—nor is there verifiable data on rates of male versus female deserters. A few loyalist men discussed how women who got pregnant would often desert the group, or they would leave and convince their male partners to desert with them. One commander was clearly quite bothered by the large number of women that had deserted the group:

In Colombia there were thousands and thousands of women who deserted. Why?
Because they wanted to solve money problems for their family, because they

wanted to solve their health problems with money. But it was a betrayal of their group, and they talked all kinds of garbage against my group. That is what happened in Colombia, and the press here, yes, they do publicize it, and they are in the newspapers, like: “No, that this woman was raped, that she was mistreated by the Commanders,” that, I don't know. “And that this woman had to give her services to her Commander.” ... That was what they did: portray us like we were, like we were people from mental institutions, that we were the worst, that we Commanders were rapists. But that is a farce. That was a farce. (*Adrian*, B44)

Yet, while several loyalists told me that more women deserted than men, largely due to pregnancy, others said that “there were many more male deserters than females” (*Manuel*, B32).

What was perhaps the most telling is that female deserters were most frequently described as liars, whereas male deserters were “sapos” (informants) and traitors. That is, the loyalists seemed to categorize men's desertion as primarily concerning because of leaks of operational information to the military (e.g., weapons caches, names of commanders, location of cash reserves, etc.) and women's desertion as the key source of lies about in-group abuses. Thus, men's betrayals threatened military operations, but women's betrayals threatened the overall credibility of the revolution frame. This difference also made the gendered division of labour in the group quite clear: women evidently did not have as much information to share about operational issues. Or, at least, that is not where they could do the most damage to the organization. Whether this was a variable influencing the FARC's reluctance to promote women to higher ranks is unclear, but it certainly seems possible.

Gender, of course, is not a separate element in the deserter versus loyalist frame; gender norms clearly intersect with the othering and the labelling noted above. Women deserters were routinely dismissed as not having been real guerrillas and blamed for reinforcing the government narrative of the FARC as terrorists and abusers. At the same

time, stories of benevolence towards deserters were often focused on women. Gendered narratives, then, seemed to be employed whenever they were the most useful to reinforcing the frame—even if they were contradictory.

8.2 Counter-Frames: “We are Not Traitors”

There are two main counter-frames that challenge the loyalist frame about deserters. The main challenge comes from the deserters themselves, who refuse to be labelled as traitors and do not want to be identified as ex-combatants, in addition to fearing being hunted down by both loyalists and FARC dissidents. The secondary challenge arises from the government, who continues to place all ex-combatants into the same category of “desmovilizado” and whose neglect of the collective economic projects promised in the peace agreement is creating mass abandonment of the protected reincorporation zones—thus dismantling the FARC hierarchy and putting the group’s stated revolution project into jeopardy.

8.2.1 *Deserter Contestations of the Frame*

Most deserters in this sample were actively seeking to shed their combatant identity—and in fact, many were afraid of being “outed” as an ex-combatant. When deserters surrender to the military and enter a safehouse, they are coerced by the military to cooperate and share information or face prison time. That is, to be eligible for benefits, they must participate in at least three military intelligence interviews (C01, C05), although a few ex-combatants testified to having participated in many more. Thus, deserters’ incentives to cooperate with government officials, and the consequences for not doing so, were high, which made the costs of desertion also very high. Indeed, almost all of the deserters in this

sample were well aware of how loyalists in both the FARC and ELN were framing them (i.e., as cowards, liars, traitors, etc.) and many went to considerable effort to show why and how that was not the case.

First, several respondents maintained that they never participated in military interviews and wanted to make it very clear that they were not the traitors that their former group made them out to be. They maintained that they had never intended to share intelligence or betray their group but had left for other reasons—usually to protect their own safety or that of someone else. As stated in earlier chapters, 47 percent of deserters in this sample stated that a threat or perceived threat from within the group—including the threat of forced abortion or witnessing in-group violence such as executions of comrades—was the main reason that they left. However, government officials confirmed that participating in at least three military intelligence interviews was a fixed requirement for deserters to receive DDR benefits (C05, C01); if demobilized combatants refused to participate, they could not obtain benefits and would be prosecuted for rebellion, sedition, terrorism, and other related crimes. Several loyalists who had served prison time confirmed this pressure, saying that they had been sentenced for seventy years or longer due to their lack of cooperation—but then were released after the peace accord. Many deserters also confirmed this requirement, but several stated that they had been surprised when they demobilized that they had to share intelligence with the military in order to avoid prison time; that is, the costs of desertion are high, but many combatants surrendered to the military not fully understanding these costs. Their calculation of alternatives and the costs of desertion did not include sharing group secrets with the military.

This unexpected requirement caused a significant amount of fear and resentment among the deserter population, who did not want to be labelled as snitches. And while they all called themselves “desmovilizados”, they refused the negative associations that loyalists had placed on this title. Several said that despite the required interviews, they had not given up any legitimate information and that their decision to leave their armed group never included betraying the group in this way. One FARC deserter who left when he was a company commander (mid-level, in charge of 54 guerrillas) explained how deserting was very difficult for him, even though he knew it was the right decision. He had many friends in the group and was distressed about leaving them. He said that he refused to answer any military questions and in fact had called his commander after he had surrendered to the military, in order to warn him:

And I demobilized, I called the commander here in Bogotá right away...and I said to him: “Friend,⁷¹ I am demobilizing.”

[Me: Really? And what did he say?]

“No! How can this be?” [laughs] And I said, “Yes, comrade, I am demobilizing.” “No, brother, how can this be? Don’t do this to me! ... No, no, no, no, my son, don’t do this to me. We’ll do something,” he told me. “We’ll do something. Think about it a few days, do what needs to be done, because there is already a lot of money in it, do it.” And I said to the man, “No, comrade, no, no. I’m going to advise you not to move that money because... you’ll lose that money, and you’ll blame me, and I don’t want any responsibility.” ... And I said, “No, call and cancel the delivery of this money, because it’s a lot of money and it will be stolen, and you will blame me, because later they are going to say that I handed it in, and this is why I’m telling you. I don’t want to continue.” “My son, stay there a few days, go and pick up the money, think about it, rest, and later, my son, do the mission, and think and return here and there will be no problem.” And me: “No, no. Comrade, I’m telling

⁷¹ He used the word “viejo” here, which technically translates into “old man”, but many Colombians use it as a term of endearment (“friend”, “buddy”, “dude”).

you no. Listen, the truth is I'm grateful, I'm grateful for all the time I shared with you all, the truth is I learned a lot with you, comrade, but no more. Listen, the truth is that I'm telling you this with pain in my soul, the truth is this is very hard for me, but no. No more." (*Caleb*, B68)

This story, and others like it, challenge the loyalist frame that deserters are all military spies or people who did not believe in the cause or did not like hard work. The FARC and the ELN knew they had desertion problems, and they knew that they were losing good people—but they could not admit this, so they doubled down on the frame that deserters were traitors. In a similar effort to portray himself as loyal, one former ELN militia commander said that he had endured 18 military intelligence interviews and five polygraph tests, but said that he drew the line at betraying the commander who had protected him as a child recruit:

I won the trust of the commander... he loved me as a son, of all the children there, because I took care of him, because I was very responsible in my things and I never went...I never failed him. Anything he asked me to do, I did it. So that's why I gained his trust, and right now the army is telling me that I delivered him [to them], and I'm not going to hand him in, because he is like my dad, the one who raised me, the one who taught me. He taught me what was good, what was good, bad ... so I did not hand him in. (*Nathaniel*, B74)

This man was not an isolated case. Many deserters professed some level of loyalty to people within their former group, and remorse at betraying their friends. Indeed, many deserters struggled with their decision to leave, and some even found a way to go back. For example, one loyalist told me how he had demobilized, enrolled in the government reintegration program, and then left the program after a year and re-joined the FARC—but in another

Bloc where the group did not know him (B36).⁷² Deserters in this sample repeatedly refuted the framing that they were liars and traitors, often saying that they had no choice but to run. It was the threat—or perception of the threat—that mattered, not the type of commitment.

In fact, disillusionment in the ideology or tactics of the group appeared to be much less influential in desertion decisions than threats (perceived or actual) from within the group, or from the government. Indeed, as noted earlier, many FARC deserters still believed in the group's professed cause of fighting for equal rights, land redistribution, and ending government corruption, and still clung to some form of the fighter-revolutionary identity. Many even said they were grateful for their experiences, but they had left for other reasons, often because they felt their life was in danger. In addition, a few “deserter” respondents were not deserters at all—four deserters in this sample had been captured by the military and, in their words, had later been completely abandoned and stigmatized by their own group. When intensely pressured by the State (with some saying they were tortured), these prisoners had agreed to the terms of the Justice and Peace Law and cooperated with the government in order to shorten their sentences and to end practices such as isolation and beatings. But because they officially “demobilized” by cooperating with the government, they were subsequently rejected by their own group. For example, one FARC respondent spent 17 years in prison (but had been sentenced to 40) and was released in 2018. He said that during his time in the group, he had never once thought of deserting. When I asked why he had not entered an ETCR upon his release (as several other respondents had done), he said:

⁷² This was surprising, given that commanders claimed to me that they always knew where all deserters were, including whether they had cooperated with the government or not.

So here I have a strong criticism against them, because they should, if they want to grow their ideological and political ranks, they should make a reconciliation not only with the army or the national police, but also with their former combatants. We gave good parts of our lives as militia, fulfilling duties ...many years lost due to the duty and fulfillment of those orders. And if there were many people who... looked for some laws [to help them], it was because at the time they were favorable and because we were already subject to State regime... So, they cannot label people, who are all here for the same reason to say that they are traitors, because many are not. They are firm and not traitors...because now I realize, what I see with more clarity, now that I have regained my freedom and I have been out more than a year, I realize that it [the peace agreement] was not a negotiation. It was like a surrender, that was more like a surrender and some commanders have settled now that they are legal, they have been accommodated, they have been given [political] seats, they have been given a security scheme...that, for me, could be called a betrayal. Because they handed over their ideology, their movement in arms, and now those troops are disintegrated, disintegrated and are being discriminated against by the State, without work. Then I do, yes there I would make that criticism. (*Jaseph*, B70)

Nonetheless, this respondent later said that he had considered going to an ETCR to ask to be recognized as a member and receive benefits, but his family had convinced him not to:

My family said to me: “And you are going to look there, you are going to leave us to look for people who left you for 17 years? You completed missions, served time in prison, and now they say, they say that they aren’t going to recognize you. So, you are going there for what?” And they were right. And because of that I didn’t report to any reincorporation zone, and [also] because they discriminated against me. (*Jaseph*, B70)

But it was clear that these respondents were torn. The counter-frame that deserters were nobler, and/or were victims of their group and that the guerrillas had betrayed them was not salient for this sub-group as it did not match their lived experience. They had never made a distinctive choice to abandon their comrades, they had gone to prison because of

their membership in the group, and now they were discriminated against not only by society and by the State but also by their own former comrades, no matter what they did or said.

For other deserters, they admitted fleeing the group but justified their actions as protecting themselves or protecting a loved one, and they vehemently contested the frame that all deserters who had entered a demobilization program were traitors. Some were clearly quite distressed at having caused harm to their former group, while others were terrified of the consequences of sharing intelligence that they had never intended to share. They placed the blame for any actions perceived as “traitorous” (such as sharing intelligence) on the government, and some expressed regret—not at having left the group but at having entered the demobilization program. In fact, one woman who had no regrets about deserting the FARC deeply regretted entering the demobilization program—which she had done with her husband twelve years after they had fled the group (B63). This woman and her husband (an ex-militia commander from the FARC) had previously been enrolled in the Colombian Victim’s Unit (CLAV) program and had been studying and receiving benefits from there. They both considered themselves victims because the husband had been recruited at age ten by a family member, and the woman said she was recruited through false promises of employment. But they had not disclosed their ex-combatant status to the CLAV and in fact had gone to considerable efforts to hide this past identity. She reported that staff in the victim’s unit had become suspicious because the couple had been helping other victims by showing them where resources were, how to find shelter, and so on. With visible anger, she recounted the following exchange:

And one day in the CLAV,⁷³ in the victim’s unit, they called me a guerrilla, a social worker [did that]. And a psychologist called my husband a paramilitary. And then

⁷³ *Centro Local de Atención a Víctimas* (Local Centre for Victim Attention).

I said to her, “Well, why are you calling me a guerrilla? Is it because guerrillas are the only ones that help people?” (*Lina*, B63)

Eventually, their ex-combatant status was revealed (though she did not disclose how this happened) and they were encouraged by the military to enroll in the demobilization program. When they hesitated, the military then threatened them with charges of sedition and terrorism if they did not comply. This woman felt that the demobilization program had publicly “outed” her as an ex-combatant, which she had previously managed to avoid. Now, not only could she not get rid of the stigma, the couple was also actively receiving death threats from their former group (primarily from dissidents who were still actively participating in armed violence). This story illustrates a clear disincentive to enrol in a government program, which has most certainly been exacerbated by the government’s narco-terrorist frame, discussed in the preceding chapter. But most deserters were not aware of these disincentives before making the decision to flee, so it was not part of their decision-making process.

Second, for deserters who made no claim of ongoing loyalty to their group or the group’s ideology, they often made considerable efforts to show how and why they were better than the loyalists—a direct rebuttal of the loyalist frame that they were worthless traitors. Indeed, these deserters directly contested the image of benevolence that FARC loyalists had constructed regarding deserters. For example, several deserters were eager to discuss their experiences in order to debunk what they had seen loyalist FARC ex-combatants saying in the news; they seemed intent on telling stories of civilian murders and drug trafficking in order to dismantle the guerrilla frame of image of the noble, benevolent and victimized revolutionary. As noted earlier, one ex-militia commander from the FARC described how he had been ordered to murder two civilians in a village at night,

and then the next morning the FARC commander came into town, publicly lamenting these murders (that he had ordered) and then blaming the paramilitaries in order to get civilian support (B18). Another ex-FARC commander struggled with the tension between revealing what the loyalist guerrillas were doing to deserters, and the very real danger of exposing himself to threats. He said explicitly that the demobilized ex-combatants, the deserters, were the “real victims” in this conflict:

I don't want them [the demobilized]... to disappear. On the other hand, if we... make ourselves known to the world, the world will know that there are some people who are being persecuted, not only by the state but by the guerrillas themselves.
(*Rob*, B01)

Although I did not directly ask any respondents about their involvement in drug trafficking or other illegal activities, a few higher ranking deserters volunteered significant amounts of information around their roles in buying and selling drugs for the FARC, partly because they explicitly wanted to refute claims that the FARC were never directly involved in narco-trafficking. Many of these deserters derided the peace process as a sham and wanted to completely refute the revolutionary project by providing testimony that the group leaders were primarily interested in profits from criminal activities.

One combatant who deserted from the FARC (and then later also deserted from a group of EPL dissidents), expressed his frustration with the FARC's failing ideology:

Drug trafficking is something that ... I mean, I never liked it when the FARC started working with drugs. Because the FARC, when Comrade Manuel Marulanda was alive, the FARC was FARC, it was a beautiful organization, where they fought for an ideal of a real people. Truly one ... things were done for the people, they helped the people. But after he died, everything became the mafia—mafia, mafia, mafia, mafia.
(*Fabian*, B19)

Some deserters also directly contested the image of benevolence that the loyalists had been trying to cultivate. For example, one woman in an ETCR explained how she had deserted to have her baby, but had gone back to the FARC to explain when she heard that they were hunting her:

I spoke with the wife of [Secretariat commander] ... she was the one who recruited me, and I went to fix my situation because I heard that they were looking for me, to fuck me, because I had given information to the army. So, I went and spoke to her directly, and I told her that never happened, that I was working, that I was dedicated to working, studying, doing things that would benefit my life... I said to her, "I'm not doing anything. I don't understand why you're looking for me. For what? I don't understand." (*Diana*, B42)

She later said that her stepfather had gathered one hundred signatures from the community attesting to the fact that she had been working and living there the entire time, and had not gone to the army, to convince the FARC not to kill her: "Those same guerrillas were going to kill me. Yes, okay, I deserted. But my stepfather wrote this letter where he said: 'She deserted but she didn't do anything bad. She is working, she is studying'" (*Diana*, B42). The distinction in the words she used is important here: most of the deserters said "me desmovilicé" (I demobilized), while the ones who never entered a government program would say "yo deserté" (I deserted) or simply: "me fui" (I left). While her story confirms the loyalist assertions that they distinguished between different types of deserters, it also indicates that the group was less benevolent about desertion than they portrayed themselves to be and that, in fact, deserters who were found had to go to great lengths to convince their group not to kill them.

Some deserters also seemed eager to demonstrate that they had had status in the group—and in society—due to their levels of command, but at the same time they wanted

to dismantle the mythology of the FARC's ideological intentions. In fact, while these commanders were very willing to expose FARC's drug trafficking activities, they did not cite those activities as their reason for leaving the group. Several of them dropped big names in an apparent bid to impress me and to demonstrate how much they knew. For example, one former FARC commander told this story:

Once I arrived at a dispatch by order of Raúl Reyes, by order of my narco-commander, by order of Commander Sonia,⁷⁴ to arrive and load and unload the cars of [a high-ranking police officer].⁷⁵ And he witnessed what was being done. The road police arrived and provided security while loading and unloading. So, what is the truth in this country? Here there will be no complete truth. (*Johan*, B31)

The use of “narco-commander” was clearly deliberate here, indicating an adoption of the government narco-terrorist frame discussed in the previous chapter. Despite having spent decades in the group, this particular commander was very bitter about his experiences and in our repeated interactions took any chance he could to debunk the revolution claims of the FARC. He and others like him were clearly trying to damage the reputation of the group and justify having left it. This too seemed to be a form of forceful dissonance reduction, but in the opposite direction: framing former comrades as criminals and abusers in order to make sense of one's desertion. For example, when I asked this former commander what he thought of certain narratives that I had heard from FARC loyalists about deserters, he said: “I'm going to reserve my opinion; I'm going to hold back a little on what I think about the reincorporation zones; the people that are there...have very different thoughts” (B31).

⁷⁴ Referring to Omaira Rojas Cabrera (alias “Sonia”), a high-level female commander who was charged in the U.S. for running a drug network that earned the FARC tens of millions of dollars (McDermott 2005). She was convicted in Washington, D.C. in 2007 (Reuters 2007).

⁷⁵ Name and identifying details withheld as this person has never been charged or prosecuted for drug trafficking.

Yet, while many deserters spoke about illegal activities in both the FARC and ELN, particularly drug trafficking, not a single deserter pointed to these activities as a reason for leaving. Two of the men cited above (B18, B19) said that threats from within the group were the reason they left—not a disillusionment with ideology or methods. And the other respondent (B31) left because he wanted to help his girlfriend escape when she became pregnant. Thus, while being involved in drug trafficking might change one's self-perception as a noble warrior or just revolutionary (evidenced by the fact that most of the loyalist FARC members vehemently denied involvement in drug trafficking), it did not seem to play a significant role in desertion decisions in this study's sample. Actually, for some deserters, the loss of the power and money they had from being high-placed managers of drug operations was clearly a painful loss. Retaliation against their former group by revealing details of drug operations and deriding the group in general may have been a way to compensate for this loss of status. In the ETCRs, people in positions of power often retained that power even after demobilization, but in the individually demobilized population, former commanders had to grapple with the return to being regular—and usually very poor—civilians once again. One former ELN commander, for example, who admitted to leading social cleansing operations that killed drug addicts and prostitutes, had tried to find status again by re-casting himself as someone fighting against child recruitment:

I am working with [the prosecutor's office]; we are catching people who rape children, people who recruit children, because that is against humanity. Recruiting a child as they recruited me, I do not want that, I do not want the same thing to happen again, that another child relives what I lived. Because I lost my youth, I lost my childhood, I lost the opportunity to study, I lost the opportunity to be someone in life. That is a

mark that lasts a lifetime, because due to this [history], you are discriminated against.
(*Nathaniel*, B74)

To battle this discrimination, some deserters compared themselves to the opposing guerrilla group, or to the paramilitaries, in order to show how they were better. Two ELN former commanders, for example, asserted that their group's ideology was "truly to fight" for the people and for equality, unlike the FARC, which they derided as a "group of murderers" (B17, B74). One FARC deserter said: "At least in the FARC you would not prostitute a female guerrilla for any reason, while in the army and the police, yes" (B68). He then went on to detail multiple graphic abuses of minors that he primarily attributed to the military but also to Colombian society in general, stating that "this would never happen in the FARC" (B68). And while some ELN deserters cited violence from the FARC as the reason why they had joined their former group, many deserters from both guerrilla groups spoke about the paramilitary or military violence that had driven them to join the guerrillas or that had caused the death of loved ones. Others spoke about being targeted in "social cleansing" missions as children, specifically mentioning the Colombian military, as a reason for fleeing to the guerrillas for protection. One FARC deserter explained that—despite loyalist narratives of revolution and protecting children who had nowhere else to go—many of them had joined simply for the guns:

I came primarily, we say, without knowing, because I did not know the structure of the FARC well. My story was not ideological. My story was the weapons. I liked to have weapons. I liked how they dressed, I liked the power that they had, and that is what I wanted (*Caleb*, B68).

This story, of course, fits with the loyalist frame that deserters were people who joined just because they wanted to shoot guns. What the loyalists did not say, however, was that *many*

people who joined as children—including loyalists—had little concept of the ideology and cited that very same love of weapons as a primary reason to join.

Finally, many deserters spoke about death threats that they had received from their former group (including the demobilized FARC), which contests the FARC loyalist narrative of having transformed to a peaceful and legitimate political party and having left violence behind. They all spoke at length about how they were always afraid of being discovered, and that they were afraid of meeting new people or building new relationships because they never knew who was an informant. Indeed, many deserters told me that they stayed within close circles of other deserters that they had met in the safehouses. These deserters made significant efforts to hide their former guerrilla identities when seeking work or participating in school, and they talked about how being an ex-combatant was a significant impediment to moving forward in their lives—not only because of the stigma against them and the resulting difficulties in finding work and housing, but also because of the fear and insecurity that followed them because they were deserters. ELN deserters were, understandably, the most nervous about being identified and found due to the group's active status, and some showed me official communiques that had been released by the group, identifying them as both a threat and a military target. But deserters from the FARC also dealt with threats and significant levels of insecurity, not only due to the rising numbers of FARC ex-combatants that have been killed since the peace agreement, but also because some deserters were receiving ongoing threats from dissidents. Several deserters from the FARC also felt that the demobilized loyalists were still hunting them. One female FARC deserter who had opted to demobilize individually rather than enter an ETCR felt

that once she left the government safehouse, the FARC would actively hunt her—a threat she did not want to think about:

The FARC has many contacts, and they can send someone to kill you anywhere. Because I was there in the commissions ... and I realized many things. And the FARC has a lot of contacts at the national or international level. There are many people left and sometimes you go around, and you don't know if it is possible that someone is working with them or not, and they could harm you. And even more so if you're a deserter who said something, that is certain. The FARC has a lot of national and international contacts and can harm you. This is life now, and it's also a reason not to think [about it]. (*Carmen*, B02)

Some of the deserters in this sample had been assigned a protective detail by the government, due to their ongoing testimony for the prosecutor's office and/or the continuation of credible threats, while others never left home without a bullet-proof vest. Indeed, despite the loyalist portrayals of benevolence and their assurances that people were allowed to ask permission to "retire", one of these respondents recalled how, when he joined the FARC at twelve years old, his recruiters told him he could never leave:

And on the way, they said to you, like, "Listen, because you have already arrived in the camp, this implies that you already know, now you cannot return. The only form of leaving is death or if you flee. But if you flee, you can't let yourself be caught because we'll kill you". (*Caleb*, B68)

For all of these respondents, revealing their ex-combatant identity meant accepting large amounts of risk; they lived with the suspicion that anyone could be an informant, and for many FARC deserters, the peace agreement had not assuaged their fear of being hunted. Thus, even those who still agreed with the group's ideology talked about the measures they were taking to remain anonymous, to pass as civilians, and to not be identified. Most of these respondents felt that the government was not doing enough to protect them; many reported feeling abandoned by the government despite having taken significant risks to

demobilize and provide testimony about crimes committed by their former group. In fact, several felt that since the peace agreement, all national and international attention was focused solely on the collectively demobilized FARC, and everyone had essentially forgotten that they (the individually demobilized combatants) existed. They voiced significant resentment against the collectively demobilized FARC for receiving better benefits than they received, especially as most deserters felt that they had done “the right thing” by leaving their violent groups, whereas the combatants who kept fighting until ordered to demobilize received a higher monthly allowance.

However, while threats from within the group were important motivators for a person to leave, they rarely were the sole reason for deserting. Often, a respondent would cite one reason for desertion early in the interview, and then over the course of the conversation, new details would emerge. For example, one ELN ex-combatant (B74) originally said that he left because his wife had been assaulted by other combatants in the group (costs of membership). He later revealed that he had a relative in the military who helped him escape and got the couple into the safehouse program (networks). Then, later in the interview, he said they had started to plan their escape when they got a new commander who was “more grotesque and stricter” than their previous one, and that he had started to witness more recruitment and sexual abuse of children, which he did not want to be a part of because it bothered him immensely (identity).

As the previous chapters have also shown, this multi-layered experience that eventually led to desertion was not an exception. While a few respondents reported that their decision to leave was sudden (e.g., one respondent said he had never thought of desertion until his friend said one day, “Let’s go”, and they left), this trajectory was rare;

most deserters reported multiple interacting factors that built up over time. For example, one ex-FARC commander who joined at age 13 initially said that he had left the group because he was “tired of war”. However, in a second more lengthy interview, when asked *how* he left, he said that he had discovered that a comrade was an army informant, and he was afraid of being captured, so he escaped during a party when everyone was drinking (B01). An ELN respondent, who was forcibly recruited⁷⁶ at age 17, initially said that he escaped because he missed his family and was bored, but then later added that he was almost killed in a bombing in 2016, which was a traumatic event that made him want to leave (B08). A female FARC deserter said that she had accidentally killed a comrade when her gun went off, a traumatic event that started her thoughts about leaving—but she did not actually leave until she got pregnant (B11). One young man from the ELN who joined at age 11 said that his entire family—mother, father, cousins, uncles—were still in the group and he would never have left if he had not lost a large sum of the group’s money: “I did not demobilize because I wanted to, only because I had this problem with the group...otherwise I would not have demobilized...there are lots of people here like that” (B17). It appears that, for some, even incredibly strong ties to the group may not be enough to prevent desertion if the threat to personal safety is large enough. But, as the paramilitary desertion patterns will show, that threat to personal safety must be greater than the predicted costs of leaving the group.

Overall, deserters used many different strategies to combat the loyalist narratives that they were all traitors, liars, and infiltrators—including denying that they had given

⁷⁶ There were only five respondents who claim to have been forcibly recruited in this sample (though two of these respondents told stories that contradicted their claims of being forced), and four of these deserted, but the small numbers make it difficult to argue with certainty if forcibly recruited combatants are more likely to desert, or more likely to cite violence from within the group as a cause.

intelligence to the State, hiding their ex-combatant status, and maligning their former group. That is, they try to organize their experiences in a different frame once they are out of the group. While some deserters left because the revolution frame lost resonance for them—often due to clear credibility issues—other seem to have adopted a counter-frame afterward in order to make sense of their new, post-desertion lives. While loyalist guerrillas tended to erase any involvement in drug trafficking or violence against civilians, deserters rejected the idea of being traitors or cowards and emphasize the idea of “being someone”, of having morals and ethics, of wanting to do something “good” with their lives. Many of them wanted to prove that they were someone worth helping, that they were a person of worth. Nonetheless, in the eyes of the government and the general public, distinctions of deserters, paramilitaries, and loyalists do not really matter. They are all in the stigmatized category of ex-combatants with all other ex-combatants.

8.2.2 Government contestations of the frame

A key aspect of the government public framing of deserters was in their widespread campaign that began in December 2010 to encourage desertion by sharing messages of hope—dubbed “Operation Christmas” and launched in partnership with the public relations firm, MullenLowe SSP3 (Hollain 2010; Steel 2013). The PR firm—whose clients include Red Bull and Unilever—selected trees along known guerrilla pathways and the military covered them with thousands of lights, along with signs (see Figure 3) that said: “If Christmas can come to the jungle, you can come home. Demobilise. Anything is possible” (Steel 2013). Another component of this marketing campaign was to release plastic globes lit with LED lights into rivers known to pass through FARC territory (see Figure 4), which had notes inside encouraging guerrillas to demobilize, and a third component involved

posters on trees that had pictures of the guerrillas as children (collected from their mothers) with the message: “Before being a guerrilla, you are my son/daughter” (C01; Steel 2013)

In this campaign, the government positioned itself as the saviour for guerrillas, even though at the same time they were mounting a massive military offensive campaign that was decimating FARC ranks. The Colombian media portrayed this campaign as effective, stating that 2,435 guerrillas deserted the FARC in 2010 alone, due to this strategy (Hollain 2010). However, ARN statistics show that overall desertion, as measured by yearly entrants into the reintegration program, was already on the decline before this operation was launched at the end of 2010, and in fact continued to decline over the next several years. In 2010, 2,227 combatants demobilized and entered the ARN program, in 2011 there were 1,368 and in 2012 there were 961 (ARN 2019b). Based on the government’s own statistics, following the launch of Operation Christmas, fewer combatants demobilized, not more.

Figure 3
Military Campaign Banner – Operation Christmas

Photo source: El Pais 2010. Image from a video taken by the Ministry of Defence.

Figure 4
River Lights – Operation Christmas

Photo source: Ministry of Defence

Some of these campaigns were also tone deaf to gender and FARC claims of insurgent feminism. For example, in one campaign to encourage women's demobilization in 2012, also in partnership with MullenLowe SSP3, a poster depicted shades of lipstick named "freedom", "love," and happiness" alongside phrases encouraging female guerrillas to demobilize so they can "feel like a woman again" and "become the mother [they've] always dreamed of being" (Alpert 2016). But this type of marketing rang hollow with most female guerrillas that I interviewed, as many were already mothers before demobilization because they either had babies while in the group—and often left them with another family to raise—or left babies behind with family members in order to join the group (B48, B50, B51, B53, B56). Once demobilized, some women have had difficult and conflicting emotions about their choices to abandon children or in reuniting with them. In contrast, several women in this study stated that they never wanted to be mothers. Several others (mothers or not) also strongly identified as "insurgent feminists" and did not feel that their choice to be guerrillas was opposed to their womanhood—on the contrary, as stated earlier, they felt that the presence of women was crucial to the FARC's goals (B07, B29, B40, B45, B50, B51, B53, B56, B61, B62). In addition, women who were militia members may have

lived with their children for the entire time that they were part of the group. Thus, stereotypical messaging imploring female guerrillas to “feel like a woman again” could, in fact, have the opposite effect as intended because it does not consider the varying identities amongst women guerrillas.

In fact, this messaging clashes so strongly with the guerrillas’ insurgent feminism that it is possible that this particular campaign was not for the guerrilla women at all. Anyone who has seen videos of FARC training camps or pictures from the FARC website knows that some women insurgents already had lipstick in the jungle; indeed, my female respondents asserted that they had everything they needed in this regard, if they wanted it, including makeup, nail polish, and hair accessories. Rather, this strategic messaging seems like it was intended for the Colombian public, to reinforce the government’s framing of the guerrilla women as victims of their own group (and, perhaps, victims of “gender ideology”) and that the government was heroic in its willingness to help them return to socially acceptable gender norms. Indeed, all of the Operation Christmas messages portray the government as benevolent towards guerrilla combatants and portray the guerrillas as victims who are trapped in guerrilla life and would go home, if only they could—even though for many guerrillas this was not at all true. It is possible, then, that this campaign was less about convincing guerrillas to desert than it was about winning public support for a costly internal conflict.

After all, the promises that combatants could demobilize and go home again turned out to be wholly false: the government has thus far been unable (or unwilling) to adequately protect deserters, and nearly all of the deserters in this sample said that once they demobilized they realized that they could never go home, because that is the first place

their former group would look for them. As noted earlier, out of all ex-combatants in the reintegration program (i.e., deserters and collectively demobilized paramilitaries), at least 6 percent have been murdered, 11 percent have been registered as “at risk” (i.e., credible threats against them), and 13-24 percent have returned to an armed group or other criminal activity (ARN 2019b; FIP 2014).⁷⁷ In addition, one study found that ex-combatants who remain in areas where there are active armed groups are 158 percent more likely to return to armed activity (Kaplan and Nussio 2018). Since deserters primarily come from these areas, sending them back home to these same areas is clearly a recipe for recidivism.

While none of the deserters cited the above campaign as having influenced their decision (and some had never even heard of it, especially deserters from the ELN), the loyalists laughed when I asked them about it, saying that it was just enemy propaganda trying to destroy them through attrition. They admitted that some people had been swayed by the campaign but claimed it was a ruse and that most guerrillas who surrendered to the military were killed. In fact, one guerrilla deserter said that after the peace process, when he met some of his former comrades, they were shocked because they had assumed that the military had killed him upon surrender (B68).

The re-naming of the ARN mentioned earlier might suggest that the government accepted the FARC’s loyalist vs. deserter frame, and perhaps the government did in fact lose this particular framing/labelling contest. It was certainly a significant move on the government’s part to accept the FARC’s insistence on a different type of reintegration programming. However, the fact that many government officials still called all ex-combatants “desmovilizados” in their interactions with me indicates that while the name

⁷⁷ These figures are from the latest ARN update on 30 November 2019.

change may have been a conciliatory signal by the reintegration agency, it was not adopted universally across government departments—especially not in the military. While it is perhaps possible that some reintegration officials were unaware of the loyalists’ strong preference for not being called “desmovilizados”, it seems unlikely given how vocal the FARC loyalists were about this preference. In fact, to conflate all demobilized actors together in the same category of “desmovilizados” had a similar effect on the FARC’s deserter frame as the government’s efforts to put combatants and ex-combatants from all groups into the narco-terrorist frame: it de-legitimized all of them.

This is certainly not to suggest that the government did not see the difference—in fact, as noted earlier, several military and ARN officials said that the FARC members who had been ordered to demobilized were much more challenging in reintegration efforts than those who had deserted and thus chose to return to civilian life. Nonetheless, all ex-combatants were placed under this label of “desmovilizado”. And, in fact, the government’s failure to implement collective economic projects was causing mass abandonment from the ETCRs (something that has only become worse since this fieldwork was conducted), which meant that many collectively demobilized FARC members were switching to individual reintegration programs or leaving the reintegration process altogether. Currently, out of the 13,104 FARC members accredited in the peace process (10,129 men and 2,975 women), 70 percent live outside an ETCR and only 23 percent live inside of one (ARN 2019c; Guterres 2020). One official even mentioned as a point of pride how many FARC members they were getting in their demobilization program who had “deserted” the ETCRs. He clearly saw this as a success, because leaving the designated and protected reintegration zones was dismantling the FARC hierarchy and structure. But

many ex-combatants who left the ETCRs were not reporting to the government; in fact, while the ARN states that that 739 ex-combatants were designated as “location unknown”, the UN was already reporting in 2018 that the dispersion of ex-combatants out of the territorial areas was hard to track and was causing significant challenges to reintegration (ARN 2019c; Guterres 2018a) .

Having ex-combatants leave the ETCRs and, essentially, follow the individual reintegration path, fits exactly into the government frame of “desmovilizados” because aside from the financial differences in the benefits they receive, once they leave the ETCRs, their process becomes nearly identical to that of the other demobilized combatants. Placing all ex-combatants together and removing distinctions of groups and rank fits with the government counter-frame that nothing the ex-combatants did before is relevant, and they are all just ex-criminals once they have demobilized.

In one way, the government appears to be succeeding in its aim of erasing former boundaries that delineated different armed actors and putting them all into the “desmovilizado” category. For example, in the safehouses, despite respondents sharing narratives of being better than each other, or telling stories about violence from opposing groups, many former ELN and FARC combatants were eating and playing soccer together, along with their children. In fact, in some of the snowballs for this study, former FARC members introduced me to both ex-AUC and ex-ELN combatants, and vice versa—which was unexpected. And many deserters in this sample (though certainly not all) appeared to have accepted this elimination of barriers between former rivals, even if they still thought that their former group was the superior one. The only ex-combatants that vehemently rejected this conflation were the loyalist FARC respondents and some of the loyalist

paramilitaries—specifically those living in the ex-AUC farming compounds. Indeed, the ex-paramilitary respondents who were in cities and living on their own exhibited far less attachment to their former group and identity as *autodefensas* compared to the ones living collectively in the farming compounds—but this could also be a selection effect where those most committed to the group wanted to stay living with the group. Nonetheless, having ex-combatants dissipate and reintegrate individually is certainly more effective at dismantling group cohesion and the overall group frame (whether it be revolution or self-defence) than allowing former comrades to live together in collective communities.

This government framing of all ex-combatants as being the same is also echoed in the media and in the general public. Indeed, the stigma against ex-combatants in general is quite high in Colombia, especially in urban centres, and all deserters spoke about this. While the loyalists in the ETCRs had experienced less interaction with the general public, and had not lived in the major cities, the deserters had distinctly different experiences. The paramilitaries in particular felt this discrimination deeply, even fifteen years after demobilization. As one ex-AUC woman, who maintained she was only ever a cook, said:

It's still terrible they "mark" you, it's what we say, right? No, that to be in the category of "demobilized", people think the worst of you...and for being a woman here too, they discriminate more... I am not proud of it, nor am I proud to say I was [AUC]. No, for nothing, because that is a bad thing. I never even killed a moth, by God! (*Clara*, B82)

While some women guerrilla deserters used a similar justification—that they had not participated in violence, and thus should not be discriminated against for their ex-combatant status—they all agreed that the stigma was impossible to escape. Some deserters expressed surprise that people somehow “just knew” that they were ex-combatants, when they thought they could emerge from the safehouse as anonymous and normal civilians.

Indeed, many of the deserters in this study had very simple goals: to blend in and to erase their past so that they could secure employment. One deserter from the ELN articulated this discomfort:

I went out [of the safehouse] and people look at you... they give you nasty looks...you know, that they discriminate against you for having been of that [armed group], but they do not understand that one has already demobilized, and wants to start a new life, a correct life. And then what they do is to discriminate against one many times... I have heard them, it happened that the [demobilized] are denied employment, they are denied housing, they cannot get a lease or anything because they were demobilized, yes? ...They try to discriminate against people, without knowing them, without knowing their good plans, that they want to have a good future, or anything else. (*Sofia*, B03)

In other words, once a person is publicly known to belong to the category of ex-combatant, their chances for a normal life are low, as is their ability to find work or even housing. When layering on racial, class and gender discrimination against Indigenous and Afro-descendant populations, campesinos, women, and displaced people, these challenges become even more profound. While many loyalists in the ETCRs—who remained somewhat separate from the general population—said that they had not experienced discrimination from the general population, many deserters voiced frustration at not being able to find work because they had no references and no official work experiences. And some said they had been promised references by the government:

That the army is going to give us work references, that the ARN is going to find work and give us references, that is a lie. We have had many interviews and [employers ask]: “But what have you done in your life, tell me.” What do they want me to say, lies? (*Johan*, FARC, B31).

As one ex-ELN woman said, her only goal was “to find a job where we are not rejected, because there are some people that as soon as they realize we are demobilized, right there they reject us.” (*Namona*, B06)

Indeed, many of the deserters in this sample were only working part-time because they could not find anything else, or because they did not have affordable childcare. And while the ARN has reported that 79 percent of collectively demobilized FARC ex-combatants are “optimistic about their future” (ARN 2019a) , that was certainly not the case for the deserters in this sample, nor for the ex-AUC respondents—all of whom were frustrated about their options and with the government for what they felt were false promises. And while this societal stigmatization and lack of employment may be the combined effect of the government framing all combatants as narco-terrorists and placing all ex-combatants under the same label of “desmovilizado”, the end result is a profound failure of reintegration.

8.2.3 The AUC Anti-Frame

The fact that this sample only contains one successful AUC deserter may not be significant given the size of the sample, but other researchers have indicated that desertion in Colombia has been predominantly from the guerrilla groups—with some of these deserters fleeing to the AUC for protection from their former group but almost never the other way around (Gutiérrez Sanín 2018). In fact, three male respondents from this sample had deserted a guerrilla group and shortly thereafter joined the paramilitaries. One AUC respondent told me that “many” people had fled the group, but most AUC respondents agreed that paramilitary desertion was rare. Indeed, research data and the government’s own data show that the vast majority of deserters (i.e., individual demobilizations) were

guerrillas (Oppenheim et al. 2015; ARN 2019b). Throughout this research process it proved very difficult finding respondents who had deserted from the paramilitaries. Due to large variations among paramilitary units in different areas—compared to the highly regimented FARC structure—it is likely that desertion patterns depended on commanders and the level of structural control in each particular unit. In addition, as noted earlier, the AUC paid their recruits and gave them many opportunities for personal enrichment, while the guerrillas did not. Thus, even if people wanted to leave, respondents in this sample indicated that they were hesitant to abandon their income, which directly contradicts theories that economically motivated recruits are more likely to desert.

Although this sample had only one successful paramilitary deserter, as noted earlier there were many ex-paramilitaries in this study that fell into the category of “would-be” deserter—that is, they would have left if they could have. Testimonies from these respondents indicate that the AUC did not have really a frame about deserters versus loyalists at all—in this study, there were no stories about deserters sharing intelligence or lying about sexual assault. There was no framing of deserters—brutal violence appears to have made the construction of a frame unnecessary. The paramilitary respondents were fairly transparent that they had been fighting for money and that the group’s main goal had been profits from narcotrafficking. While a few maintained that they were fighting to protect Colombia, only one AUC respondent noted a difference in labelling between loyalists and deserters:

It is the same as the difference between the reinserted and the demobilized: the reinserted is the one that flees and surrenders, and the demobilized is the one who plans to surrender, plans, that is, as a complete group, you see? (*Hugo*, B69).

For this respondent, he identified as a “desmovilizado” because he had remained loyal to his group, and deserters were “reinsertados” (reinserted). But as noted earlier, most guerrilla deserters also called themselves “desmovilizados”, and military personnel used that label for all ex-combatants. So, if there was an initial attempt by paramilitaries to retain the “desmovilizado” label only for the AUC loyalists, it was clearly unsuccessful.

Unlike the ELN, which permitted people to withdraw under certain conditions, or the FARC, which made distinctions between deserters who simply left the group and those that surrendered to the army, the AUC was structured more like a mafia than an army and had zero tolerance for desertion. Those that left were killed, or if they could not be found, their families were killed. And the would-be deserters in this sample were well aware of that:

And I thought of running, I thought of running but I couldn't...I couldn't because my mom lived in the village... my mom lived there, my mom, my dad, my siblings. And if you run, they kill your mom, they kill your dad, your siblings, so I couldn't. For one to leave, your family has to live somewhere else, you have to get your family out before you do this, out of the village. Because if you have them there, nothing will be left. And because of that, I did not run. (*Pedro*, B77)

Thus, while there were not many successful paramilitary deserters in this sample, it is not difficult to see why. Anyone who successfully deserted from the paramilitaries would not only need to hide themselves, they would need to hide their whole families—and given the number of still-active paramilitaries, these deserters would need to continue to stay hidden. This did not seem as significant as a concern for the guerrilla deserters, however, who said they could not go home because the guerrillas would find them, but they did not voice concern that the guerrillas would kill their families.

Overall, the ex-AUC respondents did not speak much about desertion at all. When asked about it, they mostly asserted that it never happened because people were too scared, or they shared stories of people who had been punished in brutal ways for trying. There was no attempt to portray their group as benevolent towards deserters, as no respondents took responsibility for this behaviour or claimed leadership roles (despite evidence indicating at least a few had more senior ranks). The “anti-frame”, then, was exactly that: no frame was needed for deserters because anyone who deserted was, in their minds, probably dead. The cost-benefit calculation here was very simple: stay in the group or die.

8.3 Conclusion

In the framing contest of deserters versus loyalists, there are no clear winners or losers. The FARC loyalists’ depiction of deserters may be compelling for those still within the group, but testimony from deserters refutes this depiction and has been extremely damaging to the FARC’s overall image. In addition, the government’s counter-frame places all ex-combatants into the same stigmatized category, which is reinforced by the government’s narco-terrorist frame discussed in the previous chapter. What these contests demonstrate most clearly about desertion is how compelling frames can affect perceived alternatives. Returning again to the Rusbult investment model ($\text{Commitment} = \text{Satisfaction} - \text{Alternatives} + \text{Investments}$), the deserter frame—as with the victimhood frame—calls into question whether it is the actual alternatives that matter or simply the perception of alternatives. In their efforts to encourage desertion, the government tries to convince combatants that they can go home again, that anything is possible—and some believe it, only to realize later that this promise is mostly untrue. Conversely, the guerrillas try to convince combatants that they can never go home again to keep them dependent on the

group. Indeed, as shown in this chapter, several loyalists said that they had never considered deserting because they had nowhere else to go. The deserters, in turn, try to convince everyone that they are not cowards or traitors—and, often, that they are not deserters or ex-combatants at all. And the paramilitaries successfully convinced their recruits that if they left without permission, their entire families would be murdered.

In addition, the government campaign to encourage desertion did not appear to have a significant role in this framing contest between different categories of ex-combatants. In fact, many of the deserters (especially in the ELN) had no idea that a demobilization program even existed until after they had fled the group. This calls into question not only the government's campaign but also other “counter-narrative” efforts made by governments across the globe in an effort to stop recruitment into terrorist and insurgent groups. In addition to the lack of substantial evidence on the efficacy of these counter-frames, and virtually no evidence on how they work for women (Gielen 2018; Glazzard 2017; Schmid 2014), the Colombian case shows that these frames can sometimes backfire and entrench the insurgents deeper into their own narratives. Thus, the effect of this framing contest on decisions to desert is not necessarily about which frame won and, it seems, is more about which frame failed.

While the FARC appears to have won least one framing victory in getting the government to recognize a distinct stream of “reincorporation” for the collectively disarmed troops, the credibility of the group's frame that deserters are all traitors, military plants, and liars does not hold when loyalist members know the people who have left and know that this frame does not represent all deserters. This leaves open the possibility that some people may indeed have had good reasons to leave and that committed recruits can

change their minds. The fact that some combatants deserted and then were able to return to the ranks simply by joining a different Bloc also damages the claim that the group knew everything about where deserters have gone and what they have done or said. In addition, in terms of societal stigmatization, the general public does not differentiate between ex-combatants who deserted and ex-combatants who stayed loyal—they are all just ex-combatants. Therefore, does the FARC's deserter frame actually help to maintain group cohesion, as it is clearly designed to do?

It appears that while the deserter frame certainly reduces the appearance of alternatives (e.g., by making recruits too scared to leave and/or by convincing them that they have nowhere else to go), it is not sufficient in and of itself to keep people inside the group. Even this perceived lack of alternatives can be overcome if the threats against someone are credible and large enough, especially if the would-be deserter has networks in the group—and outside the group—willing to collaborate in the escape. In this case, where the FARC deserter frame fails is where the AUC anti-frame succeeded; the FARC, it seems, was simply not ruthless enough against deserters' family members to ensure total commitment. That said, because so many FARC recruits were committed to the revolutionary frame, the group may have lost even more members if they had resorted to the same brutal tactics adopted by the paramilitaries. Arguably, the FARC could not take this route, because that type of violence against civilians—particularly campesino civilians—would have damaged their revolutionary frame, which the paramilitaries clearly did not care about.

As this chapter makes clear, there is a great deal of overlap between the various frames used by the guerrillas, paramilitaries, and the government. The victimhood frame

overlaps with the revolution frame, and both of these depend on the deserter frame to reinforce the idea of guerrilla benevolence and justice. The government's framing of the group as victimizing their own troops is reinforced by the narco-terrorist frame, and then further reinforced by the conflation of all ex-combatants into the same category of the stigmatized "desmovilizado". Clearly, these framing contests matter a great deal to the ones creating them and are enduring even after demobilization. The next chapter will outline several hypotheses about potential desertion and reintegration pathways that are generated by this evidence.

Chapter Nine: Framing Reintegration – How Contests and Exit Pathways Influence Post-Conflict Experiences

When studying insurgency and civil war, it is critical to understand different exit pathways from violence in order to prevent the resurgence of that violence. But criminologists have long stated that desistance from violent groups is a very difficult variable to measure, because people might disengage from violence but still be committed to their group in other ways, or people might disengage temporarily, only to re-join the group or commit violence later. In Colombia, these failures of reintegration and repeated resurgence into conflict have been illustrated over and over again. Millions of dollars have been poured into the country for the “War on Drugs” and the “War on Terror”, and now, for the peace process—but the country remains enmired in a multitude of active armed groups, many of whom have disarmed only to rearm again. Understanding why people join violent rebellions is not enough to understand the full trajectory of participation in armed activity—it is also critical to understand why they stay, why they leave, and/or why they return after having disarmed. This dissertation has shown that desertion and armed group fragmentation cannot be understood at only the organizational level, nor at only the individual level. These phenomena have to be understood by looking at how these groups frame reality and threats to build cohesion and collective identities, and how their recruits interpret or dispute these frames.

While the disengagement literature identifies several key variables that influence decisions to desert, this literature has largely failed to apply these same questions to loyalists in order to examine possible differences in the effects of these variables between loyalists and deserters. The literature also largely ignores questions of gender, even though gender norms—particularly patriarchy and hyper-masculinity—are well-known

mechanisms contributing to cohesion in militaristic groups. This dissertation compares loyalists to deserters, looking at the different ways they frame themselves and their opponents. I have also compared men and women ex-combatants, as well as leftist guerrillas and rightist, State-supported paramilitaries. While these ex-combatants all face many of the same variables upon demobilization (e.g., poverty, discrimination, violence, insecurity), I have argued that understanding how armed groups frame their rebellions, and how opposing actors contest these frames, is critical to understanding why some people abandon their groups while others stay. As the Colombian case shows, some counter-narratives coming from the government can backfire if they do not adequately consider the powerful components of the rebel frame that they are competing with. These framing contests are also important in understanding how different exit pathways from violence (e.g., deserting versus being ordered to demobilize) affect reintegration experiences and, in particular, affect future encounters with government officials and regular civilians.

In this chapter, I summarize the three main framing contests discussed in this dissertation, outlining how these contests—and the identities created within them—aid our understanding of why some people stay in armed groups while others leave. I also discuss where and how these frames overlap and why these connections are important to the overall analysis. Second, from these framing contests, I suggest several hypotheses to be tested in future cases about how various exit pathways affect reintegration experiences. With this in mind, I outline potential next steps for research on disengagement to systematically test these hypotheses that take gender, framing, and identity into consideration. Third, I discuss potential policy implications not only for Colombia's DDR programming, but also for addressing disengagement from violence more broadly, especially in terms of recognizing

gendered identities, values, and dynamics in armed conflict and in the structure of armed groups.

9.1 Understanding Frames: Why Contests Matter and How they Overlap

Employing the concept of frames focuses on how people organize and interpret knowledge (Autesserre 2009), which is arguably a critical component of understanding why some people stay committed to rebellions while others abandon their groups. Importantly, frames as socially constructed objects are not only inside people's minds—they are also “embedded in social routines, practices, discourses, technologies and institutions” (Autesserre 2009, 252). As such, frames exist both inside people's minds as constructs and externally as social practices and discourses—and this combination of individual and organizational factors is what makes the study of frames critical to understanding armed group cohesion. That is, studying individual psychological processes of desertion has provided nearly as many different answers as there are deserters—while there are certainly patterns, every person's story, and how they interpret and explain their decision, is different. But studying only the “type” or structure of an armed group also does not adequately explain varying patterns of desertion and cohesion within that group or similar groups. Understanding frames—and the framing contests that challenge the way people have organized knowledge and constructed both individual and collective identities—brings both individual-level and organizational-level analysis together, arguably contributing a stronger understanding to patterns of disengagement from violence. In addition, understanding how frames influence exit pathways from violence—and how certain frames

negatively affect the post-conflict experiences of ex-combatants—can improve our understanding of reintegration successes and failures.

But framing is a continuous and dynamic process; over the course of a movement, frames will be repeatedly contested and reinvented, or even replaced (Benford and Snow 2000). In this dissertation, I identified three core framing contests in the Colombian conflict, pictured below (Table 6). While there was certainly evidence of other frames, these are the three contests that appear to be most influential on rebel group cohesion and disengagement experiences in Colombia.

Table 6
The Three Main Framing Contests

Frame		Primary Counter-frame
Victims	vs.	Perpetrators
Revolution / Self-Defence	vs.	Narco-Terrorists
Loyalists	vs.	Deserters

The first framing contest identified was that of victims versus perpetrators. Within the guerrilla victimhood frame, there were several core components: the campesino identity, the gendered dimensions of victimhood, and the claim of acting in self-defence. But there was also a hierarchy of victimhood in this frame, particularly among the women guerrilla loyalists, where they viewed campesino women as more victimized than they were. This chapter identified racialized aspects of the “non-ethnic” campesino identity, showing how

shared experiences of discrimination and marginalization—and, specifically, of repression from the State—had contributed to a cohesive frame around the concept of victimhood. The chapter also demonstrated how victimhood was experienced differently by men, who largely discussed their victimization in regard to land, compared to women, who emphasized the gender-based and sexual violence perpetrated by paramilitary and State forces. This aspect of women’s victimhood in particular kept many women inside the group, as they were convinced it was the safest place that they could be. These narratives of victimhood led to a third component of the frame—that of claiming self-defence. All of these components legitimize the victimhood frame for combatants, and indeed many deserters also adhered to this framing.

The government and the paramilitaries, on the other hand, challenged this victimhood frame with a counter-frame of the guerrillas as perpetrators—and, more specifically, as perpetrators against their own troops. This, too, was highly gendered, as the most discrediting stories the government used about the guerrillas—and about the FARC in particular—came from female deserters who shared stories of sexual abuse and forced abortions in the ranks. Indeed, this contest was primarily about who was the “real” victim, who was the “real” perpetrator, and thus, who was legitimately acting in self-defence.

Here it becomes clear that many of the frames identified in this dissertation overlap (see Figure 5), and they all have gender norms woven through them. Indeed, these contests are not isolated in themselves—they are frequently reinforced by other frames, in a form of frame bridging, defined as the linking of two or more ideologically congruent frames regarding a particular issue or problem (Benford and Snow 2000).

This brings us to the second competition, that of revolutionaries versus narco-terrorists. The victimhood frame is important in justifying the use of violence and claiming to be acting in self-defence, and it is particularly critical in convincing women guerrillas that they have nowhere else to go. The revolution frame, on the other hand, is critical in demonstrating that self-defence is not enough, and that in fact the group must act offensively in order to overthrow the government and transform society. This frame has several key components that are critical to group cohesion: the fighter identity, militant masculinity, and—for the guerrillas—insurgent feminism. While the fighter identity helps gives combatants status and makes them feel like they matter, and that their cause matters, militant masculinity rewards male aggression and a gendered division of labour while creating a “guerrilla glass ceiling” in which women are included (and lauded) in the group while also being highly controlled. Indeed, the insurgent feminism that is a critical component of the revolution frame and the overthrow of traditional society is still firmly bounded within military masculinity. But, in this sample, some women who were critical of the bounds of insurgent feminism still remained in the group—often because they felt that even within these bounds, the limited gender “equality” of the group was still better than in Colombian society. That is, they still believed in the revolution, and their perceived alternatives outside the group were worse than staying inside, especially when they knew how women deserters were framed by the group. For these women, both disengagement and reintegration were (and continue to be) particularly challenging, as they disarm into a society that stigmatizes them not only for being “narco-terrorists” (the government’s counter-frame), but also for not fitting into traditionally gendered expectations of being peaceful, maternal women. The revolution frame, especially for women, shows that when

considering commitment to one's group, alternatives are highly gendered and perceived alternatives matter just as much as real ones.

Indeed, the government's counter-frame of all Colombian combatants as "narco-terrorists" has highly limited the perceived alternatives of combatants who may want to disengage. This durable and society-wide counter-frame also contradicts the government campaign that encourages combatants to demobilize so they can go home again. Deserters reported being consistently treated like criminals and harassed by law enforcement, even when lawfully demobilized. Thus, the government's "narco-terrorist" frame may influence combatants to stay in their groups, and it may be driving ex-combatants to re-join armed groups because of the lack of alternatives.

Figure 5
How the Frames and Counter-Frames Overlap

The perpetrator and narco-terrorist frames clearly overlap, as the guerrillas, and later the paramilitaries, are framed by the government as violent criminals in both frames. These frames also reinforce the framing of deserters as brave for having escaped these

groups—especially as many deserters shared stories of narco-trafficking and violence that contributed to both the perpetrator and narco-terrorist framing. The paramilitary frame of being “protectors” of the people and self-defence forces also overlaps with the narco-terrorist frame (because they stated frequently that they were helping the government fight the terrorists and protecting the people from the guerrillas) but it also overlaps with the victimhood frame, because of the assertion that they were only acting in self-defence. In addition, the “deserters as brave” framing overlaps with the guerrilla victimhood frame, because most deserters retained a narrative of also being victims of the government. In turn, the victimhood frame overlaps with the guerrilla revolution frame (overthrowing the government in the name of justice and equality), but both the victimhood and revolution frame are threatened by stories told by deserters, which necessitates (for the loyalists) the framing of deserters as liars.

This last framing contest—that of loyalists versus deserters—is between the ex-combatants themselves, though the government does play a role by discounting all ex-combatant frames and grouping them all together into one category. Labelling and othering were prominent in this contest, where the guerrilla loyalists had a very different definition of “desmovilizado” compared to the deserters and the ex-paramilitaries. While all the ex-combatants in this sample had technically demobilized, the FARC loyalists were insistent that they had not, in fact, demobilized—because to them, demobilization meant surrender and disintegration. Instead, they had simply shifted to a new strategy and were persisting with their revolutionary goals without weapons. The deserters and ex-AUC respondents, however, argued that the FARC had not demobilized at all because they were still persisting with their criminal activities.

9.2 Linking Framing Contests and Disengagement Pathways: Avenues for Future Study

What is perhaps most notable about all of these frames is that they have persisted for decades and continue to persist years after the official peace agreement with the FARC was signed. Indeed, the durability of these three framing contests predicts continued conflict, ongoing recidivism, and recurring problems with reintegration—especially for troops who were ordered to demobilize and for women who are challenging patriarchal gender norms. Arguably, the government’s insistence on the narco-terrorist frame even after signing the peace process was a contributing factor to the three top FARC leaders returning to arms in 2019.

Notably, these contests are not unique to Colombia and are in fact archetypal of frames found in many internal armed conflicts—especially that of revolutionary versus terrorist. Thus, while from this one case it is difficult to predict with certainty how framing might influence desistance in other cases, the evidence presented does suggest a few potential effects.

First and most importantly, framing contests clearly limit perceived alternatives, and in Colombia those contests and alternatives are highly gendered. Rampant stories about women infiltrators and testimonies from women who were accused of being liars about in-group violence confirm that all three guerrilla frames (i.e., victimhood, revolution, deserters as liars) had a marked influence on women’s choices: they kept many women in the group and kept them from challenging authority. And the government’s counter-frame of portraying guerrilla women as ignorant, sexually abused, and failed mothers only reinforced for many women that staying inside the ranks was the safest place to be. While these frames also limited men’s options, the overall vitriol and stigmatization of male

guerrilla deserters was not nearly so pronounced and also did not remove men's agency as it did for women.

Second, the frames enabled both loyalists and deserters to reduce cognitive dissonance quickly; for the loyalists, this dissonance reduction aided in group cohesion, but for deserters it helped to justify choices about which many were conflicted. The combatants who were strongly committed to the guerrilla victimhood frame and the components within it were much less likely to desert their groups than combatants who had experienced some form of victimization from their own comrades. Of course, this makes sense—people who experience in-group violence should be more likely to leave. But then why do other people stay? Why does this in-group violence not weaken the frame's credibility and disillusion other combatants? And this is where the frame is important in addressing cognitive dissonance: as framing influences how people organize experiences and interpret reality, highly resonant frames can be useful to ignore conflicting information, or to organize it in a way that does not threaten the frame. For example, when combatants can organize dissonant information to fit those experiences into the victimhood frame (i.e., the combatants denouncing abuses are liars, paid informants, not “real” guerrillas, etc.), it reduces the dissonance and allows them to stay. Alternatively, some combatants might choose to stay in the face of adverse experiences for other reasons—economic needs, relationships, or as some attested, simply having nowhere else to go. In this case, the frame helps them to address the cognitive dissonance in order to justify their choices to stay. Given that these interviews were done *after* demobilization, it is hard to say with certainty whether some framing choices—particularly those of deserters—influenced the choice to

leave or were adopted afterward in order to justify the choice to leave. With some deserters, the former appears to be true, while with others it is clearly the latter.

What is much clearer is the relationship of frames to the six variables of interest noted in the literature review: type of commitment, ideology, identity, networks, costs/benefits of membership, and government propaganda. For example, a highly resonant frame could shift the type of commitment: even if a person joined because of the guns or because of economic need, for many respondents being immersed in the victimhood and/or revolutionary frame (i.e., indoctrination) eventually shifted—or expanded—their type of commitment to the group. This is inextricably linked to ideology, as ideology informs both the articulation and amplification of the frame (even with the paramilitaries, where the ideology was quashing rebellion to maintain the status quo). Framing, after all, is how the group communicates its ideology to the world and to its recruits. In the Colombian case, this link is readily apparent in how each frame operationalizes gender norms, where the guerrillas use insurgent feminism to show that they are more enlightened and progressive than the State, and the State exploits gender stereotypes of women as victims to discredit the guerrillas and win public support. And, as the above evidence indicates, framing contests between rebels and the government can actually reinforce the group's framing of their ideology—such as reinforcing the belief that the government is the “real terrorist” and/or that gender equality is better inside the group than outside of it.

By now, the links of the identity variable to framing should be quite clear, as identity construction is a key aspect of successful framing. The campesino victim and the insurgent feminist are linchpins in the guerrilla framing of their cause, and the protector or “autodefensa” identity is critical in the paramilitary frame that insists they were never the

aggressors in Colombia's conflict. In addition, discursive battles around the competing identities of revolutionaries versus terrorists is a core framing contest not only in Colombia, but in civil wars all over the world.

Regarding alternatives and the costs of membership, the framing contests in this case also influenced the calculation of the costs and benefits of membership versus the costs and benefits of leaving the group, not only by creating an echo chamber of reinforcing information but also by discrediting or threatening anyone who spoke against the credibility of the frame (e.g., women who accused commanders of abuse). This effect was also highly gendered, where many women were convinced that membership in the guerrillas was the safest place to be due to widespread sexual violence and gender inequality in Colombian society, and many men could not see viable alternatives to group membership due to the inability to obtain land for farming and/or a general fear of having to find work in the cities.

Network effects, on the other hand, seem to go both ways: networks appear to be influenced by the frame but also influence the resonance of the frame. That is, being inside the group "en el monte" (as opposed to being a militia member living at home) restricted the amount of information available to recruits, thus reducing cognitive dissonance and making the frame more credible and more salient (i.e., relevant to daily life and experiences). Militia members were more likely to have access to dissonant information and to have a wider range of alternatives due to literacy skills and urban networks (although, due to data availability issues it remains unclear whether militia members are more likely to desert). Also, those that were known to be highly committed loyalists were less likely to hear anyone discuss deserting, because the ones most committed to the frame would report

any dissent to commanders. Thus, commitment to the frame was influenced by network connections (i.e., fewer connections with people outside the frame means a stronger frame), but a strong commitment to the frame also influences who was in one's most direct network.

Finally, the variable of government demobilization/amnesty promises does not appear to have convinced deserters to leave, or at least, none of the deserters in this sample. This is largely due to the government's credibility problem (i.e., combatants simply did not believe government promises). This credibility problem was especially pronounced for women, who had experienced gender-based violence perpetrated by the military and paramilitaries and also felt maligned by government portrayals of women guerrillas. Thus, the framing contests between the government and the armed groups did not seem to convince combatants to desert, but they did have the effect of reducing perceived alternatives for some combatants who might have considered desertion under different circumstances.

This study raises several implications for ongoing research on disengagement and desertion and highlights the importance of incorporating gender analysis into the study of rebel group cohesion. While there are many potential causal links to analyze here, I have identified five potential hypotheses around framing, gender, disengagement, and reintegration for future study:

1. Persistent government framing of insurgents as criminals and terrorists prevents disengagement and may impede long-term reintegration.
2. Framing contests between armed groups and the government reduce perceived alternatives, making combatants less likely to desert, or less likely to enter government programs if they do desert.

3. Cost-benefit calculations for combatants are highly dependent on societal gender norms, and gendered frames exacerbate the lack of alternatives for women combatants in particular.
4. Highly resonant frames reduce cognitive dissonance amongst recruits and help to maintain group cohesion, even in the face of serious frame credibility issues.
5. “Genderwashing” (i.e., using the language of gender equality without actually implementing it) obscures gendered hierarchies within armed groups and makes women combatants less likely to challenge internal patriarchal structures.

9.3 Policy Implications

Can the study of frames improve the implementation of disengagement and reintegration policies? I argue that it can, in several ways: first, understanding the durability of particular frames and the identities constructed within them, such as collective claims to victimhood, insurgent feminists, and the fighter identity, can guide reintegration practices that validate ex-combatants’ experience and capitalize on skills that many combatants have acquired while in the armed group. While treating all ex-combatants equally may have its advantages for the government in dismantling the hierarchies within the armed groups, it can also backfire if highly educated and/or accomplished ex-combatants feel that they are being patronized or discounted. That is, rather than treat all ex-combatants as criminals or as deviants that need re-education, reintegration programs need to acknowledge skills and knowledge that many ex-combatants have acquired and parlay these skills into employment training and other reintegration options. Rather than destroy the “fighter” identity, reintegration programs should redirect the fighter identity, showing ex-combatants how to fight for their rights and for equality without the use of violence. This shift also requires

acknowledging that many ex-combatants have legitimate grievances rather than treating them all like ex-convicts—but this, of course, requires the government to acknowledge that it too is responsible for the armed conflict.

Second, understanding how frames can shift perceived alternatives, especially for women, is critical to successful reintegration. As the preceding chapters have shown, reintegration is particularly challenging for women who have adopted insurgent feminism, as they are returning to the same status quo in civilian life (in terms of gender inequality and gender-based violence) that they had been fighting against, especially in rural areas. Reintegration processes also affect men's identities related to stereotypical gender norms of "machismo" and militarized masculinity, but psycho-social assistance and job re-training for them to cope with these changing identities continue to be lacking in all versions of Colombian reintegration. In this sample, for men in particular, the inability to find adequate or dignified work after demobilization in order to provide for their families has been a significant motivator to consider re-arming or becoming involved in other illicit activities. A program with a 55 percent male dropout rate clearly needs to assess what is not working. Arguably, both men and women suffer from the failure of DDR to adequately consider what gender means to combatants who are trying to become civilians—especially in a country with ongoing conflict and myriad opportunities to obtain power and money through armed violence and militarized masculinity.

To fully understand desertion and the impact of exit pathways on reintegration, it is not enough to study why some people abandon armed groups—we must also seek to understand why some people stay and how they make sense of those choices, even in the face of in-group violence, the loss of leader credibility, and intense pressure from

government and other opposing forces. Understanding variance in troop commitment and how combatants organize or reduce dissonant experiences—something this dissertation has aimed to do—could greatly improve demobilization and reintegration programs by improving our understanding of pathways out of violence, the gender norms that affect those pathways, and the impact of these trajectories on long-term reintegration.

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Appendix A

List of Ex-Combatant Interviews

INT #	Gender (Man/ Woman)	Group / Former Group	Ethnicity (self- identified)	Age of initial enlistment	Years in armed group(s)
B01	M	FARC/ M-19		13	20+
B02	W	FARC		13	unknown
B03	W	ELN		17	1
B04	W	ELN		20	unknown
B05	W	FARC	Indigenous	17	2
B06	W	ELN		37	2
B07	W	ELN	Afro-descendant	15	unknown
B08	M	ELN		17	3
B09	M	ELN/ AUC	Indigenous	unknown	unknown
B10	M	FARC	Indigenous	12	15
B11	W	FARC		21	3
B12	W	FARC		35	7
B13	W	FARC		25	6 months
B14	W	FARC		20	7
B15	M	ELN	Indigenous	18	6
B16	M	ELN		16	3.5
B17	M	ELN		11	14
B18	M	FARC		18	10
B19	M	EPL/ FARC		12	12
B20	M	FARC		unknown	17
B21	M	FARC		22	30
B22	M	FARC		21	18
B23	M	FARC	Indigenous	30	24
B24	W	FARC		16	14
B25	M	FARC		45	13
B26	M	FARC		16	16
B27	M	FARC	Indigenous	13	30
B28	M	FARC		unknown	30
B29	W	FARC		20	10
B30	W	FARC	Indigenous	12	6
B31	M	FARC		10	25
B32	M	FARC		11	37
B33	M	FARC	Indigenous	14	24

INT #	Gender	Group / Former Group	Ethnicity (self- identified)	Age of initial enlistment	Years in armed group(s)
B34	W	FARC	Indigenous	20	11
B35	M	FARC		13	5
B36	M	FARC		15	16
B37	W	FARC		14	4
B38	M	FARC		13	6
B39	M	FARC		13	9
B40	W	FARC		16	10
B41	M	FARC		38	5
B42	W	FARC	Indigenous	14	7
B43	M	FARC	Indigenous	12	9
B44	M	FARC		21	11
B45	W	FARC		14	7
B46	M	FARC		20	22
B47	M	FARC		25	47
B48	W	FARC		18	20
B49	W	FARC		16	30
B50	W	FARC	Indigenous	14	20
B51	W	FARC		18	43
B52	W	FARC		12	16
B53	W	FARC		13	29
B54	W	FARC	Mulatto	14	19
B55	M	FARC		18	37
B56	W	FARC		14	28
B57	M	FARC		32	33
B58	W	FARC		14	27
B59	M	FARC		16	37
B60	W	FARC		12	20
B61	W	FARC		18	30
B62	W	FARC	Indigenous	15	21
B63	W	FARC		22	4
B64	W	ELN	Indigenous	18	3
B65	W	ELN	Indigenous	12	6
B66	M	ELN	Indigenous	23	2
B67	M	ELN	Indigenous	16	2
B68	M	FARC		12	13
B69	M	AUC		17	7
B70	M	FARC		21	4

INT #	Gender	Group / Former Group	Ethnicity (self-identified)	Age of initial enlistment	Years in armed group(s)
B71	M	FARC	Afro-descendant	29	2
B72	M	FARC		13	25
B73	M	FARC/Black Eagles		14	10
B74	M	ELN		10	18
B75	M	ELN		13	11
B76	M	AUC		17	21
B77	M	AUC		21	6
B78	M	AUC/ EPL		42	7
B79	M	AUC		unknown	4
B80	M	AUC/M-19	Afro-descendant	21	8
B81	M	AUC		30	2
B82	W	AUC	Afro-descendant	30	1.5
B83	W	FARC		17	6
B84	M	FARC		13	11
B85	M	FARC		12	8
B86	M	AUC/ army		30	1*
B87	W	AUC		38	5
B88	M	AUC	Afro-descendant	13	12
B89	M	AUC		41	6
B90	M	AUC/ army		30	16 months*
B91	M	AUC/ FARC	Afro-descendant	11	19
B92	M	AUC/ army		24	2
B93	M	AUC/ army		28	1**
B94	M	AUC		28	3
B95	M	AUC		24	5
B96	M	AUC/ army		24	4 months*
B97	M	AUC/ army		39	5
B98	M	AUC		23	1*
B99	W	AUC		26	3

**Based on other available information this respondent was likely underrepresenting the actual time spent in the group.*

Appendix B

List of Expert Interviews⁷⁸ (Colombia, various cities)

INT #	Profession	Affiliation
C01	Psychologist	GAHD
C02	Safehouse supervisor	GAHD
C03	Reintegration officer	ARN
C04	Researcher	Independent
C05	Head of military interviews (of defectors)	GAHD
C06	Head of child recruitment prevention program	Colombian National Police
C07	Researcher / Community liaison	National Centre of Memory
C08	Representative	International organization (name withheld)
C09	Government representative	Donor country (name withheld)
C10	Departmental director	Colombian government Victim's Unit
C11	Regional director	Undisclosed human rights NGO
C12	Social worker	Local government
C13	Lawyer	Colombian government Victim's Unit
C14	Reintegration officer	ARN
C15	Reintegration officer	ARN

⁷⁸ To protect respondents' anonymity, especially when the pool of potential respondents in certain organizations is small, I have chosen not to disclose the gender of these respondents.