



POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Engaging Women in Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration:

INSIGHTS FOR COLOMBIA

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Engaging Women in Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR): Insights for Colombia

As the Colombian government and the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) negotiate terms to end more than a half century of violence, a crucial issue is the future of the FARC’s 8,000 combatants,ⁱ close to 40% of whom are femaleⁱⁱ.

For a peace agreement to result in enduring stability, former combatants must be meaningfully and authentically integrated into communities, with viable alternatives for making a living. A disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) process is typically used to support former combatants as they return home, relinquish weapons, leave formal or informal military structures, and reintegrate socially and economically. DDR has become a global practice—usually following peace agreements—with more than 60 formal processes initiated in over 40 countries since the late 1980sⁱⁱⁱ.

Colombia has incorporated gender perspectives and women’s inclusion to varying degrees in DDR processes for multiple armed groups. Starting in 2003, the government implemented an innovative reintegration policy based on more expansive “second generation DDR”^{iv} processes, which focus on both combatants and the larger communities affected by armed violence. Yet, as is common around the world, significantly fewer eligible females than males participate in these programs.

The following recommendations address how to design an inclusive program for the reintegration of former FARC combatants. While the current peace talks in Havana are primarily focused on “dejar las armas” (leaving behind weapons), many of these worldwide best practices should apply to the resulting program. Learning from these global insights and recognizing their potential relevance to the Colombian context will maximize chances for a successful transition.

These recommendations should inform further discussions, as there is no substitute for consulting diverse Colombian women directly, meaningfully, and consistently at all phases of planning and implementation.

Women's inclusion in disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration programs is key to a successful transition to peace.

1. **An investment in ensuring women's full and meaningful inclusion in a transition process is an investment in the stability of the country:** Harvard researchers analyzed 174 countries and found that the best predictor of a state's peacefulness is not its level of wealth, its level of democracy, or its ethnoreligious identity; it is how well its women are treated. The larger the gender gap, the more likely a state is to be involved in violent conflict—inside and outside of its borders.^v Lessons derived from experiences around the world indicate that the long-term success of DDR can be made or broken based on the experiences of female former combatants and of women living in receiving communities. The meaningful and consistent inclusion of women in all phases of planning and implementation is simply too integral to be relegated as an afterthought or designated the responsibility of a limited group.
2. **Women living in communities play essential roles in determining the success or failure of reintegration programs:** When researchers in Sierra Leone asked predominantly male ex-combatants to identify those who played a significant role in helping them reintegrate, 55% named women in the community. Only 20% cited community or traditional leaders, while 32% cited international aid workers. Respondents said community women—including some working through civil society organizations—provided guidance, shared meager resources, and, perhaps most important, facilitated their skills training and education by providing childcare, clothes, and food.^{vi} Additionally, women often carry determinative moral authority, dictating whether returning fighters will be welcomed or ostracized.
3. **Attention to gender and women's inclusion can be a source of positive domestic and international attention:** For the FARC, ensuring women's full inclusion in the reintegration process positions the group well as it transitions to a political body. It enables FARC members to sustain narratives about commitment to gender equity and fairness that could translate into votes during elections. It also increases their perceived legitimacy among international actors. For the government, ensuring women's full inclusion is an opportunity to continue building upon and setting new globally-recognized good practices—a hallmark of the Havana process to date. Both parties have an opportunity to be part of setting new international precedent by introducing an innovative aspect: considerations for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex combatants, which have already been raised in Havana, have never been officially incorporated into a DDR process.

Women and men experience conflict and its aftermath differently, and those differences should be taken into account during a DDR program.

1. **Men and women in fighting forces experience conflict differently:** Female FARC members play a variety of roles. Some achieve a relatively high rank and assume various leadership positions. Others engage in combat, recruitment, operational, and support roles. Some have reported sexual assault and slavery as well as forced sterilization and abortions at the hands of their counterparts,^{vii} while others report sexual assault and abuse at the hands of rival fighting groups.
2. **Men and women in fighting forces experience the period following conflict differently:** Returning to communities, women may face stigma associated with perpetuating violence as well as from challenging traditional ideas of female identity and gender, particularly in rural areas. Some may have ongoing physical and psychological needs related to trauma. Additionally, the Colombian experience is consistent with global findings that when combatants return to communities, rates of domestic violence often increase dramatically.^{viii} Since the presence of a gun in the home is known to increase the likelihood that such violence will result in death, disarmament can take on a unique imperative for women.
3. **Reconciliation must be an integral component of any reintegration process:** Reintegrating fighters into communities they have harmed requires the reconciliation of relationships among reintegrees and receiving communities. Following armed conflict, lingering and often extreme polarization between victim and fighter belies the reality that many male and female fighters are in fact also victims themselves, forcibly recruited as children or adults. For those who voluntarily joined fighting groups, residents of harmed communities often have little understanding of why fighters embraced the ideals they fought for. Meanwhile, former combatants may not fully appreciate the impact of their actions during the conflict. A participatory and inclusive reconciliation process should take into account the diversity of men's and women's experiences, acknowledging the varying needs of former combatants and survivors of conflict. Truth-telling has a central role in enhancing mutual understanding that can sustain reintegration, particularly in situations where retributive justice is not viable. It is necessary from the outset of a DDR process to plan for recording individuals' stories and building understanding of others' experiences. Colombia's well-established Historical Memory Commission could serve as a strong partner in the reconciliation effort.
4. **DDR processes must be designed in sync with post-conflict reconstruction plans:** Sustainable demobilization of ex-combatants relies on their successful integration into productive civilian life. That integration requires attention to social and economic development at the community and national levels. From infrastructure projects to education and job training, this post-reconstruction development must take into account the different needs of men and women from the outset. The Colombian National Development Plan (2015-2018) provides a framework and implementation mechanisms that could be leveraged to sustain the reintegration effort. If DDR and post-conflict reconstruction planning are done in relative isolation, and without gender awareness throughout, the effectiveness of both is jeopardized.

Gender-informed DDR planning is more effective and efficient, and produces a more sustainable peace.

1. **Disaggregating all data by sex improves planning:** Planners commonly underestimate the percentage of women and girls associated with fighting forces and are later overwhelmed and underprepared. This is partially due to underreporting by commanders. The Colombian government and nongovernmental organizations estimate that about 30-40% of FARC members are female^x—a proportion consistent with fighting forces having similar histories and founding ideologies. However, more reliable estimates, particularly among different ranks and of those serving in non-combatant roles, are essential.^{xi} Women's participation in various elements of programming should also be tracked closely. For instance, female former combatants who have voluntarily demobilized in Colombia have taken part in counseling sessions and availed themselves of educational and financial services at higher rates than males.^{xii}
2. **Designers of reintegration packages can unintentionally put women at a significant disadvantage:** Cash payments—even when offered to both men and women—are rarely advisable. Among other issues, female combatants in a range of conflicts report that, immediately upon receiving these payments, funds are taken away by male former commanders. Payment amounts determined according to rank disadvantage women since they are often prevented from ascending in the force due to their gender. Intimate partner relationships formed as combatants often dissolve following conflict; when packages are issued to couples instead of individuals, men typically retain the cash awarded for both. In Afghanistan, wives of combatants emphasized the importance of designing packages that benefit entire families and increase their investment in the combatant's continued participation in reintegration programs. They suggested that components might include educational vouchers for children and gas for cooking stoves.^{xiii}
3. **Assembly and cantonment sites require unique facilities and services for men and women:** Women are more likely than men to be accompanied by children. Some will be pregnant and require medical care. International best practices call for: issuing each combatant his or her own identity card as opposed to issuing one card per couple or family; providing women with separate latrines, washing, and kitchen facilities in well-lit areas; creating a health facility for women and girls, staffed by female doctors or nurses; and ensuring strong female representation among program staff and leadership at sites, particularly those responsible for interviewing and/or disseminating information.
4. **Women's full participation in training and education programs can be enabled through customized considerations:** Lack of childcare regularly prevents women from participating in reintegration programs. Providing such care or encouraging communal childcare can significantly increase sustained participation, as can scheduling programs around women's availability during the day and in convenient locations.

5. **Women’s recidivism is reduced when they have access to peer networks and associations:** Social science research indicates that women are generally more reliant than men on peer groups and are quicker to form and depend on networks. This proclivity is compounded by the FARC’s ardent group identity and established command structure, from which many females derive a strong, positive sense of belonging and solidarity. Losing these forms of support and identity has a particularly acute impact on women’s risk of recidivism and recruitment into organized crime. Demobilized FARC women placed in government-funded homes for female former combatants have indicated these facilities are helpful in strengthening the development of peer networks.^{xiv}
6. **The most effective reintegration programs build upon the reasons why individuals joined fighting forces and the experiences they gained as members:** Multiple motivations drove women to join the FARC, often distinct from those that compelled male recruits. Recruitment campaigns that emphasized gender equality and fairness often resonated strongly with women, particularly those in rural areas who were frustrated by expectations to conform to traditional gender roles or who faced domestic or state violence. During conflict, many female members rose to leadership positions, and they have no intention of reverting to previous social roles. Jobs training programs that focus on traditional responsibilities for women, such as hairdressing or sewing, will be immediately rejected by many. Jobs that build upon motivations for equality and justice and non-traditional skills they’ve already acquired—such as police officers, election organizers, and political party organizers and candidates—may be better received.
7. **To reach and persuade women, information campaigns must target them specifically:** Women evaluating reintegration options will be particularly attentive to the tactics, language, and imagery associated with information campaigns. It is therefore essential that women in receiving communities and female former combatants be involved in designing and distributing information. They can advise on effective ways to feature women in campaign imagery and link women’s unique motivations for joining the FARC to current options. They can also design effective ways to convey the existence of programs and services aimed at addressing former combatants’ unique physical needs (including care related to forced sterilizations and medically unsound abortions) as well as psychological needs (including those stemming from sexual assault and stigma).

ENDNOTES

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