

# USING A MULTI-METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH TO WOMEN'S LIVED-EXPERIENCES AS FEMALE COMBATANTS AND THEIR RETURN TO CIVILIAN LIFE

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In this article I am going to discuss the methodological framework used to approach narratives of Colombian female insurgent ex-combatants. I differentiate between women's becoming, and being *guerrilleras*,<sup>1</sup> the experience of leaving the armed organisation, and the life after. One of the objectives of my research project is to understand *memory work* undertaken by female ex-combatants in the Colombian context of ongoing conflict. More specifically, I am interested in women's active practices of remembering.<sup>2</sup> I will argue that a multi-methodological approach allowed me as a researcher to reach different layers of material that at the moment of analysis will make possible a deeper understanding of women's re-interpretation and representation of their own experiences as members of a guerrilla organisation.

Researcher's stories about entering the field usually start with a journey; this one is not an exception. By using this image I am firstly linking myself to a lineage of feminist researchers who have used the metaphor of the researcher-traveller to describe their own pursuits.<sup>3</sup> Secondly, I am giving a sense of the embodied nature of the research process, and the importance of acknowledging the locatedness of oneself in time and space.<sup>4</sup> To some extent the research journey of my PhD thesis began in 2000 with the publication of the autobiographies of two former members from the M-19<sup>5</sup> guerrilla movement. The politico-military organisation had demobilised eleven years earlier in the framework of peace agreements with the Colombian government.<sup>6</sup> Due to the topic these two life stories of former members of a revolutionary guerrilla army are part of Latin America's long tradition of *testimonio* (testimonial narrative).<sup>7</sup>

Both books were extraordinary, they were written by women:<sup>8</sup> Vera Grabe<sup>8</sup> and

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<sup>1</sup> Women guerrilla fighters.

<sup>2</sup> Annette Kuhn, 'Photography and Cultural Memory: A Methodological Exploration', *Visual Studies*, V. 22, N. 3 (2007), pp.283-292.

<sup>3</sup> Shulamit Reinharz, *Feminist Methods in Social Research* (Oxford University Press, 1992)

<sup>4</sup> Reinharz, *Feminist Methods*, p.211; Rosi Braidotti, *Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming* (Blackwell Publishers, 2002).

<sup>5</sup> *Movimiento 19 de Abril*, M-19 (19<sup>th</sup> April Movement).

<sup>6</sup> Between 1990 and 1994 five guerrilla organisations (M-19, EPL, PRT, MAQL, CRS) signed peace agreements with the Colombian government.

<sup>7</sup> John Beverly, *Testimonio: On the Politics of Truth* (University of Minnesota Press, 2004); Barbara Harlow, *Resistance Literature* (Methuen, 1987).

<sup>8</sup> Vera Grabe, *Razones de vida*, (Planeta, 2000). Re-edited under the title *El silencio de mi chelo o razones de vida*, (Observatorio para la Paz, 2011).

Maria Eugenia Vasquez.<sup>9</sup> Until then, 'official' histories of both Colombia and guerrilla organisations' had been written mostly by men about men.<sup>10</sup> Women were rarely among the protagonists and the narrators. Women's experiences of participation as actors in the armed conflict were almost invisible,<sup>11</sup> although according to official registers of the approximately 4,885 persons demobilised in Colombia between 1990 and 1994 in the course of peace agreements, 1183 were women (24 percent).<sup>12</sup> This is a low estimate as many women insurgent militants were excluded from the official demobilisation lists.

My journey into the field was twofold; it was a coming back and a going away. Due to its longitudinal stance it is space and time-based, and is influenced by my particular location in Colombia's socio-political and economic map. As a *mestiza*<sup>13</sup> Colombian woman who has experienced the effects of the socio-political violence,<sup>14</sup> inequality, chronic insecurity, and the consequences of 60 years of armed confrontation between guerrillas, paramilitaries, gangs, drug-lords, and the army, I am an insider. As a female academic writing this story across the Atlantic Ocean miles away from the on-going armed conflict, studying at a university in the Global North, and as a Colombian marked by privileges of ethnicity, class, and education, whose family has neither been a direct victim of the armed conflict nor a direct actor of the confrontation, I am an

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<sup>9</sup> Maria Eugenia Vasquez, *Escrito para no morir. Diario de una militancia* (Ministerio de Cultura de Colombia, 2000).

<sup>10</sup> An exception in Colombian case is Patricia Lara's *Siembra Vientos y recogeras tempestades* (Editorial Planeta Colombiana, 2002/1982) in which a female journalist interviews the commanders of the M-19: Alvaro Fayad, Ivan Marino Ospina, Jaime Bateman Cayon, Carlos Pizarro, and Antonio Navarro Wolf.

<sup>11</sup> Elvira Sanchez-Blake, 'Memoria de mujeres en el conflicto Colombiano: reportajes, testimonio, y nuevas semantizaciones', In *Tercer Milenio*, 23, (2012), <http://www.periodismoucn.cl/tercermilenio/2012/05/memoria-de-mujeres-en-el-conflicto-colombiano-reportajes-testimonio-y-nuevas-semantizaciones/> [accessed 7 June 2012]; Constanza López Baquero, *Trauma, Memoria y Cuerpo. El testimonio femenino en Colombia (1985-2000)* (Tempe, 2012); Luz María Londoño and Yoana Fernanda Nieto Valdivieso, *Mujeres no Contadas. Proceso de desmovilización y retorno a la vida civil de mujeres excombatientes en Colombia 1990-2003* (La Carreta, 2006); Elsa Blair, Luz María Londoño, Yoana Fernanda Nieto Valdivieso, Verónica Espinel, Laura Galeano, 'Mujeres en tiempos de guerra, Informe de investigación COLCIENCIAS -CODI - INER', Unpublished research report, University of Antioquia, Instituto de Estudios Regionales -INER, (2003).

<sup>12</sup> Londoño and Nieto Valdivieso, *Mujeres no Contadas*, p.42.

<sup>13</sup> In this context I am making reference to my mix-raced background. By locating myself as a *mestiza*, who due to her lighter skin colour and phenotypical characteristics is read as a 'white' Colombian in certain spaces I want to make visible the structures of inequality and privilege that shape my lived experience as a woman and as an academic.

<sup>14</sup> By socio-political violence I understand all the events that negatively disturb the life, integrity, and personal freedom of people; and that are originated by the states' abuse of power, by political reasons, derived from discrimination against socially marginalised people, and caused in the framework of the armed conflict. Mesa de Trabajo Mujer y Conflicto Armado, *XI informe sobre violencia sociopolítica contra mujeres, jóvenes y niñas en Colombia* (Antropos 2012) p. 28.

outsider.<sup>15</sup>

Furthermore, I discovered that although I had been working in the field of women and disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration in Colombia from 2001 onwards, I was perceived by several of the women ex-combatants as a double outsider. Some of the women<sup>16</sup> have a strong sense of belonging to a 'common past', a 'common family' defined by ties of ideological affiliation and shared experience as 'revolutionary fighters'. In some cases this common belonging is passed to their sons, daughters, nieces and nephews and in the eyes of some of the women interviewed they are the ones in charge of (re)telling the stories and keeping alive the memory of their fathers, mothers, or relatives, revolutionary militancy, rather than an outside academic. And some of them are indeed doing this work through art (painting, performance, theatre), visual methods such as documentaries, literary accounts, or blogs which aim to 'recover' and preserve the 'memory' of their relatives and the ideas of the different insurgent organisations.

In consequence at the beginning of my fieldwork I was challenged several times by the women because of my not-belonging to this 'shared past' and my 'rightness' to listen to their accounts was questioned; 'who are you again?', 'why are you here?', 'why do you want to know that?', 'Are you the daughter or niece of a comrade?', were common interpellations. It is necessary to state that this questioning of my position was not only related to definitions of belonging to a particular community, but also to security issues related to the clandestine and politically 'subversive' nature of the women's experiences. A revolutionary woman from El Salvador, while talking in 1999 about her experience as an FMLN<sup>17</sup> combatant, said that she could discuss the issues related to her militancy because the conflict had finished, 'but during the war such frankness had not been an option'.<sup>18</sup>

In Colombia total openness about women's experiences as combatants, even those

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<sup>15</sup> Academic discussion around the researcher's insider-outsider position is part of a wide ongoing debate across different disciplines. Alison I Griffith, 'Insider/Outsider: Epistemological Privilege and Mothering Work', *Human Studies*, 21 (1998) 361-376; Sonia Corbin Dwyer and Jennifer L Buckle, 'The Space Between: On Being an Insider-Outsider', *Qualitative Research, International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 8 (2009) 54-63; Sharan B., Merriam, Juanita Johnson-Bailey, Ming-Yeh Lee, Youngwa Kee, Gabo Ntseane, Nazanah Muhamad, 'Power and positionality: negotiating insider/outsider status within and across cultures', *International journal of lifelong education*, 20 (2010), 405-416.

<sup>16</sup> Especially those who were active militants in old insurgency groups. The 'old insurgency' are the politico-military organisations that appeared in the 1960s and 1970s in Colombia, and demobilised in the 1990s in the framework of different peace agreements with the government. I use this term in order to differentiate them from the women individually demobilised during the last 15 years from the two politico-military organisations still in arms the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia - FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) and the Ejército de Liberación Nacional - ELN (Army of National Liberation). Individually demobilised women are referred as 'newly demobilised'.

<sup>17</sup> *Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional*, FMLN (Farabundo Martí Front for National Liberation).

<sup>18</sup> Julia Denis Shayne, 'Gendered Revolutionary Bridges: Women in the Salvadoran Resistance Movement (1979-1992)', *Latin American Perspectives, Women in Latin America, Part 3 Identities and Localities: Social Analyses on Gendered Terrain*, Vol. 26, No. 3 (1999) Sage, 85-102, p. 89.

who demobilised almost 25 years ago, is still dangerous. They are stigmatised by some sectors of the population, and looked at with suspicion by the government. Moreover the country is still in the midst of an internal armed conflict and many ex-combatants still face threats to their personal security.<sup>19</sup> Two guerrilla armies remain active (the FARC and the ELN). After their partial demobilisation between 2003 and 2005 paramilitary groups have rearmed in different regions of the country, and the army is but another actor of violence. During the last ten years Colombian army ties with paramilitary groups, and its involvement in extrajudicial executions, massacres, and forced displacement has been denounced by victims and human rights organisations.<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless the start, in 2012, of peace dialogues between the FARC guerrillas and the government of President Juan Manuel Santos (2010-2014, 2014-2018) opened not only the possibility to put an end to the conflict but has also allowed for political voices of dissent to emerge. Funding from international feminist organisations has fostered the visibility of women ex-combatants, from old insurgency organisation members of the to the *Colectivo de Mujeres Ex-combatientes de la insurgencia* (Collective of Women ex-combatants from insurgent organisations) and the *Red Nacional de Mujeres excombatientes de la insurgencia* (National Network of women ex-combatants from insurgent organisations).<sup>21</sup> Currently they are working with other grassroots women's organisations in the framework of the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000) to ensure female participation in the current peace process. The *Collective* and the *Network* as organisations of female ex-combatants have made important contributions to peace-building and issued concrete recommendations for the current peace process in their virtual magazine.<sup>22</sup>

Although at the beginning this thesis was not conceived as a longitudinal research project,<sup>23</sup> my continuous work on the topic and in the country, my contact with the women and their lived experiences inside and outside the guerrilla organisation, as well as the inclusion as part of my current corpus of 60 life story interviews, conducted between 2001 and 2007 in three different research projects with women ex-combatants in which I

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<sup>19</sup> Blair et al., *Mujeres en tiempos de guerra*; Londoño and Nieto Valdivieso, *Mujeres no Contadas*; Dietrich, 'La "compañera política": mujeres militantes y espacios de "agencia" en insurgencias latinoamericanas', *Revista Colombia Internacional*, 80 (2014) 83-133.

<sup>20</sup> GMH, *Basta Ya! Colombia memorias de guerra y dignidad* (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, 2013); Human Rights Watch, *World Report 2014. Events of 2013* (United States of America, 2014).

<sup>21</sup> The Collective of Women Ex-combatants from the insurgency was founded in 2001 almost 11 years after the first wave of demobilisation in the country. The Collective is an umbrella organisation with different regional chapters which operate through the National Network of Women Ex-combatants. Currently it is estimated to have around 500 active members. Luisa Maria Dietrich, 'Revolutionary feminism? A comparative study into women's organisations of guerrilla ex-combatants in Latin America', unpublished masters dissertation, Rosa-Mayreder College, Die Wiener Volkshochulen, 2012.

<sup>22</sup> <http://www.revistala13.com/index.html>.

<sup>23</sup> And its methods do not follow entirely the model of a longitudinal study.

participated as a researcher, allow me to frame this project as a longitudinal study.<sup>24</sup> Besides, the different locations in time, political context, and women's life span in which the interviews are situated will make it possible to look at the narrative shifts that have taken place in women's telling about their experience.

### **Assembling the archive**

I will now consider some of the methods I used to assemble my 'archive', which is the result of different emotions and various forms of contact I made in the field during the nine months I spent in Colombia between June 2012 and February 2013. I borrow Sarah Ahmed's (2004) notion of the archive as a 'contact zone' to describe my own archive. It is made up of institutional forms of contact such as books, libraries, websites, government organisations, NGOs, universities; and of everyday forms of contact with the women who narrated their stories to me, friends, family, colleagues, places I visited, stories of friendship and activism, and with national, international and global events 'witnessed' through the media (television, radio, internet, cinema), among others.<sup>25</sup>

It is important to state that one of my first dilemmas was how to name the women I have contact with. Are they my interviewees, my research subjects, my informants?<sup>26</sup> I decided to call them narrators because on the one hand I want to share the narrative voice with them, and on the other they narrated to me a set of stories about Colombia, feminism, social movements, the growth of a political voice, that I was not aware of, and that their stories unveiled to me. Through their personal narratives and our face-to-face encounters I learned not only about their lives but also about myself, and our shared past and present as Colombian nationals. All the women narrators were contacted by snowball sampling and through a 'chain of trust'.<sup>27</sup> I was introduced or referred to them by old friends; and I have interviewed some of them once or twice in the past.

Two factors influenced my decision to take a multiple methods approach. Primarily since its conception my research was grounded in feminist methodology.

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<sup>24</sup> The research projects are: *Women in Times of War (2001-2003)*, *Engendering Reintegration Processes of Female Ex-Combatants in Colombia 1990-2003 (2003-2005)*, fieldwork for MA dissertation conducted in 2007. Additionally the researcher Luisa Dietrich (2014) who is working in a comparative analysis of women and men guerrillas in Salvador, Colombia, and Peru, allowed me to use five interviews she conducted with women ex-combatants in Colombia.

<sup>25</sup> Sarah Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Routledge, 2004), p. 13.

<sup>26</sup> This preoccupation is inscribed in the concerns brought about by the call for more democratic, participatory forms of research practice. This is an ethical discussion that can be found in the different disciplines that inform my research: sociology, anthropology, history, as well as feminist research. See: Les Back, *The art of listening* (Berg, 2007); The Personal Narratives Group, *Interpreting Women's Lives. Feminist theory and Personal Narratives* (Indiana University Press, 1989); Sherna Gluck and Patai Daphe (eds.), *Women's Words: The feminist practice of Oral History* (Routledge, 1991).

<sup>27</sup> Tina Miller, 'Shifting Layers of Professional, Lay and Personal Narratives: Longitudinal Childbirth Research', in Jane Ribbens and Rosalind Edwards, *Feminist Dilemmas in Qualitative Research: Public Knowledge and Private Lives* (Sage 1998) pp.58-71.

Different authors have discussed the elements that characterise feminist research.<sup>28</sup> They have suggested that feminist methodologies do not create new research methods but have modified them in order to ensure that the research has three main components: first it has to put women's experiences in.<sup>29</sup> This is to include women's locations and perspectives in order to give a more inclusive view of society. This first component of feminist research was present in my project since its birth as my main objective is to contribute to the construction of an alternative memory to male-stream (his)tory and (re)telling of the Colombian socio-political violence from the point of view of the women who participated in it as actors/agents of political violence. Secondly, feminist methodologies are aimed to minimise harm and control in the research process, and try to critically reflect on the unequal power relations between the researcher and the participants. Thirdly, the research should be of value to women, lead to social change and/or actions directed to improve women's status.<sup>30</sup>

Furthermore, after almost ten years of experience in the field, and taking part in three research projects that used as the main method life-story interviews with Colombian women ex-combatants from guerrilla and paramilitary armies, I started to feel that using a multiple methods approach would contribute to add thickness and more layers of information to my research.<sup>31</sup> Colombian official accounts of the armed conflict which has been described as a 'war of silencing', in which memories had been used as another form of political repression.<sup>32</sup> Thus I was convinced that due the different layers of silence, silencing done by state's official narratives, and 'selected' memories that have been used to 'construct' an official version of the armed conflict in the country, a multiple methods approach would allow the contours of different silences and inarticulations of women ex-combatants' narratives about their lived experiences to take shape.<sup>33</sup> In other words I

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<sup>28</sup> Liz Stanley & Sue Wise, 'Method, methodology and epistemology in feminist research processes', In Liz Stanley (ed.), *Feminist praxis* (Routledge 1990) pp. 20-60; Mary Maynard, 'Methods, Practice, and Epistemology: The Debate about Feminism and Research', in Mary Maynard and June Purvis (eds.), *Researching Women's Lives from a Feminist Perspective* (Taylor and Francis 1994); Shulamit Reinharz, *Feminist Methods in Social Research* (Oxford University Press, 1992); Marjorie L De Vault, 'Talking Back to Sociology: Distinctive Contributions of Feminist Methodology', *Annual Review of Sociology*, 22 (1996) pp.29-50; Alison M Jaggar and Susan Bordo (eds.), *Gender/Body/Knowledge: Feminist Reconstructions of Being and Knowing* (Rutgers University Press, 1989).

<sup>29</sup> Jennifer Brayton, 'What Makes Feminist Research Feminist? The structure of feminist research within the social sciences', (1997), <http://www.unb.ca/PARL-L/win/feminmethod.htm>, [accessed 11 April 2010]

<sup>30</sup> Jennifer Brayton, 'What makes feminist research Feminist?'

<sup>31</sup> Reinharz, *Feminist Research Methods*.

<sup>32</sup> Edlie L. Wong, 'Haunting Absences: Witnessing Loss in Doris Salcedo's *Atrabilarios* and Beyond', In Roger Hallas and Frances Guerin (eds.), *The Image and the Witness: Trauma, Memory and Visual Culture* (Wallflower Press, 2007) pp.173-188, p.179.

<sup>33</sup> Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History* (Routledge 1992); Katherine Hodgkin and Sussanah Radstone, *Contested Pasts: The Politics of Memory*, (Routledge 2006); Sussanah Radstone, and Bill Schwarz, *Memory: Histories, Theories, Debates* (Fordham University Press 2010); Pilar Riano-Alcala and Erin Baines, 'The Archive in the Witness:

wanted to have access not only to the stories that have been silenced by Colombian official accounts of the armed conflict but also to women's own silences. Their silences are determined by the current political climate, the double stigma carried by women ex-combatants for transgressing the gender order and the political-economic order, and the clandestine practices learned as guerrillas which are to this day part of what they call 'the mark of the militancy'.<sup>34</sup>

### **Different Methods, multiple layers**

As stated before, in order to pull out different layers in women's experiences, that could be overlooked when using a single method approach, I decided to take use different methods, I took an ethnographic approach doing participant observation at the *Collective and the Network of Women Ex-combatants*,<sup>35</sup> conducting life story interviews, and focus groups, and using visual methods such as photo-elicitation and photo-diaries. I also kept a fieldwork diary and a photo diary. This use of multiple methods reflects not only my multifaceted identity as a researcher<sup>36</sup> which comes from the different disciplines that are part of my training: journalism, drama, history and anthropology, they also allowed me to see the multifaceted identities of the women narrators: the ex-combatant, the peace-activist, the mother or grand-mother, the artist, the political activist, the poetess,<sup>37</sup> among others.

In this section I am going to centre my attention in the use of participant observation and visual methods (photo-diaries) as they have not been used before in research with women ex-combatants in the country.<sup>38</sup> The possibility of doing participant observation was 'opened' by Eloisa who was one my main gatekeepers (Miller, 1998).<sup>39</sup> She was the first person I contacted and she immediately invited me to one of the meetings the *Collective of Women Ex-combatants* was holding in the framework of the 'FOKUS

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Documentation in Settings of Chronic Insecurity', *The International Journal of Transitional Justice*, 5 (2011) pp.412-433.

<sup>34</sup> Proma Tagore, *The Shapes of Silence: Writing by Women of Colour and the Politics of Testimony* (McGill-Queen's University Press 2009).

<sup>35</sup> Colectivo de Mujeres Excombatientes (Collective of Women Ex-combatants) and *Red Nacional de Mujeres Ex-combatientes* (Network of Women Ex-combatants). The Collective and the Network are composed by old insurgent women.

<sup>36</sup> Reinharz, *Feminist Research Methods*, p.202.

<sup>37</sup> I am aware that Poetess is an archaism in English language, but when possible I prefer to use the feminine word (poetess, actress) in order to make women visible in spaces where they had been traditionally absent (written word, public sphere).

<sup>38</sup> The other two methods: life stories interviews and focus groups have been widely used. Across the article I have referenced some of the research that has been conducted with women ex-combatants in Colombia. Due to the rapid expansion of the field in the last 20 years many of them are not mentioned.

<sup>39</sup> I had interviewed her in 2001 and 2004.

project'.<sup>40</sup> Such an invitation allowed me not only to follow the meetings of the *Collective* in Bogotá, but also opened the possibility of taking part in two national meetings of the *National Network of Women Ex-combatants*. Sometimes I describe my contact with the *Collective* as 'researcher's luck'. Although in the past I had conducted focus groups with women ex-combatants, I had never had the opportunity of doing participant observation in their meetings. This time I was able to sit down in thirteen of their meetings, take part in the planning of the workshops on 'women ex-combatants and peace building' to be conducted in four regions, and was invited to participate in the workshops held in two cities. I was also invited to take active part in the internal discussions of the book that the collective had been writing as a form of shared auto-biography over the last ten years. And finally I went to two national meetings of the *Women's Ex-combatants National Network* as an active guest. In those meetings I took pictures, recorded the discussions, and helped to put together the memories of the event.

Conducting participant observation in the *Collective* and the *Network* can be read as an innovative method because few researchers working on the topic have had the opportunity to do so, they have usually conducted interviews and focus groups. By being present in women's ex-combatants meetings and get-togethers I was able to listen to stories and testimonies that are only shared among them, and to follow their everyday interactions. The meetings were inter-subjective spaces of memory building from the 'bottom up'. They underscored the polyphonic nature of remembering as the stories narrated by the women about their becoming, being and leaving the revolutionary struggle and life before, were built collectively, continually contested, re-narrated, and reshaped depending of the narrative function assigned to them by the tellers. The meetings were also creative spaces for the construction of a common memory, and for re-evaluation of the experience.<sup>41</sup> Finally, participant observation in the *Collective* and the *Network* not only gave me privileged access to women's activities, stories and memory practices. It also allowed me to weave ties of intimacy, compassionate listening, and an ethic of care for each other's security.

The photo-diaries were used as a way to have access to women's self-representation of their lived experience through creative methods such as photography and self-writing. A blank notebook, a disposable camera, and a set of instructions were given to the 29 women who agreed to take part on the exercise. Most of the old insurgent women were contacted during the process of participant observation in the *Collective* and

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<sup>40</sup> The FOKUS Project as the women called it, was a Project sponsored by the Feminist Norwegian NGO *FOKUS GROUP*. It was part of a broader initiative to raise awareness about the importance of the 1325 UN Resolution among different Colombian women's grassroots organisations. The Project had two components, one was aimed to strengthen the women's organisations from within, and the second was a formative component about the 1325 Resolution. There was a third component that was not explicit, bring together women's organisations from different regions, backgrounds, and fields. The first component was specific for each organisation. The *Collective* project wanted to 'reconnect' the *Red Nacional de Mujeres Excombatientes* by financing three national meetings.

<sup>41</sup> Barbara Misztal, *Theories of Social Remembering* (Open University Press 2003).



the *Network*, thus we had already established a relation of mutual trust. Only newly demobilised women were asked to keep the photo-diary after our first interview.

### 1. Photo-Diary

A notebook with a set of instructions, and one disposable camera was given to each woman. Each notebook had instructions with themes to explore both through writing and with images. In total 29 photo-diaries were distributed, but only 15 were given back to the researcher.



In the instructions they were encouraged to take pictures representing ideas or themes around the experience of being a woman ex-combatant and write an idea expressing why that image was representative or important to them. The last photo had to be a self-portrait.

Despite all women receiving the same set of instructions, all interpreted them in different ways, and structured their experiences as combatants and ex-combatants by emphasising different aspects. Some women for instance only referred to their past experience as members of a guerrilla organisation through their present, making visible how their past as female members of revolutionary organisations is embedded in their current identities. Others made an attempt to narrate their experience as a *bildungsroman* and instead of using the disposable camera provided, they added personal photographs.

Other women articulated their narration through themes such as family, loves, pains, and roots, to name some.

I want to argue that in a complex context of on-going armed confrontation and a highly polarised society, the use of innovative methods as well as a multi-methods approach allowed the emergence of experiences that have been silenced and made invisible, adding depth to the research. Each method employed allowed me to 'peel' different layers of women's lived experience, and their own understandings about it. As part of my commitment to feminist research practices and sharing authority there was a constant exchange of information with the narrators during the research process. I handed the transcriptions of the events and the visual material I gathered to the *Collective of Women Ex-combatants*.<sup>42</sup>

## Findings

During the different get-togethers, meetings and coffees shared with the women in this process I was not only able to understand how women conceptualise their own experience, but also to see their practices of remembering. Several times the women stated that the *Collective* and *Network* meetings were the only spaces where they can talk about their experiences as 'revolutionaries', or where their stories were fully understood. The national meetings were a great opportunity to see how the regional differences influenced the patterns of mobilisation in the armed groups, women's experiences as combatants, the process of reintegration to civilian life, and their life today.

For instance, women living in Bogotá had the opportunity to finish their university education, and some of them joined the *Collective of Women Ex-combatants*. This space can be considered a community of memory, where some of them have been able to reinterpret their militancy from a feminist perspective. On the contrary, women in the rural areas of the Caribbean, where the paramilitary violence was and still is overwhelming, have not only kept their identities and past hidden but also became victims. Only a few have been able to reflect upon their experience and reconfigure their identities outside traditional gender stereotypes that penalise women's involvement in illegal armed groups and by doing so transgressing gender roles.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Michael Fisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral And Public History* (University of New York 1990); Beverly Skeggs, 'Situating the Production of Feminist Ethnography', in Mary Maynard and June Purvis (eds.), *Researching Women's Lives*; Jane Ribbens and Rosalind Edwards, *Feminist Dilemmas*; Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai (eds.) *The feminist practice of Oral History* (Routledge 1991).

<sup>43</sup> Blair et al, 2003, 'Mujeres en tiempos'; Elise Barth, *Peace as Disappointment: The Reintegration of Female Soldiers in Post-Conflict Societies: A Comparative Study from Africa* (International Peace Research Institute PRIO, 2002) <http://www.peacewomen.org/resources/DDR/AfricaBarth.html> [accessed may 2003]; Vanessa Farr, *Paper 20: Gendering demilitarisation as a peace building Tool*, (Bonn International Centre for Conversion, 2002); Karen Kampwirth, *Women and Guerrilla Movements: Nicaragua, El Salvador, Chiapas, Cuba* (Pennsylvania University Press, 2002); Luz Maria Londoño and Yoana Nieto Valdivieso, *Mujeres no contadas*; Caroline Moser and Fiona Clark, *Victims, Perpetrators*

In many of these meetings old pictures of their times as guerrilla members were spontaneously brought into the conversation. For me the objects depicted in the images took a different meaning and the two dimensional images acquired depth with each description. For instance, after a workshop with women ex-combatants, I went with Ruth and her partner Clara to Linda's and Julio's house. Linda and Julio, a couple of ex-militants of the M-19 guerrilla army, had militated with Ruth.<sup>44</sup> In the middle of a conversation Linda came to the living room with a drawer full of photos of their militancy. Although they did not have any apparent sense of order, time, linearity, or importance, every time a photo was pulled out of the 'mess' they were able to remember the date when it was taken, the name of the place and the name of the comrades posing for the camera or caught by surprise in a snapshot. As we were looking at the pictures in the living room of Linda's and Julio's house, any family member was able to hear the conversation and look at the pictures.<sup>45</sup> At one point Linda's mother said to Julio: '-Ohhh you looked so handsome in that *pinta de tigre* (tiger print).'

Yoana: 'What is a *pinta de tigre*?'

Julio: 'The uniforms that we recovered from the army after the combats. Our uniforms, when we had uniforms, were made of plain olive green fabric, thus having a *pinta de tigre* was a treat.'<sup>46</sup>

The above conversation not only tells me about family member's awareness of Linda and Julio past, and everyday details of guerrilla life, like the fact that the 'proper' uniforms were taken from the bodies of the soldiers that died during combat. It also opened questions about archival practices of men and women who participated in politico-military organisations.

As stated before, participant observation at the meetings of the Collective of Women Ex-combatants is another example of how a multiple-methods approach allows

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or Actors? *Gender, Armed Conflict, and Political Violence* (Zed Books, 2001); Laura Sjoberg, 'Women fighters and the "beautiful soul" narrative', *International Review of the Red Cross*, V 92, 877 (March 2010) pp. 53-68; Dietrich, 2014, 'La "compañera política"'.

<sup>44</sup> Clara and I were the only ones who have never been members of the M-19 guerrilla organisation. Julio's mother was never directly involved with the organisation activities but was a sympathiser.

<sup>45</sup> Sarah Pink, *Doing Visual Ethnography: Images, Media, and Representation in Research* (Sage 2001); Claudia Mitchell, *Doing Visual Research* (Sage 2011); Ludmilla Jordanova, *The Look of the Past: Visual and Material Evidence in Historical Practice* (Cambridge 2012).

<sup>46</sup> The interviews are presented in poetic stanzas in order to maintain the rhythm of the speech, and facilitate the translation from Spanish into English. The audio records of the interviews were transcribed using the format: lines, stanzas, part. I adapted Paul Gee's linguistic approach to narrative. Paul Gee, 'A linguistic approach to narrative', *Journal of narrative and life History*, 1, (1991 a) p.15-39, <http://www.jamespaulgee.com/sites/default/files/pub/LinguisticApproach.pdf>, [accessed 27 July 2013]; Paul Gee, 'Memory and Myth: a perspective on narrative', in Alyssa McCabe and Carol Peterson, *Developing Narrative Structure* (New Jersey, 1991) pp.1-26.

silences and silenced topics to emerge. During the weekly gatherings of the Collective I was able to observe and understand their dynamics and work. Furthermore I was immersed in women's practices of remembering and re-working their experiences as combatants and ex-combatants. This gave me a better understanding of the different narrative functions performed by some of the stories told by women in the meetings, and the performative elements of their memory work. The photo-diaries were useful to look at the themes women used as the 'spinal cord' around which they build their life story (e.g. Family, friends, neighbourhood, love, pains, hope), and in some cases the pictures they took gave me information about their living conditions and everyday life.

The use of multiple methods was essential not only to see but also to understand how intersections of class, gender, ethnicity, age and geographical location influence not only women's narratives, but also their silences, and the possibility to value, narrate and give sense to their lived experience as guerrilla combatants, and the process of transition from the armed group to civilian life.<sup>47</sup> Women's silences were not only imposed from outside (political climate, security concerns, stigmatisation of the experience) but in some cases were linked to the clandestine nature of revolutionary struggle and practices of compartmentalisation learned and practiced by member of guerrilla organisations. In other cases silences were linked to experiences difficult to articulate due to their traumatic nature, such as the sexual violence endured during torture. Finally a multiple methods approach was fructiferous when approaching women recently demobilised. 'Memory is not always spoken',<sup>48</sup> and in the context of on-going armed conflict like Colombia, silence is a strategy used by both survivor victims and demobilised combatants to protect themselves, especially when their memories contradict metanarratives of victimhood or their experiences are stigmatised.<sup>49</sup>

During the interviews some of them explained their decision of joining the guerrilla organisation in what they thought was the adequate moral framework: falling in love of a male combatant, and following him into the ranks without fully knowing what it entailed. By using this gendered framework they inscribed their subversion of both the gender order and the political *status quo* in a way that does not contravene traditional notions of women's place in armed violence<sup>50</sup> and to some extent depoliticise their experience in a highly polarised society. But the photo-diaries and the ethnographical

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<sup>47</sup> Kristin Sorensen, *Media, Memory, and Human Rights in Chile* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Ruth Wajnryb, *The Silence: How Tragedy Shapes Talk* (Allen & Unwin, 2001); Pilar Riano-Alcala and Erin Baines, 'The archive in the Witness'.

<sup>48</sup> Pilar Riano-Alcala & Erin Baines, 'The archive in the Witness'.

<sup>49</sup> Pilar Riano-Alcala & Erin Baines, 'The archive in the Witness'.

<sup>50</sup> Luz María Londoño, 'La CorpOralidad de las guerreras: una Mirada sobre las mujeres combatientes desde el cuerpo y el lenguaje', *Revista de estudios sociales*, 21, (2005), p.67-74; M.C Rojas de Ferro, 'Las "almas bellas" y "los guerreros justos"', *Revista en Otras Palabras*, 4, (1998,) pp.38-48; Laura Sjoberg and Caron Gentry, *Mothers, Monsters, Whores: Women's Violence in Global Politics* (Zed Books, 2007); Sjoberg, 'Women fighters'; Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Women and War* (The Harvester Press, 1987).

encounters sustained with them draw a more complex picture of their reasons for enrolment, such as ties between family members and the guerrilla organisation, and a tradition of social organisation, mobilisation and resistance in their communities of origin. This does not mean that the reasons of becoming they gave during the interview are not 'truth', but that the experience is complex and multifaceted. And that in contexts of chronic insecurity and on-going armed confrontation like Colombia the use of different methods allows hidden stories to emerge.

To sum up a multi-methodological approach proved to be very useful to reconstruct women's silenced stories of participation in revolutionary groups, and had allowed me to understand how they represent their own struggle against silencing and forgetting. Pilar words in one of the meetings of the Women Ex-combatants Network speak about it,

... war is not only made with rifles

...

There is another war that is forgetfulness, right?

That one is a very powerful weapon of war.

And against that weapon we have fought all this years,

Against the weapon of forgetfulness.

Which is...

To make that story unknowable, unknown, keep it out of sight,

That nobody speaks about it.

But at the same time a multi methods approach has raised ethical questions of diverse order. (1) About intimacy with the narrators, and emotions in the fieldwork when the researcher is in a border-position between insider and outsider. (2) In relation to the use of images produced by the women in their photo-diaries, as some of them contain self-portraits and photographs of their children and relatives. (3) In regard to the use of interviews produced in past research projects. (4) And the problems that sharing my own recordings, transcriptions and pictures with the Collective as a way to reduce power imbalances may have generated in terms of security and confidentiality.

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