

# Double Agency? On the Role of LTTE and FARC Female Fighters in War and Peace

Written by Fiona Morrison-Fleming

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Discourses around women and conflict often center on women's victimhood, or else their innate affinity for peace (Smeuler, 2015; Alison, 2004; Afshar, 2003). As a vulnerable population worldwide, women are indeed uniquely impacted by conflict and suffer particularly (Smeulers, 2015; Parashar, 2009; Carter, 1996); this manifests in the targeting of women and girls through systematic sexual assault and slavery, as well as the economic responsibility many women are made to undertake when the men in their families go to fight, or are killed, wounded or imprisoned (Yusuf, 2009). In this narrative of women as victims or peacemakers, female combatants must be made sense of somehow. Why is it that a woman who should naturally abhor violence is participating in it? Often she is branded as brainwashed; she must have suffered Stockholm Syndrome; she cannot possibly have chosen this for herself (Gowrinathan, 2018b). Many female combatants, especially in rebel groups or paramilitaries, are in fact initially abducted or else feel that they have no option but to join; yet, some of these women go on to assume leadership roles in their organizations and commit their lives to the cause. To call them brainwashed is to deny them agency (Gowrinathan, 2012; 2018b).

As "liberatory movements" both the Sri Lanka's Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and Colombia's the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) were able to hold ideological space not only for the inclusion of women but also the improvement of their position in a future society, leading to high numbers of committed women in their ranks. But is this theoretical commitment born out in practice? And what happens to female fighters when their organizations' bids for liberation fail? This paper will look to the literature on gender in war and peace to examine the role played by female combatants—and their agency as political actors—in the LTTE and FARC both during and after violence; ultimately finding that in the absence of victory, these combatants' gendered realities improved very little, if at all.

### Women in Conflict and Peace: Agency

Stockholm Syndrome was first coined in an incidence of bank robbery in the Swedish capital (Namnyak et al, 2008). Two women were held hostage by robbers, and yet in negotiations with the police insisted that their captors safety be ensured—a criminologist and psychiatrist present at the negotiations asserted that they must have a syndrome to behave in such a way. One of the women, Kristin Enmark, is quoted as having said, "If you say these girls or me have this syndrome, you don't have to pay attention to what they say" (Gowrinathan, 2018b). Natasha Kampusch, another woman "diagnosed" with the syndrome describes it thus: "Stockholm syndrome turns victims into victims a second time, by taking from them the power to interpret their own story—and by turning the most significant experiences from their story into the product of a syndrome" (ibid). Namnyak et al call into question whether the syndrome is in fact nothing more than an "urban myth"; they argue that "existing literature does very little to support its existence... We also suggest that labelling the hostage victim with a psychiatric syndrome makes their story more readable and more likely to boost media circulation" (2008:10), perhaps because of societally entrenched gender roles and views about women.

When women are not viewed as agents, as full beings, it becomes the responsibility of society (read: men), to take care of and protect them, but also to control them. Within this framework, it is easy to understand how the killing of

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unarmed women causes more outrage than that of unarmed men; how the violence perpetrated by women elicits greater repulsion than that committed by men (Smeulers, 2015; Gentry & Sjoberg, 2015). Many feminists put forward the argument that if given the chance, women will prove better at leading. They are naturally inclined to listen, to nurture, to compromise. While this explanation may be flattering, it is essentialist. It presumes that all women share fundamental qualities by nature of their biology (Gentry & Sjoberg, 2015); it is the same reasoning (though differently applied) that justifies the patriarchal systems that have oppressed women for thousands of years. It is not to the benefit of women, or feminism, or liberation, to paint women as all good—women are complex, and messy, as are all humans by nature of their humanity (ibid). To put it succinctly, women, like men, contain multitudes. Cages are cages, regardless of the material of which they are constructed.

## Historical Background

### *Colombia*

In 2016, President Juan Manuel Santos achieved what many thought to be impossible: he successfully negotiated a peace deal with the FARC which will hopefully bring the intractable and bloody war between government forces, paramilitaries and the FARC to a close (Alvarado Cobar et al, 2018). Since its emergence as an independent state in the early 1800s, Colombia's history has been marked by extreme violence, predominantly between the political right and left. It is a matter of some dispute when the current day conflict actually began, with some tracing it to the 60s, and others all the way to the beginning of the republic. But whether one views its inception as *La Violencia*, a period in the 40s and 50s marked by intense conflict between the Conservative and Liberal Parties, or considers the appropriate starting point to be the 1930s campaigns for land reform, it is clear that it stems from a long history of political turmoil (Aranguren Romero, 2017).

La Violencia began in 1948 and lasted for ten brutal years as the two ruling parties vied for power. Its close was heralded by the National Front, an agreement to ensure power-sharing through trading off terms. While it brought the violence to a close, it also effectively barred all political opposition. The closure of politics to dissident voices is one of the reasons for the rise of armed insurgency, but the FARC's legacy lies even more firmly in La Violencia; Manuel Marulanda Vélez, the FARC's chief commander until his death in 2008, was a guerilla armed by the Liberal Party at that time (Molano, 2007; BBC, 2016). The group's actual foundation, however, did not come until 1964 when the military attacked communist strongholds led by Vélez and comrades; Colombia's other leftist guerilla movements followed soon after, with the National Liberation Army (ELN) established in 1964 and the People's Liberation Army (EPL) three years later (Molano, 2007).

Right-wing paramilitaries entered the scene in the 1980s and were born of a government overwhelmed by its battle against the FARC. They are referred to collectively as the United Self-Defense Groups of Colombia (AUC), and, similarly to the FARC, are heavily involved in drug trafficking and coca cultivation as a major source of funding (Coleman, 2018a). Due to their patterns of killing sprees and widespread violation of human rights, the government declared them illegal in 1989 (ibid). The groups were supposedly decommissioned in the 90s, but the many assassinations of community leaders, journalists and leftist politicians since the signing of the peace accords has been attributed to the AUC remnants (Long, 2018).

### *Sri Lanka*

After gaining its independence from Britain in 1948, the Sinhalese-Buddhist majority in Sri Lanka quickly constructed a state that marginalized their Tamil minority through demotion of the Tamil language and the designation of Buddhism as the state's official religion. Following a period of unsuccessful nonviolent protests, activists turned to violence and the LTTE was born in 1976 (BBC, 2019). While their desire was first for self-determination in a semi-autonomous region, it quickly became a campaign for a separate state. The LTTE waged a series of three Eelam Wars, the first beginning in 1983; this was followed by the first attempt at peace talks in 1985 (ibid).

Throughout the three-decade long civil war, the Tigers have controlled large portions of Tamil-majority land in the North and East of the country, establishing parallel government structures in these areas (Coleman, 2018b). In

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addition to the Women's Front, the LTTE also encompasses the Sea Tigers, a naval unit, and the Black Tigers, their suicide squad (ibid). Suicide bombings increasingly became part of their military strategy beginning in 1987, having been successfully used in the assassinations of Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and Sri Lankan President Ranasinghe Premadasa (De Silva, 2005).

In contrast to that of Colombia, Sri Lanka's "peace" came after a failed peace process in 2002 and an eventual military victory by the Sri Lankan military over the LTTE in 2009 (BBC, 2019). Throughout the conflict, "the number of internally displaced people (IDPs) has fluctuated between half a million and 1.2 million" (Gowrinathan, 2013:13), and after the end of the war, many of these people remained in camps. Previously LTTE-controlled areas became heavily militarized, with Gowrinathan (2013) reporting that many resettlement villages were situated directly across from military camps, and that the occurrence of checkpoints had dramatically increased after 2009.

## Women in War

### *Anti-state movements*

Though the LTTE's conflict is defined along ethnic lines and the FARC's along ideological lines, the two have many traits in common. Alison (2004) argues that "anti-state... so-called 'liberatory' nationalisms often provide a greater degree of ideological and practical space for women to participate as combatants than do institutionalized state or pro-state nationalisms" (448). While the FARC is not, strictly speaking, a nationalist movement, it is indeed both anti-state and liberatory. Marxist in its ideology, it therefore purports to be interested in feminism and gender equality insofar as these are essential to the foundations of communism (Franco & Sanín, 2017). One can therefore situate both the FARC and the LTTE within this framework. Anti-state projects are typically more willing to transgress societal norms and therefore to welcome women into their ranks in spite of gender roles and taboos present in their cultural context (ibid)—this is certainly evident in these organizations, both of which reportedly contained approximately 30% women (Gowrinathan, 2013; Franco & Sanín, 2017—though each has claimed much higher percentages at various times).

Indeed, both organizations make explicit their theoretical commitment to women. The 1991 aims of the Women's Front of the LTTE indicate their intention "to eliminate all discrimination against Tamil women and all other discrimination, and to secure social, political and economic equality; to ensure that Tamil women control their own lives; and to secure legal protection for women against sexual harassment, rape and domestic violence" (Alison, 2003). The FARC's claim to be "the army of the people" depends on its involvement of as many sectors of the population as possible, and purports that it "has managed to create a racially and gender neutral organization, where women are treated as equal partners" (Herrera & Porch, 2008).

### *Colombia*

Though the FARC had been active as an organization since the 60s, it was not until two decades later that they began to allow women's involvement in active combat. In its first iteration, the FARC maintained a "familial" structure whereby men brought their families along with them—the women and children did not fight, but they were present and played other roles such as cooking (Franco & Sanín, 2017). The shift in policy came following the organization's rebranding as an "army" at the 7th Conference, at which time they also decided to begin collecting rent on coca farming. Franco & Sanín argue that "ideology indeed allowed the FARC to look at female recruitment as a plausible alternative. But it was not until organizational conditions created an explicit need that women started to actually fill the group's ranks as combatants" (2017:775). Although "all non-governmental armed political groups in Colombia

have utilized female fighters... guerillas are much more predominately female" (Tabak, 2011:131).

Most scholars seem to agree that women (and men) join the FARC for want of a better option (Tabak, 2011; Herrera & Porch, 2008). Because the organization is active in remote and extremely poor areas of the country, its recruits often don't have many other choices. However, reasons cited for joining also centered on an idealization and romanticization of the guerilla lifestyle, from the lust for guns to the desire for freedom and community. Women in

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particular sought refuge from abusive situations and the threat of violence, sexual and otherwise (Tabak, 2011; Ebrahimi-Tsamis, 2018). While it would be difficult to argue that women were not sexually exploited within the FARC, it remains that many of their female members relished the sexual freedom on offer as a sanctuary from a highly patriarchal culture (Herrera & Porch, 2008). Conversely, the most common cause of desertion for women in the FARC was their policy on contraception and abortion: former combatants report that the insertion of an IUD or similar was part of a women's orientation. In spite of these preventative measures, women regularly became pregnant and were most often forced to abort (Amnesty International, 2004; Piñeros, 2018). Victoria Sandino, currently a FARC senator and one of the women who rose through the organization's ranks, described their policy thus: "maternity and war are incompatible" (Piñeros, 2018).

## *Sri Lanka*

Similar to their male counterparts, women recruits most often cited nationalism as their reason for joining the LTTE (Alison, 2003), though this sentiment was frequently tied to other experiences of repression within the Sinhalese majority state. Many of Alison's interviewees traced their desire to fight to death or displacement, usually of a close family member, but also that of friends and others in their community: one woman stated that "[?]our people have been suffering" (2003:41). Gowrinathan (2013) argues that female recruitment can best be explained by state repression as represented in the interplay between displacement and gender-based violence; Tambiah (2004), among others, has highlighted the vulnerability of Tamil women to sexual assault and violence at the hands of the Sri Lankan military. While some of Alison's (and Gowrinathan's) participants referenced experiences of rape and assault as a motivating factor in their involvement with the LTTE, others were more concerned with safety—both their own and that of others. Some felt that joining the Tigers would protect them from assault, and even more interesting, several wanted to protect their community: "I am a female; I have to liberate the Tamil women from the occupation. So I, we are, also fighting for the women's liberation" (Alison, 2003:43). In its role as de facto government in many Tamil areas, the LTTE ran a number of social and women's programs. Along similar lines, they maintained strict policies on domestic and sexual violence among their populace (Alison, 2003).

Gowrinathan's 2017 work investigates the reasons why women who have been abducted or otherwise forcibly recruited by the LTTE so often choose to remain in the movement, sometimes even attaining high-ranking positions. She finds that prior personal experiences of militarization greatly influence levels of commitment to the organization, with high levels of exposure producing high levels of commitment. In both the LTTE and FARC, it is clear that while the influences leading women to fight are varied and diverse, their agency lives in the decision to continue.

## **Women in Peace**

In the wake of peace negotiations—or military victories—revolutionary movements are prone to abandon their fiery sentiments on gender equality; or as Samarasinghe puts it, "evidence from other liberation movements illustrates that oftentimes women are politely told to go back into the reproductive sphere and to the kitchen" (1996:218).

## *Colombia*

While Colombia's peace process has been heralded as "[?]one of the most innovative and inclusive peace agreements ever written" in regards to gender (Alvarado Cobar et al, 2018:14), this would not have happened without pressure from women in civil society. The negotiating table in Havana was overwhelmingly male, and heavily connected to the military or security sector (Céspedes-Báez & Ruiz, 2018), demonstrating that even when society relegates women to being peaceful rather than violent, it is the men who waged war that get invited to make peace. Immediately following the beginning of the negotiations, Colombian women activists launched *Mujeres por la Paz* (Women for Peace), "a coalition through which more than forty organizations voiced women's demands" (ibid:94) in order to lobby for inclusion in the process. Incidentally, one of the forty was [?]Red Nacional de Mujeres Excombatientes, a group comprised of former female combatants. This coalition proved to be quite powerful: due to their intervention, the government appointed two female negotiators and established a subcommission on gender (ibid; Herbolzheimer, 2016). The body was "tasked with reviewing all documents issued as part of the peace process and ensuring that they contained gendersensitive [sic] language and provisions" (ibid:6), and was composed of

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women from both sides as well as international participants.

One of the tenets of the peace agreement was a guarantee of ten seats in Congress for FARC politicians. Since its transition into a political party, it has taken up eight of its seats (one politician is in prison, and another has refused to take his seat in protest) despite obtaining less than one percent of the vote (Long, 2018). Of these eight representatives, two are women: Sandra Ramírez and the infamous Victoria Sandino (oxígeno.bo, 2018).

Although Colombia has been demobilizing fighters since 1990, the new peace accords have caused a steep increase of combatants along with the corresponding challenges, one of which is the particular needs of women in Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) programs (Castañeda & Myrntinen, 2014). One such challenge is the duality of victim/perpetrator that many female combatants encompass; in the words of one former FARC fighter, “they [society] did me harm, but I also did harm. So you become a victim and a victimiser” (Ebrahimi-Tsamis, 2018:99). Due to the FARC’s tendency to recruit those who were poor, marginalized, and often abused either by family or other conflict actors (not to mention their tendency to allow or overlook abuse within the organization), this is a highly prevalent phenomenon (ibid).

One group of demobilized female FARC have engaged in the post-conflict discussion around gendered violence by founding the Corporación Rosa Blanca to speak out against the abuse they experienced within the organization, and they have even been joined by Elda Neyis Mosquera, alias Karina, a FARC commander who was widely regarded as one of its most powerful leaders (Orth, 2018). Sandino has responded to reports of abuse within the FARC by saying, “I can assure you that it wasn’t a policy of the FARC to victimize its own women... Were [the women] masochists or what?” (Piñeros, 2018).

Women have certainly played an instrumental role in the Colombian peace process, from their advocacy on gender-based violence and land reform to their involvement in government. Female combatants are often overlooked in the implementation of peace, and there is concern that this may again be the case in Colombia with a failure to tailor DDR programs to their needs. While the accords are certainly groundbreaking in many regards, it remains to be seen what may come of them. The current government presents a major threat, but perhaps more critically, the entire country has large amounts of healing to do. The length and brutality of this conflict have bred a culture of fear and violence that will take much more than the signing of an agreement to fix.

## *Sri Lanka*

Sri Lanka became the first country to establish a subcommission on gender in 2003 as part of their peace process; however well-intentioned, the commission only met once (Herbolzheimer, 2016). This is not a bad metaphor for the inclusion of women in peacebuilding since. Their suffering has largely been overlooked and their concerns dismissed (Yusuf, 2009). One of the stumbling blocks in the subcommission, as well as in subsequent women’s organizing, is the disconnect between experiences, and therefore needs, of women in the Tamil North and East as opposed to those living in the rest of the country (Gowrinathan, 2017). One Tamil activist commented that “[t]hey could not understand that this, militarization, was the first and biggest problem for Tamil women. After that only can we talk about alcohol and other social issues” (ibid:335).

The situation of Tamil women has arguably deteriorated since the end of the conflict. For huge swaths of the population living in highly militarized areas, and in particular resettlement camps, they have become increasingly vulnerable to sexual assault at the hands of the Sri Lankan army (Gowrinathan, 2013); this can be classed as a politically-motivated, especially when the victims are former LTTE cadres. Observes Gowrinathan, “whereas under the LTTE strict codes of behaviour prevented the disintegration of moral values, the period following the cessation of hostilities saw large increases in early marriages, domestic violence, alcoholism, and low levels of school attendance” (2013:23). The repercussions of sexual violence are especially troubling in Tamil society. Survivors spoke of long-term poverty as a result of no longer being able to get married, and about the shame that the incident would bring to younger siblings and parents (ibid). Apart from safety and security concerns, the absence of the LTTE has also led to political frustration among women: without it, they have very few outlets for resistance.

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The International Organization for Migration (IOM) has been involved in reintegration of female cadres, securing them employment in factories and local shops, among others (Murray, 2010). Says Sonny Inbaraj, “the biggest problem women ex-combatants have is that civilian society does not allow them to use the skills they developed in the armed movement”, encouraging them “to sew or be domestic helpers, rather than being carpenters, masons, bricklayers, or computer repairers” (ibid). Gowrinathan (2018a) calls this “re-feminizing programming”; it stands in stark contrast to the LTTE initiated women’s employment programs, one of which helped women to train in auto mechanics and subsequently open a car repair shop (Alison, 2003). In the words of one ex-combatant, “[?]I have no use for sewing, nor any interest in it. It’s only when I finished training that the government considers me de-radicalized” (Gowrinathan, 2018a).

The state of Tamil women in post-conflict Sri Lanka, then, isn’t really any more safe, secure, or prosperous than their lives in and under the LTTE. Until women are able to band together across ethnic and other divisions (which, importantly, includes Sinhalese women recognizing the specific challenges faced by Tamil women) and push for involvement, it is unlikely that they will be afforded much participation by the Sri Lankan state.

## Conclusion

At the end of the day, it is clear that women’s participation—and even apparent equality—on the battlefield does not necessarily translate into peacetime changes in attitude. As Wilford (1998) remarked, “fighting alongside men to achieve independence does not provide a guarantee of women’s inclusion as equal citizens” (2). For groups such as the FARC and LTTE, there is little impetus to work towards gender equality outside the movement; aside from their absolute focus being beyond the small scope of gender relations, why fight for women’s liberation and equality within the current system when they intend to dismantle it? Of course, in both cases these insurgencies have proved unsuccessful in many of their aims and therefore do not have the power to achieve women’s equality even if they truly wished to.

Western feminists have often been guilty of placing the politics of womanhood over the reality of multiple identities; many critiques of female involvement in (particularly nationalist) violence have reflected this reductive attitude. Intersectionality (Hooks, 1984) addresses this by rejecting the demand to choose one identity over another, as women are so often required to do. While Western feminists insist that Tamil and Colombian women choose their gender over their ethnic or ideological identities, organizations like the FARC and LTTE often force them to do just the opposite by abandoning their concerns for equality until after their rebellions have succeeded; each stripping combatants’ of the fullness of their identities and the ability to inhabit them. Further, both organizations offer examples of women weaponizing their femininity (or, perhaps, being made to do so) for the cause, be it through gaining intelligence via seducing police officers (Herrera & Porch, 2008), or disguising bombs in their traditional clothing (Parashar, 2009). Parashar states that “women’s bodies and gendered identities become the territories on which militants and counter-militants wage their wars and play out their ideologies” (2009:238); this can be witnessed not only in the Sri Lankan and Colombian conflicts, but in their peace as well. Even the women who choose to join—and in many instances ultimately lead—armed struggles remain caught in the gendered cages constructed by their organizations and the world at large. The case of female combatants is yet another example of the limitations placed on women’s agency in both conflict and peace.

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