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# Women of the FARC

*By Mia Kazman*



**William J. Perry Center  
for Hemispheric Defense Studies**  
*National Defense University*



**Front Cover:** FARC rebels take part in a military parade. Photo source: Colombian Armed Forces

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*Photo caption: FARC rebels in ranks. Photo source: Colombian Armed Forces*

The landmark 2016 Colombian peace agreement mentions the word “mujer” (the Spanish word for woman) 197 times. In fact, this agreement was notable for the incorporation of a gender perspective in its negotiation agenda, in addition to ending a six-decade conflict that resulted in the deaths of more than 220,000 people and displaced more than 5 million. During the final years of the conflict, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia—People’s Army (FARC-EP in Spanish) made a notable effort to publicize the participation of women in the organization. From documentaries highlighting the role women played to public appearances and pronouncements from the few high-ranking women in the organization, the FARC worked to paint an image of itself as a champion of women’s rights and equality.

This study examines the experiences of women in the FARC through a qualitative analysis of information gleaned from 129 interviews with female deserters. This exploration of what led women to join the FARC, the role they played inside the group, and the factors that led them to desert provide an inside look at the revolutionary organization and its treatment of its female members. It reveals the underlying gender dynamics at play among the guerrillas, and the way their gender affected the treatment and experiences of female guerrillas. This study explores these themes, with a particular focus on

the role of romantic and sexual relationships, policies and practices related to abortion and discrimination, and the motivations of women to join and desert from the FARC. Recognizing that the women in question were deserters, and therefore by definition disgruntled, it will provide a somewhat skewed view of the organization, but one that is valuable nonetheless due to the paucity of other sources of information, and the consistency of the information with that provided by other FARC deserters in previous studies.

### **Perspectives on demobilization and women in the FARC**

In their article “Why They Join, Why They Fight, and Why They Leave: Learning From Colombia’s Database of Demobilized Militants”, Rosenau, Espach, Ortiz, and Herrera discuss the potential for doing research with the interviews taken by the Colombian military of demobilized members of the FARC, the National Liberation Army (ELN), and the Self-Defense Forces (AUC). As an example, they present analyses of interviews with children and university students who joined these armed groups. They note that the interviews pose some obstacles to academic research, including inconsistencies in how thorough the interviewer was and which questions they asked. As of the writing of this article, almost no research has been published that takes advantage of these interviews as Rosenau et al. suggest.

Dr. David E. Spencer of the William J. Perry Center at National Defense University gathered data from a selection of 123 interviews from the years 1998-2003 for his study, titled “FARC Deserters: Who, Why and How they Desert”. In order to evaluate the motivations for desertion, he draws a variety of metrics from the interview transcripts, including the subjects’ level of education and profession prior to joining, how much time they spent in the FARC, and why they joined and deserted. He concludes that many members of the FARC remain within the organization as a result of a combination of factors, including then-inefficient government efforts to promote demobilization, lack of opportunities to desert, and fear of retaliation. While he notes that women demobilized at much lower rates than men and that there existed a gender bias against women in command positions, his research does not explicitly focus on the gendered aspects of the conflict. Spencer’s work, while an important contribution to understanding of the forces that led people to join and desert from the FARC, reflects an issue with much of the research and writing relating to the conflict: the absence of a gender perspective.

The vast majority of scholarship on the decades-long conflict in Colombia has focused on men; their fights, their disagreements, their strategies, and their victims. Only a select few have chosen to examine the experiences of the women involved in the conflict, and even fewer have examined the participation of women in the FARC. Of these, most have focused on gender in the context of the peace and Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) processes, rather than on women's experiences as members of the armed group.<sup>1</sup>

Natalia Herrera and Douglas Porch, for example, interviewed former guerrillas, Colombian officers and soldiers, and members of international non-governmental organizations for their article, “‘Like going to a fiesta’ - the role of female fighters in Colombia’s FARC-EP”. They argue that “the focus on females as victims of conflict has detracted from a discussion of the reasons for female enlistment in the guerrilla ranks, the contribution female fighters make to the military efficiency of the FARC, and to its resilience and longevity as a political-military organization.”<sup>2</sup> Herrera and Porch point out that women in the FARC are often still seen as victims, despite the fact that they are also perpetrating acts of violence. Using interviews with demobilized guerrillas and Colombian military officials, they examine how the FARC does and does not succeed in incorporating women effectively. In these interviews, they find that many women are proud of their contribution to the FARC and even gain a sense of accomplishment from it: “They revel in their service, not because they lived it as did men, but because it allowed them to prove their worth as women.”<sup>3</sup> Still, many of them ended up leaving the FARC because it was unable to accommodate them as women; issues with pregnancy, abortion, and forming stable relationships led many to demobilize.

In a similar vein, Keith Stanski examined the role of women in the FARC in the context of their position in a terrorist organization through an analysis of media accounts, human rights reports, and interviews with recently demobilized female combatants. In his opinion, “In establishing a more flexible ideology and new political profile, the FARC has come to embrace women in their cause. The group

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<sup>1</sup> See Kimberly Theidon, “Reconstructing Masculinities: The Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration of Former Combatants in Colombia.” *Human Rights Quarterly* 31 (2009): 1-34 and Virginia M. Bouvier, “Gender and the Role of Women in Colombia’s Peace Process.” Background paper for UN Women, New York, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Natalia Herrera and Douglas Porch. “‘Like going to a fiesta’ - the role of female fighters in Colombia’s FARC-EP.” *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 19, no. 4 (2008): 609-634; 611.

<sup>3</sup> Herrera and Porch 612.

depicts women as vulnerable to the same inequality, exploitation, and injustice that the movement is combating.”<sup>4</sup> Like Herrera and Porch, he observes that the FARC recruited women by offering them a sense of purpose, fulfillment, and equality they could not find in civilian life, but then failed to deliver. He concludes that, despite claims about equality within the FARC, women were still exploited. “Beneath the questions of sexual harassment, forced contraception, and abortion lie fundamental questions, such as whether positions of authority are equally accessible to men and women, how authorities conceptualize healthy relationships between men and women, and whether roles from civilian society are selectively reproduced in the movement, he writes.”<sup>5</sup>

## **Methodology**

While the works of Spencer, Herrera & Porch, and Stanski each fill an important gap in our understanding of the FARC and its members, there remains much to be learned about the FARC and women in the FARC in particular. In large part, this study does exactly what Rosenau et. al. suggested in their article; it examines the experiences of a selection of subjects interviewed while demobilizing. In this case, all of the subjects are women who were members of the FARC, and the interviews were provided by Dr. David Spencer. The methodology and layout of this paper follow a very similar format to Spencer’s deserter study, but with a focus on women.

## **Interviews**

As Rosenau et al. noted, the interviews vary widely. In the case of this study, the selection of 129 interviews were taken between 2010-2016, mainly in the southern and western parts of Colombia. As a result, most of the interviews are with women demobilizing from the Southern Bloc, with a significant number from the Northwestern and Eastern blocs as well. This can be considered a moderately representative sample of women in the FARC, as these fronts were the most active during this period. Additionally, there is little reason to think that women would be treated any differently in the other blocs,

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<sup>4</sup> Keith Stanski, “Terrorism, Gender, and Ideology: A Case Study of Women who Join the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC).” In *The Making of a Terrorist: Recruitment, Training, and Root Causes*, vol. 1, edited by James J. F. Forest, 136-150. Praeger, 2006; 140.

<sup>5</sup> Stanski 148.

or that their experiences would have been substantially different. Therefore, observations based on this sample can be considered a representative sample for the FARC as a whole.

<b>Table 1: Interviews by year conducted</b>		
<b>Year</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
2010	4	3.1%
2011	4	3.1%
2012	21	16.3%
2013	25	19.4%
2014	22	17.1%
2015	49	38.0%
2016	4	3.1%
	Total: 129	100.0%

<b>Table 2: Subjects by Bloc</b>		
<b>Bloc</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Northwestern Bloc	19	14.7%
Western Bloc	4	3.1%
Southern Bloc	86	66.7%
Eastern Bloc	17	13.2%
Middle Magdalena Bloc	3	2.3%
Total:	129	100.0%

## Process

The objective of the interviews was to analyze the subjects' motivations for joining and demobilizing, their activities while in the FARC, and general information about their experiences. Although there were many questions that were asked repeatedly, there was enough variation in questions asked and in the wording of the questions that it was impossible to analyze on a question-by-question basis. This is a challenge that was noted by Rosenau, Espach, Ortiz, and Herrera. However, close readings of the interview transcripts allowed for almost every subject to be included as a data point in the analysis. These responses reveal the ways in which the FARC recruited, trained, and treated women, and the women's experiences through the lens of cultural prejudice and precedent.

The quotes taken from these interviews have been modified in several ways. In order to protect their identities, all interview subjects quoted or referenced in the analysis are identified only by a three-or four-letter code and the year in which they demobilized; no other personal information will be attached to them. Additionally, all quotes have been translated from Spanish to English, and modified slightly to ensure comprehension. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are original.

## **Findings**

### *Recruitment and Demobilization*

“At 10 years old, who could be a revolutionary?” asked General Carlos Ospina, former commander of the Colombian Armed Forces from 2002-2006.<sup>6</sup> The FARC thought differently, and a wide variety of reports from governments, nonprofits, and academics confirm that the organization regularly recruited children much younger than 14, their declared official minimum age for recruitment. In traditional Latin American culture, 15 years was often considered the age of adulthood, and this attitude remains prevalent in many rural areas. This is amply reflected in the FARC, an eminently rural insurgency. Of those interviewed, the median age for joining was 16. However, almost a third of those interviewed claimed to be 14 or younger when they first joined the FARC. In fact, several of the interviews mention that FARC recruiters would regularly show up at schools and in communities in order to recruit young children.

TWHN, a radio operator, joined the FARC at the age of 9, and was the only subject interviewed who joined before reaching a full decade of life. According to her interviewer’s notes: “The terrorist PP initiated the process of recruitment, taking advantage when the children left school of the perfect moment to approach them and earn the children’s trust, giving them gifts, candies. By early January 2003, TWHN made the decision to join the organization.”<sup>7</sup> Her testimony indicates that, not only did the FARC admit new members younger than their stated minimum age, they actively recruited them.

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<sup>6</sup> General (Ret) Carlos Alberto Ospina Ovalle (former Commander of the Colombian Armed Forces) in conversation with the author, July 19, 2018; original quote: “A los 10 años, quién puede ser revolucionario?”

<sup>7</sup> TWHN (2014).

<b>Table 3: Age females joined the FARC</b>			
<b>Age</b>		<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
< 10	1	0.8%	
10 - 14	37	28.7%	
15 - 19	60	46.5%	
20 - 24	16	12.4%	
25 - 29	4	3.1%	
30 - 34	4	3.1%	
> 34	5	3.9%	
Unspecified	2	1.6%	
<b>Total:</b>	<b>129</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	

As Table 4 demonstrates, the women interviewed spent varying amounts of time in the FARC. Some lasted only a few months, while others stayed for more than a decade. The median time spent in the FARC was 6 years, but some women spent up to 20 years or more as members. As Spencer notes, very few demobilized in the first year that they spent in the FARC. He argues that this is due to the difficulty of escaping before one has a good understanding of how the front they were in works. It is entirely possible that some tried and failed to escape, and as a result do not appear in the records of the Colombian military.

<b>Table 4: Time in FARC</b>			
<b># of years</b>		<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
< 1	4	3.1%	
1-3	46	35.7%	
4-6	19	14.7%	
7-9	22	17.1%	
10-12	15	11.6%	
13-15	13	10.1%	
16-18	6	4.7%	
> 18	3	2.3%	
Unspecified	1	0.8%	
<b>Total:</b>	<b>129</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	

#### *What makes women join: push and pull factors*

A major disadvantage of previous surveys of FARC deserters is that each subject was only assigned

one reason for joining and one for demobilizing. However, as Rosenau et. al. note, this takes away the opportunity to more clearly see the interrelated set of push and pull factors that motivated women to join and quit the FARC. Instead, every reason that each subject mentioned for joining the FARC was recorded and included in the data presented in Table 5. Most had one or two reasons for joining the FARC, although some presented as many as four or five.

This data must be understood with one caveat: it represents the range of reasons that women who demobilized had joined the FARC, not the reasons that all of the women who participated in the FARC did so. It is entirely possible that women who did not demobilize joined for different reasons, or that they may have had similar reasons to those of women who did desert. Further research would be necessary in order to definitively say what caused women in general to join the FARC.

<b>Table 5: Reasons for joining the FARC</b>		
<b>Category</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Pressure from recruiters or friends	40	32.3%
Attracted to FARC	35	28.2%
Family in FARC	23	18.5%
Coercion	23	18.5%
Betterment	21	16.9%
Domestic problems	19	15.3%
Love	16	12.9%
Unspecified	7	5.6%
Insecurity	3	2.4%

#### *Pressure from recruiters or friends*

The FARC relied heavily on recruiting people from villages and towns where the guerrilla groups had a significant presence, often spending time near schools and gathering places to talk people into joining. This was the most common reason that interview subjects cited for joining the FARC. They mentioned being urged by FARC recruiters they met and friends who had already joined to do so as well, and the recruiters often promised the women money, power, and a better life if they joined. EDH, a radio operator, said in her interview that, “at the beginning of the year 1994, I was working as a clothing peddler with my aunt...during this time the guerrilla constantly suggested to me that I join the organization. I accepted and was brought by the recruiter BB, commander of the political organizers commission of the

39th front from the town of Siare, Mapiripàn (Meta) to a camp which was located on the banks of the Yamu river, tributary to the Siare river, where I began the basic guerrilla course.”<sup>8</sup> Social pressure was almost never the only reason that the subjects provided for joining. Rather, it demonstrates the skill with which the FARC recruiters manipulated civilians, taking advantage of what was happening in their lives to convince them to join an organization they knew next to nothing about.

#### *Attracted to FARC*

Along similar lines, many women also mentioned being attracted to the FARC as the motivation to join the group. Drawn in by the lifestyle, an interest in weapons, belief in the cause, and a desire for power, women often volunteered to join without the aggressive recruiting that DCG mentioned. For example, in the case of the guerrilla BQTH, she joined voluntarily because she admired the life of the guerrillas in the sector, claiming that “it was very good, that they were always playing around, dancing, and they didn’t have to worry about anything.”<sup>9</sup> This is reflective of the quote referenced in the title of Porch and Herrera’s article, comparing FARC life to a fiesta.

#### *Family in FARC*

For many women, having a family member in the FARC was a big pull factor for joining the organization. Some joined in an effort to find family members with whom they had lost contact, while others had family members reach out to them directly. Many simply joined to be with their family, like BNN, a guerilla who deserted in 2015. When asked why she chose to join, she said that “she followed her brother [RMM], who was a member of the 14th front of the FARC in the village Villa Lobos of the municipality of San Vicente del Caguán, thinking that she would be with him once she entered the guerrilla organization.”<sup>10</sup> The presence of family in the FARC is tied with coercion as the third-most common reason that women gave for joining. However, it is not one that others have noted; in Spencer’s study, only one respondent cited family as a reason for joining.

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<sup>8</sup> EDH (2011).

<sup>9</sup> BQTH (2013).

<sup>10</sup> BNN (2015); the acronym MDOM stands for “Muerte en Desarrollo de Operaciones Militares”, referring to someone who was killed during military operations.



Photo caption: Women in the ranks of the FARC in La Macarena, Colombia. (Gerardo Inzunza)

### *Coercion*

Spencer finds in his study that very few members of the FARC were forced to join. This is most likely due to the fact that, at the point in time at which his subjects joined, the FARC was doing well in the war. A few years later, this was not the case. Almost one fifth of the subjects attested to being coerced into joining. These women were either intimidated into joining through threats of violence against themselves and their families, or they were tricked into joining through lies and deception. In the case of MRH, the chief medic, she was “recruited by the subject [RR] commander of the guerrilla of the 15th front of the FARC, when the subject was 14 years old.” She stated that they “threatened her family and her with death if she did not leave to go to the guerilla.”<sup>11</sup>

### *Betterment*

In addition to the aforementioned factors, many women thought that joining the FARC would lead to

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<sup>11</sup> MRH (2013).

more prosperous conditions and a better future. Either their economic situation was so awful at the time that they could not see any future for themselves, or FARC recruiters lured them in with promises of money, opportunities to study, and a better life. For example, BOFW became a militia with the FARC for just these reasons. When asked why she joined, she responded: “she was at the family farm...in the month of October of 2011... in this period AA proposed to her that she accompany them she knew the terrain and that the FARC said she should come work with them in the new area of the third front. She lacked economic means and the FARC offered to help her economically. She accepted the offer and eight days later decided to join the insurgents. She traveled to the town El Para where the FARC rented a dance club for her so that she could sustain herself. The FARC covered the first month’s rent.”<sup>12</sup> This sort of situation is consistent with both Stanski’s and Herrera & Porch’s research, in which socioeconomic factors were a strong motivation for joining the FARC.

### *Domestic problems*

About one in seven (15.3%) of the women interviewed chose to join the FARC due to domestic problems, ranging from sexual or physical abuse from a parent to disputes with romantic partners or family members. This is unsurprising, as domestic violence is very common in Colombia, where it is underreported and rarely punished. For example, one female guerrilla stated that “she was in the town of Chaparral in the north of Puerto Alvira in her mother’s house. Because her mother hit her, she went off in the direction of her uncle OS. While going down the forest path a squad of six guerrillas under the command of OHE emerged from the shrub and asked her where she was going and why she was crying. She told them that it was because her mom had hit her, and they told her if she wanted her mom to stop hitting her, she should come with them. She accepted, and they took her away into the jungle in the direction of the farm of Mitare where she met up with the public order company Rusbel Rodríguez under the command of CD”.<sup>13</sup> Little did these women know, they would be subjected to much of the same harsh treatment and abuse in the FARC.

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<sup>12</sup> BOFW (2015).

<sup>13</sup> ZND (2014).

### *Love*

In contrast with the push factor of domestic violence, others were pulled into the organization for sentimental reasons. These women often joined to be with a romantic partner or were seduced by a member of the FARC who then convinced them to join. Other women commented that this was a common recruitment strategy for the FARC, who purposefully sent young men and women out to seduce people and recruit them into the organization. In the case of LZNW, she testified that “she was in love and she had a boyfriend in the 15th front...He suggested that she go with him so they could be together. After eight days, they were separated and she was sent to attend a training course. When it ended, she was told that he had deserted and no one knew where he was.”<sup>14</sup> She became a guerrilla and spent eight years in the FARC, during which time she never saw her boyfriend again.

### *Insecurity*

Despite the astronomical levels of violence in Colombia, only three of the women interviewed referenced physical insecurity as a motivation for joining the FARC. These people were trying to escape from paramilitaries and other violence. Some wanted to avenge family members who had become victims of this violence, while others joined out of pure self-preservation. In the case of APV, a deputy squad commander, she admitted that “she joined the organization due to the threat from the Self Defense Forces, who killed her uncle in the village of Mulatos in 1999. Many deaths occurred at the hands of those paramilitaries in the sector of the Mulatos Canyon, and villagers were displaced from the town by paramilitary groups.”<sup>15</sup>

In large part these results are consistent with the findings of Spencer for the FARC as a whole, and for Stanski and Herrera & Porch for women in particular. The one major difference is that Spencer found that more members of the FARC were forced to join than volunteered, whereas the opposite is reflected by this data. There are several possible explanations for this difference. Spencer’s study was conducted on interviews taken between 1998-2003, a decade before many of these women even joined. During

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<sup>14</sup> LZNW (2013).

<sup>15</sup> APV (2014); the ‘Self Defense Forces’ refer to the AUC, an association of paramilitary organizations that was one of the primary groups in the conflict.

this period, the FARC were winning the war against the Colombian military. As a result, they had more resources that they could put towards forced recruitment. By the time the subjects for this study joined (2010-2016), the FARC were in a much weaker position. Therefore, it is possible that forced recruitments became less common later on, as the FARC began to lose ground in the war and did not have the same capacity for forcing new members to join. It is also possible that gender is responsible for the difference; the overwhelming majority of Spencer's subjects were male so one could posit that forced recruitment was used less often with women than men, thus explaining the difference in findings. That is to say, men were more likely to view their recruitment as involuntary. A comparative study focused on gender and recruitment would be necessary in order to provide more clarity on the subject.

What these data show most clearly is that women joined the FARC as a lifeline. For many, this was an opportunity to both escape the issues they faced at home on the one hand, and to improve their lives on the other. The push factors reflect recognized problems in Colombian society: a lack of economic opportunities and rampant violence, both from the conflict and in the home. However, many quickly found that the FARC was not the idyllic proletarian society, full of opportunity and equality, that they had been promised. And that was one of the fundamental problems that women faced. In the opinion of General Carlos Ospina, "The home wasn't what they wanted, and the FARC wasn't what they expected."<sup>16</sup>

### *Desertion and Demobilization*

Herrera and Porch note that issues with pregnancy, abortion, and forming stable relationships often led women to demobilize. However, these subjects' reasons for demobilization fell into a larger range of categories, both compared to what Herrera and Porch found and to the data from their reasons for joining. On average, each subject noted two or three reasons for leaving the FARC, but some provided as many as five or six reasons. Perhaps this difference is just because these reasons were fresher in their minds, or perhaps it required more motivation to desert than to join. The results of the analysis are presented in *Table 6*.

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<sup>16</sup> General (Ret) Carlos Alberto Ospina Ovalle (former Commander of the Colombian Armed Forces) in conversation with the author, July 19, 2018. Original quote: "La casa no era lo que querían, y la FARC no era lo que pensaban."

<b>Table 6: Reasons for demobilization</b>		
<b>Category</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Dissatisfaction	68	54.8%
Outside pressure	56	45.2%
Internal insecurity	47	37.9%
Children	37	29.8%
Miss family	30	24.2%
Want a better future	25	20.2%
Health	23	18.5%
Romantic partner	17	13.7%
External insecurity	13	10.5%
Unspecified	9	7.3%
Leadership	8	6.5%

One of the most detailed examples comes from an interview taken in 2013 with NSW, a radio operator in the Western Bloc. Her account is a good example of the wide range of reasons women had for deserting. When asked about the motivations for her demobilization, she responded with a list:

- Her decision to flee from the guerrilla group, one she had planned for a while, was caused by a number of reasons.
- Within the front the medical situation was very precarious, since the personnel who experience any sort of illness don't receive medical treatment and the front does not possess the medicines for treating the illnesses. In the specific case of the subject, she suffered from menstrual migraines, pain in her knees and constipation, ailments the commanders did not pay attention to, and even with those symptoms they made her do the same work as the other guerrillas, making her feel demoralized.
- The lack of equipment management. There was never enough granted to the guerrillas, so they had to use the same materials for more than eight months
- The morale within the FARC was very bad. The majority of the low-level guerrillas (as well as some who have been there for a long time) intended to abandon the group, but many are discouraged from carrying out their escape because of fear of being captured and shot.
- Mistreatment of the low-level guerrillas who are prevented from communicating with their families encouraged guerrillas to leave the group. Meanwhile, the commanders and their

women are allowed to communicate with their families using the communication networks located in the town of Sardinata and in Cumaribo Vichada.

- Prohibitions on communication with family and the inability to share important moments with them frustrate many of the militants.”<sup>17</sup>

NSW presents six reasons for her demobilization: dissatisfaction, outside pressure, internal insecurity, missing family, health, and leadership. Each will be discussed in turn, in addition to the reasons that other subjects gave for deserting.

#### *Dissatisfaction*

NSW’s third reason for deserting was the most common one cited by women in this study: dissatisfaction with her life in the FARC. Many other FARC women mentioned low morale as she does, as well as boredom, exhaustion, and general disillusionment with the FARC as a whole. Others noted that many of the promises they had received upon joining- payment, a better life, security - had not been fulfilled. In particular, the lack of payment was a common complaint, especially since so many of these women had joined for economic reasons. Some also noted the lack of progress the FARC was making in achieving its military goals. By this point in time (2013), the FARC was on the retreat, suffering heavy losses at the hands of the Colombian military and struggling to maintain its hold on key territories. Some of the subjects had come to see the fight as a lost cause, and thus decided to leave. This general sense of dissatisfaction and disillusionment motivated many women like NSW to consider a new life outside of the guerrilla camps.

#### *Outside pressure*

Like many of the other subjects, NSW noted outside pressure as an important factor in her decision to leave the FARC. While she does not go into detail in this section, the meeting with her family that she mentions briefly was a critical motivation for her to leave. While the FARC did heavily restrict contact with the outside world, including with family members, many other subjects noted that they deserted at the urging of family and friends, other demobilized people, and soldiers with whom they established or

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<sup>17</sup> NSW (2013).

maintained contact during their time in the FARC. Additionally, a small number mention being swayed by the government's campaign of messages on the radio encouraging members of the FARC to demobilize. These types of contact, particularly with others who had demobilized, were critical in assuaging fears that if they presented themselves for demobilization they would be killed, tortured, or imprisoned.

This was the narrative that the FARC leadership had propagated, in an effort to discourage deserters.

### Internal insecurity

In the case of NSW, internal insecurity refers to her comments about the lack of adequate resources for the guerrillas, as well as the mistreatment she received from her commanders. Other subjects commented on physical and sexual abuse, overworking, and strictness, all of which created an environment in which they felt insecure. Some feared for their safety due to the possibility that they would be subjected to a court martial, or because they had lost the trust of their commander and feared being shot, a common practice in the FARC. Still others felt insecure in the FARC due to the murder of another member of the organization. They feared that they would be next. This is consistent with both Spencer and Rosenau et al.'s findings. Spencer found that brutality was the most common reason for demobilizing, while Rosenau et. al. ranked mistreatment second.<sup>18</sup>

### *Children*

One common reason that the subjects noted for demobilizing is inextricably linked to their gender: maternity. Some were pregnant, while other already had children. For MZII, a member of the Bolivarian Militia, the impetus to demobilize came when she found that she was to be shifted to another area, separating her from her eight-month-old daughter. She demobilized because she would have to leave her daughter with her grandmother while she gathered intelligence around the police post in San Antonio, Huila. Instead, she decided to leave and go to the municipality of Garzón where she made contact with MO who convinced her to demobilize.<sup>19</sup> Regardless of the specific catalyst, these women were determined to make a better life for themselves and their children, something they knew could only be

<sup>18</sup> Spencer, David. "FARC Deserters: Who, Why and How the Desert." Unpublished monograph prepared for the Colombian Ministry of Defense, 10 June 2003; 25 and William Rosenau, Ralph Espach, Román D. Ortiz, and Natalia Herrera. "Why They Join, Why They Fight, and Why They Leave: Learning From Colombia's Database of Demobilized Militants." *Terrorism and Political Violence* 26, no. 2 (2014): 277-285; 280.

<sup>19</sup> MZII (2015).



Photo caption: FARC guerrilla member Tatiana was the first rebel in her camp to become pregnant. Photo credit: Emily Wright

accomplished if they left the FARC. As Herrera and Porch note, this inability to come to terms with women as mothers was one of the FARC's major flaws when it came to integrating women into their organization.<sup>20</sup> This led to the policy of mandatory abortion, which will be discussed in detail in a later section.

### *Miss family*

While NSW did not have children, she did mention her desire to be with her family as one of the primary reasons she left the FARC. Several of the subjects mentioned that upon joining the FARC they were promised that they would be allowed to leave to visit their families and maintain contact with them. However, this was almost never the case. Most likely, this policy was an effort to prevent people from deserting, but for these women it had the opposite effect.

<sup>20</sup> Herrera and Porch 625.

### *Want a better future*

Due to a variety of factors, many guerrillas began to feel that they had no future in the organization. For example, EZH, a guerrilla, said “there is no future in the organization, [women] do not have any guarantees. They join deceived and then are put through many things, voluntarily or by force.”<sup>21</sup> As a result, she felt compelled to leave, due to the pressure the Army maintained on them with fights and bombings. After hearing what happened at NBD’s camp (three guerrillas who were standing guard were able to desert), she decided to take the first opportunity to desert from the FARC and become part of the PAHD.”<sup>22</sup> Many also expressed that they wanted to study and improve themselves to have better lives and did not have the opportunity to do so while in the FARC.

### *Health*

One of the reasons that MRV left was due to her health problems. She was not alone. The 23 women who mentioned health as a motivation for leaving the FARC all suffered from some sort of ailment, often ones related to their time in the FARC. Some had bullet wounds or other combat-related injuries that had not healed well, leading to chronic pains. Like NSW, many suffered from digestive problems, most likely due to unsanitary living conditions in the FARC’s camps.

### *Romantic partner*

Many women deserted to be with a romantic partner, or they deserted alongside their romantic partner. On the one hand, this is likely a reaction to the difficulties of forming stable relationships in the FARC, an issue Herrera and Porch explore in their work. On the other hand, it may also point to an interesting aspect of the divisions between male and female deserters. As many scholars have noted, men demobilized at much higher rates than women did, and no one has been able to explain why. It is entirely possible that these women would not have taken the risk of deserting had they not been influenced by their romantic partners.

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<sup>21</sup> EZH (2010).

<sup>22</sup> EZH (2010). PAHD is the acronym for the Programa de Atención Humanitaria al Desmovilizado, the body created to manage the DDR process.

### *External insecurity*

Following the Colombian military strategic and operational reforms during the early 2000's, the FARC began to find itself on the defensive, struggling to survive as their ranks decreased considerably and the army began employing more aggressive tactics under President Alvaro Uribe. As a result, external threats to the guerrillas' personal and collective security mounted. For EZH, she felt that "she had to leave, due to the pressure the Army maintained on them with attacks and bombings.<sup>23</sup> However, this was an issue for only a small portion of the subjects; overall, more of them were worried about internal rather than external insecurity. This is significant because it reflects the level of mistreatment and abuse that these women were subjected to during their time in the FARC. They felt that other members of the FARC posed a greater threat to them than the Colombian military. Additionally, one could argue that the perceived risks of deserting and demobilizing were greater than the risks these women felt they faced from the Colombian Army, but not greater than the risks they saw within their own organization.

### *Leadership*

Like NSW, a small portion of the women included in this sample stated that issues with the FARC leadership led them to demobilize. They were unhappy with the inequality they faced as low-ranking members of the organization and expressed their frustration with the commander's impunity in making exceptions to the rules for themselves and their partners. NSW mentions that commanders and their lovers would communicate with their families, a privilege that was denied to the rank and file of the FARC. Another mentions discord among the leadership as a prominent frustration. This was the case for ZBBS, a medic who specialized in odontology. In addition to missing her family and daughter, ZBBS mentioned that the motivation for her flight from the group was discord between the FARC's mid-level commanders: "They never agree when it comes time to make decisions and decisions that are made are often challenged by the other commanders."<sup>24</sup> This frustration with the leadership spurred her and several others to leave.

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<sup>23</sup> EZH (2010).

<sup>24</sup> ZBBS (2012)

## ***Life in the FARC***

### *Discrimination and rank*

The FARC has consistently presented itself as an organization committed to gender equality and women's empowerment. Certainly there are prolific women in the FARC, from Victoria Sandino and Sandra Ramirez—who occupy two of the Senate seats designated for the FARC in the peace agreement—to Karina, the infamous commander of the 47th front.<sup>25</sup> The webpage about women in the FARC, launched in 2013, espouses the importance of the role women played in the FARC and promotes the group as a feminist and egalitarian organization.<sup>26</sup> In an article posted on the Mujer Fariana website for the 50th anniversary of the FARC's establishment, Victoria Sandino wrote, "The censure and erasure of the FARC-EP has been especially directed against female guerrillas, with innumerable lies and hoaxes created in the laboratories of espionage and dirty warfare, which have been used to delegitimize our contribution to the fight [and] our role as political subjects, with rights and responsibilities to assume, capable of taking a beating and adapting to change."<sup>27</sup> A major aspect of FARC rhetoric on gender has been the assertion that allegations of discrimination and sexual violence are propaganda or stories invented to defame the FARC, as Sandino clearly demonstrates. However, experts agree that the FARC was not the egalitarian feminist utopia that it was painted as, but rather an environment in which women faced many of the same biases that plague the broader Colombian society.<sup>28</sup>

One of the major flaws of the interviews of women in the FARC is that the interviewers were exclusively men. Additionally, as the goal of the interviews was tactical and operational rather than academic or sociological, the soldiers conducting the interviews generally focused on questions related to location, supplies, and command structure. They very rarely asked about sensitive issues like discrimination and sexual violence. Given ingrained attitudes in Colombian society on gender and sexual violence, it is unlikely that the women would have felt comfortable responding truthfully and openly to

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<sup>25</sup> For more on Karina, see Maureen Orth, "She Was Colombia's Most-Feared Female Revolutionary. Can She Help It Find Peace?" *Vanity Fair*, September 2018. On Ramirez: "Colombian Rebels-Turned-Politicians Sworn Into Congress." *Voice of America*, 21 July 2018. On Sandino: Juanita Ceballos, "Colombia: Talking peace with a FARC commander," *Al Jazeera*, 25 August 2016.

<sup>26</sup> "Declaración Pública," Declaraciones, Pronunciamientos y Comunicados, 11 October 2013, <http://www.mujerfariana.org/vision/declaraciones/75-declaracion.html>

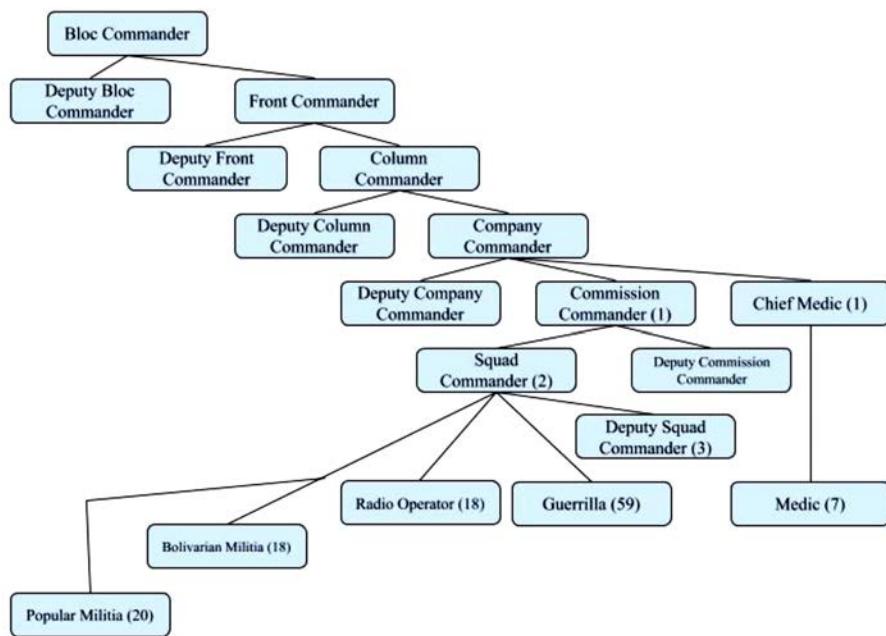
<sup>27</sup> Victoria Sandino, "Farianas en el 50 aniversario," Declaraciones, Pronunciamientos y Comunicados, 24 May 2014, <http://www.mujerfariana.org/vision/declaraciones/115-farianas-en-el-50-aniversario.html>.

<sup>28</sup> See Christine Balling, "Fighting Mad." *Foreign Affairs*, 1 June 2012; and Stanski 2006.

these questions, and even more unlikely that they would offer up the information unprompted. In fact, only 7% of women mentioned discrimination in their interview, and some only did so to deny that it existed. For example, when asked about the treatment of women, ZOSN contends that “the treatment was equal for men and women because they fulfilled the same functions.”<sup>29</sup> While it is entirely possible that ZOSN got lucky and did not face the same discrimination and challenges that other women faced, it is equally likely that she was simply unwilling to admit to it due to shame, trauma, or some other factor.

However, one can find examples of discrimination against women in the FARC in the women’s testimonies, even among those who do not necessarily say that there was discrimination or who were not specifically asked about it. The most obvious way in which discrimination presented itself was in terms of rank. As demonstrated in Figure 1, very few women held any sort of command position within the FARC hierarchy.

*Figure 1. Distribution of female subjects within FARC command structure*



\*\*Note: Some female subjects held multiple roles during their tenure in the FARC. For the sake of this analysis, only the most recent position they held was counted. The numbers in parentheses reflect the number of female subjects who stated that they fulfilled each role. Roles without numbers are ones that no subject included in this study held.

<sup>29</sup> YPRM (2015).

While the exact structure varied by bloc and by front, this chart illustrates the typical hierarchy of the FARC over the course of its existence. The only roles omitted are other low-level positions at the level of a guerrilla (such as an explosives expert), as none of the interview subjects held those roles immediately prior to demobilization. As the numbers clearly demonstrate, very few of the subjects interviewed were high-ranking officials. Only one was a commission commander, and she was inactive before she demobilized due to her pregnancy. The vast majority of the subjects were radio operators, guerrillas, or medics, positions that were essentially equivalent to enlisted soldiers. The other large group was the two types of militia, which functioned as a logistical and intelligence network for the fronts. The Bolivarian Militia members were generally fully trained by the FARC, while the Popular Militia members who received little or no training were often less trusted with sensitive missions related to money or intelligence gathering.

Only seven out of the 129 subjects, or about 5%, held a leadership position, and none had risen above the rank of commission commander. Similarly, in one of the few unprompted comments on discrimination, GBUW mentions that she was a “low level guerrilla because due to discrimination women do not get promoted as much.”<sup>30</sup> This is reflected in the information contained in each interview about the members of each front. Although a small number of women, including the aforementioned Karina, did reach high leadership positions, the majority of women in the FARC faced a ‘glass ceiling’ of sorts.

These findings are corroborated by other research. Herrera and Porch also found that it was rare for women to ascend beyond squad or commission commander, and Spencer cites a Central Bloc document in which he notes that only 7% of leadership positions are held by women.<sup>31</sup> As low-ranking members of the organization, women remained vulnerable to the same manipulation, abuse, and control that they faced in the outside world. This is particularly evident in their comments on sexual relationships and sexual violence in the FARC.

#### *Sexual relationships and sexual violence*

Stanski and Herrera & Porch note that sexual relationships were heavily regulated, in order to ensure

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<sup>30</sup> GBUW (2012).

<sup>31</sup> Herrera and Porch 619; Spencer 13.

that they wouldn't be a distraction or detract from the revolutionary struggle.<sup>32</sup> This alone is not surprising. However, upon a closer look, several disturbing trends emerge in the subjects' comments on relationships in the FARC. *Table 7* illustrates the frequency with which women had relationships with men in different roles inside and outside the FARC. Because many of the women had multiple relationships over the course of their time in the FARC, some women are counted in multiple categories.

<b>Table 7: Relationships in the FARC</b>		
	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Soldier	4	3.1%
Civilian	17	13.2%
Guerrilla	49	38.0%
Militia	16	12.4%
Commander	29	22.5%
None	31	24.0%

The pressure on women to take sexual partners is a well-documented phenomenon in the FARC. As Table 7 demonstrates, the most common relationships were between two guerrillas or two militia members (and occasionally, one of each). This makes sense, as these were the people that these women spent every day with, and who were their equals in the command structure. Almost a quarter of the women included in this study attested to never having been in a relationship while in the FARC, while only slightly fewer noted that they were in relationships with higher-ranking members of the organization. Interestingly, some women were in relationships with soldiers in the Colombian military and civilians not involved in either side of the conflict.

In the descriptions of the members of the different fronts, one detail is consistent: almost every single commander had a lover at any given time. FIQ, a medic, comments that one of the vulnerabilities of her front was that "...the majority of the terrorists of the [front] are womanizers, including the commanders KO and XS."<sup>33</sup>

Often, the only way a woman could get promoted or attain a specialized position, such as radio operator, was through a relationship with a commander. In fact, many commanders would make women their personal radio operators in order to sleep with them. Christine Balling, a prominent scholar who

<sup>32</sup> Stanski 145; Herrera and Porch 622

<sup>33</sup> FIQ (2012).

has worked extensively with female deserters, argues that this often led to competition among the women. In her words, “Women had to start ‘shacking up’ with the men to go up the ladder”, thus creating a zero-sum game in which the success of one woman meant the failure of another.<sup>34</sup>

The women who did have relationships with commanders received special privileges, including less work and sometimes even the opportunity to visit their families and have children. Those who refused were often punished with more, harder tasks. Despite being a deputy squad commander, FMW insists that “...she was never trusted by the commanders, because she did not want to be the lover of the commanders and avoid the duties of a guerrilla.”<sup>35</sup> She didn’t want the special privileges and status that being a commander’s lover brought, regardless of the perks.

The pressure to have sexual relationships began almost immediately for these women after joining the FARC. When BMQQ was asked why she left her position as a Bolivarian Militia in the FARC, she mentions wanting to be with her daughters as well as “the mistreatment present in the organization, since they were obligated to have sexual relations with the commanders of this structure, which in general began upon finishing the guerrilla training.”<sup>36</sup> In fact, commanders would often specifically recruit women for the express purpose of turning them into their sexual partners. This is reflected in the significant proportion of women who mentioned this in interviews. Almost one quarter of the women interviewed admitted to having a relationship with a commander at some point, a proportion similar to those who attested to having had no relationships at all during their tenure in the FARC. This was about 10% less than the proportion of subjects who had relationships with other guerrillas. The special privileges of being in a relationship with a commander meant that their partners would be much less likely to have the issues that led them to desert, including mistreatment and internal insecurity. Additionally, it may have been harder for a woman in a relationship with a commander to desert, due to the higher level of security and scrutiny around them.

A second trend that emerged was older commanders and guerrillas who had lovers many years younger than them. NZDH, a guerrilla from the southern bloc, mentions that several commanders like young women. While describing the structure and members of her front, ZNT mentions two people: a

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<sup>34</sup> Christine Balling (expert on demobilization) in discussion with the author, June 25, 2018.

<sup>35</sup> FMW (2012).

<sup>36</sup> BMQQ (2016).

10-year-old girl who has been in the FARC for 4 years, and her 21-year-old lover, who has been in the FARC for 11 years. Similarly, NFTM mentions a 13-year-old guerrilla who underwent an abortion. The very fact that someone that young was engaging in sexual activity with another guerrilla signals the existence of a culture in which that sort of behavior is routine and accepted.

The pervasiveness of relationships, both voluntary and coerced, as well as relationships between older men and younger women, reveal the ways in which men in the FARC, especially commanders, manipulated and took advantage of the women in the ranks. Several subjects mentioned that they had not deserted earlier because they believed rumors that the military would rape and kill them if they did. Almost none of the women interviewed overtly identified the sexual violence they had experienced within the FARC as mistreatment, or even admitted to it happening. It is hard to know what really happened, especially because the soldiers who conducted these interviews would not have had the training to discuss experiences of sexual assault with the women they were interviewing, and societal taboos would have made it incredibly unlikely that they would freely volunteer this information. Other testimonies have presented sexual violence as much more common in the FARC, including the work of Christine Balling.<sup>37</sup> In all likelihood, many more of the women included in this study were victimized during their time in the FARC than their interviews suggest.

### *Abortion*

Where there are sexual relationships, there is likely to be pregnancy as well. Although contraception was mandatory, lack of adequate resources meant that it was not always a possibility to obtain pregnancy prevention items. The FARC maintained a policy banning pregnancy and obligated all of the women who became pregnant to undergo abortions. Most of the interviews do not mention abortions. Those that do recount the violent, traumatic events that often surrounded the experience of abortion for women in the FARC. Although only three of the subjects stated that they left the FARC due to the immediate threat of an abortion, the policy of forced abortion did play a role in others' decisions to defect. Of the subjects included in this study, 36% confirmed that they knew guerrillas that had undergone abortions

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<sup>37</sup> "Fighting Mad"; see also Jose Miguel Vivanco, "Colombia: Sexual Violence By FARC Guerrillas Exposed", *Human Rights Watch*, 11 August 2016.

in the FARC. The stories these women shared reflected the often-drastic measures the FARC took to enforce this policy.

For example, when ZND was asked what factor most motivated her to take the decision to flee, she said,

“What most motivated me to demobilize was that in the month of October of 2013 SQ the commander of the 44th front of the FARC, found out from the guerrilla UB, a nurse in the public order company Wilson Palacios of the 44th front, that the guerrilla FQH was 7 and a half months pregnant. This was when SQ ordered KK the general medic of the front to conduct an abortion on FQH. In the presence of ZND, KK the medic proceeded to give her some medicines which FQH refused to consume. She stated she would prefer to die rather than have them take out her babies. Upon seeing that she would not consume the medicine to kill her babies, SQ ordered that they grab her by the feet and hands so that KK could proceed with the abortion procedure. He injected her with a medicine to make her go to sleep and with this he was able to give her the medication. Then he continued with the procedure introducing some tools in her intimate parts to extract her two male babies already well formed, according to the subject.”<sup>38</sup>

It is unclear why ZND was present for this abortion, as she was a guerrilla and not a nurse. Regardless, her observations are a chilling account of abortion practices in the FARC. While not all abortions were this violent, incidents like this were also not rare occurrences. EDH, the radio operator, had five abortions performed on her by FARC medics. She states that “abortions on female guerrillas were common; every woman who becomes up pregnant is subjected to an abortion by the doctor of the front. Similarly, she mentions that the one in charge of the practices was the subject DP who had to flee from the region because DF ordered that he be killed.”<sup>39</sup>

EDH’s account demonstrates how contentious and common abortions were. However, the upper leadership of the FARC, including its female members, view the forced abortion policy very differently. In an interview published by Semanario Voz, the news outlet of the Colombian Communist Party

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<sup>38</sup> ZND (2014).

<sup>39</sup> EDH (2011).

(PCC), Tanja Nijmeijer stated, “the decision is taken according to the wishes of the woman in question, but also taking into account the military situation, medical conditions, familial situation, and whether this breach of the norms of family planning puts the rest of the guerrillas in danger.”<sup>40</sup> This is in contrast to the testimonies of EDH, ZND, and others that reveals that the women who underwent abortions did not, in fact, have a say in the matter.

These accounts serve to illustrate several important points about life in the FARC for women. First, it appears that the FARC leadership assumed that, upon joining the organization, women guerrillas gave up all rights relating to their bodies and their reproductive decisions. Issues of indiscriminate behavior and abuse of power were among the FARC leadership when it came to sexual relationships, resulting in intense pressures on women to engage in sexual activity. In addition to exempting their lovers from labor, as previous testimonies illustrated, some commanders also made exceptions to the ban on pregnancy when it came to their own romantic partners. However, the stories of forced and coerced abortions demonstrate the complete lack of agency these women had over their bodies during their time as members of the FARC. This is not a policy conducive with the equality that Nijmeijer, Sandino, and others claim existed.

“We are the women and girls who break the silence and denounce the rapist and pedophile commanders of the FARC-EP.” This is the Twitter description of the Corporación Rosa Blanca, an activist group that has emerged in the wake of the peace agreement. Since then, the group has frequently made the news, both in Colombia and internationally, with their denunciation of sexual violence in the FARC. In contrast with the FARC rhetoric around gender equality and women’s liberation, the women of Corporación Rosa Blanca share accounts of rape, coercion, and abuse. The contradictions between these opposing messages is also reflected in the data produced in this analysis.

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<sup>40</sup> Tanja Nijmeijer, interview, “Alexandra Nariño: ‘La violencia sexual no es táctica de guerra’”, *Semanario Voz*, 27 November 2015.

## Conclusion

In contrast with the work done by Spencer, Herrera & Porch, and Stanski, the results of this study combine a focus on gender with a qualitative methodology to explore the experiences of women in the FARC. The results shed light on the motivations for women to join and desert, as well as their experiences during their time in the FARC.

Most of the interview subjects joined the FARC due to a range of factors, the most common being pressure from recruiters and friends, an interest in joining the organization, the presence of family members in the FARC, and some sort of coercion or threat. While Spencer's study indicated that coercion was the most common reason for people to become members of the FARC, this was not the case for the women whose interviews were included in this study. This may indicate a shift over time in the FARC's recruiting practices, or it may be a result of changes in the FARC's relative strength, but it is also possible that it reflects a key difference between men and women; that women were less likely to view their recruitment as involuntary, despite the obviously coercive tactics of the FARC's recruiters. In fact, the general theme in most of the interviews was that women joined the FARC as a lifeline, viewing guerrilla life as a favorable alternative to the conditions in which they were living.

Just as the subjects' reasons for joining the FARC were varied, so were their reasons for leaving it. The two most common reasons were a general dissatisfaction with their life as members of the FARC, as well as some sort of outside pressure. Consistent with Herrera and Porch's findings, children and family were also strong motivators for many of these women. Overall, these women left the FARC due to a combination of opportunity, context, and the unique challenges they faced as women in a militant organization.

Among these unique challenges that they faced, three stood out: discrimination, sex, and abortion. Based on the comments of several subjects and an analysis of the women's rank in the organization upon demobilization, it is clear that women faced a 'glass ceiling' of sorts within the FARC. As lower ranking guerrillas and as women, they were particularly vulnerable to sexual abuse and being taken advantage of by the older, higher-ranking men in the organization. This led to the issue of forced abortion, the descriptions of which support the argument that this was a common practice throughout the organization. Although many women joined the FARC as an opportunity for empowerment and better-

ment, the subjects' accounts clearly demonstrate that they more often ended up with little to no agency and no opportunities for advancement.

These results reflect what can be learned from an exploration of the experiences of women not only as victims of violence, but also as participants in violent organizations.

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