

# Journal of Vincentian Social Action

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Volume 4  
Issue 2 *WARS, CONFLICTS, AND THE  
MARGINALIZATION OF DISSENT*

Article 8

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September 2019

## COLOMBIAN CONFLICT: A SOCIOLOGICAL VIEW OF A GENDERED SOCIETY

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### Recommended Citation

Restrepo, Jorge (2019) "COLOMBIAN CONFLICT: A SOCIOLOGICAL VIEW OF A GENDERED SOCIETY," *Journal of Vincentian Social Action*: Vol. 4 : Iss. 2 , Article 8.  
Available at: <https://scholar.stjohns.edu/jovsa/vol4/iss2/8>

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# COLOMBIAN CONFLICT: A SOCIOLOGICAL VIEW OF A GENDERED SOCIETY

Jorge Restrepo

## INTRODUCTION

In this essay I explore, having lived and experienced Colombian conflict, how the construction of the war narrative was driven by *berracos* (an expression used in Colombia to identify uber-males masculinized by war). In Colombia, women, afro-Colombians, native-Colombians, LGBT, anyone over sixty (as they are not perceived useful to society), children (child-soldiers), who have no representation before the government, the voiceless minorities, were cruelly marginalized.

The characterization of the victims of the Colombian conflict started from the recognition of the differences between the agents who participated in all processes of the war. The peace process contained two systematic assumptions about those who participated in the conflict (perpetrator), and those who would tell the story about the many years of war (victims); this reinforced an understanding that *berracos* dominated the war narrative, which resulted in the exclusion of all minorities. This “*binary*” rendered men as active in the process as perpetrators or as victims.

Colombian conflict discourse emphasized a patriarchal structure that perpetuated gender dichotomy. Women were participants in peace-making, while *non-uber* men tended to take the “*pacifist*” role based on a prevailing notion that women give birth and men protect them. Conflict brought about “*masculinization*” of men through war (war became an instrument of masculinization).

When analyzing the role of minorities in the peace process, it is necessary to understand war as gendered. Creating a space to share, discuss and debate war and war experiences from the standpoint of the minorities challenged the prevailing narrative.

It was imperative for all involved to acknowledge the relationship of minorities with the state apparatus in order to recognize their role in

politics. This process required deconstruction of *berraco* gender ideology, and underlining gender as a fluid category.

The Colombian conflict imposed a power dynamic between men, women, and other minorities, established by the government and the FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia - People’s Army) as part of their internal war. They constructed their own understanding

of gender, which was reproduced by the conflict discourse. This conception of gender mainstreamed the way victims and victimizers related to each other.

## BERRACO VIEW OF CONFLICT IDEOLOGY: DISMISSAL OF THE FEMININE

Colombian conflict started as a systemic power relationship between two agents of domination. The first was the Colombian government which played a functional role of guaranteeing the reconstruction of peace, as a societal need, and the protection of civilians involved in the conflict. The second group, with a dual role of dominating and being dominated, were the guerrillas or

“Women were participants in peacemaking, while non-uber men tended to take the “*pacifist*” role based on a prevailing notion that women give birth and men protect them.”

illegal groups like Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia - People's Army (FARC) (Moser & Clark, 2001).

The society was segmented in synchrony with the ideological apparatuses and the related norms imposed on anyone who participating in the war. Conflict became the vehicle to implement gender norms. These two actors, government and FARC, continued to actively reproduce the war narrative, increased violence under different labels that affected both combatants and noncombatants, such as “kidnappings, sexual violence, torture, death threats, and harassment, loss and destruction of property and goods, recruitment of minors, injury from landmines, and attacks on infrastructure” (Bouvier, 2016, p. 4). This war induced masculinization, thus, creating *berracos*.

Men in the conflict were affected by different acts of violence, such as torture; some were even recruited by different actors of the conflict against their will. Women were forced into prostitution, displacement, sexual violence, abortions (Bouvier, 2016, p. 4), or became widows of war, the head of the household, and subjects of the government and of the guerrillas. Perpetrators objectified women, assumed them as a primary target and denied them their human rights. This systematic structure of aggressiveness fundamentally corrupted basic norms of human dignity.

In general, men in the Colombian conflict had been acting as perpetrators, as war affected women at the center of the family. Women faced the conflict in many different ways, such as mothers of the perpetrators who were recruited, most of the time, when they were young. This war dynamic reproduced women with a social disparity in the language of the conflict (Meertens & Stoller, 2001, pp. 132-148), and as a result, they were forgotten from the peace process as victims. In the conflict each side of participants were condemned to participate as passive or active agents, obligated to masculinize their identities to fit perfectly in army forces, either State or guerrillas, and combatants. (Moser & Clark, 2001).

## MASCULINIZATION OF VIOLENCE AND THE VICTIM'S ROLE IN A GENDERED SOCIETY

The dynamics of Colombian conflict during the 80s and 90s resulted in conflicting perceptions of the victims by the government. Victims' rights were *compromised* by the systemic violence, which forced them to take refuge in several “safe-zones” within Colombian territory (Moore & Barner, 2007, pp. 33-37).

Minorities were not considered part of the war process since they were not recognized as participants in the conflict. Minorities were expected to be masculinized by society as a pattern of “*naturalization*,” as part of the social acceptance of a warring society as “*natural*,” and, as such, normative. They were at high risk of suffering sexual attacks, war crimes, and were a product of collateral war casualties. The government was not willing to protect their rights, and the members of FARC sexualized the conflict by using them as tools to advance their agenda. Women and LGBT members lack of representation in the government, and this left them in the hands of their own oppressors.

“Gay, lesbian and transgender Colombians have been actively persecuted by armed groups involved in Colombia's decades-long civil war” (Espitia, 2016). This marginalization, linked with fear of not being accepted and recognized by society as active participants of civil life, condemned them to be further sexualized because of the lack of representation in the Colombian laws. Colombian criminal code IN 1890 condemned homosexuality (Martínez, 2010), which left behind a legal hole, thereby, promoting acts against this community and exposing them to perpetual abuse by members of FARC and the Colombian army.

Not only gays, lesbians, and transgender people suffered the attacks, but also women, children, and elders were subject to several forms of violence; they stoically surrendered to the systematic use of power. They were enrolled as combatants expecting to erase their gender identity (in the case of the women), and characterized as victims in a

homogenized understanding of male supremacy as part of a social contract established between all actors involved.

## POST-CONFLICT DE-MASCULINIZATION, BINARY GENDER AND SECURITY

In her book *Reconstrucción de la masculinidad y reintegración de excombatientes en Colombia*, Theidon (2009) addresses how former combatants, after demobilizing, were getting ready to die protecting their families as a stoic post-conflict possibility. As a result of this seemingly protective governmental posture, the combatants imagined themselves as martyrs, who were not prepared to lose their family members. This type of narrative was linked with the naturalization of the conflict as a masculinized vision of war; wives of former guerrilla members unconsciously associated them with security. Providing protection was how conflict familiarized men as providers and women, children, and elders as protected.

After 60 years of conflict, the Colombian government has been facing a huge problem in terms of demasculinizing the systematic conception of war in order to introduce former guerrilla members into society (Theidon, 2009). Many of those former members have grown up in an environment without education, economical resources, social capital; this highlights a difference between participants of war with knowledge and those whose only knowledge about the war was through media channels (Bouvier, 2016). This rupture of prevailing societal conception of war increased internal mobilization from villages (battlefields) to the city (sanctuary)<sup>1</sup>.

Another consequence of post-conflict was leaving LGBT people as non-recognized members of the conflict aside. Many transgender men and women were active participants of the conflict; they enrolled in the guerrilla movements, and

assumed female roles (transwomen) as companions or partners of some FARC members. After the conflict ended, most of the LGBT members, who accepted demobilization as a negotiated way to start over, found out the Colombian government had not implemented public policies to guarantee an adequate assessment of LGBT rights (Díaz Botia, 2014, pp. 4-5); therefore, policies like reparation and assistantship were not adopted for this community, as they were not considered vulnerable. Transitional justice recognized some collectivities, and emphasized the recognition of everyone's rights affected by the Colombian conflict. Colombian Constitutional Court through act T-083/17 admitted the existence of

Colombian conflict victims' rights, and claims for their constitutional protection, and this decision recognized all LGBT members who suffered any kind of violence, compensated either monetarily or in some of administrative action by the state (Corte Constitucional, Sala tercera de revisión. Sentencia T-083/17, 2017, February 13).

"...the combatants imagined themselves like martyrs, who were not prepared to lose any of their family members."

## REDEFINING MINORITIES PARTICIPATION IN PEACEBUILDING PROCESS

When Juan Manuel Santos ran for a second mandate as president of Colombia (2012), FARC and the Government sat down for a final discussion regarding the peace process as a result of international pressure to confront the crisis which was created by internal mobilization of some sectors of society, such as FARC, drugs market control, and delegitimization of victims' human rights (Esquirol, 2001, p. 83). This peace initiative addressed international humanitarian laws, and factors of a transitional process from the battlefield to the negotiation table. This development indicated that a perennial rhetoric of war embodied a sociological relation between ephemeral triumphalism, and passive-aggressive

annihilation of any negotiation, that involved two sides immersed in conflict (Bouvier, 2009, July 1, p. 31).

The Colombian peace process took more than four years in order to develop a mechanism to articulate an agreement where all the actors involved in the conflict (FARC and Government) might mediate in order to guarantee several rehabilitation projects enabling political participation and to balance internal development, as well as to eradicate social problems like illicit drug crops, rural policies, victims recognition, and step by step configuration of the termination of war (Herbolzheimer, 2016).

A big step in terms of human rights and recognition of minorities was weaving them into an emerging rhetoric of the peace agreement, where the state and FARC recognized the lack of protection of some communities like LGBT members. This approach gave a different outlook of the conflict and post-conflict; in a way, it allowed an understanding how biased imaginations assigned roles to women and men (Vargas & Diaz Pérez, 2018), such as helping the victims to reconstruct their memory of war, and to get over the conflict (Sánchez, 2018). Story-telling of conflict constituted an important pillar of a negotiated peace process and enacted the parameters to keep civil society far away from systematic war produced by conflict-generated gender discourses.

## **PEACE AND CONFLICT: GOVERNMENT AND VICTIM REDEFINED**

The Thirteenth article of the Colombian Constitution established the freedom of every Colombian regardless the color, gender, sex, and how institutions have the obligation of promote and protect their rights (Constitución Política de Colombia, 1991). This Article assures a societal inclusion of minorities to be represented in any aspect of civil life, and links government and authorities to guarantee a construction of a healthy environment.

The corpus of the peace agreement was written in such a way as to incorporate the understanding

of the victims and a legal representation of them beyond societal structures. This helped to clarify the concerns of women and LGBT members, while considering the parity conditions during different phases of the post-conflict period (Niño, 2017). Even though the peace agreement created a framework to allow LGBT members to be recognized as such, the civil society created a sense of fear in several actors, movements, social organization, presidential candidates, among others, whose ideas still operated under gender “*ideologies*”.

The progressive understanding of gender came into conflict with the new government, which allowed to propagate the traditional understanding of gender roles and to perpetuate traditional concepts of maleness and femaleness as the norm (Chahín-Pinzón & Briñez, 2015).

A more fluid understanding of gender was incorporated into societal discourse. Gender as a topic in the peace agreement granted the construction of victims’ societal memory and their recognition for an active post-conflict role in the construction of peace.

## **CONCLUSION**

This inclusive approach shaped the understanding of maleness and femaleness and how Colombians were perceived in their own society.

A negotiated peace agreement between Colombian government and FARC required mediation by different civil actors and a recognition of the memory such as a social narrative that allowed to delink war as a random event, and establish it as a starting point in a negotiated culmination of more than 60 years of societal dismemberment. This solution ended up in an inclusion of all, victims and victimizers, with an acceptable political solution for genocide, human rights violations, among others problems characterized by the was rhetoric.

Many minorities fought to be recognized as victims of the conflict, calling out for international laws to enforce public recognition of them, in

effort to attend to several social issues (human traffic, drugs, kidnapping, torture, minors' recruitment like combatants, etc.), derived from different factors that increase the risk of an unprotected citizens.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my professors Tuija Parikka and Basilio Monteiro for their guidance and suggestions which helped me to discuss how gender narratives shape conflicts and the recognition of victims by the state.

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## NOTES

1. The lack of acceptance was a product of a general narrative associated with former combatants, such as degraded agents of society, which brought shame to their communities and family members.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jorge Restrepo grew up in Colombia in the thick of long maniacal conflict, and is now a graduate student in International Communication, College of Professional Studies at St. John's University, NY.