



# A Neglected Agency: Female and Male Minors in DDR Processes

The participation of children and adolescents in armed conflicts is widespread. It takes place globally, in different political, economic, social and cultural contexts. The UN *Operational Guide to the Integrated Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Standards (IDDRS)* has specific recommendations for minors coming out of armed conflict, stating that minors should be separated from adult soldiers within 48 hours of their arrival to a demobilization zone. It also recommends family reunification and reintegration back into the local community. However, neither context nor gender dimensions are sufficiently taken into account in the guide. Case studies reveal serious problems with these recommendations. This policy brief examines these issues through a recent case study of Colombia.

## Brief Points

- Many minors experience the separation from the adult soldiers as traumatizing.
- Reunification with the family does not work well, especially for female minors who experience disrespect and stigmatization.
- Minors who become separated from adult soldiers often have socio-economic problems, as they are without a network and cannot rely on their family.
- Minors who become separated from adult soldiers often feel lonely and struggle psychologically.
- Female minors with children – separated from the adult soldiers – tend to suffer both from economic and psychological problems.

## Children and Adolescents in Armed Conflict

In recent years, there has been much focus on how to get minors out of armed conflict and on how to separate them from adult soldiers. However, there has been much less focus on how the minors have experienced this separation. Furthermore, the gender perspective in such processes has been effectively absent. The UN *Operational Guide to the Integrated Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Standards (IDDRS)* states that “the time spent in cantonment sites should be as short as possible. Where possible, children should be identified before arrival, so that the documentation process (identification, verification, registration, ascertaining of medical needs) and other procedures that apply to them in the reception and care phases last no longer than 48 hours, after which they should be transferred to an interim care centre (ICC) or to another location of civilian control”.<sup>1</sup> Behind this recommendation is the assumption that the minors have mainly been recruited to the armed groups by force, and that the best solution for them will be to return to the family and reintegrate into the local community. Therefore, the guide also states that “emphasis should be on reunifying children with their families and communities as soon as possible”.<sup>2</sup> However, does the idea of family reunification and reintegration back into the local community work for minors, and particularly for female minors who are normally more stigmatized than the males? Not least, does the assumption of forced recruitment hold? This policy brief discusses these issues based on a case study of Colombia.

## A Case Study of Colombia

The PRIO project ‘Minors in Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) Processes – The Gender Dimension’ brings fresh insight into how minors actually experience the DDR process. As part of the project, fieldwork and interviews with ex-minors from Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) were carried out in Colombia in 2019 and 2020. Altogether, 22 persons, who were minors when they joined FARC, were interviewed. 50 percent of these were female and 50 percent male. Of the 22 interviewees, 10 became separated from FARC after arriving to the cantonment sites (*zonas veredales*), while 11 had reached 18 years of age by the time the DDR process began and were thus allowed to stay with FARC. One

interviewee had left FARC on his own initiative before the peace agreement was signed. This selection of two different groups of interviewees has established a good basis for comparison. The project asked if it had been an advantage or a disadvantage socially, psychologically and with regard to education and job opportunities to be separated from FARC. Furthermore, it asked about the experiences of gender equality within the two groups of interviewees. The interviews covered three different phases in the minors’ lives: 1) why and how they had joined FARC, 2) how it had been to be a member of FARC, and 3) how they had experienced the time after the separation and the DDR process.

## Recruitment

The interviews revealed that all the 22 minors had **joined FARC voluntarily**, and that most of them also **had actively approached FARC** and asked if they could become members. Five of the interviewed even approached FARC several times before they were allowed in. FARC considered these five to be very young and asked them to wait and think more about their decision. The five were living in extremely difficult circumstances when they approached FARC, and three of them (females) strongly insisted to be recruited over several years before FARC finally let them join. The reasons the minors gave for joining FARC varied, but several of them referred to army bombings of their village, persecution of someone in their family, extreme poverty, and the lack of health and education facilities in their area. This was often combined with admiration for the work that FARC was doing in areas located nearby. Some also fled from violent parents. There was no particular gender pattern with regard to the reasons why the minors joined FARC, but the female minors tended to be the youngest.

## Gender Relations in FARC

All the 22 interviewees coincided in their positive description of the gender relations within FARC. They all emphasized the high degree of gender equality they had experienced as FARC members. Men and women had to perform the same tasks. Men who discriminated against women were punished. The interviewees pointed to a strict regulation of sexual relationships, and of sanctions against persons who violated these regulations. Rape or gendered violence was strongly punished. One (male) minor expressed it this way:

## The Story of a Female Minor

One of the interviewed female minors had been displaced together with her family. They were 10 siblings: five girls and five boys. When they were forced to flee, they could not bring anything with them, and they had no food. “We had to beg to survive.” She was now 8 years old and could not go to school, so she started working to survive. “I had to do all kinds of housework. It was very hard for me. So, I took a decision and asked if I could become a FARC member. However, FARC did not let me. I asked them repeatedly for a year, but they did not accept a girl who was a minor.” She told FARC that she suffered a lot at home and begged them to accept her. The commander said that she was very young, “just a small girl.” He said she should rather study and that she needed to think about it. Finally, when she was 10 years old, she approached FARC again and said she was ready. They still asked her to think about it for six months and told her that it was a tough life as a FARC member. There were rules and regulations to follow. So, when she still insisted six months later, they accepted her. “I was quite ready.” The commander told her that normally they would not accept persons below 15 years of age. He said they would give her six months to try out life as a FARC member. If she did not manage or did not like it, she could leave. They talked at length and explained things to her in detail. But she was convinced. She had such a hard life at home. Her father was dead and her mother had lost three children. After six months, FARC members asked her how she felt. She said that she wanted to continue. “FARC did not force us. On the contrary. Because of the violence and repression, they had to take care of us.” With FARC, she learned to read and write.

*“When persons fell in love, they first had to spend some time with each other, before they were allowed to sleep together. Then they had to ask for permission to stay together. All kinds of relations were respected, also gays and lesbians. The only thing that was not respected/sanctioned was if a person had too many different relations.”*

## The Separation

After the peace agreement and the arrival to the demobilization zones, 124 minors were separated from FARC. All except one of the interviewees in this project described the separation from FARC as difficult, and some of them also described it



Wall painting by FARC's gender group, FARIANAS. Photo: Wenche Iren Hauge / PRIO

as traumatizing. They were terrified. Some of them also thought they were going to die. One interviewee explained that the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) had to spend three days convincing the minors to go, as none of them wanted to leave. He also said that:

*"[There was] a lot of pressure, not from FARC, but from the organizations ... we felt that we did not have a choice."*

After the separation, they were taken to different interim care centers all over Colombia. Most of the minors stayed there for three months, but some stayed longer. The experiences interviewees recounted from these centers were somewhat mixed, but most of the interviewed complained about the centers' psychologists, who would often demonize FARC. The psychologists' attitudes caused those minors who perceived FARC as their family to feel distressed and disrespected. The minors had all joined FARC voluntarily, fleeing from extremely difficult conditions in their homeplace, and had experienced their time with FARC as positive. For these minors, the contrast between the psychologists' negative depictions of FARC and their own positive experiences of the group made these encounters particularly difficult.

### Reunification with the Family

With regard to the minors who became separated from FARC, it was clearly assumed that most of them would go back to their families and stay

there. However, for most of those interviewed in this group, their reunification with the family did not work out successfully. Their experiences of reconnecting with the family were quite mixed. Some of the minors only remained at home for a very short time – in the case of one of the interviewees, only three days – and others only for some months. The interviewees revealed that it can be quite difficult to return to the family. They mentioned several different reasons for this, including the extreme poverty of their parents, some of whom were also victims of forced displacement themselves. Several of the interviewees also described their parents as very traditional and as not accepting their teenagers as independent individuals who can make their own decisions. Finally, possibilities to study or work were simply not present in many of the rural areas where the families of these minors lived. The female minors encountered more problems with family reunification than the male minors. This was due to stigmatization on the basis of their gender and disrespect regarding their choice to join FARC.

### Socio-Economic Consequences

The minors who had become separated from FARC mainly had to manage on their own, without the family or any network to support them. As a result, they had to find a place to live and pay for housing, food, electricity and water. For support, they received a one-off cash sum upon leaving the interim care centers. According to the interviewees, the amounts

received varied. Some received approximately 1.5 million COP (about 393 USD), whereas others received around 2.5 million COP (about 655 USD). However, as most of them did not stay with their families, the money was quickly spent on living costs. Although these former minors of FARC also received 90% of the monthly minimum salary from the Colombian state, this was not enough to cover their monthly costs of living. For the minors who managed to get a job, the monthly minimum salary payment from the Colombian state was subsequently also reduced or stopped completely. Some of them received support for education from the Colombian Agency for Reintegration (ARN), but this only covered education-related costs. This situation made it difficult for several of them to continue their education, as they needed to work to cover their daily living expenses. Even those who had been fortunate enough to find a part-time job suffered from problems, as these were low paying jobs. For the females who became pregnant, the situation became particularly complicated.

In comparison, for those minors who had reached 18 years of age when the peace agreement was signed and were allowed to stay with FARC, the situation was different. Some of them stayed with FARC in the cantonments (ETCR), whereas others remained connected to FARC through political work and/or socially. The FARC ex-combatants living in the ETCRs do not have to pay for housing, electricity, food and water, as the ARN covers this. The ex-minors from FARC living in the ETCRs also benefit from this. The

houses in the ETCRs are rented, but the government pays the rent. Every month, the ETCR receives various types of food items, like cooking oil, meat and rice, which are distributed among the ex-combatants living there. In addition, just as with the minors who were separated from FARC, every demobilized ex-FARC member living in an ETCR receives 90% of the minimum wage, which is 740 000 COP (about 192 USD) per month. Those ex-combatants living in the ETCRs also have projects that help sustain their daily living costs. They grow fruits and vegetables and are engaged in other types of projects, such as the production of textiles and eco-tourism. Young women with children in the ETCRs enjoy various types of support, such as the use of day care centers in the ETCRs, participation in gender committees, and gender equality with regard to the responsibility for children – as gender equality is emphasized and practiced within the ETCRs. This also gives the young women the possibility to continue their education.

Even those ex-minors from FARC who did not live in the ETCRs, but who nevertheless stayed in contact with FARC, were somewhat better off socio-economically than those minors who were separated from FARC. The group in contact with FARC were members of social networks, and these individuals helped each other. Some of them were also able to start up new projects together and some participated in political work with FARC.

### Social and Psychological Consequences

In general, the group of interviewees who had been separated from FARC struggled with the social and psychological effects of this. Most of them had little contact with their families and did not receive any help from them. In addition, they had been cut off from their network with FARC. As these ex-minors were mainly re-integrated far away from each other – all over Colombia – they also had difficulties in building any network internally in this group. They

felt that their voices were not heard, and they felt lonely. In comparison, those who were allowed to stay with FARC were better off socially and psychologically. They felt that the struggle for gender equality that they had experienced within FARC during the war continued in the ETCRs and in their subsequent work for FARC. Many of them referred to FARC as their family.

### The Gender Differences

The gendered effects of the separation from FARC mainly became visible after the minors who became separated from FARC left the interim care centers and were sent back to families or relatives to reintegrate there. Family reunification was unsuccessful for both genders, but it was particularly difficult for the female minors. Female minors were more often met with stigmatization and lack of respect by their family than the male minors. Problems accumulated for both genders as their socio-economic situation grew progressively more difficult in the absence of a basic network to rely on. Again, this was felt even more strongly by the females, and particularly by those who became pregnant. The female minors who were separated from FARC also felt discontent about returning to the macho attitudes in Colombian society, as they had experienced more gender equality within FARC.

### Recommendations

The Colombia case study has shown that the separation of minors from adult soldiers can be an extremely difficult and even traumatizing experience for many minors. In addition, the post-separation lives of these minors are characterized by the accumulation of socio-economic, social and psychological problems, particularly for the females. The findings from this case study show that the assumption that family reunification and reintegration back into the local community represents an adequate solution for the minors is incorrect. Such an assumption

neglects to account for the reality and the context that these minors come from. There was a reason they chose to leave their families and home communities to join the armed group in the first place. The findings from Colombia are also relevant to other conflict contexts. This policy brief therefore offers the following recommendations:

- The UN guide's chapter on minors in DDR processes should be revised based on new research findings of minors coming out of different conflict contexts.
- The UN guide should have a stronger emphasis on the gender perspective, including in the chapter on minors in DDR processes.
- Minors in DDR processes should be given a real choice on whether to stay with the adult soldiers of the armed group or not, and their choices should be respected.
- Minors in DDR processes who choose to leave the adult soldiers of the armed group should be given stronger economic support and better follow-up on education possibilities than is currently the case. Female minors who are pregnant, as well as female and male minors with children, should be given extra support.
- Psychologists involved in the work with minors in DDR processes must be neutral to the minors' stories, experiences and preferences. The psychologists should preferably be international, not national. ■

### Notes

1. United Nations (2010) *The Operational Guide to the Integrated Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Standards (IDDRS)*. New York: UN Inter-Agency Working Group on Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration, 229.
2. *Ibid*, 230.

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### THE PROJECT

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