



Guerrilla Babies: Gender and Pregnancy Policies of Armed Groups

Leaders of armed groups often strongly advise their members to avoid pregnancies, due to the dangers that guerrilla soldiers face in the mountains and jungle areas where they operate and carry out battles. Some armed groups also give out contraceptives. However, intimate relationships between guerrilla soldiers emerge and some female soldiers become pregnant and give birth during war. The challenges they face with a new-born baby in a war zone are enormous and the options they have for how to take care of the child are quite limited. Female soldiers often carry the heaviest burden in these cases.

Brief Points

- Female and male guerrilla soldiers who place their new-born babies with civilians tend to experience psychological problems, especially when the separation from their children is long-lasting.
- In several cases, no record is kept over babies handed over to civilian families. This makes post-conflict reunification between parents and children difficult.
- Female soldiers who raise their new-born child in a neighbouring country risk losing socio-economic advantages, as they tend to miss the DDR registration process and the cash compensation and vocational training that accompanies it.
- Baby booms in cantonments may negatively affect the female soldiers' socio-economic situation. For example, in Nepal, mothers were placed in houses outside the cantonments and thus missed out on the DDR registration process, cash compensation and training courses.

An Under-Researched Topic

Critics tend to condemn guerrilla leaders' strict attitude towards pregnancy as hard and inhumane (El Espectador, 2017). However, these critics rarely take into account the full context of war and what the experience of giving birth to a baby in the jungle or mountains in the middle of a bloody war can be like. We know little about the children born of guerrilla soldiers during war, and we also know little about the experiences of their parents, and particularly of their mothers. How was it to handle a new-born baby in the midst of a dangerous ongoing war? What happened to these children and to their parents? Very little research is available on this topic. Thus, the purpose of this policy brief is to shed light on this under-researched topic. This policy brief is based on data gathered (unsystematically) through various research projects that were not designed to address this specific issue, but which nevertheless garnered important findings on the experiences of former guerrilla soldiers who had given birth during war.

Pilot Findings from Guatemala, Nepal and Colombia

During fieldwork and interviews with ex-combatants for various projects in Colombia, Guatemala, and Nepal, the author has come across some of the female guerrilla soldiers who gave birth during war. This policy brief highlights some of their experiences and discusses these against the policy of avoiding pregnancies and sometimes also carrying out abortions in armed groups. Finally, the policy brief focuses on the need for more research on this topic.

The civil wars in Colombia, Guatemala and Nepal took place during different time periods and in different contexts. Although FARC-EP in Colombia laid down its arms after the peace agreement in 2016, the war between the Colombian government and the armed group ELN is still ongoing.

The author has conducted more than 100 interviews with female and male ex-combatants from these three countries.¹ The interviews cover civil wars which ended in peace agreements with ten years in between them (Guatemala 1996, Nepal 2006 and Colombia 2016).

Gender and Pregnancy Policies of Armed Groups

The armed groups in Colombia (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia, FARC), Guatemala (Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca, URNG), and Nepal (People's Liberation Army, Nepal, PLA) all *advised* their guerrilla soldiers not to become pregnant. The URNG in Guatemala was the most lenient on the issue, whilst the PLA in Nepal was quite strict. The guerrilla groups in the three countries all had a policy of gender equality, and violence against women was severely punished.

In Colombia, interviewees referred to a process where two persons who fell in love first had to spend some time proving that they really loved and respected each other before they were allowed to live and sleep together in the camp. They had to ask the commander for permission, and they were also asked about their health, as FARC did not want to see any diseases spread among them. A frequent change of partner was not accepted. There was an atmosphere of fidelity. Estrada-Fuentes (2016) argues that this policy on relationships is also the case within the Colombian guerrilla group ELN, as female fighters from ELN in their narratives agree that they can request permission from the ELN to have a partner and children as long as it is a committed relationship. The FARC members were informed about central gender policy issues when joining the guerrilla. One of these was pregnancy. The young females were given contraceptives, and females and males were informed that FARC did not want pregnancies, as it would be too difficult and dangerous to take care of small children in the mountains and in the jungle in the midst of war and battles. In the case of pregnancies, there would be two options: abortion or to give birth and hand the baby over to a civilian family.

Interviewees in Nepal in general referred to the strict regulations of intimate relationships within the PLA. If men violated women, they would be punished by the leaders. In general, intimate relationships were reserved for married couples. To have intercourse without being married was not allowed or was regarded negatively. This could lead to punishment involving demotion and the loss of their current position within the PLA. Marriage between soldiers had to be approved of by the commander. Even when married, soldiers were advised not to become

pregnant because of the war situation. On the other hand, all kinds of discrimination, including discrimination against castes, were banned, and inter-caste marriages took place and were regarded positively by the guerrilla leaders.

Pregnancies

Despite the advice from leaders against pregnancy, there were pregnancies among the guerrilla soldiers in all of the three countries during war. Many of the female fighters interviewed had participated in the guerrilla for between 15 and 20 years. Even though most of them joined the armed group as adolescents, they would be in their 30s when the peace agreement was signed. This means that they spent most of their fertile years in the guerrilla. Spending this many years in the guerrilla also meant that they came very close to each other, sleeping together under trees and shelters, hiding together and helping each other in extreme situations. Relationships emerged which also included sexual relations. Several of them had access to contraceptives, but there were extreme periods of battles and walking long distances when they could not get hold of contraceptives. In addition, some of the female soldiers actively avoided using contraceptives because they wanted to have children, even though they knew that they could not keep their babies in the jungle or the mountains for a long time. It was simply too dangerous.

Measures Taken

The context of the civil war differs considerably among the three countries studied. Guatemala was special in the sense that many of the female guerrilla soldiers who became pregnant could go to Mexico and work for the URNG there, while taking care of their children (Hauge, 2008). Some also worked for the URNG from other nearby countries like Nicaragua. There were less possibilities to remain active in the armed groups while taking care of a child in Colombia and Nepal. In Colombia, guerrilla babies were either handed over to family members or to other civilian families (often civilian FARC supporters). According to some of the interviewees, this took place from 14 to about 30 days after the child was born, depending on the context (Hauge, 2020). In Nepal, quite few of the interviewees had given birth during the war, although many gave birth in the cantonments, after the peace agreement had been signed.



Wall painting in an ETCR (cantonment) in Colombia. Photo: Wenche Iren Hauge / PRIO

Consequences

The consequences of pregnancies and births within guerrilla groups differ both for the female and the male soldiers and for the children born, depending on the context. Early and long-time separation from the child appear to have had strong negative psychological consequences for both of the parents, although particularly for the mother. Long-time separation from the child has also affected the possibilities for later reunification between child and parents. These tendencies were most marked in Colombia, where there were fewer possibilities for parents to go to neighbouring countries with their children and support FARC-EP from there. A few of the female interviewees explained that they had handed their babies over to civilians a short time after the birth. One of these interviewees talked about how, after the peace agreement, she could not find her child, as no record had been kept and nobody now knew where her child was. Another woman had reunited with her child after many years, because other FARC soldiers remembered where that child had been placed. There was also a case where a girl who had been handed over to civilians shortly after her birth later returned to FARC on her own initiative.

The Colombian DDR process is relatively recent and has been subject to limited gender sensitive research, in particular with regard to the consequences of war-time pregnancies among the guerrilla soldiers. This is recognized in an article by Elston (2020), who analyses a film documentary produced after the peace agreement in Colombia in 2016 and looks at the narratives of female fighters. Elston concludes that the stories

of women who experienced abortion, or handed over their babies to civilians, are still considered a political taboo, and that much more knowledge is needed.

In Guatemala, many of those who gave birth went to Mexico (Chiapas) and stayed there with their child. They were more or less satisfied with their situation during the war, but when the peace agreement was signed, these parents, particularly the mothers, were not properly informed about the registration procedures in the DDR process. This meant that many of them were not registered and did not receive any economic compensation or vocational training. One female interviewee from Guatemala, who had left her children with civilians and continued the guerrilla fight inside Guatemala, expressed that the reunification with her children after the war had been very difficult. Her children were bitter and angry at her because she had left them during the war. Another Guatemalan interviewee, who supported URNG from a neighbouring country, gave birth to a child with disabilities. She said that it had been very difficult, and that she had not received any special support, neither from the URNG during the war, nor from any UN agency or international organization during the DDR process.

In Nepal, there seem to have been fewer guerrilla births that took place during the war, due to strict regulations. However, this would have to be confirmed with more research. Some of the interviewees mentioned pregnancies among married couples during the war, but they did not talk much about how the parents experienced this. On the other hand, many women gave birth during the time in the cantonments in Nepal. Most

ex-combatants spent several years in the cantonments in Nepal, and the last cantonment was not closed down until 2012, six years after the peace agreement had been signed. The women who became pregnant and gave birth there were taken outside the cantonment and placed in houses close by (Upreti, Shivakoti, & Bharati, 2018). However, because of this, many of them lost out on the registration process and did not get their economic compensation. In addition, they could not participate in courses and vocational training.

Not Getting Pregnant – The Best Option?

Faced with the desire to have a child, but recognizing the severe consequences that a birth may come with in the midst of a war situation, what may be the best choice for guerrilla soldiers? When guerrilla leaders strongly recommend that their members do not become pregnant, is it simply for the soldiers' own sake, and for the protection of the unborn child? Some of the consequences observed from giving birth, and being separated from the child, may indicate that guerrilla leaders' warnings against pregnancy have been well-founded. That said, it is also quite understandable that pregnancies do happen. Therefore, rather than moralizing in any direction, there should be more focus on how parents of children born during war can be supported economically and psychologically during reintegration processes. Particular focus should be given to the mothers who gave birth and especially to those who also lost out on the cash compensation and training advantages of the DDR process as a result. Not least, attention should be given to finding and supporting children who were placed with families outside of the guerrilla.

Gendered Consequences

As for the female and male guerrilla soldiers, both genders have experienced consequences of having a child born during the war. In cases of babies being handed over to family members or other civilians, both female and male guerrilla soldiers have felt sadness and psychological effects, particularly in the cases with a long separation from the child (Guatemala and Colombia), and in cases where they have not been able to find the child after the war. In the cases where mother and child stayed in another country (mainly examples from Guatemala), there are indications that the psychological consequences have been less severe, but that the

socio-economic consequences for these female guerrilla soldiers were stronger. This is because most of these female soldiers did not get registered as part of the DDR process, with the consequence that they did not get any compensation after the war. Here, the gender differences were more marked, as the females were the caretakers of the children in Guatemala.

Baby booms in the cantonments mainly occurred in Nepal and Colombia, as the time spent in cantonments in Guatemala was only three months. In Nepal, female guerrilla soldiers who gave birth during the cantonment time were taken outside of the cantonment to live in houses some distance away. These female soldiers lost out in the verification and compensation process, and they also lost access to educational courses, political meetings and physical training. Thus, in Nepal, there was a clear gendered effect of the baby boom in the cantonments. There was also a baby boom in the cantonments in Colombia, but so far there has been almost no research on the gendered consequences of this.

With regard to the children born of guerrilla parents and the consequences of being a guerrilla child born under difficult conditions, almost no research has been conducted at all. The author did not have access to these children during her fieldwork, only to some of the parents. A significant challenge remains concerning exactly how to access and to conduct research among these children of guerrilla parents. Several of the children are difficult to find and identify, as they were placed with civilian families during the wars. However, to get the full picture, there is a need for research on how these children have fared, not least from a gender perspective.

Need for Research

- Observations from case studies in Colombia, Nepal and Guatemala indicate that there is a need for research on gender

and the pregnancy policies of armed groups in general, and for research on children born of guerrilla parents in particular. Research should be conducted on child births and the whereabouts of these children among guerrilla groups from different contexts, examining different ways of handling the new-born children. This could encompass children who are placed with family networks or civilian families as well as cases where the parents – first and foremost the mother – have raised the child in another country, while supporting the armed group from there. One specific topic within this field that warrants investigation is what happened to sick and disabled children born of guerrilla parents during war, and to children with special needs.

- There are also several cases where the parents do not know where their children are. These are cases where no record has been kept over the babies that were handed over to civilian families. Research is needed to investigate the dimensions of this problem as well as the possibilities for international organizations, for example the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), to assist parents – especially the mothers who often bear the brunt of the separation challenges – to reunite with their children in cases where this is an adequate option.
- Another topic that begs for more research is the baby booms that sometimes occur in cantonments, such as in Colombia and Nepal. What are the gendered effects of having a child in a cantonment for the guerrilla parents? And not least, what are the long-term consequences of being born in a cantonment for the children themselves? ■

Notes

1. Interviews were conducted during the following projects: *The Demobilization and Political Participation of Female Fighters in Guatemala* (2008); *Gender Equality, Peace and Security in Nepal and Myanmar* (2016–18); and *Pilot Project on DDR of Minors in Colombia-The Gender Dimension* (2019–20).

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THE CENTRE

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