



Women of the Jungle: Guerrilleras on the Front Lines of the FARC-EP

Alexandra Welsh

Abstract:

The world of South American revolutionary groups is one that is full of imagery of machismo and legends of guerillas. However, women are often heavily represented in their ranks as fighters, or guerrilleras. Such is the case with Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarios Colombianos – Ejército del Pueblo (FARC-EP), the oldest revolutionary group in Colombia, who report that 20-40% of their members are female. The leadership of the FARC-EP declared in 1985 that women would be considered equal as fighters within their organization. This made their revolutionary group a place of equality in a country where women are offered little agency over their own lives. Along with this parity between the sexes found officially within the movement, taking on the role of a guerrillera also offers women protection from domestic violence and targeted violence waged by other guerilla groups. It also places them in a position of prestige as a combatant and revolutionary. While the lives of these women, spent largely in the jungle, are very difficult, the socio-economic realities of being a rural woman in Colombia make membership in the FARC-EP a viable, and sometimes preferable, alternative.

Résumé :

Le monde des groupes révolutionnaires sud-américains est rempli d'images machiste et de légendes de guérillas, toutefois les femmes sont souvent hautement représentées dans leurs rangs de combattantes, ou guerrilleras. Le cas notamment des Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarios Colombianos - Ejército del Pueblo (FARC-EP) représente le plus vieux groupe révolutionnaire de la Colombie et signale que 20 à 40% de leurs membres sont des femmes. La direction du FARC-EP a déclaré en 1985 que les femmes seront considérées égales aux hommes en tant que combattantes au sein de leur organisation, créant ainsi un lieu d'égalité au sein de leur groupe révolutionnaire dans un pays où les femmes normalement possèdent peu de contrôle sur leurs propres vies. Avec la parité des sexes officiellement dans le mouvement, le rôle de guerrilleras offre aussi aux femmes une protection contre la violence domestique et la violence ciblée des autres groupes guerillas. Les femmes sont aussi placées dans des positions de prestige comme combattantes et révolutionnaires. La vie de ces femmes se passe largement dans la jungle et est souvent très difficile; les réalités socio-économiques d'une femme rurale colombienne

transforment l'adhésion au FARC-EP en alternative viable et parfois même préférable à tout autre mode de vie accessible à celle-ci.

Colombia is a state that was at one time referred to as Latin America's oldest democracy.¹ In the last 60 years, however, this democracy has largely come to an end due to political violence which has given rise to what is now the oldest active insurgency group: the FARC-EP.² Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias Colombianas – Ejercito del Pueblo, known in English as the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia—People's Army, found their beginnings as an armed faction of the Colombian Communist Party, eventually developing into a stand-alone revolutionary guerilla group.³

Guerilla warfare exists in the imaginations of the world as a realm of masculinity and machismo. When women are mentioned, they exist as a casualty of warfare. While it is true that the rape and degradation of women are often used as tools to create domination over a community, women can also play a role as orchestrators of violence and participants in warfare.⁴ There are few cases that prove this better than the FARC-EP. It is estimated that within the ranks of this insurgency group, between 20% and 40% of combatants are female.⁵ The FARC-EP also makes claims itself that up to 40% of mid-level command positions are held by guerrilleras, or female combatants.⁶ Though it is a hard life for these women in the jungle amidst the ranks of the revolutionaries, many of them choose this existence for themselves as a way of regaining control over their lives. Colombia, a predominantly patriarchal society, offers poor, rural women few options other than taking on the role of mothers and wives, a life to which the FARC-EP and other guerilla groups offer an alternative. The secretariat of this particular group

¹ Melissa Herman, "Protagonists and Victims: Women Leading the Fight for a Democratic Colombia," *Feminist Review* 88 (2008): 122.

² Garry Leech, *The FARC: the Longest Insurgency* (Halifax: Fernwood, 2011), 2.

³ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁴ Herman, "Protagonists and Victims," 123.

⁵ Tazreena Sajjad, "Women Guerillas: Marching toward True Freedom? An Analysis of Women's Experiences in the Frontlines of Guerilla Warfare and in the Post-War Period," *Agenda*, no.19 (2004), 15.

⁶ Leech, *The FARC*, 52.

decreed in 1985 that all its members, no matter their race, ethnicity or gender, would be equal within the ranks of their army, an equality which is seldom found elsewhere in Colombia.⁷ By examining both benefits received by guerrilleras for joining the movement, including self-determination, protection from targeted violence orchestrated by other armed groups, the official equality of the group, and the ways in which female membership strengthens the movement, particularly through their promotion of cohesion amongst the ranks of combatants, this paper will argue that the high levels of female involvement in the FARC-EP is the result of the socio-economic realities of poor rural females in Colombia, as well as the autonomy offered to them through a life as a guerrillera.

The Origins of the FARC-EP

The FARC-EP rose out of the ashes of political violence under its current name in 1966.⁸ They are a leftist group which gained their initial inspiration from the likes of Ché Guevara and the success of the Cuban Revolution.⁹ They are a product of La Violencia, a ten year period of violent clashes between the Liberal and Conservative political parties which decimated rural and urban populations alike and lasted from 1948-1958.¹⁰ It ultimately took the lives of roughly 300 000 Colombians and thousands more were displaced from their homes.¹¹ At the centre of the ideological split between these two parties was the concept of land reform. While the Conservatives, backed by the elites and the Catholic Church, wished to maintain the oligarchy

⁷ Natalie Herrera and Douglas Porch, "Like Going to a Fiesta: the Role of Female Fighters in Colombia's FARC-EP," *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 19, no.4 (2008), 613.

⁸ Leech, "The FARC", 11.

⁹ Chris Lee, "The FARC and the Colombian Left: Time for a Political Solution?," *Latin American Perspectives* 39, no.1 (2011): 30.

¹⁰ Jenny Pearce, *Colombia: Inside the Labyrinth* (London: Latin American Bureau (Research and Action) Limited, 1990), 49.

¹¹ Alfredo Molano Bravo, "The Evolution of the FARC: A guerilla group's long history," *NACLA Report on the Americas* 34, no.2 (2000): 24.

and open lands up for local and foreign investment, the Liberals found their base of support in peasant groups who wished to maintain their small portions of already heavily parcelled land.¹² La Violencia culminated after a decade with The National Front, a power sharing system in which the two parties would serve alternating four year terms and split other political posts within the state.¹³ While this arrangement aided in eliminating some of the violence that was tearing apart the country, the agreement led to the social and political exclusion of all those with alternate political leanings, particularly Communists and other leftists.¹⁴ It was from the remnants of this socio-political group that many of the guerilla groups of the 1960s emerged, including the FARC-EP.¹⁵ These future guerrillas were largely peasants who had been victimized by the political violence of the ruling classes and had been armed by the Liberal party in Colombia and supported by the Communists to fight their Conservative rivals.¹⁶ While they started off as a small, local movement, between 1970 and 1982 the FARC-EP expanded their ranks from 500 to over 3000 members.¹⁷ A significant portion of the funds they use in order to continue to wage this war against the government are garnered through a heavy involvement in the illicit drug trade in Colombia, through which they integrate members of the popular classes and provide lucrative work for peasant farmers and labourers who would otherwise spend their lives living a subsistence based existence on their small farms, or else receiving starvation wages while working as labour for a larger corporate farm.¹⁸

¹² Ibid., 23.

¹³ Leech, "The FARC", 11.

¹⁴ Lee, "The FARC and the Colombian Left," 34.

¹⁵ Forrest Hylton, "The Cold War That Didn't End: Paramilitary Modernization in Medellin, Colombia," *A Century of Revolution: Insurgent and Counterinsurgent Violence During Latin America's Longest Cold War*, ed. Greg Grandon and Gilbert M. Joseph (London, Duke University Press: 2010), 345.

¹⁶ Molano Bravo, "The Evolution of FARC," 24.

¹⁷ Ibid., 26.

¹⁸ Ibid., 27.

The FARC-EP and Colombia

Colombia is a state which is very divided by its physical geography, particularly its long mountain ranges. As a result, the government of the day frequently lack the ability to exert effective control over large portions of the rural regions.¹⁹ In many parts of Colombia, in recent history and even up to today, the insurgency group is the only power that the peasantry encounter in their day-to-day lives. In the 1970s, as corporate takeover of rural lands increased, displaced peasants who had lost all their land to a government that did not protect them fled further into the jungle, into territories where Colombian law was rarely enforced and where the FARC-EP was the controlling power, thereby increasing the pools of people from which the movement garnered its support base.²⁰ The FARC-EP promotes political resistance to the government among their support base, telling peasants to boycott elections and then carrying out violence at polling stations to deter future political participation.²¹ They limit the amount of violence perpetuated against their supporters, however, because the insurgents receive more than political backing from amongst the Colombian peasantry. They also receive supplies and shelter and it is from among these people that they increase their ranks.²²

When elected into office in 2002 with a platform that included a promise to exterminate the FARC-EP, Colombian president Alvaro Uribe targeted not the clusters of guerrillas, but their supply chain, the peasants in their villages.²³ Instead of reinforcing the population of Colombia against the insurgents, this action only aided in further alienating the people from the government and reinforcing their connection to the revolutionary group.²⁴ It is this connection

¹⁹ Herman, "Protagonists and Victims," 124.

²⁰ Molano Bravo, "The Evolution of FARC," 26.

²¹ Lee, "The FARC and the Colombian Left," 33.

²² Ibid.

²³ Herman, "Protagonists and Victims," 122.

²⁴ Ibid.

with the peasants, as well as their inclusive policies, which perpetuates this long lasting revolutionary movement.

Poor Rural Women of Colombia

The FARC-EP's policies of integration and equality of all its members speak to those, particularly women, who have lived lives of social, political and economic exclusion. The realities of being a woman in rural Colombia include very few options. Many young girls view marriage and pregnancy as their only means of securing their own identities and positions within Colombia.²⁵ They are particularly vulnerable to abuse and neglect at the hands of the men in their lives. Men who do not make enough money to support their families sometimes turn to asserting their machismo or masculinity in other ways, including through verbal abuse and domestic violence, as well as through adultery.²⁶ In situations of warfare, women are often the first victims of symbolic violence, as rape is viewed less as an act of sex and more as an act of domination.²⁷ Many militarized groups in Colombia, guerilla and paramilitary alike, use this form of violence in territories which they control.

Poor women who live in urban areas are not immune to these same hardships brought on by poverty. Women living in slums and low cost housing, many displaced from the same land reforms and confiscations that have grown the support group of the FARC-EP in rural areas, are more susceptible to sexual violence, STIs and lower access to social services than their male counterparts.²⁸ In a largely Catholic state, women of all social and economic classes may find themselves in a position of subservience to their husbands and fathers. Without divorce as a

²⁵ Herrera and Porch, "Like Going to a Fiesta," 611.

²⁶ Elena Garcés, *Colombian Women: The Struggle out of Silence*, (United Kingdom, The Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.: 2008), 114.

²⁷ Herrera and Porch, "Like Going to a Fiesta," 610.

²⁸ Herman, "Protagonists and Victims," 122.

possible choice, few options are left available to them to escape undesirable living situations.²⁹ When circumstances become desperate, many Colombian women find themselves turning to militancy groups as the answer.

Benefits of Membership in the FARC-EP

Armed groups are the one arena in which many rural Colombian women can find some degree of agency in their lives. The power they receive over their own lives in the time they spend as guerrilleras has even been shown to interfere with attempts to re-integrate into Colombian society upon their demobilization, as they are then expected to conform to the patriarchal standards of Colombian society.³⁰ While the work they do as a member of the FARC-EP is dangerous, their membership to this group offers them protection from daily violence. The secretariat of the FARC-EP has decreed a zero tolerance policy against rape, with the punishment of this offence being death to the perpetrator.³¹ This law protects them from both sexual violence by their comrades and that carried out by other groups against peasant women.³² Their membership also permits them sexual freedom. While relationships must be approved by a commander to both begin and end, permission is rarely withheld.³³ To avoid any situation that may interfere with a woman's allegiance to the cause, however, contraception is mandatory and, should a pregnancy occur, the child must either be aborted or sent away as an infant to be raised in a civilian setting.³⁴ While former guerrilleras have admitted to missing their children, they hoped that their child would be proud of the work that they were doing and would understand the

²⁹ Garcés, "Colombian Women," 32.

³⁰ Herrera and Porch, "Like Going to a Fiesta," 611.

³¹ Leech, "The FARC", 53.

³² Garcés, "Colombian Women," 104.

³³ Leech, "The FARC", 53.

³⁴ Ibid.

importance of it.³⁵ The FARC-EP also offers women political inclusion they would not receive elsewhere. Members of the insurgency are heavily indigenous and Afro-Colombian in ethnicity, both of which are groups which are more susceptible to social marginalization within Colombia due to discrimination.³⁶ Despite their desire to expand their ranks, however, new conscripts, both men and women are often warned by their commanders of the hard lives led by guerrillas, and told that dedication to the cause should not be an escape route from petty disputes or reconcilable issues.³⁷

Women also become guerrilleras for reasons other than self-determination. Growing up in communities which were dominated by the insurgents, these women saw female combatants in their villages on almost a daily basis. The guerrilleras were armed and in uniform, just as the male participants, and were seen by the young girls as symbols of strength and beauty, a person to be looked up to.³⁸ This frequent interaction with already active members also meant that some women may have family members in The FARC-EP, while others may have fallen in love with a guerrilla.³⁹ Life as an insurgent holds the promise of travel and adventure and an escape from the stagnation of rural life.⁴⁰ Women also take this opportunity in combat not to prove that they can be strong like men, but to show that women are just as brave, if not more so, as men.⁴¹

Benefits of Female Membership to the FARC-EP

As the FARC-EP draws their members from poor, largely uneducated pools of peasants, few women enter the ranks with a complete understanding of the ideology for which they will be

³⁵ Ibid., 54.

³⁶ Herrera and Porch, "Like Going to a Fiesta," 614.

³⁷ Francisco Gutiérrez Sanín, "Telling the Difference: Guerrillas and Paramilitaries in the Colombian War," *Politics & Society* 36, no.3 (2008): 24.

³⁸ Herrera and Porch, "Like Going to a Fiesta," 616.

³⁹ Ibid., 615.

⁴⁰ Garcés, "Colombian Women," 122.

⁴¹ Herrera and Porch, "Like Going to a Fiesta," 614.

fighting. They are, after their membership is confirmed, indoctrinated into the cause with daily teachings by their commanders on the values of the organization as well as the structural social, political and economic inequality against which they are fighting.⁴² These lessons are very successful, as even after guerrillas demobilize, many of them continue to align themselves with the goals of the movement, if not the tactics utilized to achieve them.⁴³ Despite the fact that these guerrilleras may be unsure about what exactly they are fighting for when they join the ranks of the FARC-ET, the act of joining an insurgency group as a women is still acknowledged nationally as a valid form of protest against the lack of options for women and as a call for change, whether or not the woman carrying out the action is well informed enough to consciously be sending that message.⁴⁴

Joining the FARC-EP does not simply benefit the women, but also improves the solidarity of the insurgency as a continual fixture of Colombian non-party politics. As the group claims to be a voice of the people, it is important for them to maintain a good public image amongst the peasantry. This is an image which is much aided by the presence of women. Not only does the presence of guerrilleras ensure that all members of the community are represented, thereby evoking more sympathy, but women also add a softer touch to the face of the group and are often utilized for photo-ops as well as assigned as mediators of disputes within the territory they occupy and as spokespeople for their cause.⁴⁵ Including women in their ranks also aids the FARC-EP's campaign to delegitimize and undermine the military forces of the Colombian government as well as any paramilitary groups against which they may be fighting. While they

⁴² Ibid., 616-17.

⁴³ Ibid., 627.

⁴⁴ Leech, "The FARC", 52.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 613-4.

are combatants, killing women goes against deeply held cultural norms, as they are considered to be weaker and more vulnerable than men.⁴⁶

Ultimately, one of the most important roles that women play in the FARC-EP, which may be the ultimate reason their membership was legitimized in the first place, is the affect their presence has on male membership. Without guerrilleras, the FARC-EP would be comprised of solely guerrillas, unable to fulfill their social and sexual desires without having to look to women outside of the movement.⁴⁷ Female presence not only improves loyalty and strengthens the core of the group, but it also aids in deterring use of sexual violence against peasant women by members of the FARC-EP. Without women in their ranks, the FARC-EP would not be able to maintain the power they have over every aspect of the lives of their male members.

Struggles of the Jungle

Despite the official equality of the movement, and the opportunities membership in the FARC-EP affords women, they continue to experience hurdles that are brought on simply by the fact of their gender. While they may rise to be leaders of squadrons and given some power over small groups of combatants, few women ever reach a higher rank within the organization than mid-level power.⁴⁸ The highest level of command in the FARC-EP, known as the secretariat, is now, and has always been, comprised exclusively of men.⁴⁹ Many members maintain that this is due to a lack of senior women in the organization, however, those who have been demobilized state that they, as women were given fewer opportunities for advancement.⁵⁰ At the beginning of the new millennium, with the FARC-EP revisiting peace talks with the Colombian government, not

⁴⁶ Gutiérrez Sanín, "Telling the difference," 28.

⁴⁷ Herrera and Porch, "Like Going to a Fiesta," 614.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 619.

⁴⁹ Leech, "The FARC", 52.

⁵⁰ Herrera and Porch, "Like Going to a Fiesta," 620.

a single female was present at the table, either from the FARC-EP or from the governmental delegation sent to meet with them.⁵¹

Conclusion

While in recent years Colombia has been referred to internationally as a ‘political time bomb’, the society as a whole has taken small steps towards progress.⁵² Beginning at the end of La Violencia, the state has been moving away from the Catholic Church and along a path of secularization, a path which has slowly aided women in gaining their own agency outside of armed insurgency groups.⁵³ New laws promoting equality have been passed in Colombia in the last decade, including one which requires that 30% of all government related jobs be filled by women.⁵⁴ While this law shows improvement in terms of societal equality, the majority of these jobs are found in the lower levels of power, with many higher ranking positions that are held by women fulfilling more of a ceremonial role. The hope, however, is that, one day soon, women of all socio-economic standings in Colombia will find that they have options in their lives other than war or child rearing. This change will eliminate the barriers of poverty and inequality which have, over decades, created the need for rural women to turn to militancy in order to find self-determination, protection from targeted violence, and official equality in their lives. For today, however, the structure and the equality found within the ranks of the FARC-EP remain as a significant factor in drawing to the cause poor women whose lives would not otherwise afford them the autonomy and fulfilment they desire. The benefits of female membership in the FARC-EP are mutual, as women aid in improving the social cohesion of the movement, thereby

⁵¹ Herman, “Protagonists and Victims,” 125.

⁵² Pearce, “Colombia: Inside the Labyrinth,” 287.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 200.

⁵⁴ Garcés, “Colombian Women,” 103.

maintaining morale and limiting the number of male combatants who turn outside of the revolution to have their needs met. While the socio-economic factors of poverty, inequality, and violence persist in Colombia, women will continue to turn revolutionary groups like the FARC-EP and these groups will continue to accept them into their ranks as guerrilleras.

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