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Moving Towards a More Inclusive Reintegration: The Case of Demobilized Afro-Colombian Girl Child Soldiers

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Abstract

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Colombia's conflict started in 1964 and spanned over 50 years, until former President Juan Manuel Santos signed a peace deal that formally ended the conflict between the FARC-EP and the Colombian government. In total, different groups in the conflict recruited close to 17,000 children, a violation of their human rights under international human rights law. By conducting interviews with child protection experts and reviewing the ICBF's policies on race and gender, this study seeks to understand the reintegration experiences of demobilized Afro-Colombian girls, how the ICBF takes into account race and gender in the design of their programs, and whether or not Colombia's reintegration program adequately addresses the needs of demobilized Afro-Colombian girls. The findings of this study show that reintegration programs fail to adequately address their needs. Afro-Colombian girls have a distinct set of needs that reintegration programs must take into account when designing their programs, which include unique power relations within the armed groups, lack of basic services prior to their involvement with the armed groups as well as after their demobilization, and the violence still present in their communities upon their return. This study also found that the ICBF's understanding of race and gender in the design of their programs is explicit and thorough, outlining the importance of incorporating race and gender. However, the findings show that the implementation of such mechanisms fall short of being effective and attainable. This study's findings point to the need to be more inclusive in the design of the reintegration programs, and to take into account dangers present in the communities where Afro-Colombian girls will be returning to.

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Acronyms and Abbreviations

ACN	La Agencia Colombiana Para la Reintegración y Normalización The Colombian Agency for Reintegration and Normalization
AUC	Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia The United Self-Defenders of Colombia
CAE	Centros de Atención Especializadas The Center for Specialized Attention
CNMH	Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica The National Center for Historical Memory
CRC	Convention on the Rights of the Child
ELN	Ejército de Liberación Nacional The National Liberation Army
FARC-EP	Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia - Ejército del Pueblo The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia - People's Army
ICBF	Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar Colombian Family Welfare Institute
OPAC	Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict
SNBF	Sistema Nacional de Bienestar Familiar National System of Family Welfare
UNSCR	United Nations Security Council Resolution
YPS	Youth, Peace, and Security

Chapter I: Introduction

Research Problem and Context

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and its Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict (OPAC) set international standards for children's rights to non-discrimination, protection from recruitment and use in hostilities, and promotion of physical and psychological recovery and social reintegration. Colombia's conflict started in 1964 and spanned over 50 years, and at the time was the only conflict in the Americas that recruited children.¹ It is estimated that about 16,879 children were recruited by different armed groups throughout the conflict.² Colombia has two government agencies that work towards the reintegration of former combatants: the Colombian Agency for the Reintegration and Normalization (ACN) and the Colombian Family Welfare Institute (ICBF), the former caring for those who are 18 years of age or older, and the latter taking care of those who are below 18 years of age. Both are important because some combatants were recruited as children, but go through the reintegration process as adults.

A peace agreement was signed between former President Juan Manuel Santos and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia-People's Army (FARC-EP) in November 2016, officially ending the armed conflict. The peace agreement mentions reincorporation for minors who have left the FARC-EP camps.³ It also mentions taking into account the "compelling best interest" of all children and adolescents, taking a "differential rights-based approach," while also prioritizing "family and community reintegration." Through this agreement and other

¹ Gonzalo A. Vargas and Nataly Restrepo-Jaramillo. "Child Soldiering in Colombia: Does Poverty Matter?". *Civil Wars* 18, no. 4 (2016/10/01 2016): 470.

² Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica. "Una guerra sin edad. Informe nacional de reclutamiento y utilización de niños, niñas y adolescentes en el conflicto armado colombiano." CNMH, Bogotá. (2017): 17.

³ "Joint Communique #70 on Minors." FARC-EP International. May 17, 2016. Accessed April 22, 2018. <https://farc-eppeace.org/communiques/joint-communiques/item/1226-joint-communique-70-on-minors.html>.

international obligations, Colombia is legally bound to ensure that *all* former child soldiers are provided physical and psychological recovery and social reintegration.

The reintegration of child soldiers is important because it allows children affected by an armed conflict the opportunity to return to civilian life. Civilian life is different depending on the individual. For example, the return to civilian life for Afro-Colombian⁴ and indigenous children in the aftermath of the conflict is distinctly unique, as the effects of the armed conflict have disproportionately fallen on Afro-Colombian and indigenous children and adolescents.⁵

Colombia's reintegration process needs to be inclusive to their needs, too. Since 1999, 1 in 6 of the 6,000 children who escaped from armed groups or were rescued were from Afro-Colombian or indigenous communities, of which 30% of them were girls.⁶ According to the National Center for Historical Memory (CNMH), there has been a recorded 1,048 Afro-Colombian child soldiers recruited into various armed groups from 1960 until 2015.⁷ Recruitment by the FARC-EP and other groups such as the ELN mainly affected indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities in rural areas.⁸ Those from indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities who lived in situations of extreme vulnerability were highly exposed to conflict-related abuses.⁹

⁴ The terms "Afro-Colombian" and "Afro-descendant" are used interchangeably in this study. It's important to distinguish who Afro-Colombians are, first. From Leonardo Reales' article, he states: "According to the Afro-Colombian Plan of Development (1999), which was one of the first 'ethnic development' official texts in the country, the term Afro-Colombian population refers not only to the people physically identified as 'black', but also to those persons whose African background is evident as regards to their cultural expressions. This official text states that the concepts ethnic and cultural may be utilized interchangeably when defining the Afro-Colombian population and other minority groups. The same document establishes that both the phenotype and cultural characteristics should always be taken into account when locating, counting and evaluating the Afro-Colombian population as an ethnic group."

⁵ Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica. "Una guerra sin edad. Informe nacional de reclutamiento y utilización de niños, niñas y adolescentes en el conflicto armado colombiano." 423.

⁶ UNICEF. "Annual Report 2015: UNICEF Colombia." Report. 2015.

⁷ Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica. "Una guerra sin edad. Informe nacional de reclutamiento y utilización de niños, niñas y adolescentes en el conflicto armado colombiano." 233.

⁸ United Nations, Security Council, *Report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict in Colombia (September 2011-June 2016)*, S/2016/837 (4 October 2016), available from http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2016/837&Lang=E&Area=UNDOC

⁹ Ibid.

Moreover, girl soldiers face unique problems in the armed conflict.¹⁰ According to the CNMH, 26% of the children recruited under eighteen years old were girls, which is roughly 4,400 girls.¹¹ In reintegration programs, problems unique to girl child soldiers are either not addressed effectively, or in most cases, not addressed at all.¹² For example, girl soldiers frequently experience reproductive health problems and gender-specific stigmatization.¹³ Yet, until recently, post-conflict justice mechanisms designed to address suffering and help populations transition have systematically failed to address the needs of both women and children, in particular the needs of girl soldiers.¹⁴ Even among programs initiated to reintegrate and rehabilitate child soldiers, very few have focused on girls, and some have even excluded them from the process.¹⁵

Research Objectives and Significance:

If reintegration programs, then, have marginalized girl soldiers in the past, what happens to demobilized Afro-Colombian girls? Are their needs met? What happens when they return to their home communities? The present study aims to **understand whether or not Colombia's reintegration program policies are inclusive and address the needs of Afro-Colombian girl child soldiers, as well as understand the risks they may face upon reintegration into their communities.** This research seeks to collect more information on their reintegration experiences

¹⁰ Christy C. Fujio, "Invisible Soldiers: How and Why Post-Conflict Processes Ignore the Needs of Ex-Combatant Girls," *Journal of Law & Social Challenges* 10 (2008): 3.

¹¹ Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica. "Una guerra sin edad. Informe nacional de reclutamiento y utilización de niños, niñas y adolescentes en el conflicto armado colombiano." 55.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Aurora E. Bewicke. "Realizing the Right to Reparations for Girl Child Soldiers: A Child-Sensitive and Gendered Approach." *Columbia Journal of Gender and the Law* 26, no. 2 (2014): 183.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

to understand how reintegration programs can incorporate their experiences in their design and implementation.

Research Questions

Therefore, with this context in mind, this thesis aims to answer the following question:

Does the Colombian reintegration process adequately address the needs of demobilized Afro-Colombian girls? To answer this question, other questions will be explored, such as:

- 1) How has the Colombian armed conflict uniquely affected Afro-Colombian girls?
- 2) What do the ICBF guidelines say about gender and race?
- 3) What are the challenges of addressing the needs of demobilized Afro-Colombian girls?

Key Concepts

The use of child¹⁶ soldiers dates back millennia, but the phenomenon of child soldiers picked up at the end of the Cold War, and escalated with the rising number of armed conflicts in the 1990s.¹⁷ There have been an estimated 300,000 children involved in different conflicts.¹⁸ However, this statistic has been widely disputed, as information on child soldiers is generally difficult to obtain and the statistic is likely outdated.¹⁹ The definition of child soldier has also evolved over time, from the conception of its definition in the 1997 *Cape Town Principles and*

¹⁶ According to the UNCRC, a child is defined as “every human being below the age of eighteen years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier.”

¹⁷ Julie McBride. *The War Crime of Child Soldier Recruitment*. The Hague, The Netherlands: Asser Press, 2014: 28.

¹⁸ Roos Haer. "The Study of Child Soldiering: Issues and Consequences for DDR Implementation." *Third World Quarterly* 38, no. 2 (2017/02/01 2017): 452.

¹⁹ Ibid.

Best Practices, to the 2007 *Paris Principles*. The 2007 *Paris Principles* define “children associated with armed forces or armed groups” as follows:

“Any person below 18 years of age who is or who has been recruited or used by an armed force or armed group in any capacity, including but not limited to children, boys, and girls used as fighters, cooks, porters, messengers, spies, or for sexual purposes. It does not only refer to a child who is taking or has taken a direct part in hostilities.”²⁰

The definition has expanded to include all children who are recruited into various armed groups, regardless of their roles. This broad definition underscores the reality that child soldiers experience multiple violations of their rights, regardless of their actual role in the conflict.²¹

The international community has joined together to condemn the recruitment of children. Specifically, Article 38 of the CRC pertains to children in armed conflict and sets the minimum age of participation at fifteen.²² Moreover, in the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, under Article 8, it is a war crime to conscript or enlist “children under the age of fifteen years into the national armed forces or using them to participate actively in hostilities.”²³ Moreover, the OPAC was adopted in 2002. Some important features of this protocol are that it raised the age of conscription to eighteen, unless such recruitment is voluntary, as well as extending this prohibition to non-state armed groups.²⁴

Article 39 of the CRC highlights reintegration as a necessary human right for children in armed conflict. It states that “States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to promote

²⁰ UNICEF, *The Paris Principles. Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated With Armed Forces or Armed Groups*, February 2007.

²¹ Jacqueline Bhabha. *Child Migration & Human Rights in a Global Age*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2014: 176.

²² United Nations. *UNCRC - Convention on the Rights of the Child*.

²³ UN General Assembly, *Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court* (last amended 2010), 17 July 1998.

²⁴ UN General Assembly, *Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict*, 25 May, 2000.

physical and psychological recovery and social reintegration of a child victim.”²⁵ The Paris Principles define child reintegration as:

“The process through which children transition into civil society and enter meaningful roles and identities as civilians who are accepted by their families and communities in a context of local and national reconciliation. Sustainable reintegration is achieved when the political, legal, economic and social conditions needed for children to maintain life, livelihood and dignity have been secured. This process aims to ensure that children can ‘access their rights, including formal and non-formal education, family unity, dignified livelihoods and safety from harm.’”²⁶

How reintegration programs are designed is extremely important, as it provides a framework for demobilized child soldiers to enter civilian society.

Roadmap

The remainder of this thesis is divided into five sections. Chapter II provides background information on the nature of the armed conflict in Colombia, and the effects of the armed conflict on the women and girls, as well as the Afro-Colombian population. It also provides information on the reintegration process in general, and specific information on Colombia’s reintegration programs. Chapter III presents a review of the literature on reasons for the recruitment of child soldiers in Colombia and their demobilization, as well as their the experiences of children in Colombia’s reintegration programs. Chapter IV discusses the conceptual framework used to analyze research and findings. Chapter V describes the research methods and the methodology that was employed to conduct the field research. Chapter VI reports the findings from the data collection, dividing the findings into several themes. Chapter VII discusses these findings under

²⁵ United Nations. *UNCRC - Convention on the Rights of the Child*.

²⁶ UNICEF, *The Paris Principles. Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated With Armed Forces or Armed Groups*, February 2007.

the conceptual framework. Chapter VIII concludes by summarizing the findings and discussing the importance of this study.

Chapter II: Background

The Armed Conflict in Colombia

The armed conflict in Colombia involved multiple actors, including the Colombian government's National Army, guerrilla groups such as the National Liberation Army (ELN), and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC-EP), as well as a national umbrella association of paramilitaries called the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC).²⁷ A multitude of studies and reports have documented the profound deprivation, as well as the physical, sexual and psychological violence and abuse against children that occurs within Colombia's armed groups.²⁸

The impacts of armed conflict on children is something that is undisputed. Graça Machel's report, *the Impact of Armed Conflict on Children*, drew global attention to the devastating impact of war on children, and called for holistic approaches to supporting war-affected children.²⁹ The report states that armed conflict affects all aspects of child development – physical, mental, and emotional.³⁰ What is also key to understand is that not all children are affected by war in the same way, as the effects differ significantly in regard to the nature, duration, and severity of war experiences.³¹ Studies have reported high rates of internalizing

²⁷ Myriam Denov and Ines Marchand. "'One Cannot Take Away the Stain': Rejection and Stigma among Former Child Soldiers in Colombia." *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology* 20, no. 3 (2014): 229.

²⁸ Gonzalo A. Vargas and Nataly Restrepo-Jaramillo. "Child Soldiering in Colombia: Does Poverty Matter?" 471.

²⁹ Graça Machel, Report of the Expert to the Secretary General, UN General Assembly, Impact of armed conflict on children: Note by the Secretary-General, 26 August 1996, A/51/306, Available at: <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/3b00f2d30.html>.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Michael Wessells. *Child Soldiers: From Violence to Protection*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2006: 126.

problems (anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder [PTSD]) as well as externalizing problems (aggression, hostility, delinquent behaviors).³² On the other hand, some studies have found that some former child soldiers who experience severe traumatic experiences show resilient mental health outcomes and social functioning.³³ These two differing outcomes are a result of many different factors, such as the child's age, race, gender, and ethnicity.

Internal displacement as a result of the armed conflict has affected roughly 7.4 million people, with the majority of this population being poor, Afro-Colombian, or indigenous, living in areas of guerrilla or paramilitary influence.³⁴ Of the 7.4 million people, 48 percent of them are between 6 and 26 years old, and ten percent of them are Afro-Colombians.³⁵ For the Afro-Colombian community, internal displacement has meant the loss of ethnic, cultural, and territorial identity linked to their extended family and their community, their neighborhoods, their rivers, farms, mountains and animals, and their festivities, spiritual ceremonies and typical ways of relating.³⁶ This is why it is considered that even after 300 years of enslavement, forced displacement is, "the greatest and most extreme manifestation of the violations of the dignity and rights of Afro-descendant communities."³⁷ Moreover, territory is the space for development and self-determination of the "being" of Afro-descendants.³⁸ It is crucial then that territory and its protection remain a high priority for Afro-Colombian communities.

³² Ivelina I. Borisova, Theresa S. Betancourt, and John B. Willett. "Reintegration of Former Child Soldiers in Sierra Leone: The Role of Caregivers and Their Awareness of the Violence Adolescents Experienced During the War." *Journal Of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma* 22, no. 8 (September 2013): 804.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Myriam Denov and Ines Marchand. "I Can't Go Home'. Forced Migration and Displacement Following Demobilisation." *Intervention (Amstelveen, Netherlands)* 12, no. 3 (10/01 2014): 334.

³⁵ William Spindler. "Forced Displacement Growing in Colombia despite Peace Agreement." UNHCR. March 10, 2017. Accessed January 02, 2019. <https://www.unhcr.org/news/briefing/2017/3/58c26e114/forced-displacement-growing-colombia-despite-peace-agreement.html>.

³⁶ "Defeating Invisibility. A Challenge for Afro-descendant Women in Colombia." Afro-descendant Women Human Rights Defenders Project, April 2012, 42. <http://www.oidhaco.org/uploaded/content/article/389402040.pdf>.

³⁷ Myriam Denov and Ines Marchand. "I Can't Go Home'. Forced Migration and Displacement Following Demobilisation." 332.

³⁸ Ibid.

Afro-descendant women, due to their subordinated status in their communities, are at a disadvantage compared to Afro-descendant men and therefore are more prone to physical, psychological, sexual, and economic violence.³⁹ The armed conflict and forced displacement has transformed the role and participation of Afro-descendant women in the family, the community and in the organizational, economic and political structures, making them more active and visible.⁴⁰ As a result, there are new forms of intimidation directed toward Afro-descendant women, including sexual abuse in the context of the war in Afro-descendant territories.⁴¹ Between 2008 and 2010 these threats increased, resulting in the loss of the lives of numerous female leaders in the Pacific region.⁴²

The Colombian Reintegration Process

Since 1999, the ICBF has provided assistance to former child soldiers. A total of 4,811 children were assisted through this program between 1999 and 2011, of which 72% were boys and 28% were girls.⁴³ Of these 4,811 children, 2,838 were formerly associated with the FARC-EP, 1,058 with the AUC, and 721 with the ELN.⁴⁴ Prevention and care are the two core aspects of the ICBF's reinsertion program.⁴⁵ The prevention aspect is coordinated within the ICBF's ongoing child protection projects and programs, but has a particular focus in areas where there is high risk for recruitment by armed groups.⁴⁶ For a child who has been demobilized from an armed group, the care aspect of ICBF programming involves support and protection of

³⁹ "Defeating Invisibility. A Challenge for Afro-descendant Women in Colombia." 5.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 15.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid, 333.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Myriam Denov and Ines Marchand. "'One Cannot Take Away the Stain': Rejection and Stigma among Former Child Soldiers in Colombia." 230.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

demobilized youth within an institutional or family setting.⁴⁷ Here, programming focuses on psychosocial care, return to schooling, job training, and support for productive initiatives through Centers for Specialized Care (Centros de Atención Especializada) and Youth Homes (Casas Juveniles) located in different regions of the country.⁴⁸ Protection and care of demobilized children within a social or family setting can take one of two forms, depending on whether the child has a family to return to.⁴⁹ If a child can return to his or her family, the ICBF ensures that the child's fundamental rights are met and secured within the family context and provides a subsidy, depending upon the family's resources and ability to meet the child's needs.⁵⁰ If the child does not have any family or he or she is unable to return to their family, the ICBF selects a foster home (hogar tutor) trained to receive children on a voluntary and temporary basis.⁵¹

Some common aspects of reintegration programs for child soldiers include ensuring physical health, reinstalling a typical day structure, educational and training activities, therapeutic activities and also focusing on tracing family members and realizing reunification.⁵² The diversity of former child soldiers' concerns, which are psychosocial, economic, physical and cultural, indicates the holistic nature of the reintegration process.⁵³ Moreover, the breadth and scope of their concerns caution against "singular approaches" that assume that a returnee needs only a single form of support.⁵⁴ Another theme in the process of reintegration is the collective

⁴⁷ Myriam Denov and Ines Marchand. "'One Cannot Take Away the Stain': Rejection and Stigma among Former Child Soldiers in Colombia." 230.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ilse Derluyn, Lucia De Haene, Wouter Vandenhoele, and Relinde Reiffers. "Introduction to the Special Section on Former Child Soldiers' Rehabilitation." *Intervention (Amstelveen, Netherlands)* 12, no. 3 (01/2014): 324.

⁵³ Michael Wessells. *Child Soldier: From Violence to Protection*. 126.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

trauma the community faces.⁵⁵ Because of this, former child soldiers need to cope with their individual trauma, but also the challenges emerging from the war-affected society.

Chapter III: Literature Review

Child Soldier Recruitment and Demobilization

The marginalized status of children in Colombian society and the many challenges they face make them especially vulnerable to use and abuse by both illegal and state forces.⁵⁶ This vulnerability is an important insight to understand how children come to join armed groups. Researchers have found two specific ways. One way is forced recruitment. Convenience, low cost, and impunity are significant factors in commanders' decision to recruit children.⁵⁷ Commanders often target teenagers because their larger size enables them to carry heavy loads, perform difficult labor, and fight with an efficacy that rivals that of adults.⁵⁸ Moreover, children are "easier to mislead and indoctrinate, cheaper to retain, and more responsive to coercive methods."⁵⁹ Children are vulnerable subjects for forced recruitment as they can be "easily abducted, terrorized and easily intimidated."⁶⁰ In some cases, national armed forces in some states round up young boys from schools, streets, and even their homes, and forcibly enlist them into their ranks.⁶¹ This type of recruitment typically projects an image of child soldiers as "a helpless object manipulated locally by adult malevolence, yet at the same time to be rescued

⁵⁵ Michael Wessells. *Child Soldier: From Violence to Protection*. 126.

⁵⁶ Grazia Prontera. *Children and War : Past and Present. Volume Ii*. Solihull, West Midlands: Helion & Company Limited, 2016: 64.

⁵⁷ Michael Wessells. "Child Soldiers: From Violence to Protection." 32.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Bernd Beber and Christopher Blattman. "The Logic of Child Soldiering and Coercion." *International Organization* 67, no. 1 (2013): 72.

⁶⁰ Ilse Derluyn, Sofie Vindevogel, and Lucia De Haene. "Toward a Relational Understanding of the Reintegration and Rehabilitation Processes of Former Child Soldiers." *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma* 22, no. 8, (2013): 871.

⁶¹ Julie McBride. *The War Crime of Child Soldier Recruitment*. 28.

transnationally by adult humanitarianism.”⁶² This projection epitomizes the child soldier as a “faultless, passive victim.”⁶³ This image of the child soldier as a faultless, passive victim may distort the complexities of who becomes a child soldier, which can harm their chances of successful reintegration because it does not take into account the harmful nature of conflict situations.⁶⁴

While it is true that some children are abducted or forcibly recruited as child soldiers, it is also true that economic, social, cultural and political conditions can drive “voluntarily recruitment.”⁶⁵ Voluntary recruitment can be an extremely misleading term, as many children do not feel like they have any other opportunity, and choose to enlist due to staggering economic conditions, severe hunger or lack of opportunities pertaining to education or employment.⁶⁶ Moreover, separation from family typically occurs during armed conflict, or some children’s parents are killed, leaving children separated and at an increased risk.⁶⁷ In Colombia, many have observed multiple reasons for why children have “voluntarily” enlisted with armed groups. For example, they have found that crucial factors such as “war, family, education and employment, poverty, and the peer group” are contextual and may have a role to play in the recruitment of child soldiers in Colombia.⁶⁸ Abusive, exploitative families have pushed children to joined the armed groups, as well as the lack of access to education and employment opportunities.⁶⁹ More specifically, Vargas and Restrepo-Jaramillo find that in Colombia, “municipalities with higher

⁶² Mark A. Drumbl. *Reimagining Child Soldiers in International Law and Policy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. (2012): 6.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Shannon Bosch and Juanita Easthorpe. "Africa's Toy Soldiers, Non-State Armed Groups, and 'Voluntary' Recruitment." *African Security Review* 21, no. 2 (2012/06/01 2012): 7.

⁶⁶ Roos Haer. "The Study of Child Soldiering: Issues and Consequences for DDR Implementation." 452.

⁶⁷ Michael Wessells. *Child Soldiers: From Violence to Protection*. 34.

⁶⁸ Gonzalo A. Vargas and Nataly Restrepo-Jaramillo. "Child Soldiering in Colombia: Does Poverty Matter?" 469.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

rates of rural poverty, with lack of access to education, as well as those where coca is grown, are more likely to be used as recruiting grounds by armed groups.”⁷⁰ The worse these conditions, the more kids are recruited. They argue that “dynamics of armed conflict also matters: when armed conflict becomes more intense, more kids are recruited, but when these groups suffer casualties, recruiting falls.”⁷¹ This is consistent with the fact that, in Colombia, most child soldiers declare they joined armed groups voluntarily, as several surveys of demobilized children consistently show.⁷² Understanding that recruitment may be voluntary serves as a window into young people’s underlying concerns, grievances, needs and aspirations, which may otherwise be ignored in the “all-are-victims” discourse.⁷³

The role girl soldiers play are often less visible than boys, being hidden by armed groups and classified as “wives” rather than combatants.⁷⁴ For girls in Colombia, Yvonne E. Keairns finds that “being poor and disadvantaged, inhabiting a combat zone, being separated from their family, dropping out of school, not having a voice in the decisions that affect their life, being marginalized in new family structures, and failure to be protected by the family” are risk factors in the choice to become a child soldier in Colombia.⁷⁵ Despite evidence showing that girl soldiers are a fundamental part of the “war machine,” the roles played by girls are often seen as insignificant and less of a security threat, leading to a degree of invisibility that has led to the exclusion of girls from both local and international efforts to demobilize and reintegrate child

⁷⁰ Gonzalo A. Vargas and Nataly Restrepo-Jaramillo. “Child Soldiering in Colombia: Does Poverty Matter?” 482.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Roos Haer. “The Study of Child Soldiering: Issues and Consequences for DDR Implementation.” 452.

⁷⁴ Adriana Marcella Dail. “Access to Health Services and Health Seeking Behavior among Former Child Soldiers in Manizales, Colombia.” Order No. 10241493, University of South Florida, 2016: 17.

⁷⁵ Yvonne E. Keairns. “The Voices of Girl Child Soldiers: Colombia.” Quaker United Nations Office. Report. 2003: 11.

soldiers.⁷⁶ Furthermore, while there are similarities to the violence endured by all child soldiers, some of it is gender-specific.⁷⁷ Even if they are able to return home, former girl soldiers often face "resentment, rejection, and stigmatization."⁷⁸ Thus, many former girl soldiers find themselves in a triple-marginalized position vis-à-vis other victims based on their status as youths, females, and as persons associated with armed groups.⁷⁹ This invisibility is important to understand because it shows that girls' voices are necessary to understand their needs, so that they can be adequately represented in the design and implementation of reintegration programs.

Child Soldier Reintegration in Colombia

Upon exiting an armed group, the transition to civilian life represents an abrupt shift in relationships, behavioral patterns, and expectations, and entails the reshaping of identities from a "militarized" identity to a "civilian" one.⁸⁰ Some challenges in reintegration have to do with the inability to reunite with one's family, transitioning from a context of organized violence, and living with rejection and stigma.⁸¹ For example, as a result of the ongoing armed violence and the presence of armed groups, former child soldiers in Colombia were, for the most part, unable to return to their communities of origin.⁸² Moreover, it has been demonstrated that family and/or community acceptance and support are undeniably critical to war-affected children's long-term well-being and overall successful reintegration.⁸³ As a result, those children who have family and

⁷⁶ Yvonne E. Kearins. "The Voices of Girl Child Soldiers: Colombia." Quaker United Nations Office. Report. 2003: 11.

⁷⁷ Aurora E. Bewicke. "Realizing the Right to Reparations for Girl Child Soldiers: A Child-Sensitive and Gendered Approach." 194.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid, 183.

⁸⁰ Myriam Denov and Ines Marchand. "'One Cannot Take Away the Stain': Rejection and Stigma among Former Child Soldiers in Colombia." 229.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

community support are likely to fare much better than those children who experience rejection and/or social exclusion following demobilization.⁸⁴ Research has highlighted that post-conflict rejection and stigma can play an important role in shaping psychosocial adjustment in former child soldiers.⁸⁵

Child soldiers who have demobilized in Colombia have an array of needs and concerns upon their return to civilian life, whether that is back in their home community or in a context of forced displacement. Denov and Marchand state that prior to the signing of the peace deal, many child soldiers were unable to return back to their home communities, causing a huge sense of loss for many child soldiers.⁸⁶ They state that the implications of this forced migration had a powerful impact on their long-term reintegration, particularly in relation to “family separation and support, place, and ongoing (in)security.”⁸⁷ Despite having been displaced and forced to migrate to a new context and community, relocation did not always assure nor guarantee former child soldiers’ security or safety.⁸⁸ Due to ongoing death threats, they frequently had to flee and relocate, often under dangerous circumstances and urgency.⁸⁹ This sense of displacement also means that former child soldiers are very alert and on the defensive.⁹⁰ As child soldiers transitioned from a context of armed violence into civilian society, it meant that they had to come to terms with their experiences of wartime violence—whether as victims, perpetrators, or

⁸⁴ Myriam Denov and Ines Marchand. ““One Cannot Take Away the Stain”: Rejection and Stigma among Former Child Soldiers in Colombia.” 229.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Myriam Denov and Ines Marchand. “‘I Can’t Go Home’: Forced Migration and Displacement Following Demobilisation.” 336.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid, 338.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

both.⁹¹ For many former child soldiers, these experiences of wartime violence continue to have an impact on them in their daily lives.⁹²

Moreover, stigma and discrimination from community members was another powerful theme that remains a consistent factor in former child soldiers' post-demobilization experiences.⁹³ Many child soldiers recount painful experiences of rejection, and in some cases, the rejection was experienced directly from family members.⁹⁴ In other cases, it was the wider community that the young people reported as rejecting them, including community members that the youth knew personally, as well as strangers.⁹⁵ While exclusion and rejection were reported to occur within families and the broader community, many child soldiers also experienced the direct implications of stigma or their "tainted status."⁹⁶ Former child soldiers' involvement and former affiliation in armed groups represented "badges of demerit" to community members, causing labeling, stereotyping, status loss, and discrimination, which directly affected former child soldiers' ability to successfully reintegrate and lead productive civilian lives.⁹⁷ For example, former child soldiers had difficult experiences locating housing due to this stigma.⁹⁸ Many reported that potential landlords would ask where they worked and their ongoing source of income, and when the youth responded that they were receiving a government subsidy

⁹¹ Myriam Denov and Ines Marchand. "'One Cannot Take Away the Stain': Rejection and Stigma among Former Child Soldiers in Colombia." 221.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Myriam Denov and Ines Marchand. "'I Can't Go Home': Forced Migration and Displacement Following Demobilisation." 338.

⁹⁴ Myriam Denov and Ines Marchand. "'One Cannot Take Away the Stain': Rejection and Stigma among Former Child Soldiers in Colombia." 234.

⁹⁵ Ibid, 235.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

(frequently associated with former combatants), they were often turned away and refused housing.⁹⁹

Former female child soldiers have an array of concerns that are unique in comparison to male child soldiers. For example, in terms of employment, while all child soldiers have demanding schedules, girls carry extra an extra burden as they typically are forced to return to traditional gender roles that exist in Colombia.¹⁰⁰ Many are studying and working simultaneously, and in many instances, girl child soldiers are also single mothers.¹⁰¹ These young women are often balancing the pressures of work, school, and raising their children, often with minimal financial or emotional assistance.¹⁰² Childcare, or lack thereof, represented an ongoing challenge for these young women who were struggling to improve their plight and provide for their children.¹⁰³ Moreover, girls recruited into armed groups are subjected to “serious sexual violence in a repeated and systematic manner, including rape, sexual slavery and exploitation, forced pregnancy and abortion, and the passing on of sexually transmitted diseases.”¹⁰⁴ These gendered-consequences of the armed conflict coupled with structural discrimination in Colombian society, together with gender stereotypes and patriarchal attitudes, has resulted in high levels of violence against women and girls, which has disproportionately affected women and children of Afro-Colombian and indigenous heritage.¹⁰⁵

⁹⁹ Myriam Denov and Ines Marchand. ““One Cannot Take Away the Stain”: Rejection and Stigma among Former Child Soldiers in Colombia.” 234.

¹⁰⁰ Viviana Patricia Montoya Giraldo. *Former Girl Child Soldiers in Colombia: Young Voices That Need to be Heard.* Dalhousie University, 2014: 106.

¹⁰¹ Myriam Denov and Ines Marchand. “I Can’t Go Home’. Forced Migration and Displacement Following Demobilisation.” 340.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ The Lori E. Talsky Center for Human Rights of Women and Children and the Stahili Foundation. *Colombia Country Report: Children and Security.* Halifax, NS: The Roméo Dallaire Child Soldiers Initiative, 2017: 18.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

This disproportionate discrimination needs to be taken into account in the design of reintegration programs. Developing Minds Foundation provided a blueprint for establishing successful reintegration programs for former child soldiers based off of a review of the Centro de Atención Especializada (CAE) at Ciudad Don Bosco in Medellín, Colombia. In this blueprint, Developing Minds Foundation highlighted unique problems for marginalized youth. In this section, they note that Afro-Colombians tend to experience latent and sometimes direct discrimination or prejudicial treatment by other youth.¹⁰⁶ They note that Afro-Colombian children have difficulty socializing, and on the whole, their reintegration may be jeopardized due to their inability to assimilate easily.¹⁰⁷

Chapter IV: Conceptual Framework

UN Security Council Resolution 2250 on Youth, Peace, and Security

To provide insight on how to adequately address the needs of demobilized Afro-Colombian girl child soldiers, this thesis will employ the conceptual framework provided by the United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 2250 on Youth, Peace, and Security (YPS).¹⁰⁸ UNSCR 2250, adopted in December 2015, aims to recognize the role of young people

¹⁰⁶ Developing Minds Foundation. “Blueprint for the Reintegration of Former Child Soldiers in Colombia.” Report. 2014.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ This current study focuses on former child soldiers, which is defined as children under the age of 18. The justification for using the YPS resolution for the reintegration of former child soldiers is because as the Independent Progress Study on Youth, Peace, And Security mentions “it is important to recognize that youth, unlike many other ‘unchanging’ forms of identity (such as ethnicity or race), is a transitional phase of life – one that evolves and changes with the passage of time. Many researchers have described that graduation from youth to adulthood is associated with diverse cultural, psychosocial, developmental, political, and economic milestones or rites of passage that signal the acquisition of relative autonomy and recognition of adult status, based on evolving capacities and social standings. However, violent conflict, humanitarian crises, political and criminal violence, natural disasters and health crises, migration and urbanization, and entrenched gender inequality all affect and potentially dislocate young people’s transition to adulthood by distorting their life cycle process, and rupturing the conventional places of community-based belonging, status, and social cohesion.”

as agents of peace.¹⁰⁹ This is the first resolution fully dedicated to the important and positive role young women and men play in the maintenance of promotion of international peace and security.¹¹⁰ This resolution has five main pillars for action to guide the work of Member States and United Nations entities in this area: participation, protection, prevention, partnership, and disengagement and reintegration.¹¹¹ For this study, the findings will be analyzed under only three pillars: participation, prevention, and disengagement and reintegration. Although UNSCR 2250 defines youth as 18-29 years, this study will apply the framework to former child soldiers (defined as under the age of 18).¹¹²

Under the pillar of participation, UNSCR 2250 urges Member States to “consider ways to increase inclusive representation of youth in decision-making at all levels ... for the prevention and resolution of conflict” as well as calling on all relevant actors “to take into account, as appropriate, the participation and views of youth, recognizing that their marginalization is detrimental to building sustainable peace in all societies, including such specific aspects as: the needs of youth during repatriation and resettlement and for rehabilitation, reintegration, and post-conflict reconstruction; measures that support local youth peace initiatives and indigenous processes for conflict resolution, and that involve youth in the implementation mechanisms of peace agreements; and measures to empower youth in peacebuilding and conflict resolution.” Analyzing the findings under this concept of participation can help realize the right to reintegration for former Afro-Colombian girl child soldiers, because it highlights their voices as a necessary aspect in decision-making processes. Listening to their voices is one way to ensure

¹⁰⁹ Graeme Simpson. “*The Missing Peace: Independent Progress Study on Youth, Peace and Security.*” UNFPA and PBSO. 2018: ii.

¹¹⁰ Ibid, ix.

¹¹¹ Ibid, 3.

¹¹² Ibid, 9.

that their needs can be addressed in the design and implementation of reintegration program policies.

Under the pillar of prevention, UNSCR 2250 urges Member States to “facilitate an inclusive and enabling environment in which youth actors, including youth from different backgrounds, are recognized and provided with adequate support.” It stresses “the importance of creating policies for youth that would positively contribute to peacebuilding efforts, including social and economic development, supporting projects designed to grow local economies, and provide youth employment opportunities and vocational training, fostering their education, and promoting youth entrepreneurship and constructive political engagement.” Analyzing the findings under the prevention pillar can provide insight on how to enable an environment that allow children and youth the opportunities to contribute to peacebuilding efforts, which would decrease the likelihood of their re-recruitment. It seeks to address the root causes of the recruitment of Afro-Colombian girls.

Under the pillar of disengagement and reintegration, UNSCR 2250 encourages “all those involved in the planning for disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration to consider the needs of youth affected by armed conflict, such as: evidence-based and gender-sensitive youth employment opportunities, inclusive labor policies, national youth employment action plans in partnership with the private sector, developed in partnership with youth and recognizing the interrelated role of education, employment, and training in preventing the marginalization of youth; investment in building young persons’ capabilities and skills to meet labor demands through relevant education opportunities designed in a manner which promotes a culture of peace; and support for youth-led and peacebuilding organizations as partners in youth employment and entrepreneurship programs.” The UNSCR 2250 sees reintegration falling into

two categories: economic and sociopolitical. Economic reintegration typically focuses on livelihoods and jobs, whether through strengthening the employability of disengaging youth or developing an enabling environment that is able to absorb them as a newly incoming workforce.¹¹³ In terms of sociopolitical reintegration, it means that for the vast majority of disengaging youth, reintegration requires that they learn to rebuild social relations, find alternative coping mechanisms, reconstruct a new non-violent identity, and embrace new ideas and difference, in order to peacefully coexist with community members.¹¹⁴ Economic and sociopolitical reintegration are both important to ensure that the communities that Afro-Colombian girls have economic opportunities for them as well as a place to peacefully coexist with community members.

The YPS agenda is critical for the analysis of this study because through its methodology, they understand that “for reintegration processes and programs to prosper, they must demonstrate an intimate understanding of the impact that exposure to violence has had on both disengaging youth and the community into which they are being reintegrated.” They understand that it “requires reintegration processes that align with or accommodate the economic, social, political and psychosocial needs of all those involved,” and that “the reintegration of young people disengaging from violence must be gender-sensitive and reflect their diverse needs, including for physical protection; providing trauma and healing services for survivors of sexual violence; and restoring decent economic livelihoods and education for those who have been displaced or whose schools and homes have been destroyed.”¹¹⁵ This framework understands that reintegration efforts must be inclusive of the needs of *all* children, and make a concerted effort to

¹¹³ Graeme Simpson. “*The Missing Peace: Independent Progress Study on Youth, Peace and Security.*” 9.

¹¹⁴ Ibid, 109.

¹¹⁵ Ibid, 108.

put the voices of children and youth at the forefront of decision-making processes. This is vital to ensure the right to reintegration is realized for demobilized Afro-Colombian girls.

Chapter V: Research Methods and Methodology

Research Approach and Design

This study adopts a qualitative research approach, conducting interviews with child protection experts who have worked with child soldiers in Colombia. The study will also look at the guidelines set out by the ICBF on the reintegration of demobilized children, specifically looking to define the “differential focus.” This will be crucial to understand how reintegration programs have taken into account race and gender into their programs.

Access to Sites

In the initial stages of my research, I found that in order to talk to the ICBF and the ARN, key participants in the study, researchers must submit proposals of their research detailing the importance of the research, the methodology, and the way in which these organizations could contribute. I translated my research proposal from English to Spanish, tailoring each of the proposals to the specific organization. Both were returned to me with feedback. I revised both proposals and re-submitted them. After re-submitting the proposals, both organizations had rejected the requests for interviews.

Sampling Criteria and Recruitment Techniques

To be recruited for the study, participants had to have worked with children involved in the armed conflict in some capacity. Participants were referred to me by different colleagues and mentors who also work in the professional field of human rights.

Data Collection Methods and Analysis

The fieldwork was conducted from July 4th until July 15th, 2018 in Bogotá, Colombia. The primary data consisted of semi-structured interviews with child protection experts who have worked with former child soldiers in the Colombian context. Each participant consented verbally prior to the interview. The sample consisted of two male and two female participants who have professional experience working with former child soldiers. Interviews were conducted in Spanish, and on-site at times and places agreed by both the researcher and the participants. All interviews were audio-taped with the consent of the participants. The semi-structured interviews were guided by interview protocols, each lasting about an hour on average. Each interview was transcribed verbatim. The interviews were then coded into different themes that emerged throughout the various interviews. In addition to the semi-structured interviews, technical guidelines from the ICBF were also analyzed to understand how the ICBF understands a “differential focus” which encompasses the Afro-Colombian population and also encompasses gender. Triangulation was adopted as a research method, so that more than one method (qualitative and quantitative) would provide crosschecking or offer mutual validation of the data and findings.¹¹⁶ Triangulation affords researchers the opportunity to reduce irregularities in their

¹¹⁶ Henry Oluwasegunfunmi Majaro-Majesty. A Case for the Use of Triangulation in Research on Ethnic Relations of a Conflict-Transiting Community. *SAGE Research Methods Cases*, 2018: 2.

data.¹¹⁷ Triangulation was used here to validate any potential information received from participants with any other sources.

Challenges and Limitations

One challenge was that due to resources and time constraints, the researcher was unable to interview demobilized Afro-Colombian girls. An attempt was made to interview the practitioners who work with demobilized Afro-Colombian girls. However, the ICBF and ARN denied the requests to interview practitioners. This was a huge limitation to the study. Moreover, the perspectives of NGO and IGO workers, while valuable, do not fully reflect the needs of demobilized Afro-Colombian girls.

One big limitation is the amount of understanding that I do not have as someone who did not grow up in Colombia during the conflict. Through conversations with neighbors, friends, and colleagues, the reintegration of former combatants (both adults and children) is a polarizing topic. The effects of the conflict are still very present in Colombian society. I have done my research about the conflict, but there will never be a true understanding of the conflict because I have not lived through it.

Researcher Reflexivity/ Positionality

While I am not of Colombian nationality, being fluent in Spanish was extremely helpful throughout the data collection process, because the interviewees were able to speak openly and naturally, allowing for the most reliable responses possible. Moreover, professional colleagues through Columbia University put me in contact with all interviewees. This was extremely helpful

¹¹⁷ Henry Oluwasegunfunmi Majaro-Majesty. A Case for the Use of Triangulation in Research on Ethnic Relations of a Conflict-Transiting Community. *SAGE Research Methods Cases*, 2018: 2.

because the interviewees were aware of who I was, what I was doing, and were interested in being interviewed. In addition, I spent a total of about four months in Colombia; two weeks were spent conducting interviews, and the other fourteen weeks were spent volunteering and working with grassroots human rights organizations that focused on the Colombian conflict. This experience was invaluable and provided a lot of context and background for my research.

As a graduate student concentrating on children affected by armed conflict, I am fully aware of the many different factors that contribute to a demobilized child's "successful" reintegration. However, having never experienced armed conflict, there is only so much that I can understand concerning their needs. I am not a social worker nor a psychosocial expert, so I did not want to approach the study in that sense. Therefore, I approached this study using a human-rights based approach.

Chapter VI: Findings

Overview

This chapter is divided into three different sections: the first section presents the findings on the impacts of the armed conflict on Afro-Colombian girls; the second section presents the findings on the challenges to the reintegration of demobilized Afro-Colombian girls; and the third section describes the policies of the ICBF that address gender and race, specifically analyzing their "differential focus" approach.

Theme 1: The Impacts of the Armed Conflict on Afro-Colombian Girls

Sexual, Reproductive, and Mental Health

All participants stated that Afro-Colombian girls experienced a host of issues regarding their sexual, reproductive, and mental health. P1 states that when creating policies for reintegration programs, practitioners must ask, “what happened to the *girls* during the conflict?” P1 says that many times, the consequences of the conflict are physical for girls. Moreover, the emotional aspect of the girls’ experiences need to be evaluated, but not only on a human, personal, psyche level, but on the basis of affection and how to address any romantic involvements that girls may have had with commanders during their time in the armed group. P1 says that girls who were romantically involved with commanders or generals in the conflict face different challenges in regard to the intensity of the conflict but also upon their demobilization. P3 states that there is a need to strengthen some of the characterization instruments, methodologies, and protocols of approaches and special attention that is specific to girls, adolescent women, ethnic groups, Afro-descendent communities, and indigenous communities. P3 states that there are specific guidelines that take the needs of these different groups into account, but they need to be strengthened, as they are currently standardized, and as P2 states, come across as a “cookie-cutter” approach. P3 states that these reintegration programs need to adapt to the needs of girls in a better way, because many of the girls come out of the armed groups pregnant, with sexually transmitted diseases (STD), as well as different psychosocial impacts related with the violence, abuse, and sexual exploitation inside of the group as well as prior to their recruitment.

P3 states a crucial element in the reintegration process is taking into account these risks and factors, in particular what Afro girls may face in the conflict. Sexual and reproductive rights should be offered. P3 recounts testimonies of girls who have left the reintegration programs two or three months pregnant, and are living with their partners, or have established a home with

their partners only and exclusively to secure an element of safety. A reintegration program that is focused on Afro girls, P3 states, has to keep this into account in the strengthening of familial and individual capacities, so that these girls can understand that their body is not an object, and they do not have to be instrumentalized.

Lack of Community Support

P4 states that stigma is a huge difficulty for demobilized Afro girls. P4 states that there is a vulnerability that Afro girls face because of their ethnic belonging, as well as for being a girl, as well as being a *young* girl. P4 states that these three factors create a host of vulnerabilities, and what reintegration programs must also keep in mind is that being “Afro” means different things in the Colombian context. P4 states that being an Afro girl in the Pacific is different than being an Afro girl from the Caribbean. This layered stigmatization that Afro girls face, according to P4, also has to be conscious of geographical considerations, too.

P3 gives an example of an Afro-Colombian girl who was a participant in the program, and how it took her four months to be able to arrange her registration to get her identity card. She demobilized when she was seventeen years old, and while waiting, turned eighteen, and was unable to register for the reintegration program for adults until she was able to get her card. P3 states that it took her two days to get to the closest location from where she was living to complete the registration to obtain her identity card. P3 states that these circumstances do not only occur with Afro-Colombian populations, but they occur at a higher rate because Afro-Colombian communities are typically further away from populated areas and from the areas that are more developed in terms of access to services. P3 states that these situations in particular occur more often with Afro-Colombian communities, and there is a level of exclusion prior to

their demobilization, and they are perpetuated, and remain there after their demobilization. P2 states that this exclusion is structural. P2 continues by saying that for children who are not of Afro-descent, that although they too can live far from these centers, not being Afro makes it easier for them, because however far they are, there is some level of access to these services. P3 states that these are special considerations that a program of reincorporation or reintegration, as they are adopting a differential focus, would have to take into account the circumstances of the particular context.

Theme 2: The Challenges of the Reintegration of Demobilized Afro-Colombian Girls

Lack of Participation Mechanisms

All participants stated that the implementation of a mechanism that allows for the participation of demobilized Afro-Colombian girls is necessary. P1 stated that since 1999, the ICBF has had a mechanism for the participation of former child soldiers, however they say it's not so clear how it works, as external actors, such as non-governmental organizations, don't usually have access to the program nor the children in the programs. P1 continues by saying it is not so clear where the contribution of the boys and girls are in the process of reintegration. P1 says that they are under a degree of protection, but it's evident that this protection is thought of for the children by the adults.

P1 states that with the last stage with the demobilization of the FARC after the peace deal was signed, it was clear and specific to include the participation of boys and girls, above all in this case those who were minors. P1 continues by saying that they designed a model of participation where it was possible for them to participate, but until now, it hasn't been attained. It is developed inside the guidelines of the program called "A differential path of life," but really

it has become operational; there is no record that it has been materialized. P1 states that the idea is there, the figures are there, but it has not become attainable in practice. P4 echoes this point by noting the importance of giving former child soldiers a space for them to participate politically as well, so they speak, express themselves, and are a part of the process. P2 and P3 also state that their participation in different programs and initiatives of reconciliation make them stronger and prevent their re-recruitment, it prevents sexual violence against girls, and promotes that the former child soldiers, their families, and their communities acquire the tools for adequate participation.

When asked what was the reason that this participation mechanism was unattainable, P1 responded that it is a sum of different factors. Primarily though, they state that it is of political will. P1 says that the political will is necessary in order to create concrete spaces for participation and where the form of this space is created. P1 states that they must be heard, not only heard in the sense that they have a place in the discussion, but an agreement to use their voice to create concrete action to the degree of attention that they're asking for. P4 agrees that there is a lack of political will. However, P3 states that there is political will, but there is a need to specify the objectives of the different mechanisms. P3 continues that this political will is expressed in the peace deal, and that there is an intention on behalf of the government to make an efficient, sustainable peace process that promotes a stable and long-lasting peace. P3 states that this political will needs to be manifested into a specific, punctual, technically structured, financial, and legal program that is situated in a specific institution, being the ICBF.

Lack of Community Protection

Another impact of the armed conflict on Afro-Colombian girls are the remaining expressions of violence and recruitment in the communities where Afro-Colombian girls are returning to and a lack of acceptance in their communities. P2 states that although the peace deal was signed, Colombia is still in conflict, and there are still expressions of violence against boys and girls, and that recruitment of boys and girls still persists. P3 says that these expressions of violence are indeed present, and that reintegration programs cannot be closed just yet, because although the number of demobilized children have been low, the numbers have begun to increase. P2 states that another issue that affects the reintegration is the children who informally demobilized, meaning those that did not go through the reintegration programs, but instead were released or had escaped from the FARC, and returned to their communities on their own.

P2 states that another challenge for the reintegration in their communities is that the communities where Afro-Colombian girls will return to, there are battles over territory fought by different armed groups who have appeared. P2 states that many of the armed groups are running to fill up the empty spaces left by the FARC when they demobilized. P2 and P3 both state that children leave the reintegration programs, where they have their rights and basic services moderately guaranteed, and then they return to a context in which they have nothing, and State institutions are difficult to access, where there is the challenge of reaching all populations. But it's not just the children that are hard to access, they state, but for majority Afro-Colombian populations, to which the polarization of the country contributes to. Therefore, the children face a double exclusion, for having been members of an illegal armed group that communities did not support whatsoever, and having been demobilized in the time frame of a peace process that over fifty-percent of the Colombian population voted "no" against.¹¹⁸ This stigmatization, P3 states,

¹¹⁸ Former President Juan Manuel Santos proposed a peace referendum, which would have ended the armed conflict with the FARC. However, 50.2 percent of voters voted "no" to the referendum, against 49.8 percent of

hinders children from identifying themselves as former child soldiers, which then hinders them from accessing their rights guaranteed by the state. A risk of identifying themselves is that they implicate themselves, and then are subject to threats against themselves and their families. P3 states that sometimes these children are given orders not to identify themselves. P3 continues by saying that they return to the same conditions and face the same situations, that possible facilitated their recruitment in the first place. They return to their families where there is no adequate attention, they return to the same contexts of exclusion, the same contexts where there are no basic services of education and health nor registration.

Perceptions of Former Child Soldiers

Moreover, P4 states that in Colombia, there is an overall perception of childhood, that children are not considered subjects with rights. P4 continues by saying that institutions and practitioners will look at children as “pobrecitos”¹¹⁹, and provide them with education and healthcare, and think that the situation has been resolved. P1 also states that most of the time, practitioners would have a pre-conceived idea or path that the demobilized children would undertake, when in reality, many of the demobilized children were adolescents and had already defined many aspects of their lives. P1 says the implication of this is that there’s a higher level of pressure put on the adolescents, rather than opening a place for participation for them to express their ideas and what they want their path to look like.

Existing Ties to the Armed Group

“yes” votes. This meant that the peace deal could not be implemented. The deal was then revised, and signed by President Santos and FARC leader Rodrigo Londoño, also known as Timochenko. The deal was then officially passed through Congress.

¹¹⁹ Roughly translated as “poor child.”

P3 noted that during the demobilization of the FARC, the children were still in contact with the commanders and generals of the armed group. P3 states that the reintegration programs were not able to cut the tie between the children and the armed group, because they were all demobilizing at the same time. Prior to the peace deal, the tie between the two was cut off, and the children would arrive to the program because they were rescued or because they fled from the armed group. Prior, the armed group would not know where the children who left were, but now, they know. The commanders would visit the children, communicate by telephone, and P3 says this reality needs to be considered. Moreover, P3 states that upon return to the communities after the reintegration programs, the major risk in the post-conflict context that these children have is being visible in their communities, and being re-recruited by other armed groups, by dissidences of the FARC, or receiving threats, putting their life in danger. P2 states that being killed by groups of the extreme right is also another risk upon return to their communities.

Theme 3: ICBF Policies on Gender and Race

The ICBF has set out guidelines that address how they incorporate gender and ethnicity into the care and protection of children. This section will compile the findings and divide them into two sections: how the ICBF defines “differential focus” and the mechanisms that exist to realize a differential-rights based approach in relation to gender and ethnicity.

What is a “Differential Focus”?

The doctrine of comprehensive protection in the differential-rights model is represented in the effective articulation that gives a timely and comprehensive response for boys, girls, adolescents, and families; taking into account their distinctive features, as inclusive aspects, but

with specificities for their attention. Thus, comprehensive protection implies identifying endogenous and exogenous protective factors, so that these protective factors are strengthened and the prevalence of the rights of all children are empowered; such as culture, history, thought, economics, among other aspects; establishing population groups based on territorial recognition, life cycle, ethnicity, gender, and disability. At the same time, in terms of comprehensive protection of all children and adolescents, adopting a differential approach requires characterizing them adequately and identifying specific discriminations and vulnerabilities (being an indigenous child, an adolescent with a disability, etc.) and, from there, develop actions according to these identified realities that allow the generation of protective factors.

The differential focus is situated in the manifestation of identity, equity, and justice. This model is part of the recognition of the diversity of the subject population of attention and the rights that are provided to them, to visualize, deepen, or adjust the programmatic offer, with the purpose of harmonizing it with the current established public policies for the comprehensive protection of girls, boys, and adolescents and family empowerment, promoting equality and non-discrimination under the principle of co-responsibility of the state, the society, and the families in the face of this proposition, to impact the organizational culture of the ICBF and the National System of Family Welfare (SNBF). One of the attributes of the model of differential focus is its flexibility, taking into account the dynamic character of public policies and sociocultural conditions of the subject population, making it necessary to revise and redefine technical guidelines, standards of quality, and operative guides that facilitate the application of the differential focus from each one of the objectives, areas of support, and programs of the ICBF. Another attribute is providing psychosocial accompaniment with a differential focus to boys, girls, and adolescents who are victims of forced displacement and to their families by means of

the establishment of plans of familial comprehensive accompaniment, targeting the guarantee and effective enjoyment of the rights and the contribution to the comprehensive reparation.

For a differential focus, the ICBF sets out two categories used to refer to populations of African origin that arrived to the Americas through slave routes: *comunidad negra* and *afrocolombianos*. These two categories have a distinct meaning: A “*comunidad negra*,” according to Law 70 of 1993, is “a group of families of Afro-Colombian ancestry that possess a distinct culture, that share a history, and that have their own traditions and customs inside of their populated village, that displays and conserves a conscience identity that distinguishes them from other ethnic groups. The Law 70 of 1993 recognized the right to collect territorial property, which is what has allowed for the existence of 162 collective territories granted by the Colombian Institute for Rural Development (INCODER). The category “*afrocolombiano*” refers to the group of people with African ancestry that live in the country and self-identify as such. In this group, it expands upon the definition of a “*comunidad negra*” by including the urban and rural population who share this common origin but do not necessarily live in a collective form.

The ICBF guidelines define gender as the social and cultural assignment that establishes the fact of being a man or women. In gender, we can find roles, those behaviors typically assigned to men and women historically. Gender, according to the ICBF, is dynamic, and therefore changes in time and space, because for example, being a man in a capital city like Bogotá is not the same as being a man in a rural sector of the country. Nevertheless, historically, women or others comparable to feminine behaviors have been discriminated against in our [Colombian] society. Because of this, the gendered analysis gives rise to the inequality in the power relations between men and women, in which the situations of discrimination and subordination of women predominate. Gender allows analyzing how unequal social relations

between men and women operate in both the symbolic and the normative, institutional or in the construction of identities, situations that are concretized in an unequal access to the goods, to the services and power.

The ICBF also sets out a definition for the term “intersectionality” to enhance their differential-rights based approach. Intersectionality, according to the ICBF, is used to indicate how different structural sources of inequality (social class, sex, gender, sexual orientation, functional diversity, ethnicity, nationality, age, etc.) can maintain these reciprocal relations. It is a theoretical approach that emphasizes that gender, ethnicity, class, or sexual orientation, as other social categories, far from being “natural” or “biological”, are constructed, and interrelated, which implies that the same social subject can experience various forms of discrimination. The analysis does not intend to make an endless list of all the possible, overlapping inequalities, but rather to study the manifestations and identities that are determinant in each context and how they are embedded by the subjects to give them a meaning that is temporary. The objective is to go away from the possible tendency to homogenize a group of people under a socially constructed term, and to assimilate the differences of one or other social groups. It is a question of introducing a complex view that contributes to the evidence of power strategies, normalized social norms, the unwanted effects of activism or public policies, and listening, or even better, walking alongside those who are in the margins, who first-hand live the social problems and construct the responses themselves.

Differential Focus Mechanisms

One of the main strategic points of the ICBF’s mechanisms is the “participation” mechanism. This mechanism promotes the participation and encourages the leadership of all

children, adolescents, families, and communities, seen from the distinct focuses and following the public policy of childhood, infancy, and adolescence in a way that they make their rights enforceable, as well as other policies that govern the ICBF. This strategy seeks to position the differential focus in the guidelines, stages, and instruments, of the participation of the ICBF; promote the guarantee of the right to the effective participation of boys, girls, and adolescents in the instances of trouble and following the public policies; strengthen the dialogue and agreement with the ethnic authorities through the appropriate forms of government, to develop coordinated actions aimed at the comprehensive protection of children belonging to ethnic groups; and promote the equality of opportunities to the population groups subject to differential attention, to guarantee the access to institutional programs.

With regard to ethnicity and participation, the ICBF says that, in addition to Article 6 of the Convention 169 of the International Labor Organization, governments should consult the concerned populations, through appropriate procedures and in particular through their representative institutions, whenever legislative or administrative measures are envisaged to affect them directly; establish the means by which those concerned populations can participate freely, at least as far as other sectors of the population, and at all levels of decision-making in elective institutions and agencies and other responsible policies and programs that concern them; and establish the means for the full development of the institutions and initiatives of these peoples, and in appropriate cases to provide for the necessary resources for this purpose. It also establishes that the prior consultation should be done in good faith in order to reach agreement or consent on the proposed measures.

The ICBF states that the objective of the prior consultation is to allow people to have “the right to decide their own priorities in the process of development, in a way that affects their lives,

beliefs, institutions, and spiritual well-being and to the lands that they occupy, use, or control in any way, in the manner that is possible for their own economic, social, and cultural development. In addition, said people should participate in the formulation, application, and evaluation of the plans and programs of national and regional development susceptible of affecting them directly. In agreement with this, the ICBF's differential-rights approach is a part of the recognition of the right to pre-consultation and full and effective participation of ethnic groups in defining policies that affect their full development. To this end, measures must be taken to ensure the national coordination of administrative measures (as in the case of the guidelines of the ICBF's programs in compliance with the commitments of the National Planning Department 2010-2014), to achieve the conclusion of the ICBF programs to certain communities. It is also to revitalize the local participation of the representatives of the ethnic groups in the councils of socio-territorial policies.

What has been mentioned requires that the ICBF allocate the resources necessary to ensure the instances of prior consultation with ethnic communities at the level of national representation (to conclude national affairs) and the admission of programs to specific communities. To elaborate this protocol and fully implement the right to participation of ethnic groups, it should be initiated through the compilation of experiences and good practices of the ICBF in terms of agreements with communities, advanced on national and territorial levels. Similarly, the elaboration of a national directory of ethnic authorities and organizations will facilitate the construction of local guidelines for relations, in which it will be possible to arrange the entrance of the program's missions to the community. For regular programs, which are also requested by ethnic groups, the implementation should also be arranged and coordinated with

ethnic authorities in their communities from the action-without-harm focus and taking into account the contextual characteristics of the territories.

In regard to participation and gender, the ICBF says that it is necessary to facilitate the participation of girls, boys, adolescents, families, and communities, promoting the freedom of expression on the basis of equality and non-discrimination. This should be reflected in all planned spaces by policies and programs of the entity to generate processes of participation for the recognition of the protection needs of these populations.

Chapter VII: Discussion of Research Findings

Overview

This chapter is divided into three different sections that analyze the findings under the pillars of the YPS agenda: the first section analyzes the findings under the participation pillar; the second section analyzes the findings under the prevention pillar; and the third section analyzes the findings under the disengagement and reintegration pillar.

Participation

The objective of the participation mechanism under the YPS agenda seek to increase the inclusive representation of youth in decision-making at all levels. The findings show that while the ICBF has an understanding of the importance of inclusive participation, they fail to adequately address the needs of Afro-Colombian girls by not properly implementing the participation mechanism that would allow Afro-Colombian girls to share their voices and experiences in the conflict. The experiences of Afro-Colombian girls need to be put at the forefront of the conversation so reintegration programs can understand how to best address their

needs. For example, one important finding is that girls experience a host of physical and emotional consequences throughout their time in the armed group. Participants stated that physical consequences come in the form of leaving the armed group pregnant or being pregnant and giving birth while in the group, contracting STDs, and experiencing sexual violence, abuse, and exploitation from members of the group. Participants also noted that this abuse and violence typically occurs prior to the recruitment of girls as well. A search through the ICBF's policies shows that theoretically, there is an understanding regarding the violations that are gender-specific; however, there is no mechanism that addresses girls' pregnancies during their time in their group or post-demobilization. The ICBF differential focus does mention that "there are specialized programs that seek to prevent and seek to address problems that require special attention, like sexual violence, violence within the family, teen pregnancy, the prevention and elimination of commercial sexual exploitation of all children." While the differential focus guidelines state that they take into account the "distinctive" needs of all girls and boys, there is no specific mechanism that addresses this. Regarding STDs, there is no mention of this, either. Two participants stated that a reintegration program geared towards girls needs to take sexual and reproductive rights into account in their implementation. More transparency is necessary to understand if and how reintegration programs take this into account.

Moreover, all participants stated that girls experience physical and sexual abuse during their time in the armed group. Participants stated that this was not unique to their time in the group, and that for many, this occurred prior, too. In the ICBF's "Technical Guidelines for the Attention of Boys, Girls, and Adolescents," they state that there is psychosocial support for all children and adolescents from 0 to 18 years who have had their rights violated or threatened, and have been victims of sexual violence during the armed conflict, as well as outside of the conflict.

This is a crucial aspect because the ICBF addresses any violence towards girls that took place prior to the conflict, too.

All participants mentioned the emotional consequences of being in the armed group, specifically their relations with the male commanders and the psychosocial impact. A study conducted by Yvonne E. Kearns reveals that not all girls experienced sexual violence at the hands of the armed groups.¹²⁰ However, in all the armed groups, there were power differentials between the men and the young girls, where many of the girls agreed to a sexually intimate relationship when they recognized it brought with it benefits such as more food, better living conditions, opportunities to ride rather than walk long distances and other privileges.¹²¹ Participants also stated something similar, that girls will exclusively seek out partners after leaving the reintegration programs to ensure safety for themselves, and sometimes their children, too. When providing psychosocial assistance to girls, reintegration programs must take into account this transformation of identity.

As mentioned, there is an understanding from the ICBF of including inclusive participation in their program design. For example, they mention a need to allocate resources to have consultations with ethnic communities. This is important because research has shown that Afro-Colombian communities throughout history have looked for traditional ways to respond to situations that affect them, such as family, friendship and religion; those were the first resources that they had for relief and healing.¹²² Moreover, Afro-Colombians from the Pacific region have defined community as a “group of people who, despite not sharing blood ties, are united by

¹²⁰ Yvonne E. Kearns. “The Voices of Girl Child Soldiers: Colombia.” 3.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Francisco Javier Bonilla-Escobar, Gisel Viviana Osorio-Cuellar, Sara Gabriela Pacichana-Quinayáz, and Gabriela Sánchez-Rentería. "Do Not Forget Culture When Implementing Mental Health Interventions for Violence Survivors." *Ciência & saúde coletiva* 22, no. 9 (01/2017): 3055.

ethnic ties: brotherhood, solidarity, empathy, trust, and friendship.”¹²³ They also consider community as the main mechanism for transmitting customs, union, and identity to the new generations, and work to prevent its disappearance or modification. Moreover, for Afro-Colombians in the Pacific, community ties are considered stronger than family ties; therefore, the community is essentially a large family that shares practices, reciprocity relationships, and social organization, seeking the common good; these social ties are constructed through activities such as education, feeding, childcare, housing, construction, surviving economic crises and illness, and mourning the death of its members.¹²⁴ This allocation of resources to have consultations with Afro-Colombian communities, therefore, is important and shows an understanding of including the voices of youth in these process. However, there is no transparency in how these consultations are conducted. Future studies could benefit from understanding the approach in which the ICBF takes when consulting with Afro-Colombian communities.

Prevention

The objective of the prevention pillar of the YPS agenda is to ensure that youth actors from different backgrounds can thrive in an inclusive and enabling environment with adequate support provided as well as the creation of policies for youth that would positively contribute to peacebuilding efforts. The findings of this study show that the environments in which demobilized Afro-Colombian girls are returning to are not inclusive nor are they safe, and that there is a lack of support provided to them. All participants stated that violence is prevalent in the communities in which demobilized children are returning, and this is more evident in Afro-

¹²³ Francisco Javier Bonilla-Escobar, Gisel Viviana Osorio-Cuellar, Sara Gabriela Pacichana-Quinayáz, and Gabriela Sánchez-Rentería. "Do Not Forget Culture When Implementing Mental Health Interventions for Violence Survivors." 3056.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

Colombian communities. This is similar to what the literature said; however, the difference is now that the peace deal has been signed, the actors have simply shifted. Prior to the peace deal, the literature stated that children who demobilized were sometimes unable to return to their home communities, because the armed would still be present in their home communities, threatening the lives of the children as well as their families. However, after the peace deal was signed and the FARC had demobilized, violence was still present in many communities along with the risk of re-recruitment, but with different actors. Participants stated that dissident groups and sub-factions of different armed groups have formed in communities where the FARC was present. This is especially important in communities where Afro-Colombian girls return to. There is a general lack of state presence in Afro-Colombian communities, which means that dissidents of the FARC are more likely to be present in their communities, which can perpetuate cycles of violence and increase the risk of re-recruitment. One participant stated that Afro-Colombian communities are typically further away from major cities, and that being a hindrance to accessing basic services and completing bureaucratic tasks. This distance as well as the lack of state presence is worrisome as many risk factors are present that challenges and diminishes the opportunity for their reintegration.

In the Colombian context, practitioners in reintegration programs must understand the ways Afro-Colombian communities cope with violence. Psychosocial assistance is necessary, but it must recognize the cultural context in order to understand the nature of the psychological response, and to identify the most appropriate method of therapy.¹²⁵ An understanding of these cultural factors can complement interventions for demobilized Afro-Colombian girls. This

¹²⁵ Amy Jane Stevens. "The Invisible Soldiers: Understanding how the Life Experiences of Girl Child Soldiers Impacts upon their Health and Rehabilitation Needs." *Archives of Disease in Childhood* 99, no. 5 (05, 2014): 458. doi: <http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/10.1136/archdischild-2013-305240>.

understanding though, as one participant stated, has to take geographical considerations into account. In the ICBF's differential focus guidelines, they do specify between Afro-Colombians who possess a distinct culture, share a history, and that have their own traditions and customs, with Afro-Colombians who do not. However, though the ICBF has this understanding of the diverse Afro-Colombian communities, they must also be aware that they cannot treat all Afro-Colombians the same. For example, in a study conducted by researchers looking at culturally specific mental health interventions for Afro-Colombians, they found that there was a perception of discrimination in Buenaventura by the host community towards survivors of violence, which created problems of social stereotyping, and effectively isolated members of the same ethnicity.¹²⁶

Downing defines three basic state functions that must be maintained in all national territory: security, welfare, and rule of law.¹²⁷ Failure to fulfil these functions allows armed groups to exploit state weakness and take on a state-like role in these basic areas, preventing the state from consolidating its authority at regional and national levels.¹²⁸ This is especially true if some fragment or sub-group of a criminal organization remains active in the post-conflict stage when a state strives to rebuild institutions and re-establish its monopoly on power.¹²⁹ The importance of the state's entry to regions where illegal armed groups have exercised control cannot be overemphasized in peacebuilding, because the lack of this presence can severely impede state-strengthening and the stabilization of peace.¹³⁰ In areas of Colombia where the state is less present, illegal armed groups exercised more influence and the conflict was more

¹²⁶ Francisco Javier Bonilla-Escobar et al. "Do Not Forget Culture When Implementing Mental Health Interventions for Violence Survivors." 3056.

¹²⁷ Cristal Downing. "Child Recruitment to Illegal Armed Groups in Colombia: Peacebuilding and Development Challenges." *Journal of Peacebuilding & Development* 9, no. 3 (2014/09/02 2014): 36.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

intense.¹³¹ Prior to the end of the conflict, the FARC, ELN, and AUC had taken state-like responsibilities such as collecting taxes (through extortion) and protecting the safety of the population they control.¹³² After the conflict ended, the implementation of Colombia's peace agreement with the FARC meant many challenges for communities affected by the presence of armed groups and unlawful activities such as drug trafficking and illegal mining.¹³³ The power vacuum left by the FARC's demobilization has turned many areas into territories disputed between new and existing illegal armed groups.¹³⁴ This truly affects Afro-Colombian and indigenous children because their land has been used as stages for the conflict, which exacerbated conditions of poverty and gave place to a complex situation of vulnerability, associated with the internal armed conflict over Afro-Colombian and Indigenous territory.¹³⁵

The YPS agenda here is crucial to ensuring the human rights of demobilized Afro-Colombian girls, in particular by helping to prevent their re-recruitment. The YPS agenda promotes peacebuilding by youth who have been affected by conflict, citing examples of youth from all over the world as active agents of peace in their communities. This could be applied to Afro-Colombian girls so that practitioners and government bodies can understand the root causes of why Afro-Colombian girls were recruited into the armed conflict, and work to dismantle the root causes that led to their recruitment in the first place. Having demobilized Afro-Colombian girls become peacebuilders in their communities would play a crucial role in the prevention of their re-recruitment and could act as a buffer for the lack of state presence.

¹³¹ Cristal Downing. "Child Recruitment to Illegal Armed Groups in Colombia: Peacebuilding and Development Challenges." 36.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Leo Dobbs. "Longing for Home: The Bond between Afro-Colombians and Their Land." UNHCR. June 16, 2011. Accessed April 22, 2018. <http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/news/latest/2011/6/4df9f75d6/longing-home-bond-afro-colombians-land.html#>.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica. "Una guerra sin edad. Informe nacional de reclutamiento y utilización de niños, niñas y adolescentes en el conflicto armado colombiano." 501.

Disengagement and Reintegration

The findings find that in terms of disengagement and reintegration, the Colombian reintegration programs do not adequately address the needs of demobilized Afro-Colombian girls. In terms of economic reintegration, the findings state that demobilized Afro-Colombian girls do not enter communities that are able to absorb them as a newly incoming workforce; rather, they return to communities that lack basic services, most of which had not improved since their initial recruitment. Reintegration programs must provide certain job skills geared towards Afro-Colombian girls, taking into account economic opportunities that are regionally focused. Without opportunities for economic growth, demobilized Afro-Colombian girls may fall into the same patterns of violence that existed prior to their recruitment.

In terms of sociopolitical reintegration, the findings show that the reintegration programs do not adequately address the needs of demobilized Afro-Colombian girls because tension and marginalization towards former child soldiers continues to exist. This stigmatization of former child soldiers makes it difficult for them to learn to rebuild social relations and reconstruct a new non-violent identity. For example, the literature review stated that girl soldiers find themselves in a triple-marginalized position based on their status as youths, females, and as persons associated with armed groups. One participant mentioned that being Afro-Colombian adds another element to this marginalization, due to their ethnic belonging. The findings also state that being demobilized in the time frame of a peace process where over fifty-percent of the Colombian population voted no against added another layer of marginalization and exclusion. More needs to be done to address the concerns of the communities and to change perceptions of former Afro-Colombian girl child soldiers. This marginalization hinders any opportunity at a successful

reintegration. Economic and sociopolitical reintegration are both important to ensure that the communities that Afro-Colombian girls return to have economic opportunities for them as well as a place to peacefully coexist with community members.

Chapter VIII: Conclusion

A report of the Secretary General on children and armed conflict found that from January to December 2017, there was a total of 57 incidents of the recruitment and use of children, affecting 169 children.¹³⁶ The ELN was the main perpetrator, recruiting 113 children, followed by another armed group called the Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia (also known as Clan del Golfo), recruiting 35 children.¹³⁷ The continued recruitment of children by various armed groups show that Colombia must continue to strengthen their reintegration programs to be inclusive of the needs of *all* child soldiers. The findings of this research show that at the moment, Colombia's reintegration programs do not adequately address the unique needs of demobilized Afro-Colombian girls. The layered stigmatization against Afro-Colombian girl child soldiers is a huge barrier that needs to be addressed so they can adequately reintegrate into their communities. Although the ICBF has certain guidelines that address the needs of demobilized Afro-Colombian girls, there lack of implementation of certain mechanisms that could help realize their right to reintegration. The ICBF guidelines do demonstrate a theoretical understanding of the intersectional needs of different populations, which is important given the diversity of Colombia's population. However, implementation is still not there yet.

¹³⁶ United Nations, General Assembly and Security Council, *Report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict*, A/72/865-S/2018/465 (16 May 2018), available from http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2018/465&Lang=E&Area=UNDOC

¹³⁷ Ibid.

Moreover, the strategy of the reintegration of child soldiers in Colombia must shift perspectives as the reintegration is now taking place in a “post-conflict” context, despite ongoing violence in many different communities in Colombia. The disproportionate discrimination against the Afro-Colombian community, in terms of access to basic services and lack of state presence, has a negative effect on the reintegration of former Afro-Colombian girl child soldiers, because they are returning to communities that mirror the same conditions prior to their recruitment. The ICBF must also implement a more gendered-approach to their reintegration, setting out specific mechanisms that realize sexual and reproductive rights for demobilized girls. There needs to be a concerted effort that addresses the root causes of the conflict that began over fifty years ago, because these root causes are connected with the reasons why children joined the armed groups. The burden does not fall solely on the reintegration programs, though. The Colombian government must address these root causes and understand why children joined the armed groups of the conflict to best take on the persistence of violence in the communities they return to. With the many layers of stigmatization against Afro-Colombian girls, joint coordination between all the parties involved will be necessary to ensure their right to reintegration. Without their proper reintegration, Colombia’s peace deal will mean nothing.

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