

FORUM - From the Margins of War to the Center of Peacebuilding:

How Gendered Security Dynamics Matter

Introduction

“War is more than armed conflict,” said a female farmer to me in one of Colombia’s most violence-torn marginalized rural regions in 2017. This was a few months after Colombian president Juan Manuel Santos and “Timoschenko”, the leader of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia—People’s Army (FARC-EP), signed a historical peace deal that ended more than five decades of internal armed conflict in the country.¹ Although somewhat paradoxical, the farmer’s statement resonates with recent debates in peace and conflict research that revive earlier ideas of positive peace (Galtung 1969). These include the notion that “peace is far more than just the absence of war” (Guarrieri, Drury, and Murdie 2017, 5; see also Diehl 2016, 3; Goertz, Diehl, and Balas 2016),² and the idea that a peace agreement is not sufficient for sustainable peace to emerge. For the female farmer, the peace deal signed in Colombia’s power center formally ended the country’s armed conflict. But it did not change her community’s situation: the lack of well-functioning justice mechanisms, the persistence of violent threats by (new) armed groups, and the absence of licit economic opportunities. In her view, these conditions still amount to war. A positive peace agenda aims to transform these elements by promoting “justice, human rights, and other aspects of human security” (Diehl 2016, 9).

While the continued need for a positive peace agenda in Colombia is self-evident for marginalized women like this farmer, news headlines and scholarly literature on Colombia typically take a binary view on peace and conflict. Military strategists and conflict scholars

¹ The armed conflict between ELN, Colombia’s second largest rebel group, and the government continues.

² Diehl (2016, 3) states that peace goes beyond the absence of war, and Goertz, Diehl and Balas (2016) call for ‘a conceptualization of peace that moves beyond an “absence of war”’.

have argued that the FARC's weakening through former president Uribe's hardline Democratic Security Policy brought the guerrillas to the negotiation table, and hence constituted the basis for the subsequent termination of armed "conflict". Against this frame, peace scholars have concentrated on the dynamics of peace negotiations and of peacebuilding after the signing of the "peace" deal. Such approaches are problematic. Focusing on specific events or temporal phases (such as military campaigns or negotiations) reinforces an artificial dichotomy of peace and conflict, and fails to account for the blurring of lines between these two phenomena for those on the ground in moments of transition (Mac Ginty, Muldoon, and Ferguson 2007; Keen 2000).

Furthermore, conventional writings in both scholarly communities have predominantly adopted state-centric and androcentric perspectives of conflict. Starting from urban centers and drawing on (mainly male) elite interviews, they have shaped our understanding in a biased way, focusing on how politics in male-dominated power centers have informed the armed conflict (see e.g. Pizarro Leongómez 2004; Pécaut 2001; Safford and Palacios 2002).

Against this backdrop, I argue that focusing on gendered security dynamics helps overcome the binary view of peace and conflict in scholarship as well as in practice. Specifically, a gender lens helps unpack the entwinement of war and peace because it reveals long-term processes and experiences of marginalized people, rather than fixating on events and externally imposed categories such as "armed conflict". Bringing to the fore otherwise neglected narratives and perceptions (see Sjoberg 2016, 60), it also highlights how and why marginalized groups, including women, can be catalysts of processes that lead to positive peace, even in the midst of conflict. Therefore, if scholarship is to be conducive to the transformative goal of positive peace, then it should account for female and other marginalized perceptions and experiences in, and narratives of, security dynamics and shift from a focus on power centers to embrace experiences in the margins.

Drawing on the case of Colombia, I demonstrate three ways in which a gender lens facilitates an understanding of positive peace and its relationship with conflict, in a way that can help narrow the gap between studying peace and conflict.

First, listening to individual marginalized female voices and accounting for their perceptions reveals their agency in conflict and their transformative potential for building peace in the midst of war. This requires changing mindsets, and women are particularly well equipped to do so based on shared positive experiences of motherhood and caregiving.

Second, gendered security dynamics are not necessarily in sync with externally imposed categories such as “internal armed conflict”, in large part because gendered (in)security continues across state borders. This highlights how conflict dynamics can impact territories that fall outside of formally contested regions within given states. Research informing positive peace agendas therefore needs to address not only the *temporal*, but also *spatial* overlapping of peace and conflict by studying both conflict and peace territories and scrutinizing how the two are interlinked.

Third, accounting for the distinct roles of women in illicit cross-border activities highlights processes and relationships that cut across peace and conflict, namely relationships forged under the auspices of an illicit economy. In such contexts, women can facilitate outside interventions to promote legal economic opportunities and a mutually reinforcing state-society relationship. A gender lens thus helps identify entry points for transforming practices of illegality conducive to conflict into licit sustainable livelihood strategies that contribute to peace.

My argument derives from a critical lens on peace and conflict built on a bottom-up approach that employs ethnographic methods. Scholars have previously called for bottom-up approaches that account for the everyday life experiences of peace (Firchow and Mac Ginty 2017). While conventional approaches start from the power centers, I study conflict “outside

in”. Between 2011 and 2017 (including one year of fieldwork between 2011 and 2013), I have carried out extensive fieldwork based on semi-structured interviews and participant observation in and on transnational marginalized spaces that are distant from political and economic centers. Such geographical margins in vulnerable regions across the Global North and South are also the spaces where people have been marginalized socially through the absence of infrastructure, state services, and deficient integration into the national economy.³ De-centering the state and shifting our attention to marginalized voices reveals motivations, practices, and perceptions in armed conflict through which we can better understand and tackle its root causes. Sjoberg (2016, 59), calling for attention to “security as gendered experience”, refers to this as “recentering the subject and object of security studies”. In Colombia, where power centers are male-dominated, starting from the periphery means accounting for women’s experiences equally to those of men. It is conducive to overcoming what Tickner (2005, 3) calls the “often unseen androcentric or masculine biases in the way that knowledge has traditionally been constructed in all the disciplines.” My approach thus concurs with the concerns of feminist research: “Making the invisible visible, bringing the margin to the center, rendering the trivial important, putting the spotlight on women as competent actors, understanding women as subjects in their own right rather than objects for men” (Reinharz 1992, 248).

Building Peace in the Midst of War

Listening to the otherwise subjugated voices of women in a way that transcends artificial dichotomies such as “victims” versus “perpetrators” demonstrates the peacebuilding potential of individual women during conflict. In so doing, it provides a grounded understanding of

³ See Diehl (2016, 7) for the importance of accounting for the Global South.

wider transformations from war into peace. Across Colombia's margins, I met female "victims" who engaged in activities conducive to peace on the basis of shared experiences of conflict. In one case, for example, a woman who had lost relatives in the armed conflict explained to me how she had set up an initiative to educate women about their rights in the context of armed conflict. Aware of the sensitivities of such issues in a *machista* society, she invited the women's husbands to also join the workshops that she organized as part of the initiative. This way, they would feel invested in the process and see their partners' emancipation as conducive to their own goals rather than as an affront to their manhood. On a different occasion, I listened to the story of a displaced woman who had been kidnapped first by the FARC and then the paramilitaries. Both exposed her to abuse and violence. She managed to escape and lived in a makeshift settlement for the displaced. A single mother with seven children, she became a community leader, representing other mothers in community affairs, collecting items used as gifts for the community's children for Christmas, and fighting for more assistance from the local authorities. In both examples, the women's efforts had a multiplying effect that not only transformed their own lives, but also those of their communities by changing mindsets and empowering the vulnerable.

Studying and sharing the often-subjugated voices of individual women within conflict, rather than exploring generalizations, "humanizes" war by bringing emotions into narratives (see Sjoberg 2016, 59-60). A focus on individuals also shows how, despite unimaginable suffering, change is possible. Pinar Bilgin (2013, 103; see also Enloe 1996) and others argue that scholars should "amplify the voices of those who otherwise go unheard" in order to pursue the transformative commitment of conflict research: promoting emancipation to improve (people-centered) security (see Booth 1991, 319). Ordinarily unheard voices can narrate the detailed memories of the horrors that they have lived, rather than providing body counts, thereby offering deeper understandings of the experience of war. In the early 2010s for

instance, a woman in Colombia's borderlands told me how her husband had been kidnapped by the guerrillas, managed to escape, but subsequently disappeared. According to her, a few days later his remains were handed over to her and her friend in four boxes, together with the friend's husband's remains in two bags.⁴ As the woman recalled, in the years to come, she received blackmailing calls from her tormentors, requesting her to comply with orders. She remembered these orders as follows: "We have been doing intelligence on you for five years. We know where you live, where your children study, what you do. [...] [Cooperate] or we will return your children to you in bags." Being confronted with such graphic descriptions of individual fates powerfully brings the normative goal of transforming war into peace back on the radar of academics who are often detached from these brutal realities—despite studying them.

When our paths crossed again several years later, she had become a spokesperson for displaced people. Exemplifying the female emphasis on mutual support that certain feminist strands of thought (e.g. difference feminism) highlight (Goldstein 2001), she helped other widows claim benefits as victims and narrated her life story at local events to encourage others to speak out. Similar to community-based peacebuilding initiatives that scale up to the regional or national levels since they serve as models for other initiatives,⁵ her interventions based on her own experience had a multiplying effect on peace during war as well.

Listening to a variety of female voices in the margins also shows the transformative potential of those we label "perpetrators". It points to the importance of accounting for "women's experiences in the plural": they vary across time, space, and role in society (Harding 1987, 7). This is echoed by Enloe (2017, 136), who argues that "sustainable peacebuilding includes creating structures, policies, and attitudes that take [women seriously] in all their

⁴ Similar practices have been common in the Colombian armed conflict. See, for example, Centro de Memoria Histórica 2012.

⁵ See e.g. the Colombian REDEPAZ movement: www.redepaz.org.co.

diversity". Although they constitute a minority among the membership of guerrillas and paramilitaries, female combatants do not necessarily perceive themselves as being at the mercy of others. Awareness of one's own agency is a form of empowerment in itself that can unlock the emancipatory potential for contributing to peace. The reflections by a female ex-combatant who first was a member of the guerrillas, then of the paramilitaries are a case in point. She felt that values including respect, which she actively embraced in her own behavior, were essential to her success within these groups:

Me: Is it different to be a woman in the group?

She: Of course. In both groups. One's wellbeing only depends on your behavior. [...] I like it when people respect me. These are basic principles that you learn at home in your family, you never lose them. Never. You can be in the middle of a hundred thousand men and nothing happens to you. As long as you demand respect, they will respect you. This was part of my success in both groups. [...] If a woman lets herself be treated without respect, they punish or shoot her. [...] When they learned that a woman was with several men they shot her.

Me: They think it's the woman's fault?

She: Of course, because we were less women.⁶ Say ten to fifteen women for each hundred men. Obviously one has to be tough so that they don't bother you. You have to know the limits when dealing with other people. This is like everywhere. If you ask for respect, they will respect you.

She then told me about her one-year old daughter, how being a mother changed her life because it made her reflect on her situation as a woman and learn to assume responsibility. She

⁶ Considering punishment for being with several men as the women's fault reveals gendered victim blaming.

hoped her daughter would study, have a job one day and take a different path than she did. It confirmed arguments made by feminist scholars about individual transformation through motherhood (see e.g. Ruddick 1990). Such a process can occur after the formal demobilization process, as in this case, which is conducive to promoting sustainable peace rather than falling back into war. What is more, transformation into motherhood can also incentivize demobilization when combatants wish to raise children outside the armed group, thus helping to build peace in the midst of conflict.

Gendered Security Dynamics across Peace and Conflict Territories

Assuming a perspective from the margins that adopts a gender lens reveals how state borders give rise to transnational dynamics that, in turn, shape security situations both on the “conflict” and the “non-conflict” side of the border, as highlighted by Denisa Kostovicova elsewhere in this Forum. Such perspectives facilitate not only a better understanding of *international* security, as Sandra Whitworth (2013, 108) notes, but also of *transnational* security. For members of armed groups, gendered conflict dynamics such as prostitution are not limited to the conflict territory but “infect” or “spill over” to territories in peace, affecting women differently than men. One of these dynamics is sexual violence against and abuse more generally of women across the border. For example, predominantly male members of armed groups – typical clients of the prostitution business – go unnoticed in Ecuador’s border region.⁷ An extract of an interview I conducted in 2011 with an employee of a humanitarian organization illustrates this dynamic:

⁷ The predominantly male oil industry in this region further fuels prostitution.

The FARC go there to go shopping, have fun and relax [...]. There are 87 official brothels. ...it continues to be a significant business. [...] This is because of the proximity to Putumayo where the [FARC] Front 48 operates, but there are also other Fronts and groups. My colleagues say that the Ecuadorian government does not take any measures because this would affect the local economy. [...] And there is sexual violence due to the 87 brothels. There is police corruption and homicides. From what I understand, sexual violence is an everyday issue. [...]. A tolerance vis-à-vis this type of violence, it is normal.

This account dates back to the time when the Colombian armed conflict was in full swing. Neighboring Ecuador, on the other hand, was considered “peaceful”, even though women experienced the impact of the ongoing war in Colombia first-hand. More recently, after the peace deal had been signed, a similar phenomenon occurred at the Colombia-Venezuela border, although the cross-border dynamics were reversed: according to local interviewees, there was a stark increase in Venezuelan prostitutes in Colombian border towns, including Maicao and Cúcuta. This was driven by the socio-economic crisis in Venezuela, and also by the still persistent “demand” for prostitution from Colombian members of violent non-state groups -- some of which moved into Venezuela after the peace deal between the government and the FARC. While fueled by conflict, cross-border prostitution is thus an element of insecurity that persists across conflict and peace time and territory.

Transforming the Illicit Economy as a Process Conducive to Peace

The third way in which a gender lens can narrow the gap between peace studies and

conflict scholarship is by shedding new light on processes that persist throughout periods of armed conflict and those deemed “post-conflict”, particularly those linked to the illicit economy. Diehl (2016, 8) called for studying *processes* that lead to positive peace as opposed to “examining factors immediately preceding and following armed conflict.” This resonates with Goertz et al.’s (2016, 4) conceptualisation of peace in terms of relationships, rather than as the absence of events such as battle deaths or war. In Colombia’s peripheries, promoting the transformation of the illicit economy into legal economic opportunities constitutes such a critical process. Nonetheless, peace and conflict scholars have hardly paid attention to such a transformation. Where illicit economies are considered at all, they tend to be discussed as an income source to finance war or as an incentive for recruitment, thus shifting the focus again away from processes and relationships and towards specific events instead. Scholars sometimes also consider events such as drug seizures or arrests in their measurement of counternarcotic operations’ success, which in the Colombian context have been intertwined with counterinsurgency strategies. Except for anthropologically or sociologically informed works, these studies hardly investigate how cross-border, illicit flows of goods and people shape people’s everyday lives (Schendel and Abraham 2005), and even less the relevance of women in the illicit political economy of conflict zones.

A gender lens reveals women’s distinct role in coca cultivation and in the initial cocaine processing phases. These activities take place close to the border where the final product is trafficked internationally, and are central to explaining the longevity of Colombia’s armed conflict. Everyday life in such a context only partly confirms gendered stereotypes. As a female farmer of a remote Colombian border region narrated in the early 2010s, men would do the physically demanding work, while women would take risks when smuggling the paste past checkpoints:

You sell [the coca paste], you go to the village and the buyers come to the village. [...] During the week, everyone harvested... [...] On Sunday we took [coca paste] to the village. The women, not the men, took the coca paste from the farms because the police were there. When they showed up, they searched the men, but not the women, and we stuck the paste here onto our body and kept it here until the village.⁸ Then we took it out and sold it in the village. [...] We helped, but the men did the work, it was very hard work. The women, we sowed the coca, and we took the coca paste off from the farm, because there were always checkpoints with soldiers and policemen, and they always searched the men.

This account demonstrates the potential of women as peace promoters during conflict (cf. Goldstein 2001). While the relationship between male farmers and state representatives (soldiers and policemen) was marred by suspicion and mistrust, female bodies received more respect. Women were spared searches that often came along with abuses. In this case, the women arguably abused this respect due to the absence of licit economic opportunities. In the long term however, women's distinct role in terms of interactions with state representatives constitutes an entry point to rebuild the state-society relationship and facilitate transformations towards alternative, formal livelihood strategies that are required for positive peace.

Such a mediatory role of women conducive to peace not only applies to the cocaine business, but also to other forms of illegality. The dominant story of Colombia's conflict and its nexus with the illicit drug trade is one of a *machista* society, as represented in the narco-culture surrounding Pablo Escobar. In marginalized regions, male teenagers are particularly prone to joining a violent group. Having a gun, a group of friends, and money to buy a

⁸ Sticking coca paste to women's or youths' bodies is a common trafficking technique used in Bolivia, Colombia, and Peru. See, for example Linda Pressly, "Los jóvenes mochileros que arriesgan sus vidas en el valle de la cocaína en Perú", BBC, November 2015.

motorbike boosts their self-esteem and is seen to confirm masculinity (Gilligan 2003). Female attitudes can reinforce this image. For teenage girls, it is desirable to be the local gang leader's girlfriend; for mothers, it is a matter of pride to see their son becoming a well-known leader. Yet women are not only passive observers, admirers, or victims of drug trafficking. Like civilians in conflict more broadly, and as Cassy Dorff argues in this Forum, they are also agents, acting for example as gatekeepers. In one instance during my fieldwork, I was offered to talk to the girlfriend of the leader of a violent non-state group involved in illicit cross-border activities. I would only be given access to talk to him if she agreed. She therefore had a key function in mediating the access of outsiders to her partner and thus shaped which outside parties could reach the group's decision-making actors -- including those who were in a position to promote processes that would move toward peace.

Conclusion

Shedding light on gendered security dynamics breaks down divides within the study of peace and conflict by highlighting that peacebuilding efforts from individuals exist in the midst of conflict, that conflict and peace overlap territorially, and that the transformation from war to peace can start by transforming illicit cross-border activities into legal economic opportunities. In all three dynamics, women play a distinct role, serving as conduits for building positive peace. Certainly, my role as a female researcher informs these conclusions. Being embedded in the research subject itself requires awareness of one's own identity (Norman 2009, 83) and reflexivity, an aspect that Keith Krause cites in his contribution to this Forum as a necessary condition for transformative conflict and peace studies. For feminist IR scholars, this includes a reflection on one's own role vis-à-vis gendered security dynamics (Tickner 2005, 11; Harding 1987, 9). As I was considered "one of them", the women with whom I interacted may have shared their stories with me in more detail than male interviewees may

have. Nonetheless, being sensitive to gendered security dynamics in conflict is a step towards reconciling the study of peace and conflict regardless of one's own gender. It helps grasp how women's experiences in Colombia's margins differ from stories of victimization told from male-dominated power centers; how women's strength and empathy can contribute to change even if conflict continues; and how motherhood, family values, and other institutions of mutual care can be crucial for reducing violence and building peace.

Overall, incorporating a gender lens in the analysis of "conflict" and "peace" demonstrates that these categories need to be used with caution: neither necessarily reflects experiences on the ground. After all, focusing on peace is most required when there is conflict. As a women's rights activist told me on the night when Colombians rejected the peace deal in October 2016: "In situations like these, every individual should continue to sow peace."

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