

The Endurance of Women's Mobilization during Patriarchal Backlash: A Case from Colombia's Reconfiguring Armed Conflict

*Dr Julia Margaret Zulver**

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Abstract: Despite a peace accord signed between the FARC and the Government of Colombia in 2016, it is increasingly apparent that the country's armed conflict is reconfiguring rather than abating. This is evident in the widespread targeting of social leaders with threats, violence, and death. This paper focuses on the Alianza de Mujeres "Tejedoras de Vida", an association of women in Putumayo who mobilized for peace and women's rights during Colombia's armed conflict. Since 2018, however, they have been specifically targeted by armed groups for their activism and support of the peace process, leading to increased – *and gendered* – acts of violence against them. This article frames the current violence they face as an example of Berry's "patriarchal backlash", a reaction to the gains that women make in their communities during war, threatening men's hegemonic control (2017). It argues that while the resurgence of violence represents a limitation to women's mobilization, it is not insurmountable. Indeed, the Alianza's ongoing mobilization can be understood as a function of the repertoires of action developed during previous moments of conflict. This article contributes to wider conversations about the durability of women's mobilization beyond the permeable bounds of a conflict/post-conflict binary.

Key Words: women's activism, Colombia, patriarchal backlash, repertoires of action.

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* Marie Skłodowska-Curie Global Fellow, Instituto de Investigaciones Jurídicas, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México & Oxford School of Global and Area Studies, University of Oxford (julia.zulver@area.ox.ac.uk).

INTRODUCTION:

They do not want people to be organized, so who do they threaten? The leader. We women are organized, we have fuerza, there are many of us... so they know that when they hurt one of us, they hurt all of us... and we will create the scandal of the century!... 'United women are very dangerous', the say. (Fátima, 11 September 2019).¹

Fátima belongs to *Alianza de Mujeres "Tejedoras de Vida" del Putumayo*, the Women's Alliance of Putumayo: Weavers of Life. This conglomerate of women's grassroots associations based in southern Colombia mobilized during some of the most violent days of the country's armed conflict and has played significant roles in creating "social fabric" ever since. However, despite a peace accord signed between the FARC and the Government of Colombia in 2016, it is increasingly apparent that the country's armed conflict is reconfiguring rather than abating. As noted in the above quotation, violence has returned to the department in the form of "backlash." Despite the real risks they face, the Alianza continues its collective action.

Berry's work on Rwanda and Bosnia discusses the unexpected opportunities war can bring for women. Her book ends, however, with a reflection on how patriarchal backlashes can limit women's mobilization in post-conflict settings (2017, 2018). In this article, I explore this assertion by documenting the ways in which women in Putumayo resist this "revitalization of patriarchy" through ongoing mobilization despite facing increased – and gendered – violence. This mobilization does not exist in a vacuum; members of the Alianza are able to draw on past repertoires learned and refined during previous permutations of conflict in order to resist contemporary violence.

This article will use the case of the Alianza to further document and nuance the nature of what a "patriarchal backlash" looks like in practice, and examine the ways in which women resist attempts to undermine the gains obtained during conflict time. It contributes to a wider conversation about

the durability of women's mobilization, and about the ways we demarcate conflict vs post-conflict moments more broadly.

In Colombia, human rights defenders report record numbers of attacks and assassinations; the think-tank INDEPAZ estimates 738 deaths of social leaders since 2016 (2019). The UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders wrote about Colombia: "...women defenders face differentiated risks and disproportionate effects that are exacerbated according to the rights they defend... and, in a common way to all of them, their belonging to a population victimized by the war" (Forst 2018, 21). As Fátima notes in the quote above, the peace process is breaking down, and this represents setbacks and retributive violence for those who supported it.

In this sense, Cockburn was right in saying: "sometimes the postwar period is better called interbellum, a pause before fighting begins again " (2004, 39). On her continuum, violence intersects pre-conflict, conflict, peacemaking, and reconstruction moments (ibid., 43). Violence has returned to the department of Putumayo, and this has particular repercussions for women's mobilization. Interviewees are clear that they are being targeted for their activism. As one woman notes: "women are being targeted *because* we have *fuerza* (force) and that is the biggest threat we pose...they don't want leaders; they want complete social control."²

The case of the Alianza illustrates a broader phenomenon about what happens to those women who mobilized during conflict and post-conflict moments, yet now find themselves facing new scenarios of violence. Beyond the Colombian context, there are important implications for the Women, Peace and Security agenda. Promoting a top-down, external emphasis on women's representation (including as peacebuilders) and political presence without dismantling broader structures of

violence can in fact expose women to new forms of harm. In countries like Colombia, Afghanistan, Myanmar, to name but a few, it is clear that without a focus on context-specific understandings of the advancement of women's rights, international actors, policy-makers, and academics might in fact be essentializing women's so-called "peaceful nature" without contemplating the wider ethical implications of doing so.

WAR AS LIMINAL FOR WOMEN:

This article begins with the idea that violence is gendered; this serves as an explanation for both the violent experiences of the Alianza, and the way we understand patriarchal backlash. Cockburn's work on gendered violence outlines that "men and women die different deaths and are tortured and abused in different ways in wars, both because of physical differences between the sexes and because of the different meanings culturally ascribed to the male and female body" (2004, 35-36). While this suggests that violence is about who experiences violence (and how this is gendered), her definition also encompasses an understanding of who commits violence (and how this is gendered). In this paper, I therefore also consider the way that war facilitates expressions of militarized masculinity, and later, patriarchal backlash.

In *War, Women, and Power*, Berry examines the gains that women can make through periods of war and violence (2018). This is a function of shifting opportunities for women to participate in public and political life; "women engaged in a "politics of practice" that shifted their everyday activities" (2017, 178). In this sense, war is "liminal" for women, insofar as "structural changes interact with women's resilience, strength, and agency" (ibid.). For example, she shows that in Rwanda, women were able to enter politics in significant numbers due to government legislation that supported

gender equality. In Bosnia, women were able to enter civil society, gaining powerful positions and roles. She notes that the breakdown of different power structures as a function of war can lead to women entering new spheres, thus permitting their mobilization.

Indeed, others speak about women's changing opportunities for mobilization and participation during and in the aftermath of war. Wood (2008) discusses the multiple ways in which gender roles are transformed during civil war; this often includes a radical reshaping of patriarchal networks as women take on unprecedented roles (as combatants, as interlocutors with authority, through the adoption of new forms of work). Viterna's study of women's micro-mobilization during the civil war in El Salvador documents the ways in which they were able to enter the formal political sphere in the aftermath (2013). Tripp looks at women's political gains in Africa in the aftermath of conflict, and explains how these unexpected consequences emerged, in part, as a result of the gender disruptions that occur during war (2015). Zulver (2018), Kreft (2019), and Sandvik (2018) point to the development of women's transformational repertoires of action as a function of their experiences with ongoing violence in Colombia. Despite this, Cockburn notes, "the space that momentarily opens up for change [after war] is not often used to secure genuine and lasting gender transformation" (2004, 41).

The question that presents itself becomes: *are there limits to the endurance of women's post-conflict gains?* Certain scholars would suggest that these limits come down to the way that women's agency to mobilize is limited by heightened intimate partner violence (IPV) in the aftermath of conflict. There is evidence to show that incidences of domestic violence increase after conflict (Pankhurst 2007), and that [this] "must be understood in relation to the acute and prolonged stressors of war, loss, and displacement" (Zannettino 2012). Berry documents the ways in which mechanisms such as

“increased availability of weapons, heightened alcoholism and drug use, and the celebration of militarized masculinity during periods of armed conflict” (2017, 844) serve to limit the gains that women make during periods of conflict in Rwanda and Bosnia.³

Beyond this, Berry points to a further – and profound – limitation on women’s ability to mobilize in the aftermath of conflict, what she calls “patriarchal backlash” (2017, 2018). For her, this mechanism refers to a post-war “revitalization of patriarchy as a reaction to gains women make in their homes and communities during war, which threaten men’s hegemonic control” (2017, 844). This includes hostile responses to the gains that women have made both publicly and privately but becomes particularly worrying when we begin to see “evidence of a *backlash* against women’s gains” (845). Her research identifies aggressive behavior (physical, verbal, and emotional) as a direct way to “undermine women’s ability to consolidate their postwar gains and continue mobilizing in their communities” (845). This was also a finding in Cockburn’s work on post-war patriarchy in Bosnia-Herzegovina; men came home from the war to find widespread unemployment which meant they could not “fulfil the role to which they are accustomed in the family”, and therefore resorted to aggression (2013a, 31).⁴

These dynamics are also identifiable in the Colombian case, where we see increased incidents of gendered violence against women leaders and human rights defenders in the context of the implementation of a peace process during an “unfinished social contract” in which “the state is still perceived as being highly illegitimate in relation to rising expectations of the population” (Rettberg 2019, 2). The UN Special Rapporteur noted in his report on Colombia that: “the attacks have also taken the form of stigmatization, in which degrading stereotypes are used... [including] questions about non-compliance with traditionally assigned gender roles, and devaluations of their

contributions to social change” (Forst 2018, 22). Restrepo Sanín shows how this extends to women’s participation in politics, including backlash against progressive policies (2020).⁵

This article’s contribution, therefore, is to provide a nuanced reading of what this revitalization of the patriarchy looks like in the southern Colombian case and unpack how it plays out in terms of limiting women’s mobilization. Berry’s work does not delve into how women do, or do not, resist the patriarchal backlash in her case studies. What happens when women who gained new mobilizational capacities *through* their experiences of conflict are put in a situation where they are targeted *for these gains*? How limiting are the limitations on their mobilization?

Before continuing, it is important to note that I do not categorize all violent acts against women as *purely* patriarchal attempts to limit mobilizational gains obtained during the armed conflict. Clearly, non-state armed groups are killing and targeting a multiplicity of social leaders, not only women (see Prem et al. 2018). Moreover, the dynamics of narcotrafficking continue to complicate security around the country. With that said, the pursuit of gender justice that characterizes the collective actions of the Alianza presents an affront to the hegemonic control that armed groups are pursuing in the region. As mentioned in the introduction to this article, women are being specifically targeted because of their “*fuerza*” and the threat that this poses.

This article focuses on the endurance of women’s resistance to gendered violence, including in its form as patriarchal backlash. Hume and Wilding tell us that in order to assess women’s ability to resist violence, we need to contextually situate their agency or passivity not as binary categories, but rather as decisions related to where they sit in the “violent landscape of agency – what it means to act within a violent world” (2019, 15). Sandvik points to the ways in which political organizing can

be a *response* to gendered violence; she proposed that their mobilization should be “scrutinized for what it can tell us about how collective feminist political subjectivities are construed through gendered violence as a mobilising factor” (2018, 8). Kreft’s research in Colombia theorizes that women mobilize *in response* to the threat that conflict-related sexual violence poses to them *as women*, in part to attempt to change socio-political conditions (2019, 222).

This double transgression of gender norms – that women disrupted the hegemonic dynamics of patriarchal order during a time of conflict, *and* that they are unwilling to relinquish these gains during the hyper-violent attempts of non-state armed actors to regain social control – puts women in Putumayo at risk for threats, stalking, disappearances, physical violence, and even feminicide. Despite this, they persist. The following section outlines the case of conflict in Putumayo, and what this means for women’s mobilization.

THE CASE OF PUTUMAYO, COLOMBIA

Methods

This article is based on qualitative research conducted in different parts of the Putumayo department on two research trips (November 2018 and September 2019), as well as supplementary research in Bogotá. I conducted 12 in-depth interviews with women who are members of local organizations that constitute the Alianza in El Tigre, La Dorada, La Hormiga, and Mocoa. I deliberately kept interviews semi-structured so that participants could discuss issues that they felt were relevant to themes of women’s historical and contemporary activism, while also preventing potential revictimization through discussions of past trauma (see Liamputtong 2007; Wolfe 2017). I also

interviewed a local human rights ombudsman, a social worker, international humanitarian workers, and academics. For the safety of participants, all names included in this article have been pseudonymized, except those of well-known leaders whose names are publicly available.⁶

I spent time driving around the region with a community leader who wanted to show me various memory sites for the Alianza; she explained the history of the region and its violent past by taking me to places where massacres had occurred, to cemeteries where women are buried, and by showing me murals memorializing women killed during the conflict. Much of the historical testimony included in this article comes from the thorough reports prepared by the National Centre for Historical Memory (2011, 2012). Finally, I spent time at the Alianza headquarters in Mocoa, where I sat in on meetings and chatted with leaders and rank-and-file members of the Alianza.

My positionality as a researcher from the Global North impacts the power dynamics I have with participants. Julia Sachseder notes of her own research with similar participants in Colombia that such interaction are “exposed to multiple problematic influences and colonial power dynamics” (2020, 175). In the case of the researcher/participant relationship in my project, these power differentials relate to socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and race, among others. While acknowledging these imbalances, having engaged in feminist research around Colombia for over five years, I was able to establish a relationship of trust given my embeddedness in the broader women’s rights community (including a number of shared friends/contacts/allies). Much of my knowledge of the Colombian context draws on years of semi-ethnographic research with women’s organizations in other parts of the country.⁷

A Hyper-Masculinized History of Conflict in Putumayo

Putumayo is one of the country's largest producers of coca, used to make cocaine. Historically,⁸ this has meant that a variety of non-state armed groups have vied for territorial control, and thus control of the illicit economies (see Tate 2015; Idler 2019). For the local population, the "militarization of daily life" meant that "residents were forced to navigate extreme violence" (Tate 2017, 167). For much of the 1990s, the FARC maintained dominance; this led to a dynamic whereby ordinary residents were "categorized" as guerrilla sympathizers, ignoring the experiences of *campesinos*, indigenous groups, and migrants who tried to resist and negotiate with "the promoters of violence" (Cancimance López 2014, 67). By the end of the decade the AUC paramilitaries violently moved in to Bajo Putumayo, fighting the FARC and using "terror, threats, anxiety, fear, confinement, armed combat, stigma, torture, sexual violence, and imposed social order" to control the local population (CNMH 2012, 18). These conflict dynamics were complicated by the complicity of the armed forces with the brutal violence of the paramilitaries (see Tate 2015).

A feminist reading of Colombia's armed conflict brings to light certain gendered power dynamics that crosscut both historical and contemporary dynamics of violence. This is certainly the case in Putumayo, where a brutal legacy of hyper-masculinized conflict resulted in egregious levels of violence against women and girls. Here I draw on the concept of militarized masculinity – summarized by Theidon as "that fusion of certain practices and images of maleness with the use of weapons, the exercise of violence, and the performativity of an aggressive and frequently misogynist masculinity" (2009, 5) – as a way of framing the hegemonic gender relations that have characterized Putumayo throughout Colombia's armed conflict.

Importantly, the intersections of gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, geography, and ability further influence the ways that individuals are targeted for violence (see Marciales Montenegro 2015; CNMH 2015; Acosta et al. 2018). The Alianza is a diverse organization, and there is a longstanding legacy in Colombia that associates places traditionally defined as “black and Indian” – such as Putumayo – with “disorder, backwardness, and danger” (Appelbaum 2003).⁹ Most of the women in the Alianza are *campesinas*, which, as mentioned, categorizes them as guerrilla sympathizers, and isolates them from state institutions and access to justice (FIP 2017). While not a central focus on this article, it is important to note that these intersecting identities influence women’s exposure to violence, as well as their ability to protect or extract themselves from violence.¹⁰ For example, moving to Mocoa (the departmental capital) is one way to decrease exposure to violence, but this requires resources that are not available to most rural women living in Bajo Putumayo.

The dynamics of violence that women suffered during the paramilitary incursion in the late 1990s and early 2000s¹¹ illustrate that conflict in Putumayo was gendered; perpetrators acted out militarized masculinity against women’s bodies.¹² For example, Sandra took me to see a memory mural that features a teenaged girl sitting cross-legged in a blue and pink dress; she is sewing the head back onto a doll. The accompanying text tells the tragic story of how the girl – María Quintero Gualpaz – was killed by paramilitaries in 2001, but not before they had performed brutally violent acts against her and the fetus she was carrying.

Indeed, armed actors used women’s bodies for territorial domination during this time; the Centro de Memoria Histórica documents depraved accounts of public rapes, sexual slavery, sexualized violence, and feminicide during the period of 1999-2006.¹³ During this time, women’s bodies “became vehicles for [sending] terrorizing messages to the population” (CMH 2012); women were

tortured and killed in front of their neighbors and loved ones, in some cases because of accusations that they were FARC sympathizers, members of the FARC, or had had sexual relations with FARC rebels (CMH, 2012, 167). Certain women were “punished” to hurt their male relatives; by publicly sexually violating a woman, the paramilitaries sent a message of heteronormative “superiority and domination” to her partner, “dishonoring and humiliating the man who was unable to protect the woman” (ibid., 168). Other women’s bodies “became objects of desire and control by paramilitaries” (CMH, 2012, 173). Some of the women I spoke to during fieldwork told me about the multiple children in the community who are the product of paramilitary rape,¹⁴ and the ways in which this continues to affect social fabric today.

‘We are all there like little spiders’

During this moment of violent conflict, however, women in Putumayo began to organize and engage in collective action. Fátima Muriel is one of the founders of the *Alianza*; formerly an educator she travelled around the department for her work. In 1999 she began to see “horrible scenes” that led her to start referring to the situation as “a war.”¹⁵ Over time, she and her colleagues “began to see that there were organizations of women all over, and we thought we should bring them together so we could have just one united proposal. This is how we began to organize.” By uniting these “small, fragile, but significant networks of small-town activists”, the *Alianza* was born in the early 2000s (Tate, 2015, 205).¹⁶ Today, the *Alianza* brings together 137 constituent women’s associations from around the department (Redacción Colombia2020 2019).

Sandra recounts her memories of the formation of the *Alianza*, framing it largely in terms of feelings of state abandonment (or indeed, complicity with paramilitarism):

During the armed conflict, they murdered or disappeared women and nobody said anything on their behalf, in all the department. Women started to get together, to engage in protests, to go into the streets, “what is happening with our women? Help us to find them!” There were so many women who were disappeared, who were murdered. “Do something for us!” They would go out with pots and pans, to the mayors, to the police, the government. This is how they started. And this is what we do – when something happens, we are all there like little spiders, building a web. Every day there are more of us.¹⁷

Members of the Alianza have participated internationally as well. Tate outlines the multiple ways in which they focused on transnational advocacy during the 2000s (2015, 2017). Later, they were present during the negotiations between the Government of Colombia and the FARC guerrilla in Havana, where they spoke to the gender sub-commission about how the peace process could effectively take a gendered approach to women’s lived realities in a post-conflict era. As a function of this experience, they decided to train 65 women as “Mediators of Peace.” This was a diploma project that allowed women to go back to their communities and replicate what they learned, fostering new expressions of social capital. “What we want is reconciliation. The women here are very scarred, they carry pain,” Fátima explains, “without the truth they are never going to be able to forgive.”¹⁸

The Alianza and the Patriarchal Backlash

Berry presents patriarchal backlash as a significant impediment to women’s maintenance of mobilizational opportunities gained during conflict situations. Given the historically gendered dynamics of violence in Putumayo – in terms of SGBV and pervasive expressions of militarized masculinity – it is perhaps not surprising that there is evidence to show that Colombia is currently experiencing a similar “revitalization of the patriarchy” in the post-Accord era. This is reflected in the types of violence (including feminicide, disappearances, stalking, and direct threats) faced by members of the Alianza as a function of the gains they made during a previous moment of conflict.

To be clear, the reconfiguration of Colombia's armed conflict in the aftermath of the peace deal is a multi-faceted phenomenon, and one that should be characterized as existing on a spectrum of conflict. Indeed, Maher and Thomson talk about Colombia's "precarious peace" and interrogate the "spoiler potential" of the country's new and recycled right-wing paramilitary groups (2018, 2). In his visit to Colombia in late 2018, the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders noted how this reconfiguration of security dynamics impacts women, specifically:

...They are also exposed to gender specific violations, including gender-based violence, both within their community and organizations and by external actors... I received moving testimonies of women being threatened with attacks against their children (Forst 2018, 9).

He goes on to note that "in recent year, assassinations, torture, sexual violence, and threats against women defenders have increased alarmingly", and highlights how this produces "profound physical and psychological damage, generates humiliation and intimidation, and implies a violent denial of their construction as political subjects" (ibid., 22).

Putumayo has seen increased violence for women since the demobilization of the FARC. By April 2019, for example, the Alianza had identified 13 cases of femicide and 10 cases of forced disappearance in the department, which they attributed to attempts to silence those advancing women's rights in the region (Tejedoras de Vida 2019a).

A Colombian academic related: "Putumayo is an emblematic department of women's mobilization, they rendered visible what happened [during the conflict] and they lobbied hard for peace. This mobilization strengthened the women, but it also exposed them."¹⁹ She pointed to another source of retribution violence: some women spoke out, and served as witnesses in judicial processes against, paramilitary actors who are now getting out of jail and returning to the territories. Added to this is the dynamic of narcotrafficking: women who support crop substitution programs, who publicly call

on armed groups to stop recruiting their children, or who openly support the demobilization efforts of the FARC are at further risk of targeted violence. Prem et al (2018) disaggregate killings of social leaders: indigenous, campesino, Afro, and LGBT feature strongly; this would suggest that those women in the Alianza with multiple identities face differentiated risks of violence in the Putumayo context.

A local government employee explains the situation clearly:

Women's groups are the strongest [organizations] in the region and they are punished as an example to others. They have articulated with the institutions and they were the first civil society group to really speak up during the peace. They were the biggest and strongest [group] to take advantage of the political opportunity [presented by the Peace Process], ...which means they were allied with the state, so they became a target.²⁰

Put simply, he said: “the women of the Alianza are incentivizing others to mobilize, so there is a need for them to be stopped.”

If we read these statements in conjunction with the above described dynamics of “militarized masculinity” in Colombia – and in Putumayo in particular – there is an argument to be made that this violence is not only gendered insofar as the ways in which it reflects particular power dynamics and the ways that men and women “die different deaths” (Cockburn 2013a), but is also representative of a *revitalization of patriarchy*. Indeed, the Rapporteur’s mention of the denial of women defenders as political subjects reflects what the Alianza stated in a communication on their website after a female political candidate was murdered in February: “This events highlights the persecution on the basis of gender that is carried out against women leaders in the region, and that seeks to intimidate and silence those who seek the advancement of women's rights in the region” (Alianza 2019a).

The violence that women activists in Putumayo currently face can be seen as an example of Berry's patriarchal backlash, a gendered response and rejection of women's empowerment and the obstacle that this presents to groups gaining social control. Friedman's work on women's mobilization in Venezuela sees that political opportunity structures are deeply gendered, and "reflect the social meanings attributed to sexual difference" (2000). This is particularly notable in moments after (unfinished) transitions to peace. In Putumayo, the opportunities for women's mobilization are both shaped and limited by gendered power relations. Women are targeted for daring to question the logics of militarized masculinity, *and* for standing up against the patriarchal backlash. The remainder of this article is dedicated to documenting the Alianza's contemporary mobilizational strategies, and the violences that they face as a function of these acts.

THE ALIANZA AND GENDERED ACTS OF VIOLENCE

Alianza Actions

The Alianza's website outlines three lines of action: (1) women, human rights, and peacebuilding, (2) women and political participation, (3) women and social and economic development. Their stated mission is to: "empower women and their organizations... with the goal of recovering the social fabric that was affected by the armed conflict and social violence, and to build a Putumayo with gender equality and peace" (Alianza 2019b).

Among their actions include a campaign against SGBV, both conflict and post-conflict related. Women are taught how to register claims with state institutions and are also provided with psychosocial support. They also focus on commemorating gendered violence of the past through a

series of ‘truth walls’, murals painted in public spaces around the department. Fátima says: “we think there are around 1000 women killed here in Putumayo. We are putting their names on truth walls.”²¹ Finally, they are beginning projects for women’s economic empowerment; these include building cooperative stores in both rural and urban areas and serve as “a way to come together as a group, not as individuals. To build confidence and trust after everything we have lived – to create one voice, to be united, to weave peace in our territories.”²² They continue to hold workshops throughout the department where they teach participants about women’s rights and victim’s rights, offer spaces for collective healing, and strategize about how to make demands on local and national level government.

Gendered Consequences

These actions, however, have consequences. As Sandra narrates:

Around two years ago, the groups started forming here [again]. When they were talking about the Peace Accords, many people arrived in the rural areas. The Frente 48 of the FARC handed in their arms, but others who didn’t demobilize were forming. They called themselves guerrillas or paramilitaries, but we still don’t really know who. What is happening? Threats, stalking us.²³

She went on to outline her own experience with targeted violence. A few months prior to the interview in November 2018, a group of unknown men showed up at her house and asked to leave a “bag of things” for safekeeping with her. Sandra was afraid, so contacted her *compañeras* in the Alianza and went to sleep at one of their houses. When she came back the next day, the men came back, threatening her and her daughters: “They told me: ‘you come with us or you have to leave this territory, this place is going to light up with violence [*volver candela*].”

As well as threats of sexual violence to women and their daughters, the rate of femicide in the department is steadily increasing, as noted above. Women from the Alianza have been threatened,

attacked, and forcibly disappeared. The treasurer of one of the associations that makes up the Alianza, Deyanira Guerrero Tovar was disappeared in 2018 in El Placer, she has not been heard of since.²⁴ I ask Sandra why the Alianza – and her work with them – is specifically targeted by the non-state armed groups:

They want to take Putumayo back. They say that they are stronger than us women. The advocacy [*incidencia*] of women has been very strong, we always fight for women's rights. They don't want leaders. They want to take back social order and govern these territories.

Yesica, who is part of an organization that is part of the Alianza, also expressed fear at the changing security situation:

Everyone knows that the Alianza is a big force that has empowered many women and taught them how to fight against impunity. There is danger... some men came when I was leaving a meeting and asked me about the projects and about my involvement in the Alianza.²⁵

Fátima adds to the understanding: “Is being part of the Alianza a risk? I say that because we work on the issues of public policy and gender, and women's rights, we are going to have problems.”²⁶

She is clear, though, that unified mobilization is the only way forward:

We make demands when we are united, and we *do* make these demands because if we are alone they will disappear us... They know that we are an organization that will shout, fight, denounce... We will march, we will do sit-ins at the *Fiscalía* [Attorney General's Office], we will get out the lists with all of the women who have been killed and ask where is she? Why hasn't she appeared? What happened to her?²⁷

As discussed below, these actions become part of strategically “being visible”, whereby the Alianza publicizes certain elements of its struggle, particularly to an international audience, in order to highlight the violences they face.

Doubly Transgressive: Women's Rejection of the Revitalization of the Patriarchy

I argue that women's ongoing resistance to gendered acts of violence (characteristic of a patriarchal backlash) can be attributed to the repertoires of action developed during conflict itself. Whereas during the 1990s and early 2000s women were targeted for being women – i.e. within the dynamics

of hyper-masculinized gendered violence – today, women are targeted for being part of the *Alianza*. That is, they are targeted for the double transgression of both resisting gendered violence *and* continuing to exercise the gains obtained during their lived history of conflict. The clock does not restart from zero when women who were at risk, then lived a period of “relative calm”, enter a high-risk context again.

The women of the *Alianza* are modifying the repertoires learned through their first experiences with conflict to inform the ways in which they resist new dynamics of violence. Instead of merely resisting SGBV, they are modifying the lessons learned through previous experiences of mobilization to adapt to contemporary threats to their pursuit of women’s rights and gender justice.

As McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly note about repertoires:

Participants in public claim-making adopt scripts they have performed, or at least observed, before. They do not simply invent an efficient new action or express whatever impulses they feel, but rework known routines in response to current circumstances (2001, 138).

Kreft compellingly argues that women perceive conflict-related sexual violence as a threat to women’s collective interests and identity, and that they mobilize accordingly. Her macro-level hypothesis thus states that more prevalent rape is associated with greater women’s mobilization (2019, 230); “women mobilize in response to this violence and around a broader range of women’s issues with the goal of transforming sociopolitical conditions” (221). In the case of Putumayo, however, these women are not mobilizing for the first time. Rather, it seems, they are drawing on repertoires of action developed during previous mobilization. Thus, while their mobilization resists targeted violence, it extends to challenge the patriarchal system more generally. This includes violence that takes the form of a patriarchal backlash designed to undermine the gains that resulted from wartime structural shifts.

As Sandra outlined above, the Alianza was born in a moment of perceived state abandonment²⁸ – they were “little spiders” building a web to resist the impunity surrounding SGBV. This collective identity borne out of a shared identification of collective risk, and of participating in repertoires of contentious action, is non-reversible and can be activated during subsequent moments of threat to the collective. Sandra confirms: “We are sisters now, when something happens to one of us, it happens to everyone... we belong the Alianza, to the territory.”²⁹ Yesica told me about being afraid in the current climate, but then added:

I used to be crazy [after her husband was murdered and she was raped], I would cry all the time but then the Alianza supported me... I learned my rights as a woman and as a victim... so now, I am a little scared, but... I will continue [with the Alianza].³⁰

For her, being part of the Alianza has fundamentally changed her; she continues to participate in her association and the Alianza more broadly because it is now part of her identity, despite the risks that this implies. This is in keeping with Whittier’s understanding that: “participating in consciousness-raising groups, activists organizations, and political actions... gave women a new interpretation of themselves and the events around them” (2015, 115). It further echoes Calhoun’s identity-based explanations of risky mobilization, whereby:

The risk may be borne not because of the likelihood of success in manifest goals, but because participation in a course of action has over time committed one to an identity that would be irretrievably violated by pulling back from the risk (1991, 51).

Fátima frames her understanding of the repertoire slightly differently. When I asked her what impact the peace accords had upon the Alianza’s work, she stated: “the accords are great, they have great intentions. But to implement them...that’s another thing. We are here permanently. We are from this land. The institutions come and go, but we are here, we are prepared for this.”³¹ The Alianza’s representative in Puerto Guzmán, Diana, tells me that in her community, the Alianza is the only organization with longstanding presence; this is both why they are respected, but also why they face “machista men who want to predominate [*predominar*].”³²

When Fátima talks about being prepared, she is making reference to the gains that women obtained during the paramilitary violence. The current moment of patriarchal backlash, then, reflects Cockburn's understanding of a continuum of violence, defying the categories of conflict vs post-conflict (2004, 43). The Alianza is activating the same repertoires learned through a different moment of conflict to apply to this new manifestation of violence. Even the discourse used draws the past to the present: "things are going back to how they were before."³³

Nuanced Self-Protection Over Time:

Cancimance's work on Putumayo during the paramilitary incursion breaks down inhabitants' survival strategies into four categories: be brave, be neutral, be a good cohabitant/neighbor, draw on silence (2014). Drawing on Keck and Sikkink (1998), I add another strategy to the repertoire: 'be visible.' I use Cancimance's framing here, to show the ways in which the Alianza's past and present resistance repertoires are linked.

Looking at past mobilization, Tate discusses the Alianza's alternative vision of security developed during the conflict that "focused on strengthening what they called the "social fabric" – women's connections to each other and the wider community" (2015, 231). Their behaviors included sheltering threatened colleagues (being brave), dressing in a way that did not paint them as FARC guerrillas (being neutral), warning neighbors when their names were included "on the list" (being a good neighbor), staying inside to escape the attention of violent actors (drawing on silence), and seeking international accompaniment when traveling (be visible). This is evidence of the ways in

which “women employed complex survival strategies in their daily lives... women fled, bargained, and endured” (ibid.).

In the current moment, the Alianza continues its work around women’s rights in the department, as outlined in the previous section (be brave). Despite this, Fátima tells me: “We have to bring down our profile in the rural areas. I tell them that we have to protect ourselves.”³⁴ Sandra adds: “We try not to identify ourselves. We don’t wear the shirts or the jackets [with Alianza logos], we try not to go to public spaces. We go there, quietly, not visible. It’s a way to protect ourselves. We don’t always take the same route” (being silent). She continues: “We call our friends [to say] ‘I’m going out I’m coming back at this time.’ We are all very alert [*pendiente*] regarding the other members”³⁵ (being a good neighbor).

Another long-time member of the Alianza, Patricia, echoed other interviewees when she expressed her worry that “now we don’t know who is who.”³⁶ By this, she is referring to the fact that whereas before the women could identify a FARC rebel or a paramilitary, the reconfiguration of armed groups has led to unknown narcotraffickers occupying the territory. This is important knowledge in terms of being neutral. Accordingly, she explains that the Alianza no longer uses local radio to announce their activities publicly. Rather, they wait until the last minute to announce their community activities, to protect themselves (draw on silence).

Finally, as discussed above, I argue that strategically being visible is another tactic of the Alianza; leaders frequently engage with local and international media in order to explain the risks to which they are exposed. They also maintain connections with international actors and donors through ongoing projects (for example, the “No Estás Sola” anti-violence campaign, funded by Mercy Corps

and FOS). Although this might draw into questions issues of autonomy around the strategies and activities they pursue, interviewees reported that in the current context of violence the Alianza is neither targeted for, nor feels a significant level of protection from, these connections. Being visible, however, is a way to draw widespread attention to the violence they face.

CONCLUSION:

This article has detailed the mobilization experience of the Alianza in Putumayo, Colombia. It began by examining the historical conditions of violence from which the organization emerged, indeed adding further evidence to the growing literature on how conflict and war contexts can create new opportunities for women's mobilization. I argue that in contexts of renewed violence – including in its form as a revitalization of the patriarchy – women are able to draw on repertoires of mobilization learned during earlier moments of conflict. These may be modified in accordance with grounded realities of risk, but the take-away message remains: there is a certain level of durability to women's mobilization that comes as a function of new opportunities presented during war.

While in Rwanda and Bosnia there arguably³⁷ existed critical junctures that separate conflict from post-conflict moments, the end of Colombia's conflict has been far from linear. The murder of hundreds of social leaders, the increase of massive displacement and massacres, and the ongoing violent contestation for control of illegal economies since the signing of Colombia's official "peace" creates collateral damage; we know that women suffer differentially (Meertens and Stoller 2001; Meertens 2010; CNMH 2017) and intersectionally, that is, based on ethnicity, race, geography, sexuality, (dis)ability, etc. (see Acosta et al. 2018) in these conflict spaces.

We also know, however, that some women also resist violence, in their capacities as peace-builders (Rojas 2009; Restrepo 2016; Paarlberg-Kvam 2019), women's rights activists (Sandvik and Lemaitre 2015; Kreft 2019), and even feminists (Zulver 2018), thus complicating victim-perpetrator binaries that continue to dominate, for example, transitional justice literature (Baines 2015). In the Putumayo context, we even see that certain women even have to rely on the illicit economies that generate some of the gendered insecurity in their lives, requiring even more nuanced understanding about the intersectional complexities of living in this territory (FIP 2017).

In this article, I document an experience where women have not only mobilized as a function of their experiences with conflict, but also continue this mobilization. This is despite a revitalization of the patriarchy that actively seeks to suppress such mobilization and the gains that women made during the reshuffling of social order that war creates.

To be clear, I do not mean to deny that there *do* exist barriers to mobilization that women might face. For example, Berry (2017, 2018) focuses on the ways in which IPV prevents women's more public manifestations of empowerment, and Cockburn talks about an increase in domestic violence as a function of male frustration amidst post-war unemployment (2013a). Indeed, Tate's longstanding ethnographic work with the Alianza documents that IPV in Putumayo is "extremely common and remains significantly underreported in the region", and that many of the group's leaders have themselves survived incidences of domestic violence (2015, 233). Undoubtedly, this source of violence limits or shapes the way in which women choose to mobilize.

What I have underscored, however, is that these barriers to mobilization are more permeable than they have been previously represented. Again, to return to Hume and Wilding, we should not

assume that inaction by some women is a reflection of passivity; agency should be seen as fluid and contingent on the differing violences and violent repercussions that characterize daily life (2019).

At the same time, however, the enduring Alianza mobilization presents evidence that when targeted and gendered violence surges, some women *can* draw on and modify repertoires of collective action learned during previous periods of conflict. We see, then, that patriarchal backlashes do not necessarily limit women's mobilization gains but can in fact lead to a secondary wave of mobilization *in response to* this revitalization of the patriarchy. The endurance of shifts in women's roles may be stronger and more durable than expected.

These findings also draw into question the ways in which we promote women's participation in conflict resolution and post-conflict peacebuilding, as per the recommendations of the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000) on Women, Peace and Security.³⁸ Some scholars have found correlations between women's participation in peace negotiations and the durability and the quality of peace (Krause, Krause, and Bränfors 2018). The Putumayo case, however, shows that women's support of peace in fact puts them at elevated risk of retributive violence. It is important at a policy level, therefore, that proponents of the WPS agenda critically engage in context-specific analysis when encouraging women's participation in so-called post-conflict moments.³⁹ In doing so, they can become more effective allies in supporting the Alianza's strategy of "making visible" the gendered risks that women peacebuilders face whilst engaging in communities affected by ongoing violence.⁴⁰

¹ Some quotes used in this article are also included in a long-form and video journalism piece. The interviewees gave informed consent for their words to be used in the journalistic and academic publications.

² Interview, 18-11-18.

³ See Asimovic Akyol (2019).

⁴ For an interesting discussion of the lack of a masculinities perspective in the WPS agenda, see (Wright 2019)

⁵ In Kenya, see (Berry, Bouka, and Muthoni Kamuru 2020).

⁶ The women of the Alianza have a long history of media engagement, including in recent national publications (El Espectador 2020). When discussing informed consent, they were clear that previous media exposure had not led to backlash violence, and moreover that they wanted increased international exposure and visibility of their experience, both in journalism and academia.

⁷ See (Zulver 2018).

⁸ For a history of the conflict in Putumayo, see (CNMH 2012) and (Tate 2015).

⁹ See also (Taussig 1984)

¹⁰ For the most part, interviewees did not discuss how their intersecting identities relate to exposure to violence during our semi-structured interviews, which is why this does not form a central part of this article's arguments. My ongoing research with the Alianza will more directly deal with these topics, to the extent that I can do so without engaging in potentially (re)traumatizing practices.

¹¹ Women suffered violence before the arrival of the AUC in 1999, and after demobilization in 2006. This period, however, is particularly illustrative of the gendered dynamics of violent conflict in Putumayo.

¹² The male-perpetrator, female-victim binary does not reveal the complete story of violence. Militarized masculinity was acted out against men's bodies too, including in its expression as LGBT violence, see (CNMH 2015).

¹³ When the AUC demobilized.

¹⁴ For more on children born of wartime rape, see Theidon 2015; Sanchez Parra 2018.

¹⁵ Interview, 19-11-18.

¹⁶ Elsewhere I have argued that the experience of the Alianza adds to our understandings of civilian agency and resistance. See also (Villareal and Ríos 2006).

¹⁷ Interview, 18-11-18.

¹⁸ Interview, 19-11-18.

¹⁹ Interview, 16-09-19

²⁰ Interview, 11-09-19.

²¹ Interview, 19-11-18

²² Interview, 18-11-18.

²³ Interview, 18-11-18.

²⁴ Interview, 19-11-18.

²⁵ Interview, 18-11-18.

²⁶ Interview, 19-11-18.

²⁷ Interview, 11-09-19.

²⁸ For an ethnographic investigation on the role of the state in Putumayo during this time, see (Tate 2015).

²⁹ Interview, 18-11-18

³⁰ Interview, 18-11-18.

³¹ Interview, 19-11-18.

³² Interview, 11-09-19.

³³ Interview, 11-09-19.

³⁴ Interview, 19-11-18.

³⁵ Interview, 18-11-18.

³⁶ Interview, 11-09-19.

³⁷ In these settings, Cockburn (2013) asks, and Berry and Rana restate (2019, 325): "when does "postwar" become a time that truly merits the name "peace"?"

³⁸ Resolution 1325 is the first of ten UNSC resolutions that make up the Women, Peace and Security agenda. It brings a gender perspective to the impacts of conflict on women, and calls for women's inclusion in conflict prevention, conflict resolution, and peacebuilding.

³⁹ For a discussion of what it means to "localize" the WPS agenda, see (Lynch 2019).

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