War is Gendered. Solutions to it must be Gender-Sensitive

By **Fernando Aguiar**
Strategic Adviser on Conflict and EU Politics

It was in a spring sunny day in Bogota, Colombia, in a rather small waiting room, filled with a pleasant coffee aroma that I met former FARC combatant Rosa for the first time. I recall feeling quite self-conscious of my role as a young man, with limited field-work experience, inmersed in such a complex context,
where five decades of guerrilla war has left devastating consequeces on its social fabric. And yet, a 45 minutes conversation with Rosa was a touching experience that felt at the same time personal and revealing.

Today, looking at the notebook in which I scrawled my thoughts and notes, I remember vividly how Rosa walked me through her experience as a former combatant for/in the guerrilla movement. How the social experiences and gender dynamics within the movement functioned and were exploited to enhance its operational goals. But what was particularly striking in my conversation with her was how recruitment tactics were deeply rooted in gender identities and gender narratives – for both male and female combatants.

Those who joined armed groups in that highly patriarchal setting were often seeking to assert and fulfill their gender expectations. That is, to become "idealized" men and women, as per Rosa's words. Her inputs serve as a reflection into how gender as a category is fundamental in understanding power relations, local social dynamics and identity groups in conflict-affected areas.

This first-hand account showed me how, more generally, armed groups very often follow a hypermasculine ideal to recruit male individuals from diverse backgrounds. By relating violence to the ideal of how to be a "real man" or the "protector" of their communities, these organizations are able to add a social value to their recruitment process.

Very often, while men are cast as the "masculinized soldier" and the "strong militarized leader", the symbolic roles that are assigned to women are rather the opposite: the "patriotic mother", the "loyal military wife" and the "vulnerable-in-need-of-protection girl". These simplistic tropes help justify

unequal gendered relations of power. But women and men are not homogeneous. They have agency and choice. Rosa, for instance, said that life was harsh and risky within the FARC, but that she felt "empowered" and part of "a community, where she could play a self-rewarding role", something that the State failed to provide.

In this logic, female combatants might seek in armed groups the opportunity to escape from patriarchal environments, like Rosa, when she was 17, or gender-based violence, perpetrated most of the time within their homes. Like their male peers, women might also seek adventure, power and admiration from their communities. It is a feeling of devotion to the movement or a feeling of "sisterhood" and "brotherhood" that can offer an important remedy for those who feel marginalized and disconnected from their own communities.

What does this tell us in a broader sense? The example of the FARC in Colombia is illustrative: the manipulation of gender discourse is central to inform recruitment into armed groups and energize their war tactics in different conflict-affected settings. Echoing Azadeh Moaveni in her recent thought-provoking participation for *War and Peace* podcast series from the International Crisis Group, adding a gender analysis means exploring women's full agency and the structural factors that encouraged them to take up arms.

Following this understanding, if gender roles can be manipulated by armed groups to recruit and maintain their male and female comrades, gender as a source of analysis could also provide insights of resilience. What is needed, in my mind, is a critical re-examination of the politics of peace and security. At the policy level, this includes broadening the concept of gender, away from rigid stereotypes and binary definitions. The conflation of gender with women, and women with peace, can lead to a hyper-visualization of femininities, while overlooking the role of masculinities in conflict resolution. At the practical level, paying attention to

the significance of gendered identities in social experiences can help develop inclusive, and localized, programs which should focus on empowered approaches to education and development.

My second encounter with Rosa, who is now part of a feminist movement within the FARC political party, took place in a cloudy and cold Brussels. "In my view, it is not possible to understand why so many conflicts persist today without taking the role of gender into account" she said. And I agree entirely. If we recognize and apply this remark, we may better prescribe more effective policies to create alternatives to violence and sustainable solutions to conflicts across the world.
Names have been changed to *maintain confidentiality*

The BIC is an independent, non-profit, think-and-do tank based in the capital of Europe that is committed to developing solutions to address the cyclical drivers of insecurity, economic fragility, and conflict the Middle East and North Africa. Our goal is to bring added value to the highest levels of political discourse by bringing systemic issues to the forefront of the conversation.

BRUSSELS INTERNATIONAL CENTER

AUTHOR

Fernando Aguiar
Strategic Adviser On Conflict And Eu Politics