



How Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) can improve gender equality in post-conflict situations. Lessons from Guatemala.

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Processes of Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) are crucial for building sustainable peace by supporting former combatants to reintegrate into civilian life. This policy brief analyses the case of Guatemala to describe what returning home can look like for female ex-combatants, and how they could better be supported to maintain the increased gender equality experienced during conflict.

Executive summary

- The tendency to leave ex-combatants and receiving communities to their own devices to deal with the social aspects of reintegration can have damaging impacts on women's lives.
- Obstacles encountered by women include problematic emotional and family relationships, leading to psychological problems and even violence; persisting stigma producing anxiety and problems in the labour market; the loss of unity which prevents women from claiming their rights collectively.
- Recommendations include: integrate actions directed at household and family relationships within DDR; providing counselling and family support for men and women; organisational processes and societal sensitisation.

Introduction

After armed conflicts, support often focuses on economic and political reintegration, which is easier to implement and monitor, but leaves ex-combatants and receiving communities to their own devices to rebuild trust between social groups. This can be especially difficult for women, who after experiencing new roles in armed groups are often forced back into traditional gender roles. This has made peace a disappointing experience for female ex-combatants.¹

DDR in Guatemala

Guatemala was the scene of a bloody internal armed conflict between guerrilla organisations and the army from 1960 until 1996. Guerrilla activity provoked a bloody counterinsurgency campaign and acts of genocide. Over 200,000 people were killed, 82% of whom were indigenous. The country's truth commission identified the state to be responsible for 93% of these crimes, and the guerrilla groups for 3%.

Women, who composed approximately 15% of combatants, had diverse roles in the guerrilla groups, ranging from being combatants, medical staff, radio communicators and political representatives. Although some women obtained military ranks, guerrilla leadership was male. Nevertheless, they remember how men and women performed the same

everyday tasks, which was uncommon in Guatemalan society. To understand women's experiences when reintegrating into civilian life, semi-structured in-depth interviews and a focus group were held with 20 female ex-combatants.

Problems faced by women

After conflict, demobilisation support included a small economic lump sum, legal, housing and education support, and small productive projects. Being a relatively early DDR programme, it had no gender perspective. Since then, international guidelines have increasingly adopted a gender perspective, but this is often limited to a 'women focus' and to actions in the public sphere. This approach is incomplete, since as is evident from the following, problems facing women are particularly related to gendered role divisions between men and women in the private sphere.

Emotional relationships

Many women had formed emotional relationships while in the guerrilla groups, and some even had children. Yet making these relationships work in civilian life proved difficult. Once women's participation no longer served revolutionary goals, many men were no longer so keen on having active and assertive wives, while their social environment also encouraged them to take up traditional gender roles.

Patriarchal societies expect men to be successful breadwinners. Yet many men returned home without income generating opportunities and with traumas. As a result – reflecting worldwide tendencies among veterans² – some men started to have problems with alcoholism as a way to deal with a painful past and present. This facilitated instances of violence against women.

Women often ended up as the main or sole carers for their children. With no childcare provisions available as part of DDR or in general, many saw their opportunities to study or find a well-paid job trumped. They often ended up with unstable low-paid jobs in the informal sector, if at all.

Family roles

Many women who had children during the conflict had to leave their children under the care of family members or guerrilla sympathisers. The post-conflict family reunifications were often complicated. Some children had adapted to their new families, while others felt abandoned and sacrificed. Parents did not always understand this. Moreover, during their stay in the guerrilla camps, many women had lost family members due to old age or illness. Upon return, women were often blamed for not having cared for these family members, causing feelings of blame and guilt. Men seemed to experience this to a lesser degree, as their gender role did not involve caring tasks. No counselling or other psychosocial support was offered to accompany these dynamics.

Stigma

Since the end of the armed conflict, a stigma has become attached to former guerrilla members, who are being viewed as delinquents and communists. Some women have been fired from jobs once their guerrilla membership became apparent. Women suffer a double stigma: for having been guerrilleras, and for speaking their minds in a patriarchal and authoritarian society. This creates a constant anxiety about who can be trusted.

From collective to individual life

These problems are related to the change from collective guerrilla life to the tough individual reality of surviving in society. Women describe feeling isolated and marginalised. Although DDR in Guatemala was individually focused, one of the few collective experiences shows the benefits of collective reintegration for maintaining conflict-era gender relations. Women play an active role in the community, their women's group leading organisational and leadership processes in surrounding communities. Elsewhere, organisations of female ex-combatants have helped to overcome isolation and stigma, in some cases even becoming important players in the women's movement.³

Recommendations

The above shows that social reintegration in Guatemala was not successful, as social perceptions of ex-combatants still distinguish them from other citizens. Women were particularly disadvantaged. For many, a forced return to caring and household tasks has prevented them from political and economic participation. This is a lost opportunity, since women's experiences during conflict could help change imaginaries of gender roles, strengthening women's role as political and social actors. In response, key actions for future DDR processes include:

For governments, international donors and NGOs:

- Expand DDR's focus from the political and economic to the private sphere, including of the household and family.
- Provide childcare to enable women to continue studying and find employment.

- Provide counselling and family support to assist men and women to adapt to new roles, and address psychological problems caused by conflict and DDR.
- Address female ex-combatants as social and political actors whose experiences of emancipation can make them role models, helping to transform gender relations. Gender and feminist training for female ex-combatants can reinforce their agency.

For former armed groups:

- Create information and sensitisation campaigns to create understanding of the experiences and motivations of ex-combatants.
- Create organisations of female ex-combatants to build solidarity and enable them to claim their rights collectively.

References

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Find out more

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