Welcome to the jungle: A case study on female participation in the FARC, ELN and AUC

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Bachelor Project 7: Civil Wars in Theory and Practice

June 5, 2022

7967 words

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INTRODUCTION

"I joined the guerrilla in the firm belief that I would never get out of the jungle. That I would dedicate and give my life to a revolutionary ideal. [...] This is my story, the testimony of someone who is still convinced that another world is possible."

Nijmeijer (2021)

These words are written by Tanja Nijmeijer, a Dutch woman who joined the FARC in Colombia in 2002. After the discovery of her diary in an abandoned camp in the jungle and the media attention that followed the incident, she became one of the group's leading public figures. The world was both curious about her and scared of her. Not only was she not Colombian, but she was also a woman, and thus many questions were asked about her role within the organization: was she a fighter, a victim, a sex worker, or a true revolutionist?

Tanja's story took place during the Colombian civil war, a devastating conflict that lasted from 1978 until 2015. After years of political turmoil, violence erupted when several communist guerrilla groups, such as the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the National Liberation Army (ELN), took up arms to fight the Colombian government (Karl, 2017). In response, the government granted private armies the right to use violence against these insurgents, such as the United Self-Defences of Colombia (AUC) (Franz, 2016). In total, over 250.000 people have lost their lives due to the violence between these groups and others (Statista, 2021).

Although many actors participated in the Colombian civil war, this thesis will focus on the three groups mentioned above: the FARC, ELN and AUC. Tanja may not have fitted the

stereotype of a guerrilla fighter that most people have in mind, but women being actively involved in armed groups was less uncommon than one might think. However, there is a significant difference when it comes to the number of female fighters between the FARC, ELN and AUC. Female fighters were present in all of them, but in vastly different numbers, as can be seen in the table below.

Table 1. *Percentage of female fighters in the FARC, ELN and AUC*

	Number of fighters between 2000-2003	**Percentage of female fighters**
FARC	16.000	30-40%
ELN	6.000	20%
AUC	30.000	2%

Note. Based on data by Martin (2011), O'Neill (2015), Alpert (2018) and Gutiérrez Sanín (2008).

Many scholars have developed theories about female participation in times of war, and some of them have even written about the Colombian civil war specifically. However, these theories have not yet been used to explain the difference in female participation between different parties involved in the same civil war. Therefore, I aim to explain this phenomenon in my thesis by answering the following research question: *What explains the difference in female participation between the FARC, ELN and AUC in the period of 1978-2015 in Colombia?*

I will answer this question by building on the existing knowledge on female participation in warfare and applying this directly to the Colombian case to find out in what ways the FARC,

ELN and AUC vary and therefore attract a different number of female fighters to their cause. First, I will explore what other scholars have written on the topic of female fighters, after which I will formulate my theoretical expectations for the research question. For the methodology section, I will explain my chosen analysis and justify my case selection and choice of data. Next, I will shortly describe the historical context in which this civil war took place in order to enhance the understanding of the causes of the FARC, ELN and AUC. I will end the paper by analysing and discussing the data and implications of this research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Several theories have been developed on female fighters and why women would freely choose to become soldiers. In general, theories on their motivations to join an armed group can be categorised as either push or pull factors. Push factors are the factors that encourage women to leave their ordinary lives behind, whereas pull factors are the things that pull them into the life of a fighter.

Push factors

A general theory about push factors that explains female participation during wartime is the grievance theory. As Henshaw (2016) summarises in her article 'Why Women Rebel' there are typically four categories that are identified as sources of grievance: economic inequality, ethnic or religious persecution, a lack of political rights, and threats to family and community. According to Henshaw, once a certain peak of deprivation is reached, women will be driven to rebel.

The idea that economic inequality can lead to rebellion is certainly not new. In the 1848 'The Communist Manifesto', Marx and Engels wrote that they expected the capitalist society to be overthrown by labourers to make way for a 'workers society'. They specifically wrote that women, in this future society, would have an improved position in the labour market where they would not just be viewed as instruments, but as people (Marx et al., 2021). Economic inequality does not just concern income or capital, but also land ownership, as Wickham-Crowley (1993) points out. Combine this with the fact that Colombia has one of the highest Gini coefficients in the world (Richani, 2018), and it becomes clear that economic inequality could be an important source of grievance for rural Colombian women.

Another source of grievance is ethnic or religious persecution. This includes things such as government policies that favour one population group over others and the marginalization of certain cultural practices (Henshaw, 2016). According to Gurr (2011), ethnic and religious persecution mobilises individuals to come together. He argues that such practices evoke a sense of collective injustice. Rebel groups can use this anger and frustration to their advantage, as it eases the process of group formation and improves their soldiers' willingness to use violence (Collier, 2017).

The same can be argued for political exclusion, the third source of grievance. Within this term, one can distinguish political exclusion (actions with the intent to exclude a certain group from participating in the political process), political repression (a more coercive form of political exclusion) and alienation (the belief that a group is not represented in the political system at all) (Humphreys & Weinstein, 2008). Henshaw (2016) adds to this that women can be excluded from political participation on two grounds: one being that they belong to a certain ethnicity or religion and two being that they are a woman. She theorises that this too can be a source of grievance for women. This sentiment is echoed by Viterna (2006). She argues that the pushback that women in El Salvador received when they tried to get politically involved led them to turn to underground political organizations and rebel groups instead.

The last source of grievance is threats to family and community. In a study about the civil war in El Salvador, Wood (2003) found that women did not make a distinction between violent attacks made on their immediate family or their neighbours; both were perceived as equally dangerous. She agrees with Tickner (2001), who in her book 'Gendering World Politics' stresses the importance of protection and security as a political right, especially for women and children. In civil wars, young males often decide to join armed groups, and thus many women

are left to their own devices, in need of a group to ensure their safety and survival. This, according to Henshaw, is when they turn to rebel groups. Some scholars even explain motherhood as a motivation for women to mobilise, as it motivates them to fight for a better world for their children (Mason, 1992).

Pull factors

There is not one complete theory that categorizes the pull factors that lure women into the life of a fighter. Instead, scholars have identified multiple factors that influence women's decision-making. Whereas the push factors described in the section above are mostly collective motivations, pull factors can also be highly individualistic.

One such individualistic motivation is the promise of financial rewards. In most cases, guerrilla groups do not offer a salary, but instead provide their fighters with food and accommodation, whereas paramilitary groups do offer a salary (Gutiérrez Sanín, 2008). The presence of financial rewards as a pull factor is echoed by Collier (2006). He argues that people make a rational cost-benefit analysis when it comes to making an income. When there is no legal opportunity to earn enough money, both men and women are more likely to do this in an illegal way. Therefore, women have an incentive to join a rebel group for personal enrichment.

Another pull factor for women can be a group's ideology. Wood and Thomas (2017) find that the presence of a left-wing ideology increases female participation, as rebel organizations with this ideology often seek to terminate the traditional society. This includes ending the stereotypes that come with gender. Taking up arms and joining a violent group can be women's way of taking control over their lives, especially considering many women live in a highly patriarchal society where they do not always have the same political rights as men or get to experience

freedom in the same way (Herrera & Porch, 2008). This is even more so the case when the armed organization in question offers chances of moving up the ranks and promotes political rights for women (Henshaw, 2016).

Another reason for women to join an armed group is because they are actively being recruited. Rebel organizations have increasingly begun to realise the value of having female fighters on their side. According to research done by Manekin and Wood (2020), the presence of female fighters shows the outside world the seriousness of the cause and the necessity of the violence, since "even society's 'most pacifistic' members have been forced to take up arms" (p. 1644). Therefore, rebel organizations will try their hardest to recruit women. Instead of illustrating women as victims of the war, they will use propaganda material that portrays women as active participants in the war, such as a mother carrying a baby and a rifle over her shoulder (Lyons, 1999). These images are instrumental in shaping a rebel organization's public image. Therefore, many rebel groups make use of gender framing in their propaganda. Scholars have theorized that this indeed results in more female recruits, but no specific research has been done on this topic yet (Manekin & Wood, 2020).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

As can be read in the literature review, much has been written on why women actively participate in war. However, there are some questions that previous research does not answer. Is one factor perhaps more relevant than others? Do they explain the difference in the number of female fighters between different rebel organizations? And how do these theories hold up when they are tested against the Colombian case? These are questions I aim to answer in my thesis.

When it comes to developing a theory that explains the variance in female participation between the FARC, ELN and AUC, it makes sense to mostly focus on the pull factors. Although push factors are crucial in understanding why women leave their homes, they are less relevant in understanding why women favour one rebel organization over another. To answer the research question, it is important to understand in what ways the FARC, ELN and AUC differ from each other. Based on the literature, three variables stand out that might explain the difference in the number of female fighters between these organizations. These factors are ideology, way of recruitment, and organizational structure. Below, I will discuss each variable and present my theoretical expectations for the analysis.

Ideology

Before we consider how women respond to certain ideologies, it is helpful to paint a picture of the circumstances that many Colombian women grow up in. Besides a lack of money and education, abuse within and outside of the home is a big problem in Colombia. Studies have shown that more than half of demobilised female fighters from several armed groups had experienced domestic abuse, and that women are twice as likely as men to state this as a reason

to join an armed group (Darden et al., 2019). Furthermore, Colombian society is highly patriarchal: women are expected to care for their children, maintain the house and meet a high standard of beauty. Keeping these push factors in mind is helpful to understand the pull that ideology can have on women who see no way to succeed in the society they live in currently.

Darden et al. (2019) present a theory that states that in the case of abuse in a war-torn society, joining an armed group gives women a sense of agency. It offers them safety now that their family has failed them, as they are once again part of a group. This is even more so the case when rebel organizations specifically forbid the things they are running from, such as rape and domestic violence. Female fighters view measures that encourage female autonomy and sexual freedom as positive, according to research by Herrera and Porch (2008), since this would be impossible for them to experience if they were to live at home. *"They always think that women are more domestic, more feminine, and all that, but not back there,"* is how a former female fighter describes her experience in the jungle. *"With the guerrillas, it's gender equality, we're all equal"* (Alpert, 2018). A rebel organization that preaches equality, (sexual) freedom and political rights for women is like a feminist utopia for Colombian women who feel like they lack this in their everyday life. Therefore, we can expect that a clear feminist agenda resonates with the wishes of Colombian women and can function as a strong pull factor.

Meanwhile, rebel organizations have their own practical reasons for why they should care about women's rights. In her book 'Women and Terrorism', Gonzalez-Perez (2008) argues that terrorist groups are forced to develop a feminist agenda to recruit female fighters, as the need for manpower outweighs traditional patriarchal structures. Especially in the 80s and early 00s, casualties in the Colombian civil war rose to an all-time high, meaning there was a very basic need for more soldiers.

To summarize, we can expect that female participation will be higher amongst rebel organizations that advocate women's rights. Therefore, the first hypothesis is the following.

> *H1: Women are more likely to participate in rebel organizations that have a clear feminist agenda.*

Recruitment

In order to increase female participation anywhere, but especially in a mostly male-dominated field such as warfare, organizations need to invest in the active recruitment of women. The active recruitment of women in armed groups can function as a pull factor to encourage women to join organization X over organization Y.

There are multiple reasons for rebel organizations to invest in the recruitment of women. Firstly, as has been noted in the literature review, having female fighters in your troops shows the outside world the importance of your cause (Manekin & Wood, 2020). Specifically for rebel groups, it furthermore provides them with the opportunity to soften their image. Both the FARC, ELN and AUC relied on kidnapping and drug trade to finance their battles, and thus did not come across as particularly peaceful to the international community. Having female fighters and using them in propaganda and public relations helps with this (Herrera & Porch, 2008). Secondly, for rebel groups fighting the government, having female fighters offered another advantage: it forced the Colombian military to fight and sometimes kill people that generally are considered to be vulnerable and non-dangerous. This was a way for rebel organizations to discredit the Colombian government (Herrera & Porch, 2008). Lastly, there is a very practical reason why any armed group wants women in their camps: it means that there are opportunities

for sexual relations between male and female soldiers. This is good for morale and decreased the chance that soldiers will defect because of loneliness (Herrera & Porch, 2008).

Once rebel organizations realize the value that women add to their organization, they alter their propaganda and recruitment more toward women. Images of mothers and young girls carrying a gun are popular amongst guerrilla groups when it comes to promotion material (Lyons, 1999). In general, their propaganda and recruitment are based on the perception that women are not merely victims of conflict. In fact, it celebrates women as protagonists in warfare (Herrera & Porch, 2008). The tactic of portraying women as strong, military leaders for recruitment is one that is also used by government armies and is therefore not new, but nonetheless effective.

In conclusion, when rebel organizations are aware of the benefits of having female fighters, they will actively work toward recruiting more of them. It is expected that this kind of recruitment will result in a higher percentage of female fighters, as this recruitment strategy acts as a pull factor. The second hypothesis therefore is the following:

> *H2: Women are more likely to participate in rebel organizations that actively recruit women.*

Organizational structure

The effect that the organizational structure of a rebel organization has on female participation is debated amongst scholars. Henshaw (2016) found that many rebel groups place their female recruits in supporting roles in the camps and that there is little to no opportunity for promotion. However, there is another theory that argues that the role of women during war changes during each stage of civil war. Israelsen (2018) argues that the more intense the civil war gets, the more

there is a need for female fighters and thus the more important the role that women play within rebel organizations.

Generally, women seem to respond well to a feeling of equality within a rebel organization. Being able to be of service provides female fighters with a sense of pride and accomplishment. A former FARC member described her experience as a commander in the following way: *"At any moment you could die in the struggle … but sometimes you feel that you'd die peacefully because maybe in some future, others could enjoy that transformation that you were fighting for."* Other female fighters were reminiscent of the sense of authority they experienced due to the weapons and uniform and appreciated the skills and discipline guerrilla life taught them (Alpert, 2018).

For rebel organizations, implementing gender equality policies is also a way to distinguish their organization from others with a similar ideology and to increase support amongst the general population (Israelsen, 2018). Examples of implementing such gender equality policies are placing women in combat roles, providing opportunities for female fighters to move up in the ranks, and not making a clear divide between 'male tasks' and 'female tasks' within the rebel organization.

Based on the insights provided by both Israelsen (2018) and former female fighters, I expect that once a rebel organization establishes itself as a place that implements gender equality policies, this will result in more female recruits. Hence, the third hypothesis is the following:

> *H3: Women are more likely to participate in rebel organizations that implement gender equality policies into their own organizational structure.*

METHODOLOGY

Concepts

Before getting into the analysis part of this thesis, it is important that some concepts are further defined in order to eliminate confusion. In this thesis, the FARC, ELN and AUC are often described as ‘rebel organizations’, ‘guerrilla groups’ and ‘paramilitary forces’, three fuzzy concepts that could benefit from some more clarity.

A rebel organization is commonly understood as a group with political goals that opposes the existing government (Cambridge Dictionary, 2022a). Rebel organizations can take on many different forms, but according to Gutiérrez Sanín (2008), they all have one thing in common: their underlying motivation is greed. He therefore argues that rebellion can be explained like any other form of criminality, which is by investigating the motivations and environments of the fighters in question. Jo et al. (2017) further emphasize the need for a political agenda in rebel organizations, stating that if their motives are merely profit-based, they are not considered a rebel organization.

The FARC, ELN and AUC all can be described as rebel organizations, as this is a sort of umbrella term, but they are significantly different in terms of organizational structure and type of warfare. The FARC and ELN are categorized as guerrilla groups, which is defined as an armed group that attempts to overthrow the government by conducting unexpected attacks and relying on methods of unconventional warfare (Cambridge Dictionary, 2022b). Like many other guerrilla groups, the FARC and ELN mostly hide out in the jungle, although both groups also have city-based branches (Christian Science Monitor, 2002). The AUC on the other hand is considered a paramilitary organization, meaning that the fighters are organized in a military

fashion and have received military training too, but do not represent the Colombian government (Colombia Reports, 2016).

Case selection

The civil war in Colombia is a complex one with many different parties involved: from (foreign) governments to guerrilla groups to drug cartels, they all play a role in the Colombian conflict. This thesis focuses on rebel organizations, both left-wing and right-wing. Although one could argue that certain drug cartels also consist of armed groups with some sort of political goals, thus qualifying as rebel organizations, these groups have been left out of this research. The reason for this is that there are many rebel organizations involved in the Colombian civil war, which makes it simply impossible to discuss all of them in this thesis.

Instead, this research focuses on the FARC, ELN and AUC. The FARC and ELN are both left-wing guerrilla groups, whereas the AUC is a paramilitary organization. Together, they represent both sides of the civil war: the communist guerrilla groups that seek to overthrow the government and change the status quo, and the groups that fight against them. The FARC and ELN are the biggest and most influential groups on the left, whereas the AUC is the biggest group on the right (Darden et al., 2019). Even though the FARC and the ELN have a lot of similarities when it comes to their organization, there is a quite significant difference in the number of female fighters each organization has, which is why it is useful and interesting to compare these two left-wing groups. The AUC on the other hand barely has any female fighters and thus offers a sharp contrast with the FARC and ELN.

Research method

The research presented here is a comparative study with the goal to discover differences and similarities between the FARC, ELN and AUC. To answer the research question, this paper uses a combination of the Most Similar Systems Design (MSSD) and the Most Dissimilar Systems Design (MDSD) research methods. For MSSD, two objects are chosen that share a lot of characteristics but differ in the dependent variable. For MDSD, the two objects are vastly different but share a characteristic of the dependent variable (Anckar, 2008). The comparison between the FARC and ELN follows the MSSD method, whereas the comparison between the FARC/ELN and the AUC follows a modified version of the MDSS method, since they also differ in the dependent variable. These research methods only work when the objects that are being analysed belong to the same level of analysis, which is indeed the case for these objects and variables (Anckar, 2008).

As can be read in the theoretical framework, this research will focus on three independent variables that might explain the difference in female participation between the FARC, ELN and AUC. However, the downside of this method is that it will be difficult to point out one independent variable as the variable that most influences female participation, since all the independent variables occur and are being tested at the same time. That being said, this research will still be able to shine some light on whether or not these variables as a whole influence female participation in rebel organizations.

Data selection

For the analysis, a plurality of sources will be used. The goal is to rely mostly on primary sources, such as testimonies from former fighters and manifestos from the three rebel organizations in question. However, it can be tricky to locate original sources and documents

written by the rebel organizations themselves. After the FARC and AUC reached a peace agreement with the Colombian government, much of their propaganda and promotional material was taken and/or removed from the internet. Furthermore, all three rebel groups are considered to be terrorist organizations by the European Union and the United States (Acosta, 2022), making it difficult to find their writings and sources online.

Luckily, numerous scholars have written detailed reports and theories on the ideology, structure, and policy of these rebel organizations. There have also been many journalists who have interviewed (former) FARC, ELN and AUC members and have published part of these transcripts. Finally, quite some fighters, both male and female, have written books and essays on their experiences in the war. This thesis will therefore depend on some primary, but mostly secondary sources to test the hypotheses and answer the research question.

THE COLOMBIAN CIVIL WAR

In this section, a brief overview of the Colombian civil war will be provided, as knowing the history of the conflict is crucial to understanding the motives and support base of the FARC, ELN and AUC.

Although Colombia is one of the oldest democracies in South America, its history is anything but peaceful (Freedom House, n.d.). Many scholars view the civil war of 1978-2015 as a continuation of the previous violent period in Colombian history known as La Violencia. This conflict occurred between 1948 and 1958 and involved the two main political parties: the Conservatives and the Liberals. After the murder of a popular Liberal politician, chaos broke out. According to the New York Times, La Violencia prompted gruesome executions, torture, and thousands of deaths (James, 1985). In 1957, the leaders of both parties came together and drafted a unique peace agreement. They arranged for a 'National Front' government which would alternate the presidency between the two parties and share other government posts. The agreement lasted for 16 years and ended in 1978 (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2022).

During this period of relative peace, another conflict was already brewing beneath the surface. For centuries, there had been a big discrepancy between the lower and upper class in Colombia, which mostly coincided with the rural-urban cleavage. This great inequality made the countryside a perfect breeding ground for socialist groups (Richani, 2018). Around the 1960s, the FARC and ELN entered the political stage. The FARC has its origins in the Colombian countryside where it emerged in 1964 under the leadership of Manuel Marulanda Vélez as a split-off of the Columbian Communist Party (Karl, 2017). The ELN was supported mostly by the urban population and was founded in 1964 by Colombian rebels who were trained in Cuba

(Karl, 2017). Both guerrilla groups relied on illegal activities such as kidnappings, drug trade and extortion to finance their military activities. As the violence rose, the Colombian state started granting private armies the right to fight the guerrilla groups (Brittain, 2019). The AUC, originally composed of several private armies from drug lords, was one of them (Colombia Reports, 2016).

The FARC, ELN and AUC all received some sort of support from the Colombian public for varied reasons. Whereas peasants often supported the political goals and ideology of the FARC and ELN, others were happy that the AUC attempted to end the gruesome crimes committed by guerrilla groups (Gutiérrez Sanín, 2008). The expansion of these violent groups was driven by the flourishing drug industry. Coca, the raw material for cocaine, had been an important export product of the country for centuries, but Colombia's role as a supplier in the internal drug market grew exponentially in the 1970s. This led to drug cartels becoming an important actor within the political and cultural system of Colombia. Several rebel groups and governmental organizations alike got involved in illegal drug activities, which further complicated the civil war that would follow (Franz, 2016).

The violence that characterised the 80s, 90s and 00s cooled down when the Colombian government made peace agreements with both the AUC in 2004 and the FARC in 2015. The ELN was not included in the final peace agreements (Rodriguez, 2018). Today, Colombia continues to struggle with insurgency groups, illegal drug trade and the implementation of the peace agreement. Many military groups have still not given up their weapons, leading over 63.000 Colombians to flee their home in 2021 alone (Humanitarian Advisory Team, 2021).

ANALYSIS

The research question that is being answered in this section is the following: *What explains the difference in female participation between the FARC, ELN and AUC in the period of 1978-2015 in Colombia?* As has been mentioned before, the analysis will take the form of a comparative study. The table below is a summary of the analysis, after which each variable will be discussed separately.

***Table 2**. Analysis of variables on female participation in the FARC, ELN and AUC*

	FARC	**ELN**	**AUC**
Dependent variable			
Female participation	High (30-40%)	Medium (20%)	Low (2%)
Independent variables			
Feminist Agenda	Mostly present	Present	Absent
Actively recruit women	Present	Mostly present	Absent
Implementation of gender equality policies	Absent	Mostly absent	Not enough data available
Alternative explanations			
Left-wing ideology	Present	Present	Absent
Financial compensation	Absent	Absent	Present
Forced recruitment	Present	Present	Mostly absent

Feminist agenda

H1: Women are more likely to participate in rebel organizations that have a clear feminist agenda.

As has been theorized before, rebel organizations often adopt a feminist agenda when the need for new recruits is so high that this outweighs traditional patriarchal outlooks (Gonzalez-Perez, 2008). This seems to be the case for the FARC which only adopted gender issues into its political agenda in the 80s (Darden et al., 2019), which is why the FARC's feminist agenda is coded as 'mostly present'. The ELN is coded as 'present', since it has considered gender issues from the beginning (Darden et al., 2019). The AUC on the other hand had no feminist agenda (Gjelsvik, 2010).

Shortly after its establishment, the ELN released the 'Simacota Manifesto' in which it defined its goals and ideas for Colombia (National Liberation Army (ELN), n.d.). The manifesto explicitly mentioned women and called on the government to grant women their legitimate rights. A possible explanation for the ELN's early focus on gender issues is the fact that the founders of the ELN were inspired by the communist ideals of Fidel Castro and were even trained in Cuba to bring the revolution to Colombia (Karl, 2017). Their feminist agenda was a way for the ELN to establish itself as an organization of the 'new left'; an advocate for broad social change, including gender issues (Darden et al., 2019).

Although the FARC in its initial stages made no reference to feminist issues, this changed later, when the FARC conferences of 1978 and 1982 made it possible for women to officially enlist (Herrera & Porch, 2008). The FARC had some female fighters before that time, but they were unable to occupy leadership positions (Darden et al., 2019). Simultaneously, the FARC

experienced its biggest growth in members. Whereas the ELN recruited mostly among students and Catholics, the ranks of the FARC were filled with farmers and peasants. As the civil war became more violent, more of the rural population became fed up with it and decided to join the FARC in its mission to empower the working class (Darden et al., 2019). To attract more women to join the fight, it became necessary for the FARC to include gender issues in its ideology, hence its turnaround when it came to the inclusion of women into the organization. However, this change was not always welcomed by more 'old-school' FARC members who – unsuccessfully – tried to overturn this policy for years (Darden et al., 2019).

The AUC has quite a different founding history than the FARC and ELN. The motivation of its fighters was mostly the elimination of leftist guerrilla groups and the protection of its 'own' people, as the Colombian government was unable to do so. The AUC also had an interest in the continuation of ranching and drug trade (Holmes et al., 2019), and therefore benefitted from peace and quietness in the countryside. The AUC never developed a comprehensive ideology that included gender issues. In fact, Gjelsvik, (2010) found from interviews with female members of the AUC that their disinterest in feminism and belief in patriarchal principles was very rigid, even more so than in the rest of the Colombian society.

The hypothesis that women are more likely to participate in rebel organizations that have a feminist agenda thus seems to hold up. This effect is most visible in the FARC. The estimation that about 40% of FARC fighters were female is based on data from the early 2000s, many years after the conferences took place that launched the FARC's feminist agenda. Although no exact number is available, most scholars expect this number to have been much lower in the earlier years of the FARC, such as the 70s and 80s (Herrera & Porch, 2008; Darden et al., 2019). It is not probable to attribute this increase in female fighters entirely to the adoption of a feminist

agenda, but it is quite likely that this at least played some role. Clear is also that the AUC had no feminist agenda and had very few female fighters. The ELN has had a feminist agenda from the beginning, but nonetheless had fewer female fighters than the FARC. This peculiarity will be discussed later.

Actively recruit women

H2: Women are more likely to participate in rebel organizations that actively recruit women.

In general, the ranks of the FARC and ELN are composed of students and peasants, whereas the AUC mostly had urban, educated fighters (Herrera & Porch, 2008). Therefore, it makes sense that each rebel organization had a different recruitment strategy.

What stands out for the AUC is that they offered their fighters a salary. They would typically pay common soldiers about $200-300 a month, which could be complemented with earnings from drug trafficking, kidnapping, and bribes (Gutiérrez Sanín, 2008). These earnings however were usually reserved for AUC fighters with a higher status: the higher up the ladder you were, the more money you made. This was an important argument that was being used to recruit young men who expected that their participation in the AUC would provide them with more socioeconomic opportunities. Considering this economic incentive, the AUC did not have any trouble finding enough recruits and thus did not need women to fill their ranks. Although the promotional poster below does picture a female AUC fighter, there is no further evidence that the AUC ever actively carried out a strategy to recruit more women.

This was not the case for the FARC and ELN. Both rebel organizations did not offer any financial benefits to their members and thus relied mostly on their ideology to recruit new fighters. Once they realized the potential advantages of having female fighters in their midst, the FARC and ELN had several tactics to recruit more women. The FARC especially was known for using female fighters to recruit new women, as they came across as more understanding and trustworthy. The FARC also send the out attractive men into villages to seduce young women into joining FARC (Kazman, 2019). Another tactic to recruit women was to use propaganda material that highlighted women as an active participant in war. An example can be found below with a mural that says “women are also the face of the FARC”.

Picture 1 and 2*. Examples of propaganda aimed toward women from the FARC (left) and AUC (right)*

Note. Pictures by Mazars (2016) and AFP (2001).

Compared to the FARC, the ELN was slightly less proactive in recruiting women. Although the ELN also made use of the recruitment tactics described above, the organization was not as centralized as the FARC. The commanders of each block had more power and independence to make their own decisions and thus to pursue their own recruitment strategy. It is possible that

this impeded with the recruitment of women, as most commanders were still male who perhaps saw less urgency in recruiting more female fighters (Darden et al., 2019). Therefore, the recruitment strategy for women in the ELN is coded in the table as 'slightly present'.

Getting back to the hypothesis, it is clear that the FARC and ELN both had some sort of recruitment strategy for women, whereas the AUC did not. Anecdotal evidence, based on interviews with former female fighters, suggests that the recruitment strategies of the FARC and ELN were mostly effective: many women admitted to being lured into the organization by a lover or a female friend (Herrera & Porch, 2008; Kazman, 2019). Therefore, the data supports the expectation that women are more likely to participate in rebel organizations that actively recruits them.

Implementation of gender equality policies

H3: Women are more likely to participate in rebel organizations that implement gender equality policies into their own organizational structure.

Gender equality policies can involve many things, but there are three subjects that, based on interviews with female fighters (Drost, 2016; Krystalli, 2016; Casey, 2016), seem to be most important to them: the role of women in the camps, their ability to move up the ranks and the protection of their reproductive rights.

Within the FARC, there were several roles that were usually occupied by women, such as nurses, cooks, and radio operators (Darden et al., 2019). Still, women were also highly respected as soldiers. Quite some former guerrillas, both male and female, even suggested that women were better soldiers than men, as they were braver and more motivated (Herrera & Porch, 2008).

This however did not mean that it was easy for female fighters to rise to the rank of colonel or commander. Research by Kazman (2019) shows that in a group of 129 female fighters, only six of them held a leadership position. Although there was no reason on paper as to why women would not get promoted as much as men, many female fighters suspected sexism to be behind this (Kazman, 2019; Gutiérrez Sanín, 2008).

When it came to reproductive rights, the FARC was far from the pro-women's rights organization that it advocated to be. IUDs were forcefully administrated to all female fighters. If women in the camp were to fall pregnant anyway, they had to get an abortion, even if they did not consent to this (Krystalli, 2016). Furthermore, although rape was officially forbidden, in practice female fighters were expected to make themselves available for sex, especially with leadership figures. According to Nijmeijer (2021), women who were in a relationship with a commander received special privileges that were taken away from them the moment the relationship ended.

Conditions for female fighters in the ELN were slightly better. Similar to the FARC, the supporting roles in the camp were typically taken up by women, but the ELN did publicly acknowledge this to be a problem and promised to strive to overcome this (Darden et al., 2019). Something that was beneficial for the position of women in the ELN is that one of the founding members of the organization, Paula González, was a woman (Darden et al., 2019). This is suspected to be one of the reasons why the ELN adopted a feminist agenda much earlier on than the FARC. When it came to reproductive rights, the ELN was more accepting of women becoming mothers than the FARC; although using birth control was still highly encouraged, abortion was not forced on women (Darden et al., 2019). Nonetheless, after giving birth, women

were always separated from their children as to not distract them from their role in the organization (Krystalli, 2016).

For the AUC, not much is known on how much discrimination female fighters faced in their day-to-day lives, as there were so few female members. Clear is that the AUC was organized in a hierarchical, military way. It was mostly high-level drug lords who occupied important leadership positions, experienced military trained people in the middle positions and 'commoners' who filled the lower ranks (Gutiérrez Sanín, 2008). Based on interviews with former AUC fighters, it is suspected that women mostly filled the roles of lovers, domestic workers, and cooks (Gjelsvik, 2010). There is no information available on the AUC's policy regarding pregnancy, but considering that AUC fighters received a salary for their work and were not life-long members of the rebel organization, like in the FARC and ELN (Gutiérrez Sanín, 2008), it is likely that pregnant women would simply take time off or step out of the AUC entirely.

Looking back on the hypothesis, the data does not align with the expectation. Although the FARC and ELN both claimed to protect women's rights, the reality showed a different truth. Both organizations limited women in their ability to get promoted and restricted their reproductive rights. Between the two, the ELN does seem to be 'the lesser of two evils', as the organization has publicly admitted to their faults and was more accepting of pregnancies. For the AUC, not enough data on the lives of female fighters was available to be able to code them into the table.

Discussion and alternative explanations

Keeping the three hypotheses in mind, several conclusions can be drawn from the analysis. The first two hypotheses, regarding a feminist agenda and the active recruitment of women, are confirmed by the data when comparing the FARC and ELN with the AUC: the variables for the guerrilla groups were marked as 'present' or 'mostly present', whereas for the AUC they were both marked as 'absent'. The third hypothesis was not confirmed by the data: all three rebel organizations failed to consistently implement gender equality policies into their organization, even the two organizations that had a higher percentage of female fighters.

However, there some peculiarities in the results. The ELN comes out as 'more feminist' than the FARC in two out of three variables, yet the ELN had fewer female fighters than the FARC. A possible explanation for this is that the absence or presence of the three variables do influence female participation, but once a feminist agenda and gender equality policies are established, it does not matter that much to what degree they are being executed. Simply speaking, once a certain threshold has been met, a 'more feminist' organization does not always translate into more female fighters. This would explain why some of the hypotheses hold up when comparing the FARC and ELN with the AUC, but not always when comparing the FARC with the ELN.

It would also explain why the expectation that women are more likely to join a rebel organization that implements gender equality policies was not confirmed by the data. Women who join a rebel organization that claims to care about women's rights perhaps only notice the discrimination and sexism that is prevalent in the organization once they are already part of it. After all, forced abortions and a culture of machismo are probably not matters that get advertised by rebel organizations in the recruitment period.

Besides these three hypotheses, there are a few alternative variables that might also explain the difference in the number of female fighters between the FARC, ELN and AUC. One of these is the presence of a left-wing ideology. According to research by Wood and Thomas (2017), left-wing rebel organizations are more likely to recruit women than right-wing groups. The reasoning behind this is that leftist ideologies usually advocate for women's rights which attracts more women to the organization. However, this variable is unable to explain the difference in female participation between the FARC and the ELN; when it comes to ideology, the FARC is not considered to be 'more left' than the ELN. It is thus not a useful variable to explain the difference between all three rebel organizations.

Another possible explanation is the offering of financial compensation. As was mentioned before, the FARC and ELN did not pay its fighters whereas the AUC did. It has been theorized that because of this, the AUC was able to get enough men to participate in the organization and thus did not need to develop a feminist agenda and recruit female fighters (Gutiérrez Sanín, 2008). It would be interesting to test for this variable in other civil wars, where some rebel organizations pay their members and other do not, to see if this negatively influences their number of female fighters.

The last alternative explanation is forced recruitment. The FARC and ELN have both been known to forcefully recruit men, women, and children to join their organization (Gjelsvik, 2010). Reports on recent instances of forced recruitment within the ELN suggest that it was mostly boys who were taken as soldiers. Less often, girls were taken and used as sex slaves (Taylor, 2020). Although there have been some instances reported in which the AUC forcefully recruited civilians (Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, 2004), this seems to not be as common as with the FARC and ELN (Gutiérrez Sanín, 2008). There is however no information

available on how many women were forcefully recruited by the FARC, ELN and AUC between the years of 1978 and 2015. Therefore, it is not possible to examine how this variable has influenced female participation within these groups.

CONCLUSION

Women in warfare is a fascinating phenomenon that has been researched by many scholars. Theories on push and pull factors that steer women towards life as a fighter are plentiful and have usually been applied to explain female participation in a single rebel organization. This research aims to extend this way of thinking and uses existing theories on female participation to explain the difference in female fighters across several rebel organizations in the same civil war. The research question that was central to this thesis was the following: *What explains the difference in female participation between the FARC, ELN and AUC in the period of 1978-2015 in Colombia?*

As has been discussed in the analysis, two variables are essential in increasing female participation: the existence of a feminist agenda and an active recruitment strategy for women. However, what this research has also shown us is that the FARC and ELN failed in implementing a feminist agenda and gender equality policies into their organization, yet still had a decent amount of female fighters. Overall, the lack of a 'practice what you preach' approach did not seem to hinder female participation. A reason for this might be that even though these rebel organizations were by no means a feminist heaven, life as a woman in the traditional Colombian society was even worse for some women, and thus life as fighter still outweighed their other option.

For future research on the female fighters of the FARC, ELN and AUC, I recommend a wider range of data being used. The Colombian government has a database of interviews with former fighters who discuss their motives to join an armed group, what their role was within the organization and why they ultimately left. This database is not open to everyone, hence why I

was unable to use it, but surely contains a treasure trove of information on the lives of female fighters.

Moreover, the three variables that were being researched in this thesis were now all being tested at the same time. Therefore, it was not possible to single out one variable as having a more significant effect on female participation than the others. There are also some other variables that are mentioned in the discussion that could offer an alternative explanation for the difference in female participation across the three rebel groups. It would be interesting to see these variables, and the three variables that were analysed here, being tested in different rebel organizations and civil wars to see if they confirm the conclusion of this research.

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