
Leaving war and the closet?

Exploring the varied experiences of LGBT ex-combatants in Colombia

BY THERESIA THYLIN

ABSTRACT

Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) programmes have been acknowledged as a crucial part of peacebuilding initiatives and the importance of ensuring that they are gender responsive has been increasingly recognized by the international community. However, policy guidance has failed to include ex-combatants who do not conform to a narrow, binary understanding of gender and make no reference to sexual and gender minorities. Similarly, LGBT ex-combatants have been overlooked by scholars and very little is known of their experiences as they transition to civilian life. This article explores the varied experiences of LGBT ex-combatants who have been part of three different armed groups in Colombia. Using semi-structured interviews with ex-combatants from the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), the 19th of April Movement (M-19) and the United Self-Defenders of Colombia (AUC), this article shows how DDR processes may generate significant and rapid transformations for sexual and gender minorities. The article also outlines particular challenges faced by LGBT ex-combatants. In conclusion, I argue that policy makers and researchers should incorporate a gender perspective in DDR that moves beyond a narrow, binary understanding of gender in order to respond to the needs, ensure the participation, and protect the rights of LGBT ex-combatants.

KEYWORDS

LGBT, ex-combatants, Colombia, DDR, reintegration

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Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) programmes have been considered central to international efforts to end conflicts around the world (Muggah 2010; Humphreys and Weinstein 2007; United Nations 2011). The importance of ensuring that these programmes apply a gender perspective has been increasingly recognized by the international community and reached a breakthrough with the adoption of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000) on Women, Peace and Security (WPS). However, neither WPS nor other DDR guidance have been inclusive of ex-combatants who do not conform to a narrow, binary, understanding of gender and have made no reference to sexual and gender minorities. Scholars such as Hagen (2016) have described this neglect in part as the result of heteronormative assumptions in the framing of the WPS agenda. Hagen has called for the application of a queer lens and for the development of a framework for the WPS architecture that responds to the needs of those who are vulnerable to insecurity and violence because of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

Identifying, or being identified as belonging to a sexual and gender minority often adds additional layers of vulnerability to lives already under threat in conflict settings (Myrntinen and Daigle 2017). In Colombia, LGBT persons have been severely affected and specifically targeted by different armed groups, including state actors such as the armed forces and police, as well as armed groups such as guerrillas, paramilitaries, post-demobilization paramilitary groups and drug trafficking groups (National Center for Historical Memory 2015; Myrntinen and Daigle 2017; Serrano Amaya 2014; United Nations 2015; Gill 2009). The 2016 peace agreement between the Colombian Government and the FARC

marked the first time a peace agreement placed special emphasis on the fundamental rights of the LGBT¹ community and has been widely celebrated for providing a platform to articulate the particular impact of the war on LGBTI persons (Bouvier 2016; Hagen 2017). Researchers have argued that this sets a global precedent that could be leveraged for further inclusion of sexual orientation and gender identity in peace-building processes (Hagen 2017).

At the same time, it has been argued that the inclusion of gender and LGBT rights prompted socially conservative groups to reject the agreement (Krystalli and Theidon 2016). This points not only to the opportunities for inclusion that peace processes can create but also the need to work in a careful and circumspect way to avoid increasing the vulnerabilities of sexual and gender minorities or causing societal backlash. While the final agreement and the testimonies of LGBT victims/survivors help us understand how civilian LGBT persons have been directly targeted in conflict, this type of violence also exists within different armed groups in Colombia, against combatants who deviate from heterosexual norms (National Center for Historical Memory 2015). However, in spite of the emphasis on the impact of the war on LGBT communities in the peace agreement, there is no acknowledgement of the violence that has been perpetrated against LGBT persons within the ranks of armed groups because of their sexual orientation and gender identity, nor any considerations of their needs as they transition to civilian life.

Little is known of the experiences of LGBT combatants who have operated within different armed groups and their transition to civilian life following demobilization. Scholars have underscored this gap and described the methodological difficulties in conducting research in this area, in-

cluding the engrained secrecy surrounding deviation from heterosexual norms among combatants (Theidon 2009; Mendez 2012). Due to the lack of previous research within this field, this article uses scholarly literature on DDR, gender and masculinities (e.g. Londoño and Nieto 2006; Theidon 2009; Theidon 2015; Eriksson Baaz and Stern 2010; Mendez 2012; Dietrich Ortega 2015) as a starting point. To introduce the dimensions related to sexual orientation and gender identity in DDR, the article also draws on intersectional research to understand how people's lives are formed at the intersection of several different power structures (Connell 1995; de los Reyes and Mulinari 2005). While this article focuses primarily on gender and sexuality, other social categorizations, including class, age and ethnicity are important in order to understand the LGBT ex-combatants' varied experiences. Their experiences also need to be understood in relation to other factors, such as the roles held within the former armed groups as well as the armed groups' different ideologies, including their policies and practices for governing gender and sexuality. This explorative research contributes to the field of gender studies by broadening the conceptualization of gender in DDR beyond a narrow, binary understanding while also pointing to the need for further intersectional analysis to understand the experiences of ex-combatants. By introducing the long-overlooked topic of DDR and sexual and gender minorities, this article seeks to contribute to more inclusive DDR research, policy and programme implementation in Colombia, and beyond.

METHODS

This article draws on qualitative data gathered through interviews with eleven former members of three armed groups whose sexual orientation, gender identity and/or sexual practices fall outside normative hetero-

sexuality. Interviews were conducted with four former members of the 19th of April Movement (M-19), two former members of the United Self-Defenders of Colombia (AUC) and five former members of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). Two of the interviewees self-identify as lesbian women, four as homosexual men, two as bisexual men, two as transgender women and one as a heterosexual woman who had a same-sex relationship while part of the armed group.² Interviews conducted with 44 heterosexual ex-combatants as part of a larger research project focusing on the construction of gender among ex-combatants also inform this article.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted between February and March 2017 in the cities of Bogota, Cali and Villavicencio in Colombia. One interview was conducted via Skype with an ex-combatant living in exile. Given the difficulty in identifying potential interviewees, various strategies were used to locate LGBT ex-combatants. The majority of the former members of the FARC and AUC were identified and approached through the Colombian Agency for Reintegration (now called the Reincorporation and Normalization Agency) as they were current or former participants in the government led reintegration programme. The former M-19 combatants were contacted through a snowball selection and through the network *Red Nacional de Mujeres Excombatientes de la Insurgencia* (National Network of Insurgency Ex-combatant Women). One man and one woman who were part of the overall sample for the broader research only disclosed their sexual orientation and non-heterosexual practices during the interviews. Their participation allowed me to capture experiences of ex-combatants who do not disclose their sexual identities and practices, which is a particularly hard group to reach. While the sample is limited, it is unique and can serve as a starting point for

further exploration of the experiences of LGBT ex-combatants in processes of DDR in Colombia and elsewhere.

COLOMBIAN DDR

Colombia's internal armed conflict is the longest armed confrontation on the American continent and the state has engaged in peacebuilding efforts with several armed groups for decades. Colombia therefore has a long experience of DDR processes of former combatants. The urban guerrilla group M-19 was the first of several guerrilla groups to start a negotiation process in 1989 that concluded in a final peace agreement paving the way for its demobilization (García-Durán et al. 2008). In 2002, Colombian President Uribe initiated a highly controversial negotiation process, which, through the provision of amnesties and limited penalties for human rights abuses, would lead to the collective demobilization of the paramilitary organization AUC (Theidon 2009). While defecting members of the FARC had previously been able to demobilize on an individual basis, in 2016, the Government of Juan Manuel Santos reached a peace agreement with the oldest and largest guerrilla group in Latin America.

Since embarking on the first process for the DDR of ex-combatants, the Colombian government has gradually started to acknowledge the importance of gender and, more recently, has shown incipient interest in sexual diversity. Scholars have described how women from the guerrilla groups that demobilized in the early 1990s were made invisible, not accounted for, ostracized and stigmatized when they returned to civilian life (Londono and Nieto 2006). In 2008, after the demobilization of the paramilitary AUC, the Colombian National Policy for Social and Economic Reintegration committed to the application of a gender and diversity perspective amongst its strategies (República de Colombia 2008). However,

the policy does not include LGBT ex-combatants and only makes one reference to the respect for the diversity of "sexual options". In the wake of the inclusion of LGBT rights in the peace negotiations with the FARC, the Colombian Agency for Reintegration has described the identification of needs and strengthening of services for sexual and gender minorities as a challenge (Agencia Colombiana para la Reintegración 2014 and 2017). This article explores the experiences and some of the obstacles faced due to discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity, which researchers, policy makers and practitioners should take into consideration to ensure that DDR processes are responsive to LGBT ex-combatants.

LEAVING WAR AND THE CLOSET?

The transition to civilian life is a process that often generates opportunities for multiple profound changes for the ex-combatants, particularly when taking place in a conducive environment. These changes include the often rapid transformations in gender roles, practices and identities experienced during the process of reintegration (Eriksson Baaz and Stern 2010; Cockburn 2013; UNDP & IAWG 2012). My research shows that sexual and gender minorities may experience particularly significant and rapid transformations of roles, identities, expressions and practice following their demobilization. After having been forced to hide their sexual orientation and gender identity within their respective armed groups, demobilization allowed interviewees to embark on the process of disclosing their sexual orientation and gender identity. Among the ex-combatants who were able to express their sexual orientation and gender identity while within their respective armed groups, demobilization provided a higher degree of autonomy to make decisions regarding their sexual relationships and future. At the same time, my re-

search unveils the ways in which other interviewees grapple with questions surrounding their sexuality and/or do not wish to disclose their sexual orientation.

EMBRACING SEXUAL ORIENTATION AND GENDER IDENTITY

Among the ex-combatants who were forced to hide their sexual orientation and gender identity in the armed groups, transition to civilian life provided opportunities for the transformation of roles, identities, expressions and practices. The opportunity to be their “true self” was also a reason for some of the ex-combatants to leave the armed group. For some, one of the first things they did after leaving the war was to disclose their sexual orientation to their families.

“When I had just left the Peace Home [the Governments demobilization centers], I arrived at my new place in Villavicencio. One of these days, I made the decision. I called my mom on the phone and I told her, crying, I told her. I wanted her to know, to know who her son is” (Pablo, bisexual, former member of the FARC).³

Ex-combatants described how several of their family members, although conservative in their views, still accepted their sexual orientation and gender identity, either gradually or in some cases instantly. In the context of war, David described how his mother thought she had lost her son and that he had been killed during a large bombardment of the camp where he was located. When they reunited after his demobilization, she decided to stand by his side.

“My mom told me: ‘Don’t worry my son, if you are homosexual I will not lose you again. I will not bury you again. I will support you. I will respect you. You can count on me from this moment and the rest of my life.’ So she gave me that encouragement. I said to my-

self: Who else do I fear? Let’s come out of the closet as they call it” (David, homosexual, former member of the FARC).

For others, this process took longer and included embarking on the process of transitioning. Mariana spent 20 years in the jungle with the FARC without being able to express her sexual orientation and gender identity. She defected from the organization with the plan to transition from male to female and let people know who she is. This required her to go through several phases, which implied starting to identify as gay/homosexual, and finally, as a trans woman.

“I always had the intention of starting this process, from being a homosexual at the time when I left there [the FARC]. Then I decide to take the step, even if I have difficulties, I wanted to take the step to become a trans girl, because seeing the body of a woman is the most beautiful. I always wanted to have the body of a woman” (Mariana, trans woman, former member of the FARC).

Two years after her demobilization, Mariana built up the courage to walk around her neighborhood with makeup, dressed like a woman. She describes it as a gradual process which she is still in the midst of. She has not been able to disclose her gender identity in all contexts and she also struggles to sustain her transgender hormonal treatment due to financial constraints.

For others, demobilization was not such a decisive moment. Elvira engaged in her first sexual experience with another girl when she was 12 years old. During her time in M-19, she had one romance with a woman but except for this experience she only engaged in sexual relationships with men. 12 years after her demobilization she left her longstanding partner with whom she has three daughters after falling in love with another woman.

“It was an attraction so strong that I said to myself: ‘I have always denied myself this opportunity. I have never let it prosper. This time I am going to take the fight.’ At this time, I knew very little about LGBT. I knew very little about lesbians. I knew very little about this world, but I told myself that I was going to give myself this opportunity. I will not deny it. My two oldest daughters were teenagers, 14 and 13 years old, and my youngest daughter was 8-years-old, and I lived with Luis [her former partner]. I started to feel this sensation” (Elvira, lesbian, former member of M-19).

Elvira described how up until this point she had not been aware of her rights and did not consider a same-sex relationship a feasible way of life. She now identifies as a lesbian feminist and she and her partner are both engaged in the women’s rights movement in Colombia.

My research also shows that among the ex-combatants able to express their sexual orientation and gender identity within the armed groups, demobilization still provided them with greater autonomy to make decisions regarding their sexual relationships and their future. Alejandra, a trans woman who was part of the paramilitary AUC described the transition back to civilian life as “smooth”. However, even though she described how she had been accepted as a trans woman within the armed group, the process of reintegration provided her with more personal freedom.

“I have more freedom here and now, because I run my world. I handle all aspects. I decide if I want to go out with someone, or I say no. If I invite someone to my house, it’s my own decision. If I’m going on a trip with someone, it’s because I want to, and I do not have to tell anyone or ask anyone permission. I don’t have to ask a Commander ‘Hey! I’m going to go to this place!’ No. So there is a big difference in this aspect because over there [in the AUC], if I had a close relation-

ship with someone, it was very secret because we had to keep a low profile, for the boys primarily. Because for me everyone knew my condition, but many men want to be with us trans or gay people, but only in secrecy because of fear” (Alejandra, trans woman, former member of AUC).

Among the ex-combatants who engaged in secret sexual encounters within their respective groups, the ability to establish long-term relationships was a significant change in their lives. Similarly, ex-combatants made a distinction between the ability to enjoy sexual encounters and the lack of opportunities to allow oneself to fall in love. Pablo described how he enjoyed his sexual encounters in secrecy within the FARC, but how he always longed for a “serious, stable and beautiful relationship”. After demobilizing, he had to learn how to express affection and love.

“It was very strange in the beginning because I felt embarrassed. I hugged him, and I felt like if he was going to turn away from me. As if he was going to reject me. Because it had always just been sex and nothing more. So I felt very shy. I became very cold when he hugged me, when I was going to... When I started to tell him the first beautiful words of love it was very difficult because my tongue just got stuck, I just couldn’t! So I thought it was better to not say anything since I was used to this. I wanted to say it, but I just couldn’t. Then, little by little, I started doing it. And when I saw that he did not turn away or feel sorry for me, then, well, it became normal. Touching him became easier because I knew he was not going to reject me. I prepared myself psychologically to touch him. Then I touched him, caressed him, gave him a kiss on the cheek, looked at him, his face. Caressing him was complicated but little by little I started doing it. I started discovering. I started doing what I wanted to do and enjoy it the way I wanted to enjoy it, to show what I felt for this per-

son” (Pablo, bisexual, former member of the FARC).

Pablo’s partner also demobilized from the FARC. However, since he spent most of his time in an urban militia he had been able to engage in sexual relationships. He was therefore less intimidated and able to show more affection. This illustrates how the transformation of roles, identities, expressions and practices that LGBT ex-combatants’ experience are affected not only by the regulations of the armed groups they formed part of, but also by the roles held within the armed groups.

UNCERTAINTIES, SECRECY AND NON-DISCLOSURE

While leaving armed groups can offer opportunities for combatants who had not been able to express their sexual orientation and gender identity, my research also shows how other ex-combatants chose not to disclose their sexual orientation and gender identity as they considered it a private matter. Others grapple with questions regarding their sexuality. Ramón, a former child soldier, described how he is disclosing his sexual orientation and attraction to men but repeatedly said that he is still confused. Another ex-combatant who is struggling with questions regarding her sexuality is Adriana. She identified as heterosexual and it was only after several hours of interviewing that she revealed her lesbian experience. This was something she had not told anyone about before. Adriana described how, while she was part of the AUC, she had a heterosexual relationship with a man who was eventually executed by the organization accused of treason. After his death, she started spending more time with another woman with whom she initiated a sexual relationship.

“I didn’t want to have anything more to do with men. I was focused on something else. I

didn’t find another person, a man for me, right? I started going out with a woman. I started to like women at that time because I started to feel a lot of hatred toward men because of everything I had seen. But it was not something that was born within me. It was something that developed, because within the group, I met a friend. There was always something between us and we went out together. She accompanied me a lot of times to the base, and little by little, I don’t know, things started to happen between us” (Adriana, heterosexual, former member of AUC).

Adriana was planning to start a new life with her lesbian partner after she demobilized but her partner suddenly disappeared. She believes that her former paramilitary colleagues assassinated her because of their transgression of heterosexual norms. Although she is currently living in a heterosexual relationship she is still tormented by the hatred towards men that she started to feel after witnessing the cruelty of the men that were part of the paramilitary.

PARTICULAR CHALLENGES FOR EX-COMBATANTS OF SEXUAL AND GENDER MINORITIES

While transitioning to civilian life may generate particularly large transformations and new opportunities for sexual and gender minorities, LGBT ex-combatants interviewed also described particular challenges they face due to belonging to a sexual and gender minority. Researchers, policy makers and practitioners should consider, and further explore, these challenges to ensure that DDR processes are inclusive and responsive to LGBT ex-combatants.

CONFRONTING MULTIPLE LAYERS OF DISCRIMINATION

My research shows that LGBT ex-combatants are often exposed to multiple layers of discrimination based on their sexuality,

gender and class as well as other socially constructed categorizations such as the stigma associated with being identified as a ‘demobilized’ person. Pablo described how he is perceived as an “assassinator and bacteria” in the society:

“There are people who see the demobilized as assassins and there are people who see homosexuals as some kind of bacteria in the society. So for me this is something similar. It’s the same type of destructive criticism. Because at the end of the day this is not benefiting the person. They are always trying to destroy the person” (Pablo, homosexual, former member of the FARC).

These multiple layers of discrimination were described to affect both the social, economic and political reintegration of the ex-combatants. Mariana, who transitioned from man to woman, reflected on the new layers of discrimination she faces as a woman vis-a-vis as a transgender woman. She currently works in an automobile repair workshop where she is unable to express her gender identity. While she would like to seek another job in a traditionally female sector, she notes that the wages in female-dominated sectors are much lower, which is a detriment for both cisgender and transgender women. In other contexts, she faced discrimination due to being transgender, such as in the educational establishments where she was not allowed to access the facilities dressed as a woman. Others, such as Elvira described how she was marginalized in her political ambitions by male ex-combatants, not because of her sexual orientation but because of her gender. While LGBT ex-combatants are exposed to multiple layers of discrimination, my research also shows that the LGBT ex-combatants are often resourceful as they confront this discrimination. After having been denied access to her school, Mariana mobilized other trans women which led to the abolition of this discriminatory practice:

“I started talking to the rest of the trans girls, and we said that we feel uncomfortable having to come here dressed as a man. We want to be who we are! And I told them: Why don’t we take the fight? I took the fight because I wanted to be free. I thought that now I want to be accepted by the institutions. (...) It was something marvelous because I met with other trans girls and they saluted me for what I did. I fought for our freedom. I have always wanted to get further. I think there are many trans girls who cannot leave their houses, cannot be happy as they wish to, and I always thought they could come further. I would like to be a political leader” (Mariana, trans woman, former member of the FARC).

Mariana points to the fact that despite just having started her transition process one year earlier she took the initiative to defend the rights on behalf of all trans women. She described how as a demobilized trans woman she has to be willing to “work twice as hard and fight twice as hard”.

OVERCOMING CURRENT AND PAST VIOLENCE

The decades-long conflict in Colombia has made it difficult to draw a line between structural discrimination and the conflict-related violence suffered by LGBT persons in the country (National Center for Historical Memory 2015). The ex-combatants interviewed described incidences of heteronormative-based violence directed towards them because of their sexual orientation and gender identities before, during and after having participated in their respective armed groups. My research shows that this targeted violence against sexual and gender minorities impedes the ex-combatants’ process of reintegration.

Ex-combatants described how violence as well as the fear of violence limit their freedom. After his demobilization from the M-19, Marcelo immediately started working to support young homosexual sex workers

and became a strong defender of LGBT rights. After denouncing violations of the rights of LGBT persons and what he described as a social cleansing operation and assassination of sex workers carried out with the support of state actors, he survived two murder attempts. Due to his engagement as a defender of LGBT rights he was forced to flee the country and was eventually granted asylum in Spain where he still resides and continues to be a LGBT rights activist.

Ex-combatants also described how they continue to be haunted by trauma due to having been exposed to targeted sexual violence during their time spent in the armed groups. Adriana recounted how her lesbian partner was subjected to anti-lesbian rape by three of her paramilitary colleagues. While ex-combatants from different armed groups welcomed the FARC's changing policy regarding LGBT persons, others called it "a farce". Among the Colombian guerrilla groups, the FARC is known for forcefully upholding the prohibition of LGBT persons in their ranks (National Center for Historical Memory 2015). Mariana called for accountability and justice for the execution of LGBT combatants during the conflict.

"They have to acknowledge that they had homosexual people in the ranks and that they were killed. The other day we were in a foundation and two representatives of the FARC came to talk about what they think publicly and they referred to the LGBT issue. But sooner or later they have to recognize that there were people they shot. And they have to recognize that there are still gay people in their ranks and they have to respect their rights" (Mariana, trans woman, former member of the FARC).

This highlights the importance of transitional justice mechanisms and DDR programmes to contribute to accountability for crimes committed against LGBT combatants during conflict.

LGBT ex-combatants also described how the reintegration process has helped them overcome trauma related to the exposure to sexual violence before joining the armed groups. Ramón was sexually abused by several family and community members from the time he was 7 years old. He became a member of the FARC when he was 11 years old, after having left his family. He described how the psychosocial and legal support he received as part of the DDR programme has helped him move on.

"I have gotten over it. I have forgiven the people who hurt me so much. They are in the processes of investigation and will pay for it" (Ramón, homosexual, former member of the FARC).

The ex-combatants' experiences underline the importance of justice and comprehensive services for survivors of sexual and heteronormative violence perpetrated before, during and after participation in an armed group.

ESTABLISHING NEW SUPPORT NETWORKS

Demobilization interrupts the belonging to a group and often strips ex-combatants of their entire network. Community support has therefore been identified as one important factor in generating resilience and contributing to reintegration, and support to ex-combatants to form new social networks has been described as critical for DDR programmes (UNDP & IAWG 2012). However, for LGBT ex-combatants, discrimination on the basis of their sexual orientation and gender identity may in certain cases make it more difficult to build-up these networks. Ex-combatants interviewed described how they were living in isolation, without friends or family to support them.

Christian groups have been described as a source of help for ex-combatants to find ways of effecting change (Theidon 2015).

In a case study of the evangelical church in Urabá in Colombia, Theidon describes how evangelical Christianity has an important role to play in helping ex-combatants find ways of effecting change, including through promoting ‘alternative masculinities’ (Theidon 2015, 468). However, Theidon makes no reference to sexual and gender minorities. The experiences of the LGBT ex-combatants in my research show how Christian groups, instead of promoting alternative masculinities, exacerbated heteronormative rigid gender norms and supported the construction of hegemonic masculinities which not only subordinates but condemns non-heterosexual men. Ramón was placed in foster care after he left the armed group and it was through his foster family that he came into contact with the church. The placement of Ramón in a foster family that did not accept his sexual orientation shows how failing attention to the needs of sexual and gender minorities may cause additional harm to these individuals.

“They took me to church to forget all of this. I went to church with them, but I still like men. We did spiritual retreats for me to change my way of being, because of all that had happened to me, to forget and become another person, but no. I changed but they wanted me to change my sexuality. Because it has to be a man with a woman, this is what God says. I know I am committing a sin... But my inclination is this, I like men” (Ramón, homosexual, former member of the FARC).

LGBT ex-combatants described how they experienced feelings of guilt and shame when turning to the Christian faith. Adriana, who was part of the paramilitary AUC, believes that the largest crime she has committed, and for which she asks God for forgiveness, is having engaged in a lesbian relationship.

While LGBT ex-combatants spoke of the

importance of social networks, few had engaged with LGBT organizations. The only ex-combatants that had sustained their engagement in feminist and LGBT organizations were former combatants from M-19 who from the time of demobilization expressed more interest in political participation. In contrast, other LGBT ex-combatants tended not to identify or engage with the LGBT organizations they had been introduced to. Alejandra described the LGBT organizations as decadent, reduced to distributing condoms and promoting prostitution. She does not want to take part in festivals or marches as she finds these activities scandalous.

“When they organize the demonstrations, the marches, the festivals, like the celebration of the international day of the LGBTI community, what do they do? They go out. I do not say that WE go out because I do not participate! They go out for the whole world to see them, almost naked, speaking vulgarly with their tits in the air, with their butts in mini shorts, as if they were on the beach. And this is not what we should show to the public, to an audience including children. So I know that people will say: ‘That’s who they are! They have nothing else to show!’ If they want to earn the respect of the society, look at what they are doing. What is this good for? To show themselves, to walk naked, to be prostitutes, thieves, consumers of drugs and alcohol and to make scandals? So I criticize them and they don’t like it” (Alejandra, trans woman, former member of AUC).

Ex-combatants’ condescending description of other LGBT persons can be interpreted as an attempt to distinguish themselves and to erect gender hierarchies among LGBT persons and should be analysed against an understanding of heteronormative policies and practices within their former armed groups. Scholars have argued that armed conflict promotes and are dependent on a rigid heteronormative, hegemonic and gen-

der-discriminatory system and that DDR practitioners therefore should think of ways to 'disarm' these hegemonic gender systems after conflict (Theidon 2009). LGBT ex-combatants such as Alejandra have also been socialized into this heteronormative gender-discriminatory system. At the same time, my research points to the large variations between the experiences and attitudes of the interviewees, ranging from ex-combatants who expressed condescending or discriminatory attitudes towards other LGBT persons to those who consider themselves feminist and LGBT rights activists. Understanding these variations is of outmost importance for DDR processes in order to better respond to the needs of the diverse group of LGBT ex-combatants.

CONCLUSIONS

This article has explored the experiences of LGBT ex-combatants in the process of reintegration and provided a platform to capture some of the most marginalised unheard voices. In spite of war often exposing LGBT persons to disproportionately heightened risks of violence and discrimination, the international community has failed to include ex-combatants who do not conform to a narrow, binary understanding of gender; and policy and programme guidance has made no reference to sexual and gender minorities.

This article offers some key insights. First, reintegration generates opportunities for particularly significant and rapid transformations for sexual and gender minorities. For ex-combatants who were forced to hide their sexual orientation and gender identity within their respective former armed groups, reintegration is a process that allows them to make the choice of whether or not to express their sexual orientation and gender identity. The article outlines how disclosing sexual orientation and gender identity is one of the first things that some LGBT ex-combatants do

as they leave the demobilization facilities. For others, this is a process that takes years, or decades. The research also analyses the experiences of ex-combatants who continue to grapple with questions around their sexuality. While it is difficult to investigate the subjective experiences of ex-combatants who do not disclose their sexual orientation and gender identity, my sample still includes the varied experiences of two ex-combatants who do not disclose their sexual orientation. Understanding this diverse group of ex-combatants further and how DDR programmes can better cater to their needs emerges as a challenging and intriguing field of further research.

Secondly, the article outlines some of the challenges that are particular to LGBT ex-combatants. It shows how demobilized sexual and gender minorities are exposed to intersecting layers of discrimination, based on their sexuality, gender, class and other socially constructed categories such as the stigma of being identified as a 'demobilized' former combatant. These multiple layers of discrimination affect the ex-combatants' social, economic and political reintegration.

Ex-combatants described large variations in the exposure to heteronormative-based violence before, during and after participating in their respective armed groups. In one case, the ex-combatant had to seek refuge in exile after being subjected to two murder attempts because of his engagement as a defender of LGBT rights. The article also discusses the importance of the creation of new social networks to support the ex-combatant in the process of reintegration. However, for LGBT ex-combatants, discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity may in certain cases make it more difficult to build up such networks. Common supportive networks such as Christian groups, which have been described as a source to help ex-combatants find ways of effecting change (Theidon 2015), instead contributed to

feelings of guilt and shame for LGBT combatants as they exacerbated heteronormative rigid gender norms. While other LGBT ex-combatants spoke of the importance of social networks, few had engaged with LGBT organizations. In certain cases, LGBT ex-combatants expressed condescending opinions about other LGBT persons which can be interpreted as an attempt to erect gender hierarchies rather than facilitate social support networks among LGBT persons. It can also be interpreted as a legacy of the rigid heteronormative, hegemonic and gender-discriminatory system that armed conflict tends to promote and depend on.

Finally, the article also reveals that LGBT ex-combatants not only embrace their newfound freedom and embark on particularly significant and rapid transformations in the process of reintegration, they are often resourceful in combatting multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination and may exercise leadership skills to defend their rights and contribute to the creation of more inclusive post-conflict societies.

While the peace agreement between the Colombian Government and the FARC marks the first time that peace accords have placed special emphasis on the fundamental rights of the LGBT community, LGBT ex-combatants remain overlooked. This explorative research has contributed to making the experiences of LGBT ex-combatants visible and should serve as a starting point for researchers to further explore this topic in Colombia and elsewhere. I argue that policy makers, researchers and practitioners should incorporate a gender perspective in DDR that moves beyond a narrow, binary understanding of gender to respond to the needs, ensure the participation and protect the rights of LGBT ex-combatants.

NOTES

1. The Peace agreement refers to LGBTI with "I" standing for intersex. I use the common abbreviation LGBT since my sample does not include any ex-combatants who self-identify as intersex.
2. This woman, who self-identified as heterosexual, was included due to her experience of sexual practices that fall outside normative heterosexuality. She did not identify as a member of the LGBT community.
3. All names are pseudonyms to protect the identity of the interviewees. All classifications of ex-combatants' sexual orientation and gender identity are based on their self-identification.

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