NO GIRLS ALLOWED?
RECRUITMENT AND GENDER
IN COLOMBIAN ARMED GROUPS

by

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For Jon
ABSTRACT

There are approximately 11,000-17,000 child combatants in Colombia, and women and girls are estimated to make up 25-50 percent of left-wing guerrilla units. Yet, females do not appear to have a strong presence in Colombian paramilitary groups or gangs. While some research exists on girl soldiers in Colombian guerrilla groups, there is currently very little research asking why so few females appear in other Colombian fighting factions. This paper suggests that girls do not deliberately select the guerrillas from a range of viable options, arguing instead that their choices are largely based on imperfect information, risk tolerance and proximity to groups willing to recruit them. The paper then proposes that if girls are not self-selecting into the FARC, it is the gatekeepers of the armed groups that decide whether or not to recruit girls and how to utilize them. Employing rebel recruitment theories from Weinstein (2007) and Kalyvas (2006), the paper examines whether their models of economic and social resources, collective and individual benefits, and proximity still apply when looking at the recruitment of girls.
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INTRODUCTION

The role of women and girls within the Colombian armed conflict, and indeed the role of gender itself, is complex and varied. As recognized in Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000), women can be important actors in peace processes, but they are not only victims or peacemakers – they can also be active agents and participants in conflict. Between 1990-2003, girls were involved in fighting forces in 55 different countries (McKay and Mazurana 2004). Some are abducted, others are recruited, and some follow their friends or families into the ranks. Girls’ experiences within fighting forces around the world are made more severe by sexism and misogyny, and in some conflicts girls are systematically forced to provide sexual services to the males within fighting forces (McKay and Mazurana 2004, Keairns 2003). Indeed, the existing patriarchal structures in Colombia seem to exaggerate the gender-based violence perpetrated by armed actors. The Colombian conflict reinforces gendered stereotypes and heightens gender-based violence both domestically and in war, yet it can provide a forum for some women and girls to challenge traditional roles. As in many Latin American countries, girls in Colombia grow up with what has been labelled marianismo, a compensatory complex to machismo1 that heavily emphasizes Catholic ideals of motherhood, fertility, domesticity, and sacrifice (Chant and Craske 2003). The expectations imposed by marianismo and machismo are critical to understanding the roles of women and girls in the Colombian armed conflict. The overwhelming presence of armed actors in many poor communities, both urban and rural, can exaggerate these

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1 *Machismo* refers to an exaggerated form of masculinity that strongly emphasizes the dominance of males over females; it is sometimes but not always associated with violence against women.

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norms as armed actors fight for community control and often use women and girls to do so. While this paper will illustrate that the left-wing guerrillas boast large numbers of female combatants and claim to be egalitarian, the right-wing paramilitary groups rarely place females on the frontlines and have never professed to defend women’s rights. In fact, paramilitary groups are the antithesis to the guerrillas’ leftist goals, and this paper suggests that the defence of traditional values (i.e., capitalism and patriarchy) has played a large role in paramilitary formation. Even as the conflict has evolved into an ongoing turf war between several apparently wealthy groups, the role of women and ideals of gender are elements that continue to distinguish them. Yet, in some ways, this difference seems largely symbolic. Both the guerrillas and paramilitaries have perpetrated high levels of violence against women, including the forced imposition of gendered behaviours and values. Although guerrillas do have females in command positions, all-male executives continue to run both groups. Inside the ranks and in communities, women and girls continue to be targeted for systematic sexual violence as a way for men to control and humiliate their enemies.

Colombia is a highly militarized society, partly due to the mandatory military service of males over 18 and intensified by the heavily armed police and military stationed along major highways and throughout city centres. Police officers guard shopping malls and armed soldiers patrol universities. Whether it is the police, military,

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2 While the main paramilitary group, Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia or AUC) has now demobilized, the AUC commanders were all male and the existing paramilitary commanders continue to be male. It is important to note that there are several different guerrilla factions, the two largest being the FARC-EP (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia – Ejército del Pueblo or Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – Army of the People) and the ELN (Ejército Liberación Nacional or National Liberation Army). The paramilitaries are now broken into countless factions that sometimes fight with or against each other (see Chapter Four).
guerrilla faction, paramilitary, or some sort of gang, armed groups are often the main form of authority that children in poor areas recognize.

There are approximately 11,000-17,000 child combatants in Colombia, although this number is difficult to verify considering the covert nature of child recruitment, especially in remote rural areas (Coalition 2004, Watchlist 2004, UNICEF 2004, IANSA 2006). Women and girls are estimated to make up 25-50 percent of FARC units, but they do not appear to have a strong presence in paramilitary groups or gangs. In addition, the United Nations now estimates that Colombia has over three million internally displaced people, and many of these civilians move to major cities in search of employment and protection (UNHCR 2007, CODHES 2006). The cities hold tens of thousands of children and adolescents that are involved in gangs, drug cartels, and urban militias (Ramirez 2003, Ramos 2004, Zorro Sanchez 2004). As one 17-year-old male living in a neighbourhood of displaced people pointed out, for poor children “a gun is the easiest way to become equal with the police” (A17).

Although some research exists on the use of girl soldiers in Colombian guerrilla groups, there is currently very little analysis on why so few females appear in other armed groups. Much more research is necessary to understand the range of factors that draw girls into various fighting factions. This paper therefore explores why there are

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3 This estimate is from HRW 2003 and is based on statistics of males and females in child soldier demobilization programs, government reports, interviews with 112 former child soldiers, and interviews with other child and youth workers. The FARC commander Raúl Reyes also claims that group membership is 50 percent female (Reyes 2007). A 2002 UNICEF study of primarily FARC ex-combatants found that 30 percent of their 86 respondents were female (UNICEF 2002). Also, girls interviewed by Yvonne Keaikins (2003) testified that that some FARC units were more than half female, and Arjona and Kalyvas’ (2006) survey of 829 ex-combatants found that 20 percent of ELN respondents and 15 percent of FARC respondents were female.

4 Internally Displaced People/Persons (IDPs) are civilians that left their homes due to violence (or other extenuating circumstances) but have not left the country and therefore do not have refugee status.

5 All interviews that I conducted personally are marked with an “A” before the number (e.g., A1, A2, etc.), while interviews taken by other researchers are identified with a “B” (e.g., B1, B2, etc.).
large numbers of girls in the FARC but hardly any in paramilitary groups or urban youth gangs. The first two chapters look at girls’ motivations for joining armed groups, while the subsequent chapters examine recruitment strategies that may influence gender disparities in the various groups. Girls are often neglected in studies on rebel recruitment and demobilization, even when the studies focus on child soldiers (McKay and Mazurana 2004). Among many other roles, girls in armed groups can be combatants, cooks, girlfriends, sex slaves, messengers, and informants, and they are rarely spared from difficult and dangerous work (McKay and Mazurana 2004, HRW 2003, Keairns 2003, Farr 2002). Yet, without a specific concentration on girls, it is easy to for them to be neglected in preventative programming, peace negotiations, demobilization programming, and advocacy work, as girls in fighting forces often play supportive roles and are not always front-line combatants.

The role of gender ideologies (both masculine and feminine) in recruitment mechanisms of non-state armed groups has also received little, if any, research attention. Yet, the overwhelming *machismo* in Colombia and the link between guns and masculinity appear to play large roles in encouraging boys to join armed groups, and these factors may affect girls in different ways. Also, the female attraction to powerful men with guns and/or uniforms can influence both male and female involvement in these groups. There is very little gendered analysis on the recruitment of children into armed groups, and few studies look at both masculinity and femininity while also examining the relationship between the two. As neither masculinity nor femininity can really exist without the other, examining the influence of gender as it applies to both males and

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6 While the ELN also allegedly has comparatively large numbers of females, I have chosen to focus only on the FARC due to the larger influence of the group and the greater amount of available evidence.
females is integral to understanding how these relationships and expectations influence rebel recruitment in Colombia. If we can better understand why girls do or do not become involved with non-state armed groups, and/or how they may be involved but unseen in paramilitary groups and gangs, then we can better address the deeply rooted issues of gender and power that influence whether girls join armed groups and why some might prefer to stay in them. This will enable policymakers to design programs specifically for girls and boys, and it is especially important in generating effective educational programs to teach children about the risks of joining armed groups and provide them with alternatives.

**Main Arguments**

This paper explores two main arguments regarding the presence of girls in Colombian non-state armed groups. Chapters One and Two focus on girls’ motivations for joining, proposing that the reasons girls join are actually quite similar across all Colombian fighting factions. I argue that girls do not deliberately select the FARC from a range of viable options; instead, I suggest that their choices are largely based on imperfect information, risk tolerance, and proximity to groups willing to recruit them.

My second argument is that if girls are not self-selecting into the FARC, then it is the gatekeepers (i.e., the recruiters and commanders) of the armed groups that decide whether or not to recruit girls and how to utilize them. Chapters Three, Four, and Five explore why the FARC actively recruits young girls while the paramilitaries and urban youth gangs appear to exclude them. Employing rebel recruitment theories from Kalyvas (2006) and Weinstein (2007), I examine whether models of economic and social resources, collective and individual benefits, and proximity/control still apply when
looking at children, and especially girls.\(^7\) While Weinstein (2007) argues that initial economic and social resources heavily influence recruitment methods, I suggest that gender ideologies are also a strong factor in both recruitment strategy and the types of recruits that each group attracts. Kalyvfas (2006) argues that geographical control is also a key factor in recruitment, and I add that control is especially critical in the recruitment of girls in rural areas, as they have fewer options for both social and geographical mobility.

**Methodology**

I began this research with a comprehensive literature review on the leading studies about child soldiers and children involved in fighting forces. I then formed a series of questions based on the roles of girls in the different armed groups in Colombia, identifying key gaps in the research, such as the significant lack of gendered analysis and the invisibility of girls in paramilitaries and gangs. Prior to leaving Canada, I spent three months studying Spanish. I then lived in Bogotá, Colombia, for four months (August 2006 to December 2006), where I spent the first two months observing daily life in various neighbourhoods, establishing contacts, interviewing researchers and community workers, and studying advanced Spanish and Colombian slang at two universities.\(^8\) My primary contact was Eleanor Douglas with Save the Children Canada, who put me in touch with several local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) working in the municipality of Soacha. Soacha is a municipality on the southern outskirts of Bogotá, approximately 10 kilometres from downtown Bogotá. According to the 2005 census, Soacha has over 350,000 inhabitants and includes the extremely poor neighbourhood of

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\(^7\) See Chapter Two for a more detailed explanation of these theories.

\(^8\) I felt that conducting the interviews myself without a translator was especially important given the culture of mistrust in Colombia.
Altos de Cazucá, where 20,000 internally displaced people make up approximately 40 percent of residents (UNHCR 2005). Soacha, and especially Cazucá, has large numbers of paramilitaries, gangs, and incidences of both daily and extreme violence such as “social cleansing.” Cazucá is made up of mostly makeshift houses, and services such as electricity and telephones are scarce. At the time of my visit, for example, the respondents in one area of Cazucá had not had running water for at least two months and relied on tanker trunks to ship in daily rations of water. The organizations that I worked with then put me in touch with adolescents at the Soacha Community Centre, where I conducted most of my interviews in Spanish and without a translator.

The second two months of fieldwork consisted of interviews with (and further observations of) children and adolescents in Soacha Centre and Altos de Cazucá. In the last six weeks of my stay, I spent three evenings per week in the Soacha Community Centre with male and female adolescents who were enrolled in dance classes or otherwise involved at the community centre. This allowed me to spend time with potential respondents so that they became comfortable with me. All of the young respondents in Soacha knew me for at least several weeks before I asked for interviews, and they were aware of my research purposes from our first meeting. Those who did participate were surprisingly eager to talk to me, partly because I was a foreigner and they knew that I was not connected to any armed group or state investigation. Four potential adolescent respondents (two males, two females) initially agreed to participate and then did not show up for scheduled interviews. I also attended a hip hop/break-dance festival organized by the youth in Soacha and a talent show in Altos de Cazucá. These activities enabled me to

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9 Being such an obvious foreigner (i.e., tall, blonde, blue-eyed) was a surprising advantage in this research, as many respondents seemed eager to tell their stories and to hear about Canada. Some also seemed more trusting of me because I was closer to them in age than other researchers.
observe casual interactions among the children and adolescents while also studying gender relations, expectations, and social expressions.\textsuperscript{10}

In total I conducted 26 semi-structured interviews (12 females, 14 males) with key informants of different ages and socioeconomic backgrounds (see Appendix 1). Key criteria were residence and/or experience in areas of high recruitment into armed groups, such as Soacha and Altos de Cazucá, as well as personal connections and/or experiences with organized armed violence. My initial goal was to interview children and adolescents (between ages 12-18) who were living in recruitment zones and/or involved in organized armed violence. However, the reluctance of most young gang members to participate, as well as the security limitations of interviewing former or current paramilitary or guerrilla members, restricted my interviews to children and adolescents not directly involved in armed groups.\textsuperscript{11} These interviews were generally 30 to 60 minutes in length; some were one-on-one, recorded interviews in a private setting, while others were more informal and sometimes included small groups (see Appendix 1). All respondents were given a letter of consent, and I also read this form out loud to ensure that all participants understood the purpose of the research. Participants were told that I would not use their names or any other identifying features and that only I would have access to transcripts or recordings of the interviews. Participants were not paid and were allowed to leave or end the interview at any time. All interviews with children under 15 had another adult (either a teacher or

\textsuperscript{10} For security and ethical reasons, I did not take photographs or bring a recorder to these events. However, I kept detailed field notes of all of my observations and meetings.

\textsuperscript{11} One young man was previously involved in a gang (see Appendix 1); one girl was the daughter of a police officer (to protect her identity, this relationship is not noted on the interview list in any way). Almost all of the respondents under 18 had either friends or relatives in gangs or attached to gangs (i.e., as girlfriends). Some had friends in paramilitary groups, the military, or guerrilla militias. Others had experienced direct contact or violence from paramilitary groups or gangs. A list of all interviews is available in Appendix 1.
parent) present (see Appendix 1). Respondents over 15 were asked if they wanted an adult present, but none requested this option.

As access to children in demobilization programs was highly restricted, I was unable to interview girls formerly in armed groups due to issues of time, ethics, and security. This is the primary limitation of my study, which I attempted to overcome by consulting 24 testimonies from former FARC, paramilitary, and gang members that were taken by other researchers (see Appendix 2). These testimonies are critical in understanding the first-hand experiences of children in Colombian armed groups, and they have not received much analytical attention in the current literature. In addition, I analyzed both Colombian and international news media coverage of armed group activities, as well as statements and publications issues by the armed groups’ themselves. Another key limitation of my study is that I interviewed respondents drawn primarily from areas of Bogotá and Soacha, which restricts my ability to generalize across Colombia. Although I drew from materials and studies based in other regions and was careful to cross-reference my own evidence with evidence from other cities and regions, further research in other Colombian regions is clearly required to support, reject, or modify my claims.

**Summary of Findings**

First, my research suggests that the comparatively large numbers of girls in the FARC are not sufficiently explained by the FARC’s leftist/feminist ideology, or by FARC commanders’ arguments that girls join because they want to change their country and/or be part of the revolution (Reyes 2007). In fact, in my limited sample, I found that young recruits and potential recruits do not appear to have much accurate knowledge of
the politics underlying any of the armed groups. Instead, misinformation about the
expectations and commitments of joining appear to have considerable influence, as do the
location of the armed groups and the availability of alternative options.

Second, I found that the active recruitment of girls by the FARC appears to be
both an ideological and operational issue. The higher presence of females allows the
group to retain its (weakening) political image as advocates of social change, while also
boosting recruitment levels that cannot otherwise be supported by offering salaries.
Because the FARC has relied on social resources (e.g., promises of social and political
change) from its inception, a switch to economic incentives would likely further
deteriorate the group’s political image. However, the failure of these promises means that
the FARC must find other ways to recruit new members. As adults are less likely to
support a group that continually falls short of its stated goals, children become the
obvious recruits because they are more easily influenced and/or intimidated.

As the paramilitaries have the financial resources to hire recruits, they do not
seem to need future promises to increase their ranks. While this may result in recruits
who are less committed to the cause, it also means that relying on children, and especially
girls, is unnecessary. Because the paramilitaries are built on the male military tradition
and are known to be highly aggressive and machista (i.e., hyper-masculine), a visible
presence of females would diminish this image and counter the traditional values for
which many paramilitary factions claim to be fighting. Yet, my research indicates that
girls and women have played (and do play) important roles in paramilitary structure and
function. I found that their presence is marginalized because they are not usually
combatants, and the bias of both international and local organizations to focus on

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combatants means that girls and women are often ignored in demobilization and reintegration processes.

Finally, my research suggests that gangs also rely on traditional gender roles to recruit members, maintain power, and establish solidarity in an environment where so many different groups compete for power. Because informants and mistrust are deeply embedded in Colombian culture, the ability to trust members is especially crucial for gangs who do not pay recruits and rely on codes of silence. Because girls who join gangs are often viewed with suspicion (as they are violating traditional gender norms), and because girls and women are used as informants and spies by all sides, allowing girls into gangs might increase the risk of intra-gang conflicts and organizational breakdowns. This study suggests that the males in gangs seem to determine the extent to which girls are allowed to participate in crimes and other types of “male” conduct. As with the paramilitaries, it appears that it is not primarily the females who choose to remain uninvolved. Rather, it is the males who keep the girls limited to particular activities.

I agree with Kalyvas (2006) that proximity and available options are more important than ideology with regards to girls’ decisions to enlist. However, I found that the gender ideology of the recruiters is important when screening potential members, an element that Kalyvas overlooks entirely. In addition, I agree with Weinstein (2007) that information gathering, vouching, and costly induction practices (see Chapter One) are important for groups such as the FARC and youth gangs because they do not use money to recruit combatants; however, my research suggests that information gathering is quite important in the paramilitaries as well, despite their use of salaries to recruit members. I also found that gender-specific recruitment can be a form of background check that is
especially important to groups fostering a hyper-masculine image, but Weinstein and Kalyvas do not address this possibility at all.

Overall, my findings suggest that the gatekeepers are more important than the recruits in explaining the gender disparity among different Colombian armed groups. I argue that the groups’ preferences trump the preferences of young recruits regarding when and why girls are allowed to join particular groups. While economic and social resources are important in explaining different recruitment methodologies, gender-based analysis is equally critical in understanding the social controls imposed by different types of organized armed violence. The sex ratios across different groups might be overstated because females are marginalized in paramilitaries and gangs, but there is still a marked difference in how the various armed factions approach the involvement of females in their ranks. My findings suggest that further research on *machismo* and gender-based violence is especially critical in Colombia, as gendered expectations seem to play a prominent role in the recruitment of children and adolescents into organized armed violence. The persistent lack of information on girls in fighting forces illustrates the continued assumption that girls are not primary actors in armed conflicts and therefore do not warrant significant research attention. In addition, the general omission of gender analysis in conflict studies reflects the bias that issues of gender are not integral to understanding the key drivers of conflict. Yet, when sexual violence is endemic in a conflict, and one of the armed groups has prominent female combatants while the others do not, no analysis can be complete without addressing gender and its relationship to violence and power.
CHAPTER ONE: Gender-Neutral or Gender-Blind Research?

As men and boys are almost always the key players in militaries and organized armed groups, specific research on girls and women is still largely absent from the leading theories on rebel recruitment and the use of child soldiers. There is an unspoken assumption in most work on rebel recruitment that the subjects are adult males, and these theories are therefore untested on female and child recruits. Similarly, some studies on child soldiers do not adequately recognize the specific needs and circumstances of girls and treat all “children” as one category. We do not really know if girls, boys, and women join armed groups for similar reasons as men. Children may not fit into recruitment theories of economic resources and geographical control at all. This chapter looks at current theories on child soldiers and rebel recruitment in order to identify strengths and weaknesses in the existing explanations and suggest plausible alternatives. This chapter then concludes with the hypotheses that I will explore in Chapters Two to Six.

1.1 Motivations for Joining Armed Groups

Why girls join armed groups continues to be an intriguing and important question in the discourse on rebel groups and child soldiers. The majority of research looking at this question, however, remains limited by small numbers of interviews, a challenge that my study also could not overcome due to restrictions of time and security. While there is some evidence of girls’ roles and motivations for joining guerrilla movements, very little is known about the corresponding role of girls and women in gangs and paramilitary groups in Colombia. In most of the literature on the latter two groups, a consideration of

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girls and women hardly appears at all, and gender-based analysis is just as scarce. While
more material exists on girls in the FARC, the bulk of this research is descriptive and
offers little comparative analysis.

Previous research does suggest, however, that children join armed groups for
impulsive, emotional, and economic reasons. The most recent UNICEF (2006) study in
Colombia, which surveyed 329 former child combatants\(^\text{12}\) (223 males, 106 females)
found that the top four reasons given for joining armed groups were 1) they liked the
guns and/or uniform (19.4 percent of females, 36 percent of males), 2) the lifestyle
looked appealing (25.2 percent of females, 24.3 percent of males), 3) promises of money
and/or other economic necessities (11.5 percent of females, 23 percent of males), and 4)
abuse and/or family violence (25.2 percent of females, 15 percent of males). Overall, 83.4
percent of these children and adolescents said that they joined voluntarily,\(^\text{13}\) and the
researchers found that promises of money were a much more important factor in joining
paramilitary factions than guerrilla groups. An earlier report from Human Rights Watch
(2003) also offers recruitment information that is disaggregated into two different
guerrilla organizations (the FARC and the ELN) as well as paramilitary groups. The
report notes that while guerrilla units are thought to be one-quarter to one-half female,
there are very few females in paramilitary groups. No analysis, however, is offered to
explain why this might be occurring. Some respondents from guerrilla units reported that
females had similar duties and possibilities of promotion as males, and this egalitarian
\(^{12}\) These respondents were drawn from children and adolescents who were in or had passed through
government demobilization programs, which biases the sample as it is not possible to interview children
who are active in the ranks; however, the sample of respondents was a mixture of those who had been
captured, released, or had escaped, which mitigates some selection problems.
\(^{13}\) Certain levels of coercion likely exist even in voluntary recruitment. It is difficult to call enlistment
voluntary when it might be a child's only option for survival. However, the term "voluntary" usually
indicates that these children and youth were not kidnapped or forcibly removed from their homes in order
to join armed groups and/or that they themselves did not consider their enlistment to be forced.
nature could be a strong motivator for women and girls. With a sample size of 112 former child soldiers drawn from government demobilization programs,\textsuperscript{14} Human Rights Watch lists factors for joining armed groups that are very similar to the UNICEF study: 1) poverty, 2) underemployment, 3) parental ill-treatment, 4) promises of money, 5) appeal of “adventurous” life, 6) desire for a uniform and gun, and 7) simple curiosity. In a later chapter on girls, the report notes that girls’ reasons for joining are “remarkably similar” to those of boys, with the exception that many girls said they left home due to sexual abuse or harassment (2003, 55). This is echoed in the UNICEF report (2006), where 50 percent of girls said they had been abused or mistreated before leaving home, while only 26 percent of boys said the same. The Human Rights Watch report also explains that in many areas where paramilitaries and/or guerrillas are active, there is little to no state presence, and these non-state armed groups are the children’s main association with organized authority. In the urban context, this report comments that both the guerrillas and paramilitaries use urban militias or gangs to recruit more young people into their ranks. The primary recruiting difference noted between guerrilla groups and paramilitaries is that neither of the guerrilla groups paid wages to the children, even though some promised to do so in recruitment meetings.\textsuperscript{15} Paramilitaries, on the other hand, offered to pay young combatants a relatively high wage, especially in comparison to what they could make working on a farm or as street vendors in urban centres.\textsuperscript{16}

\textsuperscript{14} Again, respondents in this study were a mix of those who had been captured, released, or had escaped. See Appendix in HRW 2003.

\textsuperscript{15} The guerrillas did, however, cover living expenses and provide food, uniforms, etc.

\textsuperscript{16} Promised or actual salaries in the paramilitaries were reported as US$300 to $400 monthly (HRW 2003), which would equal US$3,600 to $4,800 per year. The 2006 estimated Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita for Colombia is US$8,600 ($716 per month), but the legal minimum wage for 2007 is US$224 per month (based on the exchange rate as of 21 July 2007). Also, 49 percent of Colombians live below the poverty line, indicating that the per capita GDP does not reflect many Colombian’s real wages. See: CIA World Fact Book www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/co.html#Econ and Proexport.
Despite this detailed recruitment information, the Human Rights Watch report does not offer any analysis as to why there are so many more girls in one type of group than the other. Apart from the mention of female promotion in guerrilla ranks, there is no discussion of the role of gender, femininities, masculinities, or misogyny in these groups, and there is no analysis as to why the guerrillas might actively recruit girls while the paramilitaries appear to deliberately exclude them.

1.1.1 Female-Specific Motivations

In two studies specifically focused on girls in fighting forces, Mazurana and McKay (2001, 2004) argue that the primary reasons for girls to actively join armed groups are 1) protection, 2) financial gain, 3) state and/or local violence, 4) abuse or problems in the home, and/or 5) having a parent, sibling, or spouse in the armed forces. Mazurana and McKay do not, however, separate these motivations by type of armed group, making it difficult to analyze whether certain groups are more likely to coerce girls, offer protection, or offer salaries and other benefits. Their large study in several African countries (2004) also focuses primarily on reintegration and post-conflict assistance, leaving a detailed analysis of recruitment outside the scope of their work. In studies specific to Colombia, Keairns (2002, 2003) and Brett (2002, 2004a, 2004b) offer similar explanations for why girls join, listing the main reasons as: 1) escape from abusive families, 2) guerrilla life looked appealing (uniform, status, opportunity to travel), and/or 3) misunderstandings about the length of commitment (i.e., they joined without realizing that they could not leave). Keairns’ study (2003) focuses on a small sample of six girls in Colombian guerrilla groups and therefore does not include an

Colombia www.proexport.com.co/VBeContent/NewsDetail.asp?ID=5519&IDCompany=22 for information on per capita GDP and labour contracts.
analysis of the different types of non-state armed actors and how the gender ratios and motivations for joining might differ. Brett’s book (2004b) offers interviews from a range of different countries, but the sample size from Colombia is still very small (seven respondents). While the testimony from girls previously in guerrilla units is helpful, the research of Keairns and Brett does not attempt to explain why there are so many more girls in the FARC than in other Colombian armed groups. But if girls’ reasons for joining armed groups are similar across these studies and do not appear tied to the ideology or motivations of a particular armed group, then why are the gender ratios in one group so different?

1.1.2 Gangs

Studies focusing on urban gangs seem to support the leading theories on child soldier recruitment, although there is still a lack of detailed analysis on motivations that are specific to girls. Miller (2001) argues that while some girls do join gangs independently, the males in these gangs rarely recognize the females as equal members, regardless of what kind of initiation the girls had to complete. Miller goes on to argue a point echoed by Moser and McIlwaine (2004) that most girls are “gang-involved” through boyfriends or relatives, rather than being members in their own right, and they often join because they want a boyfriend who has money and power. Moser and McIlwaine (2004) also argue that in high-risk urban areas, girls are more likely to become involved in prostitution while boys join gangs, but they do not specify why this might be the case. A study by the organization Vamos Mujer\(^\text{17}\) in the city of Medellín, which is notorious for its drug cartels and turf wars between various armed groups, supports the common argument that girls join armed groups to escape domestic violence.

\(^{17}\) “Let’s Go Woman” or “Woman, Let’s Go"
as well as being motivated by internal displacement, spatial restrictions (i.e., being unable to go out at night), domestic enslavement, and sexual violence in the community (2005). They suggest that many girls do not understand the larger socio-political context in which these armed actors operate and are instead motivated by revenge for something done to them or to a family member. According to this study, the primary difference between girls joining urban and rural groups was that girls in urban areas are able to live at home while still being part of the group. Girls in rural areas, however, typically join an armed group and permanently leave their family, which could significantly alter motivations to join groups based in rural versus urban areas. The authors also argue that attaching oneself romantically to an armed actor is a rational move in neighbourhoods where there is no other form of protection for young women.

Again, these explanations for female involvement do not refer to any group ideology or political motivations. In fact, the reasons for joining seem uniform across different armed groups and even across genders. Several of the key reasons from Zorro Sanchez (2004) as to why boys join gangs in Bogotá mirror previous explanations for female involvement in armed groups: 1) lack of economic opportunity/desire for immediate material gain, 2) abuse or neglect from family, 3) solidarity against attacks on youth, 4) drug use, 5) a family member is already in a gang, 6) school does not seem relevant to their daily lives, 6) to meet or “get” girls, 7) to party/drink, and 8) to obtain power. In a study on Medellín gangs, Ramirez (2003) lists poverty, power, lack of opportunities, and social exclusion as the primary motivators for both sexes, while he suggests that girls are more likely to join due to romantic reasons (i.e., following a
boyfriend into an armed group). He also argues that girls are more likely to mention escape from sexual, emotional, or physical abuse as a reason for joining armed groups.\(^\text{18}\)

1.1.3 Sample Biases and Limitations

The current theories outlined above suggest that boys and girls have common reasons for joining organized armed groups, and few of these motivations seem tied to political causes or commitments to specific groups. It is important, of course, to recognize the possible sample biases in these studies. Children who were recruited by force may be more likely to stay in the ranks (and/or less likely to testify) due to fear, or they may be more likely to be killed due to low commitment levels, ineptitude in battle, or an inability to cope with stressful living conditions. Due to the ethical and security complications of interviewing minors still in the ranks, it is difficult to determine if interviews taken from former child soldiers are indeed representative of all children who join armed groups. As mentioned, the studies from UNICEF (2006) and Human Rights Watch (2003) included children that had escaped or had been captured, resulting in a broader range of experiences compared to studies relying only on voluntarily demobilized combatants. Even so, none of these studies attempts to explain why there is a clear gender discrepancy in some armed groups versus others. If girls want to join armed groups for the same reasons as boys, then why are girls only prominent in guerrilla groups? And if girls deliberately join guerrilla groups, why are these motivations not reflected in the research?

\(^{18}\) It is important to note that this information was collected primarily from social workers and other researchers in Medellín, as well as from boys and male commanders in the gangs, as Ramirez only directly interviewed on gang-involved girl in his study.
1.2 Rebel Recruitment Strategies

As reflected in the previous section, the commonly proposed reasons for why children join armed groups are not unique to child soldiers. Family abuse, parental neglect, lack of education, poverty, and the desire for adventure are common among children and adolescents throughout the world in many different contexts. These motivating factors have little to do with the specific group that a child joins and have more to do with the simple act of running away. Running into an armed group would not be possible unless the armed group accepted those runaways. This is a key issue in child recruitment, and particularly in the recruitment of girls, that the present literature overlooks. We may understand why children join armed groups, but why do some groups in the same conflict recruit children, while others do not?

1.2.1 Financial and Social Resources

In his research on rebel recruitment strategies, Weinstein (2007) argues that differences in "initial resource endowments" (i.e., the economic and/or social resources available to the group) are highly influential in determining the recruitment strategy of a given group. He argues that groups with low levels of economic resources rely on the promises of future payoffs, collective benefits (i.e., benefits for the group rather than individuals), and promises of social change to recruit their members. If a financially poor group has public support due to credible promises of political revolution or socio-economic improvements for group followers, this type of group has high levels of social resources. Conversely, a rebel group relying on cash payments, looting, and other forms of direct economic benefits to recruit generally has high levels of economic resources, as it requires such resources to expand. Weinstein (2007) argues that the use of economic
incentives (i.e., cash payments, salaries, looting, etc.) in recruitment minimizes the importance of trust. Groups that pay fighters will therefore have high numbers of low-commitment recruits. On the other hand, he argues that groups recruiting based on ideology and social change, which are usually resource-poor groups, are more likely to a) gather detailed information about recruits, b) require existing members to vouch for new recruits, and/or c) require that recruits undergo a costly initiation process. Weinstein suggests that resource-poor groups use these three processes (i.e., information gathering, vouching, and costly induction) to identify and exclude recruits who may not have long-term commitment to the cause. Presumably this would lead to high levels of committed recruits within resource-poor, politically motivated groups. He argues that resource-rich groups that pay recruits do not need such thorough screening mechanisms, as the commitment of their recruits is based on continued salaries. In Weinstein’s theory, this type of group would display higher rates of defection and non-compliance.

Yet Weinstein does not distinguish whether he is talking about men, women, boys, or girls. There is a general assumption that he is talking about adult men, and when he does mention younger recruits, it is in the context of abduction. In his statistics on recruit demographics, he provides no gender-disaggregated data, and he has very little age-disaggregated information. He does not ask, for example, if resource-rich groups recruit women or children, which would certainly expand and modify his theory. Does the recruitment of children require the same types of information gathering, vouching, and costly induction? Or are different strategies used for young recruits? These questions have the potential to help explain the processes and motivations behind using child recruitment.

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19 He uses the example of the rebel group Renamo in Mozambique that recruited by force, including some children and adolescents.
recruits, and in the following chapters I use Weinstein's theories to explore how resources and screening mechanisms might differ in the recruitment of children, especially girls.

1.2.2 Control and Collaboration

Other key theories that are useful in analysing child recruitment lie in Kalyvas' work on control and collaboration (2006), even though Kalyvas himself does not focus on young recruits. Kalyvas agrees with Weinstein that ideology is much less important for "militiamen" (i.e., paid recruits) than it is for unpaid recruits, suggesting that paid combatants are also frequent turncoats because they will serve the highest bidder. Kalyvas argues against the common assertion that ideology is always central to rebellion, suggesting instead that because switching sides and the use of informants is widespread in civil wars, ideological devotion may be less important than is commonly assumed. Kalyvas agrees with Stoll (1993, 20) that "once an armed conflict is underway, the violence exercised by both sides can easily become the most important factor in recruitment." In fact, Kalyvas argues that most "ordinary" people have a combination of weak preferences and opportunism, making them highly susceptible to switching sides based on geography and/or their perception of which group is winning. As control signals power and credibility, Kalyvas suggests that recruits are more likely to join the group that is controlling their particular area, as everyone wants to side with the potential winner. This relationship of control and collaboration is central to Kalyvas' arguments, as it refutes the widespread assumption that joining or collaborating with an insurgency is necessarily a risky endeavour. Kalyvas suggests that higher levels of control lead to higher rates of collaboration, and, correspondingly, lower rates of defection.
Similarly, Kalyvas and Arjona's (2006) recent research in Colombia supports the idea that ideology is less important than geography when it comes to an individual's decision to enlist. This study, which included open-ended interviews with 50 guerrilla and paramilitary ex-combatants followed by a survey of 829 ex-combatants, found that only 10 percent of surveyed recruits came from areas where no armed groups were present. Among these, 55 percent joined the paramilitaries and 46 percent joined the guerrillas. The study also found that less than 10 percent of ex-guerrilla fighters lived in areas where only paramilitaries were present, and only 15 percent of all ex-paramilitaries came from places where only guerrillas were present. In addition, the study found that in areas where both types of armed group were present, respondents divided almost evenly across the FARC, ELN, and paramilitary groups, with approximately 30 percent joining each group. These results support the authors' theory that "recruitment is endogenous to, and reflects, the armed groups' presence and control" (Arjona and Kalyvas 2006, 24).

Arjona and Kalyvas do not provide detailed gender-disaggregated data, but they do provide some information regarding the ages of ex-combatants. Their study shows that the FARC has the highest percentage of recruits between ages 8 to 13, but it also has the highest percentages of recruits joining at ages above 25. Collectively demobilized paramilitaries (i.e., those who demobilize into their communities as a group) reported only 2 percent of recruits joining under the age of 14, while 13 percent of individually demobilized paramilitaries (i.e., those that left independently and entered into safe-houses or government programs) joined below this age. They suggest that this difference could be due to a range of reasons, including the fact that children might be more likely to defect, or that collectively demobilized paramilitaries may have stronger motives to
uphold a certain public image. In fact, Arjona and Kalyvas note that 20 percent of collectively demobilized paramilitaries in their study did not report their ages at time of enlistment at all, suggesting that these paramilitaries may indeed have incentives to conceal the recruitment of minors. The researchers did find that ideology was one of the leading self-reported reasons for joining, yet the promise of money or goods was a significantly higher motivator, especially in paramilitary groups, and the desires for adventure or revenge were also given as a key reasons for enlisting.

The exclusion of detailed gender-disaggregated data leaves several gaps in this study, as it is impossible to know which motivators were more important for males or females, or why almost no females were present in the paramilitary samples. The report acknowledges that females are underrepresented in this study, with only 7 percent of respondents being female. They note that, according to 2005 data given to them from the Colombian Ministry of Defence, just over 86 percent of individually demobilized combatants were male and approximately 13 percent were female. As these figures are based on official government demobilization channels, it is not surprising that females are such a minority. Girls and women in fighting forces often do not have combative roles, and because of this they are easily overlooked in demobilization programs that focus on combatants. In Arjona and Kalyvas’ small female sample, the majority of

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20 Ideology was reported as a reason for joining by 19 percent of ELN recruits, 12 percent of FARC, 7 percent of individually demobilized paramilitaries and 13 percent of collectively demobilized paramilitaries.

21 Money or goods was a motivator for 20 percent of ELN, 20 percent of FARC, 26 percent of individually demobilized paramilitaries, and 43 percent of collectively demobilized paramilitaries.

22 It is important to note that their sample was drawn from ex-combatants in government demobilized programs, and the authors recognize the bias in that their research was unable to include active combatants and also did not accurately represent the numbers of females thought to be in the demobilized population.
respondents were from the ELN (20 percent female) and the FARC (15 percent female).\textsuperscript{23} The authors do not offer any analysis as to why this might be the case, reflecting the tendency of many researchers to focus on the (primarily male) combatants and to overlook important gender differences.

\textit{1.2.3 Gender-Neutral or Gender-Blind?}

Without information on both the age and sex of recruits, it is difficult to determine if recruitment tactics and motivations for joining armed groups are gender-neutral (i.e., gender does not matter), or if it is the researchers and demobilization programs that are gender-blind (i.e., gender is ignored or dismissed). In one study that specifically focuses on theories of child recruitment, Achvarina and Reich (2006) argue that the primary determinant of child recruitment rates is the degree to which children are protected in refugee camps. They suggest that poverty rates, orphan rates, and the proliferation of small arms are insufficient explanations for the increasing prominence of child combatants in civil wars. Their argument is based on 12 African case studies where reliable estimates on child recruitment were available. The researchers did a regression analysis on poverty rates, orphan rates, and access\textsuperscript{24} to refugee and/or IDP camps, and they found that only access was significantly correlated to child soldier ratios. While Achvarina and Reich argue that their case studies support access to these camps as the primary determinant of child recruitment, they do not answer why armed groups recruit children. Their study only explains how armed groups recruit (i.e., through easy access to large numbers of unaccompanied children), and they provide no gender-disaggregated

\textsuperscript{23} Comparatively, only 2 percent of collectively demobilized paramilitaries and 4 percent of individually demobilized paramilitaries were female.

\textsuperscript{24} "Access" is the degree to which rebel groups are near to and can enter IDP/refugee camps and abduct or recruit children within these camps.
data to examine whether boys and girls are recruited in the same way through the same channels. They also make the assumption that that most recruitment is forced, which may be true in their cases but does not appear to be predominant in Colombia. While Achvarina and Reich suggest that their results may apply in Latin America, their theory cannot explain why the gender ratios in Colombian armed groups are so different. Because IDP camps, or unofficial IDP areas, exist in both rural and urban zones of Colombia, it is likely that both guerrillas and paramilitaries (as well as gangs, to some extent) have access to these children. The question of why these groups recruit children is left unanswered, and any gender analysis is non-existent.

1.3 The Role of Gender Analysis

The importance of machismo and militarization in forming images of masculinity and femininity for youth is ignored in many of the above theories on child soldiers and rebel recruitment. Yet, the high presence of females in the guerrillas, especially in comparison to other armed factions in Colombia, suggests that gender is a key element of recruitment in all of the groups. The primary difference between the groups seems to be whether girls and women are actively included or excluded, which reflects the gendered values and operational strategies of the various groups.

1.3.1 Gender and War

Gender ideologies in war and violence unavoidably influence the roles of sex and gender in recruitment strategies. Goldstein (2001) argues that this “gendering” of war (e.g., males as combatants, females as supporters) results from a combination of many different factors, the strongest of which are childhood gender segregation, the feminine
reinforcement of male warriors, and the feminization/emasculcation of enemies. Goldstein argues that the “toughening up” of boys socializes young males to prepare for the possibility of war. He suggests that boys are the main enforcers of gender segregation in childhood and that children growing up in abusive or violent environments are socialized for aggression. Goldstein also argues that keeping women apart from combat reinforces this childhood gender segregation and also supports soldiers’ masculinity. After all, if girls can effectively participate in active combat, then fighting is no longer a symbol of manhood. Finally, Goldstein argues that the feminization of enemies is a strong factor in the gendering of war, as men use gender to represent domination. The feminine is something to be conquered, penetrated, and ruled over.25 Similarly, Enloe (2000) suggests that militaries must control images of women in order to bolster traditional images of masculinity that encourage young men to join. She also argues that only groups of diminishing strength resort to recruiting women, yet she does not provide any empirical evidence to support this point. Arguably, a group that is losing strength but is rooted in patriarchal values and the male military tradition might resort to many other recruitment tactics before turning to female combatants.

As the following chapters will illustrate, recruitment patterns in Colombian paramilitaries and gangs support these theories of gender and war. Females are relegated to traditional roles and used to reinforce domination and machismo. Yet, with the large numbers of females in FARC ranks, these theories cannot explain the variance in female recruitment in Colombia. Goldstein’s arguments about gender certainly support the marginalization of women in paramilitaries and gangs, but given the traditionally 25 This can also be seen in common male competitive vocabulary such as “don’t be a sissy,” “don’t be such a girl,” “you throw like a girl,” “boys don’t cry,” etc.
machista Colombian society, we should then expect that all armed groups would reinforce these same masculine warrior images. With its active recruitment of females, the FARC does not appear to do follow these traditions. However, Chapter Three will explore the differences between FARC’s desired public image and the actual practices inside the ranks, and Goldstein and Enloe’s theories may still find support within this supposedly egalitarian fighting force.

1.3.2 Gender in Colombia

There is, of course, a very distinct image of Colombian femininity that women are expected to uphold, and those that do not may be looked on with suspicion by both sexes. Chant and Craske (2003) caution against the tendency in international literature to generalize about all Latin American women, noting the importance of looking at girls and women as individuals or in different groupings based on race, socio-economic status, and education, rather than as one category of analysis. Their wide range of topics does not allow them to study any one country or issue in depth, but their work is valuable in providing the history and context in which gender is shaped in Latin America. Chant and Craske (2003) introduce the idea of marianismo, which was noted earlier as emphasizing fertility, domesticity, and self-sacrifice. These images are important for Latin American girls as they grow up with a high value placed on motherhood and subservience. Chant and Craske note that machismo is often used to structure power relations between men and not only between men and women. They also point out that women’s expectations often fuel the complex that boys and men must be machista, while some women can also be labelled machista if they are aggressive, competitive, or display other “masculine” traits. These assumptions are supported in another study that examined primary and
secondary school students in Bogotá and found that female teenage respondents repeatedly chose young, thin, blue-eyed, blonde women as their image of ideal femininity, and both boys and girls said that girls who try to be equal with boys are abnormal, ugly, sexually promiscuous, and “crazy” (Escobar, et al. 2003).

1.4 Risk and Imperfect Information

Gender can also affect how boys and girls respond to the risks of living in such a violent environment. In a study of 5,775 Colombian adolescents (50 percent female) with a mean age of 15 years, Kliewer, et al. (2001) found that parental support was an especially strong factor in the ability for girls and female adolescents to cope with regular exposure to violence. As adolescents exposed to neglect and abuse are thought to run away sooner than their peers (Thrane, et al. 2006), the protective effect of parental support could alter girls’ perceptions of risk more than boys. A poor environment at home could make running away a viable, rather than risky, option. Similarly, a study on 269 Israeli adolescents found that risk behaviour in males was primarily associated with their peer group, whereas in females, the relationship with their parents was a much more important indicator of risky behaviour; positive relationships with parents, for example, were associated with less depression and aggression (Michael and Ben-Zur 2007).

In child soldier testimonies taken by other researchers, as well as in my own interviews, I found two essential elements that appear to be common among young recruits: a high tolerance of risk and the acceptance of imperfect information. Both of these concepts are found in economics literature, and the basic economic theory of risk aversion assumes that humans are naturally risk-averse. In other words, when calculating
the costs and benefits of a particular action, people will generally take a guaranteed offer rather than consider an equal or greater reward that is uncertain. People who choose the higher, uncertain offer are considered to be risk-loving, or at least risk-tolerant; yet humans of all ages often violate these principles of risk aversion and rational cost-benefit analysis (Tversky and Fox 1995). Adolescents in particular are over-represented in almost every type of risk-seeking behaviour (Rodham, et al. 2006), although this may be partly due to differing perceptions of risk, as adult concepts of risky behaviour may not correspond to youth perceptions (Gullone and Moore 2000). One recent study, for example, found that adolescents perceived risk to be something where the outcome was uncontrollable, whereas a challenge was difficult to achieve but had a known end-point (Rodham, et al. 2006). Fear and anger might also have opposite effects on risk perceptions, with fearful people making pessimistic risk estimates and risk-averse choices, while angry people make optimistic estimates and risk-seeking choices (Lerner and Keltner 2001).

1.4.1 Imperfect Information

In addition, almost all human choices are necessarily based on imperfect information. Decision under uncertainty requires a person to evaluate the desirability of possible outcomes and the likelihood of their occurrences (Tversky and Fox 1995). People rarely have perfect or complete information regarding where a decision will lead, and decisions may rely on how credible they judge the information given to them. In Colombia, where informants, turncoats, and corruption are embedded into the social fabric, discerning credible sources is difficult even for adults who have access to a wide range of information. Theories of uncertainty are also rooted in economic game theory,
where the players have “imperfect information” if they do not know the behaviour of the other players or how the long the game will be played. Alternatively, “incomplete information” occurs when the players do not know the rules of the game, such as the payoffs, set of strategies, and the number of players (Phlips 1988). Arguably, risk acceptance could then be linked to a person’s willingness to play a game or enter into negotiations despite varying levels of incomplete or imperfect information. The ability to discern credible information is again critical, as a player may think s/he has perfect information but in reality is being deceived.

I use these theories of risk perception, risk tolerance, and imperfect information to frame my exploration of girls’ risk perceptions and their ability to discern credible information in regards to their choices to join (or not join) organized armed groups. As many of the girls profiled in this study made decisions to enter situations that are generally considered high-risk (i.e., involvement in a non-state armed group), their perceptions of risk and their willingness to accept misinformation are important elements in determining patterns of decision-making, enlistment, and recruitment. It is also important to consider if researchers are judging the choices of these girls to be highly risky when the girls might be making quite rational decisions based on available options.

1.5 Distinguishing Guerrillas, Paramilitaries, and Gangs

The tendency to focus on child soldiers and their motivations for joining, rather than to also examine the motivations of armed groups to recruit children, leads to bundling a range of armed groups into one category (e.g., “the recruiters”). This can generate assumptions that all rebel groups in one particular conflict use children, when
perhaps only certain groups actually do so. Generalizations like this do not help us understand why some armed groups have larger number of children in the ranks, nor can they explain why the Colombian guerrillas have so many more girls than other groups in the same conflict. Evidently, even in situations like Colombia where more children and youth appear to join armed groups voluntarily rather than by force, there are screening mechanisms taking place on the gatekeeper side of operations, and these mechanisms differ among the various armed groups.

While Weinstein (2007) specifically looks at different types of rebel groups (e.g., resource-rich versus resource-poor), he does not look at children or gender, and I argue that any analysis of recruitment patterns is not complete without a consideration of both the age and sex of the recruits. The Colombia report from Human Rights Watch (2003) looks at children in different groups but does not provide empirical analysis on recruitment strategies or gender discrepancies. Achvarina and Reich (2006) look at different groups that recruit children, but they primarily distinguish these groups by differing levels of access to refugee/IDP camps. Ramos (2004) argues that the co-optation of gangs by guerrilla militias and paramilitaries is actually less common than is often stated, especially regarding paramilitaries, who frequently seek to eliminate youth gangs as part of “social cleansing” efforts. Ramos states that paramilitaries in particular prefer to recruit “clean” young men, resulting in many clashes between these more powerful groups and the youth gangs which are associated with heavy drug and alcohol use. In looking at recruitment and motivation, this argument establishes the importance in differentiating between militias, paramilitaries, and youth gangs (which can be erroneously lumped together), as the motivations for joining, the type of person that joins,
and the recruitment methods used, can be vastly different for each group. As Melguizo (2001) highlights in his analysis of Medellín, the emergence of paramilitary groups, guerrilla militias, self-defence groups, and criminal gangs in urban centres has blurred boundaries between social, political, and criminal motives. Melguizo (2001) notes that by the 1990s, the ongoing conflicts between so many different factions in Medellín made it extremely difficult to tell who was fighting whom. He also shows that while some gangs in Medellín have been absorbed by paramilitaries, others have retained their own command structures. Despite the confusion, guerrillas, paramilitaries, and youth gangs do have distinctive characteristics, economic resources, motives, and recruitment methods. Many of these differences are also gendered, yet this aspect in particular has received very little attention in the literature.

1.6 Hypotheses

Based on the theories reviewed in this chapter, my study looks at questions of recruitment and gender that are insufficiently explained in the present literature. As noted in the introduction, I have identified two primary questions: 1) why do girls join armed groups, of which this paper looks at three forms (guerrillas, paramilitaries, and gangs) and 2) why do girls appear to play more prominent roles in the FARC than in the other two types of groups?

The main hypothesis (H1) of this paper is that the opportunities available for girls have a stronger influence than their personal preferences regarding which group they join. That is, I explore whether girls truly join the FARC out of ideology and desire for social revolution (as the FARC claims) or whether limited options have a stronger
influence in pushing girls towards the guerrillas. Central to this discussion are the economic and psychological decision-making theories of uncertainty, imperfect information, and risk tolerance/aversion. I use these frameworks to explore whether girls join the guerrillas based on imperfect information and high levels of risk acceptance, rather than because they like ideology of the guerrillas or want to support the revolution. Risk perception is important here, as what may seem to be a risky decision to adults may be a rational choice for some children and adolescents. Kalyvas' (2006) concepts of control are also essential, as children may choose to run away, but where they can go and what group they join seems largely dependent on who controls their area. Poverty, abuse, or boredom may explain why girls run away, but these factors do not explain why girls seem to join one group more than others. While my sample is too small to truly test this hypothesis, I will explore its plausibility and suggest ideas for further research to support or reject this theory.

My second hypothesis (H2) is that the gatekeepers (i.e., the recruiters) determine the gender and age ratios in their groups rather than the recruits themselves. I look at Weinstein’s theories (2007) of information gathering, vouching, and costly induction, to explore how groups might recruit different types of members, but I extend these theories by including gender-specific recruitment as an independent form of background check. According to Weinstein (2007), the paramilitaries might have less need for screening mechanisms because they pay recruits, yet they seem to screen quite carefully when it comes to allowing females into the ranks. As Weinstein does not address gender in his recruitment theories, I examine how gender plays an important role in recruitment screening. I also look at Kalyvas’ (2006) theory that ideology is less important than
proximity, and I suggest that *gender* ideology of the gatekeepers can be more important than proximity when they embark on recruitment drives. That is, while Kalyvas (2006) may be right in that the pre-conflict ideology of potential recruits is not very important, I argue that the ideology of the recruiters regarding ideals of masculinity and femininity is crucial in gathering the ideal recruits and cultivating the right image.

To explore these two main hypotheses, I provide an analysis of the recruitment strategies of three types of organized armed groups in Colombia. First, I argue in Chapter Four that the FARC actively recruits young girls because the group is losing support, as the visible presence of high numbers of females helps reinforce their supposed communist/feminist ideology and public legitimacy as a political group. This argument is supported by Weinstein’s theory that group origins and initial resources influence recruitment strategy, as the FARC arguably has enough economic resources to pay recruits but cannot do so without losing its image as a socialist organization. I reject the idea that girls want to join the FARC because it is leftist and promotes equality; rather, I suggest that girls have little awareness of the FARC ideology and do not necessarily care which group they join, though this suggestion also requires further study with much larger samples.

In Chapter Five, I illustrate that the paramilitaries originated from resource-rich foundations and can therefore pay recruits, which I argue decreases their need to recruit children. I disagree with Weinstein that resource-rich groups are less likely to use information gathering, costly induction, and vouching methods to recruit. Instead, I propose that the resource-rich paramilitary units also carry out these activities, although in different ways, in order to ensure that they have recruits that will uphold the
paramilitary image. As the paramilitaries reinforce the *machista* and patriarchal traditions of Colombia, high numbers of female combatants would contradict this stance, which supports theories from Goldstein (2001) and Enloe (2000). Therefore, even if the paramilitaries needed to bolster their ranks, it seems unlikely that they would turn to women, especially young girls. If they did, it would be in their best interests to keep this weakness hidden. Finally, in Chapter Six, I look at Colombian urban youth gangs that are built on a trust and solidarity largely based on gender, which again supports Goldstein’s theories of gender domination. In this chapter, I suggest that girls are welcome mainly on the periphery of gangs in order to maintain group cohesion and male dominance. Yet, girls still become involved as girlfriends, messengers, and other support roles – similar to their activities in paramilitary factions.

**Conclusion**

Researchers have given a range of similar reasons for why children joined armed groups, both in Colombia and in other conflict-affected countries. While the leading explanations of poverty, boredom, abuse, lack of options, guns, uniforms, and status all lend a greater understanding of children’s motivating factors, they do not illustrate why girls seem to join one Colombian group in far greater numbers than the others. These theories do explain common motivators for children and adolescents to leave home, but they are unsatisfactory in explaining the different push and pull factors for girls versus boys. Theories of recruitment, especially those from Weinstein (2007) and Kalyvas (2006), help deepen the debate by studying how different rebel groups recruit, why new recruits enlist or switch sides, and why geography might play a stronger role than
ideology. Yet without further expansion, these theories do little to help us understand why girls enlist or why certain groups welcome girls while others do not. Economic and psychological theories of risk perception, risk tolerance, and imperfect information are useful in examining why girls might choose the guerrillas over other options, but again, these theories do not sufficiently explain the gender disparity in Colombian armed groups. Without looking at the gatekeepers (i.e., the recruiters), theories of risk perception, information, and geographical control are limited to explaining the options and choices of recruits, rather than also analysing the unique recruitment strategies of various armed groups.

Without a strong gender analysis, none of these theories will satisfy the question of why girls are so prominent in the FARC versus other Colombian armed groups. Goldstein provides compelling theories on childhood gender segregation, the feminization of enemies, and feminine reinforcement of traditional male roles. His theories support the marginalization of women and girls in the paramilitaries and gangs, but they do not adequately explain why groups built out of the same culture would choose such vastly different and highly gendered recruitment tactics. Goldstein (2001) and Enloe (2000) suggest that male control of the feminine is necessary to reinforce the masculine, and these ideas are helpful in exploring the use of women to advance particular agendas and win both physical and political battles. Finally, as identifying the unique features of various armed groups will help to discern recruitment tactics, distinguishing between the types of organized armed violence in Colombia is vital. Without a specific analysis on each, it is easy to conflate different armed groups and
overlook varied behaviours and patterns that are influenced by gender.26

26 I have chosen to focus only on the FARC, the former AUC and its factions, and small urban youth gangs; however, there are many other types of Colombian armed groups worth analyzing (e.g., drug cartels, the ELN, larger criminal gangs, etc.) that simply do not fit within the scope of this paper.
CHAPTER TWO: A Colombian History of Violence

The current violence in Colombia is usually traced back to the civil war known as La Violencia that took place between 1948-57, killing 250,000 to 300,000 Colombians. In 1958, the Liberal and Conservative parties created a National Front in an attempt to end the violence, effectively banning all other political parties. Seven years later, the ELN and the Maoist People's Liberation Army (EPL) appeared. In 1966, a small group of leftist revolutionaries founded the FARC (see Section 2.1), and in 1971 another guerrilla group, M-19, established itself in urban centres. In the late 1970s, under mounting pressure from the United States, Liberal President Julio Turbay began an open battle against drug traffickers, which intensified after a justice minister was assassinated in the early 1980s. In 1989, the FARC created their political arm, the Patriotic Union Party (UP), but one year later newly formed right-wing paramilitary groups embarked on violent campaigns against the UP that left many of the leftist political leaders dead. After nearly ten more years of guerrilla conflict and drug wars, including the assassination of mafia kingpin Pablo Escobar and the subsequent deterioration of his powerful Medellin drug cartel, President Andres Pastrana engaged the guerrillas in peace talks in 1999, granting the FARC a demilitarized zone in the southeast of Colombia.

27 Unless otherwise noted, the main sources consulted for this brief historical background are Livingstone 2004 and Simons 2004.
28 In 1985, M-19 achieved notoriety by storming the Palace of Justice and killing over one hundred people, including eleven judges; there are allegations that M-19 was paid by Pablo Escobar for this attack (Rowden 2001).
29 The FARC has used these murders as justification for their use of armed violence, saying that peaceful political involvement is impossible (Dudley 2004). In 1989, however, M-19 became a legal political party after a peace agreement with the government.
30 Some analysts argue that the peace talks sparked the notable increase in paramilitary violence over this period, as Colombian elites and drug traffickers fought against any increase in guerrilla power (Romero 2003, Simons 2004).
In 2000, Pastrana launched “Plan Colombia,” a controversial aid program including approximately US$1 billion from the United States over two years. In 2001, the FARC signed an agreement committing to a cease-fire, which won them an extension of the demilitarized zone until April 2002. However, the hijacking of a plane in early 2002 caused Pastrana to break off peace talks and order the FARC out of the demilitarized zone. Later that same year, President Alvaro Uribe was sworn in on a promise to crack down on guerrilla violence, and one year later members of the AUC began to disarm in a widely publicized peace process. President Uribe won a second term in office in May 2006, after changing the constitution so that he could run again (BBC 2006). His administration soon faced severe problems as some paramilitary leaders pulled out of the peace process and others revealed hard evidence of funding and cooperation between top government officials and paramilitary groups. While the president has consistently denied knowledge of these connections, his presidency is now tainted with accusations of collaborations with paramilitaries and drug traffickers.

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31 81 percent of the initial aid package was designated to military and police equipment and training (see Appendix 3 in Simons 2004); Plan Colombia aid from the US has continued at an average of US$600 million per year for a total of approximately US$5 billion over seven years, although renewal of the plan is currently under debate in the US congress (BBC 2005, LA Times 2007).

32 The government has since offered reduced jail terms and protection from extradition to many top AUC leaders, which has been met by protest from many Colombian and international human rights groups (ICG 2006). In December 2005, the government also began peace talks with the ELN in Cuba, but these negotiations are still unresolved (Grogg 2007).

33 Several top paramilitary commanders have testified that they contributed funds or had agreements with members of congress and other politicians; tape recordings have been submitted of conversations between politicians and paramilitary leaders (see www.semana.com for a long series of articles, analyses, and transcripts of the recordings). One drug trafficker associated with the paramilitaries told the magazine Semana that he had contributed US$150,000 to Uribe’s presidential campaign (El Tiempo 2007, Semana 2007b).
2.1 Origins of the FARC-EP

Officially founded in 1966, the FARC is one of the oldest and most powerful guerrilla armies in the world. The precursor of this leftist rebel group began in 1964 with 46 men and two women intent on overthrowing the government in its fight for land reform and poverty alleviation (Simons 2004, Martinez 2006). The group allegedly received backing from communist parties around the world as part of the Cold War proxy battles, and some parties still contribute funds and political support. The pull of rising profits from Colombia’s thriving drug trade, as well as funding shortages brought on by the end of the Cold War, allegedly drew the group into increasing involvement in coca production and cocaine trafficking to fund their rebellion (Monblatt 2004, Rabasa and Chalk 2001). Recent surveys estimate that 65 of the 110 FARC operational units are involved in coca or poppy cultivation and trade, and UNODC satellite surveillance from 2003 revealed that the FARC was present in all of the potential new coca growing areas in Colombia (ICG 2007). In addition, the 2006 report on coca cultivation from the Organization of American States (OAS) shows that 128 of the 428 municipalities with FARC presence are areas of illicit coca cultivation. This report’s distribution map also shows that of all the Colombian armed groups, the FARC has the largest presence in areas with the highest coca production. According to the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency, the FARC currently makes an estimated $500 million to $1 billion per year from trafficking and supplies 80-90 percent of the cocaine in the United States, which would

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34 The Communist Party of Canada is one such group that has continued to support the FARC (Lewis 2007). The FARC was pro-Soviet and also has ties to Cuba (Livingstone 2004, Simons 2004). The extent to which alleged funds were (or are) channelled from external sources to the FARC is unclear.

35 This is larger in numbers (though not necessarily in percentages) than the amount of coca cultivation found in regions with other armed groups. For example, the ELN is present in 228 municipalities, 63 of which have coca cultivation, and paramilitary groups or other unidentified armed groups are present in 98 municipalities, 40 of which have coca cultivation.
make it one of the largest drug suppliers in the world (Semana 2007c, DEA 2006). However, this percentage of the U.S. drug supply is likely overstated, as the paramilitaries also have connections with drug traffickers and undoubtedly represent a portion of the U.S. cocaine supply (Romero 2003). Also, in the various stages of cocaine production, it is difficult to know exactly when and where specific armed groups are involved. At the very least, the FARC indirectly profits from the drug trade through their ongoing “taxation” of shipping routes, drug cartels, and wealthy Colombians. Despite these allegations of substantial drug-trafficking affiliations and profits, the group still professes communist and socialist ideologies, is officially against drugs on its website, and proclaims to be fighting a legitimate revolution (www.farcep.org, Reyes 2007). The commanders have also consistently pointed at the paramilitaries in regards to responsibility for drug trafficking (FARC-EP 2001). The current Colombian government has taken an aggressive military approach against the rebels, and the FARC is involved in full-scale guerrilla warfare in rural areas, including the widespread use of anti-personnel landmines (ICBL 2006). In urban centres, the group has been accused of using indiscriminate violence against civilians as well as targeted violence against police and military bases in urban centres. FARC officials, however, have denied responsibility for many of these acts. FARC militias also appear to control certain urban neighbourhoods,

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36 See Section 2.2 and Chapter Five.
37 For example, a FARC communiqué from March 2000 states that “those people whose net worth exceed one million dollars will be charged the tax for peace .... Those who do not pay will be retained” (communiqué published in Appendix 4 of Simons 2004)
38 The 2003 bombing of a health-club/hotel in Bogotá, where 33 civilians died, is perhaps the most well-known example. The FARC denied responsibility. The FARC has also been blamed for bombings of police and military bases in cities throughout Colombia, especially leading up to the 2006 elections; however, in 2006, intelligence revealed that the Colombian military was involved in some of these bombings to make it look like FARC attacks were escalating. The FARC has denied its involvement in many of these attacks, frequently blaming drug cartels or the Colombian military. It is therefore unclear how many of these
although this fluctuates due to struggles with state and paramilitary forces (A4, A8, A24, A25, Semana 2006b, Semana 2003c).

The tactics and resources of the group appear to have changed in the 1990s, when right-wing self-defence groups grew into stronger paramilitary factions in reaction to FARC attacks on valuable farmland and the "taxing" of drug-trafficking routes, ports, and air strips (Romero 2003). As the FARC was pushed back by these well-funded paramilitary troops, battles over valuable land and drug routes became more violent. The ongoing violence has resulted in the continued displacement of millions of civilians (CODHES 2006, UNHCR 2007). Although advocacy and human rights attention regarding child soldiers in Colombia has recently increased, there is no clear data indicating exactly when FARC recruitment of children began. While the FARC denies recruiting anyone under 15, studies have found that the majority of children passing through official demobilization programs were in the FARC (UNICEF 2006, HRW 2003, Coalition 2003), and the majority joined before age 15. According to Human Rights Watch (2003), some FARC commanders have apparently admitted to recruiting children into urban militias who were considered "too young" for regular combat, and there is considerable evidence that children under 15 have also joined the regular guerrilla ranks.

"terrorist" attacks in Colombia are indeed due to the FARC. See, for example: BBC 2003, El Tiempo 2006b.

39 See Introduction.

40 In the 2006 UNICEF study of 329 former child combatants, the average age of enlistment was 12.8 years old. 54.8 percent of these respondents were in the FARC, 22.3 percent were in the AUC, 15.1 percent in the ELN, and 9.3 percent in the ACC. 47.2 percent spent two or more years in the forces.

41 See Appendix B for ages at enlistment in the testimonies reviewed for this study. Also see above footnote and the Appendix in HRW 2003; in this study of 112 former child combatants, 67 percent of respondents joined before age 15, while the rest joined between 15-18 years old. 72 percent of the under-15 recruits were in the FARC.
2.2 Paramilitary Origins

The growth of paramilitary units in the 1990s, and the subsequent founding of the ACCU\(^{42}\) in 1994 and the AUC in 1997, marked a significant shift in the Colombian civil war. What was previously a struggle between guerrillas and the government evolved into a more complex internal war between the State, several rebel organizations, a range of different vigilante groups, drug traffickers, and international patrons. In the early 1980s, the Colombian government attempted to coordinate a peace process with leftist rebels, but the country’s elites, who were primarily drug traffickers and landowners, strongly opposed such political reform (Romero 2003). What later became sophisticated paramilitary organizations first began to emerge as civilian *autodefensas* (self-defence groups), which were collaborations between landowners and powerful drug cartels that armed to defend themselves against guerrilla rebels pushing for socialist reforms and “taxing” land, crops, and drug shipments (Romero 2003, Simons 2004). This vigilante reaction was a direct reflection of the government’s inability to control large areas of Colombia. Notwithstanding recent forays into the political arena, the AUC commanders have repeatedly stated that their original role was to fill the security gaps left by the state and that they had no political ambitions (Mancuso 2004a). Landowners, drug cartels, and even some farmers mobilized into small vigilante groups that began attacking any civilians suspected of being guerrillas, leftists, or advocates of any type of human rights or political reforms (Romero 2003).

The rapid growth of this movement, due in large part to the vast wealth of the drug traffickers and landowners that could easily hire more armed men, quickly polarized the country and further degraded the power of the state (Romero 2003). In 2000, Carlos

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\(^{42}\) Autodefensas Campesinas de Córdoba y Urabá (Self-Defence Forces of Córdoba and Urabá).
Castaño, one of the founders of the AUC, admitted on Colombian national television that 70 percent of the AUC's financial resources came from drug trafficking (CNN 2000, AP 2000). Because the state was so weak in areas where autocdefensas mobilized, some civilians began to accept this vigilante justice as legitimate law and order (B13, Romero 2003). In later years, when the autocdefensas consolidated into the AUC umbrella organization and were able to institute a more centralized command, multinational companies like Chiquita began making “protection payments” to paramilitary groups in order to keep their businesses running (Semana 2007a, BBC 2007a). Attacks on anyone even suspected of being a guerrilla sympathizer made it impossible to be outspoken on any issue considered leftist or socialist, and leftist political parties continue to struggle for legitimacy in current Colombian politics.

However, to characterize the original autocdefensas as “civilians” is misleading as well as gender-blind. The paramilitaries were built out of the male military tradition and the mobilization of these vigilante groups was hardly gender-neutral. As Colombia has mandatory two-year military service for males at age 18 (with some exceptions), many adult men in Colombia have undergone military training, and this undoubtedly influenced the formation of the armed self-defence groups. Military and police officers became increasingly involved in paramilitary activities, though usually in “unofficial” capacities. Violence driven by men was a key part of the strategy, and the perpetuation of machismo as part of the defence of traditional values appears to be central to many

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43 Castaño disappeared in 2004, and his body was found in 2006 when a paramilitary commander showed authorities where he was buried. Castaño’s brother, Vicente Castaño, allegedly ordered the assassination (El Tiempo 2006b).
44 Chiquita recently admitted to paying paramilitary fighters for protection and has now paid $25 million in fines. There are now ongoing investigations regarding other corporations.
45 Links between the paramilitaries and the Colombian Armed Forces, as well as high-level politicians, has now become public and covered extensively in the Colombian media. See El Tiempo 2007, Semana Online Special (undated), HRW 2000 and HRW 2001.
paramilitary activities. There is also evidence that Colombian government forces have been directly involved in training paramilitary units, including those that employed children (B9, HRW 2000, HRW 2001).

Because women's voices are largely absent from the paramilitary history, there is a general assumption that all of the primary actors in paramilitary groups were (and are) men. Yet, as civilians, social activists, guerrillas, and paramilitary supporters, women inevitably played varied roles in these uprisings. One woman, who was director of logistical operations for Carlos Castaño, indicated that there were women involved in paramilitary activities from the beginning, though in non-combative roles (B13). In addition, in August 2006, the Organization of American States (OAS) permanent mission monitoring the demobilization process reported that 6 percent of all demobilized paramilitary combatants were women (MAPP-OEA 2006). While this is obviously a much smaller number than females estimated to be in the guerrillas, entry for women into demobilization programs has been very difficult, and the actual number of involved females may be higher. Because of the tendency for researchers and policymakers to focus on combatants, it seems probable that women's roles in paramilitary activity have been underestimated by reports and perhaps deliberately concealed by paramilitary commanders.

The AUC has now gone through an official demobilization process that began with the signing of a peace agreement with the government in 2003. As of 2006, 31,671 paramilitaries were recorded as demobilized through government channels (Alto Comisionado 2006). As noted, there is some gender-disaggregated data provided by the

46 Enilce López, a well-known gambling and lottery matron called “La Gata” (the Cat), as well as the mother of a prominent mayor, was recently held by the government on suspicion of ordering massacres, funding paramilitary activity, and hiring assassins (Semana 2006c, Semana 2006d).
OAS, but relatively few children have been included in the demobilization process, despite allegations that large numbers of minors have been directly involved in paramilitary activity. In the available information on demobilized children, the numbers are not disaggregated by sex, so it is difficult to determine how many of these minors (if any) were girls. Human Rights Watch (2003) notes that very few young girls are thought to be present in paramilitary ranks, but girls are also the most likely to be omitted from demobilization processes because of the narrow focus on combatants. There is also considerable evidence that the paramilitaries have now regrouped in many areas of the country and have strengthened rather than dismantled their sophisticated criminal networks (ICG 2006, ICG 2007, A24, Semana 2006e, Harris 2007). Because these new groups are not accountable to the AUC commanders that signed the peace agreements, there are legitimate concerns that violence could escalate as new, smaller units of *autodefensas* fight each other as well as guerrilla units for territory and control.

While overall murder and kidnapping rates appear to have declined since the demobilization agreement, sexual assault figures remain the same or are increasing in many areas (Vamos Mujer 2005, OAS 2006, WCRWC 2003). In addition, incidences of paramilitary “social cleansing” have continued, and the reinsertion of paramilitary ex-combatants into some communities has increased violent attacks against women (Vamos Mujer 2005, OAS 2006).48

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47 Although the FARC is generally considered to have the largest numbers of child combatants among the various non-state armed groups, children are regularly employed by paramilitaries through urban gangs and as armed combatants. However, as of October 2005, only 763 of the 31,67 officially demobilized combatants were minors. This does not include those combatants who were over 18 at the time of demobilization but were minors when recruited (Alto Comisionado 2006).

48 While the Centre for Research and Popular Education (CINEP) in Bogotá only recorded two sexual violations by paramilitaries in 2003, four in 2004, and three in 2005, when compared with recent detailed reports on paramilitary violence against women in Colombia, these statistics appear to be quite inaccurate.
2.3 Gang Origins

The formation of Colombian youth gangs is markedly different from the formation of paramilitary groups and guerrillas in that the organized violence of youth-based gangs is not usually politically motivated or heavily funded. While these small gangs do have some economic resources, they are mostly based on petty crime and small-scale drug sales unless the gang is connected to a drug cartel or larger armed group (A10, A24, Perea Restrepo 2006, Ramos 2004, Zorro Sanchez 2004). These gangs do not have a political agenda to propagate, nor do they have a vested interest in competing with the larger armed groups for power and control. Instead, the gangs seem to be primarily focused on immediate payoffs and the protection from “social cleansing” and other attacks (A10, A24, Garcia Suárez 1998, Perea Restrepo 2006). Many small gangs seem to start as gatherings of friends (see Chapter Six) and may initially have little intention to commit crime. In the impoverished urban neighbourhoods of Colombia, there are few legitimate opportunities for young people to earn money, or even to fill their free time, and criminal activities may quickly become a viable option. At first glance, these are not very different from reasons that adolescents seem to join paramilitaries or guerrillas. However, the type of person attracted to these small gangs might be quite different from those who are recruited into guerrilla militias or urban paramilitary factions. Young men and women who join gangs might be those least likely to trust adults and authority figures (A15, A16, A18, A21). One study of 2,837 Colombian adolescents found that violence against the adolescent and his/her drug use was more highly correlated with an adolescent’s violent behaviour than other risk factors such as personality, family, and

and suggest that sexual assaults throughout Colombia are vastly underreported (Vamos Mujer 2005, OAS 2006, WCRWC 2003).
peer influence (Brook, et al. 2003). In regards to males, those who join gangs appear to be boys that cannot or do not want to join the military, police, paramilitary, or guerrilla factions, yet they still want the power of a gun and/or the support of an armed group (A14-16, A19, Zorro Sanchez 2004, Perea Restrepo 2006). For females, the attraction to a man with a gun still applies to gangs, but being attached to a gang member can be quite different from being attached to a paramilitary or guerrilla militiaman. There is less power involved, but there also seems to be more freedom in regards to delinquent behaviour. For example, girls attracted to gang members may be those who are targeted by paramilitaries for violating gender norms and thus seek protection and support from a gang (see Chapters Five and Six). Drug users and petty criminals would likely not want to join state forces and lose their relative freedom, but they would probably be unwelcome in the police, military, or guerrilla ranks (Melguizo 2001, Sanín and Jamarillo 2004, A10, A12-16, A20, A24). While the paramilitaries seem to be less discriminating in their recruits and are known to recruit entire gangs, they seem careful not to erode the enforcement of certain social values, especially since they specifically target the thieves, drug users, and social “deviants” that are in gangs. Guerrilla militias have also targeted gangs for elimination in “social cleansing” operations (Melguizo 2001, Sanín and Jamarillo 2004) and seem unlikely to recruit known delinquents and drug users, especially given the FARC’s public renunciation of drug use and trafficking (Reyes 2007). My interviews indicated that young gang members in Soacha and Bogotá were marginalized, dismissed, and even physically threatened by many different community actors due to their reputations as drug addicts, thieves, and miscreants (A10, A12-16, A20, A24).
While some researchers argue that the paramilitaries and guerrilla militias have co-opted youth gangs as their urban armies (Melguizo 2001, Ramirez 2003, Sanín and Jamarillo 2004,), others believe that many gangs are in direct conflict with the larger armed groups because of their associations with drug use, public consumption of alcohol, and other social disturbances that the paramilitaries, guerrillas, and vigilante groups try to control (Ramos 2004, Zorro Sanchez 2004). The violent targeting of adolescents, the legitimization of executions of suspected delinquents, drug users, and prostitutes, and the impositions of curfews and other social regulations have sometimes resulted in the unintended effect of driving more young people into gangs for protection and solidarity (A5, A9, A12, A17, A21, A25). Where control is highly contested (e.g., urban areas where the guerrillas have strong militias or larger criminal gangs have already established control), the paramilitaries might recruit or coerce gangs to work for them in order to consolidate power in that area.49 The co-opting of gangs is also not entirely one-sided, as working for a paramilitary group or a larger criminal organization has distinct economic benefits. A small youth gang once limited to robberies and muggings can quickly escalate into a powerful arm of a drug cartel. In Medellín, for example, Ramirez states that “drug trafficking gave a whole new ‘status’ to criminal gangs by providing them with economic resources, better-quality and more powerful weapons, and the ability to control territories in marginalized neighbourhoods within the city” (quoted in Dowdney 2005, 179).

49 One such example is that of a group of approximately 60 armed men and boys that were controlling a sector of Altos de Cazucá. When the paramilitaries entered the area, they allegedly contacted the leaders of this gang and began hiring them to kill certain people for 400,000 pesos each. The paramilitaries effectively hired the gang, and as a result, took control of the area; arguably, this gang would have been considered a banda and was less of a risk than employing youth in a pandilla, who are viewed as more “disposable” due to their associations with drug use, drinking, and neighbourhood crime (A24).
Conclusion

Colombia’s history is clearly rife with organized armed violence, vigilante justice, drug wealth, endemic crime, and human rights abuses. Issues of gender, however, are notably absent from many discussions of the conflict and Colombian armed groups. What is evident from this brief historical overview is that many Colombians are accustomed to violence, inequality, and deception. The level of corruption in the Colombian political system, as well as the controversial influence of the United States, has created an environment in which people cannot trust their leaders and sometimes take the law into their own hands. What is less obvious, perhaps, is the impact that traditional gender ideologies have had on the types of organized armed violence in Colombia. Children are especially vulnerable, as there are few positive role models to teach them how to lead honestly and resolve problems without violence. In addition, displaced children are at particularly high risk because they do not have adequate access to social services and can easily end up as victims of “social cleansing” operations. Because the marginalization and abuse of women is common throughout Colombia, women and girls at risk of violence do not receive the assistance that they need. In many poor areas, the strongest role models that children have are the ones carrying guns. It is difficult to address issues of demobilization and rehabilitation when recruitment into armed groups is ongoing, and the perpetual creation of new criminal gangs, vigilante groups, and paramilitary-type factions weakens attempts at peace negotiations and judicial reform.
CHAPTER THREE: Choosing to Join - Information, Risk Perception, and Control

Using economic and psychological theories of imperfect information and risk perception, as well as Kalyvas’ theory (2006) of control, this chapter examines my first hypothesis that girls’ preferences to join the guerrillas do not sufficiently explain the comparatively high female participation rate in the FARC. What is especially important to consider is that guerrilla life may not necessarily be a negative experience for all girls in the ranks. Testimonies from former child soldiers indicate that some girls actually prefer life in the guerrilla ranks to life at home (B6, B11, B12, B15, HRW 2003).

Likewise, young recruits might find better security in paramilitary groups or gangs than in their own families. If this is indeed the case, we must consider how the domestic lives of girls in poor and/or displaced communities may alter their risk perceptions and decrease their ability to discern credible information. General assumptions that life in armed groups is torturous for all underage recruits must be questioned, especially in comparison to their alternatives. Also, as Kalyvas (2006) argues, preferences are open to manipulation and falsification, and retrospective claims of coercion can get a recruit “off the hook” for their actions in war. Claiming to have been tricked and/or unaware of a group’s motivations alleviates responsibility and guilt, and we must be cautious in arbitrarily portraying all recruits under age 18 as innocent and unaware children. Framing children and adolescents in fighting forces as ignorant victims removes their agency as decision-makers, and this should be approached carefully, especially with older adolescents who are certainly capable of making informed decisions.
3.1 Information and Deception

In Colombia, forced recruitment of children appears to be the exception rather than the norm (UNICEF 2006, Jóvenes Rurales 2006, HRW 2003, OAS 2006, Keairns 2003, Brett 2004). Kalyvas (2006) notes that in rebel recruitment it is important to distinguish between initial motivations for joining and motivations for staying. Because coercion, intimidation, and mandatory ideological education appear to be common tactics to keep children inside fighting forces (B1, B2, B7, B8, B14, B15, B17, B18, HRW 2003), understanding initial motivations to join is critical in creating effective policies for at-risk children and adolescents. If young recruits join armed factions based on inaccurate information, it could be too late to leave by the time they realize their mistake.

Arjona and Kalyvas' study (2006), however, suggests that Colombian recruits were aware of the motivations and ideology of each group before they joined, and their findings indicate that ideology was an important factor for a significant number of fighters (see Section 1.2). Yet, their study was based on interviews with officially demobilized fighters, who were almost entirely adult men due to the biases of the demobilization process. As Arjona and Kalyvas provide little gender-disaggregated data, this study is quite limited if applied to females. While some former female child combatants have admitted to joining the FARC because they were told that women were treated well and that it was “fun” (B7, B15, B16, B19), I found little evidence indicating that underage recruits or potential recruits really understood or cared about the vast ideological differences between paramilitaries and guerrillas. While more research is required to support my findings, misinformation certainly appears to be an issue that
warrants further examination. For example, one young girl who joined the guerrillas at age 13 explained her confusion about the group that she joined:

The reasons for saying that it's a mistake, the reasons why I'd say it's a mistake is like you join the guerrillas and you don't know what it is, at least you don't know how you're treated there, or whether it's going to be difficult there or if it's not going to be difficult. What wasn't clear for me was why they were fighting, I wondered what they were fighting for if they kept attacking the police stations with gas cylinder bombs, with a whole load of things, why do they do that? And so I... I didn't... I didn't understand, I mean, I still don't understand why, I don't know, why they're fighting, I really don't know why they're fighting, and so, that's what you don't understand, it's like you can't find the reason. And you join because, well, I joined to see what it was like, do you understand? To see, to see what they did, what they said, why they were fighting, but when it comes down to it you join and then you never understand any of that. Well, they used to pass by near where I lived, and they used to say that they were fighting for the people, but I've no idea (B19).

This raises questions of how children and youth decide whom to trust in a culture where everyone has an incentive to deceive. Why do they take risks that they do not understand?

There is a pattern in these testimonies suggesting that guerrilla recruiters deliberately use recruitment propaganda to misinform girls and young women about what life in the ranks will be like. FARC commander Raúl Reyes recently claimed that their current recruits are 50 percent women and suggests that this is partly due to the group's feminist values:

In the FARC, as many women as men enter the ranks from 15 to 30 years old, for an indefinite time, voluntarily, without receiving a salary, and we equally receive political, military, and cultural instruction.... Whoever discriminates against them [the women] will be sanctioned (Reyes 2007).

While some girls have indeed said that they found guerrilla life more egalitarian than their previous civilian life (B6, B11, B12, B15, HRW 2003), whether this is an endorsement of the guerrillas' feminist policies or a condemnation of overall gender inequality in Colombian society is unclear. Some girls may come out of the FARC ranks with an awareness of feminist and socialist ideals, but it appears that those who enlist at young ages acquire most of this ideological knowledge from FARC training sessions.
once they have already joined. The testimonies that I reviewed indicate that some
children and youth only understand their commitment after they enlist and not before.

One young female recruit who admitted to joining on impulse and then chose to stay with
the FARC admits: “At first it was so difficult, but I was being fed. Later, I changed my
thinking - this is now my life” (quoted in Lewis 2007). Two other girls who joined the
guerrillas at 15 and 12 expressed resent at being misled:

I was tricked. They told me ... they asked me if we wanted to join the guerrillas,
well, and we said yes, but, but that we weren’ t going to be there all the time ... 
first we wanted to see what it was like there, and yes, well, we’d give it a go
while we were there and if we didn’t like it then we were going home and they
said that that was OK, try it for three months. And after three months we told
them that we’d had enough and we wanted to go back home and they didn’t let us
(B18).

This girl arrived, a friend of mine, so, so she, she persuaded me to join, and so
two militiamen arrived, and persuaded me to join, and they told me that, that it
would be for two months, and they, and they lied to me, and so I said, OK, but
only for two months. I didn’t know them (B15).

It should not be surprising that young children do not fully understand what they
are getting into when they join. What is of greater concern is determining why these
children choose to believe guerrilla recruiters even when friends or family members
might warn them not to go. As noted earlier, researchers rely primarily on the testimony
of those who survived or escaped, or they have interviews that are sanctioned by FARC
commanders and are unavoidably biased.50 While there are some interviews from
children who were captured, it is possible that girls who join for ideological reasons
choose to remain in the forces, and this is why their stories do not appear. Any study
based on survivor or escapee testimony will not accurately reflect all of the children and
adolescents that join fighting forces, and the present study relies on a very small sample.

50 For example, the testimony of “Jenny” on the FARC website saying that her commanders are like
However, my evidence suggests that access to credible information could be a critical element in children’s decisions to join armed groups. To be successful, recruiters must convince children that joining the ranks is their best option. The poor conditions of these girls’ domestic lives make this an easy task for some, and misinformation might be especially key in regards to guerrilla recruitment of girls and young women. The manner in which paramilitaries and gangs use information to recruit minors seems to be quite different, as is their transparency regarding the use of minors, and this will be explored further in the subsequent chapters.

3.1.1 Community Perceptions

Even though the FARC causes thousands of people to be displaced each year, kidnap civilians, and frequently uses anti-personnel landmines in farming areas (CODHES 2006, ICBL 2006, Simons 2004), some people still believe that the guerrillas are more aware of people’s needs and development issues than other state and non-state armed groups (Arias 2003, Pérez Martinez 2004). Some Colombians, especially those in rural areas, may see the guerrillas as “more humane” and “less machista” than the paramilitaries (A10, Pérez Martinez 2004, Arias 2003). University students in particular seemed to resent the paramilitaries because students have been attacked or discriminated against on the assumption that universities harbour guerrilla sympathizers (A9, A15). The mercenary nature of the paramilitaries also influences their reputation for

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51 This is also based on many informal conversations with Colombians and personal observations through four months of living in Bogotá, studying at two different universities, and travelling in the surrounding areas.

52 This is also based on many informal conversations with university students over three months of studying at two different universities in Bogotá. There are many other sources referring to the guerrilla presence and recruitment at Colombian universities. University students and professors have been assassinated by paramilitaries and harassed by government forces for suspected guerrilla affiliations (see, for example, Semana 2003, Salazar 2006, and Vásquez 2001).
ruthlessness and violence, while the largely unpaid army and socialist origins of the FARC help maintain their image of being sympathetic to Colombia’s poor.

In a study on displaced populations living in Altos de Cazuca, Arias (2003) observed that displaced people from rural areas appeared to have a much more negative view of the paramilitaries. For example, two adult residents in Altos de Cazuca voiced their concerns about the paramilitary violence:

The paramilitaries only think of themselves, they never think of how to solve problems; they only think of themselves, how to benefit themselves… the guerrilla is more humane; if you commit some error the paramilitary will charge you, while the guerrilla will warn your family three times; the paramilitary will kill you in front of your children, but the guerrilla will give you the opportunity – the first because you didn’t know, the second you have already been warned, the third – they take you. I say the paramilitaries are the worst of the groups in the conflict (Adult resident [age/sex not provided] in Altos de Cazuca, quoted in Arias 2003).

The paras brought more violence, in contrast to the guerrilla that gives the farmer more opportunities to live. They care for [the people] a lot and give you money, sometimes food and education. It is more humane. The guerrilla … when they do threaten you, they say go so that you will not be killed. They allow the people to leave the area (Adult resident [age/sex not provided] in Altos de Cazuca, quoted in Arias 2003).

Indeed, the mass executions and threats against anyone suspected of being a guerrilla sympathizer or violating traditional norms has soured many Colombians against paramilitary forces (Romero 2003, Simons 2004). Yet, the belief of some Colombians that the FARC is indeed fighting for the people, or is at least more humane than their opponents, seems largely due to misinformation and lack of credible sources. The FARC is certainly not innocent of human rights abuses, especially in regards to the recruitment of minors, sexual violence against women, and violence against civilians.\footnote{See Chapters Two and Four.}

My interviews also suggested that some Colombians either confuse the various groups or do not care about the differences. This was especially true with children and
adolescents, who appeared unsure as to which group controlled their neighbourhood or why they were fighting. Ten respondents (four age 15 and over, and six under 15) confused the guerrillas and paramilitaries and sometimes used the terms interchangeably or simply called all men with guns *limpiezas*, meaning “cleaners” in reference to social cleansing groups (A12, A13, A14, A16, A16, A17, A19, A20-22). For example, two of the adolescents living in Soacha believed that the “limpiezas” in Soacha were guerrillas (A14, 16-year-old female and A17, 17-year-old male), while a male university student living in the same area thought they could be a mix of the different armed groups, including police or military officers (A15, age 23). Three male youth workers, however, asserted that the guerrillas did not have a presence and were not recruiting in Soacha (A5, age unknown, A9, age 26, and A25, age 19), and two researchers working in the community confirmed that guerrillas had not been in Soacha for years and that the “limpiezas” were in fact paramilitaries and sometimes off-duty military and police officers (A3, A24). Other researchers and journalists have also documented the paramilitary dominance in Soacha (IPS 2006, Arias 2003, Pérez Martinez 2004). The adolescents that I interviewed rarely referred to any sort of political affiliations and either did not understand or did not care about conversations on the greater armed conflict. Younger respondents (i.e., those under 15) were especially bored with questions about the armed groups and often changed the subject to talk about gangs, school, and domestic problems. Their perspectives were isolated to their small neighbourhoods, where they were much more concerned with daily crime and domestic violence. Even some older respondents were frequently confused or dismissive of the differences:
While I was working with this girl [in Cazuca], her older brother left and joined the guerrillas... or maybe it was the paramilitaries. I don't know. One of them. (A7, female graphic designer, age 24, Bogotá)

Now in my neighbourhood it is mostly paramilitaries – this is another problem on top of the social cleansing. The paras recruit the people to work for them, but sometimes the social cleansing groups are police, or just people from the neighbourhood... Then the guerrillas came, and they recruit kids too, so we never knew who was doing what. (A25, male youth worker, age 19, Soacha)

When describing the forced displacement of his family, one 46-year-old farmer illustrated the confusion when explaining how people were often caught between the fighting of various armed groups. If a farmer helped a guerrilla due to threats, the army or paramilitaries would attack him because he was a guerrilla: “One didn’t know [when a man came back] if it was the same guerrilla or the army” (quoted in Pérez 2004, p.60).

In the city, this confusion is further exacerbated by the fact that most of the guerrilla militias and paramilitaries are difficult to distinguish from regular citizens, and control of certain areas can fluctuate frequently. The urban groups do not normally wear uniforms or patrol openly armed. In addition, many men, women, and children are used as informants, yet they are not usually considered paramilitaries or guerrillas, even though they are on someone’s payroll (A3, A9, A15, A25, Coalition 2003). This creates an environment in which no one knows who is aligned with any particular group:

I can speak about this to you, but I would never speak about this to other people in the neighbourhood. You can’t talk about this to anyone, because this is a zone where many people are involved in the paramilitaries. Many of the politicians are involved in the paramilitaries. It is difficult to know who is who, so you can’t talk to anyone or they might assassinate you (A9, male youth worker/university student, age 26, Soacha).

Compounding the problem is the perspective that many youth have regarding the police and military. In my interviews, the police and military were implicated in social cleansing operations responsible for the extrajudicial executions of youth (A2, A5, A9, A18, A19,

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54 This woman conducted a one-year documentary project with a family in Altos de Cazucá.
A21, A24). While it is difficult to confirm such allegations, it is important to recognize that the perception is there. During my fieldwork, women and girls often spoke of the machismo in police and military behaviour as something inevitable and inherent in their culture. In Soacha and Cazucá, the girls that I spoke with did not see the police or military as trusted authority figures that would protect them. One 13-year-old girl in Cazucá simply rolled her eyes when asked about the troop of six heavily armed soldiers that appeared at her school at sunset: “Who cares? It’s not like they do anything... They don’t protect us” (A19). Once the many different gangs and criminal organizations are added to the mix, it becomes very difficult to untangle the connections between all of the armed groups:

The youth don’t have any idea about [ideology]; they don’t know the ideology or the so-called purposes of each group. They don’t know or investigate about this — all they know is ‘guns, guns’ (A24, adult male, researcher/NGO director, Bogotá).

The youth ignore what is happening [in politics]; the war is not important to them. What is important is what’s happening in their neighbourhood (A9, male youth worker/university student, age 26, Soacha).

3.1.2 Perceptions of Young Recruits

If young people outside of the ranks do not really understand the Colombian armed conflict, testimonies from former child combatants also suggest that ideology or accurate information is not highly influential in the decision to enlist. In the 2006 UNICEF study of 329 former child combatants, only 2.9 percent of girls and 1.3 percent of boys said that an armed group’s cause or ideology motivated them to join. In my review of testimonies from guerrilla children interviewed by other researchers, I did not find any that indicated an accurate awareness of FARC ideology until they had joined and were made to take mandatory political classes as part of their initial training. Further
research is necessary to support this theory, and even then it would be difficult to overcome sampling biases, as it is nearly impossible to interview minors actively involved in the ranks. It seems unlikely, however, that young children would be attracted by political theories rather than opportunities for escape and/or adventure. One boy who became a miliciano55 at age 10 and later joined the FARC ranks recounted his combat training with enthusiasm and then added: "[we had] lectures on the history of the FARC and of Colombia, political lectures, although I did not pay attention to these and always fell asleep.... They bored me a lot" (B2). Similarly, a 17-year-old girl who joined the FARC at 13 had a simple answer for why the FARC recruits young girls, an answer that had nothing to do with feminism or gender equality:

There were not many young boys left in our village, so they asked the girls. I went because I was bored at home and thought that life with the guerrillas would be an adventure. At 13 I did not know what I wanted to do, I did not realize that I could study like I am now. ("Adriana," quoted in McDermott 2002)

In addition, the milicianos that work for the FARC in urban areas are often displaced and/or unemployed youth (both male and female) and, unlike the youth receiving daily ideological education within the FARC army units, these urban militias are quite disconnected from the political work of the group and are not considered to be full-fledged guerrillas (B1, B2, B4, B5, Semana 2006b). They usually still live at home and are hard to distinguish from youth gang members or paramilitary youth. They are sometimes forced to complete a three-month course, after which they can choose to return to their militia work or become "true" guerrillas, which then requires them to leave their homes (B1, B2, B4, B5).

55 "Miliciano" (male) and "milicana" (female) are terms used specifically for children or adults working for the FARC in urban areas; those working for the paramilitaries are usually called "autodefensas" or "paras" or "paracos/paracas".
It also appears that some children simply join impulsively, perhaps following a friend, relative, or boyfriend, with little thought to the group that they are joining:

Finally I decided to enlist. I did not want my friend to go alone and also I wanted to live that experience. I think it was curiosity that brought me to the war. (B5, female, joined the FARC at age 13)

[My friend] joined up because of that, because she was sad. I joined up not because of that but because I thought [the guerrillas] were really cool. (B19, female, joined the guerrillas at age 13)

The youth [that I interviewed] joined either the paras or the guerrillas for the same reasons: lack of opportunities, abuse in the home, revenge... In general they were all very young when they joined, often only 11 or 12 years old. What kind of ideology can you understand at that age? None. None at all. (A24, adult male, researcher/NGO director, Bogotá)

One girl who enlisted at age 14 was asked by the FARC commanders why she wanted to join: “I told them I was poor and that I was bored” (quoted in Lewis 2007). Another young girl initially tried to join the paramilitaries because a girlfriend worked as a cook for them and said they paid well, but when she talked to the recruiter he told her that: “in this zone they were not taking women” (B3). After being continuously harassed by her paramilitary boyfriend, she finally decided to become a miliciana and was eventually trained and placed into the guerrilla forces. One 14-year-old girl who was in the paramilitaries stated simply: “I don’t know why I joined. I knew nothing about them. I decided on the spur of the moment. I wanted to be different, and I wanted to learn how to defend myself” (quoted in HRW 2003). Evidently, ideology or awareness of commitment had little to do with the choices of these young women. Boredom and/or the desire to escape intolerable domestic situations appear to be much stronger factors.

It is important to note, however, that some adolescents may be quite fascinated with communist teachings and/or with FARC claims that the group wants to improve the

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56 This respondent conducted interviews with former child soldiers in a government rehabilitation program.
lives of the poor. For example, one woman, who rose to the prestigious rank of FARC Commander, became frustrated with a high school that she describes as “completely machista” and was attracted to communist rhetoric that eventually led her to FARC connections within her university (B12). In 2003, the Universidad Nacional community was shocked when two female medical students (age 22 and 24) planted five bombs in five different buses. FARC members recruited them during political meetings at the university (Semana 2003a). Three students (two males, one female) from the Catholic University in Bogotá (Semana 2003b) carried out another attack in the same year. These cases, however, involved older students who would be more aware of the political aspects of the conflict. In another report, a teenage male guerrilla combatant admitted: “I enrolled, because I liked the ideology that they had, also [I liked] the guns a little” (quoted in Hernández Delgado 2003). The author of this report, however, admitted that evidence of ideological influence was quite uncommon and only present in a few interviews.  

3.1.3 Friends and Relatives

In both urban and rural settings, close friends and relatives appear to be influential in pulling children of both sexes into armed groups. Several respondents in this study had friends or family members who were involved in gangs or armed groups; also, the majority of the children and adolescents that I interviewed believed that family was the most important determining factor in regards to whether a child joined an armed group or

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57 It is important to point out that this woman joined the FARC in the 1980s, when the communist ideology was much more pronounced and the paramilitaries did not yet have a strong presence. Also, she was already in university once she actually joined the FARC.

58 Unfortunately, the report does not indicate how many children and adolescents were interviewed to obtain this information; the authors only indicate that in their interviews with former child combatants, ideological reasons were the least common reasons given for joining.
gang (A5, A9, A11-23, A25). In addition, child soldier and gang member testimonies that I reviewed, as well as reports from other researchers, suggested that family linkages or close friends were key in establishing initial connections to armed groups and gangs (B1, B2, B8, B15, B18, B20-24, Mazurana and McKay 2004, Zorro Sanchez 2004, Perea 2006, Ramos 2004). Because of this, one would assume that children with relatives in the ranks have better access to accurate information regarding expectations of time commitment and life in the ranks. However, it seems that having a family member or close friend in the ranks does not necessarily correlate with better information. Due to the high levels of mistrust and the presence of informants on all sides, the capacity for children and adolescents to distinguish credible information might be significantly diminished. It also seems plausible that displaced young people and/or those living in impoverished areas would have even greater difficulty discerning credible sources and good information due to the constant upheaval and exposure to violence. What is clear is that having family members within the ranks did not seem to deter children from joining in the cases that I reviewed; in fact, it seemed to have the opposite effect. If this holds true in more cases, then imperfect information and deception would not sufficiently explain why children choose to join armed groups. If girls already have some information and still choose to join, then there must be other factors to consider, the first of which is a malleable perception of risk.

3.2 Risk Perception

For a child, the immediate escape from an untenable domestic situation is usually more important than larger socio-political events that are difficult even for adults to
understand. Perceptions of risk among Colombian children living in conflict zones will also be very different from those of Colombian children living in gated communities and attending private schools protected by armed guards. The relative safety that is offered by membership in an armed group can be attractive in a neighbourhood where adolescent lives are not highly valued and there are few safe spaces for recreation, community involvement, legitimate employment, or quality education. As noted in Chapter One, some girls cite abuse or problematic domestic situations as their reasons for joining armed groups and gangs. Others see the lifestyle of an armed group as very appealing. Arguably, their current life in comparison may be difficult or simply boring. Because lack of parental support seems correlated with an inability to cope with repeated exposure to violence (Kliewer, et al. 2001, Thrane, et al. 2006, Michael and Ben-Zur 2007), girls living in abusive or unsupportive homes may indeed have altered perceptions of risk and antisocial behaviours that lead to joining an armed group. As one gang researcher pointed out: “Girls would rather risk the abuse that they don’t know rather than stay in the abuse that they know” (A10). In other words, while girls may suspect that life in a gang or armed group is not free from abuse, they are willing to run the risk in order to avoid the certainty of abuse in their homes and communities. As noted in Chapter One, in traditional economic cost-benefit analysis, risk-averse or “normal” people generally take a guaranteed option rather than an equal or greater payoff that is uncertain. Those who take the uncertain offer are thus considered risk-loving or risk-tolerant. Yet, choosing the guarantee of abuse over the possibility of escape is not rational in the sense of self-preservation. While running away carries an unknown risk, staying at home promises a known risk that is painful and ongoing.
The question, then, is if girls would still choose the unknown risk if they knew what life in the armed groups was really like. Although some girls and women who were (or are) within the FARC ranks might believe that life in the FARC is more egalitarian (HRW 2003, Lewis 2007, Salgado Tomayo 2006, McDermott 2002, B6, B12) the actual documented behaviour of FARC units towards civilian women and their own female combatants suggests otherwise.\(^5\) Where the FARC seems to succeed is in convincing young girls that guerrilla life is much better than life at home, and for some, this may indeed be true. They are willing to accept an unknown risk in exchange for a known one, and it does not necessarily matter where they go. As an example, one girl saw her best option as fleeing into the guerrilla ranks after her uncle had been killed by paramilitaries and she was sexually assaulted by her cousins:

> [My cousins] ended my dreams to marry as a girl, clean and white. They spoiled my hopes, they took my greatest treasure because it was like they say: “She is an untouchable woman”… afterwards I felt that everything was horrible … later I felt angry, so I said to my other cousin: “You know what? I am going to look for the guerrillas” … I was tired of everything and said: “I can’t take it here anymore, I’m leaving.” [A male] guerrilla talked to me and told me that it was good over there, that the women were well, that the girls were pampered” (B7).\(^6\)

Another girl left home impulsively due to the promise that she would escape abuse:

> They [guerrillas] asked me why my legs were like that and so I told them it was because my mum used to beat me a lot and that’s why I was like that and so they said to me why didn’t I go with them, because the guerrillas didn’t beat people, they didn’t treat you badly, they didn’t insult you, nothing (B15).

While some girls are innocent victims of armed violence, other girls find joining an armed group to be an empowering choice rather than sitting by and allowing themselves to be victims (Dale 2006). They may deliberately choose counter-cultural roles such as

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\(^5\) This includes the forced insertion of intra-uterine devices (IUDs) for birth control, forced abortions, mandatory participation in executions, and other abuses (see Chapter Four).

\(^6\) This girl testified to being raped and abused multiple times by family acquaintances, friends, and relatives before finally deciding to flee to the guerrillas, where she became the “wife” of a much older man.
becoming child combatants or gang members as an alternative to unstable homes or
domestic violence. Gang involvement or joining a guerrilla group may seem like a highly
risky choice to researchers and analysts, who then assume that these children are risk-
loving and irrational in their choices. Yet for some children and adolescents, joining an
armed group might be the least risky option. If, as one study proposes, adolescents see
risk as something where the outcome is uncontrollable (Rodham, et al. 2006),61 girls
might see joining an armed group to be less risky because they are making an active
choice. Joining an armed group may be a challenge rather than a risk, because the girls
initially feel in control of the situation. If girls are also promised a short time
commitment, they might see that the choice to enlist has an end-point, making it even less
risky. If living at home means remaining in an abusive environment beyond their control
with no foreseeable end, then staying put could logically become the most risky option.

3.2.1 “Social Cleansing” and the Acceptance of Violence

In paramilitary-controlled areas, the value of human life, and especially
adolescent life, is notably diminished, which could also change risk perceptions from
what researchers might think is “normal.” Because these areas are often void of other
forms of regulation before the paramilitaries arrive (e.g., competing gangs, unchecked
crime, prostitution, and a lack of state presence), some community residents seem to have
accepted paramilitary control as a valid form of regulation (A2, A5, A6, A9, A24). One
young man living in Soacha felt that murder by execution is now normal and the “social
cleansing” of youth has been legitimized:

> It’s a system of regulation. It’s accepted. It’s a practice that has been
> naturalized, justified. Something that is normally prohibited [serial killings]
> has become accepted as a normal form of regulation (A2).

61 See Section 1.4.
If youth see that they are not wanted nor protected in their violent neighbourhoods, arming might become one of their best options. As one young man said: “the paras have money, respect, and guns, so you can live peacefully [if you join]” (A25). In other words, joining the paramilitaries is not risky in a neighbourhood where the paramilitaries rule uncontested. Another young man agreed, commenting on the attraction that some women had to armed men: “I think that the women are attracted to the paras for the money, for the ‘stability’… the paras have houses, eat better…” (A9). Again, for girls and young women, a romantic relationship with a paramilitary or gang member might be less violent than living without protection in dangerous neighbourhoods. Another boy that used to live in Soacha noted that it was often safer to be in a gang than outside of one (CACWG 2006). Membership in a gang is therefore not a risk for some young people – it is a necessity for survival. Because unemployed, unoccupied adolescents are generally viewed with suspicion in poor, urban areas, groups of young people (and especially groups of males) are at constant risk of being targeted by vigilante groups and paramilitaries. If young men are hanging out on the street, for example, paramilitaries or police might assume they are in a gang and attack or arrest them, even if the boys are not involved in organized armed violence (A9, A24). Similarly, girls who are on the street late at night might be mistaken for sex workers and assaulted or arrested (A19, A20, A22). At that point, at least in a gang they have access to weapons and friends to protect them.

The prevalence of domestic abuse in Colombian society, especially towards women and girls, also suggests that abuse from paramilitaries or guerrillas may not be very different from abuse in the home. When violence is normalized, as it is in much of
Colombia, the girls and young women do not have accurate guidelines as to what is truly safe or risky behaviour. If the economic, emotional, and security benefits are better when attached to an armed group, the risk of abuse may indeed be a risk worth taking:

A lot of the young women are escaping from horrible home situations, especially with their fathers. Not so much sexual abuse, more that they are very restrictive with them – don’t want to go out, very controlling. So if the girls go out with these guys from the paramilitary it gives them a sense of rebellion, of power. These guys protect them – a guy with a gun. It is very common – there are a lot of girls like this (Female youth worker, age 17, Medellín, quoted in CAP undated).  

The girls don’t understand the context of the socio-political fight developed by the paramilitaries for control of the zone… The young girls get sentimentally involved with armed actors [and this] is not an irrational attraction. There are no alternatives for a peaceful and satisfactory life…. It is a way to create a family of their own (Vamos Mujer 2005).

Girls can also be attacked by paramilitaries if they are suspected of having affiliations with gang members or guerrilla militias (OAS 2006, Watchlist 2004, WOAT 2003). In this regard, girls might not be executed due to suspected delinquency, but they are at constant risk of being attacked by one side or another due to their romantic relationships or family ties with the “enemy.” This puts young women in the precarious position of needing a relationship with an armed man for protection, while also being at greater risk of attack due to this relationship.

What this section should illustrate is that perceptions of risk are highly susceptible to external factors and personal experiences. What seems risky to researchers and policymakers may not appear at all risky for young people in areas of high recruitment, especially if their friends, cousins, or siblings have gone before them. The combination of poor information and a high tolerance of risk (or altered perceptions of risk) means that some girls could rationally decide to join armed groups. Some of these girls may indeed

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62 This quote is from an interview with a young woman who works with girls and young women coming out of gangs and paramilitary groups. Published in CAP (undated).
improve their living conditions due to this choice, which is not irrational nor risk-loving. That some girls are convinced when guerrillas promise them a better life is evidence not only of skilful recruiting, but also of the poor conditions of the girls' civilian lives.

3.3 Proximity and Control

When faced with imperfect information regarding ideology and motivations of different armed groups, coupled with differing perceptions of risk and risk tolerance, girls may still be quite limited in their options. Kalyvas (2006) argues, for example, that control over certain areas or territory is a significant factor in determining the collaboration of civilian populations and/or the recruitment of combatants. He suggests that geography trumps personal preferences in rebel recruitment. His hypothesis is that the higher the level of control that is exercised by the actor, the higher the collaboration rate with this actor, and the lower the defection rate. Similarly, even though Arjona and Kalyvas' study (2006) indicates that Colombian ex-combatants were well informed regarding the different motivations of armed groups, they found that proximity was still stronger than ideology in influencing recruitment.\textsuperscript{63} In the region of Cauca, residents have testified that the AUC regularly orders searches for girls between 12 and 14 to live with them and provide sexual and domestic services (OAS 2006). In Quibdó, girls are said to "wander aimlessly" waiting to be picked up by AUC members who are searching for girls to provide sexual services, as they see relationships with these men as their only option (OAS 2006). In Soacha, respondents noted that it was very easy for boys to join the paramilitaries, pointing out that there was "a man on the corner" who was in charge of

\textsuperscript{63} Also, because Kalyvas himself notes that self-reported preferences are open to manipulation, it is difficult to determine in retrospect how much information the recruits really had before they joined.
recruitment (A9, A12, A16, A17). Because the paramilitaries and gangs appear to rarely recruit females as combatants (see Chapter Five and Six), location has a significant influence on the available options for girls. In paramilitary zones, if some girls want to join an armed group, they may have to settle for peripheral involvement by attaching themselves to an armed man, while in guerrilla zones they might have the opportunity to play more significant roles. In cases where gangs are co-opted by paramilitaries or guerrillas, the choice of girls to join a particular group is even less influential. In these circumstances, the gang leader may decide (or be pressured) to work for paramilitary units, and younger or lower-ranking members would have little say in the matter, if they were even informed at all.

3.3.1 Exclusive vs. Incomplete Control

In some regions of Colombia, the FARC or paramilitaries have exclusive territorial control.64 In these areas, children could not join an opposing group even if they wanted to. There are also other areas that have what Kalyvas (2006) calls “incomplete control” (e.g., the population has unequal access to both actors), as well as zones of “intermediate control” where the population has equal access to both (or all) groups. In Colombia, these areas of equal access would be locations where territorial disputes are most violent and displacement of civilians is very high. Large cities are also highly susceptible to fluctuations in control, especially because drug cartels are very powerful in cities such as Medellín and Cali, and state security forces have a stronger presence in urban centres. Control in these districts can fluctuate rapidly, and as was illustrated

64 This is most common in rural areas where the state has little, if any, presence. Despite the recent paramilitary demobilization, it appears that the formation of new paramilitary groups and the refusal of other groups to demobilize has retained certain paramilitary strongholds. See: ICG 2007 and Semana 2006e.
previously by the girl who was rejected by the paramilitaries and ended up joining a guerrilla militia, there are areas where membership may be possible in several different groups. The presence of so many armed actors in densely packed urban areas has created environments of high tension and danger, and zones where gangs and other armed groups operate can be off-limits for girls due to the fear of being raped or murdered (A13, A14, A19, A20, Moser and McIlwaine 2004). This inability to go out at night or go to certain neighbourhoods may be another contributing factor for girls to join gangs or other armed groups. That is, joining a gang or attaching oneself to a male armed actor can be an effective way for displaced and marginalized girls to reclaim urban spaces that have been taken from them through violence. For example, an area like Altos de Cazuca may be known as paramilitary territory, but many different gangs also operate there (A16, A17, A20, A21, A22, A24, Arias 2003, Pérez Martinez 2004). A young boy who starts committing petty crimes with his friends might not think of himself as a gang member, but it likely will not take long for the community to label him as such. To join or form a gang, proximity to either like-minded friends or a gang that is accepting new members is essential. With the wider range of options in the city, it is logical that the boys and girls joining gangs are those that have difficulty accessing other forms of social bonding, economic income, and ways to occupy free time. While the proximity of the gang does not cause gang involvement, it offers young people an option that they would not otherwise have. Indeed, just as boredom appears as a reason for joining armed groups, the lack of options to fill free time is a frequently cited explanation for gang involvement (A9, A10, A15, A19, A22-25, Perea Restrepo 2006, García Suárez 1998, Miller 2001, Zorro Sanchez 2004).
3.3.2 Available Options

Again, the common motivations for joining armed groups, such as poverty, abuse, boredom, and image, cannot override the options that a girl might have. While Kalyvas (2006) argues that control signals credibility and that recruits would rather side with the potential winner, it seems unlikely that girls choose a group because they think that group will win. My research suggests that they seem less concerned with the final outcome of the conflict and more concerned with the immediate benefits to their lives. Geography trumps personal preferences for girls because their range of options is so small. Many children would likely rather attend a good school or get a legitimate job. But if the only place to get a job or education is within an armed group, then children do not have the luxury of personal preferences. The highest restriction of options appears to be in rural areas, especially in zones of uncontested guerrilla or paramilitary control, and this may also help explain the larger numbers of girls in the FARC. In the cities, the guerrillas have a much weaker presence and are only one of many alternatives vying for girls’ attention. Mobility is also easier in the city, and public transit makes it possible for young women to move between rich and poor neighbourhoods, expanding their employment options. While more research is required to determine whether children’s preferences vary in areas of equal access, the options available clearly play an influential role in determining child involvement in armed groups. If better alternatives exist, if enlistment options are removed, or if perceived costs of involvement are high enough, it seems unlikely that girls would still join armed groups.
Conclusion

While Chapter One outlined the current theories regarding why children join armed groups, this chapter looked specifically at how misinformation, risk perceptions, and geography can influence a girl’s decision to become involved in organized armed violence. Explaining girls’ choices by saying they are poor, abused, or bored does not explain why some girls join armed groups while others in similar situations may simply run away or might not do anything at all. Identifying the information on which girls base their choices, as well as looking at varying definitions of risk and identifying the limitations of geography, can help explain the specific decision to join an armed group or become involved with an armed man. For groups facing dwindling pools of recruits, using misinformation to recruit children who are largely unaware of national news and the larger armed conflict is especially critical, particularly in groups that do not directly pay their members. Living in areas of ongoing violence can also alter children’s risk perceptions, making normally unacceptable options seem appealing. Also, location determines what, if any, alternatives a girl or boy might have, and spatial restrictions affect females in different ways than males.

Yet, arguments regarding imperfect information, risk tolerance, and proximity are insufficient to explain why one group has so many more visible girls than the others. My evidence supports the plausibility of my first hypothesis, that the girls’ preferences alone cannot explain the gender disparity in Colombian armed groups. For example, Achvarina and Reich’s theory (2006) regarding access to IDP and refugee camps does not really explain why groups in the same civil conflict with presumably the same level of access to

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displaced populations would have such different levels of child combatants, especially
girl combatants. The access to youth only explains the ability to recruit children; it does
not explain the motivation of armed groups to recruit boys and/or girls, nor does it
explain the willingness of young people to join armed groups. Even if research could
show that the guerrillas have more access to IDP camps and displaced populations, this
still would not sufficiently explain the gender disparity. Kalyvas’ (2006) argument that
geography trumps personal preferences indicates that the gender differences may be due
to limited options for girls in some areas, yet this theory cannot explain why options
would be more limited for girls in areas of paramilitary or gang control. Similarly,
differing perceptions of risk among potential recruits do not explain the prominence of
young females in the FARC. These theories only explain the willingness to become
involved in some sort of organized armed violence.

The key issue that is missing from this discussion is comparing the active
recruitment of females in the FARC with the marginalization of females in the
paramilitary factions and gangs. In the following chapter, I argue that the FARC
deliberately recruits girls and young women to reinforce their political cause, using
misinformation that specifically targets females and makes them feel important. This type
of active female recruitment does not exist in paramilitary units or gangs, although girls
do play other roles in these groups. I suggest, therefore, that the gatekeepers/recruiters are
more important than girls’ preferences and motivations in explaining the gender disparity
in Colombian non-state armed groups (Hypothesis 2). If the gatekeepers are indeed more
influential than girls’ motivations, then Kalyvas’ theory of control still applies, as given
the same levels of imperfect information and risk perceptions, more girls will join in
areas where they are actively recruited. If girls are looking for adventure or simply seeking an escape, then distinguishing who invites girls to actively participate, who keeps them out, and why, are all important points to consider when developing policies to assist children and adolescents living in conflict zones.
CHAPTER FOUR: Las Guerrilleras – Gender and Recruitment in the FARC-EP

If girls’ motivations for joining armed groups are insufficient to explain the gender disparity in the FARC versus the paramilitaries and gangs, there must be factors within the groups themselves that influence their vastly different recruitment strategies. The purpose of this chapter is to examine why the roles of women and girls are prominently advertised in FARC materials and why the continuing recruitment of girls and young women appears critical to the structure, function, and continued growth of this guerrilla army. The chapter explores misinformation as a FARC recruitment tactic, which is followed by a need for more costly induction measures to influence the commitment levels of young recruits. Using Weinstein’s theory that levels of economic resources play a large role in determining recruitment strategies, this chapter also explores the original resources of the FARC and asks why, despite alleged growing economic profits and the loss of public support, the group retains its original strategy of collective and social benefits and does not directly pay its recruits. While having large numbers of female combatants in other armed forces might hurt male recruitment by diminishing the masculine culture that attracts some men (Enloe 2000, Goldstein 2001), I suggest that the FARC uses women and girls strategically to separate the group from the male-dominated state forces and paramilitary groups. As hierarchical structure is a key element in FARC control, the chapter concludes with a discussion of why gender plays such a critical role,

65 Costly induction occurs when new recruits must perform dangerous or risky tasks to prove their worth and/or commitment before being accepted (see Section 1.2).

66 There has been increasing public protest against FARC tactics in Colombia, especially regarding kidnappings of Colombian civilians. The continued holding of both civilian and military hostages, including prominent political figures such as former presidential candidate Ingrid Betancourt, has caused public outcry. 11 hostages were recently killed in what the FARC says was an ambush by Colombian military, although the military denied any operations in the area (BBC 2007a). The FARC has refused to release the bodies, and this prompted massive public demonstrations against kidnappings (Murphy 2007).
using theories from Goldstein (2001) and Enloe (2000) to examine if the marginalization of females and the emasculation of enemies are necessary to inspire male troops to fight.

4.1 Hierarchy, Gender, and Group Control

While the seven-man FARC secretariat remains male dominated, the FARC boasts many female commanders, and women do seem to have opportunities to become field commanders in charge of units that include men and boys (B1, B14, B15, B16, HRW 2003, Reyes 2007, HRW 2003). One female FARC commander who had been in the ranks for over eleven years stated: “In the FARC, there is no machismo, as a policy. Women are not treated differently, we do not cut them any slack during training and operations” (Paez, age 38, quoted in McDermott 2002). Yet in the same interview, this woman notes that girls must ask permission before starting a relationship and that a commander may order a girl to leave her boyfriend at any time. She also notes that male guerrillas may form relationships outside of the organization, but females may only date other FARC members.

While FARC commanders claim that there is no gender discrimination (Reyes 2007, McDermott 2002, B12), various testimonies from girls and women who have left the guerrilla ranks tell different stories. Some girls who have fled domestic servitude or abuse find similar or even worse circumstances within FARC ranks. Although female guerrillas do fight on the front lines, women and girls are apparently responsible for almost all domestic tasks, such as cooking, cleaning, and washing clothing (Semana 2006b, McDermott 2002). One girl formerly in the guerrillas spoke of her disillusionment: “...You lose the principle of respecting people because you see that the
women aren't respected by the men" (B14). Some girls have also been subjected to a "selection process" in which commanders choose the prettiest ones to be their "wives" or companions (HRW 2003), although it is difficult to determine how frequently this occurs. Girls attached to commanders are likely to have considerably more protection than other female guerrillas and can be exempt from some of the more difficult work (B1, B6, B7, B16). As a result, the girls quickly learn that they can use their sexuality to protect themselves (e.g., by attaching themselves to a powerful and much older man). Although the ranks appear to be more egalitarian in that women have the opportunity to advance in the ranks and often fight alongside the men, the patriarchal structure of girls seeking out the protection of older men through sexual relationships still applies, perhaps in an even more exaggerated form than in civilian life.

4.1.1 Sexual Behaviour

Sexual behaviour also appears to be strictly regulated, which seems to directly clash with the FARC's feminist rhetoric. According to my evidence, relationships must be sanctioned by commanders, contraceptives are mandatory, and abortion or leaving the ranks is required if pregnancy occurs (B7, B8, B14, B17, OAS 2006, Semana 2006b, HRW 2003). Females are responsible for any pregnancies, yet they also have some independence in regards to sexual activity, as one girl in the guerrillas described:

If a girl got pregnant she was made to have an abortion. I think this was very painful for the girls. I mean, imagine that, making someone have an abortion. You're told, from when you join, that you can't get pregnant. At that moment, the commander calls you over and he tells you that. They can't use pregnant women, because at any moment a pregnant woman... they might even kill her. You were given contraceptive injections, they had many methods to stop the girls from getting pregnant. The men weren't given contraceptives. They'd say that it's the woman that has to deal with the contraception. It was just the women that were told, because the commander said that it was the women that decided, the men asked to have sex and the women were the ones that decided. The girls couldn't let themselves get pregnant (B14).
Rape has reportedly been used as punishment for misbehaving, a strategy that is also employed by paramilitary groups (HRW 2003, OAS 2006, B10). Yet, one female ex-combatant noted that if the FARC “war council” found a man guilty of rape, he could be executed (McDermott 2002). While she offered no details on the FARC definition of rape and how a man might be found guilty of the crime, other testimonies support that rape is officially prohibited in FARC regulations and that girls are encouraged to complain to commanders (B18, B19). Yet this should not be taken as evidence that girls are well protected in the guerrilla ranks. One 16-year-old girl who became pregnant was forced to swallow medication that terminated her four-month pregnancy and resulted in severe haemorrhaging; as punishment for the pregnancy, the girl was then ordered to cut four hectares of corn by hand (Semana 2006b). Another 14-year-old female recruit who contracted an STD from a male combatant was blamed for transmitting the disease and was then accused of being an informant for the enemy (Semana 2006b). Another young recruit testified to having been forced to shoot her friend after the friend was found guilty of sexual misbehaviour:

I had a friend, Juanita, who got into trouble for sleeping around. We had been friends in civilian life and we shared a tent together. The commander said that it didn't matter that she was my friend. She had committed an error and had to be killed. I closed my eyes and fired the gun, but I didn't hit her. So I shot again. The grave was right nearby. I had to bury her and put dirt on top of her. The commander said, "You did very well. Even though you started to cry, you did well. You'll have to do this again many more times, and you'll have to learn not to cry." (Angela, age not provided, quoted in HRW 2003)

There is a contradiction in the apparent independence given to women over their sexual relationships while strictly regulating any reproductive freedom, and these stories demonstrate the use of strict hierarchical controls to manage recruits that are at high risk to defect. As Weinstein (2007, 134) points out, hierarchy is critical in rebel organizations.
that do not have the underlying mechanisms of solidarity, trust, reciprocity, and retribution that support community governance. Indeed, in situations where recruits are misled in order to secure enlistment, a clear hierarchy and extensive establishment of rules upon enlistment are both essential to prevent defection. Because girls and women seem to be viewed with particular suspicion in Colombia, restraints on female recruits are of critical importance to maintaining operational control. This might explain why female members can only have relationships within the ranks (i.e., to prevent women from leaving and reporting back to boyfriends in enemy groups), while males may have relationships outside the FARC. Of course, this does not prevent male guerrillas from becoming involved with female informants outside of the ranks, but perhaps the males are considered more trustworthy than females.

While this supports Goldstein (2001) and Enloe’s (2000) arguments that the feminine must be controlled to support the masculine ideal, the regular promotion of women in the FARC contradicts Goldstein’s theory that women must be marginalized to maintain control and encourage men to fight. If the FARC has such a large number of female fighters, then arguably it is not the marginalization of these women that is bonding the troops and inspiring them to battle. Women and girls are controlled to some degree, but so are all recruits. Children in particular would require strict rules and monitoring to prevent chaos in the ranks, regardless of their sex. The control therefore might have less to do with gender and more to do with operational logistics. If a man causes a pregnancy it does not inhibit his ability to fight. Obviously women are most affected by a pregnancy, and pregnant fighters or infants are serious impediments to jungle warfare and the quick movement of troops. The simplest way to prevent this is to
control the sexual behaviour of the women through birth control and other methods. If
female commanders understand and agree with this, as some evidently do (McDermott
2002, B12), they will see the rules as simple operational requirements rather than gender
discrimination, even though the philosophy might seem very patriarchal from the outside.

The control over females is also a very different kind of restraint than the
Catholicism that Colombian girls might be used to, which requires female chastity and
prohibits birth control. If girls are given just enough freedom to make life seem better
than at home (e.g., they are allowed to have sexual relationships without receiving
external judgement or bad reputations, and they are also allowed to say no to these
relationships), yet are regulated to the extent that they do not control their own bodies
(e.g., they are forced to use birth control and/or have abortions, sometimes even without
their knowledge), the FARC has achieved the perfect balance of convincing girls that
they have freedom while ensuring that the girls do not leave.

4.2 Collective Benefits and Social Identities

The origins of the FARC suggest that, like many leftist rebel movements, social
resources were vital to the group’s initial formation and recruitment strategies. The group
still seems to use this strategy despite the likelihood of substantial economic profits from
the drug trade. The promises of future payoffs (i.e., social change, land reform, etc.)
initially inspired people to join the rebellion and led others to support it, and FARC
commanders must continue to make promises in order to maintain their faltering political
legitimacy. While the FARC always had some level of economic resources in the form of
sponsorship from communist regimes, “taxing” of property and shipping routes, and
kidnapping for ransom, the movement still began as a socialist struggle of the poor against the rich (Livingstone 2004, Simons 2004). Those original resources were an apparent means to an end, and communist philosophies still preclude the group from offering immediate economic payoffs to potential recruits (Reyes 2007). Arguably, this helped to discern commitment levels, as those who chose to join likely did so knowing that no regular salary would be forthcoming. As Weinstein (2007) notes, recruits who join rebel groups without immediate rewards must trust the leaders that benefits will come eventually. He presumes that they must also be committed to the cause of the group to be willing to wait for future payoffs. I argue that there are some immediate rewards, such as meals, shelter, and uniforms, that appeal to poor recruits (especially young ones) without the need for any future payoffs or dedication to a cause.

The lack of private goods offered to recruits may have initially helped female recruitment, as the absence of salaries or other economic incentives removed the possibility of having mercenaries, a characteristic of the male-dominated state forces and, in later years, paramilitary units. Another critical element in regards to gender is that enlistment in the FARC usually requires a lifetime commitment and imposes strict rules on personal relationships, sexual interaction, and pregnancies. The paramilitaries appear to be much less likely to interfere with personal relationships, and paramilitary recruits often live at home and work within their own communities. In this regard, it would appear that children wanting to permanently leave their families would be more likely to join the guerrillas. Yet, the testimonies and reports that I reviewed suggest that an

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67 There may have been other material benefits, however, such as clothing and food. This is discussed further in the following sections.
68 Nearly all of the testimonies used for this study reflect this difference (see Appendix B). Also see: Dalton and Martinez 2004 and HRW 2003.
awareness of a lifetime commitment in the guerrillas is not usually part of a child's decision to enlist. The commitment difference between paramilitaries and guerrillas is also not as acute when it comes to urban militias, as both sides have apparently resorted to employing local gangs as their "foot soldiers" (HRW 2003, A24, Melguizo 2001, Ramirez 2003, Sanín and Jamarillo 2004). In general, however, FARC recruitment has been based on the promises of collective benefits and social identities, rather than on individual economic benefits.

While Weinstein (2007) argues that rebel groups relying on social resources and future payoffs will have the largest numbers of high-commitment, long-term recruits, FARC recruitment patterns of children do not seem to support this theory. Certainly, those recruited from universities and other adults who join for political reasons are more likely to be the highly committed recruits to which Weinstein is referring, and it seems plausible that the FARC would have much larger numbers of long-term recruits than the paramilitaries. Yet, Arjona and Kalyvas (2006) suggest that proximity is more important than ideology in recruitment, and UNICEF (2006) found that group ideology was mentioned by less than 3 percent of girls and less than 2 percent of boys as a reason for joining armed groups. Due to a lesser awareness of larger socio-political issues, children seem even less likely to fit into the "highly committed" category of Weinstein's theory. The common reasons that children seem to give for joining (e.g., poverty, prestige/image, adventure, escape, etc.) have little to do with future payoffs or collective social benefits. Indeed, these reasons are largely based on immediate and individual payoffs, even if those payoffs are not clearly economic. If the FARC has more children and far more female children in the ranks than other armed groups, and if these children are not joining
because they are highly committed and/or are enticed by future payoffs and collective benefits, then it does not appear to be social resources or promises of political change that draw them in.

4.2.1 Image

That the FARC rarely offers payment to join the ranks (Reyes 2007, Semana 2006d, A24, HRW 2003) might suggest that some recruits have a certain level of ideological commitment, but there are other immediate payoffs that may attract some children more than monetary rewards. Young recruits receive individual benefits such as uniforms, meals, training, access to weapons, certain types of education, and for some, a place to escape their families and communities (HRW 2003, Ramirez 2003, UNICEF 2006). Some of these rewards are immediate and require no long-term commitment or understanding of the group’s cause in order to appreciate. This is in contrast to Weinstein's theory (2007) that groups offering no economic payment must rely on social rewards. For children, economic benefits do not necessarily mean money, and individual benefits such as status and image are not necessarily economic. Although the FARC does not pay salaries, they do “pay” their young recruits in other ways. Image appears to be particularly important. As Colombia is a country in which plastic surgery, gyms, brand-name clothes, and beauty salons proliferate, the significance of image should not be dismissed. While this might not be as evident in rural areas, the guerrillas still retain an image that some children admire. One reporter saw FARC girls wearing make-up and nail-polish in jungle units (McDermott 2002), and a former FARC combatant noted that girls in her unit could have make-up after one year of service (B19). Girls have admitted to joining the guerrillas partly because they liked the uniforms (B16, B18, HRW 2003),
and another researcher observed that some girls seem to be attracted to male guerrillas largely due to their uniforms and "rebel" image (A10). In addition, the recent UNICEF study (2006) found that 19 percent of girls and 36 percent of males joined because they liked the guns and/or uniforms of the armed groups. These children and adolescents may not understand (or care about) the FARC’s revolutionary goals, but they do understand the power and status that goes with having a uniform and a gun:

I liked their [guerrillas'] guns because, well, because the guns weren’t very big and when you carried a gun it was like you had power, it makes you really proud to have a gun.... Well to feel something, well, to feel something, to do something in, in life, to have, well, to have something that, that people admire you for... The thing that I liked best with the guerrillas was, was being able to have a gun and, and to feel proud that I had a gun and being a revolutionary. For me it was really nice, and well I liked the weapons as well. I miss them. I liked the weapons and the uniform but after that I didn’t, because it’s a really difficult experience. (B18, female, former guerrilla combatant)

Even in the cities, where FARC militias do not wear uniforms and might be indistinguishable from regular citizens, children understand the power of being connected to an armed group. One researcher noted that camouflage and military-style clothing had gained in popularity among teenage girls over the past few years, something that she considered strange in such a militarized country where one could easily be mistaken for a guerrilla (A3).69

What should be the obvious draw for girls, of course, is that FARC leaders have long proclaimed themselves to be an egalitarian organization with opportunities for women to advance in the ranks and fight for social justice and equality. In a society as _machista_ as Colombia, this type of rhetoric holds a distinctive appeal for some young women, especially those in lower social strata that do not have many options for social and political mobility. In addition to their well-developed resource section for university

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69 I was advised not to wear anything with camouflage or military-style when I went to Bogotá, due to the associations with urban militias and the possibility of being detained by police or military; yet, I saw countless young men and women wearing camouflage clothing in Bogotá and Soacha during my research.
students, the FARC website has an entire section on women’s rights that includes an extensive database of articles as well as “inspirational” testimonies from women serving in the ranks. The most recent FARC calendar, available for download on the website, has a smiling young woman with an assault rifle on the cover and includes pictures of women and girls on five of the twelve months. In addition, the website’s photo archives include multiple images of young women digging ditches, standing patrol, playing soccer, and engaging in various other activities with the male guerrillas. There is also a section of the site dedicated to International Women’s Day (March 8) that includes articles, poetry, and accolades to Colombian women from FARC commanders. Clearly, the group is making a concerted effort to appeal to female recruits by showing evidence of their egalitarian philosophy.

To have women in positions of authority in such a patriarchal society does suggest that the group has different values from their male-dominated enemies (i.e., the military and paramilitary forces). Having women and girls in combat roles portrays a less traditional, and therefore less masculine, armed group. It gives the external impression that the group may indeed be less ruthless, especially towards women. One young female FARC recruit described why she thought women were essential in her units:

The civilians got on better with the women, the civilians were more afraid of the men, but with the women it was easier to get things across to them, because a woman can go in and talk to the woman of the house, she can help her tidy the kitchen, and so the civilians trust them more. And so because of that there were always two or three women in each squadron or group (B17).

Whether or not the FARC is actually less machista within the ranks does not necessarily matter, as long as the external perception is strong enough to influence local support and

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70 See the “mujer” section at www.farcep.org.

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initial recruitment. As the following sections will show, once girls are in, it becomes very
difficult for them to leave. With loss of public support and suggestions that the
Colombian conflict has deteriorated into little more than a turf war over drug-trafficking
routes (Rebasa and Chalk 2001, Monblatt 2004, Romero 2003), the FARC must now
work especially hard to maintain legitimacy as a political organization and establish
distance from the violent reputations of paramilitaries and state forces. Without women in
positions of authority, the FARC’s claims to be socialist, progressive, and egalitarian
would be weak at best. Proclaiming that current enlistment is fifty percent female,
assigning an entire website section to women, and constantly using females in printed
materials and photos, all seem to be an attempt to retain some credibility as a socialist
movement.71

Employing attractive young recruiters also appears to be an important tactic in
establishing an image that entices young people. As discussed earlier, the group
consistently uses images of attractive young women in its propaganda. Girls who are
selected might feel privileged that they are pretty enough to be recruited, and boys may
be attracted by the presence of so many attractive females. This use of attraction can be
more successful when targeting children and young teenagers who are just beginning to
experiment with their sexuality (A10, A24), although it also appears to be successful in
Colombian universities. While adult men might balk at fighting alongside (or against)
women, children seem more likely to set aside such concerns for the chance at adventure

71 I suggest this as a plausible hypothesis, but more research is required to test this theory. It does seem that
gendered publicity efforts, as well as the recruitment of minors, have been increasing since the growth of
paramilitary power in the 1990s and the marked decrease of public support in the last two decades.
However, this may also be due to the fact that researchers and policymakers are simply paying more
attention to these elements of the armed conflict. It may also be due to the growth of the Internet and the
FARC’s own website, making it easier to access FARC publicity materials.
and romance. For a boy with no chance at a job or education, the combination of easy access to both guns and pretty girls might also be highly appealing.\textsuperscript{72}

4.3 Commitment and Incentives to Misinform

The fact that the guerrillas do not offer payment, usually require a lifetime commitment, rarely allow recruits to stay in their communities, and impose strict rules in regards to members’ personal relationships and sexual activity, while the paramilitaries do not appear to use such codes of conduct, suggests very different hierarchical structures and commitment requirements. Even though the FARC may now have substantial economic resources, it cannot change its recruitment strategy without risking the destruction of its political image. If the group began paying recruits after decades of promising collective benefits and social reform, the commanders would have to admit to a significant change in philosophy and accept accusations of being a highly profitable organization. They might also have to recognize that they failed to achieve their promises, which would significantly compromise the political image that the FARC seeks to convey. With a switch to paid recruitment, ex-paramilitaries and other low-commitment and opportunistic individuals could flood the group, threatening the centralized hierarchy and further deteriorating the guerrillas’ suffering reputation.

Weinstein (2007) argues that when financial resources are in short supply, promises must substitute for immediate payoffs, and he posits that the effectiveness of such promises relies heavily on the credibility of the rebel leadership. While the guerrilla leaders may

\textsuperscript{72} For example, one boy from the FARC seemed proud that his girlfriend had a very high rank despite her age (B1), another boasted that he was the only one in his unit of 70 child combatants with a gun (B4), and yet another noted the significance that he was allowed to have a girlfriend in the ranks (B8). Also, if boys who are unsuccessful at sports or school know that uniforms and the “rebel image” will attract girls, then guerrilla life might be especially alluring (A9, A10).
have originally had such credibility, the lengthy war with no foreseeable end has caused the FARC to lose significant support among the Colombian population. It is difficult to sell adults on the possibility of social benefits and future payoffs after forty years of no apparent change. The importance of propaganda thus becomes heightened when the credibility of the leaders is at stake and is presumably harming recruitment.

When adults are no longer convinced by such propaganda, children are logical targets for recruitment. Children are more likely than adults to accept commitments that they do not understand, especially without offers of payment. The fact that the rebellion has persisted for over four decades suggests that new generations are still effectively persuaded to take up the cause. Children are perfect targets for ideological indoctrination because they do not have the historical memory of forty years of civil war and the failure of past promises, and they are often unaware of events outside of their immediate neighbourhood. The FARC has also collected life histories upon recruitment, including the names, occupations, and locations of all family members (B1, B2, B4, Semana 2006b). As a result, children know that if they go home, their commanders will know where to find them. The promises of future payoffs need not be fulfilled if child recruits are forced to stay through fear of repercussions for deserting. Weinstein (2007) argues that recruits who are not paid must believe in future promises and rewards in order to stay in the ranks. Children can be coerced to stay more easily than adults, and young recruits might not know anything about future rewards. The collection of detailed personal

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73 When the magazine Semana released their article “Infamia” (2006a) about the treatment of girls in the FARC ranks, they based the story on documents and photos on FARC computers from Fronts (units) 58 and 35 that had been confiscated by police. The computer held complete life histories, personal information, and documented punishments of “dozens” of young recruits (exact numbers not provided), detailing activities both before and after their enlistment.

74 For example, some girls who deserted expressed fear that the guerrillas would come and find them or their families (Keairns 2003).
histories supports Weinstein’s theory (2007) that rebel groups must gather information in order to determine an individual’s level of commitment. Weinstein refers to the necessity of gathering information before enlistment in order to determine a recruit’s commitment level. That is, information is gathered to decide if a recruit is of high-risk to defect. The FARC, however, appears to gather information in order to influence commitment levels. Arguably, children are always a high-risk to defect because of fear, regret, missing their family, impulsive decision-making, and other factors. Information gathering may therefore be more important to retain young recruits through fear of repercussions, rather than to assess their pre-enlistment commitment levels. If this is the case, collection of information serves two functions: a) it determines the background, connections, and commitment level of the potential recruit (Weinstein’s theory), and b) it is a threat to the child’s family/community should the child defect or misbehave. This also supports Kalyvas’ theory (2006) that location (i.e., control) is more important in establishing collaboration that any pre-conflict ideology or commitment. It seems that girls join the FARC not necessarily because they are committed to the cause but because the FARC gives them an option they would not have otherwise. Correspondingly, FARC leaders may recruit girls not necessarily because girls are more likely to be committed to the group’s political goals. Rather, they seem to recruit girls partly because females are necessary to show that the group still has political goals.

It is important to note, however, that not all girls and women coming out of the guerrilla ranks have reported sexual violence or forced commitment (i.e., not being allowed to leave, even though enlistment is voluntary) in the guerrilla ranks. In fact, some girls report their experiences within the ranks as a source of camaraderie and friendship.
while at the same time describing situations of extreme hardship and danger. One girl expressed sadness at leaving so many friends behind and said she would continue being a revolutionary, although she did not want to return to the guerrilla war (B5). Another girl noted that in her unit, "most of the people that cooked were men" (B16), and a third girl recounted how men were routinely punished if they were accused of sexually harassing or attempting to rape the girls (B17). One girl specifically explained why she preferred her guerrilla life to home life:

It was worse being at home than being with the guerrillas, because with them, in spite of having to suffer and sometimes do what you don’t want to do, or what you can’t be bothered to do, well, I think it was worse being at home than with the guerrillas. Because there, above all, there is a lot of affection, love, they help you at difficult times, it’s not like being at home where you’re alone, there are several children but you have to bear the brunt of the work and then you’re treated badly as well, but there, if you’re passing through a difficult stage, then there are 20 or 30 that are going through the same thing. If you’re hungry, then there are 30 people going hungry as well, if you’re soaked for a week, then there are 30 people also wet through for a week, without anything to eat. Everything with the guerrillas is equal for everybody, but at home it’s not like that, if you were beaten then it was just one person, but not with the guerrillas. I think for me it’s worse being at home then there (B15).

These testimonies indicate that some females view their guerrilla experiences more positively than we might expect. Evidently, some girls are given opportunities in which they can report harassment or crimes committed against them, which may be much more protection than they ever had at home. In addition, they are regularly provided with clothing, food, and toiletries, which again, may be more than they ever had before. This does not indicate that FARC life is “beneficial” for these girls, but rather that their government, families, and communities are failing them. The FARC has considerable incentives to misinform girls by emphasizing the positive stories and minimizing cases of abuse and coercion, as the recruiters know that it will not take much to convince some girls to leave their homes.
It is also possible that some young recruiters do not know the extent to which they are misinforming potential recruits. The testimonies reviewed for this study may not be representative of all youth participating in guerrilla forces; abuses that occur in some factions may not happen in others. The girls that have had positive experiences may be asked to recruit other young people; indeed, the fact that they have had positive experiences would make them likely candidates to be sent out as recruiters. Given the apparently high levels of political education of FARC recruits, it is not unreasonable that children and youth in some units would be unaware of the human rights abuses perpetrated against civilians and fellow combatants by other units. In addition, considering the overall levels of abuse against women in Colombian society and the prevalence of *machismo*, young male recruiters who tell girls that women are treated well in the FARC may truly believe that. In summary, while it appears quite clear that some girls are being recruited into the FARC with propaganda and misinformation, it is not clear that all of the recruiters themselves are deliberately lying.

### 4.4 Vouching and Costly Induction

As noted in Chapter One, Weinstein suggests that strategies of information gathering, vouching, and costly induction are more likely when rebel organizations rely on social resources (2007, 106). While the next chapter contradicts this idea by illustrating the importance of information gathering by paramilitary units that rely heavily on salaries to recruit, this part of Weinstein’s theory is supported by the FARC recruitment of children in different ways. The previous section illustrated the FARC’s use of information gathering to influence rather than determine commitment levels. This
section discusses the use of vouching and costly induction that may also influence rather than reveal the commitment of children and youth.

If it is difficult to determine the commitment levels of adult recruits due to problems of private information (i.e., the true commitment of a new recruit can never really be known by the recruiters), it is likely even harder to determine the commitment levels of children. In fact, deliberately recruiting children with misinformation elevates the risk of defection, because the children will eventually discover that they were misled. This increases the need for other measures to ensure that new recruits will not defect by escaping to civilian life or by switching sides. In fact, the government has allegedly used former child soldiers as informants, sometimes sending them back into guerrilla ranks at great risk in order to collect information (A3, A10, A24, Coalition 2003, HRW 2003). As the use of informants is widespread throughout Colombia, the FARC would presumably be aware of this hazard and take measures to counteract it. Therefore, the use of vouching and costly induction is even more important when using deceptive recruitment techniques. As discussed in Chapter Three, the FARC contains many family networks and other close relationships. Vouching thus plays a significant factor in recruitment, as members seem to bring in family members, girlfriends or boyfriends, and other close acquaintances. While Weinstein (2007) notes that vouching is used to determine a recruit’s level of commitment (i.e., because the existing member is staking his/her reputation on the new recruit), in the case of children in the FARC, vouching may be used to further influence commitment levels. For example, if a child is told that her friend, cousin, or brother will be killed if she defects, that child may be too terrified to
ever attempt escape. But the leaders must have credibility in convincing the child that they will carry out such threats, and this is where costly induction comes into play.

Costly induction, such as making children kill close friends or relatives, or forcing them to witness violent acts, also ensures that children will be afraid to defect. Again, this costly induction usually refers to determining certain levels of commitment of potential recruits. In the FARC, costly induction ensures commitment levels and establishes credibility that the commanders will make good on their threats. In Colombia’s culture of mistrust, the children may initially be reluctant to believe anything that FARC commanders tell them, especially once they realize they have been lied to in the recruiting phase. The commanders must then use costly induction to show that they are not lying when it comes to punishment for defection. Several former child combatants have testified to watching executions of informants or other misbehaving comrades (HRW 2003, Keairns 2003). One girl interviewed by Keairns (2003) described witnessing an execution in which other children were forced to take part:

What scared me was when they caught the infiltrators and killed them. They tied them up and they did things to them that were, well to kill them, they held a meeting there and they decided to execute or punishment and they all said execution. It seemed, well, horrible because they tied you up. The first one was an infiltrator that had joined us and she didn’t do what she was told, she didn’t do anything, so in the end they caught her and went to her bed and they surrounded her and they tied her up and after a week she was shot. They took her to where we used to watch television and we had a meeting with her, and everyone said execution, execution and execution. So they told [X], another girl, to kill her and she went and she shot her once, but she didn’t hit her, then [X]’s boyfriend told her to give him the gun and he shot her five times, twice in the head and the other two in the body. X was thirteen years old…. I was present at three other executions. You were forced to be there…. There if they tell you to kill somebody you’ve got to do it because if you don’t they accuse you of being an infiltrator (B18).

There are also certain social controls that ensure children might hesitate to leave, despite deceptive recruitment tactics. For example, girls who have been sexually active (whether
forced or not) might be reluctant to go back to a community that may reject them for this socially unacceptable behaviour (CAP undated, McKay and Mazurana 2004, Farr 2002). Girls who have had abortions (again, whether forced or not) may be particularly reluctant to leave the guerrilla ranks for fear of the stigma that will be placed on them by their communities, especially given the predominance of Catholicism in Colombia. Because girls joining armed groups counter traditional gender expectations in Colombia, girls who join the FARC may be even more reluctant to leave than boys if they know that they will be viewed as promiscuous or “ruined” when they go back home.

Conclusion

Even though some girls and women who were (or are) within the FARC ranks appear to believe that life in the FARC is more egalitarian than their civilian lives, the actual documented behaviour of FARC units towards civilians and their own female combatants suggests a more varied pattern. As the group continues to fight for political legitimacy, a visible presence of female members seems important in selling this image while distancing the group from the long list of abuses against women perpetrated by armed actors in Colombia. The FARC clearly benefits from recruiting young girls in particular. Not only are girls easier to deceive and manipulate than adult women, but the practice expands the FARC’s fighting force while helping them maintain the appearance that the group truly fights for socialist and feminist values. This strategy, however, reinforces the need for costly induction and vouching measures that will prevent girls from defecting. The question of why the FARC recruits children may be explained by dwindling social support and an inability to recruit adult combatants; the question of why
the FARC recruits girls, however, appears to be a combination of the basic need for recruits and the need to perpetuate a particular ideological image. While the FARC competes with state forces and paramilitaries for adult male combatants, the group does not appear to compete with its rivals for the active participation of girls and young women. The recruitment of girls, therefore, is a quite rational strategy considering that other types of recruits may be in short supply.

Goldstein’s argument (2001) that females must be marginalized in fighting forces in order to emasculate the enemy and inspire men to fight does not seem to fit with the FARC recruitment of females. As the poor treatment and control of some girls in the FARC is specific to their sex, and the all-male FARC secretariat establishes the rules, there are some elements in the FARC that do suggest a level of *machismo* that relies on controlling women. Yet, FARC women and girls are promoted and can command groups of men and boys, and issues of traditional masculine and feminine roles are consistently challenged in the ranks. Presumably, male fighters must accept these changes at some level in order to ensure efficiency and cohesion. Although women are controlled in their sexual and reproductive behaviour, this control is distinctly different from the rigidity of Catholicism and may therefore be less restrictive than what girls are used to.\(^75\) Even though many feminists would see the FARC control of sexual and reproductive freedoms as patriarchal, allowing girls to make decisions in their sexual relationships (or allowing them to have sexual relationships at all) contradicts traditional Colombian gender ideals. This type of control does not support the feminine and masculine ideals to nearly the same extent as traditional Catholic expectations of chastity and fertility. Therefore,

\(^{75}\) Of course, it could also be more restrictive and traumatizing if the girls believe that birth control is a sin, according to Catholic beliefs.
although some FARC control appears to marginalize women (and therefore fits with Goldstein’s theory), it is important to view this control in the context of the girls’ actual lives and their traditional gender expectations. If the men see female roles in the FARC as non-traditional, and the women feel some degree of equality, then gender ideologies are indeed bending. As a result, FARC recruitment does not seem to support Goldstein (2001) or Enloe’s (2000) theories that females must be marginalized and patriarchal values reinforced in order to inspire men to fight.

In regards to rebel recruitment theories, Weinstein (2007) argues that groups relying on social (rather than financial) resources will have highly committed recruits who expect long-term or future rewards. Yet this does not necessarily apply to child recruits in the FARC. The FARC might not pay salaries, but the children and adolescents who join receive other immediate, individual benefits such as uniforms, food, shelter, status, escape from home, and even education. The boys and girls joining the guerrillas do not need to know anything about the group’s ideology in order to appreciate the benefits of regular meals and the status from having a uniform and/or a gun. They also do not need to be highly committed or expect future payoffs such as social change, because the FARC has devised strategies such as information gathering and costly induction that ensure the children will not defect. Weinstein includes these strategies as ways for rebel groups to discern their recruits’ commitment levels, but I argue that these methods are also used by the FARC in order to influence commitment levels (i.e., by scaring the children into staying). Also, because promises of social change have lost credibility after four decades of fighting without results, the FARC must rely more heavily on younger

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76 Chapters Four and Five, however, show that the paramilitary and gang recruitment do support these theories.
recruits who do not understand the failure of the group’s promised revolution. This also
contradicts Weinstein (2007), who argues that credibility of the leaders is critical when
the group is recruiting without financial payments. This may be true of adults, but in the
case of the FARC’s recruitment of children, credibility only seems important in the
immediate recruiting stage. That is, the children must believe what the recruiter is saying
regarding life in the ranks and their time commitment, but the children need not believe
anything about social change or revolution. Once they are in the ranks, the commanders
can coerce or convince them to stay.

Finally, FARC recruitment partially supports Kalyvas’ (2006) theory of control
with the fact that the FARC is not necessarily competing with other armed groups for the
recruitment of females. As a result, girls who run away are very limited in their options.
If only one group will take them as members, and that group is not in their area, then
enlistment as a guerrilla fighter is unlikely. At that point, joining a gang or paramilitary
group on the periphery might be a more likely choice. This has little to do with the girls’
ideology and more likely reflects the values of the gatekeepers. On the recruitment side,
ideology does matter, even to groups using financial payments. The paramilitaries might
have total control of an area but still will not take female recruits, while the guerrillas
might actively acquire female recruits even in areas of incomplete control. In other
words, not all recruits are equal to the different groups, and recruitment is not just about
numbers. Image is critical.
CHAPTER FIVE: Las Paracas – Control and Machismo in Paramilitary Units

While the differences in recruitment strategies between the paramilitaries and guerrillas can be partially explained by ideological origins, this chapter argues that initial social and economic resources have also had a significant impact on the gender disparities in the guerrillas versus the paramilitaries. Although girls and women have not appeared as prominent combatants in paramilitary units, there is some evidence suggesting that females play a larger role in paramilitary activity than is usually assumed. In this chapter I argue that private incentives offered by the paramilitaries enable the group to recruit more adult males and decrease the need for extensive recruitment of minors, especially girls. There is evidence that both women and children (including girls) are present within paramilitary ranks, although there appear to be fewer children and far fewer females than are present in guerrilla units (MAPP-OEA 2006, UNICEF 2006, HRW 2003). However, I also propose that women are actively involved in paramilitary activities but that it is the machismo nature and decentralized control of the paramilitary structure that conceal the involvement of females and allow for more extensive differences between various paramilitary units.

5.1 Gender and Social Identities

The social control imposed by paramilitaries emphasizes the masculine power on which the group is based. For example, because young men in Soacha are potential gang members or enemy combatants, they are all considered “legitimate” targets (A10, A24). These deaths are often advertised by the paramilitaries or recorded by the police as gang
activity, which creates the perception that the area is insecure due to gang violence and
that residents and merchants need paramilitary protection:

What do the paramilitaries do? They create a market. They sell security, so when
there are bands that rob, vandalize... the paramilitaries offer a solution to this....
So they need boys who steal, who consume drugs, who sell drugs and guns –
they need them in order to sell the supposed solution... All [of the victims] were
assassinated to sustain the idea that the zone is insecure. The people are
accustomed to this – that people are killed because that person was up to no good
(A24, NGO researcher/director, Bogotá).

Correspondingly, the traditional gender values that the paramilitaries try to enforce
seemed deeply entrenched in the children and adolescents that I interviewed.
Respondents certainly did not see the presence of girls in the paramilitaries as an
advancement of women’s equality. These girls were considered “abnormal” and often
classified as promiscuous, troublesome, and unclean. They were viewed as girls trying to
be “masculine” and this was seen as unattractive and suspicious (A11-23). “Normal” girls
might have romantic relationships with paramilitary men, but these girls did not walk the
streets with armed groups or get involved in criminal activities. This is supported by
other research done in Colombia showing that both boys and girls felt that girls who try
to be equal with boys were abnormal, ugly, sexually promiscuous, and even crazy

In paramilitary zones, sex workers and women accused of adultery have been
paraded around naked with signs on their necks stating they have “wrecked homes,”
while sexual violence is used as punishment and as a “general warning” to the female
population of the community (OAS 2006). As Amnesty International writes:

Women’s bodies have become marked as military targets, whether because they
have not conformed to their "gender role", because they have challenged
prohibitions imposed on them by the armed groups, or because they are
perceived as the "depositories" of the honour of a particular community and
therefore a useful target on which to inflict humiliation on the enemy (2004).
Testimony collected by United Nations delegates shows that many girls and women have been raped and tortured by the paramilitaries for alleged affiliations with guerrilla sympathizers. These girls are often rejected and stigmatized in their communities, and they can be blamed for not following the "rules" set by the armed group and are seen as having brought such punishment upon themselves (OAS 2006). The irony of these strictly regulated gender roles, of course, is that the paramilitaries punish girls for what they consider risky and immoral behaviour (e.g., wandering the streets late at night), yet at the same time they use sexual assault as a specific war tactic and have deliberately "ruined" countless girls and women in the eyes of their families and communities. Rape therefore becomes a tactic in which the paramilitaries can destroy families while also recruiting the girls that they have raped.

This hypocrisy is further illustrated by testimony showing the frequent use (and abuse) of sex workers by paramilitary troops, despite the fact that they seem to target these same women in "cleansing" raids (Semana 2007a). According to one young man in the paramilitaries, some girls who were "collected" from the street were first punished for violating gender norms by stripping them to their underwear and making them undergo training without any clothes (A10). Male recruits were not treated in these sexually demeaning ways, and commanders might rape female recruits as punishment for misbehaving. This young man also noted that girls who were found on the streets late at night were often picked up by the paramilitaries and either "recruited" into the ranks or punished for their behaviour by shaving their heads. He said that many girls subsequently opted to join the ranks to avoid having their heads shaved and to have the freedom to walk around at night. If they chose to return home, they were confined to their houses for
at least three months while the paramilitaries kept a close watch on them.

5.1.1 Defining Male and Female

In some paramilitary-controlled areas, the factions are reported to exert social control by mandating strict standards of gender behaviour and appearance. For example, both men and women must conform to traditional styles of dress, men cannot have earrings, dyed or long hair, and women are expected to have male partners in order to decrease the risk that they might exercise independence (OAS 2006, Amnesty 2004). While these gendered social controls are imposed on both men and women, they are based on very traditional concepts of what male and female should be. Men are not immune to these social controls, as they must be dominant and machista in order to uphold the traditional gender roles. In fact, paramilitary “social cleansing” raids have violently targeted homosexuals in particular (Simons 2004). In some displaced neighbourhoods, gender expectations are linked to increased domestic violence against women, as men feel frustrated that they cannot find employment while the women often become the main breadwinners through domestic employment and street vending (Arias 2003, WCRWC 2003). Unless their families teach them otherwise, boys learn to be machista and often violent, while girls learn that fighting for equality will get them labelled as promiscuous or crazy, or worse, attacked for violating gender norms or being potential guerrillas (Moser and McIlwaine 2004, Chant and Craske 2003, A19, A20). As a result, for boys wishing to prove their “manhood,” the paramilitaries offer an enticing avenue. The guerrillas, in opposition, could be tempting to girls who want to escape the rigidity of these stereotypes and then trap them in a different set of rules.
The paramilitaries do not need to rely on political indoctrination or even long-term commitment if their primary goal is to support the government and defend areas against the guerrillas, or even if it is to simply make money. A steady flow of cash ensures that they can continue hiring recruits, even if they lose others. Unlike the FARC, who must display a strong level of organization and hierarchy in order to pursue the apparent goal of taking over the government, the paramilitaries have never proclaimed to have such goals. Women may not be important to the paramilitaries in illustrating any type of political motivations, but if the images and roles of women directly reflect upon the images and roles of men, the paramilitaries still need to control women in order to maintain their position of male dominance. For example, Enloe (2000) suggests that militaries must control both images of men and masculinity as well as women and femininity, as the role of women in encouraging men to enlist (or not) can be very powerful. Goldstein (2001) finds evidence in his study that male bonding is important in encouraging men to fight and that this gender segregation is usually driven by men and boys from an early age. Both of these authors argue that if women are recruited into armed groups, it is crucial to keep them marginalized (i.e., in support roles) in order to maintain the masculine dominance and keep enlistment attractive to men. The FARC seems to contradict these theories, as noted earlier, but the paramilitary patterns certainly fit, as the latter group appears to recruit girls and women only in subordinate and often sexual roles (HRW 2003, OAS 2006).

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77 See Weinstein 2007 for a further discussion of the importance of hierarchy and organization in rebel organizations.
5.1.2 The Status of Women and Girls

While direct involvement of girls in armed paramilitary action seems to be quite rare, there was a distinct perception among my respondents that women and girls were indeed directly involved in paramilitary activity in the area. Without exception, all of the adolescents in this study disagreed that only men were involved in paramilitaries and gangs; they all said they had witnessed at least some female involvement. However, several respondents noted that women had a much lower status than the men in these groups (A9, A10, A14, A15, A17, A25). One young man in Soacha specifically illustrated the importance of masculinity that he saw in the paramilitary structure:

It’s like machismo… in the paras and gangs the man has the power and this is very important to the group. The girls are on the outside. The guerrillas are different because they have a political purpose – the women are important in their ideological war. The girls in the paras or gangs are kept lower. They are kept outside the group or have a very low status in the group (A9).

Two respondents also expressed the opinion that women had equal opportunities both in the acts of violence that they committed and in the opportunities to advance their lives (A14, female, age 15 and A17, male, age 17). A researcher who has worked extensively in Soacha and Bogotá said that he too had witnessed female involvement in the paramilitaries and that women were also part of “social cleansing” missions (A24). He admitted, however, that this topic has hardly been studied, as women are not usually seen as the primary actors. Larger samples are certainly required to make broader generalizations across Colombia, but it is difficult to support these assertions with sufficient testimony from those actually involved in armed groups. The security limitations of obtaining such interviews and the culture of silence that prevents most people from talking about their participation in organized armed violence makes it nearly impossible to gather accurate data from those still in the ranks.
While both the guerrillas and the paramilitaries make concerted efforts to establish certain types of gender roles and appearances, the values that each group claims to support are obviously very different. The guerrillas claim to be fighting for social change and progressive roles for women, while the paramilitaries violently enforce traditional gender roles for both males and females. As illustrated in Chapter Two, there is evidence that the FARC strictly regulates relationships and sexual activity, although there are contradictory testimonies regarding rape used as a punishment against girls and men being punished for raping female combatants. In paramilitary areas, however, rape and sexual abuse of girls and women seem to be a regular occurrence (B9, B10, OAS 2006, Semana 2006b, AI 2004), although Weinstein (2007) warns against the tendency to conflate observed violence with strategy. For example, the frequent use of rape and other brutal violence towards civilians may not indicate strategy, as commanders might not order these actions. This would fit with the high levels of low-commitment recruits that seem present in the paramilitaries, as well as the decentralized control and inability of commanders to impose order upon the range of different factions. As Weinstein (2007) suggests, the paramilitaries may be permissive of civilian attacks because they need to retain membership in areas of high defection and low commitment.

By using women primarily as sexual objects, the paramilitaries retain their male dominance both over their own women and over the enemy, which has large numbers of female fighters. In addition, because their enemy is known for using women on the front lines, maintaining a hyper-masculine fighting force may help the paramilitaries to further "feminize" their enemy and highlight the guerrillas as enemies of the social order (i.e., because guerrillas encourage girls and women to violate gender norms by being...
combatants). As Goldstein points out: “The absence of actual females frees up the gender category to encode domination” (2001, 356). In other words, because they have no females in positions of authority, the paramilitaries are free to use the category of female as a form of derision, abuse, and “emasculaton” of the enemy. Of course, they can only continue to do this as long as they themselves do not rely on female combatants or female authoritative figures. By keeping female participation unseen and unheard, the paramilitaries would not jeopardize their attempts to maintain patriarchal order:

Paramilitaries look for recruits that can help reinforce their structures of power. The FARC has a different logic in recruitment... they look for people to support the social revolution... [so they] actively recruit girls and women. Girls are not called to be part of the paramilitaries. They are not sought, not recruited (A10, male professor/researcher, Bogotá).

Some girls, however, do appear to be recruited and trained as combatants, although it appears that they more often serve as escorts, bodyguards, and as carriers of weapons and illegal contraband (OAS 2006, A24). In fact, girls may frequently carry guns, drugs, and messages for men because they are much less likely to be searched by police (A24, A25, Vamos Mujer 2005). One young man in Soacha said that “the men use women for this more than anything” (A25). In this case it would be especially beneficial for the paramilitaries to keep girls’ involvement invisible. By taking advantage of gender expectations that police will not suspect young girls because a) girls are docile and harmless and b) girls are not involved in paramilitary activity, the paramilitaries can use girls for a range of different activities without detection.
5.2 Individual Payoffs and Economic Incentives

Because the paramilitaries usually offer to pay their fighters,\(^ {78}\) they seem able to recruit male combatants with relative ease and do not necessarily need girls or women to fight. It appears that boys join paramilitaries for the money and "prestige" while girls are more likely to be affiliated as girlfriends or coerced into sexual relationships (A9, A10, A14-18, A24, A25, Moser and McIlwaine 2004, Miller 2001). As children also join the guerrillas for image and status, the two key differences in paramilitary recruitment seem to be money and gender. However, the type of image achieved in the paramilitaries might be quite different from images associated with the FARC, as there are more opportunities for individual wealth and possessions in paramilitary ranks. While recruitment of boys into the paramilitaries appears to be voluntary, as boys are offered a salary, it is extremely difficult to determine how much recruitment of girls into the paramilitaries is voluntary and how much is forced. Sexual aggression, however, seems to accompany the recruitment of girls (OAS 2006, Amnesty 2004). As a result, girls are not offered paid combatant positions and are relegated to subservient and marginalized (i.e., "traditional") roles. Some girls and women may be considered part of the group, but it seems quite rare that they are seen as figures of authority.

Why the paramilitaries use paid recruitment seems clear from their origins and supports Weinstein’s theory (2007): the original economic resources of the small vigilante groups were high, but any promises of social change or collective benefits were low. Funding and other support from drug cartels, wealthy landowners, multinational companies, and the Colombian government ensured that the paramilitaries had a steady stream of income (Simons 2004, Livingstone 2004, Romero 2003). Because these

\(^ {78}\) See Chapters One and Two.
vigilante groups were fighting to enforce the status quo, any recruitment based on ideology would have limited them to primarily wealthy combatants. While some peasants did support the vigilante groups due to high levels of frustration with the guerrillas (B13, Romero 2003), the paramilitaries still had to attract combatants from lower socioeconomic classes to fight for something that, in the end, would maintain elitist wealth and land ownership. To offset this apparent ideological contradiction, the paramilitaries offered immediate economic payoffs and, as noted earlier, eventually managed to recruit over 31,000 combatants. Offering salaries ensured a steady supply of male recruits, and the high level of economic resources practically guaranteed that the paramilitaries would not need large numbers of women and/or children to bolster the ranks.

Arguably, the use of financial payments attracted large numbers of opportunistic recruits, which also supports Weinstein's theory (2007) that groups relying on economic incentives will face difficulties with recruits' commitment levels, hierarchy, and defection. As Weinstein points out, when salaries are offered, a rebel group will attract a range of different recruits and few will truly be committed to the group's cause. The paramilitaries also lack the centralized control of the guerrillas, especially since the demobilization of the AUC. The current formation of new factions across the country, and the refusal of Vicente Castaño (brother of Carlos Castaño) and other prominent leaders to demobilize (ICG 2007), also reveals the lack of cohesion in these groups. As noted in the previous chapter, if the guerrillas are to achieve their political aim of taking over the country, they need to prove that they have the organizational ability to govern. Because the paramilitaries did not attempt to overtake the government by force (choosing...
instead to support and influence the government in other ways), there was no need to
prove they had the ability to run the country. They were purely a mercenary organization
built to fight against the guerrillas.

With these militarized origins in mind, it seems evident that women and girls
would not be asked to play a large role. In addition, because the paramilitaries were
defending traditional gender roles, resorting to female combatants would contradict their
stated ideology. Yet, though girls and women might not be paid combatants in
paramilitary units, there are distinct economic incentives for some girls and women to
support paramilitary men. Because the paramilitaries currently have a stronger presence
in urban areas, women and girls involved with paramilitaries might not be visible because
they continue to live at home, are not in uniforms, and do not “circulate” through
neighbourhoods with the armed men (A24, Dalton and Martinez 2004). Unlike guerrilla
recruits who leave their homes for training in remote areas and usually remain with their
units, many young paramilitary recruits live at home while performing activities such as
patrolling the neighbourhood, taxing merchants and buses, carrying out extrajudicial
executions, recruiting young men, and otherwise policing, and often intimidating, the
community (A24, Romero 2003, Dalton and Martinez 2004). These men have
relationships with women and girls in the area who are not normally considered part of
the official paramilitary structure. The paramilitaries also appear to exert much less social
control than the guerrillas in regards to relationships and pregnancies (Dalton and
Martinez 2004, Arjona and Kalyvas 2006), although they do exert social control in other
areas related to gender roles. Similar to the guerrilla structure, wives or girlfriends of
paramilitaries (especially of commanders) seem to have a much higher level of status and
protection than other girls and women (A9, A10, A25, HRW 2003, Dalton and Martinez 2004). In a paramilitary-controlled neighbourhood, being attractive might be a powerful asset to a girl, but it can be also dangerous if it leads to unwanted and/or aggressive male attention. In a community filled with violence and poverty, being attached to a paramilitary commander might become the best form of “stability” that a woman can find. This support from women can also influence the success of paramilitary recruitment, as boys see that paramilitary commanders get the prettiest (and therefore the most “valuable”) women. It does seem that paramilitary men have more opportunities than guerrillas to flaunt their girlfriends, money, and possessions (i.e., motorcycles, guns, etc.) due to the higher concentration in urban areas and their ability to retain personal wealth, and this would certainly appeal to boys who desire status over other boys in their neighbourhood. Again, for girls, the attraction to an armed man might not be very different between the groups, but the direct economic benefits of being attached to a paramilitary man may be significantly stronger than being attached to a guerrilla.

5.3 Information Gathering

Information gathering by the paramilitaries serves in the more traditional sense highlighted by Weinstein (2007): the commanders determine who is trustworthy and who is not by embarking on selective assassinations and creating an atmosphere of fear and intimidation (Romero 2003, Simons 2004, A24). Despite the fact that paramilitaries are

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79 For example, a 19-year-old paramilitary leader featured in a documentary in Medellin had five girlfriends. The youngest was 14, the oldest 16, and all had at least one baby or were pregnant by him. The paramilitary leader boasted that it was hard to keep the women away and that he had a lot of responsibility because he had so many women and children. Young boys looked up to him for his popularity with the opposite sex, and young girls wanted to be seen with him because he was powerful (Dalton and Martinez 2004). This suggests that paramilitary membership offers individual benefits related to image and power that are very similar to those found in the guerrillas, at least for young men.
known to use gangs to supplement their ranks in urban areas (A24, Melguizo 2001, Ramirez 2003, Sanín and Jamarillo 2004), they sometimes maintain the outward perception that they will not hire drug addicts or common delinquents, presumably because this would tarnish their reputation for establishing social order and control (A9, A10, A24). Even though Weinstein suggests that groups using financial payments will have less need for screening methods such as information gathering, vouching, and costly induction, paramilitary recruitment patterns do not fully support this. The use of salaries might ensure a constant supply of recruits, but this creates an even greater need for accurate information gathering to distinguish high-quality and low-quality recruits, especially since the risk of hiring informants is particularly high. Fear through the targeted violence of “social cleansing” has therefore become a key strategy to prevent people from reporting abuses and to ensure that recruits will stay loyal (A24, Simons 2004, Romero 2003).

When the paramilitaries enter an urban neighbourhood, they seem to have several specific actions to establish territorial control and gather information, and fear appears to be an essential strategy (A9, A24, Romero 2003, Semana 2006b). First, because they do not know the people in the area, they conduct selective assassinations against anyone that might be close to the guerrillas. This immediately imposes a sense of fear and authority over the community and stops people from speaking out to avoid being accused of guerrilla connections. Second, the paramilitaries open a security discourse with merchants in the sector. They discuss the elimination of delinquent activities (i.e., “social cleansing”) and the taxes necessary to provide protection to merchants and transport officials. Third, they identify gangs that are already established in that zone and evaluate
if these gangs can be used to control the area. Fourth, they hire informants, set curfews and dress codes, hire young men to charge taxes on the buses, collect payments from merchants, and otherwise impose social control over the area. This systematic procedure of establishing authority, hiring informants, and flushing out guerrilla sympathizers seems to be an effective way of collecting information on potentially hostile populations. Once such information is gathered, the paramilitaries can then hold recruitment drives and hire young men from the pool of recruits deemed acceptable.

The level of fear and culture of silence imposed by the paramilitary presence was very palpable in Soacha and Cazucá. One popular story recounted by children and adults of both sexes was that of paramilitary men playing soccer with the heads of their victims. In paramilitary-controlled neighbourhoods, flyers are frequently distributed regarding curfews and other social regulations, and breaking them can be punishable by death. One male teenager from Altos de Cazucá said there used to be an 8pm curfew in his neighbourhood and anyone found outside after that time was shot (A18). Another young man described how he would have to sneak home in terror almost every evening because he had an evening job (A9). Yet another young man in Soacha recounted how his friend had been shot only six months earlier for being in the wrong neighbourhood too late at night (A5). In fact, almost every adolescent that I interviewed had at least one friend who had been killed by paramilitaries or limpiezas due to breaking curfew. Some were associated with gangs, but others were just trying to get home after classes or work (A5, A9, A16, A18). As one young male resident from Cazucá explained, innocent young people are frequently caught up in the violence:

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80 This process is further explored in Chapter Six.
81 This young man noted that he would still go out at night, but only on his bicycle and he would ride home “very fast” to avoid any trouble.
They [the death squads or paramilitaries] distribute papers on what the curfew is and then go on missions of “social cleansing.” But they confuse the thieves, gang members, and drug users with normal kids who have jobs, who study. If they stop a boy or young man and don’t know him, they might kill him because they suspect him of being a thief, gang member, or in an enemy armed group (A25).

Similarly, one young displaced girl noted that the paramilitaries specifically target displaced children, regardless of their involvement in crime or armed groups:

Young people who have been displaced are stigmatised. Everyone always thinks that they support the armed groups. The paramilitaries don’t let them go around in groups, nor do they allow free movement. They say: “good children go to bed early, we put the bad ones to bed” (quoted in ANDI 2007).

5.3.1 The Monopoly on Information

According to one organization that has recorded over 450 youth murders in two neighbourhoods (Ciudad Bolivar in Bogotá and Altos de Cazuca in Soacha), 80-85 percent of victims were males and over 90 percent of all victims were between 14-24 years old. At least 90 percent were killed with guns, almost always with a bullet to the head (A24). This information is difficult to verify due to possible police involvement in the deaths (or, at the very least, a tendency to report these executions as “gang violence”) and a lack of accurate recording in morgues and the justice system. These murders have not been investigated nor prosecuted, and the researchers do not feel that they can report their information:

We have studied this a lot, have documented a lot, but we can’t speak about it, we have never put it in a book, because it is too dangerous.... Because we still have to work and live here.... Here [in Bogotá] we cannot go to the police and in Soacha even less. In Soacha the police are very involved in all of it. It’s very complicated (A24, NGO director/researcher, Bogotá).

As a result, the paramilitaries effectively establish a monopoly on both violence and information. They have the money to hire informants and influence local state authorities; they have the resources to know what is going on and who is loyal. The civilians who are
not involved in armed groups do not have such resources and therefore cannot really know anyone’s particular affiliations. The best way to access information in these neighbourhoods is to be part of the paramilitaries. Because a person could be accused of guerrilla affiliation at any time, it is often safer to be affiliated with the paramilitaries or to simply keep one’s mouth shut.

**Conclusion**

There seem to be individual incentives for girls to join both guerrillas and paramilitaries, but the economic payoffs are likely to be much higher when a girl becomes involved with a paramilitary combatant. The social benefits, however, such as challenging traditional gender roles or gaining respect from men, do not seem to be factors in female involvement in the paramilitaries. The use of financial payments to recruit members has arguably lessened the need for the paramilitaries to use non-traditional combatants such as women and children. Because the paramilitary recruits are usually paid, their access to material goods such as cars, motorcycles, houses, and clothing is much higher than guerrilla members. This could be very appealing to women and girls in low-income areas, especially in Colombia where image and status is often directly linked to material wealth. As Weinstein (2007) argues, these financial incentives also result in an influx of low-commitment recruits; in other words, there is no need to be committed to ideology or understand a cause in order to receive a paycheque. The paramilitaries must therefore counter the risks of defection and informants by using information gathering, threats, and intimidation.
Although Weinstein (2007) suggests that screening techniques such as information gathering, costly induction, and vouching are more important for groups without financial resources, this chapter shows that the paramilitaries still rely heavily on information gathering through threats, intimidation, and violence. Information gathering is critical to paramilitary recruitment strategies, as the risk of hiring informants is so high in Colombia. In addition, the use of financial resources to hire recruits seems to diminish the need to recruit younger members and especially females. This issue contradicts Weinstein’s (2007) argument that groups using financial payments are less discerning.

While paramilitary units might be less discriminating in the men that they hire (compared to the more centralized FARC) the paramilitaries evidently will not accept just any recruit. Female combatants, and especially female commanders, would significantly weaken the hyper-masculine image that the paramilitaries uphold and the traditional values that they defend. As homosexuals and other social “deviants” are also not welcome in the paramilitary ranks, gender plays a prominent role in paramilitary recruitment strategy. It is simply not as obvious because the exclusion of women is not unusual.

It seems to be the male gatekeepers that heavily influence the role and presence of females in Colombian paramilitary groups, although further research is required to broaden the sample and regions in question. Girls have very subordinate roles in these armed factions, which should not be surprising, given the military origins and financial resources of the group. The roles of women in the paramilitaries might not seem important because they are not fighters or commanders, but the image of women is integral to the image of men and the construction of gender. Evidently, social identities
are very important to both the guerrillas and paramilitaries. While the guerrillas counter traditional identities by refuting gender norms and promoting female combatants, the paramilitaries reinforce existing identities by enforcing traditional gender expectations on both males and females. Consequently, the control of women and their femininity seems to be a key element in constructing masculinity and strengthening the power of men in paramilitary units. This supports Goldstein (2001) and Enloe’s (2000) arguments that male bonding is a core element of military groups and that it is primarily males who enforce gender segregation. Again, this also supports the idea that it is the gatekeepers who control the entry and status of women in paramilitaries. Ideology may not be important to girls seeking protection or economic benefit from paramilitary men, but it is certainly important to the men whose power and reputation rest on images of machismo.
CHAPTER SIX: *Las Pandilleras* – Girls in Urban Youth Gangs

The tens of thousands of gang members in Colombia far surpass the estimated numbers of child soldiers in the country, yet gang-involved children and youth are frequently left to criminology and domestic gang studies. Small Colombian youth gangs are not usually seen as politically or internationally significant, even though this type of armed violence can have a significant impact on the economy of cities, the life quality of residents, and the authority of other armed groups. Gang members can be heavily armed and involved in intense turf warfare, espionage, and drug trafficking; they can play very similar roles to those of child soldiers and face similar levels of violence, yet they do not receive the same recognition in the prevailing literature on children and armed conflict.

In the city of Medellín, experts suggest that anywhere from 200 to 400 different armed groups are currently in operation (Sanín and Jaramillo 2004). Ramirez (2003), a Colombian researcher with the Coalition Against the Use of Child Soldiers, estimates that 60-70 percent of gang members in Medellín are between 13 and 18 years old, which equates to 7,000-10,000 adolescent gang members in this one city alone. Ramirez also estimates that 10-12 percent of these gang-involved adolescents are girls. Similarly, a recent study on gangs in Bogotá suggests that at least 467 different armed groups are

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82 See Introduction of this paper.
83 For a more detailed discussion on children in organized armed violence that are not considered “child soldiers,” see Dowdney 2005. Dowdney’s work, however, does not include an adequate discussion of female involvement.
84 This estimate is based on his interviews with 4 gang leaders, 12 gang members, and 2 teachers, as well as interviews with leaders of gang rehabilitation programs and children living in close proximity to gangs. Government reports, public health records, homicide rates, and police records were also used, which are not necessarily reliable given the tendency for male law enforcement officers to discount young girls’ participation in gang activity (A10, Miller 2001). These statistics could also be suspect due to allegations that “social cleansing” executions and other acts of violence might be misreported as gang activity (A3, A24).
operating in the capital, involving approximately 11,500-12,000 boys and young men between 14-25 (Zorro Sanchez 2004). In this study there is no mention of how many girls and young women might be involved; however, another study in Bogotá and Soacha found that 6.6 percent of 960 gang members were female, and ten of the small gangs (i.e., with a size of 6-10 members) in this study were exclusively female (Ramos 2004). Yet another researcher found that 15 percent of 924 gang members in Bogotá were female (Perea Restrepo 2006). Bogotá and Medellín are the two largest urban centres in Colombia, and although the numbers in these studies will not be representative of all Colombian cities, it does appear that the presence of female gang members is still relatively low in Colombia, especially in comparison to the high numbers of girls estimated to be in guerrilla factions.

Still, the numbers of girls in gangs are not insignificant and are likely underestimated. Some girls may believe they are full-fledged gang members while researchers, law enforcement officers, and even the gang leaders do not, leading to a general underestimation of female involvement (Miller 2001). Other girls may be invisible to researchers due to gang leaders’ desires to keep their female members hidden, for fear of risking the gang’s tough, masculine reputation (see Section 6.3). Whatever the reason, it is important to consider that some girls do join male-dominated gangs, despite the machismo ruling these groups. This chapter looks at why gangs allow entry to some girls and not others while also examining how recruitment methods differ from those of the paramilitaries and guerrillas.

Because many youth-based gangs form out of small groups of friends, there is sometimes no “recruitment” at all. For example, Ramos estimates that 73.5 percent of the
275 gangs that he studied in Bogotá were originally groups of friends that evolved into small youth gangs (2004). In these cases there was no formal decision to join or not join; instead, the groups changed over time and became increasingly involved in delinquent activities (Ramos 2004, Zorro Sanchez 2004). If the groups start as friends, they also can avoid the commitment issues and information gathering highlighted by Weinstein (2007), at least until they begin to expand. There is no need to use misinformation to recruit, because in order to survive, a small group will only want trustworthy and committed members. Nor is there a need to pay direct salaries or retain recruits with coercion; in fact, these methods could be detrimental to the cohesion of the gang. Following Weinstein’s logic, we should expect these small gangs to be filled with high-commitment, long-term individuals. But how do girls fit into this suggested recruitment pattern? As in the previous two chapters, this chapter examines Weinstein’s (2007) theories of economic and social resources, information gathering, and vouching to see if the gendered aspects of gang recruitment can be better understood with these theories. This chapter also draws upon Goldstein’s (2001) theories of social identities and the gendering of war to examine why masculine ideals and the exclusion of females might increase the cohesion of a gang.

6.1 Defining “gang” in Colombia

With the extremely rare exception of small all-female gangs, Colombian youth gangs are the near-exclusive territory of boys and young men. They are very masculine entities in which male bonding and “male” rites of passage such as fights, tattoos, and gun use, are essential in creating trust and belonging within the gang structure (A10, A12,
A16, Perea Restrepo 2006, Ramos 2004, Zorro Sanchez 2004). Also, separating gangs from other non-state armed groups can be difficult when many urban militias and criminal groups have been co-opted by the paramilitaries and guerrillas (Melguizo 2001, Ramirez 2003, Sanín and Jamarillo 2004). Although I have not selected one single gang to analyze as a unified rebel group in terms of recruitment tactics, small youth gangs can play a critical role in the urban aspects of the Colombian conflict. While paramilitaries and guerrillas are often respected (and/or feared) as authority figures in areas lacking state presence, youth gangs are frequently seen as problems that need to be addressed by such authorities. In fact, it may be at least partly due to the unchecked violence imposed by gangs that residents in certain areas have accepted the “social cleansing” operations of paramilitaries and other vigilante groups. Because their crimes are usually localized, young men and women in gangs are often treated as common delinquents rather than underage combatants (A24, Dowdney 2005). Gang members working for armed groups do not usually qualify for government demobilization programs, because they do not fit the narrow definition of “child soldier” (A24, Dowdney 2005, Ramirez 2003).85

But what exactly is a “gang”? While gangs usually imply an urban setting (as they do in this thesis), there are several different words for gang in Colombia that do not have accurate English equivalents:86 1) pandilla: a youth gang that is delinquent in nature but not involved in sophisticated organized crime; pandillas are usually associated with neighbourhood crime such as robberies, muggings, drug use, parties, and small-scale local drug sales, and they may or may not be associated with larger armed groups; 2)
*banda*: a larger, more sophisticated criminal organization, often with more adults involved than in *pandillas*, although the majority of members are usually under 26; 3) *milicia*: an urban guerrilla organization which can include *pandillas* or *bandas* that have been co-opted by guerrilla groups; 4) *mafia*: a highly-sophisticated, drug trafficking criminal organization; *mafias* can include or employ *bandas* and *pandillas* within their organizational structures; 5) *parche*: a group of young people (primarily males, but includes both sexes) that gather to party and “hang out;” this often involves drinking alcohol, consuming drugs, and sometimes includes petty crime; *parches* are not usually involved in organized crime but can serve as a gateway for further criminal activity and are often targeted in “social cleansing” operations. With all of this in consideration, this chapter focuses on the smaller, youth-based *pandillas* and *parches*.87

6.2 Gender and Social Identities

While some girls do seem to seek protection and camaraderie in male-dominated gangs, they also appear to be targeted by “social cleansing” groups in different ways than boys. The girls that I interviewed in Cazuca, for example, believed that life in their neighbourhood was more dangerous for girls, while the boys believed that it was equally dangerous for both sexes (A19-23). The group of male and female adolescents that I interviewed in Soacha centre, however, thought that their neighbourhoods were equally dangerous for both sexes (A9, A11-18). When asked why they thought it was more dangerous for girls, the female students in Cazuca responded that it was because boys could hang out on the streets and sometimes go out at night, while girls never could

87 While reference is made to links with larger armed groups, a comprehensive discussion of drug-trafficking cartels and other large criminal gangs in Colombia is beyond the scope of this paper.
because they would be attacked, raped, and/or labelled as prostitutes or “bad girls” (A19, 20, 22, 23). This was enough to keep them inside, as sex workers or “loose” girls are particularly vulnerable to being attacked by vigilante groups (see Chapter Five). Boys out at night might be targeted because they are assumed to be gang members or drug addicts, but girls out late are violating gender norms. Girls are certainly not immune to paramilitary attacks, even though some documentation suggests that they are not assassinated as frequently as boys (see Section 5.3.1), which might be due to the assumption that girls are not involved in gang activity. Both within and outside the gangs, girls who become involved in gang activity seem to be viewed with suspicion and are rarely trusted (A10, A11, A12, A15-17, A19, A23, Perea Restrepo 2006). Perhaps to an even greater degree than girls and women who join paramilitary organizations, girls in gangs are considered abnormal, delinquent, unfeminine, and troublesome. Because gangs are seen as male territory, girls who try to join gangs as actual members in their own right (e.g., rather than as girlfriends) face considerable obstacles and do not usually receive the same respect as their male counterparts (A10, A11, A12, A15-17, A19, A23, Perea Restrepo 2006, Miller 2001). This is very similar to girls in the paramilitaries, except that paramilitaries generally have more authority in their communities, so the paramilitary girls will command a correspondingly higher status than girls involved in gangs. Also similar to the paramilitaries, girls in gangs play support roles and can feed the stereotypes that equate masculinity with guns, violence, and misogyny.

As mentioned in previous chapters, some girls join armed groups due to attraction to a man already in the ranks or because their boyfriends join and encourage them to come along. In gangs, this might be true to a certain extent, but there is also evidence that
boys make concerted efforts to keep their girlfriends separate from gang activity. There is a level of protection around the masculine elements and bonding within the gang, and girls are only allowed to participate in certain aspects of it (A10, A15, A21, B22, Perea Restrepo 2006). The boys may want girls to party with them, for example, but they do not want girls to interfere in their criminal activities (Perea Restrepo 2006, A10). As Goldstein (2001) notes, gender can become an organizational tool for young men living in chaotic conflict situations: normal life is associated with the feminine, and combat life (or in this case, criminal life) is associated with the masculine. Indeed, there appears to be a clear hierarchy in gangs establishing that girls are only present when the boys allow them to be. For example, in Perea Restrepo’s study (2006), he found that girls might be allowed to party and consume drugs with the group, but they were barred from participating in criminal activities, or the boys would limit their numbers (e.g., only three girls could be present at any one robbery). This helps maintain the masculine image of the group and strengthens the perception that very few girls are involved. The exclusion or marginalization of females reinforces the masculine gang culture that attracts some boys to the gangs in the first place. Like the paramilitaries, actively including girls would undermine the male solidarity that these gangs embrace. The gangs can use girls to support them and to attend parties, but they cannot rely on girls to strengthen the group or commit serious crimes without risking their reputation as a formidable all-male gang.

Indeed, girls that violate traditional gender expectations are challenging male domination, and these girls can be threatening to a group that bases its solidarity on *machismo*. The feminine can only be used to as the “weak other” to reinforce male dominance if there are no powerful females in the group (Goldstein 2001). In gangs, girls
may sometimes permeate the traditionally male domain, but they still struggle to achieve the level of their male peers. This is similar to paramilitary structure, and like those paramilitary units, girls may be more active in gangs than it first appears. Girls that participate in “masculine” activities such as violence, drug use, and sexual promiscuity, do not fit into idealized images of femininity and must therefore be marginalized to reinforce masculinity. The girlfriends who stay uninvolved in gang activity are considered the “clean” girls or “good” girls, and they are generally awarded a higher level of respect than girls who are directly involved in the criminal and drug activity of the gang (A10, A11, A12, A15-17, A19, A23, Perea Restrepo 2006). One young man in Soacha said he was more afraid of girls in gangs than boys (A16), and another girl in the same neighbourhood noted: “Girls want guns to have power over other girls – some girls are even crazier and more violent than the boys” (A14). Several other respondents agreed with this observation, partly because female involvement in gangs was seen as so unusual (A14, A15, A17, A19-22). A young woman who had worked in Cazucá for one year observed that many girls in that neighbourhood had adopted “masculine” characteristics, including a tendency towards violence, in order to defend themselves (A7). Also, in a society where violence is a currency to solve problems, a street reputation for being loca (crazy) or for being especially violent can become a useful tool for girls to ward off potential attackers (Vigil 2003). Weapons can also be a way to obtain status when there

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88 Perea Restrepo (2006) offers an interesting discussion on three types of roles that girls typically have in Colombian gangs: 1) “la sana”, the “clean” girl who is romantically attached to a gang member but not involved in gang activity, 2) “la activa”, the girl who is involved in some gang actively but in a marginalized and subordinate role (he estimates that these girls make up 10-15 percent of all gang members), and 3) “la parcera”, the girl who is equal to the male gang members in roles and behaviour (this type is very rare). Perea maintains that “la sana” is the most common feminine presence in or around the gang, as most gang members prefer their girlfriends to be separate from the male space of the gang. However, his estimate that active female members usually make up 10-15 percent of Colombian gangs contradicts assumptions that negate a female presence altogether.
are no other options. In fact, one 17-year-old boy in Soacha commented that “rich kids carry cell phones to feel important, so poor kids carry knives” (A17).

Yet, the presence of girls is essential to reinforce the macho image that boys are trying to cultivate. Without the girls to flirt with, fight over, seduce, and dominate, the overall machista identity is incomplete. Female roles as mothers, sweethearts, nurses, and sisters that encourage soldiers to fight have long been part of war culture. Without any contact with females, there is no opposite to which the boys can compare themselves, so they need to bring in females at opportune times. In fact, access to girls may be one reason that some boys join gangs (Ramirez 2003), even though these girls might not be the ones that they respect or consider to be their girlfriends. This is very similar to the paramilitaries in that strengthening images of machismo requires the men and boys to control images of femininity. While the paramilitaries already have dominance in many areas and use women to reinforce that power, the gangs are constantly battling for power. As a result, gangs not only need girls as the “other” to reinforce their machismo, but they also need to dominate females to help prove their authority in areas where they are threatened and marginalized from different (and more powerful) male actors. This makes the control of the feminine in gangs even more important to reinforce the tenuous masculine control that is constantly threatened by other, more powerful groups. This is also distinct from the FARC’s need for girls, as the FARC arguably needs females to battle images of machismo and prove that they are somehow different from other armed groups. While the gangs and paramilitaries might need to marginalize women to prove their worth, the FARC must promote women to prove theirs.
Without further research to interview girls actually in these gangs, it is difficult to say how the girls themselves feel about their roles. Zorro Sanchez pointed out that “girls feel very important if the boys fight over them – this makes them more important than the other girls” (A10). One girl interviewed by a Colombian researcher stated that she felt respected and well-treated in her parche, and that she sometimes committed crimes with the group like any other member. She also felt that she was the only one of her sisters that was actually moving forward in her life, as they had all become pregnant and she at least was contributing money to the family (B22). Another 16-year-old parcero supported the notion that girls played a range of important roles in his group:

In the group that I am in there are also women. They are with us in the good and the bad, they take drugs and everything. If there is a robbery, they help. More than everything, they are in charge of this, to grab the women so that they don’t scream. They are also bait for the drunks, they pull them out of the taverns and everything (B21).

Similarly, this comment from a young woman indicates that some girls can have quite serious responsibilities in the gangs but do not necessarily have the option to decline:

I was supposed to hold and carry the weapons and buy and keep the drugs, to find out what people were doing, if they were robbing; I was the lookout .... I was a runner, the older guys would send me to do things .... go and kill someone, carry guns and drugs, go to someone and threaten them. When they tell you to do something you have to go (female gang member, age not provided, quoted in Dowdney 2005, p191).

Despite evidence indicating that girls are often excluded and/or subordinated in youth gangs, there may still be notable individual payoffs motivating girls to support the activities of these gangs, even if they are relegated to the periphery. By accepting and even encouraging the male control and subordinate female roles in these gangs, girls can significantly reinforce the machista attitudes that keep them on the sidelines. Girls may also fill operational voids when there are not enough young men to carry out the gang’s criminal activities. A recent study in Brazil suggests that gangs in the favelas (urban
slums) are increasing their use of girls and women, as large numbers of boys and young men are killed (Galeria 2005). Whether this is also happening in Colombia requires further study, but the question is certainly worth considering.

6.3 Economic Payoffs

In regards to economic resources at formation, youth-based gangs in Colombia arguably have the least amount between the three types of armed groups examined in this paper. Without a reliable source of income such as large-scale drug trafficking or wealthy patronage, these gangs rely primarily on localized crime such as looting and theft (Perea Restrepo 2006, Ramos 2004, Zorro Sanchez 2004). As a result, young gang members could be classified according to Weinstein’s theory (2007) as opportunistic recruits that are involved primarily for immediate economic payoffs. As groups can carry out larger and more profitable criminal acts than individuals (i.e., economies of scale), and access to weapons may also be easier due to a wider range of accessible networks and pooling of resources, the economic benefits of belonging to a gang can be quite clear for adolescents of both sexes. While these small gangs might form without any initial economic resources, they usually turn to increasing acts of delinquency to obtain the material goods that they cannot otherwise acquire (Zorro Sanchez 2004, Ramos 2004). Although there is no guarantee of regular payments, and there are high risks of being arrested, injured, or killed, the payoffs for some members are clearly higher than the costs. The promises of future payoffs may also play some role in gang membership, as new recruits are not guaranteed any income upon joining. This is particularly true for girls who may start off on the periphery and have no guarantees that they will receive any economic benefit.
However, because looting and criminal activities form the basis of individual economic payoffs for gang members, any promises of future benefits need not be very long-term, and the realization of these payoffs depends on the members’ willingness to act. In other words, promises of social change seem of the least importance in gangs, as opposed to paramilitary or guerrilla groups. There do not appear to be any political ambitions in the *pandillas* and * parches* (although larger criminal gangs undoubtedly influence politics in some areas), and discipline or clear hierarchical structures are often lacking (Garcia Suárez 1998, Perea Restrepo 2006, Ramos 2004). The ability to acquire immediate individual payoffs without imposing strict codes of conduct suggests that small gangs might indeed attract the most opportunistic recruits of the three types of armed groups examined in this paper. The payoffs are acquired quickly, the commitment in regards to training and accountability is low, and members can still participate in parties, drug and alcohol use, and petty crime, which seem more highly controlled in the larger armed groups.

For girls who are particularly set on breaking social restrictions, especially those who want the *pandilla* lifestyle (i.e., parties, drinking, drugs, etc.), joining a gang can bring significant economic and social benefits. As in attaching oneself to a paramilitary man, attaching oneself to a gang member can bring a certain level of social status, especially if that young man is a gang leader (A10, A24). Being on the periphery of a gang (e.g., as a girlfriend) can bring economic rewards through the boyfriend’s delinquent activities, and being within the gang can allow the girls to take part in certain criminal acts from which they would otherwise be excluded. This is different from being attached to a paramilitary in three distinct ways: 1) the economic benefits are arguably
lower, as the level of power, wealth, and sophistication in most pandillas cannot compare to paramilitary units, 2) the opportunities to commit petty crime are higher, as girls associated with paramilitaries seem unlikely to engage in the very activities that paramilitaries are monitoring (i.e., robberies, muggings, etc.), and 3) the opportunity to party, consume drugs, and escape the watchful eyes of vigilante groups and parents is likely higher. 89

Because the economy of the gang depends heavily on members’ ability to commit crimes successfully, it is logical that the gang would not want to take on too many female members. If the boys see girls as incompetent or untrustworthy, allowing girls into their inner circle as they plan crimes and distribute rewards would be highly risky. If boys and young men are hiding their criminal activities from their girlfriends or families, then bringing girls in is even more problematic, especially if the boys do not trust the girls to keep quiet. Unlike the paramilitaries, the gang is not paying recruits to join, so it cannot access such a large pool of male recruits that female recruits are unnecessary. Yet, because expansion and large-scale control are usually not part of the pandilla or parche strategy, female recruits remain unnecessary to the group’s survival. Girls may, in fact, be detrimental to the group’s economic gains if females are seen as dependents and not as primary criminal actors who can bring in extra income. The paramilitaries do not have this issue because of their level of accessible wealth, and having females as dependents

89 Of course, this might not always be true. In a recent documentary on a 19-year-old paramilitary leader in Medellin, there were frequent shots of young men in the faction consuming cocaine, marijuana, and alcohol, often with their girlfriends. This particular faction appeared to be a small group of young men (similar to a parche) that had been recruited and armed by a larger paramilitary unit (Dalton and Martinez 2004). Due to the decentralization of paramilitary groups, it should not be assumed that all the factions adhere to strict codes of conduct. However, as the overall stance of the larger paramilitary factions has specifically targeted drug users, street children, young delinquents, and people violating traditional gender norms (see Chapter Four), it seems likely that young men and women in gangs would have greater freedom regarding deviant appearances and behaviour.
fits within their patriarchal value system. The FARC, on the other hand, needs women in order to maintain both its size and political image. While the paramilitary’s patriarchal value system might also fit within gangs, the gangs have fewer adult members and are usually made up of boys from very poor households (Zorro Sanchez 2004, Ramos 2004), making them less able to financially support female dependents.

6.4 Trust, Vouching, and Costly Induction

While Weinstein (2007) argues that the use of economic resources to recruit members minimizes the importance of trust, my research suggests that trust is a critical element in these youth gangs, despite the obvious draw of economic payoffs. This seems to be at least partly due to the group’s origins: when a group is made up of friends, and collective self-defence is an important element of the groups’ formation, vouching becomes extremely important if new members are to be allowed entry. There may be economic benefits to joining, but there are no direct payments for membership. The group is actually relying on promises of future payoffs, which fits with Weinstein’s theory (2007) that this type of recruitment increases the importance of trust. On the other hand, gang members also fit with Weinstein’s recruit profile (2007, 102) of short-term consumers, rather than long-term investors in the group. That is, when gang members join, they are not necessarily invested in a particular social cause with long-term gains. Because the rewards for gang membership are both individual (e.g., economic rewards from crime) and collective (e.g., solidarity, protection from “social cleansing,” etc.), recruits likely have varied reasons for joining. In fact, Ramirez (2003) notes that the young gang members in his study said they would leave their gangs if their protection...
could be guaranteed and if drug rehabilitation and education programs were available.

Zorro Sanchez noted that both boys and girls often “grow out” of gangs in their late teens or early twenties (A10). Similarly, this comment from a young parcero\textsuperscript{90} indicates that gang life was not his lifelong plan:

> For now, I am thinking about finishing secondary school. Since I was little the profession that I liked was medicine, I would like to save people. But if ten years from now I am committing crimes, I think that one does not last long in the criminal life. All those who have been thieves don’t last, they are killed, they are bandits [for] two, three, four years, but they are killed. Because of this I think that I’m going to leave (B21, “Chinche”, male gang member, age 16).

As ideological commitment does not seem to play a role in youth gang recruitment strategy, weeding out opportunistic recruits who have no intention of long-term commitment might turn out to be quite difficult.

6.4.1 Trust

Although small youth-gangs do not seem to directly pay recruits (and may even be reluctant to accept new members), there are other individual benefits besides economic payoffs that may not be apparent if gangs are only viewed in the context of delinquency. Trust is an essential element in gang membership because of the range of different armed groups and informants that continually threaten the survival of a gang as a unit and of individual members. Expansion may bring further economic benefits, but it also brings serious risks to the group’s overall cohesion.

The presence of too many unreliable members can threaten this solidarity. As noted in previous chapters, women and girls affiliated with armed actors are often viewed with suspicion, and girls in gangs are no exception. In the machista world of Colombian youth gangs, girls are an obvious “other” and therefore present a threat to the trust that,

\textsuperscript{90} A parcero is a boy or young man in a parche.
arguably, keeps the gang members alive and the group functioning efficiently. With too many girls in the group, the chance of increased intra-gang conflict due to volatile romantic relationships could increase, and the gangs then risk their solidarity and cohesion. As one young female gang member in Bogotá noted: “I think that for a person to be able to enter a parche, she has to keep her mouth shut.” When she first joined her parche, the boys would threaten her, saying that if she did not keep quiet she would die (B22). While these types of threats are probably also used against new male gang members, a girl must work especially hard and be especially careful if she wants the gang to accept her.\footnote{As an example, one young man who was working as an assassin for the paramilitaries was apparently turned in by his girlfriend after the two had an argument. The girlfriend had details of some of the young man’s assassinations, including where they took place and how much he was paid, and there were indications that she was present at some of the murders (A24). This type of story circulates because it warns young men not to trust their women with too many details. It reinforces the idea that women cannot be trusted and is a compelling reason to keep girlfriends separate from gang life and/or to limit the activities where girls can be present.} As Zorro Sanchez pointed out, the lack of female presence in youth gangs “is not because the girls don’t want to belong – it is because the boys don’t want them there” (A10). Indeed, some boys seem to keep their activities deliberately concealed from their girlfriends and prefer the girls to be unaware of their criminal activities. “Franky,” a 16-year-old male gang member admitted: “My girlfriend doesn’t know that I take drugs, I told her that I had left these vices for her. But it’s a lie” (B20).

Including large numbers of girls in the gangs may also increase the risk of having low-commitment or unreliable members, due to the suspicion that many boys have of girls who choose “unfeminine” activities like criminal activity, violence, and drug use. Second, it may deteriorate the level of cohesion within the group, as some recent studies indicate that one key cause of fights both between gangs and within gangs is due to competition over girls (Ramos 2004, Zorro Sanchez 2004, Perea Restrepo 2006).
Keeping girls out, therefore, may be both a functional and ideological issue. The all-male environment may actually enhance trust between members, decrease intra-gang conflict, and increase the ability to engage in criminal and delinquent activities without the oversight of girlfriends or female relatives. Arguably, too many females (and especially females in important positions) can threaten this bonding. Goldstein (2001) points out that boys are usually the ones enforcing gender segregation, and in gangs this certainly seems to be the case. Of course, this is very similar to the paramilitary structure of retaining male dominance in order to strengthen patriarchal values and power. However, the paramilitaries often have the power and influence to control entire communities, and small gangs likely have little serious influence beyond their group members.

6.4.2 Vouching

If trust is of such high importance in gang membership, then we should expect vouching and costly induction to become integral recruitment mechanisms. Weinstein (2007) argues that vouching relies highly on reputation, and in small youth gangs, new members are frequently brought in through friends (Miller 2001, Ramos 2004, Zorro Sanchez 2004, Perea Restrepo 2006). Vouching is risky because the existing member that brings in a friend will bear the failure if that new recruit does not work out. Boys might also be hesitant to vouch for girls if they think that girls are at a higher risk for defecting or informing on gang activities. Vouching for a girl could be detrimental to a boy's machista reputation. A high reliance on vouching and recruiting through friends also helps explain why girls are involved more as girlfriends rather than as individual members in their own right. Someone who already has credibility must bring them in, and the easiest way to do this is to start on the periphery with a boyfriend or relative.
Similarly, girls already in gangs might not be allowed to vouch for new girls, especially if the existing girls are not seen as "true" members. The hesitancy to trust females would thus significantly reduce the numbers of girls allowed to enter gangs, even if girls were competent members and able to contribute to the economic benefits of the group.

6.4.3 Costly Induction

Weinstein (2007) notes that costly induction is used to evaluate levels of commitment, and violent beatings or being forced to commit dangerous crimes are common tactics in gang induction (Miller 2001, Sánchez Jankowski 1991, Garcia Suárez 1998, B20, B22, Ramirez 2003). Girls might also be "sexed-in" rather than having to endure physical beatings; this involves having sex with a male gang member (or several) in order to gain membership in the gang, but girls who are initiated in this manner might also earn very poor reputations and not be respected as genuine members (Miller 2001).

These screening mechanisms seem more similar to guerrilla recruitment than paramilitary recruitment, as gangs do not pay members and must rely on other methods to ensure the commitment level of their recruits. This again fits with Weinstein's theory that groups relying on social benefits or future payoffs will rely more heavily on information gathering, vouching, and costly induction to screen recruits. Because a small gang has a limited capacity to gather information, especially in areas where all information is suspect, it is not surprising that gangs would rely more heavily on vouching and costly induction. Also, as the pandillas and parches tend to remain small, each new recruit will have a larger impact on the group's structure and function than a new recruit in the paramilitaries or guerrillas. A few bad recruits in either of the latter groups will not be too detrimental, but one or two problematic recruits in a gang of only eight or ten could be
devastating. New recruits, therefore, must be dedicated to the “cause” of the gang (i.e., economic profit and delinquent activities), arguably even more than new guerrilla recruits. Anyone who is not dedicated could damage the entire group by turning them in to the authorities or diminishing their economic returns. Commanders might kill undedicated guerrilla recruits, or the recruits might simply run away. Runaways might even report to the authorities, but even dozens of bad recruits could not bring down the entire FARC structure. Similarly, a poorly screened paramilitary might mean some economic losses (e.g., due to wasted salary) and may weaken a faction if the recruit is an informant or traitor, but the paramilitary groups seem too strong to be broken by a few weak links. Gangs, therefore, appear to have the strongest incentives to screen potential recruits in order to maintain group survival. If girls are seen as the least trustworthy of all possible members, then gangs might screen girls with the most rigour or may not even consider them for membership.

Conclusion

The origins of youth gangs suggest that initial economic resources are low and therefore do not play a significant role in gang recruitment strategies. Gang recruitment mechanisms do, however, fit with Weinstein’s theory (2007) that groups with low economic resources rely heavily on screening methods of vouching and costly induction. This is especially important when a gang is competing with so many different armed groups for survival. Yet the incorporation of gender analysis reveals that economic resources are not the only reason to carefully screen potential gang members. Because each new recruit must bring in money to sustain the subsequent growth of the group, and
because the small size of pandillas makes them more vulnerable to damage from inferior recruits, gangs must be cautious in accepting members that might become dependents or free-riders. As girls seem to be the least trustworthy of potential recruits and are often assumed to have the lowest ability to commit profitable crime, females are not the ideal gang recruit. If gang members subscribe to traditional patriarchal values, as it seems they often do, then girls will be liabilities and dependents. For a group with low economic resources, taking on too many dependents could be dangerous.

On the other hand, this chapter highlights the fact that, like paramilitaries, gangs need girls in order to reinforce their own ideals of machismo. Again, this supports Goldstein’s theory (2001) that the cultural moulding of brave, tough men is frequently linked to the domination and subordination of women. Without the “other” of the female, machismo is incomplete. Therefore, excluding females entirely would not reinforce the gender-based domination that binds the male gang members together. If girls are allowed into the gang but in controlled amounts, and if they are only allowed to participate in certain activities, then the male control of the female remains uncontested. Similarly, when girls who are active in the gangs (and are thus violating traditional gender roles) have poor reputations and girls on the periphery can maintain their images as “good girls,” the patriarchal values of the gang are again reinforced.

While girls are not prominent members of gangs, certain types of girls (e.g., drug users, sex workers, street kids, etc.) are targeted by vigilante groups and, like their male counterparts, may be motivated to seek protection in gangs. Girls can also find significant economic benefits by being attached to male gang members, although these benefits will not usually be as high as with paramilitary men. Girls who want to go out at night and
access social spaces that were previously too dangerous can achieve these social benefits by being in a gang. Like the guerrillas, gang life can be a way for girls to defy traditional gender expectations by participating in typically masculine behaviour and activities. Yet, unlike the guerrillas, girls are not encouraged to join gangs and they do not appear to hold prominent positions. In fact, boys and young men appear to make concerted efforts to keep females out of their groups, and the active female members do not normally receive very high levels of respect. Also, the “typical” gang member (e.g., petty thief, drug user, street kid, etc.) is not highly sought by guerrillas or paramilitaries, who seem to prefer “clean” recruits while targeting the socially undesirable gang members. Gang-involved girls in particular suffer from poor reputations, often because they are violating femininity norms of domesticity and self-sacrifice. The party and drug-consuming lifestyle of *pandillas* and *parches* might be acceptable for males, but it is generally unacceptable for females. Allowing girls into the gangs, therefore, is a risk that could damage both the gang's reputation and its ability to generate economic profit.

There do seem to be several clear reasons why girls would *not* want to be involved in gangs, so the low numbers of girls may not be entirely attributable to the gatekeeper effect. Some girls may stay on the periphery for fear of damaging their reputations, while others may have better options in the city than joining a male-dominated gang that does not really want them anyway. Yet, the estimated statistics that females are 6-15 percent of the tens of thousands of Colombian gang members indicate that significant numbers of girls are indeed involved. Even more girls are likely involved on the periphery of gangs, similar to girls and women involved in paramilitary factions who are not combatants. Their invisibility to policymakers, law enforcement, community
workers, and researchers may be due to the fact that the gang leaders try to hide their presence to maintain the masculinity of the gang, or because the girls are only involved in certain activities. Whatever the cause, girls and gender ideologies are certainly part of Colombian gang culture, and gangs play an important function in the urban aspects of the armed conflict. As a result, ignoring the roles of girls in gang research and policy will only strengthen the machismo that gangs propagate.
CONCLUSION

While girls appear to have a much stronger presence in the FARC compared to paramilitary factions and urban youth gangs, researchers should not discount the participation and influence of girls in the latter two armed groups. As illustrated in the preceding chapters, one of the clearest distinctions in the recruitment techniques of Colombian armed groups seems to be the active recruitment and promotion of females in the FARC. Girls apparently do not have the same level of power and authority in paramilitary structures as they do in the guerrillas, and the paramilitaries and gangs seem to rarely recruit females into combative roles. In this regard, it appears to be the leaders of each group that determine the level of female involvement, rather than the girls themselves. The common reasons that girls give for joining armed groups (e.g., poverty, lack of options, boredom, and domestic abuse) do not seem to reflect a specific preference for the FARC over other groups. In fact, Chapter One indicated that the common reasons given by boys and girls for joining gangs and paramilitaries are very similar to those given for joining guerrillas, except that financial incentives seem to be more important in paramilitary recruitment. I suggested in Chapter Two that girls seem to join the FARC due to misinformation, high tolerance for risk, and proximity to the group (which usually translates into a lack of alternative options), rather than any ideology or any awareness of the group's stated political goals. With this in mind, I conclude that the gatekeepers do appear to have a stronger influence than the preferences of recruits regarding the gender disparities in Colombian armed groups. However, I recognize the limitations of my sample and the reliance on evidence collected by other researchers. My
conclusion, therefore, is that my theories are highly plausible but not adequately tested, and I welcome further research that might support or refute my claims.

According to my research, women and girls do not seem to join the paramilitaries and independently decide to retain a marginalized position in service roles – it is the male commanders and their reliance on traditional gender roles that determine this. Similarly, it is the all-male secretariat of the FARC that has made a concerted effort to promote women into positions of authority and to call girls and women to their “duty” of participating in the social revolution. Yet, it is problematic to argue that girls make no choices regarding their participation in armed groups. This removes their agency and once again places them in the role of victim. Some of these girls see their involvement as an empowering choice from a long list of bad options. They have taken action when their peers may have done relatively little to escape oppressive and/or abusive domestic situations. These active choices, however, do not seem to be based on the type of group that the girls join. Rather, the analysis in the preceding chapters illustrates that the options available appear to be stronger determinants of where a girl will go.

Rebel Recruitment Theories

While Arjona and Kalyvas’ (2006) research in Colombia shows that in areas of equal access, recruits divided evenly across all groups, this is arguably not the case when it comes to female children. Even if girls are able to access all types of armed groups, there is nothing to suggest that paramilitaries and gangs are equally willing to accept them. As Goldstein (2001) and Enloe (2000) argue, the presence of females is critical in creating masculine ideals. These females, however, must be marginalized in

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92 Areas where the civilian population and potential recruits have equal access to the various armed groups.
order to reinforce male dominance that fosters cohesion and fighting aggression in armed groups. While these theories are supported by paramilitary and gang recruitment, they are not supported by the FARC recruitment patterns. It seems that while marginalizing females is integral to image in the paramilitaries and gangs, promoting females is equally integral to image in the FARC.

Weinstein (2007) argues that initial economic and social resources are strong determinants of a rebel group’s recruitment strategy, and Kalyvas (2006) suggests that geographical control is more important than ideology regarding a potential recruit’s enlistment preferences. I find support for Weinstein’s argument in that the initially low economic resources and socialist goals of the FARC precluded the group from offering salaries to potential recruits. Even though the financial status of the FARC may have changed, the commanders cannot alter their recruitment strategy without admitting that their socialist revolution has failed. However, this explanation is incomplete without also incorporating a gendered analysis. The inability to use salaries (either due to resources or stated political ideologies) means that the FARC would have more difficulty finding combatants as competition for members increased. With the growth of strong paramilitary groups in the 1990s, it is logical that the pool of potential recruits for the FARC likely decreased as paramilitaries began paying and recruiting combatants. This would help explain a stronger reliance on both female and child recruits than is found in paramilitary units, who recruit primarily with salaries. Yet, as noted in Chapter Three, the comparatively strong female presence in the FARC is also an ideological issue, as the group cannot salvage its faltering political image without proof that they are indeed socialist and revolutionary. These issues of gender and image are absent from
Weinstein’s discussion, yet the subjugation or promotion of women and girls certainly reflects a particular image that could affect future recruitment and operational activities.

Conversely, it is not only economic resources that created the nearly all-male environments of the paramilitaries and urban youth gangs. Certainly the wealth of the paramilitaries and their patrons enabled the group to recruit more adult males and decreased the need for female combatants. Yet, the paramilitaries grew in reaction to guerrilla violence, and as defenders of traditional patriarchal values, an overt recruitment of women (and especially of young girls) would degrade the *machismo* image fostered by the group. The social control imposed by paramilitaries in regards to civilian appearance and behaviour illustrates the importance of gender ideology in this group, and economic explanations are insufficient without an awareness of these gendered motives.

This is further illustrated in urban youth gangs, who do not generally use salaries to entice recruits but still do not rely on females to bolster their ranks. Even in areas of incomplete control where there is likely significant competition for recruits, the gangs do not seem to resort to female members. Rather, girls are excluded, marginalized, or controlled so that they do not threaten the male dominance of the gang. As Colombian youth gangs often seem to start from small groups of friends, vouching and costly induction methods are critical to screen potentially troublesome recruits. Because these gangs are usually small, one or two poorly screened recruits could be devastating to the group, while the larger structures of the paramilitaries and guerrillas are more able to withstand weak links.

In summary, while I agree with Weinstein (2007) that the financial resources of a rebel group affect and mould recruitment strategies, I also argue that gendered values and
political ideologies have a significant impact on the recruitment patterns of Colombian guerrillas, paramilitaries, and gangs. As Weinstein does not address gender at all, I believe that the inclusion of gendered analysis modifies (but does not necessarily reject) his recruitment theories. For example, if girls seek rewards beyond those that are clearly economic, and if the various armed groups use gender as a separate form of background check, these are key elements to consider. Similarly, my analysis of female recruitment appears to support Kalyvas (2006) in that geography is critical in a girl’s decision to enlist because it determines her available options. However, my evidence also suggests that while ideology might not be important to recruits, it is important to recruiters. That is, not all recruits are equal, and even in times of recruitment shortages, not all groups will welcome female members, regardless of geography.

*Gendered Values*

The high visibility of females in the guerrillas also seems largely due to their combative roles. If women and girls are indeed involved in paramilitary factions but in “lesser” roles, their voices have been silenced by the tendency of researchers, policymakers, and journalists to look only at combatants and military leaders, rather than studying all of the people involved in the function of an organization. Females in guerrilla organizations receive attention specifically because they are *fighters*. They carry guns and they kill people; they take on “masculine” roles in a very traditional society, and this makes them exceptional. Their participation therefore appears more dangerous, more important, and more worthy of study than girls serving unseen in more traditional female roles such as cooks, messengers, nurses, logistical officers, and “wives.” Arguably, the
idea that those that kill are most important is a warrior-centric (and by default malecentric) perspective. Could those that kill maintain their power without relying on those that support, feed, and heal? Arguably, a consistent focus on combatants has excluded girls and women not only from the analytical conflict literature, but also from many disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) programs.

Similarly, because they are often girlfriends and relatives rather than “true” gang members, girls in gangs are easily ignored. They do not factor into security discussions because they are not usually shooting the guns, and they are not addressed in community gang programs because, again, they do not appear to be central to the violence. Yet they are still in the midst of the conflict, witnessing and participating in crimes, holding and storing guns and drugs, supporting masculine stereotypes that perpetuate violence, and finding protection in gangs when they cannot find it elsewhere. They can no longer be ignored just because they are not considered the primary actors.

Research Hypotheses – Final Reflections

As discussed in the preceding chapters, my evidence supports this paper’s primary hypothesis (H1) that the available opportunities are stronger than personal preferences regarding the armed group that a girl chooses to join. Girls’ reasons for joining armed groups are commonly linked to issues of poverty, abuse, boredom, and misinformation, but they do not seem linked to ideologies or strong preferences for the guerrillas over other groups. Also, the available options and the willingness of gatekeepers to accept girls significantly limit where girls can go, regardless of the girls’ preferences. This in turn supports my second hypothesis (H2) that the gatekeepers, not the recruits, determine
the sex and age ratios in their groups. I found that the FARC has very compelling reasons for recruiting young girls that are linked both to operational and political needs. The need to portray leftist/feminist values increases the requirement for females in high positions. The inability to use salaries, paired with the disillusionment of the Colombian public, has decreased the pool of potential recruits and increased the need for non-traditional combatants such as women and children. Conversely, my evidence suggests that the paramilitaries keep women marginalized in order to reinforce their machismo image and defend traditional values. While there is evidence that females do play roles in paramilitary violence, these roles have been underplayed in both research and demobilization processes, so it is difficult to determine the true level of female participation in paramilitary ranks. Finally, Colombian youth gangs also appear to maintain firm control over how many females enter their ranks and what roles these girls might play. If the girls do join, they generally have a lower status than the males and are only allowed to participate in certain activities. All of these cases suggest that it is indeed the gatekeepers rather than the recruits who are responsibility for the gender variance in Colombian armed groups. However, recognizing the limitations of my study both in sample size and geographical scope, my research can only generate these theories and suggest their plausibility. Further research will certainly enhance our understanding of how to better educate, inform, protect, and empower children and adolescents in Colombia.

**What Next?**

Because girls seem to be involved on the periphery of paramilitary factions and gangs more than they are directly involved in combative or criminal activities, they do
not appear as major players in demobilization or peace processes. This indicates a stronger need to look at the steps toward initial involvement as well as re-involvement when reintegration programs are not supplemented with options, especially for those girls who might not qualify for reintegration programs in the first place.

As this study suggests that access to credible information appears to be a key aspect in girls’ decisions to join armed groups, further research is required to look at where children obtain their information and how they assess it. If misinformation from armed groups is still effective in recruiting children, researchers and policymakers need to find ways to successfully educate children and adolescents about the risks and realities of joining armed factions. If girls understand the risks but still choose to join, then child protection advocates must look at gender-specific ways to address the increased risk tolerance of children growing up in areas of violence, abuse, and militarization. Understanding this interplay of credible information and risk perception could lead to programming that is more applicable to children’s daily lives. When armed groups are a girl’s best option, then the responsibility does not only lie with the groups’ willingness to recruit females. The problem also resides in the inability of families and communities to support children’s needs and the government’s failure to protect them. Both boys and girls in poor, urban neighbourhoods and war-torn rural areas understand little of Colombian politics, but they do see men and women with guns patrolling their streets every day. For many of them, that is real power.

Why should they believe otherwise?
### APPENDIX 1: INTERVIEW LIST (A-numbered series)

#### Summary

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Male</th>
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<th>Age 10-14</th>
<th>Age 15-18</th>
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#### Details

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<th>Bogotá</th>
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<td>A12 &amp; A13 (close friends)</td>
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<td>Length</td>
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<td>Sex</td>
<td>Occupation</td>
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<td>Laidy</td>
<td>Cazucá</td>
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<td>12</td>
<td>F</td>
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<td>Nora</td>
<td>Cazucá</td>
<td>A21, A23 (friends) &amp; teacher</td>
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<td>13</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Ines</td>
<td>Cazucá</td>
<td>A21, A22 (friends) &amp; teacher</td>
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# APPENDIX 2: TESTIMONY LIST (B-numbered series)

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<th>Quoted by Translator</th>
<th>Contacted by</th>
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<td>Rachel Schmidt</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>(started with urban militia)</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>(started with urban militia)</td>
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<td>Torres 2003</td>
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<td>Rachel Schmidt</td>
<td>Torres 2003</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>FARC</td>
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<td>Torres 2003</td>
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*Interviews were done between 2001-2002 as part of the reintegration process for former child combatants run by the Colombian Institute for Family Wellbeing (ICBF).*

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<td>Catalina</td>
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<td>ELN</td>
<td>Rachel Schmidt</td>
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<td>Gonzalez Uribe 2002</td>
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<tr>
<td>B7</td>
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<td>F</td>
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<td>17 or 12</td>
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<td>B10</td>
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<td>Arturo</td>
<td>n/a</td>
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<td>Dora Margarita</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>ELN &amp; M-19</td>
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<td>Testimony was collected over several meetings in Bogotá; was collaborated by testimony from second female guerrilla</td>
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<td>2000</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Liliana Lopez</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>FARC (became commander)</td>
<td>Rachel Schmidt</td>
<td>Interview was done over two days in Mexico as part of testimony collected for Ms. Lara Salive's book; Ms. Lopez approved the final text</td>
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<td>B13</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Isabel Bolaños</td>
<td>mid-teens (was first involved with Communist student movement)</td>
<td>AUC (became director of logistics for Carlos Castaño)</td>
<td>Rachel Schmidt</td>
<td>Interview was done with the consent of Carlos Castaño; testimony was collected over three Sundays at the Good Pastor Prison in Bogotá; Ms. Bolaños approved the final text</td>
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<td>Interview was taken in 2-hour intervals over several days; interviewers were local women trained by research team; girls were not paid and the transcripts were translated verbatim</td>
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<td>2002</td>
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<td>&quot;Girl C&quot;</td>
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<td>Keairns &amp; research team</td>
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<td>B20</td>
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<td>Franky</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>&quot;Parche&quot; (small youth gang)</td>
<td>Rachel Schmidt</td>
<td>Interviews were taken over several meetings; participants were not paid.</td>
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<th>Context</th>
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<td>19</td>
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<td>Rachel Schmidt</td>
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<tr>
<td>B23</td>
<td>1997</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Pijao</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>4 (began committing petty crime at this age)</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Rachel Schmidt</td>
<td>Interviews were taken over several meetings; participants were not paid</td>
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REFERENCES


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