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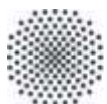
**“Women's emancipation through participation
in non-state armed conflicts? Three case
studies.”**

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1. Introduction

Taking the example of Sikh female fighters, Laurent Gayer states that it "is paradoxically through their subjection to the movement's male leadership and patriarchal values that these women seem to have found a sense of empowerment" (Gayer, 2012, 50).

The presence of women in war or their participation in violent acts or movements has always more or less existed, but has historically been ignored or fetishized, as it upsets the boundary between masculine and feminine, between the warrior man and the naturally gentle and peaceful woman. From the 1990s onwards, however, a significant number of armed conflicts have involved women, who are particularly prized by non-state armed groups. These violent events attracted the attention of international academic and political circles, within which women were analysed as the systematic victims - of rape, displacement, indoctrination - of these new conflicts affecting the global South. Nevertheless, traumatic shocks such as major crises or warlike events disrupt structures and mentalities rooted in societies, and can thus convey changes, in particular in favour of women's emancipation. On the basis of these trends and hypotheses, it seems particularly relevant to me to analyse the correlation between war and women, from the angle of the empowerment potential offered by women's participation in armed conflict.

What potential for emancipation arises from the active participation of women in armed political conflicts? This research question implies some secondary interrogations which have to be treated in this assignment, like under which conditions can participation in armed conflict lead to emancipation successes ? What aspects need to be considered in order to understand in which cases participation in violent political organizations can lead to changes or even improvements in terms of gender issues and relations between men and women?

My analysis is based on three case studies, three armed rebel groups that recruited a large proportion of women, namely the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), a Marxist communist guerrilla group that fought against Colombian government forces from 1964 to 2016 ; the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), an ethnic-nationalist movement that took up arms to demand independence for the northeastern Tamil region of Sri Lanka, leading to a bloody civil war from 1983 to

2009; and finally, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), created in 1978 and currently fighting in Turkey for creation and recognition of a Kurdish independent state.

After briefly reviewing the historical relationship between women and war within research, I will outline the various theoretical contributions revolving around the question of women in armed conflict and their prospects for emancipation. I will then present my three case studies, analysing women's participation in these organizations through various determining factors. Finally, I will discuss the elements that seem relevant to me in the light of the theoretical contributions, in order to explore the possibilities of emancipation, common or dissimilar, resulting from the involvement of Colombian, Tamil and Kurdish women.

2. Theoretical part

2.1. Emergence of issues on gender and war in feminist academic studies

The issues surrounding the theme of women and war mostly emerged in the 1980s and 1990s, a decade during which feminist theories introduced the term of gender, defined as a social and discursive construct structuring relations between men and women, as a lens of analysis into disciplines of international relations and peace and security studies (Tickner, 1992). Feminist research first pointed to the discursive and normative exclusion of women in the realm of war, due to conceptions of men as “Just warriors” and women as “Beautiful Souls” (Elshtain, 1995, 4). The feminine stereotypes like the domestic and peaceful propensity tend to categorise women as external strangers to the field of international relations and armed conflicts (Tickner, 1992). These conceptions have been criticized for fundamentally hindering our understanding of gender dynamics in conflict and the roles assumed by women in war. In 1989, in her book *Bananas, Beaches, and Bases: Making Feminist sense of international Politics*, Cynthia Enloe sought to make women, who had been relegated to the background, more visible by calling attention to the essential tasks they could perform in the machinery of war, however diverse they might be. (Enloe, 1989)

Since the end of the 1990s, the issue of sexual and gender based violence during conflict became a central theme, still today, both in international political sphere and in feminist studies. The aim is above all to give an account of a widespread phenomenon and an institutionalised practice that particularly affects women. For example, Stiglmeier on the base of the conflict in Bosnia-Herzegovina argue that mass rape can be used as a weapon of war or genocide (Stiglmeier, 1994), while E.J. Wood

states that sexual violence, including "rape, coerced undressing, and non-penetrating sexual assault such as sexual mutilation" (Wood, 2006, 308) varies both in terms of form and prevalence in all types of conflict. At the same time, some authors have sought to account for women's participation in political violence, whether voluntary or forced, and the different status they can have, between victims and perpetrators (Moser and Clark, 2001). Despite this, others show that women in armed conflicts are still essentialized or categorized in the boxes of "Mothers, monsters or whores" (Sjoberg and Gentry, 2007, 12-13), which prevents to recognize women's agency in violence.

Following the adoption in 2000 of the United Nations Security Council resolution UNSCR 1325, which sets out a policy on the integration of gender issues in post-conflict periods and into Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) processes, academic literature has also taken up these issues, arguing the importance of hearing the women's voices to promote a successful peace-building. But still today, a large number of feminist researchers are denouncing the gap between the roles adopted by women combatants during wars and their hard return to civil life, where there are stigmatized again (Mazurana and Cole, 2013, 207-208). Ortega and Maria claim that, beyond the marginalization and victimization of women in the post-war era, it is also very essential to consider women's active participation during conflicts, without which progress towards the abolition of gender hierarchies will not be possible, if women are deliberately sidelined, or if they personally sideline themselves, fearing that they will be treated differently from men (Ortega and Maria, 2009, 3)

Generally speaking, feminist studies that have emerged since the end of the 1980s have pointed to the historical essentialization and naturalization of women in wars, even prolonged today by the inability to understand and analyse women's violence without falling into stereotyped narratives, from victims to peace-supporters.

2.2. Theoretical elements on women's participation in non-state armed conflicts

This section looks at various theoretical elements discussed in the literature concerning women's active participation as combatants in non-state armed political groups, particularly rebel and insurgent groups.

Conceptualizing Violent Non-State Armed Groups

Since 1990, contemporary wars have evolved, mostly taking the form of intra-state and sub-state armed conflicts, particularly known for the involvement of armed

groups, described as particularly violent and targeting the civilian population. These groups, referred to as “Violent Non-State Armed Groups”, can be defined as follows: "Rebel groups, community militias, organizations reliant on terrorist tactics, and any other formally organized armed group not formally affiliated with a government" (Loken and Matfess, 2022, 3). In the context of this research, the focus will be on rebel or insurgent groups, which can be characterised by "using organised violence to directly contest state legitimacy by attempting to overthrow the government, secede, or otherwise replace the existing sovereign structure" (Marks, 2017, 237). That means that rebel groups, often based on a form of guerrilla warfare, have a more political dimension, contrary to the primary definition of terrorism, because the main goal is to destabilize government forces and shake up the established order (Feldmann and Hinojosa, 2009, 3).

Regarding the structure of these clandestine groups, Rapin asserts that they differ from other militarized organizations not only in the more restrictive aspect of the struggle, since it effectively depends on the responsibility and loyalty of the members, but also in their less hierarchical structure, more based on reciprocal relationships between participants, since authority is based on each member's awareness that the organisation has its necessity (Rapin, 2019). Indeed, Grosjean also differentiates three different forms of engagement in political violence, from isolated acts to fully framed violence. This third form of political violence is carried out within an organisation that is divided between its partisan and armed branches, and which selects its activists, cadres and fighters in order to establish violent and peaceful modes of action within a complex structure (Grosjean, 2019). The engagement of women within a violent organisation will be the object of the study.

Women's participation in rebel and insurgent groups

The vast majority of researchers recognise the wide participation of women in non-state armed organisations, particularly in rebel groups, “that often provide a greater degree of ideological and practical space for women to participate as combatants” (Haeri and Puechguirba, 2010, 110). For example, The Women in Armed Rebellion Dataset (WARD) found that at least 40% of rebel groups operating between 1964 and 2014 included women as combatants (Wood and Thomas, 2019). Concretely, one soldier in ten was a woman in the *National Patriotic Front of Liberia* (NPFL) (Utas, 2005, 405), while women make up around thirty percent of the *Farabundo Marti*

National Liberation Front (FMLN) in El Salvador as well as of the *Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia* (FARC), without seeing that the PKK could not carry on fighting without its female fighters, who represent essential elements of the struggle (Loken, 2017, 64).

The women fighters can be called upon to exercise various responsibilities within the violent struggle, from using weapons or detonating explosives used against the enemy, to carrying out assassinations or suicide attacks (Wood and Thomas, 2019; Haeri and Puechguirba, 2010). While some organizations may use female fighters for gendered tactical reasons, others have included women in all their combat units, offering the same training regardless of member's gender (Jordan and Denov, 2007, 43). The literature also reports the existence in some cases of branches made up exclusively of women, and sometimes even led by women themselves. "VNSAs of all ideological stripes and political contexts have organised women's wings. For example, the Amal Movement in Lebanon, Hamas in Palestine, the *Free Papua Movement* (OPM) in Indonesia, and the *Zimbabwe African People's Union* (ZAPU) all operated Women's Departments." (Loken and Matfess, 2022, 10). However, there is not always consensus among researchers in assessing the link between the creation of women's units and the leadership power granted to female combatants and managers (Coomaraswamy, quoted after Wang, 105).

Why women join violent non-state organisations ?

While it has long been common to think that women who engage in violence do so out of obligation or subordination to a man, as Sjoberg and Gentry show with regard to women going off to fight the jihad (Sjoberg and Gentry, 2008, 68), other aspects have also been taken into account to understand the complex involvement's reasons.

Indeed, female engagement could be at first driven by push factors. Firstly, it can be caused by social changes in a given space and time, like Sanin and Franco demonstrate for the case of Latin America, where the increase involvement of women in guerilla forces of the region was due to social changes in "agricultural exports, family structure, migration to cities, and religious beliefs." (Sanin and Franco, 2017, 772). In the same manner, the context of war can induce several problems that can lead to the involvement of women in violence, like for example the displacement leading to the destruction of traditional family structure, or the increase of insecurity and sexual violence in wartime (Tezcür, 2020, 3). More personal motivations can also be

grafted onto these socio-demographic aspects, such as the desire to escape a situation of vulnerability or the uncertainty of everyday life. Taking the example of women involved in the civil conflict in Peru, Boutron shows that women are driven to become involved because of the violence they experience at home or in society (Boutron, 2013, 47). This last point shows that women who are facing socio-economical and personal difficulties may be led to enlist by necessity, almost forced to engage, as the last chance to survive. Utas argue that this decision out of spite can be however understood as a tactical agency, in the sense that the victim status can drive women to commit in order to become agents of change. She thus “proposes the term victimcy to describe the agency of self-staging as victim of war, and [...] explore how it is deployed as one tactic-among others-in women's "social navigation" of war zones.” (Utas, 2005, 408)

Women can also be attracted by pull factors, on the other side. If it is common that undereducated women, mostly from rural areas, get involved to escape an unfavourable situation, it is frequently observed that urban women are often more politicized and that they can engage in violence in order to pursue their political convictions, by other means (Lafaye, 2022, 5-6). In addition to women's personal willingness, there are also organization-specific attractive characteristics, which can create a favourable environment for women's fight. Wood and Thomas (2017) have shown that the ideology of the rebel group plays an important role in the inclusion of women in their ranks. Groups with left-wing political affiliations seem more open to recruiting women, unlike groups with a fundamentalist religious ideological base. Rebel groups espousing progressive ideologies, such as Marxism or Maoism, are generally driven by a desire to destroy or overcome patriarchal structures that oppress people and alienate women in particular. Their assumed egalitarian structure can support women's inclusion in decision-making positions. In this sense, ideology can be seen as a determining factor for women, as it can reflect the groups' propensity to be benevolent towards women and therefore offer them a more reassuring framework. The authors consider that "group political ideologies shape leaders' interests in recruiting female combatants (demand) as well as the willingness of potential female recruits to participate in roles typically reserved for men (supply)" (Wood and Thomas, 2017, 8). Of course, the various push and pull factors can interact with each other, because most of the time women's involvement can't be reduced to a single cause.

Why recruit women from the point of view of the organization ?

From the point of view of the organisations, the desire to integrate women can be explained by several reasons, apart from the ideological argument developed above. Firstly, some groups may simply lack male fighters, which leads them to turn to female recruits, as was the case for the LTTE in the early stages. In this case, the decision is pragmatic, only as an answer to the deaths and need for manpower (Alison, 2003, 39). The inclusion of women can also be seen as a tactical advantage for some armed groups, mostly because women can be able to carry out risky public operations without being suspected by the society or the authorities, because of the supposed pacific women's character (Wang, 2011, 103).

Then, some groups may voluntarily include women in their ranks to diffuse a positive image, showing that the fight is global and undifferentiated (Stanski, 2006, 139). This reason can be related to the ideology of the group but not necessarily, because, here, the inclusion of women do not represent the core of the struggle, but just a means that can give more legitimacy or attractiveness to the movement. The presence of women could also lead to greater media coverage and give more visibility to the movement's cause; it also could lessen the violent image of the organisations. A brief parenthesis may be permitted on this point, because some authors are sharing the argument of Wood, stating that "armed groups with a high proportion of female combatants engage less in sexual violence (Wood, quoted after Loken, 2019, 61), in particular because women serve as a sexual alternative to rape, as they are accessible within the movement. However, Cohen or Loken, on the basis of interviews with former female combatants or women who have been raped, assert that women are also perpetrators, to the same degree as men, of sexual violence. They argue, however, that these practices are the result of the masculinist and militaristic culture in which both male and female members have been socialised in the organisation (Loken, 2017, 83). "Women and men are subjected to similar pressures from within armed groups and, facing similar circumstances, can be expected to commit similar atrocities" (Cohen, 2013, 410).

Finally, there are cases where the recruitment of women is the result of the political objective of the armed struggle itself, with women being seen as an inseparable, sometimes even central, element of the insurrectionary struggle. The PKK, for example, through the writings of its leader Öcalan, adopted an ideology in

which the emancipation of women inseparable of the liberation of Kurdish society (Novellis, 2021, 116).

Generally speaking, what we need to retain from these theoretical elements is the tension between the fact that women most of the time get involved voluntarily, but that the voluntary aspect can be largely questionable, on the one hand on the assumption that involvement may sometimes be the only way out of a catastrophic situation, and on the other hand, that the organization may also set up recruitment initiatives like indoctrination. So, even if it's accepted that women's participation can be influenced by a number of factors, it's still difficult to affirm that the commitment is entirely willed and reflected by the women themselves, and not by external forces or phenomena that determine women's enrolment in underground armed groups.

2.3.Theoretical elements on women, armed conflict and empowerment

What does empowerment mean, and what are its characteristics? Does being integrated as a woman into highly militarised structures and occupying positions normally reserved for men lead to greater equality between the sexes and to change in people's minds? The academic literature is not unanimous on these questions. Some researchers believe that war can be a vehicle for women's emancipation, by changing practices and attitudes to gender issues, while others claim that such progress requires more effort, in particular to ensure that women gain greater recognition within society or hold decision-making positions, particularly in politics.

Empowerment : a complex process

First of all, empowerment can be defined in many different ways, depending on which aspects are focused on. Mandal states, for example, that empowerment can be understood as a "multidimensional social process [that] helps people gain control over their own lives" (Mandal, 2013, 18). He also differentiates several types of empowerment, from social or educational to economic, political or even psychological. According to the author, political empowerment, resulting from women's political participation at all levels of governance, is the most important, because it can permit to challenge power institutions or deconstruct traditional dogma through better effectiveness and agency (Mandal, 2013, 22).

Secondly, there is a theoretical debate about the definition of empowerment, which is seen either as a simple "outcome", or as a "process", or both. Some empowerment

theorists, like Kieffer, see empowerment as a linear process comparable to life: the trigger being birth (era of entry), followed by childhood (era of advancement), then adolescence (era of incorporation), culminating in mature development (era of commitment) (Kieffer, quoted after Carr, 2003,12). Empowerment is thus measured at the end of the process and is considered outside any socio-political or historical context. For his part, E. Summerson Carr offers a more nuanced perspective on empowerment, which he sees as cyclical and, in a way, as an infinite variable. According to his model of empowerment, in which he integrates feminist notions, there are four (sub)processes. The first is the "position", which includes the stage of human misery, determined by both socio-economic and psychological factors, leading to the "conscientization" or "consciousness-raising (CR)" phase, during which "women can connect their experiences of oppression with those of other women and thereby see the political dimensions of their personal problems" (Carr, 2003, 15). This phase can also be translated into an active strategy within a group to mobilise for social action. Then comes the political action enabled by their interpretation of the world and the problems they have faced in the past, and by their mobilisation. If political mobilisation is successful, the possibility of change arises, otherwise oppressed groups will have to go back through the previous phases to understand why their action failed. Thus, through this model of empowerment, Carr emphasises two elements that are essential in his view, that are conscientization and praxis, ideally accomplished within a group.

War opens up opportunities for women's empowerment

It is now a question of presenting various theoretical contributions on the question of war and rebel groups as a vector or not of emancipation. It is widely accepted that large-scale, violent traumatic events generate social and political change, at both societal and individual levels (Gurses, 2018, 30). Indeed, E.J. Wood has examined the social process of civil war, which can generate a transformation of social networks through six different mechanisms, including the transformation of gender roles. For example, she states that "patriarchal networks are often radically reshaped during war because women and girls take on unprecedented roles as combatants and interlocutors with authority, and [...] take on new forms of work" (Wood, 2008, 553). For his part, Yadav, drawing on the words of sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, argues that crises lead to the questioning of practices anchored and accepted in society, and create a space

conducive to "critical reflexivity" that can contribute to change, which is itself possible if there is a "mismatch between the field and the habitus" (Yadav, 2021, 452).

Similarly, there are several mechanisms through which armed conflict can lead to positive changes in favour of women's emancipation. Firstly, women are led to adopt new roles that were previously occupied by men. Secondly, war can trigger the formation of social movements, creating skills that serve as a lever for future emancipation. Finally, these changes lead to new normative perceptions of women and their abilities (Bakken and Buhaug, 2021, 985). Thus war can represent a context favourable to the opening of new windows of opportunity in favour of women's greater awareness and greater capacity for action. Webster et. al. add that war can result in regime change, which may itself be accompanied by "a demand for new political actors, and women are often seen as more legitimate after conflict because they are perceived (correctly or not) as less responsible for it." (Webster et. al., 2019, 263).

Furthermore, if we focus specifically on the link between the active participation of women within a rebel armed group, some authors have also observed emancipatory perspectives. Laurent Gayer, who looked at the situation of Sikh women fighting within the Khalistan movement, showed that it was surprisingly within a militarised and highly masculine structure that women experienced a form of emancipation. He states that "most of women [...] enjoyed their life in the organisation, mostly because they were challenging their traditional role as mothers, cooker and excluded from the social life" (Gayer, 2012, 55). In this example, it is participation in the struggle itself that confers a form of liberation, as women are given the opportunity to accomplish other tasks that would have been impossible without the conflict. This can be linked to a contribution of Rapin, who differentiates two forms of relationship between armed conflict and emancipation. On the one hand, she evokes the possibility of emancipation through armed struggle, where weapons constitute the instrument through which an emancipatory project is realised. This may echo the notion of "martial feminism", a notion developed by anthropologist Peter Shalk in 1994, which designate armed struggle as the means of achieving emancipation. On the other, emancipation within armed struggle, describing the taking up of arms as an emancipatory virtue in itself, with liberation taking place at the very heart of the warlike process. She thus describes four possible combinations, from an armed struggle that is doubly emancipatory

because it is achieved both in and through struggle, to the opposite, where neither the political purpose nor the process is a vector of emancipation. (Rapin, 2019)

Fragility of the gains: stigmatization, backlash or the impossible empowerment ?

However, while most studies show that war can be a vehicle for change, the majority of researchers do not necessarily share a deep conviction that war profoundly emancipates women, whether they were combatants or whether this concerns women in society more generally. Indeed, emancipation, while it may be felt or experienced by women during conflicts, does not necessarily continue after the war (Haeri and Puechguirba, 2010, 108). This is what Webster et. al . conclude in their research : "[...] at least in the short and medium term, war shakes up established social and political orders and creates an opportunity for gains in women's empowerment. At the same time, we do not find conclusive evidence that such gains persist beyond ten or fifteen years' (Webster et.al, 2019, 256).

Similarly, Bakken and Buhang emphasise the importance of the post-conflict period and identify three factors influencing women's empowerment. Firstly, they state that there is a “positive association between civil conflict severity and post-conflict change” (Bakken and Buhang, 2021, 988). Secondly, the form of peace agreements needs to be observed, as formal peace agreements seem to be more conducive to empowerment than other conflict ends. The third determining factor is the inclusion of gender issues in peace processes, in the sense that the integration of women and gender-specific needs are necessary to achieve equality and the transformation of societal norms.

Thus, in order to observe long-term emancipation, research seems united in advocating efforts to sustain the gains made during armed conflict. Nevertheless, despite the progress that has been made, particularly at international level, in integrating gender issues, recognising women and giving them greater visibility in peace and security procedures, the research still underlines the failure of the post-conflict period for women. "Despite growing attention to gender as a policy focus, DDR programmes have continued to fail women and girls" (Hills and Mackenzie, 2017, 456). In another way, and beyond the tendency to invisibilise women emerging from conflict, other authors also point to the mistakes made in transitional justice, which still largely fails to recognise violence committed by women. Ortega and Maria, using the example of truth commissions, shows that the post-conflict period sometimes

exacerbates gender inequalities, as "experiences of disempowerment and marginalization often increase for women combatants as conflict comes to an end, beginning with the negotiation process". (Ortega and Maria, 2009, 2). Women are then once again confronted with a desire to confine them to a homogenous pacifist bloc that is irresponsible for their actions, which tends most of the time to exclude them from the work of reconstruction and pacification. It can happen that women, aware of this stigma, resign themselves to remaining silent or not revealing their roles as combatants in armed conflicts.

On the other hand, the desire to sustain emancipation after the conflict can face hostility within civil society itself. The transgression of certain gender norms permitted in times of conflict may in fact come up against a return of post-war patriarchal power wishing to regain control over the running of society and demanding that everyone return to the positions they are supposed to occupy. Thus, "the forms of consciousness and struggle that emerge in times of rapid social change require sympathetic and open-minded examination, rather than hasty categorization" (Kandiyoti, quoted after Yadav, 2021, 458). Some authors show that it is possible for women involved in armed rebel groups to report a positive experience of their participation in the war, but then to be relegated to the background, as was the case before the conflict. Thus the progress made in favour of their emancipation is trampled underfoot by the return of peace. Boutron takes the example of women who took up arms in the Peruvian civil war, and shows that they were subjected to sexual violence once they have been demobilised, particularly by the prison authorities, who are largely dominated by men. The domination of women's bodies thus makes it possible to punish these "deviant" women and re-establish order by reaffirming men's power through female subordination (Boutron, 2013, 49). This rejection of emancipation, based on a desire to return to the status quo, can be described under the term "backlash". This concept refers to a return to gender hierarchies and traditional norms, mostly by conservative actors, particularly in highly patriarchal societies, characterised by an exercise of control over women's bodies and honour, reduced to the private sphere.

Finally, there is a reluctance, particularly in feminist circles, to assert that women's participation in armed conflicts enables them to be emancipated, on the grounds that war has merely militarised society (Gayer, 2019) and that women combatants have in a sense only contributed to this general militarisation. Thus, while

the rhetoric of women's emancipation and liberation may appear on paper, in the ideology espoused by the armed groups, the fight is not waged in favour of women but with women in order to win the party's cause. So not only do women suffer a double oppression (Makshood, 2017, 29), since they are in reality neither free in society nor within the armed groups, but they also have to accept violence and warlike practices as legitimate means of serving a cause which, in the end, will not benefit them once they have laid down their arms. From this perspective, emancipation is achieved neither in the struggle nor through the struggle; women are simply “cogs in the wheel” (Wang, 2011, 105).

Overcoming simplistic analyses : “sexual division of armed labour” and contingency

There are several conceptions of the relationship between women's participation in armed conflicts and the prospects for emancipation, at individual level or at the level of society in general. Jules Falquet criticises these different theoretical perceptions, arguing that they fail to take account of the diversity of women's experiences of involvement in armed groups, or to understand the fragility or relativity of transformations and possible backlash. She therefore proposes the concept of the *sexual division of revolutionary labour* (Falquet, 2019), as well as an analytical grid, in order to understand the ways in which women became involved in the armed struggle and to measure the benefits or limitations for them. She invites us to look first at whether tasks within the organisation are segregated and whether women have access to positions of authority, but also to see whether there is any form of recognition of the skills or qualifications provided by the struggle. She also suggests that it is important to observe if women are subject to particular risks, particularly through constraints imposed on their bodies, such as forced abortions or sexual violence. Finally, questions of remuneration and internal struggles are also elements to be taken into account, by asking who controls the organisation, whether women are satisfied with their positions, and by whom and for what purposes women's branches are created (Falquet, 2019). The author thus argues for a relativisation of voluntarist or triumphalist theories, which see violent mobilisation solely through the prism of women's agency, a criticism shared by Gayer or Yadav, to go beyond the line “victimhood to agency” (Gayer, 2012, 64). Indeed, Yadav argue that “change does not occur in a social vacuum but takes place within situated constraints and limitations that determine the nature and the pace of transformation” (Yadav, 2021, 459). Women’s

motivation or capacity for action are not always enough for effective emancipation, that can be hindered by some contingencies.

3. Method

My research dissertation takes the form of three case studies and consists of literature-based work. This method involves a reading and critical analysis of existing academic literature on the subject, in order to compare different scientific contributions and extract certain trends, commonalities or contradictions. My analysis is based on the analyse of empirical studies conducted on women from the selected armed groups. These studies provide me not only with snippets of testimonies from female ex-combatants, but also with essential information on the respective organizations, whose official documents, websites or speeches are not available due to the illegal or clandestine nature of the groups. The researchers who carried out these studies have also contributed interesting reflections, providing me with new avenues of analysis. I also draw on more general or theoretical literature to complement these contributions. One of the limits of this method is that it is impossible for me to verify the veracity of all information or facts used in the studies, which deal with complex and violent conflicts. The aim of my work is to focus on the relationship between these contributions, and not to challenge the reality of what may or may not be described in them. Furthermore, it is possible that scientific articles adopt a certain point of view, for example by analysing war events or the words of ex-combatants through a feminist scientific lens, which can add a normative dimension to the conclusions drawn.

4. Analysis part : three case studies

4.1. Historical and sociological context: roots of the armed conflicts, formation of the rebel groups and characteristics

This part, which serves as a general presentation of the case studies, is not intended to be exhaustive, but simply serves to identify certain dynamics surrounding each rebel group, in order to understand the global framework for the central analysis about women's involvement in respective organizations.

4.1.1. Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia: people's uprising for equality

“Colombia has experienced over a half-century of sustained conflict, the longest insurgency in Latin America” (Ehasz, 2020, 4). Since gaining independence in 1810, Colombia has experienced endemic violence, particularly due to state weakness and strong rivalries between the two major political parties (Pécaut, 2008), the Liberal

Party on the one hand, supported mainly by reform-minded peasants, and on the other the Conservative Party, made up of landowners, their peasants and largely backed by the Catholic Church. This class conflict, which began in the 1920s and 1930s, saw the emergence of demands from peasants against the landowning elites, complaining of harsh working and living conditions and the latter's stranglehold on the land, crushing small farmers (Stanski, 2006, 137). These decades of political violence culminated in the civil war, known as *La Violencia*, triggered by the assassination in Bogotá in 1948 of Jorge Eliecer Gaitán, a liberal-left leader and presidential candidate who was very popular with the peasants. During the bloodiest period in Colombia's history, peasant self-defense forces known as the "Independent Republics" were formed with the support of the Communist Party. The end of the civil war in 1958 raised hopes of peace, with the signature of political compromise to alternate presidencies, called *National Front*. However, this attempt at appeasement ended in failure: on June 22, 1964, during the Battle of Marquetalia, Colombian armed forces launched a disastrous attack on the "Independent Republic", triggering a conflict that would last until 2016.

It was against this backdrop of violence and humiliation that the guerrilla organization Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC), was officially formed in 1966. Initially, the hard core was formed around some forty revolutionary peasants and two charismatic figures: Manuel Marulanda, who became the movement's historic and undisputed leader until his death in 2008, and Jacobo Arenas, the movement's major figure and political strategist. FARC defines itself primarily as a telluric movement, due to the largely rural origins of its members, and has the long-term objective of overthrowing the Colombian government and setting up a new one, controlled by FARC (Saab and Taylor, 460). The main aim, inherited from that of the Independent Republic, is to carry out wide-ranging agrarian reforms and enable peasants to recover their land rights, by defending communities targeted by the government in the countryside. Gradually, however, FARC broadened its objectives, softening the original strict peasant vision to reach a wider population, especially the most poorest and invisible Colombian. The FARC thus evolved from a defence organization into a mobile guerrilla force, with a Marxist-Leninist, anti-imperialist ideological discourse, aiming to implement a "revolutionary program calling together all the citizens who dream of a Colombia for Colombians, with equality of opportunities and equitable distribution of wealth" (Stanski, 2006, 138). This change of strategy was later coupled, in 1982, with a change

of name, adding the ending EP, for "Ejercito del Pueblo" (FARC-EP), meaning "People's army", in order to emphasize the global nature of the armed struggle and distance itself from the initial communist orthodoxy. While the guerrilla movement expanded in the 1970s, it was mainly in the 1980s that the FARC experienced rapid and significant growth, largely due to the increase in activities used to finance it, including kidnapping and involvement in national and international drug trafficking, which accounted for between 60 and 90 percent of its total budget (Saab and Taylor, 2009, 464).

FARC became a major player in Colombia, with a membership reaching 20766 at the height of its glory (Colombia Report, December 1, 2018), thanks to the military expansion that took place in the 1990s, coupled with a political strategy of indoctrination, which, for example, led FARC to recruit minors (Sanin and Franco, 2017). FARC is also known to have carried out extensive kidnapping campaigns, the most famous of which was that of the Colombian-French politician Ingrid Betancourt, held from 2002 to 2008. Indeed FARC kidnappings rose from 4 in 1996 to 66 in 2005, making a total of 468 abductions over this period (Feldmann and Hinosoja, 2009, 13). FARC's success also rests on its highly militaristic structure, which imposes strong discipline and demands particular respect for the hierarchy, through "the confinement, separation and control of people bound to the organization by lifelong membership" (Sanin and Franco, 2017, 774).

FARC's growth slowed down in the 1990s and 2000s, however, firstly after the creation of the *Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia* (AUC) in 1997, unit of paramilitaries, more or less affiliated to the government and renowned for their highly violent actions to eliminate the guerilla (Saab and Taylor, 2009). President Alvaro Uribe (2002-2010) also attempted to defeat the guerrillas militarily by implementing "an aggressive security campaign" (Gjelsvik, 2010, 27). In addition, 2008 saw the death of seven FARC leaders, including Manuel Marulanda, undermining the movement's leadership (Feldmann and Hinojosa, 2009, 8), followed by a decline in popularity among the general public, also reducing membership

Since 1982, a series of attempts to negotiate with successive Colombian governments took place, without any real success until the final peace agreement signed in 2016, 52 years after the start of violence. These agreements, considered "internationally as a progressive and remarkable agreement" (Ehasz, 2020, 17),

enabled the implementation of DDR programs, to initiate a political transition for FARC, which transformed into a legal and recognized political party. The Revolutionary Alternative Common Force now has five seats in both the Senate and the House of Representatives, guaranteed until 2026, regardless of election results.

4.1.2. Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam : fighting for homeland and self-determination

Sri Lanka is a country with a very diverse population, in which three ethnic groups in particular have coexisted since ancient times. Based on a 1981 census, Perera reports that the country is divided between a majority of Sinhalese, who make up 73.95% of the total population, followed by 12.70% Sri Lankan Tamil, 5.52% Indian Tamil and 7.05% Muslim. Other minority groups come next, making up less than 1% of the Sri Lankan population (Perera, 2001, 4). The Sinhalese, who are concentrated in the central and south-western parts of the country, are predominantly Buddhist, while the Tamils are mostly of Hindu origin and occupy large parts of the northern and eastern regions of the country. The two majority ethnic groups have more or less always coexisted, but from the pre-colonial period to the present day, nationalist tendencies have emerged on both sides, fuelling tensions and power struggles.

After three waves of colonialization, by the Portuguese, the Danes and the British, independence then led to economic and political instability and a weak state, which in turn fuelled Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist policies to the detriment of the Tamil population. Several authors list the successive laws and policies that had the effect of sidelining the Tamil population and fostering the rise of a nationalist revenge (Alison, 2009; Wang, 2011; Perera, 2001). The first stage took place directly after independence, with the banning of Tamil Indians from voting, which gave the Sinhalese majority an important political base. This was followed by a policy of demographic replacement in the predominantly Tamil northern and eastern regions of the country by a poor Sinhalese population, fostering ethnic tensions. In 1956, the "Sinhala Only-Act" was established, promoting the Sinhalese language, which became the official language in place of English. The introduction of Buddhism as the state religion, followed by the policy of standardization, restricting Tamil access to education and leading to underemployment.

Although the measures adopted by the Sinhalese majority were initially contested non-violently by Tamil youth (Perera, 2001, 19), the violence of repression

and the policy of ethnic invisibilization led to mistrust of national institutions and the rise of radical Tamil nationalism. Thus, in the 1970s, a number of protest movements emerged among Tamil youth. Under the impetus of Vellupillai Prabhakaran, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) were founded on May 5, 1976, and established their hegemony by gradually eliminating other insurgent groups. The LTTE's ultimate aim was to create a separatist Tamil state, named "Tamil Eelam", in order to give the people of this same ethnic group a homeland, the right to self-determination and Sri Lankan citizenship (Jordan and Denov, 2007,45).

The country truly plunged into a bloody civil war in July 1983, when Sinhalese violently repressed an attack in Jaffna. In 1997, an Indo-Lankan agreement was signed to establish an Indian military presence and promote a ceasefire between the two sides. The Indian Peace Keeping Forces (IPKF) however failed, due to the numerous acts of violence committed against Tamil civilians, which led to the withdrawal of Indian troops in 1990 (Arena, 2005, 43). By 2002, the conflict had claimed some 70,000 lives and displaced 600,000, 75,000 of them internally (Alison, 2003, 38). In the same year, a ceasefire was signed with the support of the Norwegian government, which offered the hope of a reduction in confrontations, but was short-lived due to violations of the agreement by both sides. In 2009, the Sri Lankan government finally opted for a military resolution of the conflict, rather than a peace agreement, leading to the LTTE's capitulation in May of that year (Fonseka, 2021, 267).

The LTTE would later be described as the "most violent guerrilla organization of South Asia" (Wang, 2011, 100). The discipline and dedicated leadership of the armed group rested on a political wing, subordinate to a powerful military wing, including its own naval force, Sea Tigers and its own suicide service, Black Tigers. The LTTE are known to have carried out many suicide attacks, mainly against Indian or Sri Lankan political figures. But the ethno-nationalist group also targeted pacifist Tamils, in order to achieve a total cause in which not even violence should be refused to respond to the suffering of the entire Tamil people (Makshood, 2017, 9). Finally, the LTTE relied on an extensive propaganda service, active in several countries around the world, but also on the massive use of child soldiers and a forced recruitment service (Perera, 2001, 23).

4.1.3. Kurdistan Workers' Party : the liberation movement

The Kurds are a stateless people, living in several regions of the Middle East, forming Kurdistan, straddling Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria. I will focus exclusively on the Kurdish question in Turkey and the reasons that led to the conflict between the Turkish state and the Kurdish revolutionary nationalists, firstly because modern Turkey has pushed its nationalism the furthest, and thus de facto contributed most to the Kurdish revolts. Kurdish identity is multi-faceted and does not form a homogeneous block, since the Kurds are not only regionally dispersed, but also have linguistic and religious differences. Kurdish ethnicity is structured according to a tribal culture, which on the one hand has prevented the Kurdish people from achieving unity, but on the other has helped to preserve a Kurdish particularism in relation to other peoples in the Middle East, which would later determine the formation of a modern Kurdish nationalism (Yavuz, 2007, 3).

The proclamation of the Republic of Turkey, on October 29, 1923, was based on the desire to create a homogeneous nation and exclude all obstacles to nationalist supremacy. In response to Turkish policies of assimilation, revolts first raised in the 1920s and 1930s to resist the Kurdish exclusion, through language bans or forced displacement orchestrated by the Kemalist regime. However, the Kurdish question really crystallized with the flourishing socialist movements of the 1960s. The new liberal Constitution of 1961 present a favourable context (Criss, 1995, 18) to the emergence of Alevi's Kurdish intellectual figures within the Turkish left, demanding the right to self-determination. Movements such as the Revolutionary Cultural Society of the East were formed in 1969 to reflect a growing Kurdish consciousness. However, this group was banned, along with the left-wing party, after the 1971 military coup.

In the early 1970s, Abdullah Öcalan studied revolutionary theories and, together with a group of young Kurds, clandestinely formed the Kurdistan Workers' Party, or *Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan* (PKK) in 1978. Anticipating the new putsch of 1980, PKK militants fled to Syria to consolidate the movement and increase military capabilities, around Öcalan, who was already establishing himself as the ultimate leader. He notably used force, even against Kurds, to impose his leadership and demonstrate the organization's supremacy, but also to show all Kurdish people that an autonomous Kurdistan can only be achieved through action and arms, and not through complacency with the Turks (Criss, 1995, 19). The PKK describes itself as a liberation movement" (Yakuz, 2001, 12) and relies on three guiding principles, developed by Öcalan

Marxism-Leninism, democratic confederalism and *Jineology*, the science of women (Aytekin, 2019, 68), with the aim of establishing freedom. Öcalan's many publications continue to be disseminated, even since his imprisonment in 1999. These writings are complex and not the subject of our study, but it is interesting to note that he draws on mythological and historical elements to deconstruct the principles of the state and patriarchal system in general, and calls for a revolution from below, in which oppressed people take power and institute democracy. The ideological construction of the PKK, built around its leader, theorist and orator, go further than the egalitarian or militaristic discourse present in the struggle of the FARC or the LTTE. In terms of its structure, the PKK is divided between its political and military branches, and is described as a highly hierarchical organization built around Öcalan's cult of personality, with regional sub-groups as well.

Since the 1980s, the PKK has been carrying out a series of attacks against the Turkish government, which has also taken "counter-terrorist" measures to curb the actions of the enemy organization. For example, since 1987, "the Kurdish-inhabited zone of south-eastern Anatolia has been under Regional State of Emergency Governorate (known as OHAL)" (Yakuz, 2001, 14). The PKK's activities were not limited to Turkey, but also extended to other regions of the Middle East and internationally (Aytekin, 2019, 78). A series of negotiations with the Turkish government have taken place, almost all of them requested by the PKK, but unsuccessfully because the conflict is still ongoing. The PKK is internationally renowned thanks to its high profile in the media for its commitment against jihadism, particularly during the battle of Kobane, where attention was focused on the female recruits, depicted as heroines (Käser, 2021, 44).

4.2. Women in the rebel groups

This section is now devoted to the central analysis of women's participation in the three groups. After presenting the general framework concerning women in each organization, I'll look at their motivations, followed by their roles and responsibilities within the struggle, to then show certain controversial practices specific to each case. For the FARC and the LTTE, I will finally on the post-conflict's features for female ex-combatants, and for the PKK, I will deliver some leads concerning the possibilities of women's emancipation, as the conflict is not over.

4.2.1. Participation of women's fighters in the FARC

When the FARC was launched, no women were present, apart from the wives of the 48 peasants who created the movement, whereas women represented 33% of its strength at the time of the demobilization process (Barrios Sabogal, 2021, 88). In the early days of FARC, members were exclusively men, of peasant origin, and families were also involved in agrarian struggles, but women performed only secondary tasks, such as cooking, and were considered too physically weak to take part in the war (Sanin and Franco, 772-773). Women's involvement became massive only in the 1990s, and continued into the 2000s. (Gjelsvik, 2010, 37). Why the change?

Several authors show that this increase is linked to a shift in attitude and strategy of the FARC-EP. Once they changed the organizational structure and adopted a more flexible ideology, aimed at presenting the movement as a solution against discrimination and injustice, the participation of women was seriously considered. "The group depicts women as vulnerable to the same inequality, exploitation, and injustice that the movement is combating. (Stanski, 2006, 139). The FARC then relied on an active recruitment policy, seeking to demonstrate that women have every interest in joining the movement's armed forces in order to escape the violence and poverty to which they are exposed every day in Colombian society. In a way, the organization includes the question of gender in its new ideology (Barrios Sabogal, 2021, 84), which coincides with its goal, the fight for access to equality. Sanin and Franco thus consider that the FARC, through the massive recruitment of women, was able to fulfil its desire to create a fully-fledged army. The militarization and feminization of FARC are thus closely linked. (Sanin and Franco, 2006, 776).

In addition to the FARC's desire to recruit women in order to expand the struggle, and to put its Marxist-egalitarian ideology into practice by giving women access to the same roles and positions as men, the desire to recruit women can also be explained by other factors. Arena reports that women had tactical advantages that were exploited by the guerrillas, such as their seductive powers, which could be used to gather information from enemy Colombian forces (Arena, 2005, 60). Thus, some authors claim that women were not part of the FARC's political and ideological project, but that they proved useful in affirming the movement as a powerful army. The feminization of FARC was therefore more the result of a strategic need than an ideological conception (Ehasz, 2020, 37).

Factors leading to women's involvement in the FARC

"Many women in Colombia experience a double discrimination, being subordinate in a class-divided society as well as being subordinate to men in a patriarchal society. For many women, joining guerrilla groups can be seen as an opportunity to fight this double discrimination." (Gjelsvik, 2010, 39)

The majority of studies concerning women in the FARC point first and foremost to motivations linked to the local socio-economic context, which drive women to sign up to start a new life within the FARC. Indeed, Colombian women are exposed to a number of difficulties that often place them in a position of inferiority, in a largely sexist society (Ehasz, 2020, 15). Some research shows that economic inequalities, demonstrated by an average wage 66% lower than that of men and a lack of education, are combined with an accepted violence in social spheres, beside the exploitation of women in mines or coca cultivation, and their forced involvement from an early age in drug or prostitution networks (Arena, 2005; Gjelsvik, 2010). These constraints on women's daily lives were exacerbated by the war context in Colombia, which led to population displacement, increased violence in rural war zones and further impoverished women (Arena, 2005, 61). Given these unfavourable circumstances, women may have decided to join the movement either out of necessity, by a cost/benefit calculation showing that they had in any case nothing to lose by getting involved, or out of a desire to extricate themselves from this unpleasant and unjust life. This can be illustrated, for example, by the words of Laura interviewed by Keith Stanski: "we would go [to the movement] because they would give us an education" (Stanski, 2006, 141).

To this, violence suffered by close relatives, often within the family sphere, can also be a determining factor for women's involvement. In such cases, FARC is seen as an escape route, a safe haven from the physical and sexual violence suffered at home. "The uncertainty and risk that accompanies an armed movement, for some, may not compare to the constant violence at home." (Stanski, 2006, 142).

On the other hand, some authors seek to show the agency of women in their decisions to join the FARC, as Sabogal does. Sabogal shows that women can be actively motivated to join, in order to avenge a loved one killed during the war or by rival groups. The author adds that women may be motivated both by an attraction to military life, with desires to learn to fight and to become more powerful, in order to

match their male comrades (Barrios Sabogal, 2021, 89). Ideological motivations, such as the desire to espouse the egalitarian objective at the heart of FARC's armed struggle, can also be added to this, but are more rarely highlighted in the academic field.

Among the various factors that drive women to join the FARC, it is often difficult to distinguish between rational behaviour, in which violent participation is the result of a conscious choice on the part of the women, and commitment out of necessity, in order to escape unfavourable or even dangerous situations. What emerges from the women's testimonies is often the possibility offered by FARC to escape a monotonous life, because even if life in the armed group can be difficult, the struggle offers an ideological framework that gives meaning to daily life, fighting for a better world.

Roles and responsibilities assumed by women in the FARC

Guided by their Marxist ideology and a strong desire for cohesion within the group, FARC advocates equality among combatants. Equality within the guerrilla group means submission to training and compliance with undifferentiated orders between men and women (Arena, 2005, 63). Taking the example of physical and military training, women are expected to perform the same exercises, whatever their physical ability, and are expected to follow the same orders.

Thus, the non-gendered division of labour can promote gender equality and challenge preconceived notions that men are better than women, and that war is an entirely male domain. Indeed, Sabogal asserts, through the words of women combatants, that they were able to achieve personal but also collective fulfilment through the framework of the group and combat within the FARC, which "gave them a sense of accomplishment and usefulness within the organization" (Sabogal, 2021, 90). Through the struggle, but also through the discipline imposed on them, women fighters were able to challenge the inferior place given to them by society, confined to the roles of housewife and in the private sphere, by equalling or even surpassing that of men in the guerrilla. However the performance's undifferentiation could have also been criticized by some women, because of the demanding nature of the exercises, the difficulty of surpassing oneself, and the suffering caused by training or combat sessions (Stanski, 2006, 144-145).

Gjelsvik nonetheless brings a critical eye to bear between theory and practice, questioning the link between performing the same tasks and reaching the same

positions (Gjelsvik, 2010, 42). She shows in several respects that this link is not necessarily verified within FARC. Firstly, receiving the same training has not enabled women to reach the same positions as men in the organization, since even if there have been a few women in high-ranking decision-making positions, this does not represent the majority. Secondly, the discipline and performance requirements imposed equally on women are not conducive to more equal rights, since the principle of equality is based on an obligation, strict devotion to the cause, and not on a genuine quest to abolish gender hierarchies. This point may be related to the fact that the Marxist ideology on which FARC is based aims to abolish class injustices and inequalities, rather than to propose a progressive reflection on gender. Referring to Barth, she argues that "eliminating the power of the dominant class would not solve the problems of the oppression of women" (Gjelsvik, 2010, 43). Lastly, the supposed equality experimented by FARC appears to be no more than a facade, since it consists rather in their ability to prove that they can resemble men in many ways, than in a real transformation of gender hierarchies. Women's self-fulfilment is not achieved by themselves, but through their conformity to male expectations.

Questioning controversial rules and practices within the FARC

Beyond these reflections on the possible liberation of Colombian women fighters through their participation in combat, there are also controversial practices within the FARC, particularly affecting women. Alongside the denounced abusive practices against women and girls like abductions and rapes, there is one aspect that clearly recurs in the literature. FARC is known to have pursued a fairly strict policy of regulating intimate and sexual relations, as well as systematic forced contraception campaigns. Indeed, from the phase of mass recruitment of women, the organization had to take strict measures to control the behaviour of its militants. (Sanin and Franco, 2017, 773). Romantic relationships were authorized only with the agreement of the hierarchy, which imposed control over the private lives of its fighters (Arena, 2005, 65). On the other hand, birth control, which involved taking birth control pills and forced abortion in the event of pregnancy, only concerned women. Thus the principle of equality can be questioned, in the sense that control of bodies is exercised exclusively over women, mostly enduring physical and psychological consequences. The women's freedom within FARC is also undermined by the constraints on their capacity for choice and decision-making, when it is reported that abortions were in

some cases carried out without the mother's consent, nor without having informed her of the moment when it would be carried out (Stanski, 2006, 148).

In fact, we can also question the possibility of women's emancipation, which seems largely limited in this context (Gjelsvik, 2010, 54). Is ideology just a facade in the face of real FARC practices? An interesting contribution here comes from Sabogal, who argues that women are considered equal throughout the struggle, yet at the individual level, they remain subordinate to men (Barrios Sabogal, 2021, 92).

However, it is important to emphasize that perceptions of such practices - or of other elements - can vary widely from one empirical study to another, as there are a multitude of experiences, lived by women combatants themselves, as well as scientific interpretations. It is therefore important to remember that the elements analysed in this research are subjective in nature and should not be understood as fixed.

Post-conflict : gateway to emancipation ?

Feminist, as well as peace and security studies generally point to a lack of representation of female ex-combatants during negotiation processes, or even a backward slide in the sense that they lose out on the agency gains made possible by the conflict context. What about female FARC ex-combatants? It's not our intention here to be exhaustive, as our study focuses on women's participation in combat. However, in order to examine the prospects for emancipation, the post-conflict period must not be overlooked, and the aim here is to give an account of the main lines of thought proposed in the academic field on the subject, which is not unanimous.

"The FARC peace process has been celebrated for its recognition of the gender differential effects of the conflict and significant inclusion of women peace negotiators." (Elston, 2020, 71). On the one hand, part of the research focuses on the success of certain post-conflict women's initiatives, which have enabled female ex-combatants to prolong the political struggle using peaceful means. Indeed, Camille Boutron highlights a Colombian peace agreement that is quite favourable to the inclusion of women, notably through the adoption in 2014 of a sub-commission for gender, including ten women, five for the parties to the conflict, with other actors such as feminist organizations, gravitating around it. This gender sub-committee enables the FARC's voice to be heard through those of women, able to share their experiences and demonstrate the legitimacy of their political commitment (Boutron, 2020, 68). The

author focuses above all on the ex-combatants' creation of a new political communication strategy, which they call "insurgent feminism", to show that their participation in FARC was motivated by a political will for emancipation (Boutron, 2020, 74). Similarly, Elston points to the success of the documentary film *Nunca Invisibles*, made by female ex-FARC fighters, as evidence of their agency and degree of political awareness, as well as being an ode to peace (Elston, 2020, 71-72). Today, there are also several websites and blogs, such as *Mujer Fariana* created in 2013, set up by ex-combatants to make their lives within FARC visible and to advocate the continuation of the struggle, in favour of women, by non-violent means. The two authors demonstrate that gender awareness and the desire for emancipation largely emerged once the conflict was over.

Thus, women's participation in FARC has not only affirmed women's political positions in favour of a more egalitarian society but also given them the organizational and militant keys to harness the skills acquired during the struggle in the service of women's emancipation. Post-conflict women's initiatives testify to women's desire to present themselves as a unified and dynamic collective group, capable of defending values and interests, autonomously and with leadership (Barrios Sabogal, 2021, 97).

Nevertheless, another part of the research points to the persistence of certain inequalities and stereotypes affecting post-conflict women, thus limiting their capacity for action and their recognition as autonomous and powerful political, economic and social players. Vergel Tovar points firstly to the insufficient recognition of the state as an actor in the conflict, which has consequences for the reintegration of FARC and thus of female ex-combatants (Vergel Tovar, 2012, 252). Other authors show that the reintegration of women into politics and society is still insufficient, due to structures that are still too patriarchal and hierarchical. For example, since the FARC's transition to a political party in 2016, women have been largely under-represented, occupying just two of the total number of seats held by the FARC (Ehasz, 2020, 11). What's more, the involvement of female ex-combatants in politics can sometimes be dangerous in the sense that they can be the target of physical violence or harassment, due to their affiliation with FARC. So the difficulty is not just "to overcome the stigma associated with being a former guerrilla fighter, but also that of being a woman challenging socio-political order." (Ehasz, 2020, 16).

Another criticism is women who have assumed leadership positions within FARC, received greater recognition of their political abilities and have more legitimacy in the eyes of Colombian political institutions, as the FARC party is in continuity with the guerrilla's hierarchical structure (Ehasz, 2020, 33). Gjelsvik also showed that motivations and social background matter. "In Colombia there seems to be a tendency for women who joined due to political conviction, had higher education or came from a middle-class background to feel a higher degree of empowerment than those who joined to escape poverty and lack of opportunities" (Gjesvik, 2010, 79). Intersectionality can thus be an important post-conflict's feature, because some women experienced violence and rape, but may also face significant economic difficulties, particularly in rural and isolated areas (Domingo et al., 2015, 6). It is also possible that society's traditional expectations may resurface after the war, demanding, for example, that women once again assume the role of mother, or take up a job in line with socially accepted female roles (Sabogal, 2021, 95).

4.2.2. Participation of women's fighters in the LTTE

When the Tamil struggle against the Sinhalese government began, the inclusion of women was not part of the LTTE's nationalist project. The few women who were present in the movement confined themselves to secondary, supporting tasks, but were not present at the front (Fonseka, 2021, 268). This exclusion of women from the war was in line with local traditions, which associated women with maternal, pacifist characteristics and sexual purity, assimilating them with a Hindu goddess. According to fairly strict religious and societal rules, including women in the armed ranks of the Tamil movement would have been a risk to the effectiveness of the fighters, possibly deconcentrated in their struggle for freedom (Makshood, 2017, 11).

However, in the 1980s LTTE leaders began to change their perceptions and strategies. The rhetoric of women's liberation was coupled with nationalist objectives and led to a campaign to recruit women, even creating an all-female branch in 1983, the Vitzthalai Plulikal Munani (Women's Front of the Liberation Tigers). The women received their first training in 1985, fought for the first time in 1986 and had their own leadership structure in 1989 (Arena, 2005, 45). The 1990s saw a period of massive recruitment, with the proportion of women in the LTTE military rising to around 30% of total strength (Alison, 2003, 39). Although the women's liberation discourse was often taken up by leader Prabhakaran as an important element in the LTTE's struggle and as a justification for mass recruitment, the literature is more sceptical on this point.

Majority of authors assert that the massive recruitment of women came at a time when human losses were high, which placed the LTTE in need of recruits, faced with a shortage of male warriors (Jordan and Denov, 2007; Alison, 2003; Wang, 2011; Makshood, 2017). Wang notes that women were also not targeted by enemy government forces, and that having women in the armed ranks could be a significant military advantage. Due to strict religious and societal norms, including the ban on men touching women's bodies, women thus have tactical privilege to carry out operations, which will thus be less suspect by the Sri Lankan government (Makshood, 2017, 36).

Another pragmatic reason for recruiting women was the LTTE's need to establish itself as the hegemonic group in the defence of Tamil self-determination. Integrating a discourse of women's liberation not only made the cause more encompassing, but also more convincing. "Women's involvement encouraged the Tamil community to regard the Liberation Tigers as the most intelligent organization which was fully representative of the Tamil nation." (Wang, 2011, 103). The LTTE have not been particularly accused of using forced abduction as a recruitment strategy, but they are known to have used extensive propaganda, through their own media, to publicize their commitment to the creation of Tamil Eelam (Jordan and Denov, 2011, 52).

Factors leading to women's involvement in the LTTE

Miranda Alison argues that, while the LTTE's reasons for taking women into its ranks were more a matter of strategy than a genuine desire for women's emancipation, women's motivations for joining the movement were more diverse. Indeed, the majority of research aligns itself with the five reasons for involvement described by Alison (Alison, 2003). The most frequent and important reason is rallying to the nationalist cause, in order to fight for the fundamental rights of the Tamils (Makshood, 2017,14). This motivation can be coupled with other diverse factors that provoke a sense of suffering and injustice on the part of the Tamils and lead to taking up arms. Women - as well as men here - are then led to engage in armed struggle because fighting seems to be the only way to protest against the deaths caused by a racist and violent government, against the insecurity that weighs on people forced to flee their home region due to forced displacement, to avenge a painful feeling of injustice, of being invisible in one's own country (Alison, 2003, 40-41).

Secondly, the deprivation of education due to Sinhalese measures, war and displacement prompted some Tamils, particularly women, to join the struggle, in order to give a minimum of meaning to a life that seemed deprived of everything (Fonseka, 2021, 270). In fourth place comes a factor that is almost systematically stated by women, that of rape. While women are frequently raped in their own homes, the prevalence of Indian soldiers in the IPKF's period from 1987 to 1990, was recognized by society as being very brutal towards Tamil women. The numerous rapes may have led to the decision to enlist to escape humiliation, exclusion or even suicide. Indeed, women victims of rape are blamed by Sri Lankan society (Jordan and Denov, 2007, 53), while the LTTE presented itself as an alternative, welcoming women regardless of their past experiences, considering that it was not the victims' fault. In fact, studies have shown that the practice of rape was very rare or even absent within the LTTE, unlike many other armed groups, which also testifies to the security opportunity offered to women within the organization. (Wood, 2006, 314)

Finally, Alison argues that LTTE women fighters may have joined the movement out of a desire to liberate themselves as women and achieve emancipation. Indeed, women may have had the idea in mind that women's liberation was only possible through the liberation of the Tamil people as a whole, and that involvement in the struggle therefore represented the most convincing means of achieving emancipation (Wang, 2011, 104). However, research into the emancipation of female LTTE fighters shows that most of the women had no feminist consciousness before joining the armed group, but only "since being with the movement and many of them now seem to have a clear commitment to wanting to improve life for Tamil women" (Alison, 2003, 44).

Thus, although the female LTTE fighters interviewed did not report forced recruitment by the organization, the true voluntary nature of their commitment was questioned by some authors. Indeed, in the face of "an environment torn by violence, fear, and social chaos" (Jordan and Denov, 2007, 57) particularly affecting the daily lives of Tamil women, the LTTE appears to be the last possible option available to women to enable them to escape.

Roles and responsibilities assumed by the women in the LTTE

From the mid-1980s onwards, women took part in military combat, gaining access to training and using weapons in the same way as men. Indeed, women were

part of all LTTE units, including the Naval Force (Sea Tigers) and the Suicide Squad (Jordan and Denov, 2007, 43). However, female LTTE fighters were known internationally for committing a significant number of suicide attacks. "The suicide-bombers from the LTTE had gained notoriety worldwide and were viewed as one of LTTE's deadliest weapons" (Fonseka, 2021, 275). The best-known is Dhanu, who carried out a successful suicide operation in India in 1991, targeting India's famous former prime minister, Rajiv Gandhi. Dhanu, like all the other women who followed her, were granted eternal glory within the LTTE. Indeed, these women were perceived within the movement, but also by other pro-Tamil movements and the general public, as heroines who had sacrificed their lives for the Tamil people, but also for women's liberation. These perceptions were also echoed in the discourses of the leaders, who saw the suicide-bombing women as unifying symbols of the struggle and a powerful example for Tamil women (Arena, 2005, 48). This question is the subject of debate in academic research. Indeed, according to the vision of ex-combatants themselves, it would seem that sacrifice is a source of inspiration for other women, as this gesture would enable them to achieve personal freedom and recognition (Wang, 2011, 104), something virtually impossible within Sri Lankan society. This would be consistent with the denomination used by the movement to refer to these women as "Birds of Freedom" and with Prabhakaran's rhetoric, asserting that women's liberation would flow from struggle. Fonseka, for example, argues that women have been able to transcend their gender roles within the movement, moving from life-givers to life takers (Fonseka, 2021, 276).

However, this argument does not meet with unanimous approval, for several reasons. Firstly, it would mean that the only women with access to emancipation are those who are willing to show their dedication to the cause, by giving their lives. Women's liberation thus appears secondary to the struggle and only enabled by it. Coomaraswamy, for example, is against the idea of any hint of female emancipation within the LTTE, as women would only be "Cogs in the Wheel", manipulated and used by patriarchy for armed struggle, but recognition of their rights the primary reason for fighting (quoted after Wang, 2011).

This question also relates to the specific issue of women's leadership within the LTTE. Once again, researchers are rather divided on this question, although the majority tend to assert that there was a considerable lack of women in decision-making

positions (Alison, 2003, 47). Jordan and Denov, for their part, claim that the lack of women was due more to a smaller number of women in the organization, compared with men, than to genuine gender discrimination (Jordan and Denov, 2007, 54). Others, however, claim that decision-making centres or high commands included a certain number of women, as in the Central Committee - the top decision-making body of the LTTE (Wang, 2011, 105), or even that discussions were organized between the women leaders of the various LTTE units, often orchestrated by Prabhakaran himself, in the forms of monthly meetings, which seemed to be fair and to give women responsibilities (Fonseka, 2021, 272). Despite these assertions, there is no evidence to support any of these arguments, and we can't say if women, even in high positions, were truly active and autonomous, or whether decisions remained in the hands of men.

Questioning controversial rules and practices within the LTTE

Female ex-combatants in particular have attested to the fact that the nationalist movement was based on strong discipline and the principle of loyalty, allowing a certain equality between men and women within the organization, since submission to the cause and respect for the rules concerned everyone (Jordan and Denov, 2007, 59). An ex-combatant interviewed by Herath similarly asserts: "I don't think there is any difference between men and women in the movement. We are all treated equally. Whatever a man is doing in the battle we are also doing the same thing". (Mallika, interviewed by Herath, 2007, 205). In addition, horizontal relations existed within the LTTE, reflecting a desire to establish human relations based on a family model and the principle of camaraderie. This desire to build a model in which members identified themselves as brothers and sisters, framed by the kinship of the LTTE leaders (Gayer, 2019). According to Herath, this not only federated the fighters by binding them with strong bonds, but also helped to spread a protective atmosphere within the movement, offering a new family to militants who were often deprived of one. Thus, LTTE can provide "an alternative familial kinship founded upon friendship, which transcends caste and religion" (Herath, 2007, 2).

However, other practices are more ambiguous, beginning with the fact that LTTE pursued a very strict policy of controlling intimate and sexual relations between members of the movement. Pre-marital sexual relations were formally forbidden, in order to preserve a certain form of purity within the movement, as well as to build a framework entirely dedicated to the struggle. Although marriage was also forbidden at

the birth of the LTTE, it was gradually authorized and even encouraged. A marriage committee even existed within the organization, arranging unions between members of the movement and organizing a very short ceremony, before offering a more private setting to the bride and groom (Jordan and Denov, 2007, 51). Marriages within the group were encouraged, as they demonstrated total dedication to the Tamil cause. However, while the control of romantic and sexual relations may have been perceived as one of the beneficial causes of the absence of rape within the LTTE, this issue is open to criticism. Firstly, this may demonstrate a form of reproduction of traditional Tamil society, in the sense that women did not have their own freedom over their bodies or the management of their sexuality. These two elements were very strictly controlled by an organization claiming to be paternal, mimicking the gender relations and female subordination visible in society. Using the words of Rajini, a Sri Lankan human rights activist murdered by the LTTE, Makshood showed women became doubly discriminated "between an exploitative organization and an oppressive society" (Makshood, 2017, 29).

The various elements discussed, which characterize women's participation in the LTTE, generally lead to two opposing perceptions, concerning the question of women's liberation. On the one hand, some authors tend to emphasize the possibility offered by the movement to change certain behaviours and relationships present in Sri Lankan society, and to offer new roles to women fighters, with greater responsibility and recognition, both within the group and in the eyes of society at large. Alison argues, for example, that the rhetoric of women's liberation, even in its limited conception, provided a space for women to discuss issues of gender and oppression. While most women entering the movement were not politicized on gender issues, their active participation may have given them a greater consciousness as Alison stated that the "depth of their intellectual conceptualization of and ability to articulate on such issues varied from woman to woman, but the depth of their commitment to women in their communities was unquestionable" (Alison, 2003, 49). Other contributors also defend the concept of martial feminism, such as Adele Ann, wife of LTTE ideologue and negotiator Anton Balasingham, who asserts that women's liberation was achieved through armed struggle and commitment to the Tamil cause (Gayer, 2019).

On the other hand, there is a more negative perception, on a predominantly male-controlled organization based on a militaristic and anti-feminist, structure.

"Women's empowerment is made possible through the adoption of masculine behaviours as opposed to consciously attempting to 'feminize' the military subculture." (Jordan and Denov, 2007, 57). These arguments then imply that the LTTE merely reproduced the gender hierarchies present in society, and that the presence of women, instead of questioning these relations, merely maintained them by serving as bait for the masculine culture of violence.

Finally, some authors are more nuanced on the idea of the emancipation of Tamil women fighters. For example Makshood argues that it is impossible to state clearly whether or not there has been emancipation, for two reasons. The first is due to the ambiguity of the movement's relation with women. Indeed, "the LTTE opened up avenues for Tamil women and also repressed them in other ways." (Makshood, 2017, 6). Secondly, the women ex-combatants themselves share different points of view and experiences, which makes it impossible to judge them from the outside. Some testimonies emphasize their sense of accomplishment in the struggle, which enabled them to achieve new things (Thamilini, interviewed by Alison, 2003, 49), while others highlight the lack of egalitarian and emancipatory prospects for women. This shows that women did not have the same expectations or perceptions of what their involvement brought them. "It is about the tensions between the different ideals of liberation - women's liberation or national liberation" (Makshood, 2017, 37).

Post-conflict : back to square one ?

The post-conflict period and the situation of women in Sri Lanka are less well documented overall than the Colombian peace accords, but the vast majority of studies show a fairly negative return to peace for Tamil women. Indeed, peace agreements between the LTTE and the Sinhalese government failed several times in the early 2000s, and the conflict ended in a military victory for the Sri Lankan state, which did not contribute to a genuine effort to recognize and reintegrate LTTE members. Indeed, most authors emphasize the maintenance of armed and military forces in the areas affected by the conflict, in the north and east of the country. This militarization has led to violence against people suspected of having been members of the LTTE or affiliated to the group. According to NGO reports, this violence affects both men and women, although women have been more affected than men. Some of this violence was even filmed and made public, as stated in a Human Rights Watch report: "photographs and video from the conflict's final days show corpses of women, some in LTTE uniform,

who were stripped, suggesting that they may have been raped before being summarily executed." (Human Rights Watch, February 26, 2013). The threats of Sexual Gender Based Violence that hang over ex-LTTE members in particular is partly due to the Sri Lankan state's failure to acknowledge any responsibility on the part of the armed forces, and continues to deny the crimes committed during and after the conflict (Davies and True, 2017, 10). Thus, the impunity of the Sri Lankan state and military maintains inequality, to the detriment of Tamils and affecting women to a greater extent, due to the structure of society.

Secondly, the studies point to a lack of effort towards gender issues during the reconstruction of the country. For example, DDR programs have been heavily criticized for failing to take into account the skills acquired by female ex-combatants during the war, or the problems they may have faced. This led to women being reintegrated into traditionally feminine fields, "with the training focused on domestic homelife, such as cooking, sewing, and rearing livestock, rather than learning skills which would make them economically independent" (Fonseka, 2021, 283). Wang also shares a pessimistic view of the possible recognition of Tamil women and their emancipation in post-conflict society, in the sense that the state has not forgiven the violence exercised by the LTTE, and particularly by the women who committed suicide attacks. In this case, the situation of women is bound to remain unchanged for as long as the state has not made the effort to work towards genuine reconciliation (Wang, 2011, 105).

Beyond the responsibility of the state, McFeeters shows that the Sri Lankan media also played a role in the re-domestication and refeminization of post-conflict women. "The media's perception of ex-LTTE women portrays them as 'abnormal' and 'failed' women, with state-sponsored rehabilitation programmes being the means for their 're-traditionalisation' as women, wives and mothers." (McFeeters, 2021, 307). This shows that images were also important elements leading to the return of patriarchy in post-conflict Sri Lankan society and the women's marginalization, who were once again invisible and confined to the private sphere. Thus, women's sense of accomplishment and the acquisition of new roles that could have opened up a window of opportunity for emancipation have been trampled underfoot by the post-conflict backlash, which has manifested itself in different ways.

There are, however, some more optimistic academic contributions on the LTTE women's capacity for action and their influence in challenging gender roles in Sri Lankan society. Indeed, Herath underlines the figure of the new woman, created by the movement under the term *Puthumai Pen*. This qualification includes qualities such as courage and self-sacrifice, and creates a new identity in which women are not considered inferior. The author thus explains that we can observe a form of empowerment, in the Tamil sense, designated as *Ah-lu-mai*, which includes "governance, authority, or leadership roles" (Herath, 2007, 196). This new identity adopted by the women during their participation in the movement may have given them a certain self-esteem and self-confidence, with positive repercussions in society. Indeed, the author argues that certain social practices that were challenged by the ex-combatants and enabled progress towards a form of women's liberation, through a refusal to maintain certain oppressive gender norms. For example, the ex-combatants rejected certain practices such as the negative perception of widowhood within Sri Lankan society, which had a positive influence on the rest of Tamil women. "Within the Jaffna peninsula, widows are not stigmatized to the same extent as before and are now a more accepted part of society." (Herath, 2007, 203).

Herath's point is that the emancipation of former LTTE fighters cannot be analysed through a Western lens, but must be understood in the Sri Lankan context. On the other hand, apart from Herath's publication, there is a lack of long-term analysis of the changes in Sri Lankan society in favour of women, and of the influence of LTTE women on the wider emancipation of women in society.

4.2.3. Participation of women's fighters in the PKK

At the time of the PKK's creation in 1978, the issue of women was not a central concern, and the PKK had very few women in its ranks. Today, women's liberation is seen as an indispensable element of the Kurdish struggle, both militarily and politically, and around 40% of guerrilla fighters are women (Grosjean, 2019). This change in attitude towards women is largely due to Öcalan's personality and publications, which have contributed to the evolution of the PKK's ideology, from a simply Marxist-Leninist organization at the outset to one based on the principles of feminism, ecology and anti-capitalism (Novellis, 2021, 116).

In fact, massification of women's involvement began in the 1990s (Tezcür, 2020, 9), largely linked to the ideological changes promised by Öcalan during that same

decade. Indeed, it was at this point that the leader really changed his discourse, asserting that the liberation of society as a whole depended on the liberation of women (Öcalan, 2013). The women's emancipation became the centre of the struggle, and a *sine qua non* for the success of the Kurdish struggle. While in prison since 1999, Öcalan first published his central work, *Democratic Confederalism*, but it was really through his invention of a science of women, *Jineology* (Aytekin, 2019, 69), that he conceived of the whole of society from the perspective of women. "The democratisation of woman is crucial for the permanent establishment of democracy and secularism. For a democratic nation, woman's freedom is of great importance too, as liberated woman constitutes liberated society" (Öcalan, 2013, 34). He thus embarks on a reconstruction of Kurdish history and mythology, asserting that women are at the origin of the world, that they have been sidelined and trampled underfoot by patriarchy, capitalism and monotheistic religions, and that the establishment of democracy and peace can only come through a women's revolution, through the reconquest of their rights and power. Through the women's revolution, Öcalan intends to destroy the dominant societal system, based on the power of men and the enslavement of women, in order to achieve socialism, and this also involves "killing the dominant man" (Käser, 2021, 50). He called the PKK the "Woman's Party" from the mid-to-late 1990s onwards and this importance given to them in the PKK greatly contributed to the commitment of women, largely oppressed in Kurdish and Turkish society (Yüksel, 2006, 796), giving them hope of being able to take control of their lives. In addition, Öcalan worked to make the PKK a non-patriarchal structure, in order to attract female fighters. For example, he redefined the term *namus*, which originally meant the protection of women's honour, as the protection of the nation's honour. The strictly structured gender norms in traditional society through *namus* are transformed in the PKK, in which women and men are equal in the nationalist struggle (Novellis, 2021).

Alongside these ideological contributions, other advances were made in favour of the inclusion of women in the ranks of the PKK, to include them in the practice, notably the creation of women's units. A women's army was created in 1995, called the Free Women's Union of Kurdistan (YAJK, Yekîneyên Azadiya Jinên Kurdistanê), and an autonomous feminine party was created in 1999, the Partiya Jinên Karkerên Kurdistan (PJKK) which is today the Free Women's Party of Kurdistan (PAJK). However, the inclusion of relative independent women's wing often provoked

reticence on the part of male party members, who tried to challenge women's agency and leadership within the PKK (Käser, 2021; Grosjean, 2013; Sahin-Mencutek, 2015).

While the ideology and practices of the PKK generally show a willingness to include women in the Kurdish cause, it has also been described that the party began recruiting women on a massive scale, out of a need for legitimacy and to spread a positive image (Novellis, 2021, 117). Thus, the recruitment of women involved strategies put in place by the party, using the difficult context of the 1990s, as well as the poor status of women in society, to propose a promising framework, and simultaneously serving the nationalist cause. In fact, Aytekin identifies several influential tactics used by the PKK to attract its members, and women in particular (Aytekin, 2019). Firstly, he points to marriage as an argument used by the PKK to attract women, breaking with the forced marriage practices to which they are subjected in society and thus offering a means of escaping them by joining up. Secondly, there are also indoctrination camps which have been particularly used to attract women, by transmitting to them the party's ideology, notably *Jineology* and the possibility of freedom allowed by the PKK. Finally, the PKK also distributes books and magazines, usually containing Öcalan's writings, particularly in towns, in order to recruit supporters. The author also points out that women can be used to win over other young women, particularly in rural areas, by serving as role models and spreading a positive message about life in the guerrilla movement. The basis of PKK recruitment is thus based on strong propaganda and use of the media (Aytekin, 2019, 66) to bring women into its ranks.

Factors leading women's involvement in the PKK

Regarding the factors that drive women to join the PKK, research seems fairly unanimous, almost systematically differentiating between the motivations of rather under-educated and poor women from rural areas and more politicized urban women. For example, Tezcür states that, for under-educated women, the main reasons for joining the movement were related to an unfavourable social and personal situation due to strongly gendered roles, which triggered a desire to develop more agency by joining the PKK (Tezcür, 2020, 18). The main reasons were, for example, to escape frequent forced marriages, or assignment to domestic tasks and a life all mapped out with no perception of social mobility, also highlighted by Olivier Grosjean (2019). At the other end of the spectrum, educated women living in cities, while also suffering

from social inequality, are more politicized and often already affiliated to radical left-wing parties. Involvement in the PKK is then seen as a continuation of the political struggle through arms, and a means of revolting against a repressive state (Tezcür, 2020, 19). Indeed, incarceration due to activism could be a future cause of involvement in the PKK. Lafaye notes similar trends, but goes further in her study to find out whether the desire for emancipation was at the heart of the motivations of women joining the PKK, and how this question was formulated according to social and geographical origin, level of education and period of involvement in the party (Lafaye, 2022, 3). She differentiates between three waves of integration, forming three generations of women: the first generation is the one that joined the PKK before the 1990s, which mostly comprises women from urban areas who have demonstrated a high level of politicization through their involvement with the Turkish left; the second generation is made up of women from rural backgrounds, often very young and poorly educated, who massively joined the PKK in the 1990s; finally, the last generation is made up of women from urban backgrounds whose villages were destroyed, which led them to join the movement in the period following Öcalan's arrest, i.e. from the 2000s onwards. These three types of women show that female emancipation is by no means the primary motive for commitment until the most recent generations. Particularly for second-generation women, enlistment is the result of a rejection of the social oppression these young women face, in a context of war that gives them no advantage. Thus, these women enlist to escape insecurity and violence, and it's only as PKK fighters that they receive an education and become aware of the issues of emancipation and female struggle. The author thus argues that it is important to differentiate between the real causes of participation - in this case repression - and the desire for emancipation, which for the most part becomes intelligible once in the party, which acts as a catalyst for feelings of revolt against an unjust society (Lafaye, 2022, 11). Among the most recent generations, however, the desire for emancipation can be discerned as a factor driving commitment. Emancipation can be understood as an individual project to assert oneself as a person. But it can also consist of a more global project, of collectively questioning the system through involvement in the PKK, proposing an alternative model of society, another way of life, based on fraternity and social cohesion (Lafaye, 2022, 15).

Roles and responsibilities of the women in the PKK

Female PKK fighters are adopting new roles within the guerrilla movement. Haner et al. describe the training and tasks imposed on PKK members and show that women take part in political classes and military training, and must demonstrate self-confidence and performance if they are to rise through the ranks, just like their male comrades. Beyond these two sessions imposed on all fighters, women also receive courses reserved for them, consisting of discussion sessions "on gender constructs, sexuality, identity, diversity of women's lives, and the existing social and institutional power structures that represent inequality between the genders" (Haner et al., 2019, 12-13). This shows that the PKK is genuinely seeking to bring gender issues into its organization and structure, giving women spaces for reflection and exchange on their feminine conditions.

In addition, researchers point out that female PKK fighters and activists access leadership roles, which is made one of its particularities compared to other rebel groups (Haner et al, 2019). Grosjean points out that women assume command functions on an equal footing with men, with men and women reportedly occupying 40% of military leadership positions respectively (Grosjean, 2013). Tezcür adds that social background and level of education do not influence women's ability to rise through the ranks in the PKK, as was the case with the first female commander in 1993, who "was an illiterate villager when she joined the PKK at the age of 14 in 1990." (Tezcür, 2020, 16). Giving women access to positions of leadership has enabled them to detach themselves from the power of men, and given them the right to establish their own decision-making processes. This advance was largely made possible by the introduction of the co-chair system, implemented in the PKK's armed and political branches from the 2000s onwards, which enables an equitable gender division of responsibilities and governance of the organization (Käser, 2021; Haner et al, 2019). This inclusive model desired by Öcalan has also been influenced by pro-Kurdish left-wing parties in Turkey, such as the BDP (Peace and Democracy Party), which increasingly uses voluntary quotas as well as this principle of sharing leadership position. This high proportion of women is welcomed and held up as an example to challenge the largely male-dominated political spheres of Turkey and the Middle East. It also enables Kurdish women, who support the PKK project, to become involved in politics and gain visibility, as in the case of Leyla Zana, the first Kurdish woman to be elected to the

Turkish parliament, who won 84 per cent of the votes in her district (Diyarbakir) in the 1991 election (Sahin-Mencutek, 2015, 9). Grosjean also notes that some PKK women have disseminated a feminine vision of leadership and war, advocating values and practices more inclined to gentleness or free speech (Grosjean, 2013, 30).

Finally, the PKK, like the LTTE, is known to have used a significant number of women to carry out suicide attacks. The literature points to various reasons why the movement might have hired women specifically for this type of mission. According to Haner et al, the PKK justified its preference for women to carry out assassinations on the grounds that they were less inclined to smoke, which would make them more successful, since unlike men they would be less bothered by the side effects of smoking. There are also other reasons for the high proportion of women committing suicide, including tactical advantages, as mentioned in the case of the LTTE, or personal reasons for revenge (Haner et al, 2019, 12). Once again, the question arises of a possible instrumentalization of women, their bodies and the pacifist stereotypes gravitating around them by the PKK. Indeed, the literature repeatedly highlights the mythical work carried out by the organization around these women-martyrs and the importance accorded to them. The best-known example is Zilan, who was erected as the goddess of freedom and love, according to the myth of Ishtar, which means in the PKK narrative that she accomplished a genuine revolution against patriarchy by showing her strength through sacrifice (Novellis, 2021, 125). Combining a feminist and nationalist narrative, these figures such as Zilan, Beritan or Berivan are examples of women who gave their all for the struggle (Käser, 2021, 64).

Questioning controversial rules and practices in the PKK

In the PKK, as in most other armed groups, there are strict rules of discipline that structure mentalities and relationships within the movement. In addition to codifying relations between guerrilla members, such as the way they dress, greet or speak to each other, the PKK totally prohibits sexual relations within the group. Although the sentence of execution for breaking the rule was abolished in 1994, penalties are still severe for deviants, ranging from denial of promotion to imprisonment or expulsion. Women who become pregnant are usually separated from their children after a few months (Haner et al, 2019, 16). Öcalan has a very rigid vision of sexual freedom, which he sees as an obstacle to the revolution. Some authors consider that the PKK's aim is to desexualize its fighters in order to promote an image

of solidarity, without sexual disturbances hindering their devotion to the cause and the leader (Grosjean, 2019). This rationalization of gender relations and libidinal economy (Lafaye, 2022, 7) is quite criticized within the literature for contrasting with the idea of women's liberation, and more akin to subjugation, preventing women from developing as women as she would intend. Grosjean and Sahin-Mencutek both point to this contradiction between theory and practice, which highlights the overriding importance given to struggle, far ahead of opportunities for self-realization or personal affirmation (Grosjean, 2013; Sahin-Mencutek, 2015).

Perspectives on emancipation

With the conflict between the PKK and the Turkish government still ongoing, it is impossible at this stage to assess the possibilities for Kurdish women's emancipation in peacetime, or to observe any post-conflict backlash. I do find it relevant, however, to report on authors' positions on the question of Kurdish women's empowerment through their involvement in the PKK. While most of the literature stresses the progress made by the PKK on gender issues, their conclusions are very often qualified by certain criticisms.

On the one hand, the PKK's ideology and structure enable women fighters to take on new responsibilities and become more autonomous. Lafaye and Novellis agree that women have acquired significant personal and collective power by constituting themselves as genuine political agents within the PKK. Novellis asserts that this step towards empowerment was largely made possible by the creation of the women's army (Novellis, 2021, 127), while Lafaye argues that the empowerment process was not only enabled by ideological imposition from above, but also by the women themselves (Lafaye, 2022, 17). This new identity is the result both of the PKK's efforts to theorize and put into practice new gender relations, and of the collective action of women, who have gradually established themselves as key players at all levels of the struggle. The new status of women in the guerrilla movement has also given rise to hopes of change in the attitudes and capabilities of Kurdish women in civil society. "These women gave us confidence and a legacy to build on" (FA, interviewed by Sahin-Mencutek, 2015, 11). Tezcür shares also believes that the engagement of female fighters has enabled greater inclusion of women within the Turkish political sphere, and thus greater visibility in the public space as well as greater confidence in their abilities (Tezcür, 2017, 14). Finally, Haner et al. show that the new gender relations in the PKK have

had impacts throughout Kurdistan. "For example, by outlawing domestic violence against women, the PKK has shifted the balance of power between men and women in Kurdish society." (Haner et al., 2019, 18).

Nevertheless, the literature reveals some more sceptical reflections on the real empowerment of Kurdish women through the PKK. Firstly, Grosjean, while not questioning the gender transformations underway and the progress made for women, does question the existence of a profound rethinking of patriarchal conceptions and gender hierarchies in mentalities. PKK remains an extremely militarized structure, led by a man to whom it must devote an unquestionable cult, and that the organization is, despite alternative practices and discourses, actually quite similar to society in maintaining tribal and traditional cultures (Grosjean 2013; Lafaye 2022).

Finally, it seems that even if women have acquired new keys to starting a revolution, their actions can be blocked by conservative forces. Novellis, for example, points to men's reluctance to recognize women as equals, and their questioning of the authority held by female figures (Novellis, 2021), which has acted as a brake on the recognition of their skills, particularly in leadership roles. With regard to Kurdish women in general, Yüksel points out that they face a double marginalization in Turkish society, due to their ethnicity and gender, and that they are sidelined both by Turkish and Kurdish nationalism, and by Turkish feminist movements. This invisibilization of Kurdish women contributes to questioning the possibilities of recognizing their rights in a society that ensures that they do not exist (Yüksel, 2006, 778).

Will the presence of women in pro-Kurdish parties be enough to keep them in decision-making positions and assert their rights? Or will they face, once the PKK fighters have been demobilized, a return to the stranglehold of Kurdish and Turkish patriarchy on the institutions of power and the control of societal structures?

4.3. Discussion : perspectives of women's empowerment

After analysing the different characteristics that structure women's participation in the three case studies, I would now like to draw up an account in order to provide some critical reflexions to the research question, linked with theoretical elements.

What potential for emancipation arises from the participation of women in armed political conflicts ? Empowerment is not a fixed concept or acquisition, and

because of its complexity, it would be impossible and reductive to answer this question in the affirmative or negative. The three armed groups have revealed, each in their own way, but sometimes also in common, certain trends concerning the possibilities of women's emancipation, which are mostly in line with the general theoretical contributions discussed above. In the light of these scientific arguments and the specific aspects of the three case studies, I will attempt to highlight the main trends that emerge from this analysis.

Evolution of women's positions : more equality and responsibilities than at home

First and foremost, I've observed an evolution between women's situation in society before they became involved and their situation within the group. Commitment to the struggle has gone hand in hand with an opening up of opportunities for women, common to all three case studies. Whether in the FARC, the LTTE or the PKK, scientific analyses and women's interviews underline the possibility during the conflict to adopt new roles and perform tasks different from those characterizing their daily lives. Beyond hard military and warlike conditions, women combatants were able to take on non-secondary roles and were no longer confined to activities in the private sphere or to their traditional functions as mothers, wives or cooks. This first step towards change can be linked to the concept of emancipation in the struggle (Rapin, 2019), as mere participation in combat has, in itself, enabled an evolution and may have led to a sense of accomplishment for women.

From this observation also stems the possibility of access to greater equality with men, and therefore of an evolution in the status of women. All three organizations arose in patriarchal societies still strongly based on tradition and religion, and in which the social position of women was far inferior to that of men. The context of war was thus conducive to a transformation of gender norms (Wood, 2008) within each armed groups, in which women and men, male and female fighters, were, in a global sense, equally considered as inherent and indispensable elements of armed political struggle. In all three cases, this feeling of being considered equal to their male comrades was largely due to the strong discipline demanded within guerrilla groups, which in this sense placed all members on an equal footing in the face of rules and performance expectations (Stanski, 2006, 145). In the same direction, armed groups may have presented themselves as a safe alternative to societal or family environments in which women experience violence almost systematically. In all three movements, the

regulation of intimate and sexual relations, and a certain disciplining of bodies, has paradoxically led to a relatively low level of physical violence and rape against female combatants, in contrast to alarmingly reported high rates of rape by state authorities (Sri Lankan armed forces) or paramilitary groups (AUC in Colombia), for example.

What's more, women have been able to access leadership positions, which again would have been highly unlikely outside the commitment, given the prevailing societal and political structures in Colombia, Sri Lanka or Turkey. While in principle all three organizations have employed women in decision-making or command positions, it is the PKK that appears to have gone furthest in promoting female leadership. Tamil women fighters have been able to increase their agency within the women's branches of military units, but the difference with Kurdish women fighters is that they have been granted greater autonomy, both politically and militarily. These new responsibilities or positions may also have given women the opportunity to build themselves personally, by developing greater self-confidence or a new identity, specific to their personal experiences within the movement. The active involvement also contribute to change in mentalities, developing a new image of women

So, even if some opinions in the literature point to a possible instrumentalization of women's depiction by armed groups, I think that new characteristics given to them during the conflict - such as courage, self-sacrifice, strength and loyalty - helped to boost their self-esteem and set in motion the beginnings of an evolution in people's minds. Their participation showed the fighters themselves, the organization and, in some cases, society, that women were capable of accomplishment, of achieving things, of changing things.

Triggering the empowerment process

As analysed above, most women did not decide to join the movement out of a desire to emancipate themselves as women, with the possible exception of the latest generation to join the PKK. Most women were prompted to join the armed movements either out of sympathy for the political cause, or, in reality most of the time, to escape daily violence or difficulties linked to their socio-economic situation. It was often once inside the organization that they became aware of their condition as women and of gender inequalities, as well as of a desire to stand up against them. This change from a state of suffering to political awareness within a group echoes Carr's contributions and, according to the author, constitutes a fundamental step towards empowerment.

Drawing on feminist contributions, he asserts that "fundamental change in a person's consciousness is a necessary impetus for engaging in empowering social action." (Gutierrez, quoted after Carr, 2003, 8).

This awareness then led to the formulation of a political project or strategy to challenge the established, unjust and unequal order. Kurdish women fighters are the most blatant example of the political formulation of women's emancipation. Indeed, the PKK is the only group to have addressed gender politics in its political and military branches, providing women with both ideological (Jineology, women's freedom) and practical (gender training, co-chair system, leadership) tools for effective political action. While the other two organizations did not clearly display a political program in favour of women's emancipation, FARC did reveal that female ex-combatants were able to formulate a fully-fledged political strategy, that of insurgent feminism and their denomination "Las Farianas", upon reintegration (Boutron, 2020). This shows that their participation in the armed conflict gave them the keys to establishing themselves as a legitimate collective voice. For the LTTE's women, the picture is more mixed. Despite the new female identity formed *Puthumai Pen*, there has been no reported collective translation at political level. Nevertheless, Herath's contribution has enabled me to consider that developments have been set in motion, rather at the individual level, in order to challenge certain practices considered oppressive in society, such as the stigmatization of widowhood for example (Herath, 2007).

This last point serves as a transition to highlight certain criticisms or limitations that I would like to address to the issue of empowerment within armed groups. Indeed, I believe that empowerment should not be understood as simple progress in itself, but as a phenomenon evolving in a certain context, in the midst of contradictory and sometimes constraining forces, which make it impossible to consider it as a simple result.

Being like men: a sign of empowerment?

Participation in armed groups can have given women new responsibilities, greater autonomy and more equality than in traditional societal structures. However, the acquisition of a more egalitarian position in relation to men does not necessarily mean that power relations have been criticized or even profoundly transformed and that empowerment is completely achieved. Often starting from scratch, in the best cases women have been able to rise to the same level as men, both in their struggles

and in their decision-making. However, access to the same rights has only been achieved by aligning themselves with male expectations, rather than through a genuine overhaul of gender relations (Lafaye, 2022, 6): dressing like men, integrating traditionally masculine warrior mentalities and postures, proving one's ability to fight, to match men's strength, showing unwavering devotion to the cause originally championed by men, etc. In all three cases, it is indeed men who hold the real power, first and foremost because supreme leadership is represented by charismatic male figures, respectively Manuel Marulanda, Vellupillai Prabhakaran and Abdullah Öcalan, to whom the rest of the organization's members are devoted. In addition to this subordination, women remain quite dependent on men for practices, rules and decisions, which are in fact largely imposed on them.

Indeed, if I follow the analytical grid developed by Jules Falquet, we can see certain trends that run counter to a real transformation of gender relations and the traditional sexual division of revolutionary labour (Falquet, 2019). Firstly, the three organizations have, in different ways, exercised a certain form of control over women's bodies. Within the LTTE and the PKK, the suicide missions carried out in a very large proportion by women can be likened to an appropriation of their bodies in the service of the struggle. With FARC, the pressure on women's bodies includes compulsory use of the contraceptive pill and forced abortions, which limit women's sovereignty over their maternity. To a greater extent, each organization was based on strong bodily discipline, which manifested itself through the regulation of intimate and sexual relations. Laurent Gayer also argues that the control of women's bodies and ideological can be thus considered as inseparable in an armed conflict, which turns into a moral war (Gayer, 2019, 44). This constant can be seen as an extension of traditional, patriarchal society, in the sense that the organization acts as a paternal or marital figure, which dispose on full authority over women's bodies. This lead to the conclusion that women's agency has been limited by exposure to dangerous practices (abortion) and by a segregated distribution of tasks (suicide missions) orchestrated by male leaders.

In the same way, I can argue that women are not in total possession of their power, by taking an example which can be however considered as a step forward, namely women's branches. These were created by men (leaders) and do not represent initiatives by women themselves. Even if the PKK seems to be the armed group in which women are emancipating themselves in the most accomplished way, progress

has mainly been conceptualized and put into practice by Öcalan, which does not make the PKK a feminist organization in the strict sense. Generally speaking, all three organizations tend to maintain hierarchies and some form of gender discrimination, in which femininity is either abandoned, instrumentalized or sidelined within a militaristic, male-dominated structure.

Taking context and external factors into account: obstacles to empowerment

Finally, I agree with Carr and Gayer's assertion that empowerment needs to be considered in a certain context, and that it is not a linear but a cyclical process, which can on the one hand be triggered or accelerated by favourable parameters, or on the other hand be slowed down or halted by hostile elements. Indeed, the three case studies revealed the existence of certain obstacles to women's empowerment. Firstly, there may be blockages within the struggle, as was the case during the formation of the PKK's women's army, YAJK, with repeated blockades led by men. In this case, men represent a brake on women's empowerment, as their agency and legitimacy as actors is questioned or even undermined. This can sometimes lead to backtracking, which can jeopardize the progress made.

Secondly, hostile forces can also manifest themselves outside the struggle, as I have noted in all three cases. Indeed, we must not overlook the fact that the cases studied are armed, clandestine organizations perceived as violent in the eyes of the local state and sometimes of society in general, which represents an additional obstacle to the recognition of the rights of women who fought in these groups. Sri Lanka is the most blatant case of a step backwards, in view of the failure to reintegrate the LTTE, the perpetuation of violence as an act of justice and superiority towards former members, and also hostility within societal and family circles, still very much marked by poverty, the preservation of traditions and religious rules. It is therefore possible to draw a parallel between what Boutron describes, for example, with the return of patriarchy in post-conflict Peru, and the case of Sri Lanka, where we see a form of backlash (Boutron, 2013). These observations also confirm the validity of Bakken and Buhaug's argument concerning the positive relationship between formal peace agreements and empowerment (Bakken and Buhaug, 2021). If I compare the FARC with the LTTE, I notice that the Colombian peace agreements, which are complacent about gender issues, have led to greater recognition and reintegration of ex-FARC fighters, unlike the ex-Tamil fighters, who have been largely invisible and relegated to

the background. Peace agreements therefore seem determinant for the sustainability of empowerment, and represents a crucial issue for the future of Kurdish women fighters.

In view of these aspects, I believe that empowerment cannot be fully and sustainably achieved without a favourable and welcoming environment. Otherwise, the advances made through armed struggle will be continually challenged and even trampled underfoot.

To conclude this section, I'd like to offer a brief, more nuanced and personal reflection on my analysis. First of all, I believe that it is difficult to measure empowerment on the basis of studies carried out in largely traditional and patriarchal models of society, for which Western theories or perceptions sometimes seem inadequate. From an outsider's viewpoint, it is certainly possible to highlight trends, but inappropriate to elevate them to the status of truths. It would therefore be relevant to understand local perceptions of women's emancipation, both within the movement and in society as a whole. In a way, this is what Herath asserts when they speak of another definition of empowerment in the Tamil sense, under the concept of "Ah-lu-mai" (Herath, 2007). This brings me to my second point, which is that I believe it is impossible to consider women as a homogeneous group, but as an infinite diversity of behaviours, experiences or perceptions. This observation makes hasty or global conclusions more difficult, in the sense that some women may have experienced total or partial personal fulfilment, while others may have experienced disappointment or even violence, or both. Here again, it is possible to draw certain conclusions, without asserting their absolute validity.

5. Conclusion

What potential for empowerment arises from the active participation of women in armed political organizations ? FARC, LTTE and PKK, in an insurrectionary context and adopting ideologies more or less conducive to welcoming women, have on average counted a large proportion of them in their ranks, averaging 30% or even 40% of total manpower. For their part, women have joined these organizations for a variety of reasons, ranging from the desire to escape poverty, suffering and violence, to the desire to take up arms to achieve a political or personal goal of progress. Within armed groups, women fighters have been able to live and evolve in a context that is generally different from their socio-economic or family environment. They were given new responsibilities, and some even rose to the highest levels of military or political

leadership. Most studies based on the testimonies of (ex)-combatants reveal the feelings of individual or collective fulfilment experienced by women within the armed struggle, because this has given them new skills, greater self-confidence and a new status. Different values were integrated into the three organizations, such as equality for the FARC in particular, courage or personal glory for the LTTE, and freedom and autonomy for the PKK. Through this new path, the women were also able to become more aware of gender-related dynamics and concepts, and thus more alert to questions of injustice or domination, for example, especially among under-educated, under-politicized women from rural backgrounds. In the case of female PKK fighters and ex-FARC combatants, for example, this conscientization may have led to the formulation of a revolutionary political strategy, through combat or peaceful reintegration respectively, whereas for the majority of demobilized LTTE fighters, it remains limited to a few individual or community advances. Conscientization is nevertheless an essential stage in the empowerment process, and even in cases where the attempt at political action or seizure of power fails, it will always be possible to propose a new, more convincing strategy.

However, the analysis of the three organizations has shown that there are a number of factors that can reduce or block empowerment prospects, or prevent them from becoming sustainable. These impediments to emancipatory possibilities most often emanate from patriarchal institutions such as the family, religion or the state. Opposition to women's emancipation can be observed within the struggle itself, such as the maintenance of certain traditions that are discriminatory and sometimes brutal towards women, or a form of reticence on the part of men who seek to preserve a domination or monopoly. But the return to peace can also represent a danger of backsliding in relation to the improvements made possible by the war context, which can vary depending on how the conflict ends, how ex-combatants are rehabilitated, how the needs and skills of demobilized women are taken into account, and how gender stereotypes are overcome. This demonstrates the importance of the context in which the empowerment process takes place, and the external, complacent or competing forces that may exist. If the environment, i.e. the structures and mentalities in place at a given time, is not receptive, the gains made are likely to prove fragile.

To conclude, this three cases study has shown that participation in armed struggle has conferred greater agency and self-confidence on women, giving them the

keys to be less vulnerable as individuals or gaining autonomy as a whole. However, it is difficult to establish a clear link between women's increased agency and genuine long-term empowerment, which would consist in a profound rethinking and transformation of gender relations at the societal level. To complement what has been observed in this study, it would be interesting to explore whether women's active participation in armed struggles leads, over a longer period of time, to positive evolutions within society as a whole, as well as to a better, more legitimate and even normalized political anchoring of women. Such a study would be particularly relevant to the PKK, to see whether the Turkish context will allow the party's feminist initiatives to be transcribed into society.

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Ich erkläre,

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