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Triply silenced agents: cognitive structures and girl soldiers in Colombia

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we employ theoretical tools of social psychology to develop a framework to understand how ideas about children, girls, and child soldiers are constructed and reinforced in the field of International Relations. We show how specific ideas of girls, children and child soldiers as victims are constructed in the United Nation's Agenda on Children and Armed Conflicts between 1999 and 2019, and how these contrast with alternative reports and narratives of girl soldiers' experiences in Colombia. Although there is a growing literature on girl soldiers, we conclude that girl soldiers continue to be a triply silenced group in international policy-making inside the categories of children, girl, and child soldier, particularly in Colombia.

KEYWORDS

Girl soldiers; Colombia; silences; security studies; cognitive structures; children; girls

1. Introduction

Pre-defined and socially constructed cognitive structures shape the international reality. Cognitive structures are the basic mental patterns people use to understand reality (Navaneedhan and Kamalanabhan 2017). Those structures unify facts, beliefs, and attitudes about the world or society (APA 2020). They influence the way decision-makers, the media, and academia receive and report on security issues. In contexts of armed conflicts, pre-conceived cognitive structures contribute to eclipsing the category of girl soldiers behind broader ideas connected to victimhood about children, girls, and child soldiers. This phenomenon affects not only academic research but also the policy-making process.

Not differentiating girl soldiers from other categories of combatants has practical consequences including higher indices of re-incidence of girls back into conflict, and the decreasing rates of success of Disarmament, Demobilisation, and Reintegration (DDR) programmes (Denov 2008; Ozerdem and Podder 2011; Coulter 2011). In Colombia, for example, the voluntary recruitment of girls is, in many cases, a matter of empowerment. However, it also creates situations of violence and discrimination that follow those children during and after their period within armed groups. Views regarding girls (exclusively) as victims (mainly of sexual gender-based violence) prevent understanding their full experience during armed conflicts.

This paper analyses the case of the Colombian armed conflict to trace how 'theoretical silences' emerge in the interplay between (flawed) ideas and interests. Ideas are the substrate that shapes cognitive structures. They unify the understanding of facts and beliefs about reality. They help, thereby, not only to creating categories of analysis but also *silences*, that is, exclusions from dimensions of thought (Verloo and Lombardo 2007). We call that exclusion, *theoretical silences*. Those exclusions are silences because they fail to address core aspects of material reality, and thus

help to reproduce inequalities within that reality. They are *theoretical* because they derive from theory-driven understandings of reality.

Alternatives to address these inequalities are a growing literature on children in international relations and security studies (see, for example, Tabak 2020; Beier 2015, 2018; Lee-Koo 2011; Berents 2015, 2018; Watson 2008, 2015; Brocklehurst 2006).¹ Although some scholars have recently worked to render girls (soldiers) more visible in the literature (Utas 2005; Herrera and Porch 2008; Coulter 2011; Denov and Ricard-Guay 2013; Vaha and Vastapuu 2018), theoretical silences continue to construct and reinforce categories of girls soldiers that prevent voicing their different experiences outside the lens of victimhood in the international decision-making processes.

We argue that girls involved in armed conflicts are triply silenced due to ideational constructions of children, girls, and child soldiers connected to the concept of victimhood. Girl soldiers outside the idea of victims are usually not an analytical concept in International Relations scholarship, global policy, and policy-making processes because of how child soldiers and children have been constructed in international discourse. Girls in armed groups are, therefore, inaccurately seen by international actors due to biased framing processes, leading to ineffective DDR policies. Those framing processes occur despite new studies critically showing the different contextual roles of girl soldiers (see Utas 2005; Denov and Ricard-Guay 2013; Vaha and Vastapuu 2018).

Our model of cognitive structures emphasises the contrast between ideas and interests in the construction of girl soldiers as a differentiated and a non-differentiated category of analysis. It intends to highlight how practices can change if accompanied by cognitive changes that grant agency – what we call, voicing – to silenced actors. Methodologically, we conduct a literature review of current scholarship on girls in armed conflicts and we employ an argumentation analysis (Boréus and Bergström 2017) on the United Nations (UN) Reports on Children and Armed Conflicts, resolutions from the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), reports by Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), and specific stories from former Colombian girl soldiers. Colombia was selected because, despite housing the longest internal armed conflict in the Americas, it is not well covered by the literature on child soldiers. That literature tends to focus on other armed conflicts. The case of Colombian girl soldiers brings new voices into the academic discourse, as well as uncovers local empowering strategies employed by those actors.

Argumentation analysis is a traditional technique used to evaluate documents in social sciences. It entails understanding the ‘structure’ of the argument, as well as ‘what different agents are arguing for and against, and with which arguments’ (Boréus and Bergström 2017, 7). In this paper, it means evaluating the language and content from multiple ‘mainstream’ official documents and alternative sources to counterbalance the content and the arguments provided by both sources. This comparison exercise enables us to develop a map of the main ideas and interests behind existing cognitive structures. We understand ‘arguments’ as the representations of ideas and interests as stated in documented sources.

This article is divided into three parts. First, we address the analytical framework and develop a cognitive structure model that binds ideas and interests. Second, we review the concept of ‘children’, ‘child soldiers’ and ‘girl soldier’, focusing on how the idea of victimhood is established. This section also defines the triple silence and how that silence may be addressed as it concerns girl soldiers. The section focuses on International Relations scholarship and its articulation within two spaces – global and local policies. Understanding the academic discussions behind ‘girls’ is relevant, as it allows us to understand how cognitive structures that form the foundation for decision-making processes emerge and change over time. Third, we cover the case of girl soldiers within the framework of the UN and the Colombian armed conflict. We also verify how the framework of triply silenced victims persists in Colombia in the context of the Peace Agreement with the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia – Ejército del Pueblo* (FARC-EP), despite some positive recent examples of gender-responsive DDR measures.

(1) Translating realities: Cognitive Structures and Theoretical Silences

Cognitive structures are shaped by ideas that drive reality, and by interests which define what agents aim to achieve through action. Ideas about *children, girls, and child soldiers*, frame the overall process through which Colombian girl soldiers are understood – those ideas intertwine with interests in keeping or changing a specific conceptual framework. Ideas and interests construct one another. Ideas shape actors' interests and their particular interests can be later used as self-reinforcing mechanisms to keep or to change a set of abstract ideas (Münnich 2010). Ideas and interests thereby ground the cognitive structures according to which global actors shape the world, or the multiple variations and possibilities of the world that come into existence (Onuf 2016). In the case of girl soldiers in Colombia, the idea behind the definition of child soldiers stress age and victimhood as the leading indicators of belonging to a group (child soldiers). Girls are, therefore, understood as *subjects* rather than *agents*.

Agency can be broadly defined as 'capacity to act'. Consequently, 'agents' are those entities and humans 'that can act in a specific context' (Braun, Schindler, and Wille 2019, 788). Unlike objects of action, agents can actively shape the political/material reality and thereby contribute to shaping, changing, and reinforcing existing cognitive structures.² Ignoring or silencing agents' role in shaping reality leads to silences that may make policy-making processes less effective, as is argued in the third part of this article.

The process of co-constitution of ideas and interests in cognitive structures can promote inequalities too. Ideas are causal beliefs that 'provide guides for action' (Beland and Cox 2010, 3–4). They are at the core of inequalities which make some situations, actors, and theories voiced, whereas others silenced. Existing and well-diffused cognitive structures play an essential role in building up in international politics, particularly when considering the unbalanced flow of information between actors that generate knowledge and translate ideas into interests like the media and international organisations like the UN. One approach to breaking the flux of knowledge that creates silences is voicing new categories of analysis as agents, instead of passive objects.

figure 1 below illustrates the processes through which cognitive and material structures mutually shape one another. Ideas: the pre-definitions and pre-concepts concerning children, girls, and child soldiers, interact with interests on developing operational frameworks and policies to address that abstract ideational object. Those two elements shape a cognitive structure in agents (policymakers and analysts). That cognitive structure drives action in the external realm, the material structure,

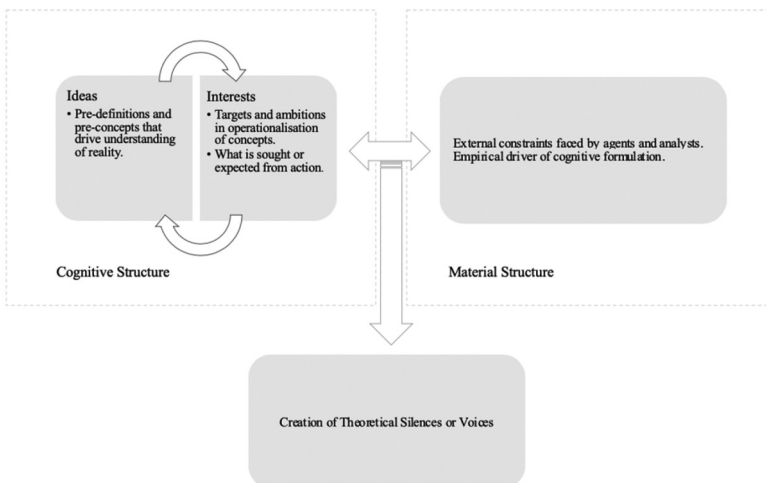


figure 1 Cognitive structure and interdependence between ideas and interests. Source: Elaborated by the authors.

where multiple cognitive structures from different actors co-exist – what we call *realities*. The material structure poses constraints to ideational aspects. For ‘material’, we address the constraints and situations that are *external* to agents, and in relation to which they have less agency. Both cognitive and material structures change or reinforce each other, leading to either theoretical silencing or voicing of actors like girl soldiers.

(2) Cognitive Structures Behind the Triple Silence of Girl Soldiers

Girls soldiers are triply silenced agents. First, within the category of ‘child’, because of their specificities as ‘girls’. Second, in the category of ‘child soldiers’, which focuses on male components and activities. Third, within the category of ‘women’, as they belong to a young age. This triple silence will be further addressed below when we trace the construction of the idea of victimhood in those three categories.

Article 1 of the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) defines children as a human being under the age of 18 years old unless legal majority was attained earlier by national legislation. This definition is, however, not precise. Childhood is a temporal, fluid, and socially constructed concept, shaped by political priorities and social contexts (Berents 2009). The idea of ‘sacred childhood’, composed of innocent and pure children, matches adults’ interests in justifying their roles as ‘moral protectors’ of vulnerable beings (Berents 2009; Cook 2009; Beier 2018). Children that do not fit the idea of ‘sacred childhood’ have ‘lost’ their childhood. Similarly, children that do not fit the cognitive structure of ‘victims’, an application of the idea of ‘sacred childhood’, become threats (Watson 2015).

The idea of children as passive victims – ‘subjects’ rather than ‘agents’ – is useful in international discourse, as it justifies humanitarian intervention (Brocklehurst 2006; Beier 2018; Lee-Koo 2018). Lee-Koo (2018) shows that, while there is a growing literature showing children’s agency during armed conflicts, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), in most situations, continue to see them as ‘victims’ of the armed conflict. Among the different types of children in armed conflicts, Lee-Koo (2011) highlights that child soldiers are the most visible category of children; but it usually reproduces the idea of the lonely, male, and ‘African’ boy archetype (Denov and Maclure 2006). Denov (2012) explains that they are perceived in the media under the categories of victims, perpetrators, and heroes. Those imageries permeate ideas within established cognitive structures that ground most DDR programmes, particularly those that constitute state-led interventions.

Patiño-Gass and González-Aldea (2021) show that the media reinforces child soldiers’ view as victims of armed conflicts when studying how British and French newspapers talk about them in the Central African Republic and South Sudan. While most representations of children are boys, girls are usually seen as victims, especially of gender-based violence. Shepler (2014) explains that the label of ‘innocent child’ helps former child soldier to be re-integrate in their communities. However, it makes invisible their other experiences, and it hides their agency (Drumbl 2012). Former child soldiers also mobilise the label of ‘victim’ to gain access to benefits in apparent reaction to how international perceptions of children translate in local contexts like Sierra Leone (Shepler 2014).

‘Child soldiers’ are, according to the Cape Town Principles (1997), any person under 18 years old that is used in direct or indirect activities in an armed conflict. It highlights the idea of children as a person of a certain age. Although it considers the involvement of minors in sexual activities and forced marriage, it is not gender-neutral. The 2007 Paris Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Groups employed the concept of children associated with an armed force or group.³

This concept involves the experiences of boys and girls that were directly or indirectly affected by war. The Paris Principles focus on specific situations of girls, including discrimination, stigma, and the importance of understanding the particularities of girls like motherhood before, during, and after the conflict. Nonetheless, children continue to be excluded from DDR activities and

programmes aimed at tackling gender discrimination (Denov 2008; Mazurana and Cole 2013; Mazurana and Carlson 2010; Vaha and Vastapuu 2018).

Ozerdem and Podder (2011) and Carroll (2015) argue that the above definitions of ‘child soldier’ are problematic because they excessively highlight girls as victims of gender-based violence. Another problem is that most comparative studies of child soldiers’ tend to discuss girls in a separated section, indicating ‘that the boy child soldier is still the norm against which girls are compared and contrasted’ (Vaha and Vastapuu 2018, 225, footnote 5).

Since women are also connected with the category of victims of war, girls tend to be seen as double victims (Denov and Ricard-Guay 2013) (although there are studies that have contested this view like Utas 2005; Coulter 2011; Vaha and Vastapuu 2018).⁴ Armed conflicts and wars are public spaces whose cognitive structure is based on the archetypic idea of the ‘adult man’ (Enloe 2014). Girls, being simultaneously women and children, are understood as exerting agency only in the domestic (private) spheres. However, girl soldiers face a material structure in which they are employed for sexual services performed in the private sphere of the conflict, even if they act as active combatants (Baines 2015; McKay 2005). These ideas of victimhood and vulnerability are not enough to understand the situation of girl soldiers (Carroll 2015).

Girls exercise agency in armed groups, contributing to their operationality (Denov 2008) performing military activities, sexual services, and support activities like cooking, nursing, and messaging (Coulter 2011; CNMH 2017). Girls participated in at least 58 armed conflicts since 1990, including in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sierra Leone, Uganda, Colombia, and Sri Lanka (Carroll 2015, 38). Girls can represent between 40% and 50% of combatants in armed groups (Wessells 2007). In 2015, 300,000 children were ‘fighting as child soldiers in over 20 countries [...]. Up to 40% of them [were] girls’ (UN 2015).

Girl soldiers can be recruited through abduction as in cases of girls in Angola, Sierra Leone, Mozambique, and Uganda (Denov 2008). However, girls can also join armed groups voluntarily, to escape domestic situations in which they are subjected to physical and sexual abuse and/or domestic exploitation, or as a means for protection. The voluntary enrolment of girls could be a way of exercising agency (Baines 2015; Brett 2004).

Cognitive structures should, therefore, also incorporate ideas that identify girls in their agency beyond mere victims of intrusive traumatic events and gender-based violence. Even though the ‘victimhood’ image permeates, indeed, most girl soldiers’ roles in armed conflicts go beyond that image. In many situations, girl soldiers also act as ‘direct’ participants, agents, and perpetrators of atrocities (Baines 2015). Even when abducted, they are often not passive (Park 2006). They resist sexual advances and suffer beatings, torture, rape, and even death (Brett 2004; Carroll 2015). Many studies show how girls and women in armed conflict resist and act in contexts of armed conflict through the idea of ‘tactic agency’ in Liberia, (Utas 2005; Vaha and Vastapuu 2018), Sierra Leone (Denov and Maclure 2006; Coulter 2011), and Uganda (Gustavsson, Oruut, and Rubenson 2017). This ‘tactic agency’, that is they develop strategies to act even constrained by power structures. This agency may be present even when they are abducted or forcibly recruited.

Despite those situations of agency, DDR programmes typically ignore the needs of this group because they are grounded in cognitive structures that lead to associate child soldiers only with boys and particular types of victims or which universalise the experiences of women (Coulter 2011). DDR programmes are designed to serve the greatest number of demobilised children; however, as girl soldiers are not always classified as such, entities that carry out DDR activities are not always prepared to demobilise and re-integrate this group, considering their specific experiences during the conflict (Denov 2008; Ozerdem and Podder 2011; Mazurana and Cole 2013; Drumbl 2012).

Most times, girls have their specific needs omitted in the gendered ideas behind child soldiers and DDR programmes (Drumbl 2012). When returning to their families and communities, sexually active girls and their offspring face stigma and discrimination and are often rejected (Baines 2015; Mazurana and Carlson 2010; Park 2006). Young mothers are seen as having broken the rules of

their communities by having children outside the socially accepted norms of marriage and reproduction (Worthen et al. 2010; Tonheim 2017).

In addition to misrepresenting the traditional concept of ‘child’ as innocent and as an object in need of protection, girl soldiers subvert the popular notions of gender and femininity since war is a traditionally male domain (Baines 2015; Mazurana and Cole 2013; Mazurana and Carlson 2010; McKay 2005). The experiences of girl soldiers differ from the ideational imagery through which they are understood within mainstream cognitive structures, which tend to silence them as children, women, and girl soldiers by over-emphasising the victimhood aspects associated with gender-based violence (Carroll 2015). This silencing process is apparent in the case of the Colombian armed conflict, as seen below.

3. Taking Account of Local Realities: Girls in the Colombian Armed Conflict

Drumbl (2012) recognises the importance of understanding the different experiences of girl soldiers and contexts besides ideas of victimhood (Denov and Ricard-Guay 2013; Vaha and Vastapuu 2018). At the same time, Mac Ginty and Richmond (2013) reinforce the importance of the local turn in peacebuilding.⁵ Understanding local contexts is necessary for peace studies. The Colombia case helps us to differentiate categories of girl soldiers outside the victimhood approach.

This section is divided into three parts: the first one addresses the global policy-making space through an argumentation analysis of how girl soldiers are described in UN documents. We analyse the Annual Reports of the UN Secretary-General on Children and Armed Conflicts, United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolutions on Children and Armed Conflicts between 1999 and 2019, and specific documents on Colombia. The second section covers the local policy-making process through an evaluation of alternative reports by NGOs, community-based organisations, and media news on the realities of the Colombian girl soldiers on the ground. These narratives present a different – and complementary – cognitive structure, as the recruitment of girls may be a manner of resistance and empowerment. The third presents the situation of girl soldiers considering the current moment post-agreement with FARC-EP.

3.1. Girl soldiers in the United Nations’ children and armed conflict agenda

UN documents mainly address girl soldiers as victims of gender-based – especially sexually-related – violence. Any girl soldier’s experience outside this category is either overlooked or, in many cases, even silenced. The UN agenda on Children and Armed Conflict started in 1996 with the publication of the Graça Machel report ‘Impact of Armed Conflict on Children’. In the following year, the General Assembly created the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict to advocate for the protection and well-being of children affected by armed conflicts.

The Representative monitors, reports, and informs the UN bodies on six violations against children: recruitment and the use of children; sexual violence against children; killing and maiming of children; abduction of children; attacks on schools and hospitals; and denial of humanitarian access.⁶ Strategies of empowerment and resistance are not the focus of all six violations, particularly considering the phrase ‘use of children’.

In 1999, the UNSC adopted its first resolution on ‘Children and Armed Conflict’. It argued that children in armed conflicts were an issue that affects international peace and security. It was followed by resolutions creating a ‘naming and shaming’ list of parties in the six abovementioned grave violations (Resolution 1379 2001) and a mechanism for monitoring and reporting (Resolution 1612 2005) with the participation of NGOs for countries that are in the UNSC agenda. All these resolutions are in Table 1, in the annexe.

The ‘Children and Armed Conflict’ agenda in the UN was created according to existing cognitive structures regarding children, child soldiers, and girls. UNSC resolutions on Children and Armed

Conflicts regard children as a homogenous group, with little differentiation between the experiences of boys and girls. The words child and children are mentioned on average fifty-six times each resolution, while almost half of them (Resolution 2143 (2014), Resolution 2068,(2012), Resolution 1998 (2011), Resolution 1882 (2009), Resolution 1612 (2005))) do not mention girls or gender at all (see Table 2 in the annexe).

The first UNSC Resolution on Children and Armed Conflict, Resolution 1261 (1999), adopted gender considerations, as it:

Urges all parties to armed conflicts to take special measures to protect children, in particular girls, from rape and other forms of sexual abuse and gender-based violence in situations of armed conflict and consider the special needs of the girl child throughout armed conflicts and their aftermath, including in the delivery of humanitarian assistance.

Notwithstanding the differentiation of category 'girls', this resolution surfaces the idea of the children as 'victims', embedded in the image of sacred childhood – therefore silencing altering roles children, particularly girls, play in an armed conflict. Resolution 1539 (2004) and Resolution 1460 (2003) also mentioned girls as victims of rape and sexual abuse and exploitation. They go, however, a step further by calling for 'taking into account the specific needs and capacities of girls' including in DDR processes and of '[m]ainstreaming the protection of children affected by armed conflict into their advocacy, policies and programs, paying special attention to girls'. Resolution 2225 (2015) showed the same approach. It recognised 'the importance of providing timely and appropriate reintegration and rehabilitation assistance to children affected by armed conflict while ensuring that the specific needs of girls'. Specific cognitive structures connect 'specific needs' with victimhood and gender-based violence, excluding other experiences of girls in the armed conflict.

Resolution 1379 (2001) and Resolution 1314 (2000) recognised the situation of girls as combatants explicitly: 'ensure that the special needs and particular vulnerabilities of girls affected by armed conflict, including those heading households, orphaned, sexually exploited and used as combatants, are duly taken into account in the design of development assistance programmes'. Even though they are mentioned as combatants, the idea of the 'girl soldier' is still connected with specific gender roles and ideas of victims since girls were passively 'used as combatants' and exploited. Resolution 2427 (2018) mentioned the word 'girl' eight times and 'gender' three times. It recognised the importance of considering the best interests of the child and the specific needs and vulnerabilities of boys and girls in the provision of child protection, without providing discussions on specific needs outside traditional gender views.

The Annual Reports of the Secretary-General on Children and Armed Conflict between 2000 and 2018 refers to Colombia under 'situations not on the agenda of the Security Council or other situations', while, in 2019, Colombia was included under 'situations on the agenda of the Security Council'. Specific information on Colombia came first to light in the 2003 Report. More detailed information started coming after 2009, when Bogotá voluntarily accepted the Monitoring and Reporting mechanism described in UNSC Resolution 1612 (2005), in December 2008.

In these Annual reports between 2000 and 2018, girls appear under the label of 'sexual violence and abuse'. There is a silence on their other experiences in the Colombian armed conflict, outside the idea of victims of sexual and gender-based violence. They are mentioned, for example, as 'repeatedly sexually abused girls' in the 2018 Report. The report also recognises the violation of girls' reproductive rights (use of forced contraceptive methods and abortions) and sexual relations with adults. The Annual Reports contribute to understanding girls as passive victims of gender-based violence in the Colombian conflict, without making visible their strategies of empowerment, resistance, and agency. One exception is the 2010 Report that mentions that 'many adolescent girls considered pregnancy as a means to avoid being recruited by illegal armed groups.' However, this strategy is inside the main framework of gender-based violence victim.

Other relevant information in the reports mention the demobilisation of children from the *Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia* (AUC) and address the hardship of demobilised children to obtain benefits and DDR, as those groups were not recognised as armed groups (and part of the conflict), unlike the FARC-EP and *Ejército de Liberación Nacional* (ELN). Therefore, girls involved with AUC were less likely to be enrolled in formal DDR programmes than girls in other groups (CNMH 2017). The same happened with girls involved and recruited by post-demobilisation groups, that continue to recruit children in the country. Only in 2016, the Constitutional Court of Colombia declared all children involved with any armed group as victims of the conflict. However, girls involved with BACRIM (like *Los Urabeños* and *Autodefensas Gaitanistas*) continue to have limited access to DDR programmes.⁷

The same results observed in the Annual Reports are verified on the Conclusions of the Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict on the situation in Colombia (2017, 2012, 2010) and on the Reports of the Secretary-General on Children and Armed Conflict in Colombia (2019, 2016, 2012, 2009). Children are considered an umbrella victim category. Reports on specific situations (ex. a 14-year-old girl was tortured by a non-identified group) tend to be more gender-sensitive in the framework of victims of gender-based violence. The 2017 Conclusions make direct recommendations considering girls: ‘urging the Government to continue to ensure that children are promptly and formally separated and re-integrated through a clear process for identification, taking into account the specific needs of boys and girls’.

The 2016 Report brings some disaggregated data by sex of child recruitment: ‘Over the past five years, 30% of the children registered and separated from armed groups were girls and the average age of recruitment for girls (13.4 years of age) is lower than that for boys (14.1 years of age)’. The 2019 Report has these statistics: covering the period from 1973 to May 2016, ‘[... there were the] use of 5,252 children and adolescents, including 1,790 female victims’.

The reports demonstrate a noteworthy effort to differentiate and singularise girls as a separated category of analysis. They also, nonetheless, tend to promote specific cognitive structures about girls in armed conflicts mostly based on the idea of ‘passive victims’ of gender-based violence – thereby hiding their agency and pursuit of empowerment. Girls associated with armed groups only received particular attention when the Special Representative urged the stop of rape and other forms of sexual violence against children – a pattern noticeable in the 2019, 2012, and 2009 reports.

3.2. Empowerment and resistance: the local realities of Colombian girl soldiers

The argumentation analysis of the testimonies of former combatants brings the picture of the girl soldier under a different cognitive structure from the one in official documents. Alternative studies about girl soldiers in Colombia deconstructs the idea of girls as (almost) only ever associated with the vulnerable, abused, and as the victim of gender-based violence, which is present in the ideas that ground the children and armed conflict UN agenda and which are ascribed by part of the academic literature, as seen in the second part of this paper. They make explicit how the recruitment can be a form of agency, resistance and empowerment in a patriarchal and sexist society facing a prolonged armed conflict.

The use of child soldiers in Colombia started in the 1990s, more than twenty years after the armed conflict began. All parties involved in the armed conflict, including the army, employed child soldiers in some capacity. The recruitment and the use of child soldiers by guerrillas (FARC-EP, ELN), paramilitaries (AUC) and post-demobilisation armed groups (BACRIM) is a methodical, systematic and deliberate policy to control populations, territories, and strategic resources in extremely vulnerable communities (Springer 2012; Higgs 2020).

The exact number of enlisted children is unclear. In 2012, Springer calculated 18,000. The Human Rights Watch estimated that there were between 11,000 and 14,000 child combatants in 2003, the year in which the AUC paramilitaries were demobilised (HRW 2003). Girls can represent between twenty-five and fifty per cent of guerrillas and paramilitaries (Spellings 2008, 22). Between

1999 and 2018, 6499 children were demobilised, including 1904 girls (29,9% of the total). From the total of children, more than 59% (3878) left FARC-EP, 29,19% (1132) left ELN; 16,23% (1055) from AUC and 3,5% (233) from BACRIM (ICBF 2020). There are many critics on the demobilisation of children with the AUC. The Colombian Government acknowledges that many AUC commanders killed children or sent them home without passing through DDR procedures to avoid being punished for their recruitment and use as soldiers (ODDR 2011).

Another particularity of the Colombian conflict is that different surveys with demobilised children (including boys and girls) show that most children consider their recruitment voluntary (Vargas and Restrepo-Jaramillo 2016, 472) – that is, as their choice. Springer's (2012) survey with 491 demobilised children concluded that 81% of them decided to join an armed group and that many leaders of armed groups entered the group as children.

Although social and structural situations may push the children to join an armed group, the fact that they decided to enter should be taken in place. Vargas and Restrepo-Jaramillo (2016) show that rural poverty with limited access to education, coca plantations, the intensity of warfare, and the number of displaced people in towns are associated with increased recruitment of child soldiers in Colombian municipalities. Other reports explain that their enlisting is 'always associated with' violence, like direct intimidation of communities (ICBF, IOM, and UNICEF 2014, 37).

In the specific cases of girls, situations of abuse at home and ludic factors like idealisations of the military life, games, and the idea of 'party' (fiesta) push girls to enlist (Herrera and Porch 2008; Moreno Martín, Carmona Parra, and Hoyos 2010). Moreno Martín, Carmona Parra, and Hoyos (2010) conclude that non-deterministic ludic factors are the main responsible factors for girls' recruitment in Colombia, followed by intrafamilial violence. Recruitment can be perceived as a mechanism for their emancipation and empowerment in a rigid, hierarchical, and sexist social structure (Springer 2012; Spellings 2008).

Cases of former *guerrilleras* highlighted these tendencies. *Elisa* was thirteen-years-old when she joined an armed group seeking revenge after her father was shot (Fontanini 2012). *Mérida* joined the *guerrilla* at nine-years-old; when she came back home, her own father turned her over to the militaries (Casey 2016). *Catarina* enrolled in FARC-EP at thirteen years-old to leave behind a problematic situation of violence in her house. Her stepfather tried to abuse her, and she even attempted suicide (López 2017).

Boys and girls received the same training in armed conflicts, and they played roles of messenger, guard, carrier for illicit drugs, recruiter (Alarcón-Palacio 2019), spy, surveillant, and domestic worker (to cultivate, cook and build pits) (Springer 2012). They also participated directly in combat, extortion, selective killings (adjustment of accounts and exemplary punishments), kidnappings, setting mines, and the disposal and management of corpses (Springer 2012). The primary activities conducted by girls in both paramilitary and guerrilla groups included patrolling, operating radio, combat, and health services (CNMH 2017). They were also employed for recruiting and intelligence, as they could 'go unnoticed' by communities and government agents, like the *fuera pública* (CNMH 2017, 246).

Demobilised girls say that life in the guerrilla movement is more egalitarian than in the civilian world. Some girls even create, in the cognitive realm, a positive idea about life as a *guerrillera*. Herrera and Porch (2008, 611–612), in their study with former girl soldiers in Colombia, concluded that

Far from seeing themselves as "victims" of conflict, former female guerrilleras especially look back on their service as an extremely positive experience, for at least two reasons. First, although discipline in the FARC-EP is strict, and punishment may be brutal, the organisation allows females a relative autonomy and control over their lives [...] Second, they feel considerable pride in the fact that, without the dedication, organisational skills and courage displayed by females, the FARC could not function with the level of combat proficiency that it has achieved, nor indeed survive as an organisation.

The National Centre for Historical Memory indicated that girls had more significant participation in guerrillas than in paramilitary groups (CNMH 2017). Although they rarely achieve high positions of command, Herrera and Porch (2008) explain that many girls do not want to command. In their study

with former girls from the FARC, they conclude that women and girls develop important roles in the guerrilla: they help in the public image of the group and have contact with civilians; they contribute to the daily activities and intelligence activities; their sexual services contribute to the morale and stability of the troops; and they demoralise the Colombian military. Fighting women and girls is hard for Colombian men since it violates cultural, social, and human rights rules.

Some girls perceive life in the guerrilla as more equalitarian (notwithstanding the violation of many fundamental human rights). Recruited and armed girls feel more empowered than civilian girls, even if girl soldiers are among the less powerful actors in the armed groups. Rape is a punishable act within most Colombian armed groups. Although demobilised girls explain that they had the freedom to choose their sexual partners and that rapes were punished, most of them engaged in sexual relations with older men who held higher hierarchical positions (especially commanders). They recognise that they would not have done this if they were not in an armed group (Herrera and Porch 2008). There is also the standard practice among commanders of giving gifts to the ‘most beautiful’ girls. Some girls reported receiving new underwear, skin creams, and make-up (Springer 2012, 35). In this sense, entering an armed group is a way of gaining social status and goods.

In guerrillas, girls are forced to use contraceptive methods, such as inserting intrauterine devices and weekly injections. Pregnant girls are frequently forced to abort or give their children up for adoption (HRW 2003; Herrera and Porch 2008). On one hand, the will to form a family and have stable relationships and pregnancy motivated girls to leave the FARC according to Herrera and Porch (2008). On the other, girls expressed their sexual freedom to engage with different partners and agreed with FARC anticonception policy, since they understood that the guerrilla ‘was not a place for children’ (Herrera and Porch 2008). This idea eclipses traditional understandings of ‘children’ implicit in the ‘victimhood’-based cognitive structure.

In interviews conducted by Gottipati (2017), ‘women who joined the FARC-EP found the easy camaraderie and gender equity, at least the veneer of it, that they longed for.’ However, when demobilised from war, they face discrimination and stigma from both society and former *guerrilla* partners. ‘Whereas men are viewed as *macho* for having fought in the war, women are seen as “loose” for having slept with *guerrilleros* and tainted for having undergone abortions.’ (Gottipati 2017). Like most boys, most girls do not receive a formal education while serving as fighters. This decreases their possibility of insertion in the labour market after demobilisation (Spellings 2008), especially when they have offspring (Denov and Ricard-Guay 2013).

Simplistic views of girl soldiers as recruited by force and as mere victims of sexual violence hide the complex role of girl soldiers in Colombia (including the examples above of empowerment, agency, and resistance). The next section briefly discusses how this approach of girl soldiers in Colombia is also internalised in the period post-agreement between the Colombian Government and the FARC-EP.

3.3. A change in the cognitive structure of girl soldiers in Colombia?

As a result of the 2016 peace process, the FARC-EP agreed to free all children under 15 years old from their ranks immediately, while older children would be gradually liberated through a particular integration programme (Alarcón-Palacio 2019, 16). Despite that, children continue to be recruited in Colombia by BACRIM and FARC-EP dissident groups (UNSC 2019). The Peace Agreement created the Comprehensive System of Truth, Justice, Reparation, and Non-Repetition, was responsible for adopting a ‘territorial, differential and gender approach [...], with special protection and attention for women and children victims of the armed conflict’ (JEP 2019). This language may indicate evidence of the recent emergence of a differentiated cognitive structure which offers voice to girls; however there are many questions regarding how this will be implemented. Policy changes after the election of Ivan Duque in 2018 raised further concerns about the continuation of the peace process (García Pinzón 2020), including the full demobilisation of all child soldiers.

The cognitive construct that identifies girls as agents in armed conflicts counterbalances with life after the reintegration process, usually driven by a cognitive structure that does not regard child soldiers and girl soldiers as agents of their experiences. Child soldiers in general, and girl soldiers more specifically continue to be placed in the category of *victim*, even in situations where they exerted agency. Martuscelli and Villa (2018) highlighted how the Colombian peace agreement only allowed participation to child soldiers when they were defined as victims, excluding experiences that do not fit this framework of victimhood.

Fajardo Mayo et al. (2018) concluded that discourses and studies in Colombia on the situation of child soldiers treat them as victims of the armed conflict. Nonetheless, they argue that ‘boys and girls have [...] powers and resources that contribute to the construction of alternative subjectivities to violence and victimisation’ (Fajardo Mayo et al. 2018, 8). This also happens to girls that are trapped in patriarchal mentalities in DDR, lack spaces of participation and have restricted contact with their male peers (Fajardo Mayo et al. 2018).

Although the *Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar* (ICBF),⁸ responsible by DDR for children since 1999, has guidelines to understanding the intersectionalities of girl soldiers, it is not clear how they are implemented, as many programmes in the field are administered by NGOs (Torres Hernández 2017). Herrera and Porch (2008) also concluded that one of the main problems of DDR in Colombia is that the agency and empowerment experiences of girls during the armed conflict are not recognised. Institutions and foster families expect girls to return to patriarchal logics where they cannot talk: ‘re-insertion into society proved difficult for many because they were expected to reassume the subordinate role traditionally expected of Colombian women’ (Herrera and Porch 2008, 628).

Girls feel that they cannot make decisions about their lives and decide to abandon these programmes either coming back to armed groups or getting married (Torres Hernández 2017). DDR measures failure, thus, to address their expectations and experiences during the armed conflict since specific ideas and interests of what does it mean to be a demobilised girl are not the same of former girl soldiers. ‘If in the planning and implementation of these programs the capacity of the agency of these social actors is excluded, taking their situation only as the result of economic and subjective determinisms, this also excludes their ability to commit and take responsibility for their own return to civilian life’ (Moreno Martín, Carmona Parra, and Hoyos 2010, 465). DDR programmes reinforce, thereby, their view as victims such as described in the section on the UN documents.

Despite changes of tone and new DDR guidelines following the 2016 peace process, in Colombia DDR programmes are not designed to fulfil the specific needs of these girls, and there is a high risk for boys and girls to be re-enlisted in a new armed group when they feel they no longer belong to their communities and they do not have the same agency they used to have during conflict. As highlighted by Vaha and Vastapuu (2018, 225), ‘the dominant narratives that commonly victimise [...] girl soldiers are not only normatively problematic but also immensely harmful for females of all ages who attempt to enlist in [...] [DDR] programmes in the aftermath of war’.

4. Conclusion

Ideas that ground mainstream cognitive structures lead to triply silencing *girls* under the categories of ‘women’ (adults), ‘children’ (boys), and ‘child soldiers’. Media (Patiño-Gass and González-Aldea 2021) and policymakers construct an idea of children and *child soldier* as gender-neutral and as regional neutral, which these definitions are not. While those instances continue to refer to child soldiers as abducted combatant boys, or girls as victims of gender-based violence, they will reinforce a cognitive structure that generates theoretical silences of a whole group of people: girl soldiers that do not fit the current approach to assisting victims.

Specific ideas connected to the victimhood of children, girls, and child soldiers ground ideas and interests that prevent voicing girl soldiers. Those interrelations between ideas and interests continue

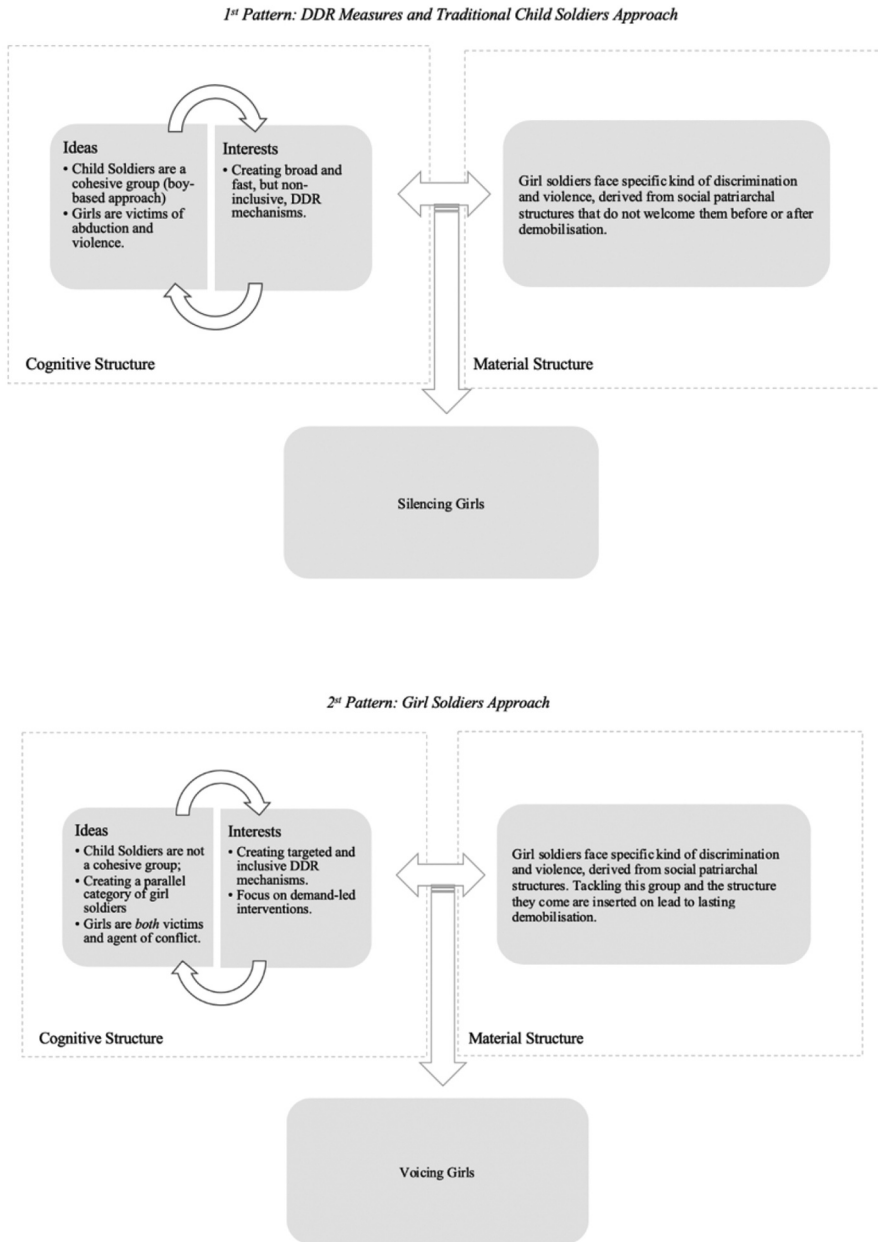


figure 2 Interrelations between cognitive structures and reality. Source: Elaborated by the authors.

to prevent policymakers from understanding different girl soldiers' experiences in Colombia that do not fit the idea of *victim*. This has implications for peacebuilding and the future of peace in this country, as seen in [figure 2](#) below. This diagram shows the interrelations between cognitive and material structures in the Colombian case for the traditional DDR understanding, and for a theoretical framework that focuses on voicing girl soldiers. Although an important emerging literature has addressed perceptions of girl soldiers critically, the victimhood image continues to be

present on representations of child soldiers and girls soldiers in the media, and international decision-making as by the UN and in Colombia.

Based on the analysis above, we identify two patterns of cognitive structures that apply to Colombian girl soldiers. In both patterns, the material structure of *girl soldiers* contradicts the idea of the state as a unitary actor, whose interest would be intervening to save victimised children. In the first pattern, child soldiers – both boys and girls – are silenced as a category of agency because they do not fit the category of ‘victimised children’.

In this framework, the cognitive structure is grounded in ideas that picture the children in war as the standard boy in an armed conflict in weak states. Girls are mainly victims of sexual violence and abuse. The interests framed by that idea is that of creating non-inclusive DDR measures; that is, measures that do not foresee the participation of girls and the specific contexts that may lead to their participation.

The material reality connected to that cognitive structure is that girl soldiers’ specificities, such contexts and social-role related experiences, are not adequately addressed by DDR measures. Girl soldiers are silenced before, during, and after the armed conflict. By that logic, girls are a different category from that of boys, connected solely to the idea of victims. They are abducted children victims of gender-based violence. The consequent interest that flourishes from that thinking is not dealing with different experiences of girls in armed conflicts. In the case of Colombia, this cognitive structure clashes with a reality in which some girls regard their recruitment as a path towards empowerment usually hidden by most established cognitive structures. That group of girl soldiers is, therefore, silenced, as seen in the Output of the 1st pattern in [Figure 2](#) below. This silence forces them to abandon DDR programmes that expect them to erase those experiences and be ‘good girls’.

A second alternative pattern, also seen in [Figure 2](#), derives from the same material structure as the first one. It differs, however, in its basic cognitive understanding of the child soldiers issue. In that pattern, girls are singularised in their specificities beyond the broad category of child soldiers. They are regarded as both victims and agents. This recognition leads to interests in reshaping DDR mechanisms, to make them more targeted and focused on the demands of the groups they are designed to demobilise. Those newly shaped interests reinforce the idea of girls as singular actors. The impact on the material level ought to be tackling specific discrimination faced by different girls and, thus, contributing to lasting demobilisation in that specific group (and preventing re-recruitment), which is no longer silenced, but voiced.

Excluding ideas and interests grounds cognitive structures that trigger marginalisation of an entire social group within the general framework of the Colombian society. Since girl soldiers are usually not considered as a specific group with unique defining aspects and behaviour patterns, they are not targeted by proper policies and academic studies. When they are considered, specific views of gender-based violence *victimhood* is the only lens used to address girls associated with the Colombian armed conflict. This leaves behind girl soldiers that do not see themselves as victims, or who do not fit in this category. Moreover, they are eclipsed by most discourses that try to understand the Colombian conflict and to implement adequate policy measures. A theoretical silence is thus created. Voicing that group can be achieved through structural changes in cognition, which will impact material reality.

Multiple actors can play a crucial role in that endeavour, such as academic researchers, media, and official agents. Making Colombian girl soldiers visible can contribute to discussions about peacebuilding and post-conflict standards or society in the country. At the same time, girl soldiers in Colombia help to deconstruct specific ideas regarding children, girls, and child soldiers.

Notes

1. See for example the Journal Critical Studies on Security Volume 3, Issue 1: Children, Childhoods, and Security Studies and the book Beier, J. M. (ed.) 2020. *Discovering Childhood in International Relations*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

2. For a specific discussion of Agency and Childhood, see Esser, F., Baader, M. S., Betz, T., & Hungerland, B. (Eds.). 2016. *Reconceptualising agency and childhood: New perspectives in childhood studies*. London and New York: Routledge.
3. The Cape Town Principles (1997) mention child 177 times, girl 4 times, and boy 0. The Paris Principles (2007) mention child 644 times, girl 124 times, and boy 23 times. While the Paris Principles give more attention to girls, the concept of a 'child associated with an armed force or armed group' is not different from the concept of 'child soldiers' in the Cape Town Principles. The associated verb reinforces the lack of agency of children in armed conflicts.
4. Denov and Ricard-Guay (2013, 485) affirm that 'The recognition and study of girls associated with armed groups has evolved over time, beginning with a focus on their vulnerabilities and victimisation, leading to an increased understanding of the complexity of their roles and experiences, to greater attention and examination of girls lives in the aftermath of violence.'
5. The authors explain that 'The local turn effectively allows for the reconstruction of emancipation, via the everyday, in an empathetic frame (solidarity), in which subjects have agency (meaning we are all subjects).' (Mac Ginty and Richmond 2013, 770).
6. According to Lee-Koo (2018, 66): 'These issues and the reporting mechanisms that support them lack nuance or balance that speaks to how children might negotiate or deflect violence, build resilience to it, or indeed have other experiences or relationships with violence that are not covered here. Even though it appears to constitute the breadth of the agenda, it speaks only to some children's experiences some of the time'. We show that this also contributes to see girl soldiers as victims of gender-based violence.
7. For a discussion on the role of BACRIM see (in Spanish) López, N. L. 2015 'Las bacrim: ¿ actores del conflicto armado colombiano?.' *Derecho Público* 34 (26). https://derechopublico.uniandes.edu.co/components/com_revista/archivos/derechopub/pub487.pdf, accessed 28 September 2020.
8. Children under 18 years old are demobilised through the ICBF programmes. Adults go to the DDR programme of Agencia Colombiana para la Reintegración – ACR. ICBF treat demobilised girls inside the framework of children. See https://www.icbf.gov.co/sites/default/files/abc_-_victimas_de_conflicto_armado_-_desvinculados.pdf and https://www.icbf.gov.co/sites/default/files/procesos/lm10.p_lineamiento_tecnico_acompanamiento_psicosocial_a_ninos_ninas_y_adolescentes_victimas_de_conflicto_armado_v1.pdf, both accessed on 27 September 2020.

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