

Research Brief

Transitional Justice and Female Ex-Combatants: Lessons Learned from International Experience

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Over the past decade practitioners, academics, and policy-makers have focused greater attention on the role of women in conflict prevention and transformation, the impact of women and their organizations on peace negotiations, and the involvement of women in political, economic, and social postconflict reconstruction.

In spite of important advances, the relationship between female ex-combatants, disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR), and transitional justice measures has been overlooked. This may be a consequence of the portrayal of women as nurturers of life and as “positive” social actors who support violence reduction and peace. Similarly, transitional justice has had limited engagement with female ex-combatants, a gap that may be exacerbated by stereotypical gendered notions about women, based on traditional concepts of what is female and what is male.

Acknowledging the range of female ex-combatants’ experiences and recognizing women’s potential for complicity and agency in organized violence is an important step toward deconstructing commonly held stereotypes of gender-appropriate behavior. The creation of transitional justice bodies in which women, too, are held accountable for crimes committed during a conflict period has important implications for the long-term success of demilitarization and peacebuilding. Initial analysis of ex-combatant engagement with transitional justice measures finds that women are mostly disregarded, and provides some evidence of complex power dynamics in which female ex-combatants in particular have not been a primary focus of attention.

This chapter thus examines the relationship between female ex-combatants, DDR, and transitional justice, with a particular focus on truth commissions. The potential of truth commissions to recognize women’s multiple and contradictory roles during armed conflict and to publicly acknowledge their agency and experience can contribute to a reconsideration of postconflict gender relations. Given the scarcity of empirical research on female ex-combatants and their engagement with truth commissions, the ideas set out here are of a provisional nature. The chapter aims to encourage more work in this area, rather than offer final conclusions.

Research Project

Transitional Justice and DDR

This project examines the relationship between disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) programs and transitional justice measures. It explores the manifold ways in which DDR programs may contribute to, or hinder, the achievement of justice-related aims. The project seeks not only to learn how DDR programs to date have connected (or failed to connect) with transitional justice measures but to begin to articulate how future programs ought to link with transitional justice aims. The project is managed by Ana Patel, Deputy Director of the Policymakers and Civil Society Unit at ICTJ.

Overview of the Situation of Female Ex-combatants

Women fighting in armed conflicts are a diverse group. As such, comparative analysis without overgeneralization is a challenge. Female ex-combatants may be marginalized, stigmatized, and excluded in different ways, not just with respect to their experiences in armed groups, negotiations, and DDR, but also with respect to transitional justice measures. Female combatants are still a minority in armed groups: researchers have estimated that women represent from 10 to 30 percent of members. Women fulfill multiple—and sometimes contradictory—roles within armed groups. Although armed groups may provide opportunities for women to access leadership roles, the majority of women combatants are found in the rank-and-file segments, not at the command level.

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Female (Ex-)combatants in Negotiation Processes

Experiences of disempowerment and marginalization often increase for women combatants as conflict comes to an end, beginning with the negotiation process. There is a tendency across different negotiation processes involving armed opposition groups to exclude women. Although the inclusion of women in peace negotiations is no guarantee of the adoption of gender-responsive approaches, researchers have argued that the participation of women has made a difference in some cases.

Female Ex-combatants and DDR Processes

Over the past decade, the mechanisms of exclusion of female ex-combatants, as well as the failure of DDR programs to address their gender-specific needs, have been documented extensively. Women may feel that they have nothing to gain, that the costs of stigmatization override the potential benefits, that participation in DDR may even be counterproductive to their reintegration, that they simply have other priorities at that time, or that they no longer want to be connected with armed forces. Whether excluded or willingly abstaining from DDR programs, women's consequent self-demobilization has a powerful impact on the success of their reintegration.

Female ex-combatants registered in a DDR program face different obstacles created by gender-blind processes. The first set of obstacles is related to the lack of adequate consideration of women's specific needs and capacities in DDR program planning and implementation. The second set of obstacles is related to factors that deter female ex-combatants from taking full advantage of DDR program benefits and services. DDR programs often promote a traditional sexual division of labor by offering training for female combatants in "female" skills, such as cooking, tailoring, and mat weaving, that support the "return" of women into the domestic and private sphere. A third set of obstacles for women in DDR processes is related to the breakup of chains of command and the disintegration of collective group identity in favor of individual identity.

Finally, there are obstacles related to the stigmatization of female ex-combatants—an issue that is often cited as a hindrance to women’s reintegration and that similarly constitutes a deterrent for women’s engagement in voluntary transitional justice initiatives. DDR programs are more likely to contribute to the stigmatization of female ex-combatants through some of the gendered practices described above. Moreover, being too visibly associated with fighting forces, especially in contexts where ex-combatants are seen as perpetrators of atrocities, may result in threats to women’s physical security. Given these many factors, women are often extremely guarded in their interactions with authorities, and they try to avoid being identified as combatants or collaborators—a fact that has implications for their participation in truth commissions and other transitional justice initiatives.

Truth Commissions and Female Ex-combatants

By the time transitional justice measures initiate their operations, female ex-combatants have usually gone through a series of empowering and disempowering processes, including DDR. An analysis of the relationship between women and truth commissions must acknowledge that accountability measures are not neutral players in a general context in which gender dynamics are being renegotiated. Truth commissions may play an important role in perpetuating or dismantling gender stereotypes, prioritizing certain categories of women over others, and highlighting gendered patterns of violence over others. Gender arises as an issue in aspects of truth commissions, including: the development of its mandate and institutional design; statement taking; women-specific and thematic hearings; reconciliation; and final reports.

Advances in international law and policy, along with increased levels of women’s activism, have had an impact on the design and work of truth commissions in regard to women. Many truth commissions have paid particular attention to the experiences of women, children, and indigenous populations. In spite of these important developments, however, the gender perspective adopted in recent truth commissions promotes a particular aspect of women’s experiences of conflict: their victimization. Scholars have noted that accountability institutions implicitly encourage women to assume a victim identity in order to be acknowledged, feeding into stereotypes of women as perpetual victims. There are very limited examples of truth commissions engaging directly with female ex-combatants.

Opportunities for Engaging Female Ex-combatants

The increasing tendency of DDR and transitional justice to overlap in time is likely to lead to situations where these processes become increasingly intertwined. There is, hence, an opportunity to challenge a series of assumptions about women in both types of initiatives. There have been different kinds of formal and informal engagement

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between DDR and transitional justice measures. Information exchange is one useful point of cooperation since DDR programs are likely to have systematized information based on sex-disaggregated data, including specific analysis of the special needs of female ex-combatants and other women participating in DDR, information that may be important for truth commissions. Additionally, DDR implementing agencies may be in the best position to identify interventions in which women enroll, which may be targeted by a truth commission in order to bring more women into the process.

Given that overlap between DDR programs and truth commissions is likely to continue, there will also be more opportunities to engage with female and male ex-combatants. Analyzing the relationship between DDR and truth commissions through a gender lens provides some initial evidence for the assertion that both public policies operate on traditional gendered assumptions and stereotypes. Truth commissions have the opportunity to address the marginalization of female ex-combatants by acknowledging women's wide range of experiences during armed conflict. Truth commissions may also reach out actively to female ex-combatants, whether formally demobilized in DDR programs or self-demobilized, as well as (released) political prisoners. Gender mainstreaming in both initiatives should be seen not only as a technical process in which a gender unit or the hiring of gender experts ensures a positive impact on female ex-combatants, but also as a process requiring political will.

Beyond the Marginalization of Female Ex-combatants?

Truth commissions' engagement with female ex-combatants has been limited, as has been their impact on women ex-combatants. Although truth commissions increasingly address gender equality in their mandates and institutional design, this rarely includes consideration of or outreach to female ex-combatants. Rather, truth commissions have by and large contributed to the further marginalization of female ex-combatants. This marginalization sustains the unequal, gendered power relations of DDR programs. By effectively failing to seize the opportunity to challenge gender relations in the postconflict context, truth commissions undermine the empowerment, positive experiences, or skills female ex-combatants may have acquired through participation in armed groups.

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