

From victim to survivor: the girls of water and rice

Charlotte V. Reed

This personal reflection is based on key lessons that have emerged as a result of a year of fieldwork with female (former) child soldiers in reintegration programmes in Colombia. In working with, and observing, a local non-profit organisation in Bogotá, Colombia, it became evident that assisting the girls in transitioning from a victim mentality to that of a survivor was critical to successful reintegration. This reflection seeks to demonstrate the important work being undertaken in Colombia, and highlights the importance of this transition, which ideally can influence reintegration programmes on a global scale.

Keywords: child soldier, Colombia, reintegration

The girls like physical contact. Whether it is a hug or to sit next to you, they always want some form of physical connection, as if seeking reassurance that you are truly there. The *Taller de Vida* (Workshop of Life) is a non-profit organisation in Bogotá, Colombia that provides psychosocial support to former child soldiers. There, the girls participate in art and drama therapy as a way to heal, and hopefully, improve their reintegration experience. They receive critical support from the psychologists on staff, and through a variety of activities and programmes, build relationships with individuals who truly care about their wellbeing.

As part of the fieldwork for my dissertation, I spent a year working at *Taller de Vida* with former, girl child soldiers, who ranged in ages from 16 to their mid-20s. They were all formerly associated with the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC), for periods ranging from a few months to many years. During that time, they lost family

and friends, participated in violence, were violated and victimised themselves. Despite the horrors they witnessed, and the trauma they experienced, in daily interactions they tend to come across as any other young female from Colombia, if wise beyond their years. They participate in games, enjoy crafts and dance, they gossip and form alliances with their peers. They are engaged and engaging, and interested in life in other countries. While most love Colombia, they seem to have little hope for an end to this ongoing conflict. Despite this, they want to make a difference, to contribute in some way to making society a better place and to keep other children from experiencing the trauma they went through.

Colombia is a country that has rarely seen a respite from political violence. The centuries of conflict and unrest – manifested as direct, cultural and structural violence – has allowed this struggle to permeate all aspects of society. The current conflict, ongoing for over 60 years, is merely the most recent and visible manifestation of what has become culturally embedded in Colombia. The violence there has permeated all aspects of the country; it can be seen in the day-to-day existence of the population, in the high levels of domestic violence and sexual abuse, in the petty and violent crime that remains in the city centres and the overflowing slums built on the outskirts. It can also be seen in the constant struggle of life; in the mini wars waged by the taxis as they fight the traffic in Bogotá, or the people fighting to get onto public transportation, the victor being the person who can push the hardest and force themselves onto the bus.

It is hard to not become a part of this violence, and nearly impossible to stay peaceful when faced with the daily battles of life. Coming from a country of relative peace, a country that has a deep respect for the rule of law and a love of lines and traffic lights, the chaos and struggle was a shock. At first, I attempted to remain above it, but after a time, I too began to push my way onto the public transportation, not yielding to others on the sidewalk and to skim my eyes over the extreme poverty and destitution. These daily battles and the potential threat of violence, as well as the vigilance it takes to constantly be aware and ready for an attack, is exhausting and slowly wears down one's own empathy and optimism. In a country where nearly everyone I met was friendly, generous and kind; this contrast is stark and abrupt.

In such a place, how can we expect anyone to understand peace – personal or otherwise? Specifically, how can we ask those most vulnerable and abused to see a future for themselves beyond the violence, to move from victimisation to a life that they can celebrate? I learned from *Taller de Vida* the importance of supporting the girls, yet at the same time, stressing their independence and ability to take care of themselves.

The girls at *Taller de Vida*, and other organisations I worked with, were directly involved in the conflict. However, most faced violence and vulnerability long before their time with armed groups. Joining armed groups, whether voluntarily or by force, is directly related to their situation of vulnerability beforehand. As such, these are girls who grew up in the face of violence, many of whom experienced it at the hands of their parents or family, i.e. those meant to protect them. These girls have hurt others and been hurt themselves. They have been victimised systematically for years, and now face the challenge of creating a new and peaceful life. The key theme that emerged over the course of my time at *Taller de Vida* was the idea of viewing oneself as a victim versus a survivor.

Legally, former child soldiers in Colombia are considered victims of the conflict. The programmes targeting this group, which were developed by the Government of Colombia (GOC), emerged from this mind-set. The GOC has the stated goal of restoring the child's rights and providing reparations for the wrongs that happened to them. While all of this is important; i.e. former child soldiers *are* victims whose rights have been abused and do deserve support and reparations, stressing their *victimhood* seemed to also be a hindrance to their personal development.

The girls at *Taller de Vida* were a part of the GOC programming, but also received outside help from the organisation. In contrast, through their work with *Taller de Vida* they were beginning to see themselves as survivors. This mental switch proved critical to a successful reintegration. Through psychosocial support, vocational skills training, reconnecting them to their bodies via dance and yoga, and encouraging interpersonal skills within peer groups and with staff members, *Taller de Vida* sought to strengthen the resilience of the girls, and uncover their individual strengths. Stella Duque, the director of the organisation, was constantly asking the girls how *they* were going to improve their lives, as opposed to how she, or the government, could do it for them. In individual conversations with the girls that I observed, I was struck by the responsibility she placed on the girls for their own futures. While she always acknowledged the trauma and violence they had suffered, she encouraged them view what they overcame as a strength and to use these strengths to move forward in their lives. She was sympathetic and willing to support the girls in whatever endeavour they wished to embark upon, but required the girl to do the work and have the agency to make critical life decisions. She spoke to them as survivors, not as victims, a vocabulary drastically different from the government programmes.

This survivor mentality was demonstrated clearly in a photo presentation entitled *'The Girls of Water and Rice'*, which had been created by girls, all of whom were victims of sexual abuse, in addition to being child soldiers. It begins with the statement, *'We are girls who were involved in the war, girls who have endured situations that leave irrevocable signs on our bodies. But we are like water, which flows and resists. We are like water that goes against the current and travels to a new destination. We are rice, because it is a symbol for resilience. A rice kernel can be exposed to water without being damaged and it is able to transform itself and grow.'* In this way, the girls are claiming their past and expressing their power and ability to overcome the war and trauma. It was this

critical message, the importance of viewing oneself as a survivor and responsible for your own success, that I saw missing in the government run programmes, but one that was strongly encouraged within *Taller de Vida*. While my time was spent solely in Colombia, I believe this is a lesson that can supersede geography and culture, and prove critical to the improvement of all reintegration programmes globally.

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