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## A pathway towards empowerment in post-conflict Colombia?

The case of female victims of conflict in the department  
of Meta

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## **Declaration**

I, Viviana Daza, declare that this thesis is a result of my research investigations and findings. Sources of information other than my own have been acknowledged and a reference list has been appended. This work has not been previously submitted to any other university for award of any type of academic degree.

Signature.....

Date.....

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# Abstract

In this thesis I seek to examine the perceptions that female victims of violence in Meta, Colombia hold regarding empowerment, as they understand it from their life experiences before and after being victimized. I also aim to explain the life strategies that these women implemented in order to overcome challenging situations. In doing this, I explore the links that exist between such strategies and post-conflict reconstruction in the struggle to achieve sustainable and durable peace in the country. In the first section of the thesis I examine how the term empowerment has permeated the academic literature through a historical retrospective of its use from the early 70s by women's grassroots organizations. In addition, I explore the evolution of the term and its inclusion in the development agenda jargon, which has served as a bastion to advocate for the rights of the disenfranchised and most vulnerable ones. Secondly, I delve into the literature regarding women's role in post-conflict reconstruction of conflict afflicted countries around the world.

I argue that although much attention is paid to the displacement phenomena in Colombia with development programs and public policies that aim to promote empowerment amongst female victims, their own voices remain unheard. The ways in which conflict victims experience and cope with adversity vary from person to person. This suggests that the pathways to empowerment are essentially personal endeavors that derive from people's own perceptions and from their relations with others in the community. In the second section of this thesis I analyze the findings in light of the theoretical framework previously provided. With this, I address the significance of female victims' perceptions regarding empowerment focusing on narratives about their lives before and after being victimized. In exploring the mechanisms that the female victims implemented, I shed light on the factors that may have contributed, or not, to their empowerment process and to the reconstruction of their communities.

From my findings, I argue that female victims perceive themselves as empowered women who are able to overcome obstacles and strength their livelihoods. Participants do not longer feel victims of the conflict; instead, they feel they are agents of change. In particular, findings suggest that the life strategies participants implemented have positively influenced their perceptions about self-reliance and self-worth. In addition, these life strategies have fostered participants' social and political participation in their communities.

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# List of abbreviations

AUC	Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia
CEDAW	Convention of the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination Against Women
DANE	Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadística (National Administrative Department of Statistics)
FARC	Fuerzas Revolucionarias de Colombia (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia)
FIP	Fundación Ideas para la Paz (Ideas for Peace Foundation)
ICRW	International Center for Research on Women
IDMC	International Displacement Monitoring Center
MDG	Millennium Development Goals
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development programs
UNRISD	United Nations Research Institute for Social Development
UNSCR	United Nations Security Council Resolutions

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# 1 Introduction

*“If empowerment is ever to have a meaning it must enable those women who are most affected by violence to find ways of articulating the pain and accommodate the slow process of healing”*  
(Afshar, 1998:3)

The internal armed conflict in Colombia has been, undoubtedly, one of the most brutal struggles in the continent for more than five decades (Cepeda, 2013). Violence in Colombia permeates all levels of society in all the regions of the country involving various actors, motivations and modalities. Millions of people in Colombia have suffered dreadful crimes, massacres, forced disappearances, kidnappings and damages to public and private assets, to name a few. The conflict has hampered rural economic development and worsened poverty levels. The outskirts of cities became the refuge for millions of displaced persons, from which the majority are women and children (Camacho and Rodriguez, 2012). However, the peri-urban neighborhoods of Colombian capital cities such as Bogota, Medellin and Villavicencio have not always been safe havens where the displaced persons find new opportunities to restate their lives. On the contrary, in these spaces new hazards challenge peoples’ daily lives, victimizing them yet again.

According to IDMC’s report in 2016 there were approximately 7,246,000 internally displaced persons in the country. Internally displaced women and children -African-Colombian and indigenous peoples- are disproportionately affected by displacement; around 54% of the displaced population are women and children (IDMC, 2016). Displaced women and girls are particularly vulnerable to suffer violence and sexual exploitation and they struggle to access government assistance that can help them rebuilding their livelihoods, being often forced to resort to negative coping mechanisms. While in 2016 the peace agreement between the Colombian government and the guerrilla FARC was a significant achievement, displacement has continued with various obstacles to return and weak durable solutions for the displaced population. In this context, the country faces numerous challenges for post-conflict reconstruction, peace-building and the reintegration of a highly-divided society.

Considering the aforementioned, the primary aim of this thesis is to understand how the female victims of the armed conflict in Colombia perceive empowerment in their lives and to explore the life strategies that they implemented in order to recover their livelihoods. In doing this, specific attention will be given to participants’ voices about their realities and experiences of empowerment. This thesis focuses on a group of 20 female victims of conflict

who live in the department of Meta, Colombia. Essentially, this thesis aims to explore both, participants' perceptions of empowerment by understanding their life stories and exploring the mechanisms that these women followed in order to overcome their situation after being victimized.

To guide this thesis, the following research questions are explored:

RQ1: How do female victims of the Colombian armed conflict perceive empowerment?

RQ2: What strategies do female victims of the Colombian armed conflict implement to strengthen their livelihoods?

In recent decades, the discourse and research on the internal displacement phenomena in Colombia has gained increasing attention among scholars who are interested in the gender aspects of the conflict and in the differentiated impacts of the war in women's lives. To name some of these studies, Donny Meertens and Segura (1997) and Meertens (1999 and 2016) have been researching on the topic of internally displaced people focusing on gender from the early 90s. In her studies, she explores displaced women's roles and resilience before and after their displacement. Similarly, Blanco and Amaris (2013) explore the roads that displaced people undergo that include episodes of violence, adaptation to host settlements and hope for a better future. Similarly, Barros and Matheus (2014) focus on women's role in the Colombian armed conflict, which concluded that the conflict has forced women to adapt to new roles in society not only as victims but also as combatants in the armed groups, and as political leaders and peace promoters in the communities. On the other hand, Pareja and Ibañez (2014) have explored the struggle of internally displaced women and their roles in the reconstruction of their lives and communities in Medellin and Bogota.

There is abundant research literature on the issue of internally displaced people in Colombia. Some of which have focused on the socio-economic struggle of displaced women and girls in peri-urban areas along the country. Whereas other research emphasizes on the development and aid programs that foster women's empowerment, implemented by the national government and international organizations in the communities. However, the way in which women understand and operationalize empowerment in their lives before and after the victimization events is still poorly understood and it is under examined. Women's voices regarding their own pathways towards empowerment and their roles in peace-building are both crucial for reweaving the social fabric and for implementing policies that are more

effective in empowering vulnerable population and strengthening post-conflict reconstruction. This issue has never been more pressing than now when the post-conflict setting in Colombia is fragile and develops amid remaining violence with rebel armed groups, criminality and drug trafficking adding to the complexity of internal displacement in the country.

### **Women's empowerment and their role in post-conflict reconstruction**

To understand a concept as nebulous as empowerment, it is important to recognize that its meaning is highly controversial. The use of the term “empowerment” extends over centuries; however, during the last decades its practice is more popular, predominantly in the academic literature, the development industry and mainstream politics and economics (Porter, 2013). In the 70's and 80's, radical social movements – particularly women's movements – adopted the term “empowerment” to advocate in favor of the disenfranchised, vulnerable and oppressed, to emancipate women and achieve equality and equity (Moser, 1993). These efforts aimed to raise consciousness about issues of class and the asymmetrical power relations between genders that subordinate women, hamper their access to resources and give them unequal human capabilities (Busch & Valentine, 2000; Nussbaum, 2000; Duflo, 2012). Consequently, “empowerment” joined the struggle for change in the development jargon as a bastion for social policy reforms, programs and practices (Batliwala, 2007; Cornwall & Ayidoho, 2010).

In fact, the discourse about empowerment is paramount in international policy documents such as the UNSCR 1325 (United Nations Security Council Resolution) a blueprint document for women and their role in peace and security. CEDAW (1979) (the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women) an international bill of rights for women that 189 countries have ratified (UN, 1993). In addition, empowerment has been also used in both development goals sets. First the MDGs (Millennium Development Goals) number 3 “*promote gender equality and empower women*” (UN, 2000), which emphasized on eliminating gender disparities on primary and secondary education as well as decreasing gender gaps in terms of poverty, labor market, wages and participation in public and private domains. Secondly, in the SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals) the objective number 5 is “*to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls*”, which acknowledges that women continue to suffer discrimination and violence around the world. The SDG 5 states that “*providing women and girls with equal access to education, health care, decent work,*

*and representation in political and economic decision-making processes will fuel sustainable economies and benefit societies and humanity at large” (UN, 2015).*

Even today, almost 50 years after empowerment reached the development agenda, women are often discriminated against –sometimes even before birth-, and women are generally more vulnerable; showing alarming disparities in gender equality and power relations (Kabeer, 2016). The empowerment approach to development acknowledges these inequalities between men and women and the status of subordination that women hold within the household and in society. This approach also regards that women experience oppression differently from men in the grounds of class, caste, colonial history and their position in the global economy (Moser, 1993). Hence, empowerment advocates for women themselves to counteract these oppressive structures and drive transformative change in society (Kabeer, 2012; Narayan, 2005).

On the other hand, in the growing existence of wars and violence around the world, efforts to end conflict and restore peace in societies are fundamental. However, peace-building actions are often undermined by the post-conflict economic and political contexts, which reinforce structural inequalities between men and women (True, 2013). Notwithstanding, women’s roles in promoting both, the economy and social contexts are crucial for the long-term recovery of societies. War has profound effects in the values, identities and social roles of societies, thus, peace-building efforts must include gender aware approaches that reconstruct women and men’s roles, social relations and power structures in post-war settings. In doing this, the inclusion of women in the economic, political and social reconstruction of conflict affected societies is essential to achieving peace.

## **1.1 Structure of the thesis**

This thesis has seven chapters. Following this introduction, chapter 2 provides brief background information of the armed conflict in Colombia. Chapter 3 presents the methodological aspects of this thesis. In turn, chapter 4 provides an account of the theoretical framework delving into literature about empowerment. In chapter 5 I will explore relevant literature on women in post-conflict reconstruction. Chapter 6 will explore and present the empirical findings including primary and secondary sources. Chapter 7 provides a summary and discussion of the major findings and presents the concluding remarks.

## **2 Contextual background**

The present chapter deals with a brief historic background about the conflict in Colombia and its implications for society -especially for women-. The aim is, therefore, to offer a contextualization of the causes of conflict, its main actors and its evolution throughout the years, emphasizing on the department of Meta in Colombia. In doing so, I will explore women's diverse roles during the armed conflict, their current roles in post-conflict and the tensions that remain with existent guerrillas and criminality in the country.

### **2.1 The Americas' oldest armed conflict**

The conflict in Colombia has developed through several stages of violence where varied armed actors have interplayed. The most known ones are the left-wing guerrillas (FARC and ELN), the extreme right-wing paramilitaries (AUC), which partly became criminal bands "bacrim" after their demobilization in 2003, and the Colombian state armed forces (Livingstone, 2013). However, there have been other actors in the conflict, such as drug lords, traffickers, and criminal groups. During the conflict, all the aforementioned armed actors have been involved in violent acts where civil population was caught in the cross fire. Millions of people in Colombia have suffered dreadful crimes, massacres, forced disappearances, kidnappings and damages to public and private assets, to name a few (Tawse, 2008; Vargas and Caruso, 2014).

One of the departments (province) in Colombia that has been affected the most is Meta. From the early 80's this region has been disputed by the FARC, the AUC, criminal bands and drug lords to gain control, not only of the territory, but also of the political and economic sectors in the region (FIP, 2013; Rodriguez, 2014). This is due to its particular location, which facilitates traffic from the southern part of the country to the central region. Thus, the production and traffic of cocaine became the engine for social and armed conflicts in the county, while supporting the military funding for the guerrillas and paramilitaries as well (UNDP, 2010). Among the most notorious impacts of the conflict in Meta is the forced internal displacement that particularly affects farmers, indigenous people, women and children. The attacks and threats to civilians and destruction of infrastructure and livelihoods, mainly in dispersed rural areas, has provoked an unprecedented exodus of people who fled their homes escaping from violence and seeking refuge in larger cities (UNHCR, n.d.).

Women and children are amongst the most affected ones by displacement as husbands, fathers and brothers are often fatal victims of conflict, women have to assume breadwinners roles and are left alone responsible for their children. In settlements, women and girls are also more vulnerable to sexual exploitation, domestic violence and financial insecurity (UN, 2016). Besides forced displacement, other impacts can be also mentioned such as forced recruitment, corruption, land dispossession, kidnappings, and massacres among others (Duarte and Cotte, 2014).

In addition, the agricultural sector in Meta has been severely affected. Illegal crops increased and became the main economic activity for the farmers than remained in rural territories. This population lacked public services and access to credits to boost their food and commercial crops, thus resorted to the illegal cropping of cocaine as a way to earn money and subsist (UNDP, 2010; Duarte and Cotte, 2014). Violence was used to remove people from their territories resulting in constant cycles of land dispossession and tenure struggles over the years in Meta. In fact, Meta is one of the counties with greater quantities of land restitution claims in Colombia made through the Law 1448 of 2011 (victim's law) (Rodriguez, 2014). In a recent study of the relation of conflict and dispossession, Duarte and Cotte found that conflict has, undoubtedly, affected the socio-economic development of the region as well as fostered the unsteadiness, wastelands and detriment of the agricultural sector in Meta (Duarte and Cotte, 2014).

Consequently, Meta has very high levels of poverty, low access to education, to health, to employment and housing compared to the other provinces in Colombia. The disadvantaged population is mostly located in rural areas. In general, women and children are a social group which has been systematically affected and vulnerable to the violation of their rights by all the armed actors (Andrade, 2010). There are numerous international, national and local organizations working with women in Meta, some of which are grassroots organizations consolidated by the female victims in their new settlements. These groups have put forward in the national agenda women's needs as direct victims of the conflict; they have claimed for land restitution and have promoted peace-building activities in their communities (Galvis, 2011). Although, Colombian public policies aim at assisting the reconstruction of conflict victims' lives and their re-integration in society, the livelihoods of thousands of female victims remain at stake and put them in vulnerable positions. The living conditions and the



limited opportunities to access resources (education and the market) hamper their pathways towards empowerment.

### **2.1.1 The peace agreement and the gender approach**

In August 2012 peace negotiations initiated between the current Colombian government and the oldest guerrilla in the country, FARC. The peace agreements went through a four years long process of constant instability that, in many occasions, put at risk the continuity of the negotiations. The peace agreement relied on Norway, Chile and Venezuela as external guarantors of the process that reached a preliminary accord in September 2016 (Alto Comisionado para la Paz, 2016). With growing skepticism and divided public opinions, president Juan Manuel Santos promoted a referendum to consult Colombian people about the viability of the pre-agreements that FARC and the Government have signed. It was for the surprise of many around the world that the Colombian population voted “NO” to the implementations of such agreements in the country, which required a revision of the final document that was finally signed in November 2016.

About two years after the peace agreements started, approximately 301 women’s organizations presented their suggestions and their intention to participate in the negotiation table. They presented numerous proposals to the peace commission and gained attention towards the inclusion a gender approach to the agreements and to the future post-conflict reconstruction in the country. This is how a gender sub-commission for peace was created and effectively included women to participate and formulate the final document that both parties signed. The objective with the gender approach was to create conditions in which women –and people with diverse gender identities- can access in equal conditions the benefits of living in a country free of armed conflict (Acuerdo final, 2016).

The gender approach also recognizes that women have been asymmetrically affected by conflict and that their role in peacebuilding, reconciliation and the pacific resolution of conflict in the territory is crucial. The agreements transversally include a gender perspective with the inclusion of women in rural reforms, political and social participation and the compliance of truth, justice and reparation of victims. In this way, women do not only play a key role in the implementation and compliance of the agreements but also, in the generation of meaningful cultural and social change that can foster a sustainable and long-lasting peace.

## 3 Research methodology

The following chapter presents the research methods used in this study. The chapter is divided in three parts; the first one explores the rationale behind this study's choice of research approach, research design, methods and the tools to collect data. The second part describes in detail the research site, the sample and the fieldwork in the department of Meta in Colombia. Lastly, this chapter presents the procedures for data analysis, ethical considerations of this study and finally an overview of the research methodology.

### 3.1 Data collection methods

To answer the guiding research questions and to better understand the case under investigation this study used: semi-structured interviews, participant observation, informal conversations with informants in the field and document analysis of mass media sources and secondary sources. The section below presents a more detailed explanation about the data collection tools.

#### 3.1.1 Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews encourage participants to communicate freely, using their own words to share experiences from their own worldviews. For instance, Patton describes the purpose of qualitative interviewing as the way *“to capture how those being interviewed view their world, to learn terminology and judgments, and to capture the complexities of their individual perceptions and experiences.”* (Patton, 2002:348). To use semi-structures interviews as tools to collect data supposes a flexible process where the participants should feel free, comfortable and willing to express their ideas. The goal with this tool is to provide information into how the interviewees experience and view their reality, identify patterns and unfold lived events (Bryman, 2012).

Semi-structured interviews are the backbone of data collection in this study. Before conducting the fieldwork in Meta, I prepared the interview guides following key topics of interest for the study, and arranging the wording of the interview questions to address the participants. Interviewing women, talking to them and listening to their stories proved being the best method for collecting empirical data during the fieldwork. The first approach to the field only included observation of the settings, the location and facilities in the slums and the

farms. It was only through direct contact and interaction with the participants that I started to grasp insights about their perceptions, their life experiences, their feelings and hopes. But this was not always an easy task. To build trust with the participants took time and patience, there were topics I realized were too sensitive and many of my participants refused to talk about them –however this varied from person to person-. In any case, I was aware of that –to share painful and a traumatic experience with an outsider is not easy and many were not eager to stir up old memories-. However, I managed to create a good rapport with my informants, and the interviews went smoothly. Little by little I learned how to state the questions and what was best to ask to prompt relevant and detailed information.

In total I conducted 24 semi-structured interviews; the first interviews I conducted were in two slums in the outskirts of Villavicencio with twelve women – most the participants live there -. Later I conducted two more interviews in a rural area 45 minutes away from Villavicencio and two more in downtown Villavicencio. I also conducted four interviews with NGO’s representatives based in Villavicencio. Once based back in Oslo, I conducted four interviews more online - through Skype- with female victims of conflict in Meta. Conducting the interviews and observations in the field allowed me to become familiar with the environment in the settings and their reality before conducting interviews with officials and program developers in the department’s capital city.

### **3.1.2 Document analysis**

Document analysis in this thesis emphasizes on secondary sources i.e. published books, research works, journals and newspapers. During the data collection process, I gathered several documents produced by NGOs regarding development programs and strategies to approach the communities in Meta. These documents are informative brochures about the programs and provide relevant background information for this thesis. However, for the document analysis I used official documents from the government in Colombia regarding development programs, as well as documented legislation for the conflict’s victims and post-conflict reconstruction. These documents assisted during the analysis and triangulation of data. Secondary sources and official documents are, as stated by Bryman (2012), sources of information that are available to the researcher but have not been produced particularly for social research purposes.

In addition, I used media articles regarding development programs, displaced persons and conflict victims –in Meta and elsewhere in Colombia- published in local and national newspapers. I also included several secondary academic sources on the issue of displaced people – especially on female victims-, from a perspective that involves the strengthening of human capacities and income generation activities. Secondary academic sources related to post-conflict resolution are also considered. Some of this information was collected from online academic journals and are mostly written by Colombian scholars. All the data analyzed in these documents was constantly cross-checked and triangulated with the empirical data gathered in the field in Meta.

### **3.1.3 Other methods**

Participant observation is often used in qualitative research. The objective is to immerse oneself in the participants' social setting, to observe people's behaviors and how they interact with others in the community (Bryman, 2012). This research study used observations and informal conversations with participants as tools to gather data and create rapport with participants. I conducted participant observation throughout the fieldwork, every time I visited the slums and the rural areas where participants live. I focused the observations on the participants' housing environment, the settlement facilities, and infrastructure such as: meeting places, local shops, schools, transportation and roads.

I also conducted research at the participant's work place (handcrafts shops), not only to the premises, the machinery, the raw materials and the merchandise for sell, but also, the interaction participants had with each other, with neighbors, suppliers and with costumers. I visited their shops and work places several times, I observed the participants manufacturing the goods, working on the land and selling their products. All the information and insights about these observations were written down on a fieldwork journal I kept to organize incoming ideas and new knowledge acquired.

As the observations took place I also conducted informal conversations with participants, who could share their life experiences while doing other activities. In addition, after the recorded interviews, some of the participants followed up on statements that they explained before but did not want, or forgot, to mention during the formal interviews. At times this information –off the record – touched upon delicate topics and was generally shared when the tape recorder was off and when the participants seemed to feel more comfortable with my

presence around them. The data collected with these conversations was also included in the fieldwork journal right after my visits to the field and have assisted in the general analysis and triangulation process of this study.

## **3.2 Research approach**

The way in which people view, experience and understand the world are key to the qualitative researcher who seeks a deeper understanding and exploration of social phenomena (Berg and Lune, 2013). This study aimed to understand participant's strategies to strengthen their own livelihoods and to explore their perceptions about empowerment. By using the qualitative approach, I could study issues of interest in depth and detail as they spontaneously unfold. To do this, I approached the field without constrained preconceptions of categories or theories.

The qualitative approach prompts the researcher to observe and interview individuals in settings and within conditions and spaces that are comfortable and familiar to them. The qualitative design aims to avoid manipulating the phenomena's characteristics; the aim is to understand it in the context through the participants' own interpretation of their reality. Patton (2002) and Creswell (1998) argue that the qualitative researcher should adopt the role of a pupil who can understand the social realm and later explain the facts about the phenomena from the participant's own point of view. In this way, I explored the participants' experiences and perceptions in detail in their own communities in Meta, Colombia. There, I could carefully observe and listen to what people say and interact personally with both the participants and the environment surrounding them to obtain first-hand information. While this study's primary research approach deals with qualitative methods and empirical data, this study is also informed by a quantitative research approach based on secondary sources. These sources contributed relevant statistical and numerical data about the female victims of the armed conflict at the national and local level as well as the NGO's and some programs implemented with this population along the region. Both approaches provide this study with comprehensive data that allows for a wider understanding of the lives of the female victims.

## **3.3 Research design**

I opted to use a *global ethnography* design (Burawoy, 2000) to build a richer –more nuanced- picture of the challenges that female victims of conflict in Meta face. This design has allowed

me to explore the local context in both, time and space, but to also contrast it with wider national and international dynamics. In doing so, this study utilized various approaches to data collection and analysis to learn as much as possible from the specific case of female victims in Meta. In addition, this study used secondary data, official documents and newspapers articles to compare the case in Meta with other similar cases in Colombia. In this design, the case in Meta is – simultaneously - embedded within complex national and international development aid trends and mandates.

For global ethnographers, the dynamics of social issues and realms extend out of the local, out of the concrete, and expand over space and time. Local social struggles and global forces are entangled and mutually shape each other. According to Burawoy et al. (2000), the aim of the global ethnographer is to understand how individuals and groups – often the marginalized - negotiate, avoid, challenge and even re-create the intricate global network that involves them. Global dynamics are indeed rapidly expanding and traversing continents but they are still being forged between the local and the global. As Burawoy, (2001:148) states:

*“Global ethnography...shows globalization to be a very uneven process and, most important, an artifact manufactured and received in the local. Globalization is produced and consumed not in thin air, not in some virtual reality but in real organizations, institutions, communities, etc. From this point of view the global becomes ethnographic”.*

When using a global ethnography design the researcher enters the lives of those they study and attempt to place him/herself within their realities and experiences. To understand the local, it is necessary to capture the external forces, the connections and the imaginations that the subjects have in relations to the global. Burawoy et al. (2000) sees that the relationship between international organizations and the communities they intend to address as increasingly “*disconnected*”. Often the ideologies of development agencies diverge with the local communities’ social and economic needs. Many development programs continue to be applied with a top-down approach. On the other hand, globalization also has the potential for triggering social change amongst the marginalized “*Globalization does not only produce structural irrelevance, it can also produce new patterns of interdependence, giving new weapons to the weak*” (Burawoy, 2001:155). For global ethnography developed and developing countries constitute the “*nodes of a global chain*” (Burawoy, 2001:157). Hence, the effects produced in one country or “*node*” can influence both, up and down the chain.

In this thesis, it is important to understand the participant's point of views, experiences, and imaginaries regarding empowerment examining their life strategies. I argue that the analysis of the case in Meta is incomplete if studied in isolation. Hence, to assemble the picture of the case this thesis examines its relations to other cases - contrasting differences and similarities – and understands the case as part of wider dynamics that transcend the local to the regional, national and ultimately the global.

### **3.4 Data analysis procedures**

I took the first steps towards the analysis of data during the early stages of the fieldwork. I conducted a preliminary analysis of the observations noted on the fieldwork journal and the media articles about the development program in the slums. These formed the initial structure of the analysis that I later triangulated and contrasted with the participants answers during the interviews and the secondary data sources. These procedures generally help enhancing the validity and reliability of research studies (Berg and Lune, 2013).

To analyze participants' interviews I first organized and divided the data into informant categories, women at the slums, women in rural areas and women in the city and finally data gathered from NGOs' staff. First I took notes from each interview recorded and constantly compared them with the interview notes, the observations and informal conversations notes for each participant in a "spiraling research approach" that, according to Berg and Lune (2013), also strengthens the validity and reliability of data. I put greater interest on relevant themes for the study, which later I cross-checked with the rest of the participants' interviews to find commonalities, divergences and patterns across the data set.

From the interviews, I selected the fragments that I considered to be most relevant and eloquent to use as citations during the writing process. These citations aim to answer the two research questions of this study. In general, the analysis of data emphasized on the triangulation of the empirical information gathered through interviews, observations and informal conversations during the fieldwork. This analysis was then later cross-checked with the information gathered in the media and the document analysis of the media articles, official documents and academic secondary sources.

### 3.5 Research site

Colombia is constituted by 32 municipalities called “departments”. The research site for this thesis was in the Meta department to the east of Andean mountains in Colombia. It is home to the geographical center of the country. Meta is a vast territory of grass plain land called the “llanos”, but it also has mountain ranges like the “Sierra de la Macarena”. The department is rich in natural resources and biodiversity, with biofuel, livestock and agriculture as its main economic activities. According the DANE, there are approximately



Figure 1. Map of Meta department and the capital city Villavicencio

Source: Alcaldía de Villavicencio

979.710 inhabitants in the department. The capital city of Meta is Villavicencio – located 89 km south from Bogotá, is a municipality with 495.227 inhabitants (DANE, 2014). From the early 80’s this region was disputed by the FARC, the AUC, criminal bands and drug lords to gain control. These groups struggled not only over territory, but also over the political and economic sectors in the region (FIP, 2013; Rodriguez, 2014). This is due to its location, which facilitates drug trafficking from the southern part of the country to the central region. Most of the fieldwork was conducted in two slums in the outskirts of Villavicencio called *La*



*Reliquia* and *13 de Mayo*. From the 24 participants in this study, 20 are women victims of violence. From those 20 women, 14 live in the slums, 3 live in rural areas and 3 live in Villavicencio city. The other 4 interviews were also conducted in Villavicencio with NGOs personnel.

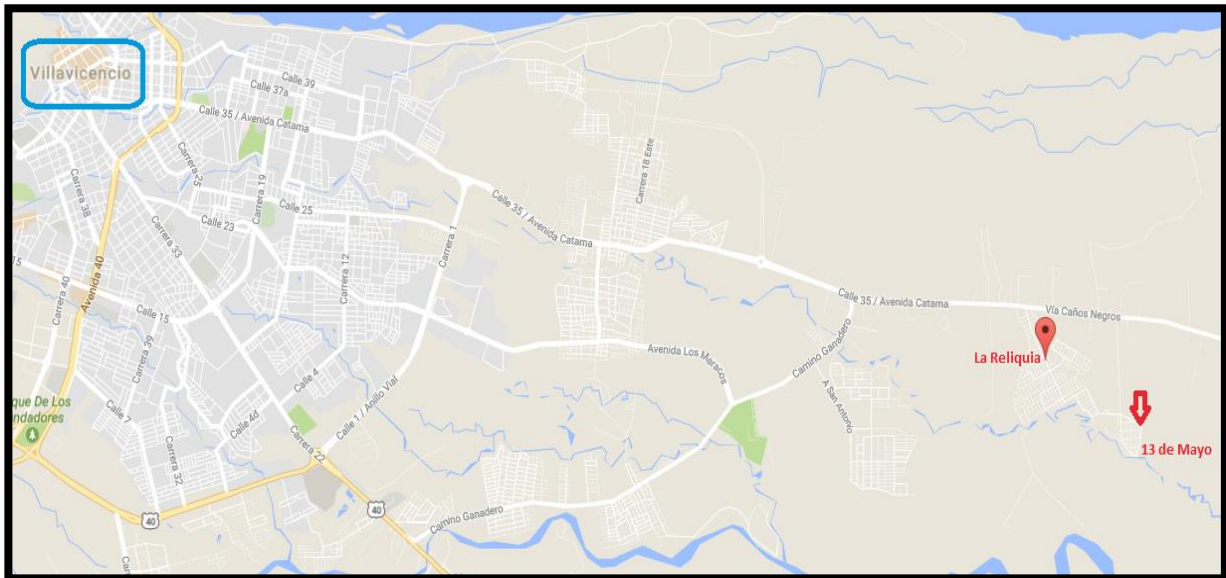


Figure 2. Location of the slums in Villavicencio

Source: Google maps

*13 de Mayo* is a settlement forcibly occupied on May 13<sup>th</sup> 2008 – hence its name - by hundreds of displaced people in the south-east of the rural periphery of Villavicencio. There were few hundreds of people – displaced, ex-combatants, demobilized from the AUC, and others - when they first occupied the terrain. Nowadays, there are almost 5000 people in this slum, which has grown much and, according to the participants, is just a small trace of what it used to be back then. In the beginning people built rudimentary shacks everywhere around the land. Without water, electricity or sanitation facilities life became a struggle for survival every day. During the rainy season people had to go through mud and walk for about 30 minutes to get to the nearest neighborhood – *La Reliquia*, a suburb that was equally occupied years before – to get water, food and, with luck, maybe a job, and send the children to school. The *13 de Mayo* slum has a violent reputation in Villavicencio, criminality, smuggling and insurgency are common problems and are often portrayed in local media.

*La Reliquia* slum' infrastructure is more advanced compared to the newer *13 de Mayo* slum. This slum was also forcibly occupied in the beginning of the 2000's. Houses in *La Reliquia* are majorly built in bricks, sometimes they have two floors painted in light colors and are somewhat well distributed in the terrain. The only paved road is the main one that crosses the

Reliquia slum from the start until the end – which is just few blocks away from the dusty, narrow and uneven pathways of *13 de Mayo*-. Everything one may remotely need for daily life can be found along the main road in *La Reliquia*.

These two slums are located rather far from the urban area in Villavicencio. The bus that goes there from the center of the city takes about 45 minutes to get there. During the trip, there are at least 20 minutes crossing an uninhabited immense plain green area. But, this ample and almost idyllic view of the “llanos” changes abruptly. The scene contrasts with the scarcity of the first houses in the slum, that later comes to life with numerous small shops on both sides of the road – grocery shops, butcheries, bakeries, cafes, clothes shops, toys, bars the list is endless-. There is one school, but I could not see parks or other green areas.

The reality in *13 de Mayo*, however, is very different. There are few houses built with bricks, but most of them are built in other materials, some with only few old plastic covers and rusty aluminum roofs. There are no paved roads. The dirt roads are narrow, very uneven; and they match the houses’ colors, a dull and sad dark yellow. The only form of transportation are small bike taxis that for few hundred pesos would take people from “*La Reliquia*” to almost everywhere in “*13 de Mayo*”, but these are, sometimes, commodities that the locals cannot afford.



Photo 1. *13 de Mayo* slum in Villavicencio. Photo by Viviana Daza. 2016

Besides these slums, there are other two places where I conducted the fieldwork. Two interviews were conducted in Villavicencio and another two interviews in “*Prado*” a small rural village about one hour away from Villavicencio. One of the participants in this area lives in the village centrum in a humble house. In her house, she established a tiny shop where she sells confectionery. The other participant lives at a small plot of land in the rural area of that village. From the village centrum, I had to take a small car that would take me as far as the road allowed. Later I had to walk up a mountain, crossed two streams and followed

a small road through vegetation to arrive. The farm is small and very humble; there is a house with the necessary to live. There are some food crops and a rudimentary poultry barn, which is the informant's and her family's livelihood.



Photo 2. Farm at "Prado" village. Photo by Viviana Daza 2017.

### **3.6 Sampling**

The choice of site and sampling of participants was facilitated by my background knowledge of the area and some connections through family and friends. I was aware that big portions of the population in the slums are victims of conflict, and that this fact has attracted local, national and international development agencies over the last decade. I started by contacting NGO's staff that could work as gatekeepers to reach women in the field but this approach only pointed out selected people by the organizations, probably the ones that are most in contact with them. However, as my interest was to contact women in their households, women who may not have much visibility with the people designing and conducting the programs, I decided to visit the slums on my own. This was initially a challenge, not only because of the violent reputation of the slum, but, because creating trust was very difficult. I started connecting with people in small shops, the information provided by them was scarce, and they were naturally skeptical of me.

After my fourth visit, I could finally talk to a couple of women who, not only agreed to participate in the study, but also passed around the word and put me in touch with other

women who in turn put me in touch with others. This is how the study site extended along both slums in Villavicencio and a rural area in Meta. In total, I interviewed 20 women from which 19 are officially declared direct victims of conflict, only 1 is an indirect victim but identifies herself as one. From these 20 women, 2 are community leaders in the slums and 1 is a leader of a women's organization in rural areas in Meta. Their backgrounds, ages, occupations and ways of victimization varied. 19 of the participants are mothers and are internally displaced – and often suffered displacement more than once-. In addition: 5 suffered sexual violence by armed actors, 15 were victims of domestic violence (before and/or after the displacement), 7 are head of household and 4 are victims of kidnapping and forced disappearance of husbands, fathers, brothers and/or sons. All the interviewees have participated in various development programs in their communities.

The aim of this strategy was to locate cases with information-rich participants. Bryman points out that with this approach to sampling *“the researcher makes initial contact with a small group of people who are relevant to the research topic and then uses these to establish contacts with others.”* (Bryman, 2012:202). With this strategy, I could access a wider spectrum of women who have previously participated in development programs and who represented a varied sample of education level, background, victimization, age, etc. The participants in this study additionally included 1 representative of UN Women in Colombia, 1 from the UNDP office in Villavicencio, 1 from GIZ (German NGO) and 1 from “Retoños”, a local civil society organization.

### **3.7 Ethical considerations**

As social research studies specifically elaborate on the lives, activities and behaviors of people, ethical considerations are important components to bear in mind. Participants should be offered with guarantees to protect – always – their identities, and their physical and mental well-being. As Dowling and Brown stated *“research should be designed, reviewed and undertaken to ensure integrity and quality, also research subjects must be informed fully about the purpose, methods and intended possible uses of the research.”* (Dowling and Brown, 2010:35). Accordingly, participants must be provided with full anonymity when they require so, and they should voluntarily participate in the study.

This research study was first registered in the Norwegian Social Science Data (NSD) and an

acceptance to conduct fieldwork was obtained. All the participants in this study were informed about the purposes and possible uses of the information they were going to provide if they agreed to be interviewed. This process included both oral and written consents that participants signed before the interviews. I also informed the participants that they could withdraw the interview at any stage with no further explanation and that the recording would be then erased. The tape recorder was only used with the oral consent of participants; the recorder could be stopped at any moment. When the participants preferred not to be recorded, I only took notes. In addition, due to the sensitivity of the victimization cases, I informed participants that they could choose to answer, or not, certain questions and if they had topics they did not want to touch upon we could avoid them during the interview.

In all the cases, without exceptions, the names of participants are anonymized. Therefore, the names displayed in the thesis are fictitious. Similarly, the job titles, shops' and village' names are anonymized. It is important for me to keep my participants safe and comply with the “do not harm” ethic of social research. Considering the violence history in the department of Meta and the participants' conditions as conflict victims, I paid special attention to anonymize every detail that may unravel their identities. This includes age, livelihood activities, backgrounds, victimization details and perpetrators, family characteristics etc.

### **3.8 Limitations and challenges**

Being from Villavicencio myself facilitated the initial contact with the participants; my familiarity with the language, culture, customs and my background knowledge were generally favorable during the field work and data collection processes. However, my role as an external agent –an outsider- often challenged my interaction with the female victims' who participated in this thesis given the sensitive nature of the topic. Often, the experiences that my participants lived before, during and after the conflict were very traumatic and some of them feared – or mistrusted- sharing with me certain details or expressing their opinions due to reprisals.

On the other hand, security issues were also limiting during the field work, especially when I mobilized to and from the slums and the rural areas in the department of Meta. Also, my presence around the slums for long periods of time rose suspicion and discomfort, given the slums' violent reputation and the presence of armed groups in the area. This discomfort

appeared not only among participant’s family members and neighbors but with other “actors” that continuously checked over the public places where I conducted the interviews and observations. This fact may have conditioned participants’ answers and willingness to share sensitive information.

To conclude this chapter, I consider that the research methodology applied to this thesis comfortably fit the specific phenomena of interest. In addition, the empirical data collected together with secondary data analysis are both valid and reliable to address the two guiding research questions. The chapters that follow will present background information, analytical framework and relevant concepts, as well as the findings, discussion, and the conclusions of this thesis.

### 3.9 Summary

Methodology overview					
<p><b>Research questions</b></p> <p>RQ1: How do female victims of the Colombian armed conflict perceive empowerment?</p> <p>RQ2: What strategies do female victims of the Colombian armed conflict implement to strengthen their livelihoods?</p>					
Research approach	Research design	Data collection tools	Data analysis	Research site /Sample	Ethics /validity and reliability
<p>Qualitative approach</p> <p>* Emphasis on participants’ voices and experiences</p> <p>* Drawing on secondary quantitative sources</p>	<p>Global ethnography</p> <p>* Comparing and contrasting the local with the global</p> <p>* Understanding of the case as embedded in complex global dynamics</p>	<p>Tools</p> <p>* Semi-structured interviews</p> <p>* Fieldwork journal</p> <p>* Document analysis of official documents, secondary academic sources and newspapers</p> <p>* Others: participant observations</p>	<p>Analysis of</p> <p>* Observations crosschecked with fieldwork journal</p> <p>* Interviews: form categories and identification of common patterns, similarities and contrasts</p> <p>* Cross-check and comparison with document analysis</p>	<p>Meta, Colombia</p> <p>* 13 de Mayo</p> <p>* La Reliquia</p> <p>* Villavicencio</p> <p>* Prado (rural area)</p> <p><b>Sample:</b></p> <p>* 20 female victims of conflict</p> <p>* 4 NGO staff</p> <p>* Document analysis of newspapers and secondary academic sources</p>	<p>Ethics</p> <p>* Complete anonymization of participants</p> <p>* No harm</p> <p>* Oral and written consents</p> <p><b>Validity and reliability</b></p> <p>* Continuous triangulation</p> <p>* Spiraling approach</p>

Table 1. Methods summary

## 4 Theoretical framework

The following chapter seeks to explore the theory and concepts that frame this thesis. The chapter focuses on the definition of women's empowerment, its position and practice within the field of development and its constraints. In doing so, I will revise existing theory and empirical research studies based on the work of Kabeer (1999, 2017), Batliwala (1994), Porter (2013), Fraser (1989) and Cornwall & Anyidoho (2010) among others.

Other theoretical approaches to frame this study could have included the rights based approach to development or, alternatively, the capabilities approach. However, these frameworks place an emphasis on international agreements (legal documents) and literature about human rights and entitlements. This, I argue, would limit the scope of participant's interpretations and ideas about their experiences. I consider that the women's empowerment theory offers a better structure with which to understand and analyze female victims' perceptions about their own empowerment processes and their participation in the development programs carried out in their communities.

### 4.1 Understanding women's empowerment

The widespread influence of empowerment in the gender equality arena resulted in the rapid adoption of its "*transformative*" echoes into other development and social justice fields such as healthcare, education, workers' rights and rural development, among others. Therefore, empowerment "*became a trendy and widely used buzzword*" (Batliwala, 2007) which was – and still is – extensively used to refer to women and gender equality.

This thesis adheres – but not exclusively- to the definition that Naila Kabeer coined "*...empowerment is about the **process** by which those who have been denied the ability to make strategic life **choices** acquire such an ability*" (Kabeer, 1999:435). There are two ideas within Kabeer's definition of empowerment that are broadly accepted by many other scholars. The first is that being previously denied the ability to make choices is a precondition for empowerment. This implies that only the already – or once - "disempowered" can take part in the process of change that foster their empowerment (Kabeer, 2003). The second idea is that empowerment is essentially a process, a journey towards the capability of

making *choices* that are relevant for one's own life and wellbeing (Cornwall & Ayindoho, 2010; Rowlands, 1997, Parpart et al., 2002).

Caroline Moser's analysis of empowerment encompasses a narrative of ideas of power, access to resources, decision-making and choice to foster change. Moser states that empowerment is "*the ability to determine choices in life and to influence the direction of change, through the ability to gain controls over crucial material and non-material resources*" (Moser, 1993:74). For Moser, the control over resources –tangible or not- is crucial for the empowerment process, however, for others such as Parpart et al. (2002) empowerment is not the simple control over resources but the processes whereby women can achieve small but meaningful changes in their lives. Empowerment puts strong emphasis on access to political structures, to markets and income that enable people to participate in economic and social decision-making. In other words, as Rowlands puts it "*it [empowerment] is about individuals being able to maximize the opportunities available to them without or despite constraints of structure and State*" (Rowlands, 1995:102).

Following her examination about the meaning of empowerment, Kabeer (2003, 2017) asserts that to have *choices* and opportunity is arguably more significant than the access to resources. For Kabeer, "*empowerment refers to the expansion in the capacity to make strategic and meaningful choices by those who have previously been denied the capacity but in ways that do not merely reproduce, and may indeed actively challenge, the structures of inequality in their society*" (Kabeer, 2017:651). To be able to make decisions does not seem to complete the picture of the empowerment process. Conversely, to be able to make *strategic* choices – like the ones that have important consequences for life and claims for justice and equality within society- signify a greater control over one's own existence. To have choices can raise people's consciousness of their agency, self-worth and their capabilities to lead their lives.

According to Kabeer (2003), there is a close relation between poverty and disempowerment. If an individual is unable to satisfy one's basic needs, his or her dependence on those who have the power to do so increases; thus, restraining the individual's capacity for strategic decision-making and choice. Jo Rowlands accounts on this matter state that "*empowerment is more than the participation in decision-making; it must also include processes that lead people to perceive themselves as able and entitled to make decisions*" (Rowlands, 1997:14).

Similarly, Deepa Narayan agrees that empowerment is a process that enhances both people's



choices and freedom over their own lives; she states that “*empowerment refers broadly to the expansion of freedom of choice and action to shape one’s life. It implies control over resources and decisions*” (Narayan, 2005:4). Although, the lack of *choice* is presumably to affect both women and men, existing gender inequalities usually exacerbate the effects of poverty and underdevelopment. Hence, empowerment is a journey towards consciousness of self-reliance -and the power within the self-, which leads the disadvantaged to engage in endeavors for change that can positively transform their lives.

When thinking about empowerment practice and policy, some scholars argue that interventions should be run locally to consider the cultural and historical contexts of the population and to take advantage of people’s knowledge (Porter, 2013; Cornwall & Ayidoho, 2010). However, others such as Parpart et al. (2002) add that these efforts focus only on local ways to understand empowerment, which are often limited. This is because they deny the entrenched influence and power dynamics at regional, national and global levels. According to Parpart, there are power structures at the local level that can be much more complex and fractious. Therefore, empowerment interventions should be more aware of the way in which national and global power structures interplay in defining and restraining the possibilities for change at the local levels (Parpart, 2002).

Notably, empowerment is not easily conceptualized. The definition of *empowerment* may vary according to language, history, location and cultural contexts; making of it a “hazy” term (Afshar, 1998). But, why is “empowerment” so *ambiguous*? Can its use be truly transformative? First, understanding empowerment as a socio-political process urges us to accept its multiple subjective meanings not only to collectivities but to individuals. For instance, language and cultural contexts are relevant when breaking down the term. Empowerment may not have a direct translation into other languages- as it is the case in Spanish, where the term has been adjusted from English-. Even so, the scope that this and other translations cover may be limited and abides to the subjects’ own interpretations. Hence, empowerment could mean different things to different people whose beliefs and experiences of power and oppression are dissimilar. In this regard Halef Afshar argues that:

*“Empowerment becomes a process that cannot be done to or for women, but has to emerge from them. This conception of empowerment as a dynamic, enabling process in turn has implications for political action and development agencies. The question, then, is what kind of intervention in the empowerment process is enabling and what is not?”* (Afshar, 1998:4)

Under such circumstances, the transformative force within empowerment relies, not only on how the oppressed understand and practice it, but on the interpretations, that political, economic and social structures assign to it. This ambivalence weaves the way to growing debates and controversy that may have ultimately diluted the term, as I will explore later in this chapter.

### 4.1.1 The power in empowerment

As it is apparent from the discussion above, “power” is a key term when defining em-‘power’-ment. Definitions such as the one Batliwala coined - “*empowerment is a process and the result of a process of transforming the relations of power between individuals and social groups*” (Batliwala, 2007:560)-, situate *power* as crucial for the process of empowerment. Power is the foundation concept of empowerment and can be partly responsible for the confusion around it (Parpart et al., 2002). *Power* is conceptualized and experienced in many ways by different people – just as empowerment is-, which may have caused the term to be highly disputed within the social sciences field. As Kabeer proposes, power relates to concepts of agency and *choice* that determine the way in which power is exercised, Kabeer states:

*“...power relations are expressed not only through the exercise of agency and choice, but also through the kinds of choices people make. This notion of power is a controversial one because it allows for the possibility that power and dominance can operate through consent and complicity as well as through coercion and conflict”.* (Kabeer, 1999:441)

Certainly, power has been the interest of several theorists such as Nancy Fraser (1989) and Michel Foucault (1989). In their dissertations, both, Fraser and Foucault explore the power dynamics and practices within determined institutions in society, which recreate inequalities based on gender, race, and class. In addition, these theorists also explore the forms of resistance to this domination and the democratization processes that advocate for new and more equitable institutional practices. Fraser (1989) deduces that institutional power practices generally permeate all parts of the institutions’ structure, so resistance should directly tackle such practices to generate change. Fraser states that “*if power is instantiated in mundane social practices and relations, then efforts to dismantle or transform the regime must address these practice and relationships*” (Fraser, 1989:26).

In a similar manner, in her examination about the meaning of power, Rowlands (1995) state that power is most conventionally described in terms of “power over”, as the capacity that an individual –or group- has over another person or group to enforce their will, forcing them to be submissive. For instance, power is present in conflict, and decision-making processes where a “zero-sum” situation interplays, *“the more power one person has, the less the other has”* (Rowlands, 1995:101). In addition, power is fluid, relational and connected to the control of resources and knowledge in society’s institutions (Parpart et al., 2002)

Rowlands argues that some definitions identify various kinds of power, i.e. economic power, social power and threat power. However, these definitions aim to be “neutral” and disregard the dynamics of power within society (gender, race, class). For feminist’s theorists, the analysis of “power over” must bear in mind gender inequalities and the dynamics of oppression. To have power over others is, under the gender lens, an instrument of domination of the marginalized, of their lives, relationships, and communities. This oppression is often exercised by men over other men, by men over women and dominant social, political, economic and/or cultural groups over those who are disenfranchised (Rowlands, 1995). This type of power undoubtedly hinders the capacity of the disempowered groups to participate in decision-making that can influence their lives and their relationships with the world around them. In this way, “power over” contribute to the maintenance of inequalities between men and women.

In contrast, Rowlands goes on to explain that there are other more fruitful ways to think about power. For instance, the kind of power that can exhort –and lead- people to achieve goals and stimulate others to raise their potential and gain benefits, in a positive-sum game. This way to understanding power assumes that there is a wish to see a group accomplishing their full potential and that there is no conflict of interest when setting the agendas to reach personal and collective goals. This is the kind of power that reflects the altruistic essence of empowerment (Rowlands, 1995).

Power dynamics and structures in society take place in institutions and in material and discursive contexts – at local, national and global levels- that can, by and large, enable or constrain empowerment actions (Fraser, 1989). As Parpart et al. (2002) explain, groups can become empowered through collective actions that seek to challenge and overthrow unequal power relations. But, these efforts can be thwarted –or facilitated- by the structures of power they encounter. Power relations are crucial for understanding empowerment as Batliwala

suggests, “*empowerment is the process of challenging existing power relations and of gaining greater control over the sources of power*” (Batliwala, 1994:30). Empowerment processes aim to change three critical aspects in society: to transform power structures (family, state, market, and education, among others) so that these structures shift the ideologies that maintain social injustice (caste, class, gender) while changing patterns over the control of the economic, natural and intellectual resources (Batliwala, 2007).

Besides the dichotomy of “power over” there are other categories of power that Rowlands (2007) identifies as *power to*, *power with* and *power from within* that are relevant to the meaning of empowerment. The first one, *power to*, refers to the productive power that sometimes incorporates forms of resistance and/or manipulation. “*Power with*” deals with the power that collectivities can promote and the capacity of people to come together to effect change. And finally, *power from within* refers to the individual awareness which points out the inner strength that resides in each one of us and that make us human. This form of power favors the self-acceptance and self-respect that lead to the view of others as equals. Rowlands argues that “...*this power can be what enables the individual to hold to a position or activity in the face of overwhelming opposition or to take serious risks*” (Rowlands, 2007:14). For empowerment, it is more important to exercise power rather than to possess power. A more feminist approach to power, as Kabeer (2003) asserts, emphasizes on the transformative potential of *power from within* to achieve significant changes in women’s’ lives.

Other scholars such as Caroline Moser similarly argue that the *power over* as a form of domination is not what best describes empowerment. Moser claims that “*the empowerment approach acknowledges the importance for women to increase their power. However, it seeks to identify power less in terms of domination over others, and more in terms of the capacity of women to increase their own self-reliance and internal strength*” (Moser, 1993:74). Hence, the “power” in empowerment is indeed a process that promotes women to exercise *power over*, but it also embraces other forms of power (*to*, *with* and *from within*) to challenge the status-quo and to generate meaningful and life changing outcomes rather than adopting the controlling nature of power to dominate others.

Theoretical discussions about of power inevitably call attention to the “powercube” approach, which was first developed in the Institute of Development Studies at the University of Sussex and is often related to the American political sociologist John Gaventa. The “powercube” was initially created as a way to explore how powerful actors in society exercise control over the

decision-making agenda and the way in which less powerful actors react to such practices and build awareness and actions for change (Gaventa, 2006).

The “powercube” approach assumes that power is crucial for social change and offers a framework which has been increasingly used among development organizations and NGO’s for the analysis of power. This cube has to do with the ideas discussed earlier in this chapter about “power over”, “power to”, “power with” and “power within”. The analysis of power here emphasizes on various

aspects such as: levels, spaces and forms of power and the way in which those three interrelate. Each aspect of power deals with three areas: the “form” dimension includes the way in which power reveal itself: visible, hidden and invisible. The “space” dimension deals with the areas of participation and practice of power: closed, invited and claimed

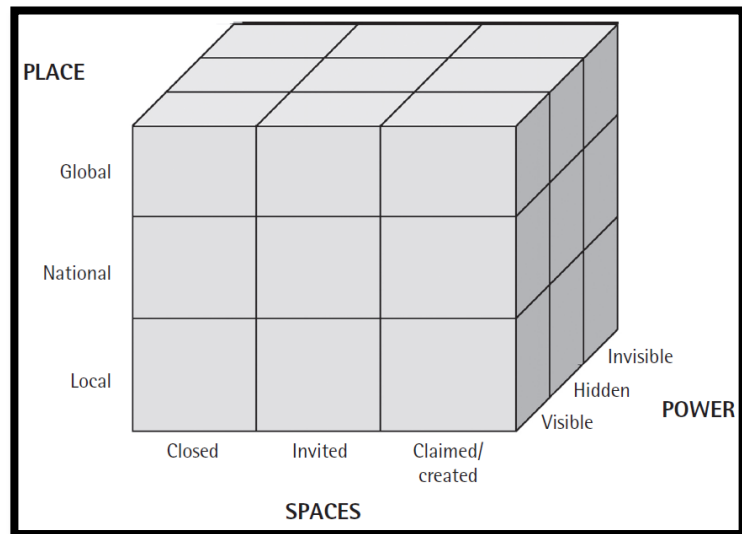


Figure 3. The Power Cube: Power in Spaces and Places of Participation. Taken from Gaventa (2005)

and finally the “levels” dimension that refers to the decision-making which includes: local, national and global levels (Gaventa, 2005). The use of the “powercube” allows for an exploration of power dynamics and the possibilities for change within it; the cube provides tools for individuals to advocate and plan strategic action and achieve change.

Evidently, the conceptualization, practice and analysis of power are highly contested arenas, which are filled with interpretations and approaches as this historic overview has attempted to show. Indeed, the dynamics of power and democracy, as Fraser (1989) eloquently urges us, involve more than people’s participation in social decision-making. On the contrary, such processes include the em- ‘power’-ment of individuals through their self-determination and self-organization in every area of activity in their personal and social lives, shifting with it, the ideologies and hierarchies of power. After all individuals are the ones who should play an active and determinant role in shaping their life conditions and wellbeing.

#### 4.1.2 Empowerment: resources, agency and achievements

As mentioned above, to exercise *choice* is crucial for the conceptualization – and analysis- of women’s empowerment. This sub-section will explore the ideas of Naila Kabeer (1999) regarding *choice* and the three interrelated dimensions that shape it: resources, agency and achievement, which aim to assist the understanding and measurement of empowerment.

Resources	Agency	Achievements
Pre-conditions	Process	Outcomes

Table 2. Dimensions of choice, adapted from Kabeer (1999)

As discussed earlier in this chapter to have *choice* holds an important significance in the notion of empowerment. Before delving deeper into the dimensions, allow me to briefly grasp on Kabeer’s understanding of *choice*. First, to exercise a great deal of choice does not mean that a person is empowered – though “powerful”. Disempowerment is deeply involved with the process of getting the ability to make choices; it is on the verge of being a prerequisite for empowerment.

Furthermore, to have *choice* certainly suggests the likelihood of alternatives; this means that an individual has a range of possibilities to choose from. The alternatives availability can have a crucial role in promoting critical consciousness among people exhorting them to question their status within the social order. However, Kabeer (1999) explicitly argues that not all choices – and alternatives- have the same relevance for different people. The Author differentiates between first and second order choices. The first order choices – “strategic”- refer to those that hold greater relevance and consequences for people to live the lives they want and for their wellbeing, i.e. choosing who and when to marry or where and how to live whereas the second order choices are less influential and critical for people’s lives however important for improving people’s quality of life.

### Resources

To enhance the ability to exercise choice, it is imperative to have access to resources. In this respect, resources do not only entail material possessions, as the traditional economic sense of the word would suggest, but also to the human and social resources gained through the interactions in the social domains that make up a society, namely the family, the market, and the community. Resources can refer to actual allocations that people get and to future

demands and claims. As a matter of fact, the way in which people in a society get access to these resources depicts the rules - and norms- that guide distribution policies in the mentioned institutional domains. Hence, the rules that govern distribution give specific individuals in society control over others in deciding the allocation of existing resources, giving them the ability to define priorities and set rules for claims. For instance, head of households and elite members are often given decision-making authority over others through their position within the institutional context they belong to, controlling the access to resources of those who are disempowered (Kabeer, 1999).

Resources are repeatedly present in methodologies to measure empowerment, often portrayed in narrow terms of access to resources. However, Kabeer (1999) contends that the analysis of resources cannot simply focus on the “access to” since this would be an indicator of potential rather than of choice. How can it be argued that women’s access to resources – through inheritance, customary laws, etc.- give them alternatives for choice, greater human agency and achievements, and ultimately to empowerment? One way to operationalize this is to go beyond the “access to” towards “control” of resources, which relates to having a say in relation to the resource in question. But, the definition of “control” is contested and has different interpretations in the literature, which presents a challenge while measuring empowerment through *resources* means (Kabeer, 1999).

### Agency

Per Kabeer, agency is more than the observable ability that a person may have to define his/her goals and act accordingly to achieve them – this can be exercised by individuals as well as collectivities-. Agency includes ideas of the motivation, meaning and purpose that individuals invest to their activity – their “power within”. Most commonly in the social sciences, agency is related to “decision-making”, but Kabeer states that the term agency goes beyond that to complex ideas of bargaining, negotiation, manipulation, resistance, among other less tangible cognitive processes of analysis and reflection (kabeer, 1999). Agency can take up two different approaches to power, a positive and a negative one. The first refers to “power to” – as discussed earlier in the previous section- this entails that people have the capacity to seek their goals and define life choices even against opposition. On the contrary, agency can take the form of “power over” where the domination of an individual or group supersedes others’ agency (Kabeer, 1999).

Measurement of *agency* emphasizes on the positive and negative indicators of it. For example, women's participation, women's mobility in public domains, and women's decision-making, among others. The indicators of decision-making agency are usually based on women's roles regarding specific decisions – i.e., household budget, children's education, food purchased and cooked, work outside, house repair, income earning activities, and many more- (Kabeer, 1999). However, most of these indicators may not have a significant impact on women's welfare, forasmuch as women are generally able to exercise decision-making within the household arena. This disregards the informal decision-making agency that women often do and the renegotiation of power relations they perform within the private domain. Thus, the measurement of agency should also focus on the areas where women can have a say and on those strategies that allow them to decide on issues that are relevant for their lives.

### Achievements

When conceptualizing achievements, Kabeer touches upon one of the constraints of measuring empowerment –which I will explore later in this chapter-. Empowerment concerns with the inequalities within a society, however, the value that every disenfranchised person gives to certain choices is likely to differ from one another, and it is a matter of *choice* preference. Again, cultural, political and historic contexts play a crucial role in the perception of choice and the kind of achievements people value most. As Kabeer asserts,

*“An observed lack of uniformity in functioning achievements cannot be automatically interpreted as evidence of inequality because it is highly unlikely that all members of a given society will give equal value to different possible ways of “being and doing”.* (Kabeer, 1999:439)

The functioning achievements that Kabeer mentions refer to primary “functionings” that tend to be universally valued such as adequate shelter, health and nutrition, in other words: basic needs achievements. Therefore, if the analysis of basic achievements demonstrates asymmetrical differences between men and women, there is evidence of gender inequalities based on lack of capabilities rather than differences in *choice* preferences. Kabeer argues that confining the analysis of achievement to these basic functionings implies that the disempowerment of women is by large a matter of poverty. Consequently, this perception disregards other forms of gender disadvantage in wealthier economic social groups and overlooks other dimensions of discrimination among the poor that do not relate to basic functionings. Kabeer states: *“It is only when the failure to achieve one's goals reflects some*



*deep-seated constraint on the ability to choose that it can be taken as a manifestation of disempowerment*” (Kabeer, 1999:438).

Furthermore, “achievements” could go beyond the basic needs achievements and involve the analysis of other functionings that could be of value in other contexts such as the case of political representation. Nonetheless, these approaches assign value to more complex achievements which forgo the criteria of women’s choices, their values and communities. Arguably, this approach to understanding –and measuring- of achievement is, subjected to the external values and the values of those who are conducting the measurement rather than the values of those who are directly implicated in the empowerment process (Kabeer, 1999). In addition, the exercise and definition of choice is closely interrelated to that of power. To measure empowerment, it is fundamental that the choice made appears to contribute to the wellbeing of those who are exercising such choice. Consequently, evidence of basic need achievements’ gender inequalities is due either to the active discrimination of women by men as a dominant group or to the absence of choice by women who have assimilated a subordinated status (Kabeer, 1999).

These dimensions of choice are, according to Kabeer determinant in measuring empowerment, she argues that, “...*the three dimensions are indivisible in determining the meaning of an indicator and hence its validity as a measure of empowerment*” (Kabeer, 1999:452). While encountering challenges, the measurement of resources, agency and, especially, achievement can provide a more nuanced picture of the meaning and practice of empowerment.

### **4.1.3 Women’s empowerment and development**

As the discussion above has suggested, empowerment emerged amongst social movements in the 70’s and 80’s in the effort to drive down inequalities in society, regarding gender, caste, class, and other forms of discrimination (Rowlands, 1997). Initially, empowerment was a development approach of grassroots organizations in developing countries contexts (Moser, 1993; Kabeer, 2017). However, the development arena rapidly adopted the *empowerment* framework as a promising tool to achieve greater justice and equality for all, a key to economic and human development and a successful tool to mobilize attention and resources to assist the disadvantaged, especially women, and advocate for transformative change (Cornwall & Anyidoho, 2010; Porter, 2013; Batliwala, 2007).

Esther Duflo assures that empowerment and economic development intertwine with each other and have two main outcomes: first, women empowerment has the potential to reduce gender inequalities and second, empowering women can accelerate development (Duflo, 2012). This perception implies that empowerment improves women's access to health, education, paid labor, rights and political participation, which constitute the pillars of development. In this sense, empowerment seems to benefit development; when gender equality improves, poverty tends to decline; whereas discrimination against women can hinder development. This is a rather optimistic view; indeed, poverty and lack of opportunities foster inequalities between women and men, thus enhancing economic development may improve women's conditions, but economic growth is certainly not enough to accomplish gender equality and overcome discrimination against women (Duflo, 2012; Porter, 2013; Rowlands, 1995).

As women's responsibilities fall primarily on domestic domains, it is more difficult for women to be part of the market, at least into the one that is counted as economic growth (Kabeer, 2016) –unpaid domestic work leaves women outside economic development counts– The inclusion of women in the economy by increasing their opportunities in the labor market is essential to achieve lower levels of gender inequality and benefit development. The labor market – and development interventions such as empowerment - should recognize the different and changing roles that women hold in society. Moser relates these changing roles to gender practical needs, those that aim to foster women to actively participate in the market bearing in mind their social roles as mothers, wives, and daughters (Moser, 1993). More so, per Kabeer (2016:300), *“...studies suggest that women's access to a range of valued resources including education, employment, land, cash transfers, and credit, is associated with increased investments in family welfare, including children's health and education”*

Furthermore, there is considerable evidence in the literature that indicate that access to education is essential to empower women. Education has the potential to bring about change in individual's cognition and behaviors (Stromquist, 1988; Kabeer, 2003). Education is therefore, compelling to strategies for women's empowerment and development, education strengthen individuals' power to, power with and power from within discussed earlier in this chapter. Improved access to information, knowledge and the acquisition of skills boost women's role in decision-making and greater willingness to question male dominance (Kabeer, 2003).

On the other hand, access to paid labor – even when carried out in the home, in agriculture, in the informal or formal sector - can increase women’s agency and capacity to negotiate greater degrees of respect, raise women’s mobility and ownership of savings and assets, shifting the balance of power within the household and the community; ergo, paid labor can empower women (Kabeer, 2003, 2008). For instance, women’s access to credit –micro-credits- and self-help groups may lead to many changes in women’s own perceptions of themselves (i.e., self-worth, self-reliance) and their role in house-hold decision making (Kabeer, 2016, 2017). As Kabeer states, *“women’s access to paid work, particularly work outside the home, has important implications for their own well-being and agency”* (Kabeer, 2008:102).

Women’s’ empowerment approaches include women’s political roles and participation. Measurement methods regularly use the number of parliament seats occupied by women in a country as a strong indicator of empowerment. In addition, women’s involvement in local government and administration - not only participating in the formulation of policy but also its implementation- is also relevant, since it engages women in problem-solving and decision-making regarding pressing issues that directly affect them within their communities (Kabeer, 2003). Further in the analysis of empowerment Elisabeth Porter draws a clear connection between empowerment and human security. She argues that adopting women’s empowerment strategies in conflict-affected contexts has the potential of encouraging women to participate in reconciliation processes that exhort people to respect each other, heal wounds, meet basic needs and enhance gender equality (Porter, 2013). Similarly, the UNSCR 1325 assigns a pivotal role to the empowerment of women in armed conflict, peace-building and security.

### **Women’s empowerment around the world**

Governments and major donor agencies have supported over the years development work aiming to empower marginalized women. The literature is filled with project evaluations, descriptions, research studies and experiences about women’s empowerment around the world – primarily in the global south-. Micro-finance is one of the most used strategies that empowerment projects use. The works of Naila Kabeer have extensively illustrated the practice and outcomes –both positive and negative- of micro-credit in Bangladesh and India. In the former, Kabeer (2001) acknowledges that micro-credit programs for the poor population became central in poverty-eradication strategies from the national government and international organizations; in fact, Bangladesh became the center for the popularization of

micro-finance (Kabeer, 2017). Kabeer argues that loans made to poor women enhance self-worth perceptions, mobility and social status in the community as well as connecting to notions of agency, achievements and decision-making power within the household. Nonetheless, micro-credit interventions may not always be automatically empowering for all women, some may not find it helpful or may not be permitted to participate at all. Micro-finance programs should consider the aspects of women's lives are most likely to contribute to positive changes in both women's and their families' lives (Kabeer 2001, 2017).

Hashemi et al., concur with Kabeer in asserting that micro-credits programs are largely used in Bangladesh as poverty alleviation strategy. The authors focus on a micro-finance project that provided financial services to poor rural women, the conclusion points out that those micro-credits programs do empower poor women in rural Bangladesh by strengthening their economic roles, and their ability to control their assets and income. The indicators used to measure empowerment included mobility, economic security, relative freedom, political and legal awareness and participation, among others (Hashemi et al., 1996). In a study based in Afghanistan, Beath et al., (2013) explore the widespread of development programs that aim to improve women's social, economic and political status. Finding in this study suggests that these development initiatives improve female participation in political, social and economic activities and increases their mobility and income.

In Latin America, the literature about empowerment programs is equally vast, focusing on rural development, democracy and political participation, conflict, peace-building and land rights, among others. For instance, Stephanie Barrientos (1998) critically examines women seasonal workers in Chile and how the agribusiness has contradictory effects on their empowerment. Barrientos argues that women are given double burdens combining their productive and reproductive roles, besides the unavailability of paid work during the off season. On the other hand, the market also appears as a facilitator of empowerment by providing income during the season and bringing women together and making their work visible. Similarly, Deere and León (2001) study agrarian reforms along South America, bringing examples from Perú, México, Honduras, Costa Rica and Colombia. Deere and León explore the unequal distribution of land ownership and women's struggles for land redistribution in the region. Empowering poor rural women necessarily need land tenure reforms that grant women ownership and usage rights over land.

Furthermore, Macaulay (1998) explores women's role in the emerging grass-roots popular

movements and local government in the transition from military and authoritarian government to democracies in Chile and Brazil, which has the potential to empower women. In addition, Pankhurst and Pearce (1998) critically assess the degree in which women's participation in conflict resolution may lead to conditions that facilitate their empowerment. The authors claim that there are highly significant differences in the way men and women experience violence –drawing examples from Nicaragua, El Salvador and Colombia-. They argue that women's empowerment benefit peace and reconciliation, “...*the empowerment of women itself might be an essential component not only of the luxury of positive peace, but also as a useful mechanism for lessening or avoiding the escalation of violent conflict in the first place*” (Pankhurst & Pearce, 1998).

Generally, women's empowerment inclusion in the development agenda reflects objectives of countering discrimination, reducing vulnerability and inequalities, and overcoming subordination, oppression, and coercive power relations. As Elisabeth Porter puts it “*culturally sensitive empowerment is a powerful ethical goal and a transformative, political practice linked with justice, equality and rights.* (Porter, 2013:12). Nonetheless, as I have pointed out before, empowerment is highly controversial. There are several scholars that critique empowerment and its effects on the development industry.

#### **4.1.4 Constraints**

As organizations, scholars, and even politicians around the world increasingly adopted the term empowerment, their discourse became more malleable. It is precisely this flexibility that renders empowerment to be nebulous and contradictory concept. The organizations that adopt empowerment can fill in the term with their own meanings, which are later used to advance their agendas and pursue their own projects. The definition of empowerment poses serious questions for development agencies and governments. When exploring this contention, Cornwall and Anyidoho vehemently question the response of gender equality activists towards the development mainstream conception of empowerment - depoliticized and instrumental - that is used as currency for the allocation and bargaining of resources. They state that,

*“...feminist and gender equality activists have bought into the mainstream women's empowerment narrative, seeing it as a Trojan horse for other more transformative projects or as a way of redistributing at least some of development's resources to women”* (Cornwall & Anyidoho, 2010:145).

One of the most frequent criticisms of empowerment is the extra burden of work that women have to endure (Kabeer 2016; Batliwala, 2007, Meagher, 2010). Caroline Moser goes beyond adding a third burden to women's role in society: reproductive work (childbearing and rearing responsibilities), productive work (secondary income earners), and community managing work (collective and social work) (Moser, 1993). Besides the increased women's reproductive and household maintenance responsibilities and their added role as breadwinners, women may often lack control over the income they earn, for instance the one obtained through micro-credit, to male claims in the household, which raises questions regarding the contradictory effect of such empowerment interventions (Meagher, 2010). On the other hand, empowerment programs may only temporarily alleviate women's situation. In poor households, diverse economic activities that aim to increase women's participation in the economic market may simply serve as a survival strategy – to meet basic needs and endure crises- with little opportunities for change (Kabeer, 2008).

Other constraint that literature identifies is the slow progress in which empowerment programs take place (Moser, 1993). Regularly, development agencies are preoccupied with showing projects' results, yet empowerment is time-consuming and each individual go through the process of self-confidence, self-reliance, agency and achievements at their own pace (Rowlands, 1995). In addition, measuring empowerment is a challenge; there is greater number of empowerment programs around the world than there is consensus about the best way to measure it. The intrinsic value of empowerment makes it vague and highly entangled to the context. Certainly, as Naila Kabeer (1999) urges, the problem of empowerment measurement relies on the "values"; empowerment does depend on the meaning that each individual assign to it and it is, at the same time, embedded in wider social and cultural values within the community.

As empowerment is not concept with only one meaning, instead it is formed by several dimensions, which may not always interplay in the same way at the same place or direction. Hence, studies can examine the same phenomenon at a given context and yet yield different results depending on the dimension they attempt to measure (Narayan, 2005). Empowerment is usually portrait and handled by western development agencies. Whose interpretation of empowerment is more relevant for measurements, the external one or that of the individuals who engage in the empowerment processes? As Cornwall and Anyidoho (2010) compel us to think: empowerment for whom by whom and for what?

So far in this chapter I have discussed how empowerment is understood in the literature as a process -undertaken by those who have been previously *disempowered*- towards the ability to make strategic choices that can positively affect one's life. Despite its contentious and contradictory meanings, development policies, discourse and practice acknowledge that empowerment is crucial to gain greater justice, improve gender equality and enhance meaningful change.

## 5 Understanding women's role in post-Conflict reconstruction

Before starting the theoretical exploration of women's role in post-conflict reconstruction contexts, it is necessary to shed lights on the concept of peacebuilding and its history in the development literature. In the early 70s, the Norwegian sociologist Johan Galtung played a key role in developing the term peacebuilding when exploring approaches to conflict interventions. According to Galtung (1969), to achieve sustainable and stable peace there is a compulsory need to address the root causes of violence while supporting peace management and conflict resolution at the local levels. Galtung asserts that bottom-up approaches, which seek decentralized social and economic structures, have the potential to both transform coercion into a culture of peace and overcome the root of conflict formation, and favor sustainable peacebuilding (Galtung, 1996, 2007).

International organizations, governments, development agencies and numerous civil society institutions worldwide increasingly adopted peacebuilding in their official discourse. This reflects, in part, the international interest to end and prevent war and to keep global stability and security (Barnett et al., 2007; Zelizer, 2013). Thus, there is a myriad of actors that conceptualize and operationalize peacebuilding according to their needs, agendas and purposes. Hence, there is no consensus on the precise definition of peacebuilding. For instance, the "agenda for peace" adopted by UN in 1992 (section 21) defines peacebuilding as the *"action to identify and support structures which will tend to strengthen and solidify peace to avoid a relapse into conflict"*. Other definitions state that, *"Peacebuilding means more than stability promotion; it is designed to create a positive peace, to eliminate the root causes of conflict, to allow states and societies to develop stable expectations of peaceful change"* (Barnett et al., 2007:44).

Furthermore, peacebuilding is generically understood as the processes and the tools that external interventions implement to reduce the risk that a state bursts into – or otherwise return to- war; these interventions can be implemented at any stage of the conflict (Zelizer, 2013). These processes include transitions from war to peace, maintenance of sustainable peace, activities to restore assets and the economy, crisis prevention, among others. The UN emphasizes – and agrees to an extend with Galtung – that peacebuilding is much more than the elimination of armed conflict, it is also the eradication of its foundational causes, so that



actors do not have a motive to use violence to settle their disagreements, hence reconciling opponents. Successful peacebuilding efforts also foster the reintegration of civil society, the creation of the rule of law mechanisms and tackles underlying structural and societal issues.

Per Barnett et al., peacebuilding activities can be divided in three dimensions; the first one deals with the stabilization of post-conflict to reinforce the state's stability and discourage former fighters to returning to war, this includes activities such as disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR). The second one refers to the reestablishment of the state's institutions rebuilding its capacity to provide public goods and strengthen state's legitimacy. The last one considers socio-economic issues, so the post-conflict society can manage conflict peacefully while fostering development and economic growth (Barnett, et a., 2007). Seemingly, the overarching aim of peacebuilding practices focus on interventions run by civil society and governmental actors – often accompanied by external institutions- to generate meaningful change in the relationships, culture and institutions of society, hence preventing, ending, and otherwise, transforming conflict.

However, there is also criticism of peacebuilding approaches and theories in conflict resolution. For instance, the terms' elasticity encourages contentions about its definition. The growing institutionalization of peacebuilding emerges from bureaucratic power and political disagreement that can hinder the more noble purposes of achieving sustainable peace (Barnett, et al., (2007). In addition, authors such as Chandler (2011) argue that peacebuilding predominantly reflects western hegemonic values, pushing forward their political, economic and geographical needs over conflict-affected states. Chandler also contends that peacebuilding practices create dependency on external intervention to solve state's internal conflicts.

The aforementioned discussion about peacebuilding leads the way into a further exploration of women's roles in post-conflict reconstruction and peacebuilding efforts, as it is presented in the development literature. I now turn to explore such issues in the following section.

Armed conflicts affect the social structure of societies. The devastating effects of wars often target and affect the most vulnerable members of a society. Nevertheless, the ways in which women and men experience conflict are rather different; women are often target of violent acts, breaching women's human rights and limiting their mobility (Chatellier & Fayyaz, 2012). While men are often portrayed as soldiers and combatants going to fight for honor and

to protect their families, women's stereotypical roles situate them as responsible for the household, left behind away from conflict. However, this is not always the case. For instance, in conflict-affected societies, as Caroline Sweetman (2005) argues, conflicts hold a heavy gendered aspect, and women do not always seclude themselves from the armed conflict as passive actors. In fact, women can play active roles in the initiation of hostilities and women can directly participate in the warfare as combatants, promoters of conflict, war supporters, members of the work force, soldiers, terrorists, peace protesters, revolutionists or uninvolved in the conflict, among others (Sweetman, 2005; Cahn, 2006; Hudson, 2009).

A gendered aware perspective of post-conflict reconstruction acknowledges that the outbreak of armed conflicts greatly – and disproportionately – affect women. Women are often the most affected as war makes them especially vulnerable. Women become the sole head of household, the only breadwinners, and responsible for the survival and wellbeing of their families in hostile environments and in times of social upheaval. Sørensen (1998:ii) states:

*“In times of conflict, when men engage in war and are killed, disappear or take refuge outside their country's borders, it is women who are left with the burden of ensuring family livelihood. Women struggle to protect their families' health and safety – a task which rests on their ability to cope pragmatically with change and adversity”.*

Certainly, post-conflict reconstruction presents an opportunity to advocate for women's rights and gender equality while restoring society (True, 2013). In her work for UNRISD (United Nations Research Institute for Social Development) in 1998, Birgitte Sørensen documents various ways in which women contribute to the reconstruction of countries torn by violence and emerging from conflict. According to her perspective, women develop strategies and actions in the event of conflict in order to survive and ensure their families' wellbeing. Similarly, women are also driving forces for peaceful agreements and negotiations amid conflict. Women' voices and actions push groups involved in the conflict to cease-fire and seek peace agreements and women become “*social agents of change*” in the rebuilding process (Sørensen, 1998).

The following part of this chapter will explore three components of women and post-conflict reconstruction: political, economic and social.

### **5.1.1 Political Reconstruction**

Even though women and men's interests during political reconstruction are somewhat similar, women's diverse roles as economic providers -i.e. widows, mothers, daughter or wives- certainly require differentiated attention. As ICRW's (1998) report urges, women's interests depend on the recognition of their rights in the new and/or modified political system and heavily rely on the extent to which they are allowed to participate and advocate for their needs.

The political reconstruction dimension deals with the opportunities and challenges that women experience in post-conflict societies. Per Zuckerman and Greenberg (2004), to rebuild political stability and ensure the inclusion of all members of the communities in decision-making represents a very large challenge for countries that emerge from armed conflicts. In these contexts, the rights of all citizens are at stake, therefore, peace-building processes must regard agreements about power-sharing and the consolidation of strong and capable institutions that respond to the community's needs. These institutions should be able to protect citizens and promote sustainable peace regardless of gender, race, class, background – and most importantly – the roles and actions carried out during and after war. Such peace-building activities are relevant to consolidate non-violent environments where new relationships of trust and empathy develop (Sørensen, 1998).

Certainly, during and after conflicts, political actions have the power to assist women in the adaptation of their new lives, and the recognition and protection of their rights. This is how women have the potential to become “*agents of political change*” in post-conflict reconstruction in their households, the local communities and finally permeating the society (Herndon & Randell, 2013). Women can embark on political actions during and after war, which help articulating reconciliation and peace building. Examples of this are the women liberation movements to negotiate peace, democratization and decentralization processes, among others.

#### A. Women liberation movements

The nature and reasons behind conflict are naturally diverse and differ from one another. To begin with the analysis of women's political rights and roles in post-conflict settings, it is necessary to acknowledge women's conditions before and during the armed conflict. As social injustice and deteriorated gender equality can provoke social unrest and outset conflict, women's liberation movements focus efforts in meeting expectations of gender equality,

freedom and equity in the event of peace-agreements and the reconstruction of political systems during post-conflict (Hudson, 2009).

Women's involvement in liberations movements can initiate before the conflict. These are usually grassroots movements that advocate for political, social and economic rights of women (Sørensen. 1998). According to this author it is possible that women acquire skills during the conflict when in exile -i.e. leadership, knowledge about rights- and then practice these newly developed skills to advance their political agendas. These efforts are visible and are difficult to ignore by national governments that are pushed to answer to their requirements and regard their strategic gendered needs.

#### B. Peace-building activities

Peace-building processes often follow two parallel pathways. The first one refers to the formal negotiations that political leaders and parties undertake to reach peace-agreements which are frequently supported by external actors such as international organizations and/or governments from other countries. The second pathway is often undertaken by grass-roots and civil society organizations – including victims' groups and citizens- that claim for peace and advocate for peaceful resolutions to conflicts. These efforts are often displayed when violence escalates and atrocities increase directly affecting the population.

Political rebuilding processes become the core issue of formal negotiations between the governments and the insurgents; this process entails the definition of power relations and prioritizes political actions for the post-conflict political context (Bop, 2001). It is often the case that female citizens are under-represented in these negotiations, despite women's needs that are different from those of men in conflict-affected contexts. Female participation in peace-building activities would, undoubtedly, promote the adequate attention to women's needs and rights, however, as Sørensen (1998) contends, peace-agreements activities tend to be widely male dominated generally excluding women from the negotiation table.

In contrast, female citizens have far more representation in informal grass-roots activities for peace-building. In these efforts, women from all sorts of backgrounds and experiences with the conflict come together to campaign for peace, yet such activities are often diminished to volunteer or social efforts with little impact on the political arena (Sørensen, 1998). The stereotypes of women's role in peace-building agreements generally discuss their nurturing and caring role within the household. However, Sørensen draws attention on the internal wars

of Angola, El Salvador, Eritrea, Kenya, Nicaragua, Rwanda and others, as examples where women were also combatants and active supporters of war, holding high level positions. In both cases, women's involvement in the warfare and/or the peace-building activities is a matter of choice; a choice that male, as well as female citizens are able to perform. It is common to observe that women act as peace-builders starting by their households, with their families, which later extends to the community (Cahn, 2006).

Regardless of these two pathways to peace-building activities, women's involvement in efforts to achieve peace is certainly vital, not only for the recognition of their rights but also to prevent further discrimination and marginalization of women in society. Hence, women's work in grass-roots organizations is equally important as their participation in formal peace processes and negotiating groups.

### **5.1.2 Economic reconstruction**

Economies shattered by war are central for post-conflict and reconstruction processes. In fact, this is one of the main issues in the negotiation table. As stated before in other parts of this thesis, women in post-conflict settings endure impacts on their livelihoods that differentiate from those of men. The economic reconstruction of a post-conflict country is an important, complex process that directly – or indirectly- impacts women's livelihoods (Bop, 2001). Reciprocally, women's strategies and participation in generating income to provide for their families are factors that may influence the revitalization of the post-conflict economy (Sørensen, 1998). In their new roles as breadwinners and the sole responsible for their families, female victims of violence often face greater challenges in the post-war –frequently weakened- economic scene. The economic needs vary greatly among women; hence the strategies women place to overcome their situation and to restore their livelihoods are different from one case to the next.

Economic reconstruction includes governmental initiatives to stimulate and develop the economy, for instance, through the rehabilitation and strengthening of infrastructure and production facilities. This involves the employment of qualified human resources that cooperate with the initiatives to recover the economy, -i.e. loans, credits and other resources allocation-. Generally, national authorities together with international assistance are crucial to the economic recovery of countries emerging from conflict. However, the actions of individuals or collectivities are equally influential; such strategies for survival come from

men and women who develop a wide range of economic activities to avoid being further marginalized and escape poverty (Sørensen, 1998). Women often engage in economic activities on their own, but they also form collectivities based on kinship, location, and shared experiences during the conflicts (Sørensen, 1998).

#### A. Agricultural activities

As it is often the case, the agricultural sector is the main source of income and livelihood for most of the population in conflict-affect countries. Focus on agriculture in post-conflict contexts is then prioritized as it is expected to foster the reconstruction of the economy. However, rural areas are frequent targets of violence; devastation and destruction of infrastructure, environmental degradation, ongoing displacement and dispossession, which pose serious challenges for the economy to recover (Sørensen, 1998).

Nevertheless, women find further constraints due to customary and inheritance law that restrict not only their access to land and resources, but also diminish their legal rights, and limits their control over income. For instance, women may lack ownership of the land because of husbands' death and/or occupation by others. In addition to this, many women in rural areas must employ themselves as casual workers in poorly paid jobs, which gives them income, just enough to meet their basic needs but erodes their social positioning and increases uncertainty of future income and steady livelihood (Zuckerman & Greenberg, 2004).

Furthermore, the literature also points out that women can be benefited from laws that assure them land to work and establish their economic activities. Such actions do not only favor the economy but also strengthen peace-building processes. Drawing on experiences from Rwanda, True (2013:1) states,

*“In post-genocide Rwanda, some female small-scale landholders and entrepreneurs have gained new found rights to land, property and equal inheritance... the political, economic and social status of citizens –and women citizens in particular- can be improved during the rebuilding of societies after conflict”.*

Therefore, policies and programs aiming to foster the agricultural sector as a tool to revitalize the rural economies should include gender perspectives that not only curtail discrimination through customs and heritage laws, but also policies that acknowledge the power structures within the household and in the communities, granting appropriate and non-discriminative land rights to women.

## B. Informal Sector activities

The informal sector economy is the one that women in post-conflict countries most often engage with. Within this sector of the economy women are involved in entrepreneurship activities that foster their perseverance under the difficult post-war circumstances. While it is possible that the economic activities women carry out to generate income are temporary, these petty trade activities enhance women's experiences and improve skills that can be used later in more sustainable forms of work.

Sørensen (1998) draws on an example from Somalia where women involved in nomadic economic activities -like selling sugar, salt, grains, and livestock, among others- also learn concepts of supply and demand, profit and loss. Usually, the lack of formal employment opportunities drive women into the informal economy sector with activities such as selling vegetables, cooked food, and offering themselves for domestic work (Zuckerman & Greenberg, 2004). The list of informal economic activities that women can perform is rather large and may vary from country to country. However, women often endure constraints to their entrepreneurship with stricter regulations for the commercialization of goods, stigmatization of their labors and, more acutely, the lack of economic resources, lack of access to credit, loans and lack of social support mechanisms.

The informal economic activities that women perform frequently relate to women's traditional occupations in society. There are women who also engage in activities that are most often dominated by men, for example: commercial farming, wholesales, smuggling and the ownership retail businesses (Chingono, 1996 in Sørensen 1998). Regardless of the type of activity, the informal economy is determinant for women in post-conflict contexts to access cash and be able to meet their needs and maybe even invest in commodities. Most of the times women may resort to several sources of income to attain the necessary assets. However, this comes at not low price for women, as I explore in the previous chapter, these economic activities add up to the domestic and child-rearing tasks that women still have to perform, which lead women to become overburdened (Sørensen, 1998).

## C. Formal sector employment

Employment in the formal sector is undoubtedly appealing for women and men in countries emerging from conflict. Formal sector employment widens the possibilities to access a regular income and a fixed job in the unstable economy of post- conflict contexts. In fact,

during post-war the need for human resource increases involving women even when this goes against customary laws. However, the lack of proper qualifications to take up formal jobs due to lack of access to education and skills training constraints women's possibilities to get into the formal market. In addition, the options to get formal jobs are more limited. During war, enterprises, companies and governmental bodies reduce or close operations, which make the formal employment highly scarce and unstable. In post-conflict, the recovery of the formal economy takes time and requires the large inversions and regulations that help re-establishing private companies and government institutions (Sørensen, 1998).

Other factor that limits their participation is that women play traditional roles in families and are often expected to bear the full responsibility for parenting. Because of this and the lack of childcare facilities, women are not able to take up jobs outside the house and participate in the job market equally with men. Additionally, with demobilization in post-conflict contexts, there is a growing male labor force that increases competition for the formal labor market (Sørensen, 1998; True, 2013).

During post-conflict, development and reconstruction efforts carried out by international relief and development organizations, may also offer new areas of employment for women through local organizations. However, these formal jobs may gradually decrease with growing stabilization of governmental institutions that resume full capacity. In such cases, the opportunities for women to take up jobs at state's institutions decreases as well. This fact may, as Chatellier & Fayyaz (2012) argue with examples from Pakistan, hinder women's rights and further broaden gender inequalities in post-conflict contexts.

As the discussion has illustrated so far, women's economic activities during and after armed conflicts are crucial for the recovery of the economy in the household, the community and the overall society. Women are indeed both individual and collective economic actors with the capacity to revitalize the agricultural sector. Women are important contributors in the recovery of the post-conflict economy being entrepreneurs in the informal sector and participants of formal employment when opportunities appear.

### **5.1.3 Social Reconstruction**

Armed conflicts quite frequently create social disintegration, causing psychological trauma and disrupting culture and identity in society at large. Usually, budgets are redirected from



social services to fuel military campaigns while destruction of the infrastructure creates insecurity and affects the provision of social services to the population. Thus, the reconstruction of the social sector is crucial for peace-building. Per Sørensen (1998) the rehabilitation of societies torn by violence regards two aspects. The first one deals with the allocation of resources to rebuild the social infrastructure to provide education, healthcare and other welfare services while engaging people in the rebuilding process. The second aspect regards long-term social integration that generate inclusive social environment, diminish discrimination and exclusion. These processes aim to rebuild confidence, trust and respect while strengthening solidarity, hence reducing the likelihood of renewed violent conflict.

In a gendered analysis of peace-building, the process of social reintegration is crucial to meet women's needs recognizing their capacities in the transformation of social identities, relationships and roles. Women often carry the main responsibility for their family's welfare during and after conflict and commit to actions that enable the rehabilitation of society (Izabiliza, 2005). Women often participate in the rehabilitation of services responding to post-conflict social distress, engaging in education and healthcare activities with their communities. Governments and societies are both equally important to carry out processes of social reconstruction. Governments are responsible for the reallocation of resources and for the definition and entitlement of rights among the community, which integrates the participation of society. As Sørensen (1998:31) urges us "*...it is through both government policy and social practice that the structure of post-war society eventually emerge*".

#### A. Education and healthcare

Access to education and healthcare services are decisive for social reconstruction. For instance, in post-conflict contexts education has the potential to bring about change by building human capacity and improving the possibility for employment once peace has been achieved. According to True (2013), education is a powerful tool to support the reconstruction of societies, and it is often implemented in refugee camps where teachers – female and male- contribute to children and adult education. Education is believed to be crucial for post-conflict reconstruction. In this respect girls' and women's education has the potential to reweave social fabric, improve women's conditions, and foster women's empowerment (Stromquist, 2015).

Similarly, healthcare provision is also relevant for effective social reconstruction. As violence destroys health clinics and drive away health professionals, women often undertake primary healthcare and war-related distress. Evidently, such efforts are basic considering scarcity and crisis during and after conflict. Even though women's participation in healthcare provision is often regarded as an extension of women's domestic roles, this could also serve as source of future opportunities for long-term employment within the health sector (Chatellier & Fayyaz, 2012).

## B. Social Reintegration

The literature widely refers to the social reintegration of selected groups in post-conflict societies – i.e. ex-combatants, demobilized, refugees-. Female returnees and ex-combatants face three main challenges when reintegrating into mainstream society, namely: lack of skills, education and resources, which are necessary to engage in socio-economic activities (Sørensen, 1998). In addition, the reintegration of female ex-fighters encounters an additional issue regarding their social status and roles. This is because these women abruptly change their active roles in war to be confined in domestic domains, in gendered unequal roles for the division of labor and socio-political participation. Certainly, there are differences among women during peace-building processes, for instance, women who were fighters during the conflict have different needs and face different challenges as opposed to women who engaged in peace protests, female victims of conflict or those who were uninvolved in the conflict (Hudson, 2009)

The integration of post-conflict society is a major challenge and often a burden for many societies. Social attitudes towards population groups and stigmatized people such as disabled people, orphans and abused women, among others, increases tensions between the returnees and those reintegrating in society with the host population. In the case of ex-combatants in Colombia, illustrated by Moser & Clark (2001), there are serious challenges to reintegration because of stigmatization and issues of distrust, resentment, guilt and societal rejection. Hence, the need for social reintegration is a priority for international assistance and operations. Several humanitarian programs carried out in post-conflict contexts acknowledge this need and identify women as capable actors to settle disputes and create a more peaceful environment starting from the heart of their families (Izabiliza, 2005). As Sørensen states, *“Women are perceived to be particularly instrumental in peace-building, reconciliation and*

*social reconstruction, and therefore many of the programme's activities target women"* (Sørensen, 1998:40).

As the discussion has shown so far, the reintegration of post-conflict societies is a highly complex process that involves a wide variety of social structures: identities, roles, relationships, and welfare institutions. The reconstruction and reweaving of the social fabric at all levels: national, local and in the households, involves people's adjustment to new political, economic and social circumstances (Santillan, 2015). Thus, the importance of social networks and organizations that involves all members of society, especially women, to share their experiences and aspirations with others is crucial for the reconciliation of societies.

# 6 A pathway towards empowerment in post-conflict Colombia

This chapter discusses the findings obtained during the fieldwork in Meta, Colombia. In doing so, I will convey the data collected in the field, secondary academic sources and information from the media. As previously illustrated, the empirical data for this thesis was collected with semi-structured interviews conducted with twenty female victims of conflict and four organizations' staff members, which are complemented with observations and field notes. There are two sections within this chapter. The first part begins with the examination of participants' perceptions of empowerment. In turn, section two delves into the life strategies that participants implement to overcome their situation after the victimization events.

## 6.1 Female victims' perceptions of empowerment

The following are the themes that emerged frequently in the participants' interviews when asked about their understanding of empowerment and the way in which they experience it in their lives. The presentation of findings is based on short life stories and anecdotic cases of the participants' lives. All the names given to the female victims in this thesis are flowers' names –some of which are local flowers-. Similarly, the NGO's staff members' names are all fictitious and aim to protect the participants' identities.

Amapola is 27 years old and was born in Villavicencio. She identifies herself as a victim of the Colombian armed conflict but acknowledges that her life experience does not match the official definition of victim stated by the government in the Victims and Land Restitution Law 1448 of 2011,

*“Victims, for the purposes of this law, are those persons who individually or collectively have suffered damages for events occurred as of January 1, 1985, as a result of violations of international humanitarian law or of grave and manifest violations of international humanitarian law., which occurred during the internal armed conflict” (Law 1448, 2011:Article 3).*

However, as Amapola claims, the armed conflict has impacted, directly or indirectly, the lives of all Colombians for more than five decades. As the photo 3 illustrates, massive

manifestations claiming for peace in Colombia often involve all sectors of society, from victims, to minority groups, citizens, etc. (See Photo 3)

In fact, Amapola explains that seeing fellow citizens suffer and die in the warfare, witnessing the despair in victims' eyes, and personally enduring social inequality and inequity, are all factors that make her feel a victim. From an early stage at home with her family, Amapola started to delve into communist ideas and initiated in political participation in her community. She has had the opportunity to study social sciences and specialized in human rights, she has worked with vulnerable groups in the past and is currently working with her own social organization focusing on female victims of conflict in the department of Meta.



Photo 3. Peace march in Colombia October 2016. Taken from RCN radio.

As expected, Amapola's understanding of empowerment is well informed by her academic formation and work experience in the field. She identifies two main components of empowerment: autonomy and leadership, which intertwine with personal, social and political dimensions. In the first, she explains that the individual can strengthen self-confidence, fostering with it personal human development. In the social dimension the individual can relate to others and work together to achieve meaningful changes; while the political dimension deals with individuals' possibilities to participate in decision making that directly affect their lives in society. Amapola asserts that, "Empowerment is both, a process of vulnerability reduction and capacities strengthening". Amapola adds that such process is predominantly individual, since everyone experiences empowerment differently.

Furthermore, Amapola eloquently asserts that she feels empowered and that her empowerment process is one that continuous in search for more ways to empower herself and help others women around her find their path towards empowerment. Amapola says,

*"I am an empowered woman. I have been able to reduce vulnerability and strengthen my capacities. Education, the social relations with peers and with my family, the empathy and organization to influence change in the territory [Meta] are all basic elements for my empowerment process".*

Amapola has been working with female victims of conflict –i.e. forcedly displaced, sexual violence survivors, ex-combatants - along the department of Meta for several years. She asserts that, in numerous cases, female victims' lives are examples of resilience, faith and hard work. During the interview, Amapola emphasizes that the empowerment process is, predominantly, a unique experience for each woman but that is constructed collectively in each community, from the perspectives and values of each group. Amapola expresses that, *“To see a woman, who gets back on her feet, wipes off her tears and starts a new path regardless of her fears and other’s criticism is truly magic”*. The life experiences and the empowerment processes of the female victims that Amapola refers to, have somehow influenced the way in which she perceives her own empowerment process. Amapola says that she feels highly inspired to keep devoting her time and energy on projects that assist female victims of the conflict in Colombia.

When asked about empowerment, almost all the participants – including the NGO members interviewed- often refer to *autonomy* and *economic independence* as key factors for the empowerment process. Generally, participants' perceptions deal with the actions that individuals freely perform in pursuit of the personal and family wellbeing. This is apparent in the conversation with Heliconia, who was 35 years old when the FARC forced her family - five young children and her husband- to flee the rural area where they used to live. With little more than what they were wearing, they had to walk for long hours the night of their displacement. She says that there was no transportation they could take, no land to hold, no possibilities and no hopes. They first settled in an impoverished neighborhood in Villavicencio in 1998, when the big influx of displacement in Meta was just starting to expand. They moved to “13 de Mayo” slum in 2008 together with other 900 people who forcedly occupied the land hoping to finally build their own house and start a new life.

When asked about her perception of empowerment, Heliconia, almost instantly, says that empowerment deals with *autonomy*; the autonomy that allows people to manage his/her own life and destiny. Heliconia asserts that *“it [empowerment] is the capacity of doing activities for one self and for one’s own benefit and of the family and of the society”*. Within this statement, Heliconia shows a strong focus on the actions that people can perform to enhance personal welfare (including that of the family and of the society). In her perception, such actions are the product of decisions that a person chooses to make to achieve an outcome, which is somewhat favorable for all. Heliconia's perception closely relates to Kabeer's

(1999) idea of choice that is described as the capacity an individual has to choose from a range of alternatives, which gives him/her autonomy to decide. Such choices are determined by the values of each individual, as Kabeer (1999) argues, not all choices have the same relevance for different people.

In a similar manner, Hortensia, a displaced woman who lives in downtown “Prado” with her two daughters and three grandchildren, asserts that empowerment refers to the capacity that every person has to control their own lives. She emphasizes on the personal, professional and economic benefits that an empowered person would seek to fulfill his/her goals, which, per Hortensia, are characteristics of an *independent* person. This is, for Hortensia achievements in personal and professional terms are crucial for the empowerment process. She argues that *“if a person is empowered is also independent to make decisions and find solutions for problems. I think I am empowered from the day I started to work and make my own money, I stopped depending on somebody to decide for me”*. For both participants, Heliconia and Hortensia, economic independence is crucial to foster one’s autonomy and to be part of the decision-making that is relevant for their lives.

Roberto, who has worked for the UN women office in Meta for the last 6 years, concurs that economic independence and women’s empowerment are bound together. More specifically, Roberto affirms that economic dependence and vulnerability to gender violence are indivisibly linked. Hence, a woman who economically depends on her husband –or father- is more vulnerable to suffer gender violence. For Roberto, the elimination of gender violence - and other forms of violence against women- is key for the peaceful reconstruction of the Colombian society in the post-conflict context. To achieve this, Roberto argues, the economic empowerment of women is indispensable, Roberto says,

*“...to economically empower women ensures their participation in the construction of peace. Such peace-building efforts include all sectors of the population (those that have been directly affected by conflict, the ones that participated in it and the civil society). But, to be successful these peace-building actions have to consider the differential needs of women and men in society as well as promoting the elimination of violence against women in all its forms”*.

In fact, Colombia occupies one of the highest positions in world ranks regarding violence against women. This is not exclusive to the violence suffered because of the armed conflict, but also includes sexual violence, femicide and domestic violence, among others. According to UN women (n.d.), in Colombia between 1995 and 2011, approximately 2.700.000 women

have been forcedly displaced (6% of the country's population). On the other hand, one of the biggest newspapers in the country, El Espectador, reports that in 2016 there were 4 femicides per day in Colombia and impunity around these murders rose to 90%. And in the same year, El Tiempo newspaper –as shown in photo 4- claims that 7 out of 10 women are victims of some type of aggression.



Photo 4. Demonstration against gender-based violence. Taken from El Tiempo 2016.

Under this scenario, it is evident that the elimination of violence against women is a pre-condition for post-conflict reconstruction and, as Roberto claims in his interview, women's empowerment is essential to achieve this goal.

The perceptions of empowerment previously illustrated are comparable to the ones expressed by Magnolia and Girasol. Magnolia -who is 78 years old, lives in “Prado” village and was displaced almost 20 years ago, from a rural area in Meta- understands empowerment as the capacity that a person owns to achieve life goals and to fulfill given duties within the family. Magnolia refers to achievements as the indicators of people's empowerment, within these she mentions: to own a house/shelter, to provide for the family, and to nurture and educate children. These achievements deal with the “primary functionings” coined by Kabeer (1999), which are universally valued, in other words these are basic needs achievements.

On the other hand, Girasol emphasizes more on the responsibility that every person has first and foremost with him/herself to attain happiness. Girasol is 57 and used to live in the countryside until 2002 when her family was forcedly displaced, they now live a modest life in an impoverished neighborhood in Villavicencio. She argues that empowerment is inherent to every human being since everybody has the capacity, and the right, to empower oneself. Girasol explains that her empowerment process has been rather slow, and only until recent years has she been able to become autonomous and independent from others. This is because, as per Girasol, she started a small business where she sells homemade food, she gained economic independence.

Furthermore, Girasol thinks that economic independence has opened new opportunities for her self-reliance and sense of self-worth. Hence, while Magnolia considers that



empowerment relates more to the responsibilities that a person may have with others in the family and the community; Girasol, sees empowerment as a process that comes from within, which is an inherited human right that can foster self-realization. Girasol says that,

*“We are entitled to all kinds of possibilities in life: economic, intellectual, social, cultural, etc. Everyone is responsible to achieve such possibilities. Empowerment is to have the power to decide for myself and to choose how I want to live, and how to make a happy experience of my life. Understanding this has taken me long, only now at my old age I see how capable I am to build the life I want to live. Because it is never too late, is it?”*

For several participants, empowerment strongly relates to the power people have to make choices that are crucial to personal wellbeing. The power to make choices is emphasized within empowerment by authors such as Cornwall & Ayindoho (2010), Rowlands (1997) and Moser (1993). Generally, empowerment is understood as the capacity that individuals have to make choices – given that the person is presented with several options to choose from – that are relevant for her/his wellbeing. Therefore, to be disempowered supposes the lack of such capacity (Kabeer, 2012).

This is evident in the conversations with Dalia and Azucena, who identify that the capacity to make life choices gives people the power to decide and achieve greater levels of independence and self-worth. For instance, Dalia -a 25-year-old displaced woman who lives in “13 de Mayo” slum- explains that by being empowered a person can attain dreams that are relevant for that person’s future and that empowerment is key in reducing the oppression that women commonly experience from childhood. As a matter of fact, Dalia has been attending a self-help group in the neighborhood; there they talk about, among other things, power relations in the household and human rights. Dalia says that the opportunity to attend these sessions and learn about new things have transformed the way she perceives her own capacities. She says, *“I feel I am worthy of respect and that I am able to do many more things for myself”*. In this regard, Azucena, who also attends the self-help group in the slum, adds that empowerment also means to be in full control of one’s life, making choices that enhances the individual’s ability to achieve the life one wants to live.

During the interview with Rosa I asked her about what conditions she considers would foster empowerment processes. To this question, she eagerly answered that to be able to access resources and education are both, undoubtedly, a pillar for a person to achieve empowerment. This perception relates to the “pre-conditions” to empowerment that Kabeer (1999) points

out. Kabeer argues that for an individual to exercise *choice* it is necessary to have access to resources, which do not only refer to the material possessions that the traditional economic sense dictates, but also to the human and social resources that individual attain in the interactions with social institutions (i.e. the family, the market, the community). The access to resources, per Kabeer (1999) can both refer to the current allocations and future claims that people have. The power structures in societies often dictate the norms in which resources are allocated. This is, few members of the society are granted the power to distribute resources to the rest under pre-established and, frequently, accommodated rules.

Rosa further elaborates her idea about lack of resources and education with an example of her own life. Rosa is approximately 31 years old, she lives now in Villavicencio and has two children, she is unmarried and she lives with her uncle and his family. She explains that when she was 11 years old her father was assassinated in front of her eyes at her grandparent's farm house. She seems rather undaunted when sharing this piece of her life. She continues explaining that she was too little to understand why those heavily armed men came that fateful night or what reasons they had to extinguish her fathers' life.

Rosa and her family were always poor and disadvantaged, they had a small plot of land in a distant rural area in Meta, she could hardly attend school and only completed 5<sup>th</sup> elementary grade when the misfortune happened. They eventually moved to a middle size urban town in Meta and the struggle for survival was just starting. Her grandparents employed themselves in underpaid seasonal jobs that roughly covered some basic expenses. Being a girl, Rosa had to work as well, mostly as domestic help and under bad conditions. Rosa says, *"I only dreamed of a better job, as a secretary for example, but with no education or training, I was just fantasizing"*

Few years after, the town where they lived slowly became the center of dispute of armed actors and when Rosa was 13 she was contacted by a member of FARC who convinced her to join the revolutionary struggle. Promises were made, a better life, a fixed monthly payment, food every day and freedom. Rosa accepted, and became a combatant for more than four years. She says she went voluntarily but acknowledges that she was too young to analyze how much her life would change with that decision. Life as a combatant was not easy at all, she says, women and men are given equally hard and dangerous tasks. But there are more restrictions for women than there are for men.

She was lucky, she argues, because one of the commanders allowed her to leave when she got



Photo 5. FARC's female fighters. Taken from theguardian.com 2016

the civil society after years spent as combatants. Now, they have the possibility to pursue their dreams and achieve their lives' goals.

Rosa further explains why she thinks that education and access to resources are crucial for the empowerment processes, at least in her case. Rosa says that with no education and no documents, the prospects of getting a job in the market was acutely limited, and with no income she could not improve her situation. Rosa states,

*"My life became a vicious circle; with no job, I could not have an income to afford a decent life and study. And with no education I could not get a well-paid job that allowed me to do both, study and work. That is why I say that without education and resources [income] there are not possibilities for empowerment. Without these two elements, empowerment was also a dream".*

In this statement, Rosa focuses on her lack of education and access to resources which were barriers of her empowerment process during the years following her reintegration. As revealed by Stromquist (2015), access to education is essential to empower women since it has the implicit potential to bring about change in people's cognition and behaviors. Stromquist considers that education is a powerful tool to support peacebuilding processes in societies torn by conflict and that women's education is crucial for the reconstruction of

societies. Essentially, by educating girls and women, a society favors the re-weaving of the social fabric and improves women's conditions after traumatic events. Thus, women's education is closely linked to their empowerment.

Rosa claims that she feels more empowered now. Approximately 7 years after her reintegration, she managed to finish high school and with a diploma it was easier for her to get a job. She is now planning to start vocational studies next and, hopefully she says, start her own small business. Rosa's victimization experiences have, undoubtedly, shaped her perception about empowerment. It is clear in her discourse the importance she assigns to the access to education and economic resources for her empowerment process.

In the interview with other participants such as Begonia, empowerment also refers to the participation in decision making within the community. For Begonia, who actively participates in the "13 de mayo" neighborhood board, her engagement in administrative activities to improve living conditions in the slum has impacted the way in which she experiences empowerment. She says that working with others for the same goal strengthens reliance and make her feel she can generate change. Begonia says

*"Since I started to participate on the "junta de acción" [neighborhood board] I can see how we can support each other and make good things for the people here. I am aware of my capacities now, I know we have the power of change in our hands, I feel others can appreciate our efforts, and that fact, gives us the strength to continue".*

Photo 3 shows a street of the "13 Mayo" Slum displayed on the news that the Región 365, an independent and local newspaper, wrote about the legalization process that the neighborhood board promoted before the local government in 2015 and from which Begonia was an active member.



Photo 6. Street in 13 de Mayo. Taken from Region 365 newspaper

However, Begonia also adds that empowerment is not always easy to attain. She says that at times, she feels she "loses" power and the strength to continue the struggle. Begonia has suffered displacement twice and her husband was abducted –a forced disappearance- about a

decade ago. Still now she does not know if he is still alive or what happened with him. She has three children from which one of them has physical and mental disability. She has been living in the “13 de Mayo” slum since 2012 and ever since she has been an active member of the community. Begonia certainly feels proud of all she has achieved with her family; she says that she managed to finish high school and has sent her children to school as well. Begonia adds, *“I have achieved some of my life goals, I graduated from high school and my kids go to school. It has not been easy, but those achievements only prove I can do it. I am capable of standing on my own two feet”*.

On the contrary, for Anturia the experience has been somewhat less positive. She is 68 years old, she never married nor had children and she never attended school, she is illiterate. She used to live, and work, at a dispersed rural settlement in Meta with her sister’s family from where they were forcedly displaced by paramilitaries in 2002. Anturia suffered sexual violence from armed group members as well. She has been living in “La Reliquia” slum ever since her displacement; she lives alone at a small squalid dwelling in precarious conditions.

When asked about her understanding of empowerment, Anturia says that she is not very familiar with the term but that she has heard of it before from people who come with projects to help children and the elderly in her neighborhood. She says that she thinks the term refers to “power” to do things, and that power means “can-do” (poder hacer). Anturia expresses that she used to feel more empowered before, when she had a place to live and work in rural Meta. In her explanation, Anturia focuses on the lack of economic means to survive in her current setting without a livelihood, which makes her depend on others’ help. Anturia states that,

*“I did not really need money before, and I just worked in the land and cultivated my own food. Things were easier then, I lived with limited commodities, I was poor (I am poor now too) but I managed better before. I still can decide for myself, but with no access to economic resources or an income my life as an old person depends on others’ good-will”*.

In Anturia’s statement it is evident that she does not feel empowered, at least not as she claims she felt before her displacement. Anturia has participated in some of the development programs that the local governments and NGOs implement in the slum but given her vulnerability (her old age, illiteracy, unemployment) her possibilities to modify her situation are limited. In Anturia’s case the emergency interventions become her only source of income together with charity offered by religious groups and the community. This reflects one of the

criticisms of the use of “empowerment” in development assistance. For instance, Moser (1993) claims that the state and the development agencies are often more preoccupied with showing quick results, disregarding that empowerment processes are time-consuming, each individual go through the process of self-confidence, self-reliance and agency at their own pace. More so, each individual has specific needs that require assistance if empowerment is to be achieved (Rowlands, 1995).

Generally, the female participants in this thesis understand the term empowerment as a process that can be both individual and collective. When expressing their perceptions and experiences about empowerment almost all the participants repeatedly refer to the sense of self-reliance and self-worth they attain when they generate an income and when they participate in decision making within the community. These conceptualizations are often followed by ideas of autonomy and economic independence. In some cases, the participants focus on life achievements as indicators of their empowerment processes, such as graduating from high school, sending children to study, own a house, start own business and purchase goods for themselves and for their families, among others.

These perspectives are closely related to the strategies and activities that participants put into action to overcome their situation and to rebuild livelihoods in their new settlements. In doing this, the research question below is considered.

## **6.2 Life strategies and the reconstruction of female victims’ livelihoods.**

The ways in which the armed conflict in Colombia affects the participants’ lives are varied and terribly difficult. Certainly, this is not unique to the Colombian conflict; rather it is a reality lived by millions in conflict affected areas around the world. However, in conflict and post-conflict settings, women are not only a very vulnerable sector of the population. In fact, female victims are often the ones that firmly engage in activities to end the conflict and advocate for peace-building efforts. Women frequently involve in activities – individually or collectively – that aim to rebuild their lives and seek a better future for themselves and for their families.

In a study conducted by Diana Britto (2010) from University of Amsterdam, about forced displacement and violence against women in Colombia, the author argues that women, in

their caregiver roles, are prompted to join with other female victims creating alliances that, not only attempt to ensure survival strategies, but more importantly, seek to establish emotional support. Furthermore, in a study of female victims' heads of household and their life strategies in Medellin, Pareja and Iañez (2014) found that women implement survival mechanisms to adapt to the new environment once they are displaced. The authors show that women in their sample engage in productive activities in the informal market and are set aside from the formal sector due to their low schooling levels and lack of work experience.

Female victims of conflict implement life strategies to improve their situation through mechanisms that include the economy market, social relations and political participations in their communities. Hence, the interest of this section is to illustrate the plans of action that female victims have undertaken after the victimization events to overcome their situation and to strengthen their livelihoods.

As was previously shown in chapter 2, almost all the interviewees have previously participated in various development programs, some of which fostered the creation of sustainable economic initiatives. In fact, several of the interviews were conducted in participant's work place (i.e. workshops, stores, restaurants, farms). Hence, the findings presentation in this section emphasize on the activities that women implemented once they were displaced but will also draw parallels with participant's experiences in their current livelihoods.

### **6.2.1 Women in the economy**

Findings in this thesis predominantly suggest that the most important strategy female victims implement to rebuild their livelihoods is to get involved in economic related activities that provide them with an income. As there are, naturally, pivotal needs that require immediate attention when displacement first occurs, such as safety, shelter, food, water, education, physical and psychological help. Female victims are often compelled to adopt survival mechanisms to enter the informal market at any cost and to innovate in all possible ways to sustain their families and survive their new life conditions.

Immediately after being forcedly displaced, some of the participants found temporary refuge at relative's homes in Villavicencio. Others sought government humanitarian emergency programs, which supported them for the first months. Few other participants struggled

huddled together with their families in squalid hostel rooms, when they could afford them. Certainly, meeting the most basic needs was a critical issue in all the cases, losing their livelihoods and properties meant that participants had little economic resources to make ends meet. After conducting nearly half of the interviews it became apparent that the most important strategy –at least the most compelling one- was to engage in income generating activities to provide for their families’ needs. This is well illustrated by the case of Iris, a young woman who now lives in “13 de Mayo” slum. Iris was forcedly displaced twice, first in 2000 by the FARC when she was 14 years old and later in 2004 by Paramilitaries. She expresses that,

*“The first time [first displacement] my mom, my 4 siblings and I fled to Bogota, we were very scared and did not know where to go or what to do. We lived there for some time in precarious conditions. We lived in a very small room we rented with the money we could take out of the farm the day we escaped... Life in the capital was not easy, we could not get regular jobs but as we needed to eat, to pay the rent and buy medicines for my mom, I was never picky for jobs. I could have done anything that gave me some pesos. I remember that my sisters and I stood up many days at the traffic lights in the streets cleaning car’s windows or simply asking for money. Other times we would offer ourselves to help in domestic chores or as cleaners in the vicinity, in restaurants and bars”.*

In this statement, Iris plainly refers to the survival strategies that she and her sisters needed to implement forced by the circumstances in Bogota right after their first displacement. Such activities are all confined to the informal economy sector, which is unstable and does not offer the minimum guarantees for women. This is similar to the results that a study by Meertens (1999) yielded about female IDPs in Colombia. Meertens argues that displaced women find themselves often overwhelmed by the new roles they have to assume as head of households in unknown settings. In such circumstances, women participate in activities in the informal economy, including beggary and, at lower levels, prostitution.

Iris continues her story by explaining how, after some time living in Bogota, she met her husband and together moved to a rural area in Guaviare (a department south of Meta) where they worked at a farm. When Iris and her family where forcedly displaced for the second time she was 19 years old and already had a child. She says,

*“Being displaced again was traumatic. I could not help remembering the hard times my family and I lived before. I did not want that for my baby, but our lives were in great danger if we did not escape. We decided to flee to Villavo [short for Villavicencio]. First, we stayed at one of my husbands’ cousin’s house, but we did not last long there. I knew I needed to work and make money but with my small baby it*



*was very difficult. I started selling candies in the public busses the first week, it was never easy. I felt ashamed and it was hard to beg for help. I always did something, worked in something; I was never at home just waiting for my husband. It was not easy to beg for food, but when your family's wellbeing depends on you, you do not think it twice, do you?"*

With this, Iris expresses that to perform an activity that could yield an income -regardless of how small- was, in fact, extremely meaningful for her and for her family. She eloquently remarks that she needed to work so she would contribute to the family economy, to pay for rent and food. During the interview, she frequently stated that she was always used to work and to earn money, and that she disliked depending on others. This seems to be, at least partially, one of the reasons why she desperately looked for all sorts of activities that could provide her with an income. In addition, Iris says that her husband employed himself in various informal chores, which gave them barely enough money to make ends meet. However, she also affirms that it was relatively easier for her husband to get small jobs than it was for her. She says, *"I could not leave my kid alone, I needed to take him with me to work because my husband could not take care of him. I was never hired because of that. Who accepts an employee with a small child? I had to work informally, in anything I could"*. Here, Iris expresses her critical view about the challenges she faced when she wanted to get a job. She perceives that her husband had more opportunities to enter the economy market than her because she was expected to carry own nurturing tasks with their child, which greatly limited her access to the market. In this regard, Kabeer (2016) argues that as women's responsibilities fall on domestic domains, it is more difficult for them to be part of the market, at least into the one that is counted as economic growth

In 2008, they moved to "13 de Mayo" slum, Iris explains that it was a swamp terrain, they started building a shack with rusty materials, there was no electricity, potable water and there



Photo 7. 13 de mayo Slum in 2008. Taken from eltiempo.com



Photo 8. 13 de Mayo slum 2016. Photo by Viviana Daza

were not sanitation facilities, which greatly affected people's health. At the time I conducted the interviews the slum did not have potable water or a sewage system yet. However, the slum's dwellings and streets are indeed different now; some houses have second and third floors, painted in bright colors, while others are still more rudimentary (see photos 8 and 9). There are even small shops and a big public school nearby. One of those shops is Iris' store; she started it by commercializing few basic supplies from her house's living room. Iris proudly says that, with time, the store has grown and it is now one of the biggest in the slum.

After being displaced two times, Iris' strategy to overcome her family's situation was primarily to engage in diverse economy activities, all of them in the informal sector, since the circumstances and her lack of education limited her possibilities to access formal jobs with a steadier and fixed income. In this regard, Zuckerman & Greenberg (2004) state that the lack of formal employment opportunities -due to the weakened post-conflict economy or to women's lack of skills- drive women into the informal economy sector with activities such as selling vegetables, cooked food, and offering themselves for domestic work.

This is very similar to the case of Jacinta, a middle age woman originally from the Caribbean coast of Colombia. Her husband was murdered and Jacinta was forced to leave her hometown with her two children. After a couple of months living in dire conditions in Bogota, she decided to move to Villavicencio in 2009. Jacinta expresses that, evidently, the first strategy was to start working so she could provide for the most pressing needs. For several months, she and her family barely survived with a scarce emergency economic support from the government, which became her solely income. Jacinta says "*... they [the state] neglect us. They gave me a little money in the beginning. As I was not working then, that was all the income I had. But that is not enough. I feel we are not wanted, I had to almost beg them to support me*". Jacinta has also worked informally selling homemade food she first cooked and then sold in the neighboring vicinities. However, at the moment of the interview, Jacinta was not performing such economic activity any longer; she was working as domestic help instead.

Furthermore, Pareja and Iañez (2014) conducted a study on displaced women in Medellin and their life trajectories after displacement. Their study found, as Jacinta's comment illustrates, that female victims often rely on emergency assistance that the state or other organizations provide for short periods of time. On the other hand, women are challenged by bureaucratic processes to access assistance, which not only constraints women's relation with the state but also, increases women's sense of state's abandonment. In fact, the authors highlight that, in

many cases, such economic assistance become the only source of income for these women. Hence, they resort to the informal market since they are not able to participate in the formal economy sector due to low levels of schooling, unemployment and lack of possibilities.

Brunelia and Orquidea are both head of household and currently work, with other two women, at a small-scale business where they make and sell art crafts. Orquidea has an 8-year-old girl and was displaced in 2009, they moved to Villavicencio and have lived in La Reliquia slum ever since. Orquidea used to have a small plot of land where she cultivated for cash crops and had a poultry farm. Being a peasant all her life, she finished 5<sup>th</sup> elementary school grade and



Photo 9. Some of the handicrafts at Brunelia's and Orquidea's work shop. Photo by Viviana Daza.

could not continue her education due to economic reasons. Once in Villavicencio, after the displacement, she says that life became a struggle for survival. Orquidea, as several other interviewees, identifies that working and generating and income was crucial to somehow have “normal” lives and start the recovery of their livelihoods. Orquidea says,

*“The first thing I think of when we got here [Villavicencio] was that we needed a plot of land to cultivate our food. But being honest we could not even afford building our shack. I knew I needed to work. I have always been a farmer but, where in the city could I have gotten a job? So, the solution was to work as domestic help. I did so for some years. It is very hard; cleaning for others and depending on others is horrible. That is why I thought of getting together with a neighbor and we started making “envueltos” [corn-based parcels], which we tried selling around. But this was not successful either”.*

These survival strategies are, as the ones identified by Iris and Jacinta before, enclosed in the informal sector economy. In fact, as Sørensen (1998) argues, these types of activities are rather common among women in post-conflict settings. These informal economic activities often respond to the traditional –and stereotyped- occupations assigned to women in society such as domestic help and petty trade. Arguably, informal economy strategies are determinant for women in post conflict contexts to not only access cash and make ends meet, but also to invest in commodities as well (Sørensen, 1998). However, as several scholars argue, these economic activities add up to the domestic and child-rearing tasks that women are expected

to perform in society, which lead them to become overburdened (Batliwala, (2007); Meagher, 2010).

Brunelia's story is very similar, she has two daughters, who were little girls when they were displaced and her husband was murdered. Brunelia suggests that she implemented two strategies to overcome her life situation after displacement. The first strategy has to do with the possibility to generate income and create a new livelihood. Brunelia expresses that she would have preferred to get a job in the formal market because this would have given her and her family more stability, but she was not able to get such a job. This relates to Sørensen's (1999) idea about employment in the formal sector that appears to be appealing to women – and men- in countries affected by –or emerging from- conflict. This is because formal sector jobs increase the likelihood of fixed income and stability. However, as the same author affirms, such jobs are not abundant and women have very limit options to get them.

In Brunelia's case, her lack of training and education was always a constraint. Hence, she worked in anything she could get. Brunelia states,

*“I went out every day looking for something I could do, anything! I begged in the city centrum, I used to help at a restaurant washing the dishes. I also worked as a domestic helper. I cleaned cars; I sold candies in the busses. I had to change many things in my life. I never thought of doing those things. But I did, and still do, everything to support my family”.*

Brunelia's perception partly resembles some of the findings in Bello's (2004) study on gender perspectives of conflict in Colombia. Bello claims that displacement has the power to shift people's behavior and idiosyncrasy in many ways. Under these circumstances, people are either able to adapt to their new conditions -performing activities that they never imagined they would can do (begging, cleaning, selling in busses) to survive and rebuild their lives- or they adopt more pessimistic approaches to face challenges.

Furthermore, for other participants, such as Petunia, to reestablish her family's livelihood was fundamental in the reconstruction of their lives in Villavicencio. Petunia is 63 years old, her voice is vigorous and her discourse is very convincing. She appears as a strong and eloquent woman. She started her story by telling me that she married when she was 15 years old and that she had 12 children, from which only 8 are alive. The armed conflict has impacted Petunia's life in many ways from a very early age. She was forcedly displaced twice, two of her oldest sons were kidnapped and later disappeared, other two, a son and a daughter, were

forcibly recruited when they were teenagers, only one of them survived, and a fifth one died when he stepped on a landmine. One cannot begin to imagine how much pain Petunia has endured and how merciless the armed conflict on people's lives is.

Petunia explains how her family's livelihood changed over the years after their first displacement. Her husband and she used to be peasants; they worked in the land with livestock and had rice crops. Petunia comments,

*"I liked working in the farm, it was hard work, but it was our job, our sustenance. When we were forced to leave, we lost everything; it happened too fast, we could not sell anything. In the town where we moved that time, we managed to get a job at a farm, but this time we were not the owners, we just day labored there. We earned very little money so I decided to start cooking and selling food for the other workers at the farm. This is how the idea of the restaurant started".*

Petunia suggests that she saw an opportunity to generate income from her house and that this was very convenient because she could do both, take care of the younger kids and work at the same time. She says that their lives were more or less stabilized, her husband and she had a job and the kids were attending school. However, in 2003 an armed group came to the village and forced several families to leave that same evening. Petunia's family was in that list, there, two of her teenage kids were forcibly recruited and she would not know much about them for more than 6 years. Petunia and her family were assisted for 6 months by the government in Bogota but after that time they decided to move to Villavicencio and establish their lives there. They used to live in the outskirts of the city, usually the most impoverished neighborhoods. They struggled for survival for a few years until they heard of the occupation of terrains south of Villavicencio. Per Petunia, her family founded the "13 de Mayo" slum together with others. Petunia has struggled to keep the terrain where they have built a squalid house. She says,

*"We came here on the 13 de Mayo of 2008 and we did not move from here. The local government did not want to help us getting a house to live or at least a piece of land where we can seek refuge. So, we forcibly took this land. It took the government 7 years to legalize the neighborhood. From 2015 we are part of the urban area of Villavicencio and we finally got electricity. Living here was not easy in the beginning, not at all. We had to walk long distances to get water; some families had a watering hole in their terrains. But the worse was the lack of waste management. We got sick very often".*

With this, Petunia briefly describes how life in the slum used to be when they first occupied the terrain. Petunia says that during the first year while they were building their house, she

was not able to work or provide for the family. However, her husband got informal temporal jobs in the city center. After a while, Petunia also started selling candies in the local busses and in the streets downtown. She would take her younger kids with her because, back then, she could not afford sending them to school. Petunia suggests that she got tired of that form of work since it was very hard and left very little profit, so she started making homemade pastries that her husband would sell. This business idea evolved and Petunia started a small restaurant, like the one she used to have before. As Petunia's story has illustrated so far, the strategies that she implemented to strengthen her livelihood primarily focused on activities that allowed her to obtain an income and provide for her family's needs. Petunia seems to acknowledge that having access to paid labor –produced by her small restaurant- has increased her capacity to negotiate with others for greater degrees of respect, and raise her sense of self-worth and self-reliance.

In a similar way, Magnolia concurs with previous participants when they identify that economic activities are crucial for overcoming dire situations. When Magnolia was forcedly displaced in 1998 she was almost 56 years old. She is married and had 10 children, from which one was murdered by the paramilitaries; they accused him of being a guerrilla combatant in 1997. Magnolia states that before the “tragedy”, as she calls it, her family life was modest, but peaceful. Their livelihood was based on the agriculture and livestock, which they later commercialized in neighboring villages and in Villavicencio. Magnolia acknowledges that, even though she worked hard in the farm; she did not have the possibility to administer the money. It was always her husband who oversaw the family's economy. She adds,

*“Luckily my older sons helped a lot in the farm. It is a very demanding job. Besides my responsibilities to take care of my kids and prepare the meals, I had to work at the farm, with the animals too. I never saw any money in my hands. It was the “old one” [her husband] who always handled the money. But the economy was not going well. Maybe he was not so clever to negotiate. When we had to move out and came here [Prado, Meta], I realized I needed to be more independent and from that moment on I am the one who manages the economy at home. I decided to do that because I became aware of my capacities and that I was fully capable of managing my house, elsewhere than only in the kitchen”.*

In this statement, Magnolia affirms that she realized her potential to manage the family's economy and implemented economic activities in the new settlement where they came to live once they were forcedly displaced. Magnolia, her husband and one of their sons live now at a farm in the rural area of Prado village in Meta. They have been living there since their



Photo 10. Poultry barn at Magnolia's farm. Photo by Viviana Daza



Photo 11. Egg production at Magnolia's farm. Photo by Viviana Daza

displacement almost 20 years ago. Magnolia says that they used to have fruit crops and had few cows for milk production for a short while but now they are getting old and they lack the necessary energy to work hard in the land. However, she has a small and rudimentary poultry for egg production, which she sells in town once a week. Magnolia claims that by becoming responsible for her family's economy she is aware of the capacity she has to make choices and be more autonomous in the decisions that directly affect her wellbeing.

This same feeling is shared by Azucena and Jazmin. Both have participated in economic projects run by NGOs in the slums. These projects included training (handicrafts production, business management, finances and merchandising) and the provision of raw material and machinery. At the time the interviews were conducted, the small-scale businesses from these women were still running but had very little profit and they feared they had to eventually close. In her study, Pinilla (2009) refers to the creation of small-scale business in Bogota's slums as a survival alternative that female victims of conflict often implement. Pinilla argues that such productive projects are not always successful due to lack of supervision and viability.

The results Pinilla found are somehow transferrable to the case of Azucena and Jazmin. Once the project finished the women were left alone and they did not get further guidance to face challenges in the informal market. Azucena is associated with other three women in the manufacturing and commercialization of stuff toys. When I interviewed her, Azucena assured me that from the moment she started her project she has been feeling increasingly empowered. She says this because, despite the minimum profit she makes for her work, she can do great things, open her own store, and more importantly for her, she has been able to

leave her occupation as a domestic helper. This means that Azucena feels she has the power within herself to restore –and even improve- the livelihood she had before.

Jazmin is a young woman, head of household; she has three children and lives with Dalia her sister, who has four children of her own. The sisters also have a small-scale business. The project they participated in, offered them the machinery and materials to elaborate bedding and linen products, and training on how to create and maintain a business. But they did not offer them training on how to make the products. These two women told me that they spent approximately three months learning on their own from a magazine they bought, before they could start selling their products. They tell me that sells are not always good, which limits their profit. Besides, if they use the materials and do not sell the products they cannot acquire new materials to keep the production up.

Despite all these challenges, both Jazmin and Dalia feel they are empowered, they feel they can overcome their current situation. Given that they used to have informal jobs as domestic helpers, both identify that working from home has several advantages. Jazmin says, *“I am proud of our work. We learned how to do this on our own and the products get better with practice. We are happier doing this, than cleaning others houses. We can pay attention to the kids, we work from home. We do not sell much, but we hope things will get better soon”*.

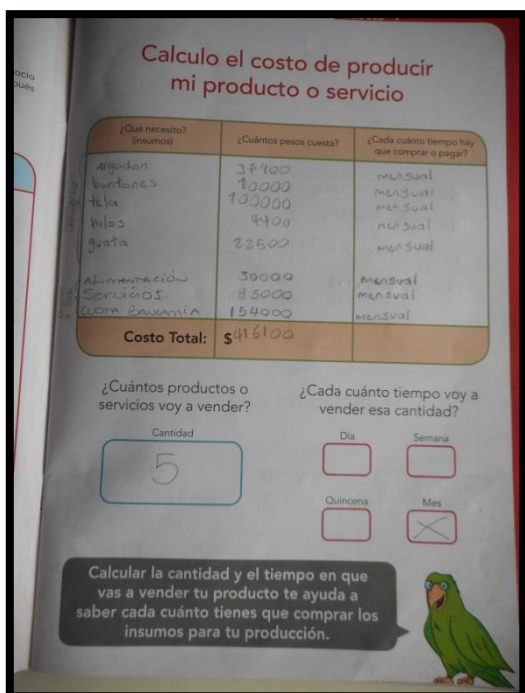


Photo 12. Workbook for the business management course Jazmin and Dalia took. Photo by Viviana Daza

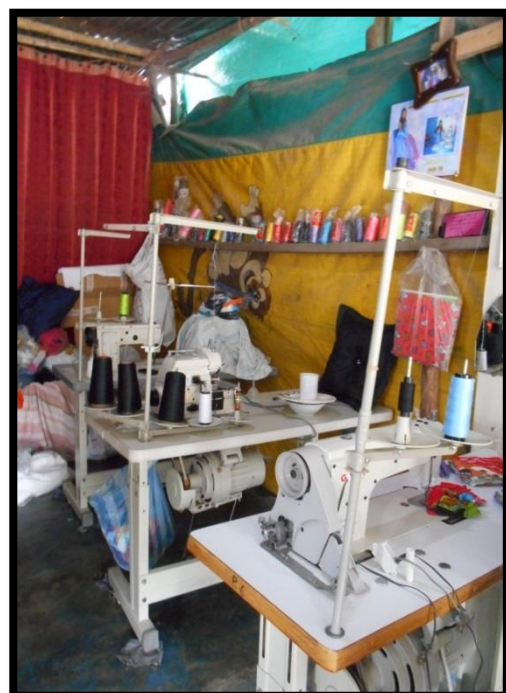


Photo 13. Jazmin's and Dalia's shop. Photo by Viviana Daza



## 6.2.2 Women in social and political participation

Although, economic and income generating activities were repeatedly mentioned in all the interviews, there are some participants who identify other strategies to overcome their situation. For instance, there is Violeta and Flor. Violeta used to live at a rural area approximately 8 hours away from Villavicencio. She was always involved in socio-political activities at her home town. She campaigned for several political parties and was a labor unionist. Violeta says that her participation in politics was the main reason why her life was threatened and all her family was exiled in 1999. Violeta and her family sought refuge with relatives and friends in Villavicencio; they have been living there ever since.

Violeta explains that although it was relatively easy for her to get jobs at offices and maybe even with governmental institutions -given her education and experience- she did not want to involve in public jobs any longer. She says that she feared for her life and preferred to take on labor jobs and remained anonymous. Violeta did so for several years until she moved to live with her family in “13 de Mayo” slum. She claims that when she witnessed people’s struggle for survival and the lack of interest from local government towards people’s needs, she felt the need to engage again in political activities. These activities were, in fact, part of the reconstruction of her life and healing wounds process. Violeta expresses that,

*“Of course, I was scared to continue in political activities here in the city. We feared for our lives. I could get “good” jobs but I just wanted to work as domestic help and maintain a low-key profile. But, after the first months living in the slum I started feeling that I was not complete. My life was reconstructed somehow with time and my family’s company. But being involved with the community was something I needed, something I yearned to do, so I could feel like my life was a bit more like the one I lived before. I like it, I am happier now”*

Violeta is now fully involved in the local political scene in “13 de Mayo”, she is one of its most influential leaders. She explains that being a victim has shown her new ways of understanding the conflict and new perspectives to work with vulnerable communities to put their needs forward in the local government and seek peaceful ways to solve problems. In her statement, Violeta refers to her engagement in political activities as a strategy to rebuild her life and her position within the community where she lives at now. As Herndon & Randell (2013) claim, political actions have the power to assist women in the adaptation of their new lives and the protection of their rights. Hence, involving women in decision making

fosters them to become agents of political change, which is crucial for the reconciliation and peacebuilding in post-conflict contexts, like the one in Colombia.

Margarita is also a leader in the slum, she was forcedly displaced in the early 2000s with her husband and two children. Margarita used to work at a rural elementary school before displacement, where she worked for several years. Immediately after being displaced, Margarita and her family moved to live in Villavicencio. She could not get a job as a teacher in the city since she did not have professional education to do so. Hence, she had informal jobs, which were often seasonal jobs as kitchen help for oil palm farms not far from Villavicencio. Margarita is one of the establishers of the 13 de Mayo slum in 2008. She says,

*“I did not know I could be a leader. When I first arrived here [the slum] I was very shy and this did not help me much... If we want to change things in the slum it is important that we raise our voices and demand for our rights. I soon realized that people followed me and that I have the ability to convene and they listen and approve my ideas. I have performed several roles in the neighbourhood board, which was the driving force behind the legalization process of the terrain, we were a “subnormal” settlement but not we are a legal neighborhood in Villavicencio. Performing these tasks for the community is very important for me. I feel I am doing something to help, and this helps me feeling less of a victim and more as a strong actor of change”.*

Margarita eloquently expresses that her political participation within the community has been a crucial strategy for her situation to improve. This means that her involvement in politics has not only strengthen her self-confidence, but it has been also effective in generating change for the community’s benefit. Here Margarita highlights that by doing these activities in the community she has increased her self-perception as an active promoter of change, greatly diminishing her identification as a victim. This fact seems to be very important for Margarita. During the interview, she frequently mentions that although her situation fits the description of a conflict victim; she feels she is more a conflict survivor. Margarita affirms she has the driving force to exceed challenges and expand her life opportunities.

Similarly, Flor, a woman displaced in 1998 with her 3 children and her husband, describes how the strategy she implemented, after looking for work, was to establish a network with others living under the same circumstance. Flor says,

*“I started getting together with other people from my region, those who were also fleeing from conflict. We started sharing our pain, mobilizing for help with governmental institutions. For example, we would help others building their shacks, explaining where to carry the water from or sharing food when we had and helping*

*with kids. The emotional support we could offer each other was invaluable in reconstructing our lives”.*

Flor states that creating groups to support each other resembled the life dynamic she had back in the countryside. She says that although life in the rural areas in Colombia is far from easy -because people have to struggle for survival- daily life is simpler than in the urban areas. Flor says that people in the countryside are more generous and empathetic than in the large cities. Flor adds *“life in my hometown was simple, we did not have many facilities, but we had what we needed and most importantly life in community used to be peaceful. So, when we came here to the city, with no other belongings or resources, the best thing we could do was to help each other”*. In the interview with Flor it is apparent that she greatly values community service and social groups where people come together to reconstruct, support and strengthen their livelihoods. Moreover, Flor acknowledges that these groups are crucial for the emotional support that she needed for the hard times lived these years.

Furthermore, Flor comments that her life has changed since she started to get involved in the social groups she attends to. Flor created a social network that support each member when needed. Flor says that she feels she is not alone in the struggle and that being with others living under similar circumstances gives her the strength to continue fighting for better life conditions for all. Flor says *“I feel good with this change. Now I can trust others, when I need a favor there is always somebody in the group that can assist me, or at least give me ideas on how to proceed”*.

Flor’s experiences and perceptions about the social groups in her community are similar to the ones that Meertens found in her study with displaced women in Colombia in 2002. In this study, Meertens shows that women groups are, in fact, reweavers of the social fabric in urban contexts where the displaced population seeks refuge. She focuses on “grupos de receptoras” [receivers’ group] in Bogota, Cartagena and Medellin. These groups do not only receive and guide newcomers -(displaced people)- about their rights and the steps they need to follow with state’s institutions. But also, offer help regarding domestic violence, solve community problems, and deal with political and social participation within the community. Meertens claims that displaced women develop more capacity of integration in reception communities than men do regarding social issues in their neighborhoods.

Begonia holds similar perceptions as the ones aforementioned. Begonia, and other 4 women, have a small-scale business resulted from one of the sustainable economic projects implemented in the slum. The shop is located at Begonia's house's livingroom. These women make handicrafts with recycled car tires. They first go in search of the old tires at the local dump, later each woman in the shop has an specific task,



Photo 14. Tires' handicrafts. Photo by Viviana Daza

while one cleans and outline the rubber, the other one designs and cut, and the others paint and finish up each product. Begonia and her co-workers devote almost all their time to produce items for sale, she argues that despite the low selling rates at the moment, they keep on working hard to maintain their business open but she says there is a lot of uncertainty because they have not attain any profit in the last three months.

As I mentioned before, Begonia has a son with special needs, he needs new medication every month, which is expensive and retrieving it from the healthservice facility is time consuming, so Begonia tells me that there is a neighbour who will go pick the medicine up for her. In fact, while conducting the interview with Begonia, a woman –neighbour- knocks on the door and asks Begonia if everything was ready. Begonia nods and gives the woman some money, then the woman leaves and Begonia elaborates on it. She explains that she has created, with other eight women in the neighbourhood, a small support group. She calls it “the helping group”. Each woman in the group is head of household and all of them are victims of conflict, they all have informal jobs and used to struggle a lot with their children since they had to leave them home alone while they went to work.

The women in the group meet once in a while to discuss general problems they may have in their lives, with the children, with work, etc. They take turns to babysitt the smaller children while other woman in the group would take the older ones to school before going to work. A couple of women are in charge of meal preparation for the kids and once in a while they eat all together. Begonia comments,

*“We are alone, we do not have more family around. So we only have each other, we must care for each other and help whenever it is necessary. My neighbour always*

*goes for my sons' medicines, I cannot go myself. I cannot leave my son alone, he does not behave with other people. In return I help her with food. She is old and lives with her grandchild, so they often come have lunch with us. I often take care of the others' small kids here at home. Sometimes we even get together to cook and share all together”.*

Forming a support group with other women is very significant for Begonia's and her family's lives. Begonia asserts that having the support of other women in the same circumstances as her has provided her with the strength to work everyday to achieve her goals and ensure a better life for her family. Begonia argues that the sense of community and empathy with other women in her neighborhood played a positive role in restoring her trust and rebuilding her and her family's lives. This relates to the concept of “power with” that deals with the power that collectivities can promote and the capacity that people have to come together and effect change (Rowlands, 2007).

Several local and national press media have documented the realities of the victims of

conflict along the country. Some of the articles and investigations focus on the conditions in which victims live and their daily struggle for survival. Others report on the various projects and development programs that the government and other organizations implement with these communities in urban settings. In other cases, such as the one published by El Espectador this year (see photo 15), the emphasis is placed on the strategies that women implement to reconstruct their lives by healing the wounds that violence caused. Strategies are developed through photography projects, sewing, writing handicrafts making and others. Projects like the one explored in the newspaper's article aim at



**Photo 15. "Photography to reconstruct memory and heal wounds". [elespectador.com](http://elespectador.com)**

reconstructing victims' lives, reclaiming their rights as citizens and survivors of the conflict in the context of the “truth commission” agreed in the peace accords in La Habana last year.

In general terms, this thesis' findings show that the female victims of conflict in Meta implement economic, political and social strategies in order to overcome their situation after the

victimization events. They do this individually and collectively with others in similar circumstances, on their own or participating in projects implemented by third parties. The main life strategy focuses on economic activities, more specifically, informal sector activities. These are, as Sørensen (1998) points out, the most common economic activities women in conflict settings engage with. This includes petty trade, small-scale business and domestic help, among others. Participants have also implemented social and political strategies that have favoured their adaptation to their new realities and shaping their life plans. Findings suggest that participants in this thesis identify -and experience- such mechanisms as meaningful for their lives, and crucial for the reconstruction of their livelihoods and social positions within the society.

# 7 Discussion and conclusion

The following chapter will present a general discussion on the most predominant tendencies of this thesis' findings. The research questions will be revisited considering the theoretical framework to provide concluding explanations. In addition, when appropriate, the discussion will include analysis of secondary academic studies to critically examine and compare the empirical findings of this thesis. Section 7.1 focuses on the discussion about research question one: how do female victims of the Colombian armed conflict perceive empowerment? Section 7.2 provides the discussion in relation to research question two: what strategies do female victims of the Colombian conflict implement to strengthen their livelihoods?

## 7.1 Perceptions of empowerment

In general terms, participants in this thesis perceive empowerment as a process where individuals -who are disempowered- achieve greater control of their own lives. Findings show that “to make choices” is an ability that participants often refer to when defining the term empowerment. Such choices have the potential to generate meaningful changes in people's lives. According to Kabeer (1999:435), “*empowerment is about the process by which those who have been denied the ability to make strategic life choices acquire such ability*”. In addition to this, Kabeer also asserts that empowerment is both an individual and a group process. In fact, participants perceive that empowerment is a process that can be constructed individually but also in collectivities. This perception includes coming together for political participation, social interaction and to enhance economic empowerment (working together economically). Participants' perceptions also indicate that their agency is exercised on their own as individuals but also as individuals that are organized in formal or informal groups in their communities.

All the participants consider that empowerment enhances individuals' sense of self-reliance and self-worth that in turn provide them with greater control over their lives. Participants perceive that empowered people are not only able but also, entitled to make decisions. Hence, if a person is unable to satisfy basic needs, their dependence on others increases, restraining their ability to make strategic life choices. This, as Kabeer (2003) argues, leads to disempowerment.

### **7.1.1 Resources, agency and achievements**

Findings generally reveal that participants' perceptions of empowerment involve ideas about resources, agency and achievements. These three factors intertwine and seem to play an important role in the way in which participants experience empowerment in their lives before and after displacement.

As presented in chapter 4, access to resources can enhance the ability to exercise choice, this entails that resources are preconditions of empowerment. Kabeer (1999) asserts that such resources do not only include material and economic possessions but also, a wider spectrum of human and social resources, which can be granted through actual allocations or future claims. These resources are developed through social interactions in the institutional domains that constitute society such as, the family, the market, the community and the state. Regarding this, there is strong evidence in the findings that indicate that access to resources – and the lack thereof- has deeply influenced the way in which participants perceive empowerment.

The most predominant factor in the findings deals with women's economic independence. This suggests that participants who engage in economic activities that provide them with an income, experience greater ability to exercise choice in their lives. Hence, they feel empowered. According to participants, economic independence enhances their perceptions of self-reliance and self-worth. Being able to provide for themselves and for their family increases the control they have over their own lives, facilitating their participation in decision-making in the domestic and community domains.

The NGOs' members who participated in this thesis argue that by being economic independent women can reduce vulnerability and strengthen their capacity to generate meaningful changes in their lives. This is evident in Meertens (1999) and Ramirez (2005) studies that found that displaced women in Bogota feel empowered when they engage in income generating activities. Similarly, this thesis' findings strongly indicate that all the participants feel empowered when they have access to an income that allow them to provide for their families. However, findings also show that when women are unemployed or make little profit from their economic activities, their perceptions of self-reliance decrease and they become increasingly dependent on others (male relatives or the state). Consequently, participants feel more vulnerable and unable to make choices that directly affect their lives.



Furthermore, findings imply that access to education is closely linked to the economic independence of the participants and it is a precondition of empowerment. Poverty, lack of opportunities and low levels of schooling are all common in participants' lives. In many cases, the lack of skills and education has acutely limited their opportunities to access paid labor, urging them to engage in informal economic activities and beggary. Findings reveal that lack of education also hinders participants' capacities to deal with legal processes facing state's institutions and organizations.

Nevertheless, participants acknowledge that with training and education their possibilities to improve their conditions increase. Findings suggest that participants' ability to make choices boosts when they are able to attend training programs, finish high-school, and participate in courses where they learn about human rights, gender and peace-building. These findings deal with ideas coined by Stromquist (1988) and Kabeer (2003) who argue that education is crucial for the empowerment of women and girls.

With economic independence and access to education, participants' sense of agency positively increases. Participants feel more autonomous and reliable of making choices that can foster their own wellbeing and that of their family's as well. With this, findings show that participants gained the ability to define their goals and started working upon them. For instance, some participants perceive that they obtained greater levels of negotiation with their male counterparts in important decisions for the family, such as where to live, how to educate the children and what businesses to do. These perceptions about agency regard Kabeer's (1999) definition, which states that agency is an observable action that involves individuals' motivation and purpose to achieve certain goals. Agency also deals with Rowlands (2007) idea of "*power within*" that drive people to be agents of change of their own lives. Regarding this, participants perceive that the control and access to resources (education, income, paid labor) are necessary to achieve their life goals and to increase their agency.

The last factor in which participants hold similar perceptions is the idea of *achievements*. This primarily refers to the basic needs achievements that allow participants to make ends meet and which hold equal universal value (adequate shelter, health and nutrition). These are what Kabeer (1999) calls "*primary functionings*". Participants refer to the present time when talking about achievements, feeling proud for having supported their families after violence occurred. For most of the participants being able to provide for their families and endure hard circumstances are outcomes of their actions and a manifestation of their agency.

Particularly, findings indicate that participants sense of achievement include, but are not limited to, completing high-school education, sending children to school, building their own house and owning a small-scale business. Seemingly, participants' feelings about achievements focus on meritocracy ideas where they feel it is their individual responsibility to become economically independent.

## **7.2 Life strategies**

Forced displacement is a tragic and highly disruptive event in people's lives. It affects family and social relations, disrupts livelihoods, exacerbates gender inequalities and destroys material and symbolic foundations for women and men. However, under these circumstances, women are more vulnerable to uprooting, poverty and social exclusion. Implicitly, displacement is in itself a life strategy that people opt to when their lives are in danger. Considering this, the following discussion will focus on the strategies that participants implemented after being displaced to overcome their situation and to strengthen their livelihoods.

### **7.2.1 Economic strategies**

There is strong evidence in the findings indicating that economic activities are one of the main strategies that participants implement soon after their displacement. Sørensen (1998) argues that women in post-conflict contexts often engage in the informal sector economy to restore their livelihoods. This is because of two aspects; first, the adaptation to their new circumstances in the urban areas where they settled is very complex. And second, because the lack of education, skills and unemployment compel them to take on informal economic activities such as petty trade, informal sales, and domestic help. Findings in this thesis show that these activities are common for all the participants and are essentially survival strategies.

The participants engaged in the informal sector to provide decent housing and nutrition for their families. These were clear objectives for the participants in their new roles as breadwinners or as secondary income earners. However, findings suggest that the participants could not always satisfy such basic needs and had to resort to beggary. Most of the participants showed their discontent with activities like beggary and cleaning (domestic help), but argued they were willing to do so if their family's wellbeing depended on it. As Kabeer (2008) argues, these are primarily survival activities that may have very limited impact on

changing people's circumstances. However, findings also imply that, in some of the cases, petty trade activities eventually became more sustainable forms of work where participants could generate steadier income and improve skills on finances, merchandising and business management.

More so, findings show that many of the participants involved in several informal jobs simultaneously to be able to provide for their families. These factors relate to Sørensen (1998) discussion about informal economy in post-conflict contexts. She argues that regardless of the type of activity performed, the informal sector economy is determinant for women to access cash and to make ends meet in the fragile economy of post-conflict.

Findings in this thesis relate to those of Soledad, Jurado and Aceros' (2014) study about displaced women in Cucuta, Colombia, the fact that female victims only have access to the informal sector is a clear indicator of the lack of efficient public policies that foster the inclusion of the displaced population in the urban labor market. In fact, the inclusion of women in the economy by increasing their opportunities in the labor market benefits development and reduces gender inequality (Kabeer 2003). As the discussion in the literature shows, access to paid labor, even when it is carried out in the home, in agriculture or in the informal sector, can enhance women's agency and capacity to achieve goals, increase mobility and ownership of assets. With this, paid labor has the potential to empower women.

### **Education and small-scale businesses**

Findings indicate that participants regard training and education as a useful strategy to rebuild their livelihoods and improve their possibilities to access the paid labor market and/or to create small-scale businesses that may provide them with steadier incomes. This is a frequent pattern in all the participants' interviews, including those of the NGO's members and it is evident in the secondary academic data and in some of the newspaper's articles used for the analysis. While some of the participants could finish their high-school by following adult education programs, others attended training courses as part of development programs run by NGO's that aimed at fostering sustainable economic activities. The participants who graduated from high-school perceive that their opportunities to get a job and to continue into tertiary or vocational education in the future increased. This means that education facilitated their participation in the paid labor market and enhanced their agency because they can set their goals and act accordingly to achieve them.

On the other hand, several participants co-own a small-scale business where they applied the skills learned during training. This has impacted participants' ideas of self-worth and self-reliance. Findings show that participants feel they are capable of being entrepreneurs and innovate in the market. For most of these participants their small-scale businesses are proof of their perseverance and hard work, which makes them feel proud of what they have achieved. In fact, some of the participants claim that since the moment they became involved in the productive activities with their businesses they feel their roles in the domestic domain have changed, that their opinions weight more than before in decision-making. This perception also includes the recognition of their labor in the community; participants feel that their efforts are appreciated and this provides them with a more favorable status in the community. In addition, findings suggest that working in a group with other women in the same circumstances facilitated the process of opening and making their shops thrive. This fact also provided them with the strength to overcome challenges as they worked together to reach common goals. However, by the time the fieldwork was conducted some of the small-scale businesses were facing difficulties and they were at risk of bankruptcy. Despite their apparent prosperity, such productive activities are not always successful. This is because, as Pareja and Ianez' (2014) findings suggest, they often lack viability and monitoring from the organizations that initially implemented them.

In general, findings demonstrate that participants' access to knowledge and the acquisition of skills increased their participation in the labor market in the informal economic sector. Developing skills also fostered the creation of productive activities that, although not fully successful, have allowed the female victims to explore their capacities, grow with others under similar circumstances and develop greater levels of independence and agency.

### **7.2.2 Political strategies**

Findings strongly indicate that participants engaged in political activities in their communities as a mechanism to strengthen their lives after the events that victimized them. For some of the participants who were politically active before displacement, to engage in political activities in their new settlements represented an opportunity to reconstruct their lives and to regain their lost positions in the community. Whereas, for other participants who just initiated political activities for the first time in their lives after being displaced, this strategy was crucial in the adaptation to their new circumstances, helping them to overcome

difficulties and respond to the communities' needs. The discussion here focuses on Herndon and Randell's (2013) reasoning about political participation in post-conflict contexts, which argues that involvement in political activities has the power to assist female victims in the adaptation of their new ways of life; it is also a tool to put forward their needs and the protection of their rights.

### **From victims to survivors and agents of change**

In addition, findings suggest that the participants' involvement in political activities strengthen their self-confidence and self-esteem because they regard themselves – and are regarded by others- as generators of positive change in the community. Even though all the participants are aware of their victims' condition before the law and for other legal purposes, most them prefer to identify as survivors of the armed conflict. Findings indicate that the participants who engage in political activities do not only identify as survivors but as agents of political change. In a study on displaced women in Cartagena and Medellin, Meertens (2002) reached similar explanations about political participation. In this case the author shows that political and social participation are both strategies that foster the reintegration processes of displaced women.

Findings generally reveal that through the implementation of political strategies and the participation in political debate in their communities, participants have gained greater knowledge about their individual rights and group rights. This has also enhanced participants' interaction with the local government and NGOs to articulate their needs and start processes for the benefit of all. This deals with Kabeer's (2003) claim that women's involvement in local government and administration - not only participating in the formulation of policy but also its implementation- is also relevant, since it engages women in problem-solving and decision-making regarding pressing issues that directly affect them within their communities. Thus, findings show that political activities are crucial for participants to curtail vulnerability and to promote their ability to make strategic life choices that directly affect them and their communities.

### **7.2.3 Social strategies**

Findings indicate that social relations are necessary for participants to reconstruct their lives after the victimization events. First, all the participants resorted to family members and

friends in the cities where they fled to seeking for temporal shelter and help. In addition, participants assert that while in their new settlements their interaction with others under similar conditions increased, thriving to construct new social relations and to change their precarious living conditions. Participants perceive that an important strategy for the recovery of their lives was to organize with others to achieve common goals and request support from the government and other organizations. This strategy includes forming groups to work in economic activities, support in daily life activities and to offer each other emotional support.

The reweaving of the social fabric is crucial for the post-conflict reconstruction of societies, as Sørensen (1998) argues, the social strategies that individuals implement act as a support network that aim to provide basic social services, such as daycare for children and healthcare. Besides creating a sense of community, social integration can also generate inclusive social environment, rebuilding trust and strengthening solidarity among those involved. Findings suggest that participants value the social interaction they have built through the years with others under similar circumstances in their communities. Participants often refer to feelings of solidarity and cooperation within these groups. The social strategies that participants implemented after their victimization events are evidence of what Rowlands (2007) calls “power with”, which is indicative of the power that collectivities have to enhance individuals’ capacity to come together and effect change. Certainly, findings show that social strategies and “power with” are crucial for the adaptation of participants’ new realities and the reconstruction of their livelihoods within the community.

### **7.3 Constraints**

Participants have endured dire circumstances and radical changes in their lives and livelihoods due to the armed conflict. Most of them have been living in urban spaces after their displacement for over 10 years and still now they persevere to improve their lives. Findings show that this has been a long process of struggle for survival, filled with challenges and battles that the participants have fought –and still fight- striving for a better future. Certainly, as the participants lacked resources, skills and assets after displacement they became dependent on state’s assistance and other people’s charity. These circumstances hampered –and still do- their opportunities to exercise choice, process their agency and achieve their life goals. Nevertheless, findings show that participants perceive themselves as

relatively empowered women who have gone through a process of acquiring greater capacity to make choices and generate change.

Kabeer (2008) discusses that diverse economic activities in poor households that aim to increase women's participation in the economic market may simply serve as a survival strategy – to meet basic needs and endure crises- with little opportunities for change. This contrast with the participants' perceptions than indicate that the economic activities they perform -even when in precarious labor- have positively influenced their empowerment experiences regardless of how unstable and minimum their income is. Participants emphasize on how meaningful these activities have been for their survival and adaptation to their new circumstances after displacement. However, I argue that this type of labor is disempowering in a way, since they put participants in vulnerable positions where they urge others to use their labor. With this, participants have no financial security they are trapped in a circle where day by day they hope that their work will continue. This is in part the outcome of fragile public policies that fail to adequately integrate female victims into the economic market

Paradoxically, findings indicate that participants' economic empowerment strongly depends on the global market of economics controlled by the elite -in Colombia and powerful western countries-, which is precisely what the rebels were fighting against in the first place. Although findings show that the survival economic activities that the participants implemented may have not brought numerous meaningful changes to their lives'. They have, however, shaped the way in which participants perceive and experience their empowerment processes.

Additionally, Findings do not clearly support that participants regard overburden as a disruption of their lives. Many of them assert that being able to work and care for their children is, in fact, a positive outcome of being “increasingly” economic independent, working from home or in the neighborhood. Authors such as Moser (1993), Kabeer (2016) and Batliwala, (2007) identify that empowerment brings about a second (and third) burden to women's role in society. These are, reproductive work (childbearing), productive work (income earners) and community managing work (collective-social work). Regarding this finding suggests that participants accept the double burden as part of their expected duties as mothers and wives and ultimately estimate that it is beneficial for their families.

## 7.4 Conclusion

From the outset, this thesis operated on the clear intention to examine and understand how the participants perceive empowerment by listening to their stories and life experiences. This also includes an exploration of the life strategies that participants have implemented to rebuild their livelihoods. In doing so, the analysis is supported by empirical data from primary and secondary sources. The analysis focuses on concepts of empowerment, power and post-conflict reconstruction. Generally, participants understand that empowerment is process through which people achieve greater levels of control over their lives, increasing their ability to make choices. Participants perceive that empowerment processes are usually carried out individually, enhancing ones' "power within". But they also assert that empowerment is fostered by social and political participation in the community, which resorts to the "power with" to achieve common goals and to better adapt to their new living conditions.

Participants' perceptions focus on three dimensions: resources, agency and achievements. These relate to the ideas developed by Kabeer (1999) regarding the conditions of empowerment. First, participants believe that access to resources, specifically to paid labor and education, are necessary pre-conditions for the empowerment process to happen. With greater levels of education and training, participants perceive that their opportunities in the labor market would increase, primarily in the formal economic sector. On the other hand, to access paid labor -at least one that provides with a minimum income- increases participants' economic independence, which fosters their conceptions of self-reliance and self-worth. With greater economic independence, participants feel that they are more autonomous and that they can exercise their agency. Sometimes they also perceive that their ability to negotiate power within the household increases. With increased access to resources, participants' ways to manage their agency strengthens, hence favoring their path to achieve their life goals. Certainly, participants' ideas of empowerment focus on meritocracy, where they see themselves as directly responsible for their wellbeing. Their current life circumstances are the product of their hard work and of the enriched empowerment processes they have experienced.

The life strategies that participants implemented to strengthen their livelihoods strongly emphasize on the economic activities they performed after their displacement or victimizations events. All the participants resorted to informal survival activities that initially included domestic help jobs, beggary and petty trade. Although, such economic activities



worked as survival mechanisms, participants identify that these strategies were crucial for them to strengthen their economic independence. These economic strategies intertwine with participants' ideas about access to training, education and paid labor. Participants who could access training programs and formal education saw how their opportunities to access paid labor increased. This includes the creation of small-scale businesses where the female participants joined with others in productive activities manufacturing and trading handicrafts.

The economic strategies that participants implemented not only assisted with their initial survival but also fostered participants' feelings of self-reliance and self-worth allowing them to strengthen their livelihoods and promoting their pathways towards empowerment. However, I argue that participants' economic activities are still highly unstable and uncertain for the future. Participants' financial security in post-conflict Colombia is fragile, which can have serious implications for their livelihoods and may likely disempower them instead.

The last two strategies that participants implemented relate to political and social participations. For participants, their involvement in activities that fostered their relations with others under similar circumstances was pivotal for the reconstruction of their own lives and their communities. These two strategies have allowed participants to create social networks that offer material and emotional support. In some cases, "power with" has benefited common goals shared by several in the new settlements and has fostered participants' knowledge about political participation and implementation within their communities. These strategies have also improved participants' skills to negotiate with local government and with NGOs for the development projects that they consider would benefit their communities. I have shown that political and social strategies are both important for rebuilding livelihoods and to enhance participants' experiences with empowerment.

This thesis' findings are rather easily generalizable and practical to apply to other contexts. These can provide useful knowledge for program developers, government officials and policy makers to understand and consider the factors that are relevant for the empowerment of female victims in post-conflict contexts. The emphasis here were participants' interpretations of empowerment and their lived experiences after being victimized. However, to develop a more holistic understanding of the impact of life strategies on female victims' pathways to empowerment, further research is needed. A detailed extended approach is required in order to understand wider impacts of development programs and reintegration policies on the lives of those who survived the armed conflict.

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