

RESEARCH

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The participation of women in the construction of memory, experiences from Euskadi and Guatemala.

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Author: JONE OTERO MARTINEZ

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Introduction

Mugen Gainetik and Baketik are backing this new publication that aims to contribute to the visibility of women's memory narratives. Women all over the world have promoted ways of meeting, making human rights violations visible and building new paths and bridges. The two focal points of this research are Guatemala and the Basque Country, territories linked to Mugen Gainetik and Baketik, which have served as case studies to understand the way in which women experience armed conflicts of political origin.

Thus, this study is approached from a feminist perspective that places special emphasis on recounting the facts from a deep insight by integrating women's experiences in all their complexity. The readings are often diverse, due to the very different contexts, but it is also evident that, despite differences, listening attentively generates points of convergence and ways of perceiving that are close or even shared.

This work therefore aims to contribute narratives, testimonies and analysis to the shared construction of post-conflict stages. It also aims to stake a claim for the need to continue promoting spaces for listening that recognise the women who, with their thoughts, emotions and actions, have played a leading role in our shared history.

For this purpose, the work has been divided into two parts: firstly, *What We Know*. That is, a reading of the knowledge that other people and entities have generated around this reality. Secondly, *Exploration*, which, as its name suggests, gathers the women's testimonies and interweaves them to generate a conversation through time and space.

Finally, this study forms part of the project *Memory, from a Glocal Feminist Perspective, as a Tool for the Construction of Peaceful Coexistence*. The project is a collaboration between Baketik and Mugen Gainetik and is funded by the Basque Agency for Development Cooperation.



WHAT WE KNOW

The three roles

In order to fulfil the objective of recognising the active role (or rather: roles) of women in conflict contexts and to make visible the specific violence they suffer within them, the theoretical framework of the study includes at least three of the roles that women have played throughout history: victims of sexual violence, peacemakers and combatants. Of course, reality exceeds the range of these possibilities, so it is a conscious decision to present only these three roles in order to narrow down the framework of the study.

Women victims of sexual violence

In armed conflicts and hostile contexts, violence perpetrated against women worsens, making them the main victims. Years of history and armed conflicts and political instability in all parts of the world show the **sexual violence** that men repeatedly inflict on women and girls. Many feminist theorists have spoken of sexual violence as one of the most extreme manifestations of patriarchal control¹; sexual violence as a **weapon of war**² and a tool of power³ that turns women's bodies into a battlefield.

Women who suffer sexual violence in conflict contexts **face great physical and emotional wounds**: forced pregnancies, sexually transmitted diseases, lack of economic resources, destruction of their homes or inability to protect their children, among others. Discrimination and inequality are exacerbated in these situations and violence reserved for them alone increases. Even so, avoiding victimisation, avoiding generalisation and **overcoming the view that women are both sufferers and recipients of violence** is a major challenge⁴.

1 Irantzu Mendia Azkue, page 11

2 GUADALUPE CAVERO MARTÍNEZ (2021). Las mujeres en los conflictos y postconflictos armados: la resolución 1325 de la ONU y su vigencia hoy [Women in armed conflict and post-conflict: UN Resolution 1325 and its relevance today]. (p. 17). Available at: <https://www.inmujeres.gob.es/publicacioneselectronicas/documentacion/documentos/DE1865.pdf>

3 Carolina Jiménez Sánchez. Page 82

4 Carolina Jiménez Sánchez. Page 83

Women peacemakers

Differential socialisation between men and women has meant that men have traditionally been the protagonists of wars and conflicts, while women have been the passive victims in them. While many of the values that women receive in their socialisation are essential because they prioritise life and speak of resistance and peace, this study promotes a view that **men and women have the capacity for both war and peace.**

In any case, women have taken the pacifist initiative countless times and it is enough to look at just a few examples of the groups they have created throughout history: *Women's International League for Peace and Freedom*, *Jerusalem Link*, *Women's National Coalition*, *Northern Ireland Women's Coalition* and so on. And they have done so even when taking a step forward in conflict contexts as peacemakers and breaking the stigma of victimhood has been a great challenge and a **powerful act.**

Women combatants

Very little is known about the women who have fought in wars, and women are rarely recognised for **their ability to commit violence in defence of their ideals.** There are examples throughout history that show how their violent acts are attributed to motivations linked to other issues, such as susceptibility to being manipulated by a man in their “dependent nature”.

Most commonly, **women's armed participation occurs in liberation movements and revolutionary guerilla armies.** There are many examples: El Salvador, Nicaragua, Colombia, Eritrea, Angola, Namibia, Sri Lanka and Kurdistan, among others. Although, in the words of Guadalupe Cavero Martínez, “*not all of them decide freely to fight*”⁵. Moreover, authors such as Irantzu Mendia Azkue⁶ point out that women, in addition to defending their ideals and the interests of the group, often join armed groups as a survival strategy or as an escape route to play other roles and change their destiny.

5 Guadalupe Cavero Martínez. Page 12

6 Page 12

Notes on conflict

There is a widespread belief that in the absence of war, society is at peace. However, **to the extent that feminism defines the patriarchal system and its violence, women live in permanent conflict**. Moreover, peace studies have been spreading the concept of “positive peace” since the 1980s, as opposed to the term “negative peace”, which refers to a situation where, in addition to the absence of direct violence, work is also done to eliminate structural and cultural violence.

The “positive peace” perspective allows for a much more holistic approach to conflict and takes into account the structural violence that exists before, during and after the violent manifestations of a politically motivated conflict. In this sense, the patriarchal system is part of the structural and cultural violence that a positive peace must take into account⁷.

Women of the study

This research project takes two conflicts, the Guatemalan and Basque conflicts, as case studies in order to understand the role of women in them, also taking into account north-south differences. The aim is not so much to delve into the conflicts as to **contribute to the generation of narratives, content and knowledge about the role of women** in these contexts. The aim is to recognise their contributions and experiences in all their complexity and to stake a claim for the importance of their participation. Or, to put it another way:

Objectives

- To identify the **roles** that women have played in conflict contexts.
- To recognise the role of women in the **post-conflict period**.
- To detect the **common elements** and experiential **elements** that women have had in conflict contexts.

To this end, a total of 11 women were interviewed in depth. They were chosen in an attempt to ensure a diverse representation of experiences.

⁷ BAKETIK FUNDAZIOA (2024)



Exploration

Analysis of the in-depth interviews has been carried out with the intention of breaking some silences, but also with the firm intention of respecting the pauses of those who have generously shared their testimony. It is also an analysis that, while it does not capture all voices, tries to bring them forward in a sensitive way.

Salient elements

The following is a brief summary of the most salient elements of the analysis, although it should be noted that, in the task of synthesising them, they lose their richness of nuance and depth.

Crossed pains

Inspired by the term coined by Andrea García González in her book *Calla y Olvida* (2023), crossed pains refers to the fractures in the family nucleus itself and in close social environments in conflict contexts. These are situations in which several people united by very strong ties, such as family or friendship, are damaged by occupying different positions and spaces in conflicts. Crossed pains have been present in both Guatemala and the Basque Country and have had a great impact on women who, due to their traditionally assigned role, have been the ones who have sustained life.

Transgenerational pains

Gloria Almira, an indigenous Guatemalan, says that women are participating first by healing themselves because in Guatemala there is a whole psychosocial and transgenerational trauma. “We, regardless of whether

or not we agreed with that conflict, were beaten and we passed that trauma on to our sons and daughters". The same is true of Maite, a 28-year-old Basque woman, whose uncle was killed by ETA when she was a child. Her family was actively involved in peace processes and she continues to wonder whether some of the decisions she made, such as her choice of studies, were her own or were shaped by the inheritance that has been passed on to her.

The search for an identity of one's own

When women are affected by conflict, more often than not, they have to face the task of raising their families alone. These are times when conflict hits them hard and, although they feel pain and grief, they are obliged to take on the care of others and balance various needs: generating income, providing security, caring, defending their ideals... Among all these obligations, questions arise such as "Who am I without all this?" or "How do I heal and continue?"

An extension of men

The women's testimonies are diverse. There are occasions when the same day can be narrated from very different perspectives. However, even in these cases, there is a connection between the women. In addition to the fear in their deepest selves, some women are linked to men who have been the main protagonists of the conflict. And, being conceived of as an extension of them, they have suffered great consequences (including the violation of the right to life).

Global sexual violence

It does not matter which side of the Atlantic you are on. Nor the type of conflict or war. The reality is that the patriarchal system always holds violence specific to women. Even when the story enters into the logic of "enemies" and "friends", violence still occurs. This is corroborated by the testimonies of the interviewees. Some of them, to this day, provide companionship to women who suffered this violence during the conflict.

The invisible conflict

Women from north and south point out that politically motivated conflicts make the systemic violence suffered by women invisible. One of the interviewees explains it thus: "At that time I had the feeling that there was no violence in the Basque Country other than terrorist violence. I, as a woman, never felt the way I felt, for example, when I lived in Alicante. In Alicante I was afraid to go out alone at night. In the Basque Country [...] I had the feeling that nothing was going to happen to me as a woman. [...] The reality was not that nothing could happen to me or that there was no such violence, but that the other violence eclipsed the rest. It was so pervasive and divided the population so much that the rest was not talked about. [...]. It was all about the conflict."

The figure of the mothers

The figure of the mother appears strongly as the woman who protects her children and her family and also as the self-sacrificing woman who hands over her sons to the struggle. This handing over of sons is based on different casuistries. On the one hand, it may be the mother, in defence of ideals, who appears as a figure willing to live with the loss of a son for the good of the whole group. On the other hand, the handing over of sons is seen as the only alternative to protect them.

For example, during the war in Guatemala, being part of the military system was a matter of obligation. The army set up trucks and searched for young men in towns and villages. There were young men who shunned the army and, of their own free will and for ideological reasons, ended up joining the guerillas. However, as the war progressed, cases of persecution and enforced disappearance increased. Thus, many women, resigned mothers, ended up encouraging their sons to do military service, even if it meant altering their mentality and way of thinking, because they believed it was the way to shield them from disappearances and murders.

Mothers also appear as the sustainers of life when their partners or family members disappear, lose their lives or are imprisoned. They break through many stigmas and assigned roles to cope with these new circumstances in conflict situations.

Awakening in conflict

Persecution or violence lead many women who, until that point, have been in the private sphere without any kind of political participation to become aware and to want to occupy the public space. This is something Guatemalan and Basque women have in common.

Servants

It is complicated to talk about the alteration of women's roles in conflict contexts because it is true that women go out into other spaces and take ownership of some experiences that are only reserved for men. However, it is also true that many of the roles assigned to women are intensified and accentuated in conflict contexts.

This is why, in conflict contexts, women are not spared from their role as servants either. In the Guatemalan war, there were military detachments where men abducted women to clean and cook. In the Basque Country, too, there were women who took on tasks such as preparing meals for men who were actively involved in the conflict.

“It is my decision”

The youngest of the interviewees was the one who had the most doubts about whether or not her concerns, decisions and militancy spaces were influenced by other people and experiences. The rest saw things very clearly: Guatemalan women as well as Basque women, pacifists, politicians, teachers, activists, artists... They argued that their role during the conflict and the decisions they have taken have been theirs alone.

Building the future

Is it possible to speak of a post-conflict stage when the Guatemalan and Basque women interviewed feel that the conflict has not ended? How can we talk about post-conflict stages when the wounds and consequences of violence are still alive? Can women feel that they are in a post-conflict stage when peace never reaches them?

The women interviewed do not see themselves reflected in this history with a capital letter, or in the great peace, which is a mainly male hegemonic conception. They do not belong to a history that suppresses them. And, nevertheless, this does not make them any less important. The fact is that women are already healing wounds and transforming reality, writing new narratives and contributing to peace. But what does this peace look like?

- It is a peace made of small encounters, which makes people look each other in the eye with the generosity of recognition and acceptance of pain.
- It is an introspective peace in the community context because trauma is expressed and other women take it up with warmth and return a gaze that makes them step out of the role of victims.
- It is a peace with memory because it preserves what has happened and brings many voices to the story, including those who have not yet spoken.
- It is a peace that recognises and trusts in previous knowledge and its transfer.
- It is a peace that seeks transformation in everyday life.
- It is a peace that demands a change of system, based on social justice and equality.
- It is a peace that stakes a claim for the role of women, their leadership and feminist politics.

CONCLUSIONS

The stories of Guatemalan and Basque women differ in their rhythms and the words they use to name things. Guatemalan women speak of survivors, not victims. They mention trauma and put a lot of energy into companionship. This is followed by an increased awareness of the diversity of women: rural, indigenous, urban. And there is also a greater presence of the church or the multiple worldviews of indigenous peoples.

With Basque women there are more moments of silence and sentences that are left up in the air, unfinished. There is pain, as with Guatemalan women, but they are less forward in showing it. As if, in reality, one could not or was not allowed to show it. As if the thoughts were first sifted through a sieve.

Some differences are cultural. North and south viewpoints. Others are probably more related to the nature itself of each conflict. Even so, it is easy to see how their stories intertwine. How together they talk about something else that lies behind one's own particular experience. And there we discover them: women survivors, custodians of knowledge, mothers, sustainers of life, providers, entrepreneurs, servants, fighters, captors, politicians, pacifists, multifaceted, complex, with their bodies traversed by the patriarchal system.

Reality does not fit in with pure archetypes. There are no absolute figures, but rather feelings, roles and actions that are articulated and embodied in the same body, in the same woman, who in turn does not cease to communicate with an environment that is hostile to her. And that body, that woman, is at the same time a collective. **It is us women.**

Proposals

With all of this in mind, the following is a summary of the fundamental content of the study in terms of proposals for continuing the work of constructing a just memory with women:

Recognise the plurality of women's experiences in order to appreciate their different narratives, experiences and perspectives.

Gather knowledge and experiences that contribute to generating new ways of looking at and embodying certain experiences. For example, in the case of this study, the fact that Guatemalan women identify themselves as survivors rather than victims shows their capacity to overcome trauma and their commitment to mutual companionship.

Always contextualise the cultural impact and the axes that run through the women we listen to. Understanding differences in narratives as a result of cultural diversity, the various axes of oppression and the nature of specific conflicts leads to a deeper appreciation of the unique challenges faced by women in different contexts.

Avoid homogenisation of women and recognise them in their complexity as human beings, capable of fulfilling diverse roles and functions within society, challenging conventional gender stereotypes.

Make visible the history of women's struggles and achievements in order to challenge subordination structures.

Advocate for and promote a present and future in which there is space for all the stories that women have played out, even when they defy traditional gender expectations, thus promoting an environment of equity and justice for all.

Finally, Gerda Lerner (2017) said that *“Women’s lack of knowledge of our own history of struggle and achievement has been one of the major means of keeping us subordinate.”* And building peace and the future is about recognising all these stories, even when women step outside of what has been designed for them. A future of recognition for all. A healing and fair future.

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