

# **The Strength of ‘Power-With’: Colombian Refugee Women in Ecuador Fighting Hardship Through Unity**



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## ABSTRACT

The present thesis is a case study about *La Red de Mujeres Libres sin Fronteras*, a refugee-led group of Colombian refugee women in Ecuador. The aim is to find out, to what extent and why does membership of the group empower its members and help them overcome their hardship. In order to answer the research question, 18 interviews were carried out with 17 members of the group and a representative of Asylum Access. The gathered data was analysed in the framework of intersectionality, new social movements and empowerment. The interviews show that the biggest obstacle the women face in Ecuador is discrimination that affects the members on a daily basis. As a way of coping, *La Red de Mujeres Libres sin Fronteras* is a response to discrimination. It empowers the women as well as the group as a whole in providing them a platform of meaningful participation. The enhanced sense of belonging provides a safe space where new positive stories and collective narratives are created, enabling the group to challenge the dominant narrative that forms the basis of discrimination. The negative effects of discrimination are countered by increase in self-esteem and self-confidence. Furthermore, the members have increased the power-to as they feel more able to cope with negative situations. It has increased their awareness of their rights and through the objective of visibility, the public awareness of their rights. Through solidarity, the women individually, as well as the group level, have used this space of meaningful participation to become active agents in the implementation of refugee support. Though still in early stages, the group attempts of collaboration with other institutions is promising in terms of sustainability of the group. The group is not focused on political empowerment as discrimination is restricting the access to already existing rules. Despite economic hardship, the group is not aimed at economic empowerment on the level of the individual. Economic empowerment is also limited on the collective level though there is a plan to auto-finance the group through collaboration. The thesis concludes that *La Red de Mujeres Libres sin Fronteras* has significantly empowered its members both the individual and collective level by enhancing the power-within, power-to and power-with and, while it is mostly evident in the socio-cultural domain, there is a possibility of positive spill-over effects to other domains. This, however, needs to be confirmed with further research over time.

Keywords: *refugees, gender, empowerment, social movements, intersectionality, discrimination, Colombia, Ecuador, power*

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT .....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	iii
TABLE OF CONTENTS .....	iv
INTRODUCTION.....	1
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK .....	3
1. Women, Gender and Power .....	3
2. Intersectionality .....	8
2.1. Refugee Women .....	12
2.1. Refugee Identity and the Threat of Stigma .....	14
3. Social movements.....	16
4. Empowerment.....	22
METHODOLOGY .....	27
ANALYSIS .....	34
1. Background Information	
1.1. The Colombian Conflict.....	34
1.1.1. Background of the Conflict .....	34
1.1.2. Civilian Population Bearing the Burden .....	36
1.2. Refugees in Ecuador.....	39
2. Results of the Empirical Research	
2.1. Main obstacles.....	41
2.1.1. Stereotypes and Stigmatization .....	41
2.1.2. Access to Basic Rights .....	45
2.2. Creation of the Group.....	50
2.2.1. What is <i>La Red de Mujeres Libres sin Fronteras</i> ?.....	50
2.2.2. Support from Asylum Access .....	51
2.2.3. Gender-based movement.....	52
2.2.4. Objectives.....	54
2.2.5. Group Dynamics .....	55

2.3. Empowerment process .....	56
2.3.1. Self-Esteem and Confidence .....	56
2.3.2. Sense of Belonging – a Second Family.....	58
2.2.5. An Opportunity to Help Others .....	61
2.2.5. Empowerment in Other Domains.....	64
DISCUSSION .....	68
CONCLUSION .....	71
REFERENCES.....	73
APPENDICES .....	86
Appendix A Lyrics to “Great Wars” (“ <i>Grandes guerras</i> ”) .....	85
Appendix B 3C Model.....	86
Appendix C Interview Questions.....	88
Appendix D Consent Form .....	90

# INTRODUCTION

We left behind my beautiful land  
Without knowing what's to come  
With weeping in my soul  
I leave my promising future behind  
[...]  
And just because I am Colombian  
I don't want you to judge me  
In my land there are bad people  
I won't deny it but the good ones – we are more  
I can show it to you<sup>1</sup>

The above is an excerpt from “Great Wars” (“*Grandes guerras*”), a song narrating the story of suffering and displacement under the armed conflict in Colombia. Despite the recent peace agreement between the Colombian government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), there is unlikely to be an immediate, or even medium-term, end of violence and internal as well as external displacement (NOREF, 2015). Most of those who have had to flee, have crossed the border to Ecuador. In 2016, the number of Colombian refugees in Ecuador exceeded 60 000, accounting for 98% of the total number of refugees in the country (UNHCR, 2016). The number of asylum requests stands considerably higher, at around 233 000 (ANDES, 2016, February 23). As it is implied in the song lyrics, the women continue to find themselves in a vulnerable position in Ecuador as their gender and refugee status intersect with other social categories as they experience generalized racism, discrimination against Colombians and patriarchal mentality.

The song is performed by *La Red de Mujeres Libres sin Fronteras* (Network of Free Women without Boundaries), a group of Colombian refugee women that was created about a year and a half ago with the aim of helping its members overcome the innumerable challenges they face in Ecuador. This refugee women-led group became the focus of our thesis since, in the

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<sup>1</sup> “Great Wars” (“*Grandes guerras*”), written by Pilar Garces, a Colombian refugee woman in Ecuador. Part of the repertoire of *La Red de Mujeres Libres sin Fronteras*. See Appendix A for extended lyrics.

aforementioned context, studying the effects of collective action on individual refugee was considered to be of great interest to us. Therefore, we decided to conduct a study that would provide an answer to the following research question: **To what extent and why does membership of the women's group *La Red de Mujeres Libres sin Fronteras* in Ecuador empower its members and help them overcome their hardship?**

First, the thesis will describe the main relevant theories on intersectionality, social movements and empowerment as well as gender and power concepts that will be used throughout the paper as a theoretical framework for the analysis. Secondly, the methodology will explain the type of method used for the research, the way the data was collected, the type of interviewing method utilized, as well as the challenges and limitations faced during the conduction of the research. Thirdly, the analysis will start out by setting the background context by discussing the Colombian armed conflict as well as Ecuador's role as the host country for refugees. Then, and in order to be able to analyze the group's role in helping its members to overcome hardship, it is important to understand the main challenges they face in Ecuador. This is followed by a chapter on the mobilization and essence of the group and the analysis ends by analyzing different aspects of empowerment to fully answer the research question. Finally, a discussion part will follow where the main findings are presented and explained before concluding the thesis.



# **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

## **1. Women, Gender and Power**

Given that our thesis focuses on a women's group, it becomes necessary to discuss the term "woman". Up to the mid-20th century, this term was viewed in a biological determinist way. Geddes and Thompson (1889) posited that what differentiated the behavioral, social and psychological traits of men and women was their metabolic state. According to them, men are "katabolic" and therefore "more active, energetic, eager, passionate and variable", while women are "anabolic" and thus "more passive, conservative, sluggish and stable" (p. 270). They also conclude that "man thinks more, women feels more" (p. 271), and used this biological reasoning, not only to explain behavioral and social differences between women and men but also to justify how social and political arrangements should take place: "what was decided among the prehistoric Protozoa cannot be annulled by Act of Parliament" (p. 267).

In 1949, French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir (1949) started a debate on biology versus social and cultural constructs by arguing that "one is not born but rather becomes a woman" (p. 13). A few years later, sexologist John Money conducted a study with newborns which revealed that adults identified sex according to their own perception of biological differences, and such identification led to a social response that started the gender socialization of the newborn (Fausto-Sterling, 2012). Therefore, sex and gender started to be viewed as separate categories. Sex is physiologically and anatomically determined since it refers to physical attributes, while gender denotes the set of social constructions connected with the concepts of masculinity and femininity, which are associated with the biological root (sex). According to John Money and Anke Ehrhardt (as cited in Fausto-Sterling, 2000), gender is "a psychological transformation of the self—the internal conviction that one is either male or female (gender identity) and the behavioral expressions of that conviction" (p. 3). Gender therefore shapes individual identity or self-representation since every human being, depending on their sex, is compelled to personally identify themselves with a specific gender and with its socially constructed characteristics and roles. Anne Fausto-Sterling (2012) claims that individual identity begins at an early age and proceeds throughout the years as one gains culturally-specific gender knowledge and starts to make associations between adult behaviors of men and women that are considered culturally "appropriate". She therefore sustains that gendered self-identity is socially imposed by initially having to acknowledge the labels of male and female and then proceed to

self-label accordingly. Rubin (1975) argued that sex turns into gender through the sex/gender system, which is defined by her as a “set of arrangements by which a society transforms biological sexuality into products of human activity and in which these transformed sexual needs are satisfied” (p. 159). Given this, biological differences are fixed and make sexed bodies “coat racks” which “provide the site upon which gender [is] constructed” (Nicholson, 1994, p. 81). Women are therefore oppressed “by having to be women” (Rubin, 1975, p. 204). Or as Tina Chanter (2006, p. 14) claimed: “Nature does not dictate whether a woman should be confined to motherhood, nurture does.” As such, social expectations, ideas, beliefs and prejudices lead to the rise of femininities and masculinities as performed gender identities. This idea led to more modern conceptualizations of gender identity that consider it more as a “doing” than as a “being,” making gender a more fluid concept, one that is continuously being reproduced depending on the specific social setting in which one is located (Butler, 1990; Cohn, 2013). It was precisely this notion of contextualization of gender that revolutionized the study of women, since if gender is contextually and socially dependent, it should then be subject to alterations by political and social reforms, which is the core belief of feminism (Jacoby, 1996).

However, Butler argued that feminism recognizes that “the universal person and the masculine gender are conflated, thereby defining women in terms of their sex and extolling men as the bearers of a body-transcendent universal personhood” (1990, p. 9). Therefore, women are not only defined by their sexed body, but also in relation to men. Beauvoir had already suggested that man is the universal, the norm, while woman is the “Other”, the inessential: “She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute-she is the Other” (Beauvoir, 1949, p. 3). Thus, women are viewed as relative to men, but this relativity also entails a hierarchical component: they are considered as less than or inferior to men (Chanter, 2006). Carol Cohn (2013) also explained that gender does not only differentiate between men and women, but it also makes hierarchical distinctions between as well as within them, valuing some categories more than the others and organizing access to resources, rights, responsibilities, and authority accordingly. This entails that depending on a person’s biological sex, not only are they restricted to a specific gender identity and particular gender roles,<sup>2</sup> but their life options

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<sup>2</sup> According to John Money and Anke Ehrhardt (1972), gender identity is “the sameness, unity, and persistence of one’s individuality as male, female, or ambivalent”, while gender role is “everything that a person says and does to indicate to others or to the self the degree that one is either male, or female,

become more or less constrained based on it as well. Thus, women's oppression is caused and protracted through patriarchal social structures or "the codes of law [that] have been set up against her" (p. 171) as Beauvoir (1949) described them, by which power of men over women is safeguarded.

The concept of power has been central for feminist theory and it has been highly debated across the social sciences (Rowlands, 1997). Max Weber (1978) defined power as "the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance..." (p. 53). This type of power has been generally referred to as "power-over" (Follet, 1924, p. 200) although Rowlands (1997) also named it "zero-sum" (p. 9). Power-over is a negative form of power, one that entails coercion and control over others (Rowlands, 1997; Follet 1924). According to Rowlands (1997), power-over is exercised by dominant political, economic, social or cultural groups over marginalized ones. In this sense, some people will always have power at the expense of others. When applying a gender lens, this form of power is predominantly exercised by men over other men, as well as by men over women. Thus, when power is considered as power-over, if women gain power it will inevitably be at the expense of men, leading to the view of women's empowerment as inherently threatening for men.

To counter this line of thinking, Follet (1924) suggested that instead of coercion, power should involve co-action and the result of this would be a form of power which she coined as "power-with" (p. 200). This concept of power implies identifying common ground and building bridges among diverse interests, developing collective strength. Suzanne Williams (1994) described it as involving "a sense of the whole being greater than the sum of the individuals, especially when a group tackles problems together" (p. 233). Power is then viewed as a process (Rowlands, 1997), or as "as energy and competence rather than dominance" (Hartsock, 1983, p. 224). The conceptualization of power as capacity was key for feminist theory and many feminists have since then called for a reconceptualization of power as a capacity to change things, giving rise to a new form of power, the power-to.

Power-to is a productive and enabling power, the power to make a difference (Rowlands, 1997; Williams, 1994). Thomas Hobbes' (1651) definition of power as a person's "present means to

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or ambivalent." As such, "gender identity is the private experience of gender role; and gender role is the public manifestation of gender identity" (p. 4)

obtain some future apparent good” (p. 53) also seems to be in line with the concept of power-to. As such, this form of power constitutes the essence of individual empowerment and, when based on joint support, it gives way to joint action or “power-with”.

Finally, Williams (1994) and Rowlands (1997) identify a fourth form of power, coined as “power-within”, which Williams defines as “the spiritual strength and uniqueness that resides in each of us and makes us truly human” (p. 233). It is therefore related to a person’s sense of self-knowledge, self-acceptance and self-respect in order to be able to accept and respect others as equals. It is a form of power that entails complementarity as opposed to “power-over” which implies duality, it does not condemn difference but rather identifies and acknowledges aspects of the others in one’s self (Williams, 1994).

Foucault’s (1980) conceptualization of power differed from the others by viewing oppression of women as being discursively constructed, and therefore power as relational, not as possessed but rather as exercised: “if we speak of the structures or the mechanisms of power, it is only insofar as we suppose that certain persons exercise power over others” (p. 786). Although he uses the term “power over”, he clarified that “by that I am not thinking of a zero-sum game but simply (...) of an ensemble of actions which induce others and follow from one another.” (p. 786). He then argues that power does not exist in a specific form since it only exists “when it is put into action” (1982, p. 788) and sustains that discourse<sup>3</sup> is one of the main drivers of power (Foucault, 1990). Discourse rules the way a topic is reasoned about and defines the way ideas are put into practice, ideas which are utilized to control people’s conduct. It constructs a topic, defining and producing the objects of knowledge (Hall, 1997).

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<sup>3</sup> Stuart Hall describes a discourse as “a group of statements which provide a language for talking about – i.e., a way of representing – a particular kind of knowledge about a topic (...) discourse is about the production of knowledge through language” (Hall 1992, pg. 291). Therefore discourse was not used as a linguistic concept, but rather as a “system of representation”. (Hall, 1997, pg. 72). It is not about what it *is* but what it *does*, its function of constructing meaning and transmitting it, which is in turn interpreted differently depending on culture and historical context: “representation connects meaning to language and culture” (Hall, 1997, p. 15). A system of representation is therefore “different ways of organizing, clustering, arranging, and classifying concepts, and of establishing complex relations between them.” (Hall, 1997, p. 17).

Foucault also viewed the concepts of power and knowledge as inextricably related, not so much as Francis Bacon's "knowledge is power" (Bacon as cited by Moore, 2010, pg. 125), but rather as power and knowledge directly implying one another (Foucault, 1979). Therefore, "there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations." (Foucault, 1979, p. 27). As such, knowledge of something creates power, but also being in a position that allows the exertion of power enables the gathering of knowledge.

Additionally, Foucault sustains that "power is everywhere" and "comes from everywhere" (1998, p. 63). This view of power as exerted, as decentralized and as productive rather than as possessed, as top down exercised, and as repressive (Sawicki, 1988, p. 164) made the focus of feminists shift from power and its subjects to the concept of power relations. Additionally, Foucault's idea that "one is always 'inside' power, there is no 'escaping' it" (p. 94) led to feminists to deeper explore and analyze the complex ways in which self-understandings, behaviors, experiences, and capacities of women are constructed in, as well as by, the power relations which they are aiming to transform (Armstrong, 2005).

Foucault posited that, if we wish to analyze power, we must not talk of one power but of multiple powers and try to localize them in their geographic and historic specificity (Foucault, 2007). He believes that the heterogeneous power relations taking place at the micro-level of society can be the cause of certain global outcomes of domination, such as class power or patriarchy. Based on his model, resistance must be done in local struggles opposing the various forms of power exercised in everyday power relations (Sawicki, 1986). Therefore, Foucauldian-influenced feminism aims at discovering the situated gender power relations occurring at the micro-political level, to be able to determine real opportunities for resistance and social change by women (Armstrong, 2005). Indeed, Foucault (1978) sustained that "where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power" (pp. 95-96). Here again we find the idea of power being everywhere and everything always being inside power. Additionally, he states that "discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it" (Foucault 1990, p. 101). Discourse can thus be a site of both power and resistance.

The work of Michel Foucault has been profoundly influential amongst feminist scholars (King, 2004) for several reasons. First, they both give importance to forms of power that go beyond the political domain, namely the countless power relations that take place at the micro-level of society (Sawicki, fall 1986). They both also believe that discourse plays a crucial role in producing and sustaining hegemonic power, while marginalized discourses contain forms of resistance within them (Chung, 2011). Additionally, Foucault sustained that the body is a site of power and that sexuality is a cultural construct, significantly contributing to the feminist critique of essentialism (Armstrong, 2005). Furthermore, they both aim at dismantling unrecognized but existing forms of domination (Chung, 2001). Finally, feminists have also taken up Foucault's ideas of power/knowledge, putting special emphasis on the criteria used for claims to knowledge to be legitimated, so as to develop a theory that does not take the experiences of Western, middle-class, heterosexual, white women as the norm (Armstrong, 2005).

## **2. Intersectionality**

According to Judith Butler (1999), women should not be considered a unitary gender category, a group that shares equal features or experiences, since that does not allow to capture “the multiplicity of cultural, social, and political intersections in which the concrete array of ‘women’ are constructed” (p. 19–20). Agreeing with this like of thinking, Cohn (2013) posits that power inequalities do not only take place between men and women, but also within them. This leads to the notion of intersectionality, which sustains that different intersections of diverse social categories, such as race, class, nationality, religion, and ethnicity among others, with gender, create manifold masculinities and femininities which have power disparities associated within each intersection. Cohn argues that the hegemonic<sup>4</sup> masculinity is the dominant form of masculinity in any given social and cultural setting, and that its specific characteristics allow this form to have greater power over all femininities as well as over subordinate masculinities. Nevertheless, neither hegemonic nor subordinate masculinities constitute homogeneous gender categories, since they are also defined by other power structures in society (namely class, race,

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<sup>4</sup> The concept of “hegemony” was popularized by Gramsci who defined it as the “‘spontaneous’ consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group”. He also added that “this consent is ‘historically’ caused by the prestige (and consequent confidence) which the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production” (Crenshaw, 1995, p. 90). Therefore, hegemony started to be viewed as rooted in history and as culturally constructed.

nationality, ethnicity, religion, amongst others). Cohn finds it relevant that these subordinate masculinities, irrespective of their multiple intersections, tend to be portrayed using stereotypical essentialist female traits (weaker, less courageous, more emotional, etc.) (Cohn, 2013).

The term “intersectionality” was first introduced by scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 to challenge feminist as well as antiracist theory and politics that failed to “accurately reflect the interaction of race and gender” (1989, p. 140). She argues that the fundamental aspect of intersectionality is that it recognizes that multiple oppressions do not occur and are not suffered separately “because the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism” (1989, p. 140). Therefore, oppressing social categories do not each produce a different separate discriminatory experience, it’s should not be “a competitive either/or thinking” (Hooks, 2000, p.29) but rather a compatibility thinking where diverse identities coexist and their intersections create new greater experiences. Instead of focusing on the addition of different social categorizations, an intersectionality approach analyzes them as a mutual, intertwined process of transformation (Lykke, 2010), together constituting a "matrix of domination" (Collins, 2000, p. 18). This term introduced by Patricia Hills Collins refers to the way in which different social categories produce interlocking systems of oppression for women.

Nevertheless, although the term was coined by Crenshaw, black feminists scholars had been arguing that identity is formed by interlocking social categories for decades (Nash, 2008). In the seminal text “All the Women are White, All the Men are Black but Some of us are Brave: Black Women’s Studies” published in 1982, Hull et al. had already claimed that analyses should include intersections of gender, race, and class and called for the reposition of black women within feminist studies. Additionally, black feminists such as Hooks and Collins have recurrently considered race as a fundamental social category of feminist analysis, indicating that gender is not “the sole determinant of woman’s fate” (Hooks, 2000, p. 15). Moreover, countless feminists such as Butler and Mohanty have argued against the notion of a universal ‘woman’, since the experience of ‘woman’ is not one but differs depending on all other intersecting identities (Butler, 1999; Mohanty, 1984). All of these claims were included in Barbara Smith’s words in 1981: "What I really feel is radical is trying to make coalitions with people who are different from you. I feel it is radical to be dealing with race and sex and class and sexual identity all at one time. I think that is really radical because it has never been done

before" (Smith as cited by Collins, 2000, pp. 232-233). Therefore, the term intersectionality served to provide a name that designated pre-existing ideas.

This framework was also intended to respond to the critiques of identity politics. Crenshaw (1991) argued that the weakness of identity politics was that it overlooked intragroup differences and "ignoring the difference within groups contributes to tension among groups" (p. 1242). As such, feminist efforts and antiracist efforts were carried out as if the experiences that each aimed to politicize were mutually exclusive. Sexism and racism were therefore considered as "either/or"<sup>5</sup>, not taking into account that both identities may intersect in a person, as is the case of black women (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1242). Identity politics thus relegated the identity of black women to a location that it ignored. Intersectionality would then serve to include that location in identity politics by considering intersectional identities since there is a "need to account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed" (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1245).

Therefore, an intersectionality approach also aims at resisting the dehumanization of marginalized groups or the "objectified others" (Collins, 1986). Similarly to the concept of "the other" to designate woman in relation to man, those who differ from the assumed norm (white men), such as black women, are negatively "othered" and dehumanized. According to Collins, dehumanization is inherent to systems of domination and Brittan and Maynard sustained that "domination always involves the objectification of the dominated; all forms of oppression imply the devaluation of the subjectivity of the oppressed" (Brittan & Maynard as cited by Collins, 1986, p. S18). Regarding this individual subjectivity, Collins points out that self-definition and self-esteem are essential to resist the oppressive social forms of domination and to reject internalized oppression: "if Black women refuse to accept their assigned status as the quintessential "other", then the entire rationale for such domination is challenged" (Collins, 1986, S18). This relates to Gramsci's idea that without consent there is no hegemony.

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<sup>5</sup> Crenshaw, Collins and Hooks all point to the concept of "either/or thinking" as a cause of oppression as well as a way to perpetuate the marginalization of individuals due to certain intersecting social categories. Hooks described this concept as "the central ideological component of all systems of domination in Western society (Hooks, 2000, p. 31) and Collins refers to it as "the construct of dichotomous oppositional difference", which is characterized by its focus on differences and these differences imply hierarchical relationships of domination and subordination (Collins, 1986, p. S20).



The focus of such an approach was initially on gender and race, although class, sexuality, physical ability and age were soon included in the analyses (Crenshaw, 1991; 1995; Meyer 2002). Nevertheless, it has eventually become “the most valid approach to analyze social stratification as a whole” (Yuval-Davis, 2011, p. 4) and the social categories to be analyzed when conducting an intersectional analysis depend on the situated empirical reality at the time (Yuval-Davis, 2011).

Leslie McCall emphasizes the importance of intersectionality, calling it “the most important theoretical contribution that women’s studies, in conjunction with related fields, has made so far” (McCall, 2005, p. 1771). However, despite its generalized acceptance and plausibility, this approach has been widely criticized for its unclear methodology due to its complexity, and vagueness (Choo & Ferree, 2010; McCall, 2005). As a response, a number of scholars have developed different methodologies to carry out an intersectional analysis.

In “The Complexity of Intersectionality” (2005), McCall describes three different intersectional methodologies, each differing on how they understand and utilize social categorizations. The first approach is the “anticategorical complexity” since it deconstructs analytical categories based on the idea that categories are too simplistic and fail to capture the complexity of the experiences of different individuals. McCall further states that it is not a matter of how to categorize social groups but rather whether these should be categorized at all, since the process of categorizing may result in exclusion. In order to illustrate this idea, McCall uses the example of the social category “gender”, and describes that, since there are not two genders as was thought before, but countless ones, the singularity and separateness of this category are challenged. Nevertheless, McCall points out that it is not possible to fully avoid the normalizing boundaries of language due to the fact that new relations of power/knowledge constantly arise in new classification systems. The second approach is called the “intracategorical complexity” which consists of using finer intersections of categories in order to better capture the complexities of the lived experiences of individuals. This approach maintains the critical viewpoint on categorization but acknowledges that social categories represent durable relationships at any given point in time. Therefore, it uses the experiences of multiply marginalized individuals as a way to demonstrate the shortcomings of categories. The third approach consists of the “intercategorical complexity”, which “begins with the observation that there are relationships of inequality among already constituted social groups, as imperfect and ever changing as they are, and takes those relationships as the center of the analysis” (McCall,

2005, pp. 1784–1785). This approach utilizes existing social categories provisionally in order to evidence the relationships of inequality between social groups. McCall states that this approach considers the possibility that broad social categorizations could reflect more or less accurately the realities of narrower social groupings, hence reducing the complexity of the analysis.

### *2.1 Refugee Women*

In the case of refugee women, their refugee status becomes an essential categorization that must be included in an intersectional analysis.

A refugee is commonly known as a person who has been forced to flee his/her country due to armed conflict, human rights abuses, famine or natural disasters. However, over 140 countries are state parties to the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and the 1967 Protocol, which states that a refugee is: “a person (...) who owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.” (UNHCR, 2010, p.14). According to such definition, there must be a legitimate fear of being persecuted on the basis of the specified reasons in order to be granted refugee status.

Before being recognized as a refugee, “someone who leaves their own country, often for political reasons or because of war, and who travels to another country hoping that the government will protect them and allow them to live there” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2016) is called an asylum seeker.

The 1951 Convention has been widely criticized for its gender-blindness, since it does not include gender as a reason for persecution (Crawley, 2000). As a consequence, reasons related to female genital mutilation, human trafficking, prostitution, domestic violence, rape, honor crimes, forced marriage, forced abortion or sterilization, which are suffered exclusively by women, are neglected. This leads to the rejection of asylum applications that are based on these types of situations, and such a rejection can actually cost them their lives (Patrick, 2004).

Furthermore, during armed conflict, the majority of the refugee population are women and their dependent children, who not only have generally been exposed to extreme physical violence (Pittaway & Bartolomei, 2001), but they also endure alarming levels of sexual and gender based violence at all stages of their journeys (Amnesty, 2016).

The experiences of women at armed conflicts differ because women is not a monolithic group, but a vastly diverse group whose experiences, options and identities are shaped by the intersections of different social categories such as race, class, nationality, age, citizenship, national identity, religion, sexuality, physical ability, etc. These factors and the sense women make of them shape their relations to armed conflict. However, the main social factor that shapes individual resources, experiences and identities, since it is, in essence, a structural power relation, is gender. As seen, gender is a way of ordering and symbolizing power, where masculinity is valued higher than femininity, and where hegemonic masculinity is more valued than subordinate masculinities and all femininities. However, gender does not stand on its own as a factor that structures power in society, since it is the intersections of gender with other social categories that generate numerous masculinities and femininities, and associated power differentials (Cohn, 2013).

Gender is thus a symbolic system, where traits, characteristics and beliefs are attributed to each category in order to justify power differentials among them. In such a system, the nation is symbolized as a woman that the male soldier must protect and the physical woman is attributed the role of the national, racial, cultural, ethnic or religious identity, which implies that their bodies must be protected by men in order to assure the reproduction of their nation. This woman-as-nation symbolic gender coding has been responsible for the massive use of rape in wars as an instrument of genocide and also to justify and legitimate war (Yuval-Davis, 1997).

Women bear the direct impact of the symbolic system associated to gender, not only when they are caught in armed conflict, but also when they manage to flee. Refugees in general are routinely demonized as “illegal immigrants” and face widespread xenophobia and racism (Pittaway & Bartolomei, 2001, Bowes *et al.*, 2009). They are “othered”, and thus considered of lesser value than the dominant nationality and culture, due to a generalized “perception that a priori regards a foreigner as an adversary, a rival, a competitor, or an adventurer who is a threat to prosperity, culture and identity.” (Theodor van Boven as quoted by Pittaway & Bartolomei, 2001). Women are “othered” twice, for their refugee situation and for their “subordinate”

gender and makes them key targets for rape and sexual abuse. Moreover, refugee women who suffer these types of crimes keep their trauma secret out of fear that they could be labeled prostitutes and their refugee status or visas could be refused due to moral reasons. Additionally, women also generally suffer post-traumatic symptoms which include depression, anger, anxiety, loss of sleep, loss of self-esteem, fear of going out and feeling dirty, among others (Pittaway & Bartolomei, 2001).

As a result of the “othering” of refugee women, they are commonly considered second-class citizens in their host countries and face discrimination in terms of employment opportunity, wages, and working conditions. They also continue to be targets of physical and sexual abuse. Illegal jobs are frequently their only viable option, but they are nonetheless denied access to labor laws. In such situations, they become “outsiders-within” a term that Collins (2000) describes as members of an oppressed group who are allowed entrance to specific work environments enabling them to have firsthand knowledge of the structures of oppression, but are denied access to procedures that could change the nature of such exploitive relationships. Furthermore, when race also plays a crucial role in the intersectional experience of a refugee woman, such oppression is exacerbated. Black refugee women are thus further “othered” and face magnified discrimination, and even more so if other social categories considered “subordinate” also intersect in their identity (Crawley, 2000b): “racism and sexism intersect in particularly nasty ways to produce profound marginalization” (Razack as quoted by Crawley, 2000b). As a consequence, and given the existence of universal racist myths concerning black sexuality, the likelihood of not being considered credible in their asylum applications is aggravated (Crawley, 2000b).

## *2.2 Refugee Identity and the Threat of Stigma*

Having been forced to move from their countries of origin, refugees lose a sense of belonging and need to reconstruct their identities in a foreign society, while having to face that identities, opinions and perspectives are also imposed on them by society because of their refugee status (Crawley, 2000b; Burnett, 2013). Sometimes, refugees are stereotyped as helpless, docile and grateful persons, while others they are viewed as cheaters, thieves and criminals. Neither stereotypical image is valid to typify the complexities of the human personalities within the social category of refugee (Harrell-Bond, 1997). It is frequently the case that the refugee label carries social stigma with it, which is based on negative and misinformed points of view, often

bolstered and perpetuated by the media, the politicians and the citizens, that depict refugees with xenophobic characterizations (Burnett, 2013).

According to Goffman (1963), the term stigma refers to “an attribute that is deeply discrediting” and “constitutes a special discrepancy between virtual and actual social identity” (p. 3). Crocker *et al.* (1998) suggest that “stigmatized individuals possess (or are believed to possess) some attribute, or characteristic, that conveys a social identity that is devalued in a particular social context” (p. 505). Additionally, Link and Phelan (2001) define stigma as “when elements of labeling, stereotyping, separation, status loss, and discrimination co-occur in a power situation that allows the components of stigma to unfold” (p.367). By these definitions, it becomes clear that members of a stigmatized social group are discriminated against by the general public, leading to marginalization and status loss. When an individual bears a stigmatized attribute, they are “reduced in our minds from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one” (Goffman, 1963, p. 3). They thus become the “lesser other”, and on this assumption numerous forms of discrimination are exercised which effectively reduce their life chances. A specific ideology is also constructed in order to demonstrate their inferiority and the danger they represent. This results in their marginalization from society and the consequent feeling of being “a discredited person facing an unaccepting world” (Goffman, 1963, p. 19). Shame becomes a frequent feeling, and could eventually lead to self-hate or self-derogation (Goffman, 1963).

Goffman (1963) distinguishes between three types of stigmatization: abominations of the body (physical deformities or disabilities), blemishes of individual character (addiction, mental illness, imprisonment, homosexuality, etc.) and tribal identities (gender, race, religion or nationality). Refugees thus endure tribal identity stigmatization, although some may face other types of stigmatization as well, since individuals may be members of more than one stigmatized group simultaneously (LeBel, 2008). In order to cope with the different types of stigmatization, Major and O'Brien propose three coping strategies. The first one is attributing the rejection experienced to discrimination rather than to themselves, so that they do not feel guilty about their situation and feelings of self-hate and self-derogation are avoided. The second coping strategy consists of disengaging their efforts and self-esteem from domains where they are negatively stereotyped or where they will endure high levels of discrimination, rather than trying to strive or engage in these domains. This strategy protects one's self-esteem, but it could happen at the expense of the possibility of success in those domains. The third main way suggested of coping with stigma is by identifying themselves more closely with their

stigmatized group rather than distancing themselves from it. This strategy helps because “groups can provide emotional, informational, and instrumental support, social validation for one’s perceptions, social consensus for one’s attributions, and a sense of belonging. Group identification is positively correlated with self-esteem among stigmatized groups.” (Major and O’Brien, 2005, p. 405). Therefore, group identification is a way of offsetting the negative effects of stigmatization on personal self-esteem.

### **3. Social Movements**

The study of social movements grew considerably during the last decades of the twentieth century. However, the discussion of the concept of ‘social movement’ was absent from the analyses due to the heterogeneity of the different approaches that did not allow any synthesis to be made (Diani, 1992). These approaches gave rise to different trends or schools within social movement analysis, the main ones being: the ‘collective behavior’ perspective, the ‘Resource Mobilization Theory’ (RMT), the ‘Political process’ approach and the ‘New Social Movements’ (NMS) theory (Diani, 1992).

The collective behavior perspective belongs to the so-called ‘traditional theories’ which began with LeBon’s Contagion Theory explained in his book ‘The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind’ published in 1895. The contagion theory states that whenever individuals become part of a crowd, their personality and behavior are transformed. The anonymity, the thought of individual unaccountability and the feeling of invincibility that the crowd provides result in the emergence of an “unconscious personality” driven by primitive instincts which he named “the collective mind” (McPhail, 1991, pp. 3-4; see also Locher, 2002 and Buechler, 2011).

In 1921, Robert Park and Ernest Burgess further refined the contagion theory and claimed that collective behavior is “the behavior of individuals under the influence of an impulse that is common and collective, an impulse, in other words, that is the result of social interaction (Park and Burgess as quoted by Buechler, 2011, p. 62). LeBon’s ideas on irrationality and lack of consciousness as inherent in collective action are thus perpetuated, although they distinguish between crowd and public: “when the public ceases to be critical it dissolves or is transformed into a crowd” (Park and Burgess as quoted by McPhail, 1991, p. 7). Crowds are homogeneous and uncritical, there is neither discussion nor reflection and only the collective impulse governs.

In the public, however, there are discussions with a variety of ideas that moderate one another and critical thinking allows different issues to be raised and parties to be formed (McPhail, 1991).

Eighteen years later, Herbert Blumer further developed LeBon, Park and Burgess' ideas. Blumer agrees with LeBon's Contagion Theory and names this random and erratic behavior an "elementary collective behavior" (Buechler, 2011, p. 63), adding that such behavior arises as a result of social unrest. Blumer also distinguishes between the crowd and the public, and introduces a third type of collective behavior, the mass, in which members are heterogeneous, less organized than the crowd and with less interactions than in the public (Buechler, 2011). Additionally, Blumer (as cited in Shepard, 2010) distinguishes four types of crowds. The first one is the acting crowd, which emerges as a response to some focal event, shares a purpose and sees judgment and critical thinking blurred by the rapport and often aggressiveness of the group. The second type is the expressive crowd, which uniquely looks to unleash emotions, without any plan of action or external goal. The casual crowd is the third type suggested by Blumer and it is a temporary, poorly organized group that simply shares a momentary point of interest. Finally, the conventional crowd is one that follows a specific purpose and has established procedures and guidelines for appropriate behavior (Shepard, 2010).

Blumer (1995) also treats the concept of social movements. He defines social movements as "collective enterprises to establish a new order of life" (p. 60) which start as poorly organized elementary collective behavior as a response to a 'cultural drift'<sup>6</sup> or social unrest. Once these general social movements acquire customs, leadership, structure and a focus to achieving a particular objective, they become specific social movements, which, according to Blumer, are a more stable and solid form of social organization (Buechler, 2011).

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<sup>6</sup> The term 'cultural drift' was coined by Blumer and has been subsequently widely used by scholars. By a cultural drift, Blumer refers to "gradual but pervasive changes in people's values and self-conceptions" (Buechler, 2011, p. 65). These usually differ from the social reality at the moment or are in tension with the established polity (Ramet, 1995). Once these new ideas are developed, social movements are organized in order to get them operative in society. Blumer believes that cultural drifts lead to general movements, from which specific movements then emerge (Buechler, 2011). Examples of general movements that derived from cultural drifts may be the women's movement, the labor movement, the youth movement or the peace movement (Blumer, 1995).

The work of Ralph Turner and Lewis Killian in 1957 marked a turning point in the collective behavior theory. They introduced the “Emergent Norm Perspective”, which challenged the “mass hysteria” idea that had long predominated in collective behavior analyses. The emergent norm approach suggests that “the impact of groups on individuals resembles ‘normative constraint’ rather than contagious mental unity” (Miller, 2014, p. 31). As such, in collective action it occurs that existing norms are not valid to guide social action in a particular ambiguous situation and members of the crowd collectively overturn the usual institutional practices and create new norms for such a situation (Arthur, 2013; Locher, 2002). Once all members learn which norms and behaviors are appropriate, they engage in them, making it a normatively guided collective behavior rather than a hysterical or irrational one (Locher, 2002; Miller, 2014). Moreover, Turner and Killian argue that the behavior of a crowd is not homogeneous, since different motives for participation are found which lead to a “differential expression” (the existence of diverse feelings and behaviors) among the members (Miller, 2014, p. 31).

Turner and Killian also challenge the contagion theory by claiming that even in crowds with high levels of excitement individuals maintain the awareness of personal identity and critical thinking, and their behavior is rational insofar as it derives from their personal motives for participation (Miller, 2014). In relation to this, they developed a classification schema of crowd participants based on their individual motives for taking part in a particular collective behavior episode. According to such classification, individuals may be ego-involved, concerned, insecure, curious or ego-detached (exploiters) (Locher, 2002). Therefore, people have individual reasons and tendencies to participate in collective behavior.

As for social movements, Turner and Killian define them as “a collectivity acting with some continuity to promote or resist a change in the society or organization of which it is part.” (Turner and Killian as quoted by Diani, 1992, p. 4). By viewing them as collectivities, social movements are thus considered to have shifting and temporary membership and a leadership that is determined by informal decisions of the members rather than by formal procedures that would legitimize authority (Diani, 1992).

During the 1970s a new approach to social movements began to attract the attention of scholars who searched to deeper understand the emergence, magnitude and effects of the different social movements that had taken place in the 1960s (Edwards & Gillham, 2013). The Resource Mobilization Theory (RMT) was first set forth in 1967 when Meyer Zald and Roberta Ash



published a seminal theoretical paper that focused on how social movements obtain resources, gain members and retain member commitment, which are considered as key elements for its success or failure (Miller, 2014; Locher, 2002). RMT differs from the collective behavior perspective in that organizational factors are paid greater attention when analyzing social movements. It defines social movements as “a set of opinions and beliefs in a population which represents preferences for changing some elements of the social structure and/or reward distribution of a society” (McCarthy & Zald, 1977, pp. 1217-1218). In this regard, a social movement is regarded as no more than an observable and shared change of view of a group of people about their society (Miler, 2014). However, McCarthy and Zald also introduce the concept of a social movement organization (SMO) which they describe as “a complex, or formal, organization which identifies its goals with the preferences of a social movement or a countermovement and attempts to implement those goals” (1977, p. 1218). An SMO is thus the formal organization by which the goals of a social movement are pursued. RMT draws attention to the conditions that are needed to constitute a social movement organization (SMO), to the dynamics of interorganizational cooperation and competition, and to the tactics that authorities use to control or integrate movements (McCarthy & Zald, 1977). This theory also argues that the differences and similarities among diverse SMOs are found in their organizational components (structure, goals and tactics) and not in their values, ideologies and beliefs.

In 1978, Charles Tilly claimed that it was the interaction between organization, interests and opportunity that explained a social movement’s degree of mobilization and collective action (Locher, 2002). He relates the rise of social movements to a wider distinctive political process by which those interests that are marginalized try to access and change the established polity (Diani, 1992). In 1982, Douglas McAdam crystallized Tilly’s ideas in a new theory on social movements called The Political Process Theory (PPT). This approach, unlike the RMT, considers that ideologies and beliefs are equally important to material resources and to political connections for social movement success. As such, a social movement will only succeed if the social, political, and historical environment are favorable and if all available means to attain its goal are utilized (Locher, 2002). Although resource mobilization is accepted as a key factor, emphasis is nevertheless put on the overall dynamics that produce social unrest and its particular features, as opposed to RMT’s focus on the organizational aspects of social movements (Diani, 1992).

In the 1980s a new theory appeared in Europe that viewed the social movements that had emerged from the 1960s onward as “new” versus the “old” movements related to industrial class conflicts. New social movements are based on “newly emergent collective identities” (Wickham-Crawley & Eckstein, 2015, p. 39) and engage on issues such as women’s rights, gender relations, race, ethnicity and migration, environmentalism, human rights, animal rights, pacifism, etc. (Buechler, 2013). The New Social Movement (NSM) theory emerged mainly to respond to the inadequacy of classical Marxism, given its economic and class reductionism, to analyze new forms of collective action. In this sense Buechler (1995) describes the concept of ‘new social movements’ as “a diverse array of collective actions that have presumably displaced the old social movement of proletarian revolution associated with classical Marxism” (p. 442).

Unlike in the working-class movement, where the social adversary was clearly identifiable with the ruling actors, in new social movements the actor faces difficulty in designating its adversary since they are implicated in conflicts where the adversary becomes impersonal, undefined, or distant (Wieviorka, 2005). Actors in the new social movements are highly culturally aware and challenge cultural orientations of their societies. Their causes are thus more culturally than socially driven. Unlike in the working-class movement where the subject was social and collective, in new social movements there is a high interest in the subjectivity of the actors. Additionally, the relationship to politics greatly differs among the different new social movements. While some declare that everything should be considered political, such as the women’s movements, others wish to completely distance themselves from politics (Wieviorka, 2005). This challenges previous theories such as the PPT.

Scholars supportive of this theory began to focus on reasons of action related to politics, culture, ideology and identity as the root cause of the emergence of new social movements. The most notorious advocate is Alain Touraine who argues that social movements are classes that enter into the struggle of control over ‘historicity’ (Buechler, 1995). The term ‘historicity’, according to Touraine, refers to the “overall system of meaning which sets dominant rules in a given society”. (Touraine as quoted by Diani, 1992, p. 5). New social movements mobilize due to collective identity-building and aim to create new meaning and new social relationships, change the public discourse and foster collective claims-making in extra-institutional ways (Wickham-Crawley & Eckstein, 2015). Therefore, the main field of conflict for new social movements is culture, and the goal pursued is the control of society's capacity to create the conditions of self-management (Buechler, 1995).

Having analyzed all the main theories of social movements, the collective behavior approach, the RMT, the PPT and the NSM, Mario Diani (1992) attempts to provide a definition that synthesizes the main contributions of each of them: “a social movement is a network of informal interactions between a plurality of individuals, groups and/or organizations, engaged in a political or cultural conflict, on the basis of a shared collective identity” (p. 13). Therefore, there are three main aspects that must be met in order to be considered a social movement and which will be applied in the research: it must be a network of informal interactions, there must be shared solidarity and beliefs and the collective action must be directed towards the attainment of political or cultural goals. Given the focus on culture and identity and the struggle for historicity, apart from Diani’s definition, NSM theory will be mostly used throughout the research.

Additionally, Solava Ibrahim (2017) has proposed a 3C model<sup>7</sup> to explain how grassroots movements can enhance collective capabilities. As individual capabilities of members of marginalized groups are limited, they take part in acts of collective agency that leads to new collective capabilities that help to achieve more than they are able to achieve individually. The model is aimed at enhancing the understanding of dynamics for initiating and supporting collective agency. According to Ibrahim (2017), it takes changed behaviour on an individual level, collective agency on the collective level, and institutional reforms on the individual level in order to make grassroots movements sustainable and successful. The 3C model contains on three processes: conscientization, conciliation, and collaboration.

1) Conscientization – brings on positive behavioural changes on the individual level through enhancing the power-within. The individual is the "building block and the starting point" (p. 205) of social change. The process entails an increased awareness of one's socio-cultural reality and an increased awareness of one's own capability to change their reality. Thus, it is a critical reflection of one's life and an active pursuit for solutions.

2) Conciliation – supports collective agency on the collective level through addressing the power-with. The process entails creating a "communal vision" (p. 208) through social

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<sup>7</sup> See Appendix B

interactions and inclusive decision-making. New social relations, social networks, and communal responsibility need to be promoted.

3) Collaboration – enhances change at the institutional level through addressing the power-to. This process is important of the sustainability of the movement. It entails collaboration with other actors such as NGOs, donor agencies and the state.

These processes work together to bring about social change. The 3C model is based on ideas on social innovation, the capability approach, participation and empowerment and has been developed to assist those who seek to “empower marginalized groups and tackle structural inequalities” (Ibrahim, 2017, p. 198).

## **4. Empowerment**

In order to understand empowerment, the concepts of power and powerlessness must be examined first (Lord & Hutchison, 1993). The notion of power and its various forms, power-over, power-to, power with and power-within, have already been discussed in a previous section, as well as Michel Foucault’s conceptualization of power. In relation to powerlessness, if power is conceived as power-over, it can lead to the “paranoid fallacy” which believes that powerlessness is always a result of domination of the powerful (Sindic, 2015, p. 143). However, there are multiple sources of powerlessness, which greatly differ from the idea of domination by a powerful force. In this regard, Sindic (2015) gives the example of a powerless group as a result of a lack of consensus among its members, rather than because of the prevention of power by another group (p. 143). Notwithstanding the above, when power is used as power-over, it generates conditions of oppression by the ‘powerful’ dominant group and grievances for social justice by those being marginalized, oppressed or exploited (Sjöberg *et al.*, 2014).

At a personal level, powerlessness can be viewed as “the expectation of the person that his/her own actions will be ineffective in influencing the outcome of life events” (Lord & Hutchison, 1993). Lerner (1986) believes that there are two kinds of powerlessness, the real and the surplus. Real powerlessness emerges as a result of the concentration of wealth by the few who control economic and political decisions and thus exert power over the many. Lerner argues that this

real powerlessness is internalized by the oppressed leading to a feeling and a belief of being even more powerless than they really are, creating a forceful obstruction to empowering action. Due to surplus powerlessness, “we are simply accepting as ‘common sense’ the way the world actually is, including both our isolation and our belief that the world is simply made up of a conglomerate of isolated beings like ourselves” (Lerner, 1986, p. 392). It is therefore an internalized conviction that change cannot take place, a way of thinking that results in low self-esteem, isolation, apathy and in an unwillingness to seek change. According to Lerner, this feeling is not likely to be overcome by oneself since “alone there is very little that can be accomplished by ‘any one person.’” (Lerner, 1986, p. 392). However, if one could rise above the selfishness, isolation and realism which are characteristic of our current society and if one could trust one another and rely upon each other, then they would become part of the potential “we” that can have the strength to transform things. Being part of a movement is thus crucial to defeat surplus powerlessness and feel empowered, but for that to occur, it is necessary that the movement creates ways of confronting surplus powerlessness by doing the following: educating on surplus powerlessness, its origin and effects; having as the movement aim to seek change that ensures greater compassion both within the movement and in society in general; focusing on providing support to the group’s members in order to eliminate self-blaming, anger, conformism, apathy and to learn mutual support (Lerner, 1986).

Empowerment has been greatly viewed by scholars as related to personal control over one’s life as well as to democratic participation in one’s community. Rappaport (1981) claims that “by empowerment I mean that our aim should be to enhance the possibilities for people to control their own lives” (p. 15) and some years later adds that “empowerment conveys both a psychological sense of personal control or influence and a concern with actual social influence, political power, and legal rights.” (1987, p. 121). Similarly, Gutierrez et al. (1995, p. 229) stated that “empowerment is the process of increasing personal, interpersonal or political power so that individuals, families, and communities can take action to improve their situations”. However, by the latter, one can observe a shift from individual to collective empowerment as well as a view of empowerment as a process.

The work of Paulo Freire (1971) greatly influenced the theoretical approach to collective empowerment. In ‘Pedagogy of the Oppressed’, Freire focused on conscientizing about Lerner’s posterior concept of surplus powerlessness through claims such as “the oppressed, who have adapted to the structure of domination in which they are immersed, and have become

resigned to it” (p. 47) and on encouraging social mobilization of the oppressed groups in order to struggle for justice and freedom. Numerous scholars have since then argued that social movements enable empowerment, not only for the group but for individual members as well (Benford & Hunt, 1995; McAdam, 1982; Piven & Cloward, 1977).

A widely used definition of empowerment is that of the Cornell Empowerment Group: “Empowerment is an intentional, ongoing process centered in the local community, involving mutual respect, critical reflection, caring and group participation, through which people lacking an equal share of valued resources gain greater access to and control over those resources” (as cited by Zimmerman, 2000, p. 43). In such definition not only a direct link between empowerment and group participation is observed, as well as the understanding of empowerment as a process, but also Rappaport (1995) emphasizes the concept of ‘resources’. Rappaport conceives these resources as “the ability to tell one's story, and to have access to and influence over collective stories” (1995, p. 802). By the term ‘story’, Rappaport refers to the sequence of lived events that are unique to an individual. When the story is not idiosyncratic to an individual, Rappaport calls it a ‘narrative’, and when the narrative is common amid a group of people, he calls it a ‘community narrative’ (1995, p. 803). Community narratives often struggle to influence or contradict the ‘dominant cultural narratives’, those that are communicated through social institutions and mass media, and are known by most members of a given society. These types of narratives are often the source of stereotyping and stigmatizing marginalized personal and community narratives (Rappaport, 1995). Individuals with negatively perceived identities, such as the types that Goffman identified, find it difficult to create new positively viewed personal stories on their own. In these cases, the support of a shared community narrative becomes crucial in order to encourage and sustain one’s personal story. A collective context, namely mutual help groups, where a new community narrative is created, where social and emotional support is provided and where different personal stories and new ways of thinking about oneself are exchanged, provides the framework for empowerment (Rappaport, 1995).

If narratives are viewed as resources, then analyzing who controls these resources, who awards social value to some narratives and not others becomes necessary to understand empowerment versus disenfranchisement. Rappaport claims that, like most resources, the power to tell stories is unevenly distributed and the stories of the marginalized or “othered” are ignored. Storytelling within a group allows its members to strengthen new community narratives that confront

dominant narratives, thereby empowering the community that would otherwise remain disempowered (Williams et al., 2003). At an individual level, such community narratives are crucial for individuals to sustain their own personal stories and discover strengths and new self-perceptions that had otherwise remained undisclosed due to the powerful negative constructions of the dominant narratives (Williams et al., 2003).

Building on Rappaport's ideas, Williams et al. (2003) assert that culture and identity are important aspects of empowerment and argue that storytelling is a powerful tool to increase a group's efficacy and member empowerment. Sharing stories with an emphasis on one's identity and culture strengthens the members' perception of who they were, provides them with a greater sense of belonging, and builds personal and group power which then allows the group to challenge dominant narratives. According to Williams et al. "newly found subject positions that are more enabling of agency and building community are conducive to the exercise of individual and group power that can challenge institutional power and dominant social discourses and structures" (2003, p. 39).

Williams et al. (2003) arrived to such conclusion by carrying out a participatory action research project that lasted three years, utilizing the storytelling methodology and identifying outcome elements that have been widely considered by scholars as necessary to determine that empowerment has taken place within a group of individuals:

"The process of the storytelling incorporated elements of both personal and group empowerment. Its purpose was to:

- Strengthen our connection to our identities, cultures and values;
- Build self esteem and confidence through sharing our stories;
- Build some common narratives from our experiences;
- Build a sense of group and belonging; and
- Draw out issues for advocacy and speaking out." (p. 37)

By recognizing these elements in the members' evaluation comments of the storytelling methodology, Williams et al. (2003) concluded that the approach had empowered both the group as a whole and each of its members in particular.

Therefore, it could be concluded that empowerment is linked to collective action, that it occurs both at individual as well as at group level and that it is a process that leads to particular outcomes related to identities and values, self-esteem and confidence, collective narratives, sense of belonging and the ability to effectively tell those narratives (or control the narrative resources) challenging the dominant cultural narratives.



# METHODOLOGY

The following chapter discusses the methodology used to conduct our research as well as the challenges and limitations encountered during the application of such methodology.

## *Case study as a research method*

The present paper constitutes a case study of a refugee women's group in Ecuador. This research method was chosen due to the desire of gaining an in-depth understanding of the specific empowering effects that this particular group in Ecuador has on its female refugee members. Kathleen M. Eisenhardt (1989) defines a case study as "a research strategy which focuses on understanding the dynamics present within single settings" (p. 534). Similarly, Robert Yin (1984) claims that "the case study method allows investigators to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events- such as (...) small group behaviour" (p. 4). As such, in order to deeply understand the characteristics and dynamics that take place in the single setting of a specific refugee women's group in Ecuador, the case study research method presented itself as the most suitable one.

Moreover, Yin (1984) posits that case study is the most appropriate research method when it comes to "how" or "why" research questions. Given that our research question is: "To what extent and why does membership of the women's group 'Red de Mujeres Libres sin Fronteras' in Ecuador empower its members and help them overcome their hardship?", it became even more evident that this research method should be used in order to carry out our study.

Apart from the case study method, other possible research methods were history and experiment. Histories are preferred when researching events that occurred in the past, and with no relevant persons who can narrate what happened or give direct testimonies (Yin, 1984). Not only does the case study examine contemporary events, but it employs two sources of evidence that are not used in the history method: interviews of persons involved in the events studied and direct observation of the events themselves. In regards to experiments, these are utilized as a research method when the investigator can manipulate behavior, which is not the case of the

case study method, nor that of our research since we as investigators cannot manipulate the behavior of the participants of our study (Yin, 1984). Although Yin (1984) acknowledges that different research methods are not mutually exclusive, he argues that there are situations in which a particular method presents a distinctive advantage over the others. In this sense, the situation in which the case study method arises as the sole most suitable method is when there is a “how” or “why” research question, when the events studied are contemporary and when the investigator has little or no control over the participants’ behavior. As explained, our study meets all three conditions, which led us to choose the case study as our research method.

### *Data Collection*

“Case studies typically combine data collection methods such as archives, interviews, questionnaires, and observations. The evidence may be qualitative (e.g., words), quantitative (e.g. numbers) or both” (Eisenhardt, 1989, pp. 534-535). As such, the data collected for the research derives from the review of relevant literature on issues of gender, empowerment, social movements, the Colombian conflict, the situation of Colombian refugees in Ecuador and the phenomenon of stigmatization, as well as from documents analysis and in-depth interviews of the group members.

The review and analysis of existing texts and documents as a part of the research is a distinctive component of the qualitative method (Vromen, 2010). Quantitative methods aim attention at measuring causal effects, whereas qualitative methods focus on “what”, “how” and “why” questions and therefore intend to gain understanding and explain a particular outcome or the occurrence of a specific phenomenon. As opposed to quantitative research, qualitative analysis rarely looks for generalizability over many cases, but rather aims at delving deeper into the problem (Vromen, 2010). Social constructivism plays a central role in qualitative research, since they are both linked by a mutual respect for the complicatedness and intricacies of the human experience, the relevance of context and the existence of an absolute “truth” (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015). Although the existence of reality is not nullified, the meaning of reality is claimed to be socially constructed (Burningham & Cooper, 2005) and hence dependent on the subjective and personal experience of everyday life; on how the world is personally understood by each individual as opposed to pertaining to an objective and absolute reality (Hammersley, 1992).

Given that this research aims to deeply understand the dynamics of a social movement and the different realities of its members, and to what extent and why it empowers them, qualitative methods were deemed as being the most pertinent to approach it. Additionally, social constructivism will be of use, connected to the qualitative methods. Onwuegbuzie and Leech (2005) describe this research paradigm as one that believes in “multiple constructed realities that generate different meanings for different individuals, and whose interpretations depend on the researcher’s lens” (p. 270). Therefore, our epistemological premise is that there is not one single “truth” that can be accurately measured by using scientific principles, but rather that each individual views the world differently, which makes personal social constructions, lived experiences and particular contexts as necessarily having to be taken into consideration, something that can hardly be captured through quantitative research.

Based on the constructivist view and taking a step further, empirical phenomenology argues that “a scientific explanation must be grounded in the meaning structure of those studied” (Aspers, 2009, p. 1). This means that the subjective experiences of the studied individuals as well as their interpretations of the world are key to the research. Its main objective is “to explicate the meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experiences of a person, or a group of people, around a specific phenomenon (Simon, & Goes, 2011). In order to explain the meaning, one must understand it first, and “understanding of something demands connecting it to something that is already known” (Aspers, 2009, p. 2). When taking an empirical phenomenology approach, this linkage occurs when the first-order constructs (the participants’ experiences, perceptions and constructions) lead to the researcher’s connection to or development of second-order constructs (theories).

In our research, we aim to understand the subjective experiences of a group of people, in this case a women’s group, around the specific phenomenon of empowerment, and linking them to already known theories in order to be able to explain why and to what extent this phenomenon occurs.

As part of the qualitative method, both primary and secondary written sources have been used to carry out the research. Primary written sources regard original documents created by different political actors which could go from governments to NGOs or movements. Secondary sources refer to documents which comprise an analysis (Vromen, 2010), such as scholarly journal articles or books. Nevertheless, the most frequent means of data collection in an empirical

phenomenological research is through in-depth interviews of the participants (Simon & Goes, 2011) and these will constitute our main sources of information for the research, which will be connected to written ones in order to obtain an answer to the research question.

We have thus chosen an inductive research approach to carry out this study. According to Trochim (2006), the inductive approach looks to analyze a phenomenon by starting from specific observations and ending up developing broader generalizations and theories. He also states that “qualitative research is exploratory and inductive in nature” (2006, p. 162). It is therefore descriptive and aims to “discover and understand a phenomenon, a process, or the perspectives and worldviews of the people involved” (Cooper & Endacott, 2007, p. 817). Additionally, according to Thomas (2006) “The purposes for using an inductive approach are to (1) to condense extensive and varied raw text data into a brief, summary format; (2) to establish clear links between the research objectives and the summary findings derived from the raw data and (3) to develop of model or theory about the underlying structure of experiences or processes which are evident in the raw data.” Such purposes are in line with those of this study, making the inductive approach the most suitable one to employ.

### Conducting interviews

Our main source of data came from the interviews with all the participants of the group *Red the Mujeres Libres sin Fronteras*. We decided to use the unstructured interviewing method since it “provides a greater breadth than the other types, given its qualitative nature” (Fontana & Frey, 1994, p. 365). Structured interviewing aims at acquiring exact facts of a codable nature so as to explain behaviour as per pre-established categories. However, unstructured interviews attempt to gain understanding of the complex behaviour of individuals without enforcing pre-established categorizations that might limit the area of inquiry. Interviewers that utilize this method are not rational and cold when conducting the interview, but rather empathic and looking to establish rapport with the respondents. Nevertheless, although the tone of the interviewer must be friendly and somewhat informal, he/she should not engage in ‘real’ conversation where questions are made by the respondents and where personal opinions are discussed. The researcher starts by asking general questions to ‘break the ice’ and then proceeds to more specific ones, while at the same time trying to ask questions that aim to check the veracity of the information given by the respondent (Fontana & Frey, 1994).

Following this method, and taking into account that they were essentially unstructured, our interviews broadly followed the following format<sup>8</sup>:

1. Introduction of the study: we explained to them what the research consisted of and why their participation through an interview contributed to its accomplishment. The consent form<sup>9</sup> was given to them at this point, in Spanish, and signed after having carefully read it.
2. General questions: questions about age, nationality, duration of stay in Ecuador, family composition, etc. were asked following their consent to participate in the interview.
3. Specific questions: after the general inquiries, questions that aimed at understanding their particular lived experiences and perceptions were asked. Although there were a set of specific questions that were asked equally to all participants, depending on the answers additional different ones were made in each case in order to deeper understand their viewpoints and also to check the consistency and honesty of their answers.
4. Closure: we informed that the interview was over and expressed our gratitude for the time taken and for their will to participate in the study.

By using this method and sequence in the interviews, our aim was to deeply understand their lived experiences, their personal perceptions and opinions as well as their feelings around the phenomenon of empowerment through membership participation of the women's group "Red de Mujeres Libres sin Fronteras", which could lead us to then explain the phenomenon with the previous inclusion of a linkage with literature and theories on the topic. All interviews were carried out in Spanish and recorded, following their consent to do so as long as only the researchers would listen and have access to such recordings.

Altogether, 17 interviews were carried out with the members of *La Red de Mujeres Libres sin Fronteras*. In addition, one of the employees of Asylum Access was interviewed in order to include their recount of the creation and dynamics of the group and analyze the role that development actors can play in the success of such refugee-led groups. The average age of the women is 35 years. All of them are mothers who have an average of three children per person, from one child to eleven children. Five of them are single mothers and none of them have a formal job though most are occupied in the informal sector, mostly selling handicraft,

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<sup>8</sup> See Appendix C for examples of questions

<sup>9</sup> See Appendix D

alimentation, and coconut juice. Their education varies from fifth grade to higher education. Most of the group members, eleven of them Afro-Colombians, come from areas such as Chocó, Valle del Cauca and Nariño where UNHCR (2017) reported increase in displacement figures and continuation of violence in March, 2017. The newest member of the group had been in Ecuador for 15 days at the moment of the interview while the most time spent in Ecuador was 11 years. The average time they have been living in Ecuador is two years. While the majority is waiting to be resettled to Canada or the United States, some are still waiting for an answer to their request for asylum while others have only recently applied.

### *Limitations*

While conducting the research, we encountered various challenges and limitations. First, the interviews and interactions were carried out in Spanish, which is not the native language of one of us, and could possibly lead to misunderstandings or difficulty in capturing the exact meaning. Nevertheless, even for the other researcher who is Spanish, there are also cultural and language differences which had to be dealt with. As Aspens (2009) claims “understanding is more likely to occur if ego and alter attach the same meaning to words, if they both know the subject matter well, are engaged in the same activities, share the same habits of communication, and so on” (p. 4). Therefore, not sharing the exact same language and culture as the participants limited to some extent the accuracy our understanding of their testimonies.

Additionally, due to logistical reasons, several interviews were conducted in the participant’s homes, which, on one side made them feel at ease and more likely to express themselves freely and truthfully, but on the other side, led to distractions, interruptions and sometimes the spontaneous opinion of a relative or a friend that was overhearing the interview. Nevertheless, although these posed obstacles in the smoothness and continuity of the interviews, they never caused a complete interruption and all interviews managed to be fully carried out.

Another limitation is the fact that in a qualitative analysis in which reality is understood to be socially constructed and where subjective experiences and interpretations play a major role, “the researcher’s understanding of an essence is always “on-the way”, partial, and particular to the experiences from which the interpretations were formed” (p. 189). Therefore, the researchers’ assumptions and prejudices cannot be rejected or suspended, they must try to be minimized and focus on objectivity and impartiality, but it is important to acknowledge that

such type of research always entails a certain degree of subjectivity from the researchers, especially when having to make close rapport with the respondent during the interviews. We have thus tried from the beginning to take an unprejudiced stance and maintain it throughout the analysis, but we have found ourselves more often than not empathizing with the participants and seeing that our personal ethical principles and opinions managed to partially obstruct such impartiality.

# ANALYSIS

## 1. Background Information

### 1. 1. The Colombian Conflict

#### *1.1.1. Background of the Conflict*

The Colombian armed conflict began in the 1960s, when the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia*, FARC) and the National Liberation Army (*Ejército de Liberación Nacional*, ELN) appeared during a period of political violence known as *La Violencia* (The Violence). After being excluded from the agreement that intended to stop the fighting, they started an armed insurrection against the Colombian state authorities (Council of Foreign Relations, 2017). Since then, the fight against the government has continued for over 50 years, with FARC as Colombia's biggest illegal armed group (InSight Crime, 2017a).

In order to fund its struggle, FARC has used methods of “kidnapping, extortion and participating in the drug trade on various levels” (InSight Crime, 2017a, para. 3). Although FARC ideally believed that it could preserve a central apparatus of command through its Secretariat, the group is broken up into over 70 fronts (except for the special units that go where they are required to and carry out special operations), making this vision unviable in Colombia given its geography and size. Thus, the fronts have the capacity of exercising significant autonomy which “can make them lethal criminal organizations” (para. 16) and gives them the incentive to “thieve, kidnap, extort and plunder, since their growth depends, in part, on their financial return” (InSight Crime, 2014, p. 6). FARC operates in all of Colombia, it has “a vast support network of logistical experts in bombing, transportation, kidnapping, arms trafficking, food storage, etc.” (InSight Crime, 2014, p. 6) and it also manages its own “militia groups in the cities” (InSight Crime, 2014, p.6).



Besides FARC, one of the principal *guerrilla* groups in Colombia is the National Liberation Army (ELN) (InSight Crime, 2017b). Initially formed in 1964 by a group of intellectuals inspired by the Marxist ideology and the Cuban revolution (BBC, 2013, May 27), the group currently focuses on kidnapping, extorting foreign and local companies, and attacking economic infrastructure, particularly electricity pylons and oil pipelines. Throughout the years, “[...] the ELN's modus operandi has evolved and increasingly autonomous factions have acted in more criminal than ideological terms,” (InSight Crime, 2017b, para. 8) and the group has actively participated in drug trafficking by making alliances with large drug trafficking organizations.

During the 1980s, right-wing paramilitary groups arose out of landowners who organized to fight the *guerrilla* groups. The largest group was the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC) who finally demobilized in 2006. Nevertheless, instead of protecting civilians from the crimes of the *guerrilla*, most AUC members focused on drug trafficking activities or on protecting land holdings belonging to large landholders, and such alliances “gave paramilitary groups access to weapons, cars and communications equipment, but [...] distorted their original purpose” (InSight Crime, 2011, para. 4). The AUC turned into a greatly strong force within the Colombian conflict; it had around 30,000 soldiers which operated in two-thirds of the country (InSight Crime, 2011). The AUC has been responsible for countless assassinations and massacres of Colombian civilians (El Tiempo, 2010).

After its demobilization in 2006, newly created successor groups took over the criminal operations that had been previously carried out by the AUC, usually even using the same command structure (HRW, 2010). These new illegal groups focused on purely criminal purposes, such as kidnapping, extortion, drug-trafficking and other crimes (Congressional Research Service, 2012). Various human rights organizations have stated that the *Águilas Negras* is one of the strongest new paramilitary groups replacing the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (*Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia*, AUC) after the demobilization (Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, 2011). Furthermore, Human Rights Watch (HRW) identified the *Paisas*, the *Urabeños* and the *Rastrojos* as other existing large successor groups (HRW, 2010).

### 1.1.2. Civilian Population Bearing the Burden

A weak state and ongoing fights on multiple fronts mean that the civilian population has been caught in the crossfire of these warring sides, being the victims of the aforementioned criminal activities and sometimes being targeted on purpose (BBC, 2013, May 27). With more than 220 000 people dead during the five decades of the conflict (BBC, 2016a, June 21), the conflict has had an impact on a significant and diverse part of the civilian population, from poor farmers who are displaced from their land and have no means of income to rich people who have fallen victims to kidnappings (Amnesty International, 2008).

However, the effect of the conflict on some groups and communities has been disproportionate. “These are not victims caught in the crossfire, or *collateral damage*, but individuals and groups who have been deliberately targeted because of who they are, what they do or where they live” (Amnesty International, 2008, p. 45).

Gender-based violence and gender stereotyping are not phenomena that have surged with the start of the conflict but are a constant throughout the country’s history. However, both have been exacerbated by the conflict. Women and girls are targeted by all sides of the conflict in order to instill fear, impose control, to take revenge or to sexually exploit. Sexual violence has been “a defining part of the conflict” (Amnesty International, 2008, p. 45), with rape used for torture or to dishonor the enemy and paramilitary groups killing sex workers, dubbing them socially undesirable while armed groups also kidnap and rape women and girls, forcing them into prostitution. Both, civilian and *guerrilla* women are affected but the reluctance to denounce the abuses, be it due to shame or fear, or the fact that it is still often seen as “a private matter and as a normal fact of life” (p.45) means that these issues receive less attention than other human rights abuses. Displacement and the loss of “livelihoods and support networks” (p. 46) that often accompanies it, puts women in an increased risk of experiencing sexual violence, or resorting to prostitution. They often face obstacles in accessing services and suffer from stigmatization as suspected *guerrilla* supporters.

Afro-descendant communities are also among the groups to disproportionately suffer from the conflict. They suffer from discrimination and are more likely to be displaced. This is especially true for areas of the Pacific coast, such as the city of Buenaventura where levels of violence inflicted on the population by FARC militias, paramilitaries, and criminal groups linked to drugs’ trade has increased after the supposed demobilization (Amnesty International, 2008).

Afro-Colombian women and girls are in a particularly vulnerable situation as they suffer difficult socio-economic conditions and an increased risk of violence and sexual exploitation (UNOCHA, 2016).

### *1.1.3. Peace Agreement: A Quick Fix?*

The peace talks with FARC started in 2012. This was the fourth time in thirty years that peace talks between the government and the rebel group have taken place. Despite the bilateral ceasefire and a peace treaty between president Santos and FARC leader Londoño widely supported by the international community, the Colombian population rejected the peace agreement during a public referendum (Reuters, 2016). Though the ceasefire and peace treaty had decreased armed action and massacres, the outcome of the referendum created political uncertainty about the implementation of the treaty and the possible actions of both sides (UNOCHA, 2016). On November 13, 2016, the government and the FARC reached a new agreement which incorporated proposals made by the opposition and other groups (BBC, 2016a, June 21). However, fundamental differences of opinion regarding key points of the agreement obstructed possible compromises and a renegotiation of the treaty (InSight Crime, 2016, October 3). In spite of the objections, Colombia's congress ratified the new agreement on November 30 (BBC, 2016b, October 3).

Despite the peace agreement that suggests an eventual demobilization of FARC, experts have suggested that in the short and medium term, the violence and displacement is unlikely to stop (NOREF, 2015). The ELN and newly surged groups expand their presence over territories that had been previously controlled by the FARC, in particular in key regions for illegal economies (InSight Crime, 2016g; International Crisis Group, 2012; Fundación Paz y Reconciliación, 2015; WOLA, 2017). In March 2017, UNHCR reported that despite the peace agreement, displacement figures in certain areas such as the Pacific Coast Region are increasing as the violence inflicted by the battle for territorial control among irregular armed groups continues (UNHCR, 2017). After a United Nations official was abducted in south-eastern Colombia in May this year, Amnesty International (2017, May 8) raised awareness of the urgent need for protection for thousands of people in the country where limited State presence in rural areas as well as illicit activities and limited socio-economic perspectives have fuelled the conflict (UNOCHA, 2016).

Therefore, despite the peace agreement being a valuable opportunity for peace-building in Colombia (Amnesty International, 2017, May 8), the killings, forced recruitment, gender-based violence and limited access to basic services, such as education and water, continue, particularly affecting the Afro-Colombian community (UNHCR, 2017). As these communities that have historically carried the biggest burden of the conflict continue to suffer from increased levels of human rights violations, the whole peace process could be undermined (Amnesty International, 2017, May 8).

Moreover, while peace talks with FARC have received a lot of attention in relation to the Colombian armed conflict, it is important to note that the second peace talks with ELN, the second biggest armed group in Colombia, began in February 2017. These talks are crucial in order to avoid their increased influence and recruitment of previous FARC members. However, due to difference in structure, ELN entities have more autonomy which can prolong the talks and increase the probability of diverging factions (UNOCHA, 2016). According to a poll organized by the Colombian newspaper El Tiempo (2017, June 29), 66% of the people are pessimistic about the talks.

## 1.2. Refugees in Ecuador

To some extent, the conflict has expanded to the Ecuadorian territory (UNHCR, 2011). Lenin Moreno who assumed the role of the president of Ecuador earlier this year has declared that peace is good for everyone and has expressed his full support to the formal peace dialogue with ELN that Ecuador has been hosting since February (El Universo, 2017, May 8). For the moment, the outcomes of the peace agreement with FARC and the ongoing peace dialogue with ELN are unlikely to be notable in the short-term and the flow of refugees to Ecuador continues. Last year, an average of 500 new refugees arrived each month (UNHCR, 2016, June 7). Consequently, Ecuador currently hosts Latin America's largest refugee population (UNHCR, 2010) with 98% of the more than 60 000 refugees originating from Colombia (UNHCR, 2016). Only a part of Colombian refugees are registered as such and in 2011, UNCHR (2011b) estimated that the actual numbers of Colombian refugees needing international protection is between 130 000 and 200 000 (UNHCR, 2011b).

Ecuador has ratified the 1951 Refugee Convention, the 1967 Protocol, and the 1984 Cartagena Declaration (KNOMAD, 2016) and is known for its open refugee policy which is in accordance with the commitment to international human rights (UNHCR, 2012). The Constitution of Ecuador which was ratified in 2008, has a human rights based approach which includes concepts such as human mobility and universal citizenship<sup>10</sup> (UNHCR, 2010). Article 40 recognizes people's right to migration and states that no one shall be considered illegal in Ecuador because of their migratory status. Article 11 states that all people are equal and have the same rights, duties and opportunities. Thus, no one can be discriminated for reasons such as ethnicity, birth place, sex, gender identity, cultural identity, language, relationship status, or migratory status. According to the Constitution, all forms of discrimination will be sanctioned by the law (Constitution of Ecuador, 2008).

Nevertheless, in 2012, in an attempt to suppress the number of refugees, Ecuador retracted to a more strict policy with Refugee Decree No.1182 that despite being in accordance with the 1951 Refugee Convention, imposed restrictions on asylum claims and the criteria for being

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<sup>10</sup> See the Constitution at <https://goo.gl/A5S8FD>

recognized as a refugee (KNOMAD, 2016). Before part of the Decree was contested in 2014 the Constitutional Court, it led to rejection of one third of the claims causing an increase in the number of people without documentation (KNOMAD, 2016; UNHCR, 2012). The Decree was afterwards modified, extending the registration period and reinstating the refugee definition from the 1984 Cartagena Declaration. In addition, both recognized refugees and asylum seekers have a right to freedom of movement and a right to work (KNOMAD, 2016).

Despite Ecuador's significant legislative efforts to accept and provide protection to refugees, there are several informal barriers for Colombian refugees in exercising those rights. Many of those who are in need of protection, do not apply for asylum due to lack of knowledge of their rights or fear of approaching State authorities (UNHCR, 2011b). In the private sector, there is little awareness of refugees' employment rights. Despite facilitated access to labor opportunities through freedom of movement which does not place refugees in camps but makes them live within the local community, refugees face discrimination based on their nationality and migratory status (KNOMAD, 2016). Thus, even though many do integrate well, many others face serious challenges stemming from the lack of safety mechanisms and lack of access to basic rights such as housing, education and employment (UNHCR, 2011).

The peace agreement seems to have further damaged these perspectives of integration as there is an increased pressure from the society for the refugees to return to Colombia (BBC, 2016b, October 3). In 2012, UNHCR organized a public campaign called *In Their Shoes (En Sus Zapatos<sup>11</sup>)* to raise awareness about Colombian refugees as the media has focused more on Colombia's 6<sup>th</sup> place in the list of the happiest countries in the world than on the 1<sup>st</sup> place among countries with highest numbers of displaced people. While state authorities have claimed that no one will be forced to return, representatives of UNHCR have claimed that the Ecuadorian public needs to be informed about the progressive essence of the peace process and that people granted asylum have the right to stay in Ecuador (BBC, 2016b, October 3).

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<sup>11</sup> See more at <http://www.ensuszapatos.org/>

## **2. Results of the Empirical Research**

### **2.1. MAIN OBSTACLES**

The main struggle the members face on a daily basis is discrimination and the restricted access to basic rights that results from it. The aim of the first chapter is to analyze the discrimination group members face as (afro)-Colombian refugee women in Ecuador. The understanding of the members' perception of the origins of the discrimination and the effect the discrimination has on them is essential to analyze the reasons for the creation and the dynamics of the group as well as the objectives it carries. The first part of the chapter presents the members' experiences with stereotypes and social stigma and the second part discusses the relationship between discrimination and access to basic rights.

#### **2.1.1. Stereotypes and Stigmatization**

Out of the main types of stigmatization identified by Goffman (1963), the stigmatization experienced by the members of *La Red de Mujeres Libres sin Fronteras* is mostly based on tribal identities such as gender, race and nationality. Studies carried out in the Colombian refugee population show that nationality is identified as the main motive for discrimination (58%), followed by race among Afro-Colombians (57%), refugee status (18%), and gender<sup>12</sup> (10%) (FLACSO-ACNUR, 2011). As several theorists (Crenshaw, 1989; Lykke, 2010) have pointed out, it is important to keep in mind that multiple oppressions are not to be seen as separate because they form a whole new discriminatory experience. Thus, ultimately a more holistic idea about how discrimination based on different tribal identities coexists and intersects is needed in order to understand the experience of the group members.

In the media, discriminatory attitudes towards Colombians by both, media and the authorities are not rare (UNIFEM, 2005). For the group members, their Colombian nationality, made

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<sup>12</sup> No separate numbers for women

evident through their accent, has become the basis of stigmatization. Marcela<sup>13</sup> shares how people have attacked her in public transport: “They say we are Colombians who come to this country to kills, that we are thieves, prostitutes...<sup>14</sup>” They are frequently told to go back to their country and are often made to stand up to provide the seats for others. One interviewee recounts how she was pushed and told that Colombians had come to Ecuador to steal.

There are gender-specific stereotypes about Colombians: “They think that all Colombian women are prostitutes and all the men are thieves. For one, we all pay. And they catalogue us all the same while we aren’t the same at all!<sup>15</sup>” Based on this widespread depiction of Colombians, the group members receive derogatory comments in public spaces. “They think that we, [Colombian] women, are prostitutes. For example, when I go to the street in shorts, they tell me horrible words, I am automatically a prostitute. Once I did it and they asked me how much I would charge for a while.<sup>16</sup>”

Studying stereotypical representations of black women in Ecuador, Rahier (2011) found that a black or dark-skinned woman is usually thought to be promiscuous, uneducated, and of “easy sexual access to men” (p.63). Marcela admits that she has been discriminated a lot due to her skin color. She recounts: “Around one month ago, with my husband in *El Recreo*...He was taking photos and two policemen came. [...] He [one of the policemen] said it was not allowed and made him delete the photos. Then he turned at me and told me: “Do you know that prostitution is illegal in this country?” and I told him: “Excuse me? In case you don’t know, before saying anything you have to ask, first of all, he is my husband, we have two children and we will have been together for 10 years, I am not a prostitute.” The man didn’t know what to respond.<sup>17</sup>”

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<sup>13</sup> Names have been changed to protect the identity of the group members

<sup>14</sup> “*Dicen que somos colombianos que venimos a matar a este país, que somos ladrones, prostitutas...*”

<sup>15</sup> “*Piensan que todas las mujeres colombianas son prostitutas y todos los hombres ladrones. Por uno pagamos todos. Y nos catalogan a todos iguales cuando no somos iguales para nada.*”

<sup>16</sup> “*Piensan que las mujeres somos todas prostitutas, por ejemplo si yo salgo a la calle con un short me dicen palabras horrosas, ya soy automáticamente prostituta, una vez lo hice y me dijeron que cuanto cobrara por un rato.*”

<sup>17</sup> “*Hace un mes mas o menos con mi esposo en El Recreo el estaba tomando fotos y vinieron dos policías. El dijo que no estaba permitido y le hizo borrar las fotos. Luego se giró a mi y me dijo “usted sabe que la prostitución es ilegal en este país?” Y yo le dije “perdón? Por si usted no lo sabe, antes de decir cualquier frase usted tiene que preguntar, primero el es mi esposo, tenemos 2 hijos y vamos a hacer 10 años juntos., yo no soy prostituta” El señor no sabía qué responder.*”



Being discriminated due to skin color is one of the main forms of direct discrimination for the women of Afro-Colombian heritage in the group. When asked about the main problems regarding discrimination in Ecuador, Veronica says she has experienced it all, from insults telling her to go back to her country to homicide attempts for being black.<sup>18</sup> She adds that her afro-Colombian husband suffers from similar problems and the discrimination has little to do with her gender. “Before we used to live with 6 families in one house and one time the owner of the house received a letter saying that she had to evict all black people. Some guys came and stabbed one person and cut the fingers of another... it was chaotic,<sup>19</sup>” she says.

Others do feel more vulnerable due to their gender. Ingrid has an Ecuadorian partner and she has felt that because she is a woman, his family members “think that they can treat me as they wish<sup>20</sup>” and “because one is a woman, she will let it happen, and it is not like that.<sup>21</sup>” Joana supports that idea with her own perception of Ecuadorians as chauvinists and abusers, partly because “the women let them [men] do it, they surrender.<sup>22</sup>” According to INEC (2011), the national institute for statistics, 6 out of 10 women in Ecuador have experienced gender-based violence.

It is emphasized that there is no unitary gender category and that there can also be power inequalities among women. The group members recount their perception of what Ecuadorian women think of them. While Valentina says that she had not been treated badly by men, she explains that she has felt tension with the Ecuadorian women. She attributes this to differences in culture and living dynamics back in Venezuela: “A Colombian woman is very flirtatious, but the Venezuelan woman is a slave to fashion and appearance, and that causes clashes with Ecuadorian women. They say that we are very scandalous, very divas, very pretentious. In that aspect, I feel a rejection, especially on the part of women.<sup>23</sup>” Marcela agrees that the fact that

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<sup>18</sup> *Negra* – black woman.

<sup>19</sup> “Antes vivíamos 6 familias en una casa y una vez le llego una carta a la dueña de la casa diciendo que tenía que desalojar a todos los negros. Vinieron unos tipos y apuñalaron a uno, le cortaron los dedos a otro.. fue caótico.”

<sup>20</sup> “*Piensen que me podían tratar como se les da la gana.*”

<sup>21</sup> “*Ellos piensan que porque uno es mujer, se va a dejar, y no es así.*”

<sup>22</sup> “*Las mujeres se dejan. Se sumeten.*”

<sup>23</sup> “La colombiana es muy coqueta, pero la venezolana es esclava de la moda y de la apariencia, y eso causa choques con las mujeres ecuatorianas. Dicen que somos muy escandalosas, muy divas, muy pretenciosas. En ese aspecto siento un rechazo por parte de las mujeres sobretodo.”

there are some Colombian women dedicated to prostitution and the very different way of dressing might fuel the stereotypes.

This perception in regards to the perception of Ecuadorian women's attitude towards them as Colombian women is shared by Elizabeth: "I have heard a lot that [Ecuadorian] women think [...] that the majority of the women who are here –Colombians–that they come here to prostitute themselves. That they come to take their husbands away because to a lot of [Colombian] women they have shouted on the street: Colombian [woman], go to your country, you come to take away our husbands!<sup>24</sup>"

Rappaport (1995) says that stereotyping and stigmatization is often based in the dominant community narrative which is further implanted by lack of information. Joana points out that the lack of information is an issue: "Here they don't even know what a refugee is, why one is here, and what is a refugee, they don't know that, and the authorities/organizations haven't bothered to explain to the city of Quito, to the whole Ecuador, why we are here!<sup>25</sup>" This lack of information often goes hand in hand with pre-existing negative points of view that are enforced by politicians, media and the citizens. Thus, the refugee label itself also carries a social stigma.

All in all, negative gender-specific stereotypes surrounding Colombians, discriminatory attitudes regarding gender and race in the Ecuadorian society, and the lack of information resulting in the social stigma of the refugee label form a community narrative that leads to discrimination. While the group members focus more on certain tribal identities in identifying the basis on which they are discriminated, it becomes clear that multiple oppressions form a distinct discriminatory experience.

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<sup>24</sup> "He escuchado mucho que las mujeres piensan que [...] la mayoría de las mujeres que están aquí, colombianas, que vienen a prostituirse. Que vienen a quitarles sus maridos porque a muchas les han gritado en la calle: "Colombiana, andate pa' tu país, que vienen a quitarnos nuestros maridos!"

<sup>25</sup> "Aquí ni siquiera saben que cosa es un refugiado, por qué uno está aquí, y que es un refugiado no lo conocen y las entidades como que tampoco se han preocupado para hacerle conocer a la ciudad de Quito, a todo Ecuador, por qué nosotros estamos aquí!"

## 2.1.2. Access to Basic Rights

The main challenges that Colombian refugees have faced (access to employment, housing, education, etc.) are paired with the spread of discrimination and a general context of poor economic and social conditions affecting the Ecuadorian population. (UNHCR, 2011, p. 5)

### *Access to Employment*

While Ecuador's income poverty still rates at 22.9%, unemployment has been decreasing, reaching 4.4 % in March 2017 (INEC, 2017). This makes Ecuador one of the countries with the lowest unemployment rate in the region. However, a study by the Netherlands Interdisciplinary Demographic Institute (NiDi, 2006) shows that Colombian refugees form a vulnerable group that experience high levels of unemployment and poverty. Lack of awareness of existing rights both by Ecuadorians and the refugees themselves as well as institutionalized discrimination result in employment in vulnerable sectors that provide little job stability (Sozanski, Sarmiento & Reyes, 2016). Due to the social stigma of the refugee label, it is more beneficial to omit that part of their identity altogether. "We don't present ourselves as refugees anymore because they don't accept us!"<sup>26</sup> Ingrid says.

Therefore, and even though asylum seekers have been granted the right to work, they are often employed in the informal market (Asylum Access, 2014). Lack of opportunities for labor market participation was one of the main issues identified during the interviews. None of the members of the group are formally employed and those who are economically active are occupied in the informal labor market. Mostly, they sell coconut juice, Colombian foods and handicrafts on the street. Some of them experience delays in the asylum process and due to limited economic assistance and a time restriction on housing support, they have resorted to selling the food received through coupons from organizations like HIAS.<sup>27</sup> Thus, the instability created by lack of income has a significant effect on the daily lives of the group members. For Valentina, lack of job opportunities is by far the biggest challenge she faces in Ecuador.

Due to stereotypes about Colombian women discussed in the previous chapter, the group members face increased challenges in finding safe employment matching their skills. Despite

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<sup>26</sup> "Ya no nos presentamos como refugiados porque no nos aceptan!"

<sup>27</sup> HIAS – Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, a non-profit organization providing assistance to refugees.

some of the group members having attended university, they join others in selling food, handicrafts, and coconut juice. As a black Colombian woman, the job search is further complicated by the discriminatory attitudes of the employers. Marcela recalls a job search: "... once I went with Esmeralda to a restaurant where it said that they needed two girls, so we went to ask and right away they told us no, that the Colombians and the black [women] don't work. And it hasn't been once, there have been several times. From HIAS they once sent me to a shop but the man, seeing that I was black, said no."<sup>28</sup> The figures published by INEC in 2010, show that afro-Ecuadorians are the group most affected by unemployment. Moreover, there is a significant gender-based difference among afro-Ecuadorians as only one third of those reported to be active in the labor market were women.

### *Access to Housing*

Ecuador's policy of freedom of movement means that instead of living in refugee camps, refugees are responsible for finding accommodation among the local population. The majority of refugees live in urban areas like Quito, Guayaquil, Santo Domingo and Cuenca that host 60% of the refugee population. Urban areas are thought to provide more protection and better opportunities. 30% of the refugee population, including the members of *La Red de Mujeres Libres sin Fronteras*, live in Quito, the capital of Ecuador. While studies have shown that most people have found refuge, local integration is low (FLACSO-ACNUR, 2011) and despite having spent a relatively short amount of time in Ecuador, many of the group members have lived in numerous different accommodations.

Many of the women believe that as women, they are in a more vulnerable position in the housing market. "...people think that because one is a woman, she is weaker. Once I went to look for a rental and the woman asked me if I had a husband. "Ah, but how will you pay me the rent?" So

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<sup>28</sup> "...una vez fui con Esmeralda a un restaurante donde ponía que necesitaban 2 chicas, así que fuimos a preguntar y de una nos dijeron que no, que colombianas y negras no trabajan. Y no ha sido una vez, han sido varias veces. De HIAS una vez me mandaron a un almacén pero el señor al ver que era negra dijo que no."

I think that there exists discrimination for being a woman, because the woman didn't rent to me for not having a husband.<sup>29</sup>"

Such gender-based discrimination interacts with discrimination based on nationality and race causing further problems with housing. Marcela recalls meeting a landlord: "One goes and as soon as they hear the accent they ask: "Where are you from?" and say: "I don't rent to black people." Being Colombian and black is horrible... [the discrimination] in housing is horrible, we have lived in 7 places in a year.<sup>30</sup>" Overall, 80% of Colombian refugees have faced difficulties in finding accommodation (FLACSO-ACNUR, 2011).

### *Access to Health Services*

The group members recall discriminatory experiences from health services as they have received derogatory comments about their appearance. Veronica recalls: "The doctor told me that I was a transvestite because I was very skinny, it made me feel bad.<sup>31</sup>" Other times, they have not been able to access the services altogether. One of the interviewees says her daughter was turned back from the hospital and, as a consequence, lost her baby. While 11% of the refugee population attributes the difficulties in accessing health services to the overall low quality of the public service, 56% feel that their access has been restricted specifically because they are Colombian (FLACSO-ACNUR, 2011).

### *Access to Education*

Those who are raising their children alone, face additional hardship both in economic terms as well as in having to protect their children from the same discrimination they themselves face. Though according to the law, refugees have equal rights to education, it is often the case that because of lack of knowledge or reluctance to obey those norms, refugee children are refused access to education. Of those having made an attempt to access educational services in Ecuador,

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<sup>29</sup> "... la gente piensa que por ser mujer una es mas débil. Una vez fui a buscar arriendo y la señora me preguntó que si yo tenia marido y le dije que no porque mi esposo aun no había llegado aquí. Y ella dijo "ah pero usted como me va a pagar el arriendo?" entonces creo que sí existe discriminación por ser mujer, porque la señora no me alquiló por no tener marido."

<sup>30</sup> "Uno va y en cuanto oyen el acento preguntan "de donde es usted?" y dicen "yo a negros no le alquilo". [...] El hecho de ser colombiana y negra es terrible. En la vivienda es terrible, nosotros hemos vivido en 7 sitios en un año."

<sup>31</sup> "El doctor me dijo que yo era un travesti porque era muy delgada, me hacía sentir mal."

67% have experienced difficulties due to lack of documentation, economic hardship, and discrimination (FLACSO-ACNUR, 2011). The 12-year-old daughter of Eliana, who has been waiting for the results of the asylum process, has not been able to attend school for more than a year. For those who do have access to education, there is often discrimination from part of the teachers as well as other students (FLACSO-ACNUR, 2011). Relating a case of bullying, Valentina says that her daughter is the one who suffers from discrimination the most. These kind of challenges and the burden as the head of the household intersecting with different aspects of discrimination place single mothers of the group into a different situation where everything become more complicated. “As a single mother everything is more complicated, more difficult,<sup>32</sup>” says Carolina.

As shown, discrimination penetrates most aspects of group members' lives, including their access to basic rights and as asserted in previous studies (FLACSO-ACNUR, 2011), is the most visible, and perceived the most on a daily basis, in the public space. This means that the group members feel as if the whole society is the source of this discrimination, portraying a negative identity upon them. When there is a negative community narrative and the general public discriminates against the stigmatized group, it leads to marginalization in the society. This causes shame and self-hate, and often makes people feel as if they were the “lesser other” (Goffmann, p.19) in an unaccepting world.

Thus, discrimination has a profoundly damaging effect on refugees’ self-perception (UNHCR, 2011b). Most members of the group agree that discrimination has had a lowering effect on their self-esteem, and affected them psychologically and emotionally. Veronica recalls a time where she felt highly affected and was crying daily. Some of the women have felt the need to change the way they dress. Marcela says: “Here I have changed the way I dress because if I wear shorts, they right away think that I am selling myself!<sup>33</sup>” Other members of the group said that due to the discrimination they experience, they avoid leaving their house as much as possible in order to avoid looks, comments and insults on the street. Insults have become a daily occurrence: “...

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<sup>32</sup> “*Como madre soltera.. todo es como más complicado, más difícil.*”

<sup>33</sup> “*Aquí he cambiado mi forma de vestir porque si me pongo un short ya piensan que me estoy vendiendo.*”

It is daily. If one day I am not insulted, I feel that I am on a different planet because here every day one is discriminated.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> *“... Es diario. Si un día no me insultan yo siento que estoy en otro planeta porque aquí todos los días le discriminan a uno.”*

## 2.2. CREATION OF THE GROUP

### 2.2.1. What is *La Red de Mujeres Libres sin Fronteras*?

According to Major and O'Brien (2005), there are three ways to cope with stigmatization: attributing the experience to discrimination, avoiding domains where they are negatively stereotyped, or further identifying oneself with the stigmatized group. When talking about the idea behind *Red de Mujeres Libres sin Fronteras*, the members clearly state that it is the discrimination and common problems they all experience as refugee women in Ecuador that pushed the initiative forward. The group was founded on the 8<sup>th</sup> of March in 2016, on International Women's Day with two main objectives: solidarity and visibility. The principal aims of the group are to raise awareness of their situation as Colombian refugees in Ecuador, to combat discrimination, to help others that arrive in the same situation as they arrived and to serve as a nonviolent, free and open space to which to resort in order to overcome the numerous difficulties they face on a daily basis.

It therefore meets Diani's (1992) criteria in order to be considered a social movement since it is a network of informal interactions, there is a shared solidarity and common beliefs, and the collective action is focused on the fulfilment of political and cultural goals. Additionally, since there is a strong focus on culture and identity, and the main struggle is changing the public discourse, it can be considered to be a new social movement.

When posed with the question: "What is *Red de Mujeres Libres sin Fronteras*?" the members answer that it is:

"...a group to enforce everyone's rights."

"...support for integration."

"...my second family."

"...the best thing that can happen to every refugee woman."

Each woman used different words to describe what the group is, but it was generally considered by them as a space where they can evade from their endless worries, where they feel welcomed and valued, and where they can pursue change and action. All in all, something that helps them overcome their shared hardship in Ecuador in different ways.



### 2.2.2. Support from Asylum Access

Asylum Access – an international non-governmental organization (NGO) focusing on refugee rights played an important role in the mobilization of *Red de Mujeres Libres sin Fronteras*. The members themselves place high value on the employees of Asylum Access. They explain how they support the group by pushing them forward and acknowledge their ability to place themselves in the position of the refugees. Development actors such as NGOs can have a valuable role in initiating and supporting the creation of grassroots movements and provide assistance as they help marginalized groups enhance their collective capability (Ibrahim, 2017).

NGOs often start their empowerment projects by creating groups that focus on activities related to conscientization: reflecting on one's life and status as well as the socio-cultural reality (Ibrahim, 2017). Such activities are facilitated by Asylum Access in what are called Encounters of Women<sup>35</sup> that bring together women who have been victims of violence. During those meetings, they identify problems which are then addressed with the help of Asylum Access. Those are open spaces with a high rotation of people.

Most of the current members of *La Red de Mujeres Libres sin Fronteras* were first invited to participate in these meetings. However, invitation-based participation does not always allow for meaningful participation. Real participation, on the other hand, offers an opportunity to become their own agents of change and then collaborate with others to challenge existing power relations (Ibrahim, 2017). Thus, the idea for a refugee-led group surged.

While Asylum Access has played an important role in the creation of the group, they are now focused on increasing the autonomy of the group. “We are working a lot with them with the topic of autonomy. That is to say that even though the group was prompted by Asylum Access, the idea is that you [the group members] take decisions, you decide what you want to work on, what you don't want to work on and you take the decision about everything.”<sup>36</sup> *Red de Mujeres Libres sin Fronteras* therefore provides an opportunity to create their own, and truly

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<sup>35</sup> *Encuentros de Mujeres*

<sup>36</sup> *Estamos trabajando mucho con ellas el tema de la autonomía, es decir el grupo fue impulsado desde asylum Access, pero la idea es que vosotras toméis las decisiones, vosotras decidáis qué queréis trabajar, qué no queréis trabajar y toméis decisiones en cuanto a todo.*

participatory space that they share with people with similar understandings and goals. This space then promotes empowerment (Ibrahim, 2017).

### 2.2.3. Gender-Based Movement

We all suffer from chauvinism. Because men... I tell you that that is why in the group it is us, the women, because the man thinks that one is not able for anything and it is them who decide and it is them who know and it is them who can do things. In other words, one is left to take care of the children, the home, and to serve their needs and one cannot get out of that.<sup>37</sup>

The members of *La Red de Mujeres Libres sin Fronteras* are all women. According to the new social movement theory, it is the “newly emergent collective identities” (Wickham-Crowley & Eckstein, 2015, p. 39), based in different non-class social categories such as the indigenous, queer, the “greens”, and women, that become the basis of emerging social movements. Women’s issues are commonly based on their subordinate status and shaped by their social standing within the family and the society as a whole. Thus, gender can become the basis of the social movement in two main ways: 1) as a social base of mobilization and 2) as a set of issues that concern women as such (or in combination with other statuses and identities such as race and refugee status) (Wickham-Crowley & Eckstein, 2015).

Therefore, one of the main reasons for the group to consist of women is the sense of a shared experience. Referring to the shared experiences of the women, Marcela says: “We have been the victims of many things during our lives...<sup>38</sup>” There is an expressed wish to demonstrate the capability and strength of women because “there are times when it is thought that we [women] are the weaker sex and we want to demonstrate that we are capable of many things.<sup>39</sup>”

According to Veronica, women have more solidarity and often have more initiative to take action. “Nothing is too big for us, whatever we decide to do we will do. We are not embarrassed

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<sup>37</sup> *De machismo sufrimos todas. Porque los hombres.. por eso le digo yo, por eso estamos en la red nosotras las mujeres porque el hombre cree que uno no es capaz de nada sino que son ellos los que mandan y ellos son los que saben y ellos los que pueden hacer las cosas. Y uno mejor dicho se queda como para cuidar a los hijos y el hogar y a tender a ellos y de ahí no puede salir (Joana).*

<sup>38</sup> *“Nosotras hemos sido victimas de muchas cosas durante nuestras vidas.”*

<sup>39</sup> *“Hay veces que se piensa que somos el sexo débil y queremos demostrar que somos capaces de muchas cosas”*

to sing in public without knowing how to sing and I think men would be more embarrassed.<sup>40</sup> Marcela explains that it is important that the group consists of only women because it gives them the opportunity to demonstrate their capacities:

There are things that men do that we can do as well or better. There are jobs that they don't hire us for just because we are women, just because of gender discrimination. But we as women have a lot of mental and intellectual capacity, we are able in many things and we want to demonstrate that we can do many things. That we have an equal footing.<sup>41</sup>

Only the minority of the members believe that it is not important for the group to consist of women. Ingrid, for example, says that it would be important and beneficial to include the opinions of men. For her, the main reason for including only women is that women are more able to regularly attend the group meetings as they are more affected by the lack of job opportunities. While at first, including men would be an obstacle for expressing herself, it has more to do with an overall lack of familiarity than gender. For her, discussing projects with both, men and women, would be beneficial for the group.

Nevertheless, for the vast majority of the members, the importance of having a gender-based movement is utmost. For them, it is important that it is a space for women, as the name states: a network of women. "If men entered [the group], it would not be the same anymore because I think that among women we understand each other more, what one says in the group is accepted and no one is criticized."<sup>42</sup> Many believe that women understand each other better and have a different way of expressing themselves. While women are widely discriminated in the society surrounding them, this gender-based movement provides a space of no discrimination and no limitations. "Among women we have more confidence, like we feel free. Better among women than among men,"<sup>43</sup> Eliana concludes.

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<sup>40</sup> "Nada nos queda grande, lo que nos proponemos hacer lo hacemos. No nos da vergüenza ponernos a cantar en publico sin saber cantar y creo que a los hombres les daría mas vergüenza"

<sup>41</sup> "Hay cosas que hacen los hombres que las podemos hacer igual o mejor. Hay trabajos en los que no nos contratan solo por ser mujer, solo por discriminación de género, pero las mujeres tenemos mucha capacidad mental e intelectual, astutas en muchas cosas y queremos demostrar que sí podemos hacer muchas cosas, que estamos en igualdad de condiciones."

<sup>42</sup> "Si entraran hombres ya no sería lo mismo, porque creo que entre mujeres nos entendemos más, en la red lo que dice una se acepta y no se critica a nadie."

<sup>43</sup> "Entre mujeres, pues tenemos como mas confianza, nos sentimos como libres. Entre mujeres como mejor que entre hombres y todo eso."

## 2.2.4. Objectives

...for other people not to suffer as much as we have suffered, so they would find support...<sup>44</sup>

The group has two objectives: solidarity and visibility.

The objective of solidarity stems from the difficulties the members experienced on arrival. They state that the lack of support for new arrivals is a continuous problem that was there before them, when they arrived and will continue to be there in the future. As members of the group, they believe they have the strength and ability to help newcomers who feel extremely lonely, vulnerable and powerless upon arrival. The newly mobilized members who have found out about the group mostly through word-of-mouth, value this aspect of the group the most as they themselves have received emotional support from the group and are thus motivated to join the group to give this help forward to those who will arrive after.

The second objective of the group is to increase visibility to let others get to know them and make them understand that “we are women like all the women in the world”<sup>45</sup> with the end goal of eradicating discrimination. The intention to create new public domains of discourse is characteristic to new social movements. In order to do so, the group creates dances, songs, games, and workshops in open spaces with the aim of demonstrating that “we are all the same, the only difference is the country where we are from and our accent, nothing else.”<sup>46</sup> Up until the time when the interviews were carried out, the group had participated in events such as the International Women’s Day,<sup>47</sup> World Refugee Day on June 20, International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women on November 25 as well as events for LGBT awareness. In the activities to increase visibility, they approach both public and private institutions.

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<sup>44</sup> “... , otras personas no sufran tanto como hemos sufrido nosotros, que encuentren un apoyo...”

<sup>45</sup> “Que nosotras somos mujeres como todas las mujeres del mundo.”

<sup>46</sup> “Todos somos iguales, solo nos cambia el país de donde somos y nuestro acento, nada más.”

<sup>47</sup> “One of the authors of this research accompanied the group to their second march in celebration of the International Women’s Day in 2017.”

## 2.2.5. Group Dynamics

As it is common for new social movements, *Red de Mujeres Libres sin Fronteras* is based on inclusive decision-making. All opinions can be expressed and decisions depend on the majority. Marcela explains: “We have created rules. If the majority say something, it is accepted. But every time that a member proposes something we try to consider it.<sup>48</sup>” This forms part of the conciliation process in Ibrahim’s (2017) 3C model which enhances the power-with through the creation of a communal vision.

There are some theorists who claim that communal belonging is always empowering but others suggest that power dynamics within the group can in fact be disempowering (Ibrahim & Alkire, 2007). When asked whether something can be improved in the group dynamics, some of the members claim that “there are some people that decide for all<sup>49</sup>” and others say that “there are conflictive people who don’t like to receive instructions.<sup>50</sup>” However, while group members believe that communication can be improved within the group, most find the discussion process a useful experience. It provides them with knowledge and tools to better understand others and better express oneself. María, who supports the group as part of her role in Asylum Access, emphasizes that they “do work a lot in order for the leaderships to not be individual but to be collective.<sup>51</sup>”

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<sup>48</sup> “Hemos creado hasta reglas. Si la mayoría dice algo, se acepta. Pero siempre que una compañera propone algo tratamos de verlo.”

<sup>49</sup> “Hay unas personas, algunos, que deciden por todos.”

<sup>50</sup> “Hay personas conflictivas, que no les gustan que les manden.”

<sup>51</sup> “Si trabajamos mucho en que los liderazgos no sean individuales, sino que sean colectivos.”

## 2.3. EMPOWERMENT PROCESS

The last chapter discusses the members' reasons for staying as part of the group in order to analyze the process of empowerment that takes place in the group. The main reasons for permanence in the group have been categorized into three parts: 1) increase in self-esteem and confidence, 2) sense of belonging, and 3) an opportunity to help others. In the second part of the analysis, it is then discussed whether the empowerment process has taken place in additional domains.

### 2.3.1. Self-Esteem and Confidence

On the level of the individual, the most noticeable change since joining *Red de Mujeres Libres sin Fronteras* is the increase in self-esteem and confidence. This finding is in accordance with Major and O'Brien (2005) who claim that group identification can counter negative effects that stigmatization has on personal self-esteem. This increase in self-esteem and confidence can be seen as an enhanced power-within. This power-within is further developed through workshops about coexistence and psychological well-being as well as yoga that have taken place in the group with the help of Asylum Access. They work on recognising aspects of other members of the group in themselves, and increased self-awareness, self-respect and self-acceptance.

The majority of group members say that the group has taught them how to better deal with discrimination. "Little by little, I started understanding that not everything that people say to me has to affect me,<sup>52</sup>" says Veronica. It has increased the power-within, enhancing the self-acceptance of the members as one of the interviewees explains: "For being Colombian, or because of the colour, they tell us: "Ah, this black [woman], I don't know what..." but I don't pay them attention because this is the ignorance of the people, it's the mental barriers. Races don't exist, because I don't define myself for being white or black. Yes, before I felt bad, but

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<sup>52</sup> "Poco a poco fui entendiendo que no todo lo que me digan las personas me tiene que afectar."

not anymore, now I see that it is normal, that I am not the only one who is being discriminated.<sup>53</sup>”

The group empowers its members to know their rights and take action to defend these rights. In addition, feeling the support and encouragement from other group members can make a difference. Fernanda says: “I have learned that I am equal to all the people and my rights are not to be violated here nor anywhere else.”<sup>54</sup> When asked whether the group has helped her in situation of discrimination, Valentina responds: “Yes, a lot. Even with my daughter when she has had problems in school because she was hit in the school, the members of the Red helped me and encouraged me to denounce the situation to the school director. Thanks to that, the boy apologised.”<sup>55</sup> The members are better equipped to deal with abuse without responding in an abusive way. Ingrid says that she used to be shy and not talk much. When she was insulted in Ecuador, she stayed quiet but after joining the group she has learnt that she also has rights so she has become more self-confident in defending herself.

The power-to that stands for the capacity to change things in one's life is seen as the essence of individual empowerment. When asked to define the essence of the group, Elizabeth says: “It is something that helps us, makes us stronger, helps us to get ahead/get through, gives us strength ... *La Red* is something really good, a hope, something that helps us and motivates us to get ahead<sup>56</sup>” Thus, the group has helped the women to target the surplus powerlessness that is often the cause of low self-esteem by enhancing their power-within and power-to that is helping them take charge of their own life and believe in their capabilities.

Eliana says: “It gives more confidence to one because one shares and gets to know a lot of people who are also going through the same situation, so having those people next to one, one

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<sup>53</sup> Siempre por ser colombiana o por el color nos dicen “ay esa negra, que no se que” pero yo no les hago caso porque eso es ignorancia de la gente, son barreras mentales. Las razas no existen, porque por ser blanca o *negra no me defino. Antes sí me sentía mal, pero ya no, ahora veo que es una cosa normal, que no soy la única a la que discriminan.*”

<sup>54</sup> “*He aprendido que yo soy iguales a todas las personas y que mis derechos no se vulneran ni aquí ni en ningún sitio. Ahora con la red siento respaldo.*”

<sup>55</sup> “*Si, muchísimo. Incluso con mi hija cuando ha tenido problemas porque en el colegio la pegaban, las compañeras de la red me ayudaron y me animaron a denunciar la situación al director de la escuela. Gracias a eso el niño se disculpó.*”

<sup>56</sup> “*Es algo que nos ayuda, como nos fortalece, nos ayuda a salir adelante, nos da fuerza... La red es algo muy bueno, una esperanza, algo que nos ayuda y nos motiva a salir adelante!*”

feels more secure.<sup>57</sup> Thus, sharing experiences with others and becoming part of a “we” provides the power-to to transform surplus powerlessness – the internalized belief of incapability of changing one’s reality that is often the cause of low self-esteem and even unwillingness to change that reality, and fight anger and self-blaming through trust and mutual support (Lerner, 1986). In the view of this mutual support, power-to then leads to joint action or power-with as even when empowered on an individual level, there needs to be cooperation in order to achieve common goals (Ibrahim & Alkire, 2007; Uphoff, 2012).

### **2.3.2. Sense of Belonging – a Second Family**

For me, the network is my second family, they are my sisters!<sup>58</sup>

Group members identify sense of belonging as an important aspect of being part of the group. While members face daily discrimination in the society and struggle to feel welcome, the group is a place where they feel free, relaxed and accepted. They are able to have positive interactions that create mutually supportive relationships. They discuss their problems and help each other on an individual and group basis in a variety of activities from school inscriptions and uniforms for children to formal complaints for mistreatment. Eliana says:

I like being in *La Red* a lot because there one feels free. If one leaves the house stressed or has some kind of a problem, the moment one arrives there, to the group, one feels free. For the moment, it’s as if the problems went away...while one is there.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> *“Le da más confianza a uno porque uno comparte y uno conoce, osea, a bastantes personas que también están pasando por la misma situación de uno, entonces pues uno ahí, como que uno teniendo a esas personas al lado uno se siente como que más seguro.”*

<sup>58</sup> Para mi la red es mi segunda familia, son mis hermanas. Fernanda.

<sup>59</sup> Me gusta mucho estar en la red, porque ahí osea se siente como libre, osea si uno va estresado de la casa o tiene algún problema en el instante que uno llega ahí a la red se siente como libre, por el instante como que se le van los problemas. Mientras que uno esta ahí.



For most of the members the group is synonymous to sharing, love, the feeling of compassion for others' stories, unity, freedom, and lack of rejection. Rather than feeling alone, they feel part of a "we".

A collective context such *La Red de Mujeres Libres sin Fronteras* which offers social and emotional support helps to sustain and encourage personal stories by creating a new collective narrative based on their shared experiences. It is difficult for an individual whose identity is negatively perceived, to create a new and positive personal narrative on their own. The members value the certainty of having someone who will listen to them in case of a problem highly. This provides an alternative point of view and helps them see things from a different perspective. This is a way to gain control over their own stories and challenge dominant cultural narrative (Rappaport, 1995; Wickham-Crowley & Eckstein, 2015). By challenging the dominant narrative they challenge the basis of stereotypes and stigmatization. The communal vision developed through social interactions therefore helps to counter the negative effects that discrimination has on members' self-esteem and their perception of themselves. Thus, and in accordance with Rappaport (1995), by sharing different personal stories and exchanging new ways of thinking about oneself, a framework for empowerment is created.

Storytelling, whether through songs or discussions, is one of the means through which sense of belonging is enhanced. *Red de Mujeres Libres sin Fronteras* started with the creation of a song that they often sing among themselves and at events such as the World Refugee Day. The songs such as "Great Wars" and "The Lament of a Refugee" are based on group members' experiences and have a strong reference to their cultural background. The name of the group, The Network (*La Red*), is representative of the different origins and cultures the members seek to represent. The members come from different areas of Colombia<sup>60</sup> such as Pasto, Buenaventura, Cali, and Tumaco – all with their own cultural characteristics. Thus, while the members share the experience of escaping their previous realities and facing similar difficulties in their current lives in Ecuador, through the group, they have also learned about different cultures, foods and customs. This way, the creation of a community narrative is closely connected to strengthening the connection to identities, cultures, and values.

Storytelling can also be a powerful tool of empowerment by increasing one's perception of who he/she is (Williams *et al.*, 2003) and helping to achieve control over one's life. Fernanda says:

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<sup>60</sup> In addition, one from Venezuela.

“The songs, for example talk a lot about everything that is happening to us in Colombia and it helps me a lot to change the way I am.<sup>61</sup>” The belief that one is able to change their lives, enhances the power-to. The aim of song and dance presentations is to introduce the Colombian culture and show their unity as a group. Paula says how it makes her feel more important, “like famous artists.<sup>62</sup>” Belonging to the group has shaped the members’ individual and collective identity and increased the feelings of self-worth. “We are not simply refugee women from Colombia but we are *La Red de Mujeres Libres sin Fronteras*. It’s as if we had a status, something higher.<sup>63</sup>”

In order to fight the dominant narratives and social stigma surrounding refugees and Colombians, they aim to prove that “we are not all the same”: “With the songs and dances we try to make people understand that we are not all the same, that we are not bad.<sup>64</sup>” Joana explains the purpose of singing:

[It is to] demonstrate what we are. Like look that we actually didn’t come because we have made the conflict but the conflict carried us away. So what happens is that if one introduces oneself through singing, people know that we are not people of conflict. We are people, mistreated by the conflict, and it is the conflict that has us here.<sup>65</sup>

That way, and through the objective of increased visibility, the group can address attitudes and beliefs that prevail in the society and “hold particular inequalities and injustices in place” (Rowlands, 2016, p. 124).

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<sup>61</sup> “*Por ejemplo las canciones hablan mucho de todo lo que nos pasa en Colombia y me aporta mucho para cambiar mi forma de ser.*”

<sup>62</sup> “*Como artistas famosas.*”

<sup>63</sup> “*No simplemente somos las refugiadas de Colombia, sino que somos La Red de Mujeres Libres sin Fronteras. Como que tenemos un estatus, algo más alto.*”

<sup>64</sup> “*Con las canciones y los bailes intentamos hacer entender a la gente eso, que no somos todos iguales, que no somos malos.*”

<sup>65</sup> “*Demostrar lo que nosotros somos. Osea, que miren que nosotros en realidad no venimos porque hemos hecho un conflicto sino que el conflicto nos llevó a nosotros. Entonces que sucede, que si uno se da a conocer por medio del canto la gente sabe que nosotros no somos personas de conflicto. Somos personas maltradas sobre el conflicto y el conflicto nos tiene a nosotros acá.*”

### 2.3.3. An Opportunity to Help Others

I feel happy because I'm helping with something, I am putting my grain of sand!<sup>66</sup>

Solidarity is one of the two main objectives of the group and an important incentive for participation in *Red de Mujeres Libres sin Fronteras*. Ibrahim and Alkire (2007) say that helping others is one of the ways of experiencing empowerment or agency. As lack of agency has found to be central to subjective ill-being (Narayan & Petesch, 2007), the increase in agency through the group's activities related to its solidarity objective has therefore increased the subjective perception of general well-being as one of the group members claims: "One feels happiness being able to help another person!<sup>67</sup>"

The group members feel that through these activities their importance in the society has grown. When society's perceptions of refugees as a burden are imposed on refugees, they are not fully incorporated into the society. Thus, only when truly empowered, are they able to make a meaningful contribution, both economic and social, to the host country (Kelly, 2004). The group has offered its individual members an opportunity to take action, increasing their feeling of self-worth and importance. "Being in the group gives one a feeling of.. as if one was more important, that is to say people take you into account more. One feels like she is adding something here to Ecuador, to the culture here, or among the women and all that. We feel that support. That I do feel,<sup>68</sup>" Paula says. Feeling like they are making a contribution in the host society is thus an important step in empowering the women and developing their power-to.

In light of joint action, the increase of power-to on the individual level then also enhances the power-with. Recently, the group has been working on finding an office and a computer for the group as well as trying to find sponsors for food and other essentials that they can then use to assist new arrivals. They have launched a project called Give a Smile Without Borders<sup>69</sup> with the aim of collecting items like clothes and food for the many people who are still entering the

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<sup>66</sup> "Yo me siento feliz porque estoy ayudando en algo, estoy poniendo un granito de arena!"

<sup>67</sup> "Uno siente felicidad de poder ayudar al otro."

<sup>68</sup> "Estar en La Red le da a uno como ..como que uno es mas importante, osea lo toman mas en cuenta, ... uno se siente como que se esta portando algo aquí al Ecuador, a la cultura de aquí, o entre las mujeres y todo eso. Sentimos como ese respaldo. Eso yo siento."

<sup>69</sup> Regala una sonrisa sin fronteras.

country with nothing. “We thought about them and thought about ourselves when we arrived and wanted to help them,<sup>70</sup>” Fernanda explains. Based on Amartya Sen’s capability-based understandings on the connection between empowerment and human development, Ibrahim and Alkire (2007) point out that through empowerment, marginalized groups can become the “effective agents of their own human development” (p. 395). In addition to increasing individual well-being and self-worth by increasing the agency of the members, the group thus has the potential to be an agent of change in shaping the reality of those identifying themselves as Colombian refugee women in Ecuador.

A member of the group explains that despite their own lack of economic resources, they focus on helping others as they have first-hand experience in arriving in Ecuador as a refugee:

[We care about helping others despite the lack of our own economic resources] because we realize the way that we arrived. When I arrived, we had to sleep on the floor for three months. It was horrible. But I thought that if I returned, they were going to take away my two children, because in Colombia, starting from when they are 12-years-old, they put the eye on the boys. But if I went on like that, we were all going to suffer, especially the baby who was a couple of months old.<sup>71</sup>

Therefore, these resources - firstly, the shared experiences and secondly, the information they now possess, make them the best equipped to assist other refugees.

Now we know how people arrive, because when we arrived, we didn’t know what it was like to arrive here as refugees. I arrived to nothing. And moreover, the migration police treat people badly. And we think about the people who come, that they have to sleep on the floor when they arrive. So we all want to help those people who come. We started thinking that we at least have beds, a roof and a class of water. But those who

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<sup>70</sup> “Pensábamos en ellos y pensábamos en nosotras cuando llegamos, y queríamos ayudarles.”

<sup>71</sup> “Porque nos damos cuenta de la forma en la que llegamos, yo cuando llegue nos toco dormir en el suelo 3 meses. Fue horrible. Pero pensaba que si regresaba, me iban a quitar a dos hijos, porque en Colombia a partir de los 12 años ya les ponen el ojo a los muchachos pero si sigo así vamos a sufrir todos, sobretodo el bebé que tenía unos meses.”

arrive don't. And this is what moves us, to help those people who arrive. And then, whatever comes for us.<sup>72</sup>

The objective of the group is first, to help on a material level with clothes and food, but in the medium-term also with information regarding services. Thus, the group has asked Asylum Access to support them by carrying out workshops about topics related to refugees and asylum. Some of the courses are held by more experienced group members, giving them the opportunity to enhance their *power-to* to influence and shape the reality of the group. “I also had to give two courses and that made me feel more empowered,<sup>73</sup>” says Fernanda. This relates to identity and a sense of belonging as she continues to explain that she feels empowered “because I feel that here they do take me into account, it’s where they know I do exist, because for Ecuador I don’t exist, because I am not a refugee, I don’t exist.<sup>74</sup>” Therefore, the group is planning to start leading courses about handicraft outside the group. In order to use this opportunity to also increase the visibility as Colombian refugee women, they try to include the refugee theme in order to sensitize the general public.

### *Collaboration*

*Red de Mujeres Libres sin Fronteras* has identified certain needs that require collaboration with others because even though the group has a lot of ideas and initiative, all activities need a budget, even if just for mobility. In Ibrahim’s (2017) understanding, enhancing collective *power-to* through collaboration is essential for inflicting social change. Therefore, the group is working on project proposals to other public and private entities. They have asked Asylum Access to support the group with a series of workshops such as enhancing members’ project

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<sup>72</sup> “Ahora sabemos como llega la gente, porque cuando llegamos nosotros no sabíamos como era llegar de refugiados aquí. Yo llegué a la nada. Y además los policías de inmigración tratan mal a la gente. Y pensamos en los que vienen, que tienen que dormir en el suelo al llegar. Entonces todas queremos ayudar a esas personas que vienen, nos pusimos a pensar que al menos nosotros tenemos camas, un techito y un vaso de agua. Pero los que llegan no ...Y eso es lo que nos mueve, ayudar a esas personas que llegan. Y después lo que venga para nosotros.”

<sup>73</sup> “Yo también tuve que dar dos cursos y eso me ha hecho sentirme más empoderada.”

<sup>74</sup> “Porque siento que aquí sí me toman en cuenta, donde saben que sí que existo, porque para Ecuador yo no existo, porque no soy refugiada, entonces no existo.”

management skills. The women have so far learned about necessary requirements, content these proposals should have, and how to approach providers of public and private funding.

With the help of Asylum Access, the group has already managed to raise awareness about the existence of the group and forge connections with other institutions. Before June 20 last year, Asylum Access announced that it was not going to be Asylum Access to carry out the activities within the framework of the World Refugee Day but the women themselves as part of *Red de Mujeres Libres sin Fronteras*. The other institutions agreed that the women will be responsible for the administration of the event. Since then, several institutions have invited them to give a presentation in several spaces.

### *Sustainability*

Even though several group members are waiting to be resettled into other countries, they all emphasize the need for *Red de Mujeres Libres sin Fronteras* to be sustainable. Recently, the group has elected a board with a president, secretary and treasurer. The group is working on their mission and objectives to take as the basis for their work, they have an e-mail and a Facebook page. María from Asylum Access says:

The process is very incipient but it is also true that it is one of the few processes there are, because I have been here for three years and I have never seen an association of refugee that would be truly maintained, that would be sustained over time.<sup>75</sup>

### **2.3.4. Empowerment in Other Domains**

Empowerment can be described in different domains. So far, the analysis has focused on empowering aspects that have been emphasized by the group members during the interviews. The group members unanimously emphasize the essence of the group as a support group for themselves individually, as a group, and as a community in general, rather than a group that

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<sup>75</sup> “El proceso es muy incipiente pero también es verdad que es de los pocos procesos que hay, porque yo he estado 3 años aquí y nunca había visto una asociación de personas refugiadas que realmente se mantenga, se sostenga en el tiempo.”

seeks economic and political empowerment. However, the obstacles as well as some of the group's activities do touch on economic and political subjects. Thus, potential of empowerment in these domains and the possible connection between different domains is discussed in the final part of the analysis.

### *Economic Aspect*

In the first part of the analysis it was established that the main obstacles the group members face are discrimination and restricted access to basic rights, including employment. Despite unemployment and economic hardship, most of the members do not expect individual financial gain from the group's activities and all agree that any funds raised should be used for the benefit of the group to fund their administrative costs and to help with one of the main objectives of the group – solidarity.

In June last year, there was an exhibition of paintings as an expression of some of the group members' experience as refugees. Although those paintings were later sold and the money shared among the authors, economic gain was not the original idea behind these paintings as group members say that “the paintings, we made them without thinking that they would be sold.<sup>76</sup>” The description of the exhibition on the website of the Ministry of Culture and Patrimony presents art as a “tool to transform one's life” (Ministerio de Cultura y Patrimonio, 2016, para. 4) and what the group members most value about being able to sell the paintings, was the interest from others to familiarize themselves with their stories. “When the paintings were sold, it was something very nice because we didn't think that another person would be interested in the art that we were exhibiting there. Therefore, it was something very nice!<sup>77</sup>”

As a matter of fact, entry for those who are looking for economic gain is restricted. When there was an opportunity to earn some money from selling food at the event the group assisted, this attracted a lot of women who had little interest in the group's objectives. Therefore, the members decided to restrict entry to the group. When someone wants to join the group, they need to have shown that they are participating for more than a specific activity that is being carried out. Every entry to the group is discussed among the members.

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<sup>76</sup> “Pero los cuadros nosotras los hicimos sin pensar que se fueran a vender.”

<sup>77</sup> “Cuando se vendieron esos cuadros fue algo muy bonito porque nosotras no pensábamos que otra persona se pudiera interesar en el arte que nosotras estábamos exponiendo allá, entonces fue algo muy bonito.”

Thus, while most of the group members aspire to find a job in the near future, only a minority think that the group should directly facilitate this process. María from Asylum Access says that it surprises her a lot that despite the fact that some of the members of the group are single mothers and all of them are economically in a very precarious situation, their initiatives do not focus on how to start a business or gain an income for themselves. Instead, they are trying to find a way to support each other and to support the refugee population that comes to Ecuador. “That surprised us a lot because keeping in mind the situation in which they find themselves, it is striking!”<sup>78</sup>

When asked about the possibility of starting a business together, a group member replies: “No, we were thinking about creating our own office - we already have a computer – to be able to receive and give the help from there.”<sup>79</sup> Despite individual financial struggles, memories of the lack of support on arrival to Ecuador have had a profound effect on the members. Hence, any financial objectives relate to facilitating the provision of help for those who face difficulties on arrival.

As refugee women, we know that those who arrive, arrive with even greater needs than those of ourselves. We want to establish the office and legalize the group, to be able to ask for support as a foundation. What we want is for the group to be a foundation.<sup>80</sup>

Some theorists argue that essential economic resources are necessary for empowerment (Ibrahim & Alkire, 2007) and self-financing is indeed important for the autonomy of the group in order to carry out any initiatives and be able to support others. Therefore, the group has planned a series of handicraft and recycling workshops to gather funds. However, other than the necessary in order to carry out the group’s objectives, there is little focus on economic empowerment even on the collective level. Carolina says: “In *La Red* it is not so much about

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<sup>78</sup> “Eso nos sorprendió bastante porque teniendo en cuenta la situación en la que se encuentran, es llamativo.”

<sup>79</sup> “No, nosotras estábamos pensando en crear nuestra propia oficina, ya hemos conseguido un ordenador, para de ahí poder recibir las ayudas y poderlas dar.”

<sup>80</sup> “Como mujeres refugiadas, nosotras sabemos que las que llegan, llegan aún más necesitadas que nosotras. Queremos asentar la oficina y legalizar la red, para poder pedir ayudas como una fundación. Lo que queremos que sea la red es una fundación.”



the material things, it is more about emotional and spiritual things. It is more than economic help. [...] What we learn in *La Red* is more important than any economic help we could get.<sup>81</sup>”

### *Political Aspect*

When talking about refugee policy, group members mention delays in asylum seeking processes and premature reduction in support as a result of the peace process. The group recently took part in the municipality roundtable (*mesa del municipio*) where they were the only refugee-led group, to discuss the Colombian peace process and what it means for the Colombian refugee population in Ecuador. “It is said that peace was already reached in Colombia, it is wrong because it is not, there is still war. [...] Here, they are cutting some of the help because of that,<sup>82</sup>” says Carolina. For the most active members of the group, being involved in talks over the peace process is an important step for political empowerment.

However, when talking about obstacles, the objectives of the group and reasons for participation, the political domain received few mentions among the group’s members. As mentioned in the background information on Ecuador’s refugee policy, there exist several positive laws regarding refugees. This policy however is hindered by widespread discrimination. Furthermore, having received discrimination and abuse from the border control, police and the state authorities, the members have little faith in the group’s ability to improve these situations through activities in the political sphere. Therefore, as long as discrimination continues to be the main issue holding back the exercising of rights, the group's activities are naturally focused on increasing awareness in the hope of enhancing the implementation of these rights.

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<sup>81</sup> “*En la red no son tanto cosas materiales, son mas cosas emocionales, espirituales. Es mas alla de una ayuda economica [...] Lo que aprendemos en la red es mas importante que cualquier ayuda economica que nos den.*”

<sup>82</sup> “*Dicen que ya se hizo la paz en Colombia, es una falsa, porque no, todavia hay guerra. [...] Aquí nos están cortando algunas ayudas por eso.*”

## DISCUSSION

The results of the analysis confirm that there are ongoing empowerment processes in *Red de Mujeres Libres sin Fronteras* in several aspects and levels. There is a strong focus on psychological and emotional aspects of empowerment. On the individual level, there has been an increase in power-within and power-to. This is evident in enhanced self-esteem and confidence that has increased their capabilities to change their lives and to deal with discrimination that was found to be the most defining aspect of the group members' hardship. On the collective level, the group's power-with has been enhanced by a strong sense of belonging. Through the tool of storytelling, the group has created a common vision of their identity. This has empowered them to challenge the dominant narratives that exist in the society and form the basis of discrimination. On both, the individual and collective level, the increased agency and feeling of meaningful participation in the society has led to overall increase in the subjective well-being of the group members.

It is somewhat surprising to find that there is little focus on the economic aspect of empowerment given that financial hardship was one of the main obstacles for the members of the group in Ecuador. Economic resources and empowerment have received a lot of attention in empowerment studies and are sometimes thought to be necessary for empowerment (Ibrahim & Alkire, 2007). However, the findings show that in *La Red de Mujeres Libres sin Fronteras*, solidarity is viewed as much more personally enriching than economic gain. Solidarity has shown to increase subjective well-being, self-importance and enhance the power-to and power-with. As a group, their main focus is on increasing the visibility of refugees, hoping to counter the root cause of unemployment and lack of implementation of rights – discrimination.

In previous studies, Malhotra, Schuler and Boender (2002) have addressed the issue of women's empowerment being often measured through “achievements such as political participation, legal reform, and economic security” (p. 8). The findings of this thesis confirm that often such achievements are not enough, or should not be the main indicators to be used, to analyze whether empowerment is taking place. In the light of implementation challenges, namely widespread discrimination in the society, of Ecuador's generous refugee policy, it becomes clear why mere focus on economic or political spheres might not lighten the hardship.

Malhora *et al.* (2002) have suggested that agency is the “essence of empowerment” (p. 9) which plays the key role in the process. The interviews showed that what the members themselves

value the most about the group is increased self-esteem and confidence, sense of belonging, and helping others. While increases in self-esteem, self-confidence, and sense of belonging can be seen as outcomes of empowerment, the results of the current study show that agency is indeed central to several of these aspects.

Some theorists suggest that the strongest aspect of empowerment lies within our own positive self-identity and connection to others (Cole, Rothblum & Espin, 2013). The importance of the sense of belonging becomes more clear when Yuval-Davis' (2011) understanding of belonging is taken into account. People's emotional attachment to certain groupings as well as constructions of identity become more important when in situations of decreased security. It is then of utmost importance that "narratives of their identities" (p. 15) survive.

The analysis has thus shown that in the studied case, power-with was the crucial form of power that enabled the enhancement of the power-within and then the power-to. As seen, the different forms of power are interlinked and mutually enabling, all of them being necessary for empowerment processes to occur.

The focus on emotional and psychological support, reconnecting with their identities and having the sense of belonging has the potential to help the group and its members in other spheres. There is a possible link between increasing agency in one domain to positive effects in another (Alkire, 2005; Malhotra *et al.*, 2002). Thus, further research over time could address the possible positive spill-over effects these aspects of empowerment can have in other, in this case economic and political, domains. If positive spill-over effects are found, it would be interesting to study the effect on general well-being and integration. Further insight can be gained in the future when the group has existed for longer and more general conclusions can be drawn if similar groups would be studied on the national level as well as in other social and economic contexts.

The findings of the case study lead to the idea that refugee-led groups are of utmost importance in refugee empowerment in general. *La Red de Mujeres Libres sin Fronteras* effectively addresses the root cause of their hardship and the increased agency allows its members to feel more important in the society and the group to have an active role in development of the refugee support system. The fact that it is a gender-based movement provides a space of mutual trust but it is not only the women who benefit from the activities. "If she is well, her home will be a

bit better. Because she will inspire happiness, a bit more confidence in the home,<sup>83</sup>” says Carolina.

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<sup>83</sup> “*Si ella esta bien, su hogar va a estar un poco mejor. Porque va a inspirar alegria, un poquito mas de confianza en su hogar.*”

## CONCLUSION

The analysis started out by explaining the background of the Colombian conflict which has highly impacted the civilian population, resulting in high numbers of internally displaced people and refugees in the neighbouring Ecuador. Despite the peace agreement with FARC last year and the ongoing peace talks with ELN, the violence in certain areas has increased.

Ecuador's refugee policy is generous, providing protection and rights to both, refugees and asylum seekers. Nevertheless, lack of awareness and widespread discrimination together with difficult social and economic conditions among the overall population have placed the members of *La Red de Mujeres Libres sin Fronteras* in a vulnerable position. They face daily discrimination stemming from stigmatization in which social categories such as gender, race, and nationality intersect.

As a way of coping with the discrimination, the women further identify themselves with the marginalized group. With the help of Asylum Access, the refugee-led group surged, offering the members the means for meaningful participation. For them, it is important that the group consists of women as it provides a safe environment and an opportunity to demonstrate their capabilities as women.

The group has two main objectives: solidarity and visibility. The power-with stemming from unity enables the group to help newcomers that bear surplus powerlessness. Group members give enormous value and importance to solidarity as they believe that the feeling they get from helping others is much more valuable and enriching than the feeling of receiving economic gain. The second objective is increasing their visibility by conscientizing the Ecuadorian society about the reality of Colombian refugees in Ecuador. The group thus aims at achieving a change of the dominant narrative which would then eradicate discrimination, the root cause of the inequalities and hardship they endure.

The analysis has shown that the extent to which membership of the group empower its members includes the individual level with increased self-esteem, confidence and self-importance due to the enhancement of power-within, power-to and the fact of helping others, respectively. Inside the individual level, the group is not focused on individual economic empowerment although steps are being taken for the group to be economically sustainable. It also includes the collective level, with a strengthened sense of belonging and shared identity, due to the enhancement of power-with, which has empowered them to confront the existing dominant narratives that

foment generalized discrimination. The extent, however, does not entirely reach the institutional level, as only small steps have been taken so far towards institutional empowerment. In order to attain it, greater collaboration with other institutions should be carried out, as well as increased formalization of the group and, finally, group sustainability over time should be assured. Politically, the expectations are in the long term, envisaging to implement many of the positive regulatory requirements through increased visibility.

All in all, the results of the case study suggest that collective action is an empowering tool that strongly helps its members overcome hardship in situations of refuge in a discriminatory society. As one of the members said “the key word of the network will always be “to help”!<sup>84</sup>”

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<sup>84</sup> *“La palabra clave de la red siempre va a ser “ayudar”!”*

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# APPENDICES

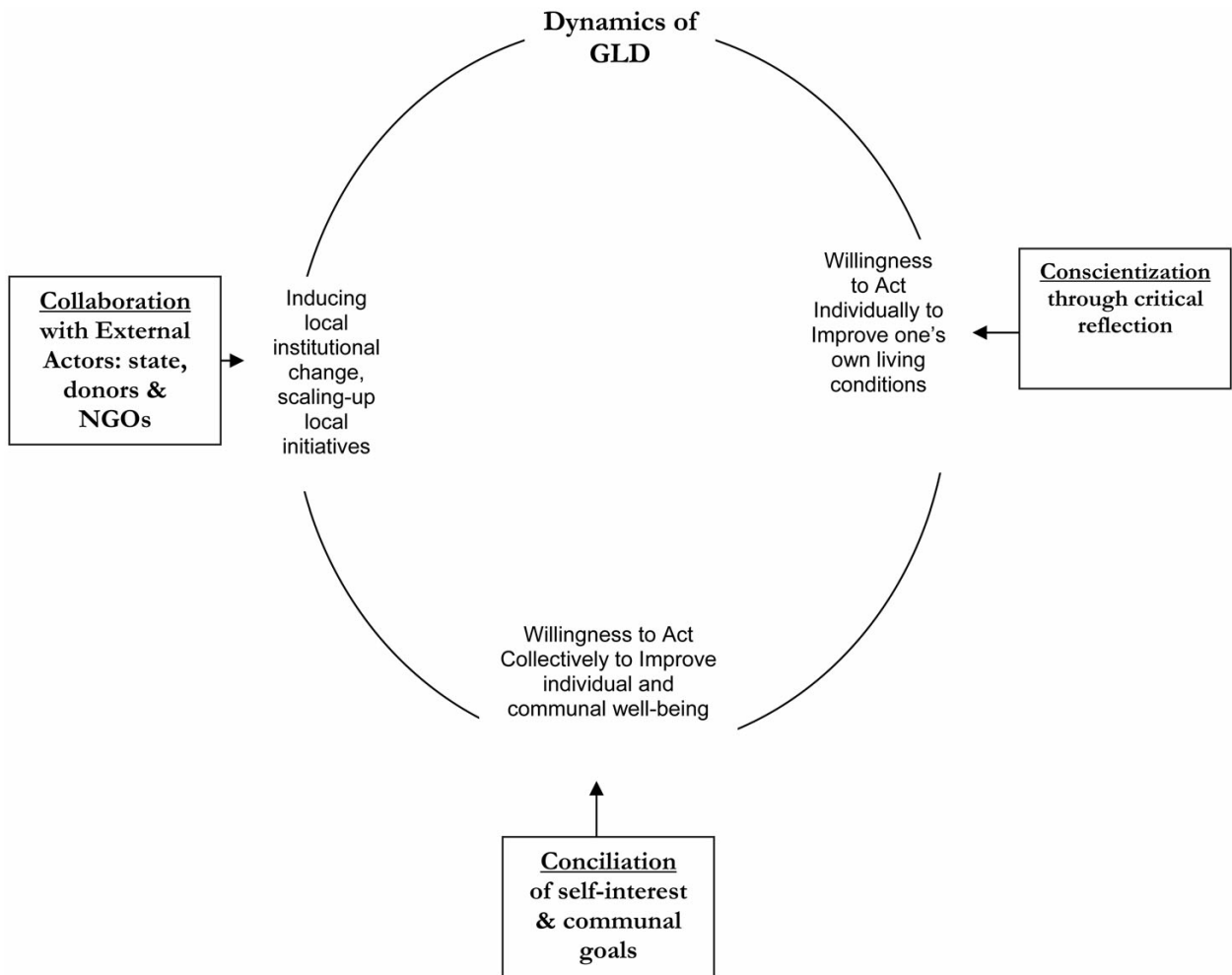
## Appendix A

### Lyrics to “Great Wars” (“Grandes Guerras”)

♪ Hoy contarles a todo lo que puedan oír	Today we tell you all that you can hear
♪ Ya vengo desde Colombia para refugiarme aquí No fue por mi propio gusto que yo vine hasta aquí	Now, I come from Colombia to seek refuge here It wasn't for my own liking that I came here
♪ El terror de grandes guerras me sacó de mi país	The terror of great wars took me away from my country
♪ Huyendo con mis hijitos por el miedo de morir	Fleeing with my children from the fear of dying
♪ Dejamos mi bella tierra Sin pensar que ha de venir Con yanto dentro de mi alma Queda atrás mi por venir	We left behind my beautiful land Without thinking that it would come to pass With tears in my soul, I leave it behind to come here
♪ La guerra es cosa terrible, Dios nos libre de tal mal Ver cómo muere tu padre, tu hermano, y tu mamá Cómo matan tu hijo y tu sin poder hablar	War is a terrible thing, God, save us from such evil Look how your father, brother, and mother die How they kill your son and you cannot speak
♪ Y porque soy colombiana, No me quiera Usted juzgar En mi tierra hay gente mala No lo voy a negar, pero somos más Los buenos se los puedo demostrar	And just because I am Colombian, I don't want you to judge me In my land there are bad people, I won't deny it, but we are more - I can show you the good people

(Garces & Bonilla, 2017, p. 62)

Appendix B  
3C Model



(Ibrahim, 2017, p. 199)

## Appendix C

### Interview Questions

#### **Preguntas entrevista:**

Nombre, edad, procedencia, hijos, pareja (salario?), etnicidad, nivel educativo, salario, tiempo en Ecuador, reasentamiento?

#### Sobre la red:

Cómo describiría la red de mujeres libres sin fronteras?

Cómo surgió esta iniciativa? Qué objetivos perseguía?

En qué le ha ayudado participar en la red? Qué ha aprendido?

Siente que desde que participa en la red ha cambiado su forma de pensar y de actuar frente a los distintos problemas que enfrenta en Ecuador? Como?

Sientes que tienes más confianza en ti misma y más fuerza para exigir tus derechos?

Qué acciones se han llevado a cabo desde la red y que planes se tiene a futuro?

En qué le beneficia la realización de este tipo de actividades?

Cuáles son los principales problemas que tiene la red? Qué cosas mejoraría?

Por qué solo de mujeres? Han pensado en incluir a hombres también?

#### Sobre discriminación:

Cuáles son los principales problemas que ha tenido que enfrentar en Ecuador?

Sufre discriminación por ser mujer? (y por ser afrocolombiana?)

Siente que por ser mujer usted le tratan peor que a los hombres y que la vida es más difícil? Por qué?

Qué opinión cree que tienen los hombres ecuatorianos de las mujeres colombianas? Y las mujeres ecuatorianas?

Por qué cree que tienen esa idea?

Alguna vez ha recibido ataques físicos o verbales?

Qué consecuencias tiene para usted esta discriminación?

Siente que el grupo le ha ayudado cuando se ha sentido discriminada?

Siente que la policía y el estado ecuatoriano les ayuda frente a incidentes relacionados con la discriminación?

Qué entidades humanitarias le están ayudando aparte de Asylum Access?

## Appendix D

### Informed Consent Form

#### FORMULARIO DE CONSENTIMIENTO INFORMADO

**Título del proyecto:** En qué medida los grupos de mujeres refugiadas empoderan a sus miembros? Un caso de estudio del grupo “Red de Mujeres Libres sin Fronteras” en Ecuador.

**Nombre de las investigadoras:** Natalia del Corral, Karin Uuskam

El estudio forma parte de la tesis de Natalia del Corral y Karin Uuskam, para obtener el título de maestría del programa de Desarrollo y Relaciones Internacionales de la Universidad de Aalborg en Dinamarca. El propósito del estudio es entender cómo y en qué medida la pertenencia a un grupo puede empoderar y permitir a superar la situación a la que se enfrentan las mujeres refugiadas.

Para obtener las respuestas a las preguntas planteadas, los miembros del grupo “Red de Mujeres Libres sin Fronteras” han sido invitadas a participar en entrevistas semi-estructuradas sobre su experiencia como mujeres refugiadas en Ecuador y como miembros del grupo. La duración de la entrevista es aproximadamente de 45 minutos y serán grabadas. La grabación será escuchada únicamente por las investigadoras y una vez finalizado el estudio serán destruidas. La participación en el estudio es voluntaria y los participantes tienen el derecho de retirar el consentimiento de participación en cualquier momento durante de la entrevista o después. En ese caso, todo lo grabado hasta ese momento será inmediatamente eliminado. También puede decidir negarse a responder cualquier pregunta que le resulte incómoda.

La información obtenida va a ser utilizada en el análisis del estudio de una forma anónima, a menos de que usted requiera específicamente que su nombre aparezca asociado a sus respuestas.

Si tiene alguna pregunta, puede comunicarse con las investigadoras escribiéndoles a los siguientes correos:

Natalia del Corral, [nataliadelcorral@gmail.com](mailto:nataliadelcorral@gmail.com)

Karin Uuskam, [karin.uuskam@gmail.com](mailto:karin.uuskam@gmail.com)

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Confirmando que he leído y entendido la descripción del estudio, así como el procedimiento de participación en el mismo. Comprendo que mi participación es voluntaria y que puedo retirar mi consentimiento libremente en cualquier momento, sin necesidad de proporcionar una explicación. Entiendo que mis respuestas se mantendrán confidenciales y se utilizarán en el estudio de una forma anónima, a menos que yo requiera específicamente lo contrario. Confirmando que la investigadora me ha explicado el estudio y ha contestado mis preguntas. Voluntariamente doy mi consentimiento para participar en el estudio.

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Nombre de la participante	Fecha	Firma
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Nombre de la investigadora	Fecha	Firma
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Nombre de la investigadora	Fecha	Firma
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