



Scene from the film: A street in Bogotá. ©Noah Debonis

Strangers to Peace

A Journey of Conflict Reconciliation in a "Post-Agreement Society" – Insights from Producer Colleen Alena O'Brien

KANA OTA – HUMAN SECURITY STUDENT AND AARCON INTERN

"The FARC consider themselves freedom fighters. Many Colombians see them as terrorists."

*From the film *Strangers to Peace* (2022).*

Three ex-guerrilla fighters face retribution, anxiety, and danger as they attempt to rebuild their lives after leaving the FARC army and the Colombian conflict. *Strangers to Peace* intimately captures the personal stories of Dayana, the market vendor navigating her new identity as a trans woman; Ricardo, the young father secretly clinging to his communist ideology; and Alexandra, the indigenous child soldier, who was forced to leave her family behind in the Amazon.

What is visible only from within Colombian society

On October 21, 2024, Aarcon invited producer Colleen Alena O'Brien, for the screening and Q&A event of the documentary *Strangers to Peace*. After the event, I interviewed her to learn more about her personal experiences while shooting the film and her understanding of the contemporary situation in Colombia.

Colleen Alena O'Brien

Postdoctoral researcher in the Department of Asian Studies at Palacký University in Olomouc, Czechia. She is a cultural and linguistic anthropologist interested in Indigenous languages and cultures; practical approaches to peacebuilding and reconciliation during and after conflict; ethnographic filmmaking; and fisheries management in the Caribbean.



Thank you for joining us today and taking the time for us. In *Strangers to Peace*, one of the key elements is the reintegration of former FARC combatants. Could you share your thoughts on the program?

This is probably an unpopular opinion among academics who study this and maybe activists too, but I think the reintegration program does a good job with the resources they have. Everyone I met who works there was so passionate; they really want to help these people. I mean, you could say that some of the things they do might not be the best designed. For example, a lot of people who have seen this movie pointed out that it was problematic that Alexandra's therapist pressured her to go back to her abusive mom. So, you could say that might not be a great approach. But maybe that is what's best for Colombian society. I don't know, I don't have an opinion on that, but in any case, you could criticize some of their individual strategies. You could criticize that there's a lack of funding, but the people who work there have good intentions and they're trying really hard to help these people reintegrate however they can. The program offers educational support. They'll pay for high school if you didn't finish, help you get into university, and give you some basic job training. They'll do all these things for you. In some respects, other Colombians are angry about that because they don't get the same opportunities. The people living in slums, they don't necessarily get free job training. But this agency does all of this for former combatants so that they don't rearm, and that is important and helpful. I think they are doing the best they can given the circumstances.

Some of the main characters seem to refuse any responsibility for the harm they caused. Do you think this is a common reaction among former combatants who participate in the reintegration program?



Of course, there are other factors, but there is a tendency among former combatants to refuse responsibility. ACR, The Colombian Reintegration Agency, for a long time, actually forced them to be like “What I did was wrong, I feel bad. I need to apologize to the society, my family, victims’ group and everybody.” In my opinion, this is problematic because it’s very black and white. If you’re a child soldier and you were kidnapped, forced into being a soldier, and forced to kill someone when you were ten years old, you still had to say, “I did something wrong, and I was bad, I regret my choices,” though the choice wasn’t truly yours. Their approach in the past was too black and white. Now

they’ve changed it partially, mainly because of the recent FARC demobilization in 2016. The FARC commanders and negotiators of the peace agreement don’t want to admit that what FARC did was wrong. That was a political project, and now they have a political party, too. So, they kind of apologize for something but usually in a very vague way. That could be like “Sorry that conflict happened,” or something. But they won’t be like “I’m sorry that I killed this woman’s son.” These vague apologies aren’t helpful. When I was working with current FARC members, none of them took responsibility for anything. They were just like “The FARC is great, our political vision is great, and now we don’t fight with weapons anymore, but we fight with words.” So, they are not apologetic.

In this kind of situation, do you feel civilians consider the conflict to be over?

That’s tricky. I think outsiders who aren’t familiar with Colombia often refer to it as a post-conflict society. Within Colombia, they call it a post-agreement society. I don’t think Colombians see the conflict as over, but they see it as a period following an agreement with one of the armed groups.

What do you think the film contributes to the international society on a broader scale?

I hope it opens up conversations about what's going on in Colombia and reintegration of ex-combatants in general. I would hope discussing this within a Colombian context could also be helpful for looking at Uganda or anywhere affected by conflict with child soldier, and what do you do with them after war. I hope this film could help understand Colombia and reintegration programs better. Also, I hope the film helps Colombians better understand the nuances of the armed conflict or the peace process, which they often don't know much about. That was interesting too in working on this project, because I'm an outsider, but on the other hand I know a lot about this by now. So, having conversations with Colombians about the conflict and reintegration process was useful, I think. And doing the screenings in Colombia, too. A lot of Colombians told me that they learned a lot from our film and this project, which is great. I also think filmmaking is a deeper way of showing what is going on. I could write an article about FARC reintegration, but only a couple of academics would read it, and it wouldn't impact people very much. Whereas a film, even people who don't care about the topic might watch it if it's in a film festival or something. So, it's a way to reach a broader audience.

After watching the film, I'm questioning myself what the end of conflict actually looks like in practice and how a social reintegration program should be structured when a conflict still lingers on. It might be difficult to find a proper answer to these questions, but that makes films and research such as these even more important to the field of conflict resolution and management.



About the author

Kana Ota is a master's degree student in Human Security program at Aarhus University. She is specifically interested in conflict mediation and the application of conflict management to cases of sexual violence. She is currently an intern at the Aarhus Centre for Conflict Management.

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