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Fragile Peace, Persistent Systems:
Child Recruitment through the Lens of the Transformative Justice Cube

Master's Dissertation

Abstract

Peace without transformation reproduces violence. In Colombia, child recruitment declined briefly after the 2016 Havana Accord, only to surge again in recent years. This thesis argues that recruitment is not a residue of conflict, but a systemic practice sustained by capitalism, coloniality, and patriarchy. Bound to the logics of capitalism, coloniality, and patriarchy, it governs symptoms while leaving systemic causes intact. To address this gap, the study develops the *Transformative Justice Cube* – a conceptual model that systematises explanatory dimensions, systemic logics, and levels of response. Applied to Colombia, the Cube reveals why recruitment endures and offers a framework with wider relevance for analysing systemic violence.

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The views expressed in this research do not necessarily represent those of the British Council and are the researcher’s own.

List of Abbreviations

AGC	Gaitanist Self-Defense Forces of Colombia
ELN	National Liberation Army
FARC-EP	Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia
IDP	internally displaced person
JEP	Special Jurisdiction for Peace
PDET	Development Programmes with a Territorial Focus
PPT	Temporary Protection Permits
TJ	Transitional Justice
UN	United Nations

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1. Introduction

"I did it for money for my family" (Cueto, 2025)

In June 2025, Colombia was reminded of how fragile the promise of peace remains (ibid.). A 15-year-old boy was arrested after attempting to assassinate a presidential candidate (ibid.). The case reverberated far beyond Colombia's borders. It confronted observers with the uncomfortable persistence of child recruitment – not in a context of open war, but nearly a decade after the celebrated 2016 peace accord (UNICEF, 2016; Maier, 2020; Vinet, 2020). The incident dramatised a broader reality: far from disappearing, child recruitment has resurged in recent years (Pannell, 2025).

The 2016 Havana Accord, officially titled the *Final Agreement to End the Armed Conflict and Build a Stable and Lasting Peace*, was widely praised as a milestone in Transitional Justice (TJ) (National Government of Colombia and FARC-EP, 2016; UNICEF, 2016; Maier, 2020; Vinet, 2020). Special recognition was given to children's rights, raising hopes that the recruitment of minors would soon belong to the past (National Government of Colombia and FARC-EP, 2016). Yet these hopes have not materialised. While reported cases of recruitment initially decreased after the signing of the accord, UNICEF estimates that more than 1,000 children were recruited between 2017 and 2020, and figures have risen sharply again since 2021 (UNICEF, 2016; Pannell, 2025). Some studies even document a rise of up to 1,200% in the post-pandemic years, linking this resurgence to economic collapse, territorial competition among armed actors, and the limited reach of public institutions (Cueto, 2025). Researchers suggest the true scale is even higher, pointing to underreporting in remote and marginalised regions (ibid.)

The persistence of recruitment almost a decade after the peace agreement reveals two central problems. First, it shows that recruitment is not simply a residue of conflict but a durable feature of Colombia's social order. Second, it signals that Transitional Justice mechanisms, despite their ambitious design, have failed to disrupt the systemic dynamics that sustain this practice. If TJ mechanisms were designed to protect children, how can recruitment not only persist but increase? The answer cannot be found in implementation failures alone. Instead, the persistence of recruitment points to systemic logics that transcend individual agreements or policies. These logics – capitalism, coloniality, and patriarchy – organise vulnerability in ways that render children structurally available to armed actors.

Against this backdrop, the thesis is guided by the following research question:

Which structural and systemic conditions enable the continued recruitment of child soldiers in Colombia after the 2016 peace agreement, and how do they prevent the transformative implementation of real change?

Approaching the problem through these questions allows for a dual contribution. Analytically, the thesis reconceptualises recruitment not as an aberration but as a predictable outcome of systemic violence. Conceptually, it situates the Colombian case within debates on Transitional and Transformative Justice. TJ, while effective in expanding recognition and creating institutional frameworks, has been criticised for its inability to challenge the deeper logics of inequality (Thomason, 2015). The argument advanced here is that TJ, by remaining embedded in existing capitalist, colonial, and patriarchal systems, cannot dismantle the conditions that sustain recruitment. At best, it manages the phenomenon within prevailing orders. Transformative Justice, though still under development, offers a framework for addressing these systemic dimensions

and thus help peace processes avoid reproducing the very inequalities they claim to overcome (Gready and Robins, 2019; Otálora-Gallego, 2025). As Otálora-Gallego (2025) suggests, its critiques are less fatal flaws than invitations to deepen the concept, ground it empirically, and explore its potential.

It is precisely in response to this challenge that the *Transformative Justice Cube* is developed in this thesis. While drawing on existing debates in peace and justice scholarship, the Cube represents the author's own conceptual contribution: By bringing together three analytical axes – dimensions of explanation, systems, and levels of response – it seeks to provide a heuristic model that both clarifies the dynamics of child recruitment in Colombia and offers a tool applicable to other manifestations of systemic violence. Importantly, this type of inquiry cannot remain at the level of abstract theorising. Research that aims to challenge systemic violence must also be attentive to context and specificity. As critics of Western universalism caution, theories of peace and justice risk reproducing the very hierarchies they seek to overcome if they ignore local knowledge, histories, and practices (Quijano, 2000; Mac Ginty and Richmond, 2013; Autesserre, 2014; Mac Ginty, 2016; Espinosa-Miñoso, 2024). For this reason, the thesis relies on a case study approach (Tellis, 1997).

The structure of the thesis reflects this dual ambition. The literature review situates the study within existing debates on child recruitment and TJ in general and in Colombia specifically, highlighting the gaps that a systemic approach can fill. The theoretical framework introduces the concepts of the Transformative Justice Cube, a model building on structural and systemic violence, Transitional Justice, and Transformative Justice, and outlines how this model informs the analysis. The methodology section explains how the thesis bridges micro-level experiences with macro-level systemic dynamics through a case study approach. The analysis unfolds in two parts. Part I applies the Transformative Justice Cube perspective to the phenomenon of child recruitment, examining how capitalism, coloniality, and patriarchy converge to sustain it. Part II critiques existing responses, showing that TJ mechanisms since 2016 have been unable to address recruitment's systemic roots. The conclusion synthesises these insights, reflects on the implications for Transformative Justice, and outlines the significance of the Transformative Justice Cube for both academic debates and peacebuilding practice.

2. Conflict Background

"Children do not start wars, adults do" (O'Neil, 2018, p. 43)

The Colombian armed conflict, which endured for more than fifty years, has its origins in persistent socio-economic inequalities, unresolved disputes over land ownership, and the marginalisation of rural communities (National Government of Colombia and FARC-EP, 2016; Luna, 2019; Maier, 2020; Lauer Perez, 2025). Its roots reach back to colonial rule, when Indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities were stripped of fertile land and resource-rich territories (Quijano, 2000; Luna, 2019). These patterns of expropriation, legalised and defended over centuries, created extremely unequal land distribution: A narrow elite consolidated vast estates while rural, Indigenous, and Afro-Colombian groups were relegated to poverty and political invisibility (Quijano, 2000; ABColombia, 2011). Demands for restitution and justice, voiced in peasant and minority movements, were consistently met with repression (ibid.).

It was in this context that leftist insurgencies emerged in the 1960s. Groups such as the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC-EP) and the National Liberation Army (ELN) positioned themselves as defenders of the rural poor, inspired by Marxist thought and liberation theology (Luna, 2019; Maier, 2020). The insurgent spectrum later diversified with movements like M-19 in the 1970s (Lauer Perez, 2025). Yet from the 1980s onwards, the ideological motivations became entangled with illicit economies (Parada, 2022). Drug trafficking provided guerrillas and paramilitaries alike with immense resources, transforming the conflict into a hybrid conflict of ideology, territorial control, and organised crime (ibid.)

The consequences for civilians were devastating. Over 220,000 were killed by 2012, by 2016 7.7 million displaced, and more than 9 million officially registered as victims by 2022 (Maier, 2020; Londoño, 2023, p. 3). Children were not spared but systematically targeted. Recruitment into guerrilla, paramilitary, and even state forces was widespread: Human Rights Watch estimated in 2003 that minors made up up to one-third of insurgent ranks and one-fifth of paramilitary forces (Downing *et al.*, 2022; Cueto, 2025). Their tasks ranged from trafficking and extortion to sexual servitude, intelligence work, and assassinations (Hurtado, Iranzo Dosdad and Gómez Hernández, 2017; ACAPS, 2024). The exploitation of children was thus not incidental but integral to the functioning of Colombia's conflict economy.

The 2016 Havana Accord, hailed internationally as a landmark of TJ, promised to reverse this trajectory (UNICEF, 2016; Maier, 2020; Vinet, 2020). Yet the celebrated design masked deeper continuities. While FARC-EP camps were demobilised, dissident factions quickly reconstituted, paramilitaries reorganised, and other armed groups seized vacated territories (Human Rights Watch, 2025; Lauer Perez, 2025). Today, at least eight armed conflicts persist, involving ELN guerrillas, FARC-EP dissidents, Gaitanist Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AGC) paramilitaries, and transnational criminal networks (ibid.). Within this complex landscape, child recruitment persists. Today, Colombia remains marked by what Lederach describes as "contemporary conflict" – a cycle of recurring violence despite formal agreements (Maier, 2020).

3. Literature Review

3.1 Child Soldiers: A Historical and Contemporary Perspective

The recruitment of children by armed groups in Colombia must be understood within a broader debate about the drivers of child soldiering globally. While some scholars have framed the phenomenon as a feature of so-called 'new wars' arising from state collapse and changing forms of conflict (Singer, 2006), historical evidence contradicts the assumption of novelty (Mann, 1987; Miller, 2016; Vargas and Restrepo-Jaramillo, 2016). Instances of children in combat have been documented across a range of historical conflicts, suggesting that their involvement is neither unprecedented nor limited to a specific type of conflict (ibid.).

Despite its long history, the issue only gained sustained international attention in the late twentieth century, coinciding with the development of a normative framework that prohibits child recruitment in armed conflict (Vargas and Restrepo-Jaramillo, 2016). Key milestones included the 1977 Additional Protocols to the Geneva Conventions and the 2000 *Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict*, signalling an emerging international

consensus on the need for child protection (OHCHR, 2000; Vargas and Restrepo-Jaramillo, 2016). Yet this framework has not eradicated the practice, as rising numbers demonstrate (UNICEF, 2023; Cueto, 2025; Pannell, 2025).

Colombia is consistently identified in United Nations (UN) reports as one of the countries most affected by child recruitment (Vargas and Restrepo-Jaramillo, 2016). Non-state armed groups such as the FARC-EP and the ELN were among the most persistent recruiters for decades (ibid.). Moreover, the post-accord fragmentation and reorganisation of armed actors have, according to several scholars, reinforced the persistence of recruitment, as dissident factions and successor groups continue to rely on this practice territories (Downing *et al.*, 2022; Human Rights Watch, 2025; Lauer Perez, 2025).

3.2 Explaining Recruitment: Between Strategy, Agency, and Structures

Understanding the systemic and structural drivers of child recruitment requires engaging with the question of how and why children become involved in armed groups. Scholarship offers a range of explanations that can be broadly divided into two perspectives: on the one hand, the organisational and strategic decisions of armed groups; on the other, the agency, motivations, and vulnerabilities of the children themselves. Complementary accounts highlight structural and contextual conditions such as poverty, violence markets, and social disintegration.

3.2.1 Recruitment as Organisational Choice

A significant body of literature views recruitment as a strategic organisational choice. Vargas and Restrepo-Jaramillo (2016) emphasise the importance of the “demand side”, arguing that groups deliberately recruit children because of their perceived advantages. Scholars frequently stress that children represent cheap and long-term labour, are more obedient, easier to manipulate and indoctrinate, and sometimes perform specific tasks more effectively than adults (Singer, 2006; Beber *et al.*, 2013; Vargas and Restrepo-Jaramillo, 2016). This perspective has been widely applied to Colombia, where Hurtado, Iranzo Dosdad and Gómez Hernández (2017) underline the strategic value armed actors assign to children. Andvig and Gates (2010, p. 78) argue that organisational preferences and incentives weigh more heavily than local socioeconomic conditions, even though such conditions “affect the supply of children available for recruitment or abduction”. Gates (2011) further develops this line of reasoning, noting that specific organisational structures, such as personalised chains of command or dependence on looted resources, increase the likelihood of child recruitment.

Yet this approach is not without limitations. Vargas and Restrepo-Jaramillo (2016) criticise the reliance on generalised assumptions about “childhood”, which ignore cultural and age-related differences. Variations between conflicts, and even between groups within the same region, are not adequately explained (ibid.). Other authors caution against portraying traits such as irrationality or manipulability as uniquely “childlike”, since these characteristics are equally observable among adults (Cramer, 2002; Kahneman, 2003; World Bank, 2015; Vargas and Restrepo-Jaramillo, 2016).

Spatial vulnerability is another factor. Achvarina and Reich (2006) show that large concentrations of unprotected children, for example in refugee or internally displaced person (IDP) camps, substantially increase the likelihood of recruitment. Guarin Arellano (2024) notes similar dynamics but stresses that this mechanism applies only

in limited ways to Colombia. Whereas Vargas and Restrepo-Jaramillo (2016) argued that Colombian recruitment occurred largely without systematic recourse to camps, the massive influx of Venezuelan refugees since 2015 has shifted the situation. With numbers rising from around 48,700 in 2015 to more than 2.8 million by 2025 (International Organization for Migration, 2024), new recruitment spaces have emerged that remain underexplored in current literature.

3.2.2 Agency and Vulnerability of Children

Beyond the recruiters view, scholarship also examines the agency and motivations of children themselves. Molloy (2024, p. 58) argues that while forced recruitment is central, "in most cases, forced enlistment is not the way a child soldier joins the army". Haer (2019, p. 76) stresses the need to account for individual motivations to explain variance across cases. Studies demonstrate that children may join armed groups for diverse reasons: to escape domestic abuse (Brett, 2003), to gain social status (Kohrt *et al.*, 2016) or out of economic necessity (Brett and Specht, 2004). Family ties can also act as pull-factors when relatives are directly involved in conflict (ibid.).

In Colombia, the majority of children are reported to join "voluntarily" (Vargas and Restrepo-Jaramillo, 2016; Hurtado, Iranzo Dosdad and Gómez Hernández, 2017; Hurtado, Iranzo Dosdad and Rodríguez, 2023, pp. 77–78), though voluntariness must be critically interrogated in contexts of asymmetrical power and structural pressure. Many studies point to structural drivers such as unemployment, poverty, lack of access to education, social exclusion, and limited opportunities, all of which render children vulnerable to recruitment (Hurtado, Iranzo Dosdad and Gómez Hernández, 2017; Hurtado, Iranzo Dosdad and Rodríguez, 2023). Vargas and Restrepo-Jaramillo (2016) identify strong connection between recruitment and rural poverty, low school access, and coca cultivation.

Yet structural conditions are not uniform drivers; they operate in ambivalent ways. Missing education, for instance, reduces opportunity costs for recruitment but schools can also function as a site of ideological mobilisation (Brett and Specht, 2004). Child labour can normalise early adult roles and thereby ease military recruitment, yet it may simultaneously constitute an alternative to joining armed groups (Vargas and Restrepo-Jaramillo, 2016).

Poverty emerges as a particularly salient driver. Brett and Specht (2004, p. 127) describe it as "the single most commonly identifiable characteristic of child soldiers". Vargas and Restrepo-Jaramillo (2016) empirically demonstrate that Colombian municipalities with high rural poverty, limited education, and coca cultivation display significantly higher rates of child recruitment. Singer (2010) adds, that marginalised children must not be seen solely as victims but also as actors in violence markets, where evolving conflict economies normalise their use. Honwana (2006, p. 46) links these dynamics to postcolonial crises that undermine social structures, producing a "commodification of children". Hurtado, Iranzo Dosdad and Gómez Hernández (2017) and Hurtado, Iranzo Dosdad and Rodríguez (2023) extend this argument, framing recruitment as a form of human trafficking: judicial records and testimonies reveal children subjected to multiple forms of exploitation, both economic and sexual.

Finally, conflict itself remains a key driver. Civil wars destabilise communities, destroy livelihoods, and normalise violence (Brett and Specht, 2004). Colombian data indicates that recruitment rose during periods of intensified conflict and declined as groups

weakened (Vargas and Restrepo-Jaramillo, 2016). Armed conflict thus operates not merely as context but as catalyst for recruitment.

3.3 Transitional Justice: Ambitions and Limitations

Since the signing of the 2016 Peace Accord, Colombia has implemented a series of policies and programs aimed at preventing child soldier recruitment (Vinet, 2020). One of the core measures has been the integration of child protection provisions into the peace agreement, explicitly prohibiting the recruitment and use of children by armed actors and strengthening institutions tasked with monitoring, reporting, and offering psychosocial support to affected minors (Martuscelli and Villa, 2018; Vinet, 2020; Armas Contreras, 2025). Transitional Justice mechanisms, such as the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP), now prosecute former commanders responsible for child recruitment and establish truth commissions that highlight the experiences of child victims, including specialized committees for children and adolescents (González Cabrera, 2024; Armas Contreras, 2025).

Yet TJ, both generally and in Colombia, faces sustained criticism. Mainstream TJ is widely critiqued for its narrow legalist and technocratic focus, which privileges criminal accountability and civil-political rights while neglecting root causes of conflict such as structural violence, socioeconomic inequality, and the legacies of colonialism (Gready and Robins, 2019). Bell (2016, p. 1) describes this as a set of “fundamental ambiguities”, offering neither a clear theory of change nor meaningful engagement with root causes. These critiques apply directly to Colombia. Molloy (2024), in a study of 77 peace agreements worldwide, concludes that “most agreements fail to fully address either the root causes or future prevention of child soldiering”. The Havana Accord is no exception: while the text includes child protection clauses, structural drivers remain unaddressed (Martuscelli and Villa, 2018). Downing (2014) notes that measures against recruitment require not only legal prohibition but also stronger state presence and developmental initiatives targeting poverty and education.

Other critiques focus on representational politics. A report by Forced Migration Review (Armas Contreras, 2025) demonstrates that Colombian TJ frames ex-combatant children primarily as passive victims, hindering both reintegration and understanding of recruitment’s socio-historical conditions. Martuscelli and Villa (2018) how that during the FARC-EP negotiations, children were alternately depicted as victims or threats, but rarely as agents. Mitra (2022), similarly argues that simplified humanitarian narratives, while politically expedient, marginalise children’s own voices and experiences.

Gendered dimensions are also often sidelined. Martuscelli and Villa (2018) reveal that gendered harms were frequently simplified, with women, and particularly girls, portrayed predominantly as victims. The systematic exclusion of women and girls from meaningful participation in peace processes further entrenched marginalisation (ibid.). Recent reporting by Children Change Colombia underscores the issue: child recruitment has surged since the COVID-19 pandemic, yet the JEP’s ability to address new recruitment strategies and gender-specific violence remains limited (Mawer, 2025).

Structural critiques also highlight the embedding of TJ within broader political economies. From a decolonial feminist perspective, Paarlberg-Kvam (2021) shows how commitments to gender equity and redistribution were undermined by the prioritisation of extractivist economic models, particularly in mining and biofuel sectors. Such dynamics reproduce precisely the inequalities peace processes are intended to

overcome. Decolonial analyses stress that TJ often enacts Eurocentric models, disregarding indigenous legal practices and thereby perpetuating epistemic violence (Durdiyeva, 2024). Wright, Rolston and Ní Aoláin (2023) note that colonial continuities remain largely absent in analyses of the Havana Accord, despite the urgent need for decolonising peace processes and institutions. Even the accord's ostensibly innovative "territorial peace" framework has been criticised as insufficiently reflective of power dynamics Cairo et al. (2018).

Overall, critiques warn that unless TJ engages seriously with economic, gendered, and colonial power relations, it risks losing legitimacy and effectiveness. Violence may then be reproduced in new forms rather than dismantled (Gready and Robins, 2019).

3.4 Research Gap: Towards a Transformative Lens

The existing literature provides valuable insights into individual motives, structural risk factors, and organisational strategies in Colombian child recruitment, as well as extensive critiques of Transitional Justice. Yet it rarely integrates these strands systematically. Analyses tend to focus on specific structures without connecting them to the deeper systemic logics that sustain recruitment even after the 2016 Havana Accord. This leaves a conceptual gap: TJ addresses symptoms but fails to engage with systemic dimensions. It is precisely here that this thesis intervenes. Colombia serves as a case study to demonstrate the need for advancing Transitional Justice towards Transformative Justice (Gready and Robins, 2019), and creating a framework attentive to both structural and systemic violence.

4. Theoretical Framework: Transformative Justice Cube

This thesis develops a theoretical framework that captures the interplay between agency, structures of violence, systemic logics, and peacebuilding responses. The central assumption is that child soldier recruitment cannot be reduced either to individual decisions or to isolated structural flaws. Instead, it emerges from the interaction of multiple dimensions, which this framework brings together in a three-dimensional model (Figure 1).

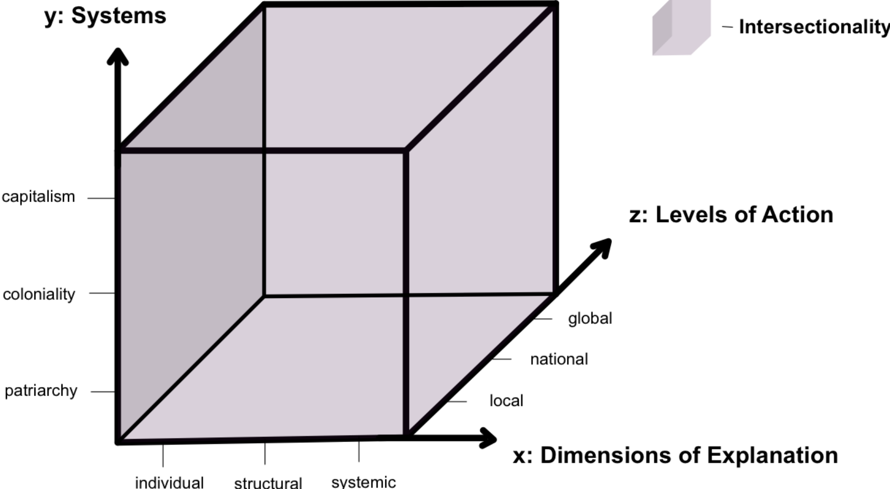

Figure 1: Transformative Justice Cube (own illustration)

This heuristic cube structures the following discussion. The X-axis is elaborated through the concepts of structural violence, systemic violence, and agency, defining how children's choices are shaped within and against violence. The Y-axis foregrounds capitalism, coloniality, and patriarchy as systemic logics of harm. Intersectionality is introduced as the transversal lens connecting and reproducing these logics. Finally, the Z-axis situates these dynamics within peacebuilding responses, critically engaging with Transitional Justice and making the case for transformative justice as a more adequate framework.

4.1 Dimensions of Explanation

4.1.1 Agency, Child Soldiers and Recruitment Dynamics

In this analysis "agency" is understood as the capacity of children and young people to act purposefully within – and in response to – their social, political, and economic contexts (Dowding, 2008). Recognising agency is essential to avoid overly simplistic victim-perpetrator binaries that obscure the complexity of child soldiers' experiences. While structural, systematic, and intersectional inequalities constrain children's choices (ibid.), framing them solely as passive victims or inherent threats is misleading. Integrating agency into this framework moves the analysis beyond reductive classifications. Combined with structural, systemic violence and intersectionality, it frames recruitment not as individual choice but as the outcome of interwoven relations of domination encompassing colonial, racialised, patriarchal and economic dimensions.

4.1.2 Structural and Systemic Violence

The concept of structural violence was first articulated by Johan Galtung (1969, p.170), who expanded the notion of violence beyond visible, physical acts to encompass harm embedded within social structures. Structural violence refers to systematic inequalities in power relations and institutions that prevent people from meeting their basic needs and realising their potential (ibid., p.168-169). It produces avoidable disparities in health, education, security and life opportunities (ibid.)

Galtung's model distinguishes between direct, structural, and cultural violence, which together constitute the "violence triangle" (Galtung, 1990). Cultural violence legitimises and normalises both structural and direct violence by ideologically or symbolically justifying existing inequalities (McGill, 2017, p. 6). This perspective is especially relevant in post-conflict societies, where violence is not limited to big acts but remains deeply embedded in everyday social structures (ibid.)

Structural violence has tangible consequences. It creates fertile ground for direct violence by reproducing poverty, exclusion and political marginalisation (Farmer, 1996; Thomason, 2015). Analytically, it can be broken down into three dimensions (Gready, 2010; McGill, 2017): social marginalisation, meaning the exclusion of certain groups from participation and recognition; political exclusion, referring to the denial of effective political agency even under formal democracy; and economic exploitation, that is, systematic poverty, inequality and the denial of resources and opportunities. In practice, they are deeply intertwined and mutually reinforcing (McGill 2017, p. 7). In Colombia, this entanglement is evident in land conflicts, rural economic marginalisation, and political disempowerment of specific populations (ibid.).

However, Galtung has been criticised for treating these structures as though they were malfunctions that could be repaired without addressing the wider systems that

generate them: Winter (2012) notes his neglect of class, gender, race and coloniality. Global economic structures interact with local contexts: even land reforms may reproduce poverty and dependency (McGill, 2017). Latin American feminists sharpen this critique and highlight how neoliberal reforms exacerbate poverty and gender-based violence (Muñoz Cabrera, 2010). Structural violence alone risks obscuring how race, class, and gender intersect to reproduce oppression, suggesting inequalities are not flaws but actively sustained for systemic ends.

This points towards systemic violence, shifting the focus from individual structures to broader systems. While structural violence identifies harmful arrangements, systemic violence, as Žižek (2010, p. 2) describes, highlights that these structures are integral to the "smooth functioning of our economic and political systems" and legitimised through the assertion that "there is no alternative" (ibid.). They are not broken, they work exactly as intended to sustain profit, privilege, and control.

In Colombia, this means that rural poverty, racialised dispossession, and the gendered experiences of child soldiers are not anomalies but functional to a broader system of profit and control. Understanding recruitment through the lens of systemic violence thus links local vulnerabilities to the global capitalist-colonial order.

4.2 Systems of Capitalism, Coloniality, and Patriarchy

Systemic violence becomes intelligible when placed within the logics of capitalism, coloniality, and patriarchy – the Y-axis of the framework. These are not separate spheres but interlocking systems that sustain structural inequalities (Espinosa-Miñoso, 2024).

Moore (2017) conceptualises the current epoch as the *capitalocene*, in which capital is not merely an economic force but the organising axis of life itself. Colonial hierarchies, far from being historical remnants, continue to structure global and local relations of production, governance, and legitimacy (Rodney, 2018). Coloniality is therefore understood as "the naturalization of territorial, racial, cultural, libidinal, and epistemic hierarchies that enable the reproduction of dominant relationships" (Losada Cubillos, 2018). Lugones (2010) adds that these hierarchies "became woven into the historicity of relations, including gender relations" (ibid., p.743), as colonialism imposed rigid dichotomies that naturalised both racial and gendered forms of subordination. Her notion of the "coloniality of gender" highlights how "racialized, colonial and capitalist heterosexualist" logics intersect to reproduce oppression (ibid., p.746), while decolonial feminism is understood as the praxis of contesting and transforming these very logics (ibid., p.747). Early feminist voices such as Luisa Capetillo insisted emancipation requires linking struggles against labour exploitation and patriarchy, underscoring their mutual reinforcement (Ruiz, 2023). More recently, decolonial feminists foreground coloniality and state violence as central to systemic oppression (Muñoz Cabrera, 2010). Gendered violence and state power in Latin America cannot be separated from colonial legacies that structure political authority and economic exclusion (ibid.).

4.3 Intersectionality as Transversal Lens

While the concept of systemic violence clarifies that structures are embedded within larger systems, intersectionality helps to identify *who* is most affected, *why* they are targeted, and *how* these effects are produced through overlapping axes of oppression

(Crenshaw, 1991). Coined by the Afro-American scholar Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw intersectionality expresses a “complex system of multiple, simultaneous structure of oppression” (Muñoz Cabrera, 2010, p. 10) in which race, gender, class, colonialism and other forms of power interact to produce unique and compounded “new dimension of disempowerment”. (ibid.) Colonialism, in this sense, is not a closed historical event but an ongoing structure (“coloniality”) shaping hierarchies, property relations and ideas of civilisation and legality (Wright, Rolston and Ní Aoláin, 2023, p. 67). Consequently, it rejects treating these as separate factors, instead showing them as mutually constitutive in configuring prevailing structures of violence today.

This underscores that marginalisation does not operate homogeneously. Intersectional oppressions are reproduced through neoliberal, colonial and patriarchal logics (Espinosa-Miñoso, 2024). Indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities face specific dispossession, racialised exploitation and political exclusion (McGill, 2017). Gender dynamics are likewise critical: girls are not only combatants but are also subjected to gender-based violence and often overlooked when programmes conceptualise child soldiers as predominantly male (Saenz Galvis and Carmona-Parra, 2021). López and Hart (2022) further highlight how Latin American literature exposes connections between corruption, political violence, and gendered harm.

4.4 Peacebuilding Responses

4.4.1 Transitional Justice

The Z-axis situates these dynamics within the realm of peacebuilding responses, where mechanisms operate at the local, national, and global levels. Here, Transitional Justice has become the dominant paradigm, aiming to support societies in moving from “violent or authoritarian pasts” towards a just future by establishing accountability, rehabilitating victims and promoting institutional change (Paige, 2009; McGill, 2017). This “toolkit” (van den Berg, 2022, p. 122), encompasses three key models: retributive justice, restorative justice, and distributive justice (Clark, 2008; Lamont, 2016, p. xi). Retributive justice concentrates on holding perpetrators legally accountable and imposing punishment through formal prosecution (ibid.). Restorative justice, by contrast, seeks to repair social relationships and promote reconciliation, often through instruments such as truth commissions (ibid.). Finally, distributive justice aims to confront structural violence directly by supporting measures like community reconstruction and the redistribution of resources (ibid.).

In Colombia, TJ has played a central role in the peace process following the 2016 agreement. Various mechanisms – prosecutions, truth commissions, reparations programmes and institutional reforms – aim to reconcile the country with its violent past, rebuild institutional trust, transform social norms, and prevent recurrence (McGill, 2017).

However, as Latin American decolonial feminists point out, mainstream TJ frameworks often import Eurocentric legal paradigms that marginalize local understandings of justice and memory (Lugones, 2010; Espinosa-Miñoso, 2024). There is thus a risk of “discursive colonization”, where international norms and external expertise override the lived experiences of those most affected (Espinosa-Miñoso, 2009). In practice TJ has often been dominated by a criminal justice paradigm (McGill, 2017). Approximately 82% of global TJ measures focus on individual criminal accountability (Olsen, Payne and Reiter, 2010). Yet it has been widely criticised for neglecting structural violence and socio-economic drivers of conflict (Thomason, 2015, p. 75). In the case of child

soldiers in Colombia, this means that prosecuting commanders addresses individual perpetrators, while the social and economic factors that make children vulnerable to recruitment largely persist.

4.4.2 Transformative Justice

It quickly becomes clear that existing TJ approaches are insufficient and require further development. Drawing on the concept of structural injustice, Thomason (2015) argues for rethinking TJ as "structural justice", which must "(a) revise or abolish the original institutions that contributed to the violence and (b) implement new institutions that prevent economic, social, or political disenfranchisement". As Otálora-Gallego (2025) similarly emphasises that direct and structural violence form a continuum that TJ mechanisms must address comprehensively if they are to achieve meaningful transformation.

Latin American decolonial feminists deepen this analysis. For example, Espinosa-Miñoso (2024) critiques mainstream feminist engagement with TJ for importing Western notions of gender that erase racialized and colonial violence endured by Black and Indigenous women. Feminist justice must disrupt colonial power relations, embrace intersectionality, and prioritise affected communities' epistemologies.

The notion of "transformative" is central here. The concept of Transformative Justice has gained increasing prominence (Wright, Rolston and Ní Aoláin, 2023). Unlike conventional TJ models, which primarily aim to establish individual accountability and restore rule-of-law institutions, Transformative Justice calls for a much deeper engagement with the socio-economic and political structures that enable and reproduce violence (McGill, 2017; Wright, Rolston and Ní Aoláin, 2023). Wright, Rolston and Ní Aoláin (2023) identify two fundamental challenges that TJ faces in addressing coloniality. First, there is the question of how and why TJ should engage with colonial harm – how far back historical reckoning should go, and what forms of reparation are appropriate (ibid.). Second, there is the critique that TJ itself can function as a tool of (neo)colonial power by imposing international norms and external expertise to export "proper" democratisation and human rights – often at odds with local self-determination and concepts of justice (ibid.).

These tensions are particularly evident in Colombia, where the TJ process has been heavily shaped by international actors, and NGOs from the Global North, raising questions about epistemic inequality and local ownership. Moreover, the concept of "colonial debris" (Stoler, cited in Wright, Rolston and Ní Aoláin, 2023) points to the enduring remnants of colonial projects that continue to organise social structures and reproduce inequality. Scholars such as Park (2015, p.273) suggest that "within the context of settler colonialism, the goal of transitional justice must be decolonisation". Latin American decolonial feminists highlight the necessity of reparations that go beyond restoring the status quo, focusing instead on land rights, economic justice, and cultural autonomy for marginalized groups (Rubio-Marín, 2009).

These debates underscore the necessity of adopting an intersectional, decolonial and transformative approach to justice in order to dismantle systemic logics that profit from exclusion and prevent recruitment of child soldiers. As long as structural and systemic inequalities, racialised marginalisation and patriarchal violence persist, children remain vulnerable to (re)recruitment, even in a formally "peaceful" society.

4.5 Conclusion

In conclusion, the heuristic cube developed here is not only a framework for this thesis but also a contribution to the ongoing theorisation of Transformative Justice. As Otálora-Gallego (2025) reminds us, critiques of Transformative Justice should be read less as "insurmountable defects" than as a call to deepen the concept. The argument in this thesis is that Transformative Justice must explicitly incorporate the systemic dimension (Lugones, 2010; Žižek, 2010; Espinosa-Miñoso, 2024) and be operationalised through a model that links agency (Dowding, 2008), systemic logics, and peacebuilding levels (Clark, 2008; Lamont, 2016; McGill, 2017) via intersectional thinking (Crenshaw, 1991). This approach aims to move beyond Western epistemologies (Rodney, 2018; Espinosa-Miñoso, 2024) while opening pathways for transformative solutions (Wright, Rolston and Ní Aoláin, 2023). When peace processes fail to recognise this context, they risk producing, at best, superficial stability while leaving the conditions for renewed violence intact. With this theoretical foundation established, the next chapter turns to the empirical analysis of child soldier recruitment in Colombia.

5. Methodology

5.1 Case Study, Exploratory and Explanatory Approach

To address the research question, this study adopts a case study design to investigate in depth the structural and systemic violence underpinning the continued recruitment of child soldiers in Colombia following the 2016 peace agreement. A case study is defined as "an in-depth, multifaceted investigation […] of a single social phenomenon" (Feagin, Orum and Sjoberg, 1991, p. 2). This approach enables a context-sensitive analysis of the mechanisms of violence and allows for a holistic perspective drawing on multiple sources and perspectives (Tellis, 1997) and, according to Yin (2009), strengthens validity.

This research employs an exploratory and explanatory approach (Stebbins, 2001; Næss, 2015): it seeks to uncover mechanisms of violence in Colombia that remain underexplored, while at the same time questioning the limits of existing Transitional and Transformative Justice debates (Gready and Robins, 2019) and thus reflect back on the theory itself. To this end, the author develops the *Transformative Justice Cube* as an original conceptual tool: it expands Transformative Justice by explicitly integrating the systemic dimension, moving analysis beyond Western epistemologies and opening pathways for transformative solutions. The case study therefore serves as a site for theory-building.

5.2 Data Collection and Operationalisation

The analysis draws on a combination of mainly secondary sources and key documents such as the MEAC findings report (Downing *et al.*, 2022). Sources include academic literature, government documents, NGO reports, and journalism. Data collection is purposeful and theory-driven, guided by the framework's focus on structures, systems, and intersectional dynamics.

Structures are defined as institutional arrangements, legal frameworks, or social practices that perpetuate harm and marginalisation. Operationalisation involves identifying recurring patterns of exclusion over time. When harmful arrangements persist despite reform, this signals a resilient system rather than isolated structures.

Systems are characterised by their capacity to absorb or deflect reforms while maintaining inequality. Tracing these dynamics allows the study to differentiate between structural and systemic violence, offering insight into why vulnerabilities endure.

5.3 Epistemological Reflection

Epistemologically, this research is conscious of its own limitations and reflects on knowledge asymmetries between the Global North and South. As a scholar with no direct connection to Colombia, there are inherent constraints on access and understanding. To mitigate this, the study systematically engages with South American scholarship, particularly Colombian voices, and prioritises works based on interviews with affected individuals, thereby indirectly incorporating their voices into the analysis. This approach aims to counter colonial knowledge hierarchies and enable a more inclusive perspective.

5.4 Ethical Considerations

The study involves no direct contact with participants, minimising ethical risks. Sources are publicly available, and the use of sensitive testimonies follows Jones (1999) guidance on privacy. Respect for dignity and careful contextualisation are maintained when working with accounts of survivors.

5.5 Contribution

Although based on existing materials, the study contributes new knowledge by offering an original theoretical synthesis. It identifies enduring structures of violence in Colombia, while also exposing the limitations of international Transitional Justice mechanisms. More importantly, the case becomes a site for refining Transformative Justice: showing that only by engaging with systemic logics can we move beyond Western epistemologies and lay the groundwork for inclusive solutions. The study further contributes by introducing the Transformative Justice Cube as a heuristic model that systematises and connects different analytical dimensions. This framework not only advances conceptual clarity within Transformative Justice debates but also provides a tool that can be adapted to other contexts of systemic violence. In this way, the study produces both context-specific insights and broader reflections on how peace processes might be designed in a more sensitive and sustainable manner.

6. Analysis

Child recruitment in Colombia is commonly framed through “push-pull” drivers (Gutiérrez Sanín, 2010; Arjona, 2014; Downing *et al.*, 2022; Hurtado, Iranzo Dosdad and Rodríguez, 2023). Yet “there is no single combination of factors” (Downing *et al.*, 2022, p. 4) sufficient to explain patterns across contexts and motivations are “intricate and multifaceted” (Guarin Arellano, 2024, p. 38). This chapter advances a stronger claim: Child recruitment a predictable outcome of systemic violence, reproduced by the interlocking systems of capitalism, coloniality, and patriarchy. Using the Transformative Justice Cube, the analysis examines how constrained agency, capitalist exploitation, colonial hierarchies, and patriarchal orders render children structurally available to armed actors. It further interrogates why current Transitional Justice responses introduced after the 2016 Havana Accord remain inadequate, failing to disrupt these logics, leaving conditions for renewed recruitment intact.

6.1 Child Recruitment as Spawn of Systems

6.1.1 Agency within Constrained Systems

Acknowledging the constrained agency of child soldiers challenges simplistic binaries of voluntary versus forced recruitment. In Colombia, an estimated 75% to 85% of children reportedly joined armed groups “voluntarily” (Vargas and Restrepo-Jaramillo, 2016; Hurtado, Iranzo Dosdad and Gómez Hernández, 2017; Hurtado, Iranzo Dosdad and Rodríguez, 2023, pp. 77–78), a pattern mirrored globally (Hurtado, Iranzo Dosdad and Rodríguez, 2023). Yet voluntariness must be situated within environments where “armed groups are the only employer and exert physical control over the populace” (Downing *et al.*, 2022, pp. 4–5), rendering enlistment a “realistic survival strategy” (ibid.). For many, affiliation is less an expression of ideological commitment than a means of securing food, shelter, or protection from gender-based violence (ibid.).

Recruitment is never one-sided. While some children actively seek affiliation, armed groups also deploy varied strategies of incorporation: In Colombia, paramilitary groups, state forces, and criminal networks have all targeted minors (Downing *et al.*, 2022; Cueto, 2025). Alongside abduction and coercion, contemporary tactics include offering money, positions of authority, or organising community events (ACAPS, 2024). Groups increasingly use TikTok, WhatsApp, and Facebook to project a “glamourised image of life in arms” (Cueto, 2025; Pannell, 2025). Recruitment thus occupies a grey zone between voluntary and forced (Bjørkhaug, 2010; Hurtado, Iranzo Dosdad and Rodríguez, 2023), characterised by Honwana’s “tactical agency” – agentic acts within unfreedom (2009).

The critical question, then, is not whether children “choose”, but which structures render such choices intelligible and how exit is foreclosed (Phillips, 2013; Hurtado, Iranzo Dosdad and Rodríguez, 2023). Poverty, insecurity and the absence of alternatives make affiliation rational, while threats, debts, territorial domination, and fear of retaliation ensure that leaving is more dangerous than staying (ibid.). Conflicts must thus be viewed less as anarchic breakdowns than as “social orders” organising labour and opportunity (Durrenberger and Martí, 2006). Recruitment becomes a form of integration into violent economies sustained by systemic inequalities.

6.1.2 Capitalist Precarity and Unfree Labour

Economic necessity remains the most frequently reported motive for recruitment: In one study, 68% of children reported wages or work opportunities as their primary reason for joining (Gutiérrez Sanín, 2010), with practitioners repeatedly linking vulnerability to unemployment, school disruptions and collapsing licit livelihoods (ACAPS, 2024). The COVID-19 pandemic intensified these pressures: “With the problem of the pandemic and without schools, those who do not like to work virtually left to look for jobs and got recruited”, recalled one woman from Guapi (Downing *et al.*, 2022, p. 12)

Paramilitary groups institutionalised financial incentives, offering monthly salaries ranging from US$85 for foot soldiers to US$1,745 for commanders, while guerrilla factions traditionally rely less on wages (Hurtado, Iranzo Dosdad and Rodríguez, 2023, p. 78). Benefits such as maternity leave for young mothers further blur the boundary between military service and employment (ibid.). These practices demonstrate how recruitment intersects with “tactical agency” (Honwana, 2009) and labour relations, positioning armed groups as employers embedded within capitalist logics.

In impoverished regions marked by displacement and unemployment, where the state has failed to provide, armed groups function as “employers of last resort” (Downing *et al.*, 2022, p. 5). Steinfeld (2001, p.14) captures this dilemma: individuals often face “a choice between disagreeable alternatives and chooses the lesser evil”. For children, this means entering arrangements of “unfree labour” where entry may not be coerced, but exit is precluded (Phillips, 2013, p. 178).

The drivers of such recruitment extend beyond individual circumstances and must be situated within global capitalist dynamics. Child recruitment is embedded in extractive, territorial, and protection economies in which land control, resource flows, and violence generate financial returns (Le Billon, 2011; Gago and Mezzadra, 2017; Paarlberg-Kvam, 2021). In Colombia, illegal gold mining and agro-industrial megaprojects constitute points where armed actors enforce labour, reproduce dependency, and consolidate territorial authority (ABColombia, 2011) and coca-producing departments such as Cauca and Putumayo illustrate how illicit economies thrive where legal livelihoods collapse (Cueto, 2025). Those who control these resources simultaneously shape the conditions of local sovereignty (Hurtado, Iranzo Dosdad and Rodríguez, 2023). International drug trafficking, arms trading, and extractive industries insert child recruitment into circuits of global accumulation, rendering children disposable labour in conflict economies (Le Billon, 2011; Gago and Mezzadra, 2017; Paarlberg-Kvam, 2021). Here, capitalism does not merely produce precarity – it normalises it, embedding children into exploitative systems of production.

Exploitation within these groups mirrors wider patterns of labour exploitation. Recruited children endured long working days for meagre wages, strict hierarchies, and conditions that damaged health and obstructed education (Hurtado, Iranzo Dosdad and Rodríguez, 2023, p. 79). Far from resisting capitalist logics, armed groups internalised them, transforming child soldiers into commodified labourers (Honwana, 2009). Reintegration programmes that simply return children to the same neoliberal economy without structural reform risk perpetuating this cycle. As Hurtado, Iranzo Dosdad and Rodríguez (2023, p. 82) caution, if children continue to face only “a choice between bad and worse”, violent groups will remain a viable alternative, even in post-conflict contexts.

6.1.3 Colonial Legacies and Racialised

The racialised dimensions of recruitment further reveal how Colombia’s colonial legacies shape vulnerability. According to the Single Registry of Victims, of the 9,707 officially registered child soldier victims between 1985 and 2023, 1,763 belonged to ethnic minority groups, 59% Indigenous and the remainder predominantly Afro-Colombian (ABColombia, 2025). Although minorities only form 12% of the population, they are vastly overrepresented (ACAPS, 2024, p. 7). This disproportion reflects the “coloniality of power”: persistent hierarchies that naturalise racialised dispossession and territorial exclusion (Losada Cubillos, 2018). Historical legacies of land expropriation, systemic racism, and state neglect leave Indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities acutely exposed to armed violence (Quijano, 2000). Chocó, where 79.5% of residents identify as Afro-Colombian, exemplifies these dynamics and exhibits some of the country’s highest recruitment risks (ACAPS, 2024).

Recruitment dynamics differ between rural and urban contexts but remain racialised in both. In rural departments such as Cauca, Nariño, and Chocó, where Indigenous and Afro-Colombian populations predominate and state presence is weak, armed actors

exploit entrenched poverty and marginalisation to embed militarisation within extractive frontiers of coca cultivation and mining (ACAPS, 2024). In other municipalities such as San José del Guaviare, and La Uribe – long dominated by the FARC-EP and later paramilitary groups – over 40% of respondents reported child recruitment as common practice (Downing *et al.*, 2022, p. 9). Such entrenched geographies of violence, cultivated over decades, cannot simply be dismantled overnight. In these spaces, armed groups exercise informal sovereignty through informal institutions establishing parallel systems of justice, employment, and security (Arjona, 2014; Hurtado, Iranzo Dosdad and Rodríguez, 2023). Recruitment becomes woven into the social order, to the point that paramilitary groups use radio broadcasts and public announcements to openly enlist children (Hurtado, Iranzo Dosdad and Rodríguez, 2023, p. 77). This governance consolidates conflict as routine: communities either acquiesce, flee, or participate (ibid.).

Urban dynamics differ but remain racialised. In Quibdó, a predominantly Afro-descendant city in Chocó, 22% of community members reported child recruitment, with ethnic minority children particularly affected (ACAPS, 2024). Here, displacement from rural violence pushes indigenous children into precarious urban settings where gangs and criminal groups exploit their vulnerability (Cueto, 2025). While urban recruits often seek to improve their social or economic standing, rural children are more frequently forcibly enlisted, with families harassed or threatened (ibid.). Yet in both contexts, recruitment draws overwhelmingly from low-income, marginalised backgrounds where state presence is limited.

Coloniality also operates transnationally. Colombia hosts over 2.9 million of Venezuelan migrants and refugees, including unaccompanied minors specifically targeted by groups such as the ELN and FARC-EP dissidents (Downing *et al.*, 2022, p. 13; Human Rights Watch, 2025). Migrant and refugee children's racialised exclusion and precarious legal status produce hyper-vulnerability to recruitment.

Ultimately, colonial hierarchies not only generate disproportionate exposure to recruitment but normalise it as part of racialised territorial orders. Recruitment is thus less an aberration than a reproduction of colonial structures, where marginalised populations are made structurally available to armed actors.

6.1.4 Patriarchy, Gendered Violence, and the Myth of Equality

Patriarchy profoundly structures both the pathways into and the experiences within armed groups. Girls, while performing operational roles such as combat and logistics, are simultaneously relegated to domestic labour, sexual servitude, or coerced partnerships with commanders (Hurtado, Iranzo Dosdad and Rodríguez, 2023). The paradox is that for some, enlistment initially appeared to promise liberation from patriarchal households, offering "better economic opportunities and a greater degree of gender equality" (Denov and Ricard-Guay, 2013; Hurtado, Iranzo Dosdad and Rodríguez, 2023, p. 80). Yet such openings frequently become "equality traps" where apparent parity coexisted with coercion, exploitation, and sexual violence (Hurtado, Iranzo Dosdad and Rodríguez, 2023, p. 81). However, sexual abuse is not confined to female recruits: testimonies reveal cases of male adolescents subjected to violence by higher-ranking men, exposing how patriarchal hierarchies reproduce domination across genders (ibid.).

Masculinity is similarly instrumentalised in recruitment. Armed groups frame participation as a rite of passage into manhood, offering boys opportunities to

demonstrate strength, access resources, and gain social recognition (Downing *et al.*, 2022, p. 5). Peer networks reinforce this dynamic (ibid.). Patriarchy thus simultaneously subordinates girls and channels boys into violent subjectivities, sustaining cycles of militarisation.

Crucially, patriarchy does not operate in isolation. Its effects are compounded by capitalism and coloniality, producing intersectional vulnerabilities. For instance, Afro-Colombian girls in Chocó face the convergence of racialised exclusion, economic marginalisation, and gendered violence, making them particularly targeted by armed groups (ABColombia, 2011, 2025; ACAPS, 2024). To address recruitment effectively, TJ and reintegration must confront patriarchy as a constitutive vector of militarisation, rather than treating gender as a residual "vulnerability". Only then can cycles of violent be disrupted.

6.1.5 Recruitment as Driver of Perpetual Conflict

"We're seeing a generation of children lost into these networks of criminality for whom they bear little importance" (Pannell 2025)

Child recruitment not only exploits minors but perpetuates cycles of violence and insecurity recruitment patterns extend beyond individual harm to destabilise communities at large (Downing *et al.*, 2022). A new generation grows up within militarised structures, normalising violence and sustaining conflict as adults (Pannell, 2025). The erosion of families and social networks deepens these dynamics, compounded by urban-rural divides and racialised discrimination (Downing *et al.*, 2022). Reintegration often fails, returning children to the same oppressive conditions. Stigma, lack of education, and absent psychosocial or economic support – particularly in Indigenous and rural areas (ABColombia, 2025) - produce high rates of re-recruitment (Rhode, 2022).

6.1.6 Conclusion

The recruitment of children into Colombia's armed groups cannot be reduced to the dichotomy of coercion versus choice. Rather, it emerges from the entanglement systemic logics. Capitalism generates precarity, offering armed groups as "employers of last resort" (Downing *et al.*, 2022, p. 5).; coloniality entrenches racialised and territorial hierarchies that make indigenous, Afro-Colombian, and migrant children disproportionately "available" (ibid.); and patriarchy organises gendered vulnerabilities, subordinating girls through coercion while socialising boys into violent masculinities (Hurtado, Iranzo Dosdad and Rodríguez, 2023). These logics mutually reinforce one another: racialised poverty, gendered exclusion, and economic dispossession converge. Child recruitment is not a deviation from social order but an expression of it.

6.2. Why Current Responses Fail: Transitional Justice without Systems Change

6.2.1 The Havana Accord: Strong on Paper, Weak in Practice

The 2016 Havana Accord was internationally celebrated as a landmark of TJ (UNICEF, 2016; Maier, 2020; Vinet, 2020). Praise centred on its holistic design – six pillars spanning land reform, political participation, and mechanisms for truth and reparations – and on its explicit commitment to children's rights (National Government of Colombia

and FARC-EP, 2016). Yet the accord's global recognition stands in sharp contrast to local realities (Echavarria *et al.*, 2024; Lauer Perez, 2025). By 2023, nearly half of the planned peace measures were either minimally implemented or not initiated at all, and many of those in place remained narrow in scope (Echavarria *et al.*, 2024). More fundamentally, the agreement failed to confront the systemic logics that continue to nourish violence and recruitment.

The Transformative Justice Cube helps illuminate this tension. This analysis focuses explicitly on the Peace Accord and TJ, as it incorporated actors across all three levels: On the global level, international actors such as Norway, Cuba, European Union, UN, Germany and the US – set normative frameworks and standards (Rieser, 2017). National elites and the FARC-EP negotiated the political architecture (National Government of Colombia and FARC-EP, 2016). Local actors such as women's initiatives, Indigenous groups, and victim organisations were consulted, but their practical influence was limited (Petersen, 2021). TJ thus risked becoming a mechanism that aligned national and international interests while leaving structural inequalities intact. As Bucheli (2021) argues, law served "political interests" and perpetuated injustice rather than transforming it.

The ambivalence is particularly visible in the treatment of child soldiers. The accord mandated the National Reincorporation Council to design programmes for minors leaving the FARC-EP, focusing on psychosocial support, education, and family reintegration (National Government of Colombia and FARC-EP, 2016). Formally, children were recognised as victims of grave human rights violations. Yet practice reveals a deep ambivalence: they are cast simultaneously as innocent victims and as threats, an ambiguity that systematically negates their agency (Martuscelli and Villa, 2018).

Implementation gaps confirm this critique. Fewer than one-fifth of Colombia's 9.7 million registered victims have received reparations (Human Rights Watch, 2025). Programmes reached only a fraction of affected children, excluding especially those recruited by criminal structures (ACAPS, 2024). Even when formally recognised as victims, they are often treated as "quasi-independent agents faced with a limited menu of unpalatable options" (Downing *et al.*, 2022, p. 7). Recruitment persisted despite legal prohibitions because local dynamics – economic exploitation, territorial control, and community dependency – proved stronger than central regulations (ibid.). Although the recruitment of minors is officially banned, Downing et al. (2022, p. 12) note the gap between rules "designed and imposed by high-level commanders" and the practices of lower ranks, who continued to deploy children.

The shortcomings extend beyond underfunding or definitional ambiguities. They reflect the persistence of systemic violence. State security doctrines exemplify this: although human rights violations by security forces decreased under President Petro, key reforms, such as restricting military jurisdiction or removing the police from the Ministry of Defence, remained unimplemented (Human Rights Watch, 2025). Armed actors adapted flexibly. When bombardments that endangered children were halted, groups intensified recruitment and deliberately dispersed minors in camps to deter attacks (ABColombia, 2025). Security sector design thus remains bound to patriarchal and militarised logics, leaving children persistently vulnerable.

6.2.2 Capitalism and the Continuity of Conflict Economies

Child recruitment is inseparable from Colombia's extractive economy. Armed groups embed themselves in frontier zones of coca cultivation, illegal mining, and agro-industrial expansion, where violence secures labour and territorial control (Armas Contreras, 2025). Rather than rupturing these dynamics, the 2016 accord left existing regimes of ownership and resource extraction intact, ensuring that sovereignty and accumulation remained in the hands of elites and global markets (Gago and Mezzadra, 2017). Post-conflict policies were designed more as continuation of neoliberal logics, privileging international investment in mining, energy, and biofuel sectors (ibid.). By leaving ownership, labour, and resource regimes intact, the accord blocked transformative possibilities.

This continuity depoliticised reintegration. Risks were individualised while structural inequalities persisted (Martuscelli and Villa, 2018). Land reform, nominally central to the accord, was largely paralysed as rural elites defended property and extraction rights, while the pandemic and conservative backlash further entrenched institutional inertia (Parada, 2022). Commitments to gender equity and redistribution were subordinated to the prioritisation of export markets (Paarlberg-Kvam, 2021). Reconstruction thus reproduced the very inequalities it claimed to overcome (Gutiérrez Sanín, 2010).

The violence economy is also transnational. Gold and coal produced under exploitative conditions, including child labour, enter global markets for electronics and jewellery, generating profits for local elites and multinational corporations alike (Le Billon, 2011; ACAPS, 2024). Arms, money, and drug flows, as well as European resource policies and investment incentives, amplify local dynamics (Robinson, 2014). Profits along these supply chains reward continuity rather than transformation. So long as peace is framed as a project of market integration, child recruitment remains a calculated mechanism of profit maximisation. TJ that fails to address extractivist value chains and neoliberal accumulation logics inadvertently stabilises demand for the recruitment of minors (Gready and Robins, 2019).

6.2.3 Coloniality and the Limits of Territorial Peace

Capitalist exploitation is inseparable from Colombia's coloniality. Colombia's history of dispossession and marginalisation stretches back to the sixteenth century, when Indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities were expelled from resource-rich areas including Chocó, Cauca, Nariño, the Llanos, and the Amazon (Quijano, 2000; Luna, 2019; ACAPS, 2024). Gold, oil, coal, and arable land formed the basis of colonial accumulation, secured by forced labour and slavery (Gutiérrez Sanín, 2010; Le Billon, 2011; Luna, 2019). Independence left the deeper structures intact: colonial property and power relations were legally and economically institutionalised (Quijano, 2000; ABColombia, 2011). Today, extractive industries, plantations, and illicit economies remain concentrated in these areas, sustaining cycles of displacement and child recruitment (Le Billon, 2011; Cairo *et al.*, 2018; Armas Contreras, 2025).

The Havana Accord addressed these peripheries but without dismantling colonial hierarchies. Its "territorial peace" approach sought to strengthen state presence yet left land and resource regimes in the hands of national elites and international supply chains (Cairo *et al.*, 2018). This consolidated oligarchic and external interests while marginalising local participation (ibid.). Decolonial demands for epistemic, political, and economic transformation went largely unheard (Wright, Rolston and Ní Aoláin, 2023).

The underimplementation of Development Programmes with a Territorial Focus (PDET) illustrates this failure: in 2023, multidimensional poverty in PDET municipalities was almost double the national average, precisely in regions with the highest recruitment rates (Human Rights Watch, 2025).

Displacement remains structural. Between January and July 2025 alone, more than 121,000 people - predominantly Indigenous and Afro-Colombian – were forcibly displaced (Human Rights Watch, 2025). Such patterns are not “criminal deviations” but structural outcomes of ongoing land appropriation and global exploitation (Gutiérrez Sanín, 2010).

Colonial logics also shape sovereignty. The underlying logic rests on Western notions of sovereignty that equate state presence with peace while erasing Indigenous knowledge and political traditions (Goyes *et al.*, 2021). This colonial reasoning extends to migration. Venezuela’s displacement crisis has brought more than 2.9 million migrants to Colombia, including unaccompanied minors targeted by the ELN and FARC-EP dissidents (Downing *et al.*, 2022, p. 13). In 2025, the government introduced a decree enabling guardians of Venezuelan children with Temporary Protection Permits (PPT) to obtain a special residence permit (Human Rights Watch, 2025).

Yet these measures remain partial as many cases remain invisible: “there may be fear among community members that prevents them from openly speaking about and therefore reporting this issue” (Downing *et al.*, 2022, p. 15). The persistence of violence and recruitment in precisely these territories is thus not coincidental but the product of entrenched colonial-capitalist entanglements.

6.2.4 Patriarchy and the Gender Blindness of Reintegration

Patriarchal orders further compound these dynamics, shaping both recruitment risks and experiences of violence. Girls in particular are marked in public discourse and DDR programmes as passive victims, rendering their agency invisible (Martuscelli and Villa, 2018). The result is threefold: heightened exposure to sexual violence, dependency that facilitates recruitment, and stigmatisation during and after demobilisation (ACAPS, 2024; ABColombia, 2025; Human Rights Watch, 2025)

Empirical studies underline the specificities of militarised femininities: female combatants experienced reproductive control, forced abortions, sexual violence, and *machismo* (Svallfors, 2024, p. 301). Although around 40% of FARC-EP members were women, gender-specific traumas and discrimination remain largely unaddressed in reintegration (Bílik *et al.*, 2019). While DDR programmes nominally target women, they often neglect trauma-sensitive support, childcare, sexual diversity, and safe access (ibid.)

Rather than enabling emancipatory participation, gender inclusivity is often reduced to quantitative indicators, undermining real agency (ibid.). Girls and queer youth thus remain particularly vulnerable to recruitment and social marginalisation after demobilisation, with Afro-Colombian and Indigenous girls facing compounded discrimination (Maier, 2020).

Yet women and queer persons are not only victims but also agents of change (Peters, 2011). Local peace initiatives and the establishment of a gender sub-commission in the Havana process highlight collective agency, even if often sidelined institutionally (Ruiz-Navarro, 2019). Without a feminist, intersectional approach, however,

transformation remains limited to pragmatic adjustments rather than transformative change.

6.2.5 Conclusion

Current responses remain inadequate because they address recruitment's symptoms while leaving its systemic roots untouched. The Havana Accord exemplifies Transitional Justice that is ambitious on paper yet fragile in practice, depoliticising reintegration and neglecting structural reform. This failure has fuelled remobilisation. Land distribution was minimal, and state protection for the roughly 7,000 demobilised FARC-EP fighters proved insufficient. Since the accord, 250 ex-combatants have been killed by paramilitary death squads, driving an estimated 3,000 back into armed struggle (Rhode, 2022) and directly fuelling renewed child recruitment.

Capitalist accumulation, colonial hierarchies, and patriarchal orders continue to organise vulnerability, rendering children structurally available to armed actors. Without confronting these interlocking logics, peacebuilding risks reproducing the very inequalities it claims to overcome. Reports highlight that Afro-Colombian and Indigenous children are disproportionately affected, underscoring the need for context-sensitive approaches that address the specific pathways of recruitment in marginalised communities (Downing *et al.*, 2022). The persistence of recruitment is thus less an "implementation glitch" than a fundamental design flaw: Transitional Justice that leaves systemic logics intact may regulate violence, but it cannot dismantle the conditions that sustain it.

7. Conclusion

This thesis began from a puzzle: why does child recruitment persist, and even intensify, nearly a decade after Colombia's 2016 Havana Accord – a settlement widely celebrated as a milestone of Transitional Justice? If TJ was designed to protect children, how can their recruitment not only continue but increase? This has guided the analysis, which argues that recruitment is not a residual practice of conflict, but a systemic phenomenon embedded in interlocking systems of capitalism, coloniality, and patriarchy.

The analysis leads to a clear conclusion: if child recruitment in Colombia is the spawn of interlocking orders, then the problem is not only one of failed implementation but of conceptual limitations. Transitional Justice, bound to the very logics that sustain violence, cannot dismantle its systemic foundations. At best, it governs symptoms. What is required is not a "better toolkit" but a paradigmatic shift towards Transformative Justice – a framework that makes systemic causes its central object of analysis and intervention.

Transformative Justice, as developed in this thesis, has a dual orientation: epistemic and political. Epistemically, the author proposes the *Transformative Justice Cube* as a new conceptual model. Its innovation lies in systematising three analytical axes: (1) dimensions of explanations – individual, structural, systemic; (2) systems – capitalism, coloniality, patriarchy; and (3) levels of response – local, national, global. Building on insights from diverse strands of scholarship, the Cube draws together arguments and debates that are often treated separately and reworks them into a single, coherent framework. It enables recruitment to be located at their intersection, such as, a practice

within violent economies, as a product of colonial territorial and epistemic regimes, and as an effect of gendered power relations.

Although applied here to child recruitment in Colombia, the Cube's conceptual design allows for broader application: It can serve as a lens for analysing other phenomena of systemic violence, from displacement and land dispossession to gender-based violence and environmental injustice. In each case, it highlights how multiple logics converge to render certain populations structurally vulnerable. Politically, the model underscores that recognition and redistribution cannot be treated as separate goals but must be understood as mutually constitutive conditions for non-repetition. The Transformative Justice Cube, proposed here, is not presented as a final model but as an invitation for further development in research and practice.

This shift also demands a break with universalist models. One-size-fits-all approaches reproduce Eurocentric assumptions of superiority and silence plural knowledges. Decoloniality, therefore, is not a thematic add-on but a methodological principle: it requires shifting epistemic authority to those whose lives are ordered by violence. Feminist peace research strengthens this perspective by foregrounding the role of bodies, reproduction, care, and stigma as structuring dimensions of violence. Without these lenses, recruitment risks being misrecognised or reduced to overly simplistic categories.

For the field, this implies rethinking what "success" means. Procedural metrics – cases, prosecutions, verdicts – are insufficient as long as the economic systems, territorial arrangements, and patriarchal hierarchies that reproduce vulnerability remain untouched. Transformative Justice shifts the measure of success from outputs to orders: the decisive question is whether interventions interrupt the material, symbolic, and institutional infrastructures that make recruitment possible. This requires frameworks that are robust enough to capture multi-causality yet flexible enough to evolve through critique, regional case studies, and iterative refinement. The goal is pluriversality, not uniformity – comparison without homogenisation.

At the same time, the argument presented here has limitations. First, it is largely based on secondary data and textual analysis, which constrains the immediacy of lived experiences. While this choice reflects ethical and practical considerations, it risks reproducing the very distance between knowledge production and affected communities that decolonial perspectives seek to overcome. Future research could address this by grounding the Cube in participatory and collaborative methodologies with those most affected by recruitment. Second, the thesis focuses on Colombia as a single case. Although the Cube aspires to wider applicability, its dynamics will differ across regions, and comparative studies are needed to test its adaptability. Third, the Cube necessarily abstracts complex realities into analytical dimensions. While useful as a heuristic, it should not be mistaken for a totalising explanation. Its value lies in opening questions, not foreclosing them.

This thesis thus offers one step toward rethinking both the study and practice of justice in post-conflict societies. It demonstrates that, in Colombia, without a multidimensional and intersectional lens, child recruitment dynamics risk being moralised, individualised, or obscured altogether. The Transformative Justice Cube directs attention away from managing recruitment as a residual effect of conflict and towards transforming the systemic conditions that make such practices possible. As long as structural inequality, racialised exclusion, and patriarchal violence persist, children will remain structurally available to armed actors – even within a society formally declared at peace.

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