

## Colombia - Misogyny Stalls Progress for Women in Colombia Post-Peace Accords

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By Natalia Bonilla – May 9, 2018

Bogotá, Colombia—More than one year after the peace deal between the Colombian government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia People's Army (FARC-EP), uncertainty and frustration have paved a rocky road for peacebuilding in the nation. Despite being the first peace agreement in the world to acknowledge the different realities and disadvantages women and the LGBTQ population face, macho culture and gender-based violence continue to play a big role in the slow approval of laws established in the six-point accord. It's not far-fetched, advocates say, to point toward deeply entrenched misogyny in Colombia as the culprit.

"We still do not have in place the legislative measures to make the peace accord operational," said Marina Gallego, coordinator for Ruta Pacifica de Mujeres, a Bogota-based feminist organization focused on the negotiation to end the armed conflict. Gallego refers in part to the government's continued failure to reintegrate the FARC guerillas into society, among other reforms.

The Colombian peace process was one of the first to include an explicit focus on gender. Pictured here are female FARC combatants. (Silvia Andrea Moreno)

The armed conflict in Colombia negatively affected [4.2 million women](#), according to the Colombian government's March 2017 registry of victims. This number encompasses women who, as a result of the conflict, have lost property, been attacked, harassed, threatened, displaced, sexually assaulted, or killed. It also includes women who were the victims of forced disappearance; 77,100 are still missing. Women were not just victims—they were also combatants. The need for a peace process that emphasized issues of gender could not have been more clear—and unlike in many conflicts around the world, many negotiators agreed.

The 2016 peace accord with the FARC was unlike others around the world in that it recognized that the armed conflict affected men, women, and those with non-binary gender identities differently in rural and urban areas. [In the six-point document](#), emphasis was placed on promoting access to land and justice for women, promoting women's political participation, and guaranteeing their economic, social, and cultural rights.

Female activists and feminist organizations pushed hard to get women to the table during the peace talks that took place in Havana from 2012 to 2016, and over the course of the talks, [they succeeded](#). In regional roundtables throughout Colombia, [60 percent](#) of the victim's delegations that traveled to Cuba were composed of women. This inclusion of women in the peace process led to the creation of a subcommission focused on gender, and the peace deal became the first in the world to explicitly prioritize gender.

With the upcoming presidential election on May 27, women-led groups that championed the campaign for the inclusion of female combatants and victims in the peace process—

heralding the slogan “women as peacebuilders” —are raising concerns over the 2018 budget plan, and the lack of dedication to implementing the peace accord.

“We are convinced that there is a lack of political will,” said Adriana Benjumea, director of Humanas Colombia, an activist organization that promotes and defends women’s rights in the country and throughout Latin America. “One of the main compromises of the peace deal was the dissolution of paramilitary groups...but what we have seen [instead] is the spread of their presence.”

And while in rural areas, there have been significant improvements after the FARC-EP demobilization, other forms of violence still threaten the lives of women. Gallego said women reported a decrease in threats and sexual harassment after the FARC-EP handed over their weapons, but pointed out that coca crops and drug trafficking continue to advance in this post-conflict period.

### **A hundred points vs. the male status quo**

For women like Yolanda Perea Mosquera, the stalled adoption of the gender subcommission’s recommendations are personal. During the conflict, then 11-year-old Mosquera was raped in her home by a FARC combatant in Rio Sucio, Colombia, Public Radio International [reported](#). Later, guerilla fighters killed her mother. For years, she wanted revenge. Now, nearly two decades after her rape, Mosquera and many other victims see little hope for justice, in spite of the supposed success and inclusiveness of the peace accord.

Of the laws approved since the accord was settled, only half so far have reflected [the accord’s gender focus](#), according to Gallego. Gallego also suspects that many of the proposed laws that are focused on women’s rights have not even been debated because of their emphasis on gender.

Among these neglected recommendations is the proposed disarmament, demobilization, and [reintegration process](#) for female FARC combatants. Under the peace accords, the process is supposed to reflect an understanding of the unique disadvantages faced by women combatants attempting to return to a normal life—such as the difficulty in finding housing as a single woman. The recommendations also included [restitution of land](#) to victims, specifically rural women who were often disregarded as landowners, but this has not yet been realized.

“The final accord establishes between 100 to 120 gendered measures in each of the six points,” said Benjumea. Yet even with the many measures in place, Benjumea said that “the current process needs to [be] strengthened to make that gender perspective come true.”

Although it is still too early to determine the success of the peace accord as the approval of laws continues, Colombian female activists are convinced that most lawmakers would rather preserve culturally entrenched misogyny than engage in legitimate, inclusive peace-building.

“Sensible issues such as the reincorporation of former female FARC combatants...and the political participation of women are confronted with opposition,” Benjumea said.

The political reforms are meant to ensure the participation of women as candidates. However, when discussions take place in Congress, congressmen tend to resist tackling issues that affect women in the peace process. “First, there are these congressmen that have been in their positions for too many years, and do not want their power to be disputed...[the idea of] women seeking to participate in parity raises that fear,” says Diana Salcedo, spokesperson for [Cumbre Nacional de Mujeres y Paz](#), an alliance of eight national women’s organizations that represent more than 1,500 local minority groups. “Second, there is this issue of control and domination over women.”

Then there is the insidious notion that all is well as it is, and nothing needs to change.

“There is a widespread informal notion that women are already equal to men so there should not be any discussion to prove it,” said Salcedo.

### **Elections as a proving ground**

On Nov. 29, the Senate rejected a political reform that would not only have provided ground for gender parity in elections, but also offered victims of the conflict the possibility to earn congressional seats. For this year’s presidential election, five women announced their candidacy in the race for the first female president of Colombia. By April 2018, only two (Viviane Morales and Piedad Cordoba) remained in the running toward the first round of elections, which will take place on May 27. On April 9, Afro-Colombian presidential candidate Piedad Cordoba announced she would withdraw her candidacy. She was one of only two women who did not create coalitions with male presidential candidates to ensure a position, such as vice president, in the executive office, no matter what. On May 2, the last remaining female candidate, Viviane Morales, dropped out of the race.

Although she did not pinpoint a specific reason for her decision, Cordoba and her running mate [denounced](#) the misogyny pervasive in Colombia’s media and political establishment. Both she and Morales were excluded from presidential debates that took place in Medellin and Barranquilla. In late April, Morales was left out of an economic debate hosted by national media outlet *Portafolio*, leaving the platform to four leading male candidates—and offering yet another example of the uphill battle for Colombian women.

As of the time of publication, no women candidates remain.

Without a legal and social recognition of women as political leaders, instead positioning them only as a second choice or right hand to male politicians, “We are not able to rise to power,” said Salcedo. “As women we can participate in political party’s lists, but [men] can still choose who to send to the ballot.”

Still, while parity is slow in coming, there has been at least one success—at least when it comes to representation. In 2017, perhaps the most emblematic achievement for women following the peace process was the creation of the Special Jurisdiction for Peace, a post-conflict transitional justice system that will investigate and prosecute crimes against humanity that took place during the armed conflict. Of the jurisdiction’s 51 judges selected by an [independent committee, 28 are women](#).

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For Gallego, the nomination of women “gives symbolic support to the gender perspective” since the Special Jurisdiction for Peace is the first Colombian tribunal composed of more than half women. “That, in itself, is a win.”

But the composition of the special jurisdiction was also met with criticism.

“The selection of women for the Special Jurisdiction for Peace advances female representation, but it does not mean that the female agenda is being represented,” said Salcedo. “It does not mean these female actors are feminists or would look after the rights of female victims.”

As the peace agreement process continues, and with hope from the current administration and feminist groups that its further approval retains a focus on gender, “the next president will not have the armed conflict as an excuse,” Benjumea said. “We have to learn from this transitional justice [process]...to help the victims, to stop gender violence. He or she will have to put in place a national budget in favor of eradicating violence, and building peace.”