

Gender and Colombia's Peace Agreement

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Girls' Globe

Gender has become a hot-topic issue since the referendum vote on Colombia's peace negotiations. Several tumultuous weeks following the failed referendum on Colombia's peace agreement, renewed negotiations between the government of Juan Manuel Santos and the FARC produced a new agreement. Misconceptions regarding the role of gender language within the initial peace agreement, however, seemed to cast fear and doubt that it would be removed from a new accord altogether. Why was a gender focus within the country's peace deal so controversial? And what follows for women within the country's peacebuilding processes now that a new agreement has been signed?

More than 50 years after the start of a conflict that has resulted in more than 220,000 deaths and nearly six million displaced, the decades-long Colombian war has reached a formal end as of Thanksgiving Day (Nov 24th, 2016). Representatives of the FARC—an armed, left-wing guerilla group—and government representatives under President Juan Manuel Santos had spent four years engaged in peace negotiations. A previous peace agreement was brought to a popular vote in October. Most believed that this referendum would conclusively bring an end to the decades' long conflict. Yet contrary to poll predictions, the No campaign triumphed by a margin of less than 1%.

While there are many reasons to which the failure of the referendum has been attributed, **the inclusion of gender language within the agreement is something that many claim was a significant source of support for the opposition.** Led by leaders such as ex-General Inspector Alejandro Ordóñez, certain right-wing opponents of the deal advanced the idea that such language—particularly text around LGBTI rights—aimed to promote a “gender ideology” that would threaten the integrity of traditional family units, perhaps even encourage homosexuality among children.

Thankfully, the peace deal signed on November 24—which President Juan Manuel Santos claims “is the definitive one”—has retained a focus on women's rights.

Wording within the revised agreement states, **“the recognition of equal rights between men and women and the special circumstances of everyone, especially women, regardless of their marital status, life cycle and family and community relationship, is a subject of rights and of special constitutional protection.”** It also underscores **“the need to ensure affirmative measures to promote such equality, the active participation of women and their organizations in peace-building and recognition of the victimization of women because of the conflict.”**

This is a major victory in itself, yet it represents a mere starting point for the inclusion of gender within post-conflict processes. Moreover, this situation underscores some of the challenges faced when integrating women within peace and security issues.

Why women in peace processes matters

In Colombia, women represent more than half of internally displaced persons in the country, and countless numbers have been victimized through sexual violence—a weapon of war heavily used throughout the conflict. Within a context of persistent victimization, many women gained agency by joining rebel militias or contributing to civil society groups that sought to bring an end to violence.

Over 20 years ago, the United Nations Security Council signed Resolution (UNSCR) 1325, a landmark framework that lends recognition to women's distinct experiences within conflict. UNSCR 1325 calls for the need to protect women and girls from violence and prevent its occurrence, while including them in decision-making processes during and after periods of conflict. But the record so far isn't great.

Women have represented a mere 9% of negotiators and 2.4% of chief negotiators across global peace negotiations between 1992 and 2011. Since Resolution 1325 was adopted, **just under 30% (138/504) of agreements included any references to women**. Thus Colombia's most recent peace agreement—groundbreaking for many reasons—is notable in that gender issues and women's rights have been pushed through by a Gender Sub-Commission that was appointed to voice the perspectives of women throughout ongoing negotiations.

This is a great starting point, but it is exactly just that. A true commitment to peace means ensuring that its benefits are ***felt by all segments of society***. Certainly, including women within peace negotiations and including language around women's rights is part of that, but it is only the first stage of a post-conflict reconstruction project that requires ongoing commitment to these rights and perspectives.

Transforming social relationships that contributed to violence against women and which inhibit their economic or political opportunities is part of a long-term process that requires support from those both at the policy and local level. Commitments made within the peace agreement require a strong civil society that will keep the government accountable.

Ms. Marcia Mejía Chirimía of CONPAZ, a peace advocacy group, claims **“the voices of those on the ground are strong, but often not loud enough to reach the right people. It is difficult, and often dangerous, to be a leader in this context – which is why they need international support.”** Among those who have faced death threats for similar work, she now calls on the international community to take part in supporting the country's peace process and the inclusion of those most affected.

There is much that can be done as a global community to support others in pursuing such work. Engaging in online advocacy through social media is one way of keeping these efforts relevant and strengthening the voices of those in vulnerable positions, as is supporting online campaigns through human rights organizations.

As Colombia continues its long path towards recovery, it will be necessary to continue integrating gender perspectives into post-conflict initiatives,

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programs and policies. This is necessary not only so that women can experience justice and empowerment after decades of violence, but because all of society benefits when women are included in the construction and experience of peace.