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## Colombia's Rejection of the Peace Pact Creates New Hurdles for Women

By Isabella Flisi on Oct 30, 2016 07:12 pm

*[Photo] Claudia Mejía, the executive director of Sisma Mujer, a Colombian feminist organization. She helped incorporate gender elements into the country's new peace agreement, which is now being renegotiated after a surprising "no" referendum vote.*

BOGOTÁ — By a thin margin, Colombian voters said no in early October to a peace agreement to end the decades-long war in the country between the guerillas, FARC-EP, and the government. The painstakingly written peace pact was developed with considerable contributions from women to embed commitments to gender rights in the country's post-conflict setting. Now those gender elements, new rights won for women by women and the LGBTI community, could be weakened.

What happens next is a renegotiation of the agreement by the end of the year, those involved in the process say. The agreement failed because some churches and the political right in the country questioned, among many other aspects, what they label a "gender ideology" threaded throughout the agreement, which they contend will unravel the basic fabric of Colombia's very conservative society.

To clarify what the groundbreaking peace agreement achieved and its current status, Claudia Mejía, 58, the executive director of [Sisma Mujer](#) (meaning, loosely, earthquake woman), a Colombian feminist organization, was interviewed in August and in October in Bogotá, the capital. Her organization has been a force behind the women's movement in the country since 1998.

Mejía has a law degree, a postgraduate degree in human rights and women and a master's degree in arts in peace studies and development. She is also a co-founder of the National Network of Women ([Red Nacional de Mujeres](#)), which has advanced initiatives in women's rights.

More recently, as part of the peace talks that took place over the last four years in Havana, Cuba, Mejía was invited by the sub-commission on gender to the Summit on Women and Peace ([Cumbre Nacional de Mujeres y Paz](#)), as part of a [gender experts group](#) to recommend ways to incorporate gender and women's rights in the peace agreement and the post-conflict milieu. The topic of sexual violence against women was one of the most difficult discussions, she said, for the two sides to broach.

In the interview, Mejía analyzes how a female and feminist perspective permeates the agreement and delves into why it was rejected and how the gender component can be saved. The conversation was done in Spanish and translated by Flisi and has been edited and condensed.

**ISABELLA FLISI:** The peace negotiations have been innovative in several respects, including the important role that women played. For the first time in the history of conflict resolution, a sub-commission on gender was created, composed of women in the government and FARC-EP, to fully ensure the participation of women and victims in the discussions. What were the real benefits of the commission?

**CLAUDIA MEJÍA:** From our perspective, the achievements and advances were made possible by three conditions. The first is that in Colombia there is a strong women's movement with [a] capacity for advocacy and advancing proposals, and this is framed in the context of a strong civil society. The second is that the two delegations conversing in Havana [FARC and the government] listened to women and paid attention to their proposals and demands. This sub-commission made significant

efforts with leaders of each delegation. The third condition was the presence of an international community supporting equality and the full enjoyment of women's rights, which played an important role in the peace negotiations.

We achieved several real benefits and accomplishments: first, it was possible to mainstream a gender perspective and women's rights within all the agreements. The sub-commission fully accomplished its tasks because of its ability to engage deeply with the women's movement and influence the leaders, or male "barons" of each of the two delegations. Within the agreement, women's rights were included in the agenda items of rural development, political participation, solutions regarding the problem of illicit crops, victims' rights, post-conflict planning and implementation and verification of the agreement.

**FLISI: What are some examples of gender-specific measures in the peace agreement that will have a positive impact on women in Colombia?**

**MEJÍA:** An example is the prioritization of women on the agenda for rural development. One measure created a fund to provide land to farmers in an "integral perspective" [including technical assistance and access to credit]. Also, the agreement established measures of special attention for women to access land and formalize land ownership, recognizing the difficulties women face in owning property legally. These measures should guarantee women's access to land in an equal way. When I say equally, I mean with differentiated, positive measures in favor of women.

**FLISI: What proposals did you bring to the table in Havana to address wartime sexual violence?**

**MEJÍA:** It was not easy to raise claims on sexual violence because the members of the two delegations still find it difficult to acknowledge the occurrence of wartime sexual violence perpetrated by both members of the public forces and FARC. Sisma Mujer, collaborating with the organizations [Corporación Humanas](#) and [Red Nacional de Mujeres](#), is part of an [initiative](#) called "Five Keys for a Differential Treatment of Sexual Violence in the Peace Agreement." The initiative addressed specific proposals for treating sexual violence. We had to make an intense effort during a year and a half to explain that a differentiated approach is needed and what measures would ensure this approach. We achieved this approach in most of the agreement on victims' rights.

One fundamental point that we argued in Havana was that sexual violence is not the only expression of violence against women but is one of the most devastating in the lives of women and their families, and it is a clear expression of discrimination and contempt of the female body and female autonomy — which is associated with patriarchal society. Giving sexual violence differential treatment sends a clear message to Colombian society: we cannot continue allowing violence against women, either in peace or war

*[Photo] Mejía, second from left, and other women in Havana, Cuba, above, participated in Colombian peace talks as part of a sub-commission on gender.*

**FLISI: Were the recommendations of the gender experts and women's representative in Havana been taken fully into account in the negotiations?**

**MEJÍA:** From the platforms of the Five Keys and the women's organizations more broadly, we feel we have been taken into consideration in many of the decisions incorporated in the [Victims' Agreement](#), making it possible to send a clear message to Colombian society about the need to eradicate violence against women and sexual violence.

Sexual violence was recognized as a crime that is not eligible for amnesty and, as it was established in the peace agreement, sexual violence is a crime that requires different treatment by the Truth Commission and the special tribunal for peace. The commission will have a working group that focuses on violence against women, especially sexual violence. The tribunal will have a working group that focuses specifically on the investigation of sexual violence against women. This is a great achievement of the peace agreement that now risks getting lost after the plebiscite rejected the implementation.

**FLISI:** Despite a narrow margin, the majority of voters rejected the peace agreement that was reached after years of intense conversations in Havana. As a result, the parties must renegotiate it. As you said, the agreement has an important [focus on gender](#) and promoting gender equality, but a significant segment of Colombian society [did not like this gender approach](#). Among others, a rumor that fueled rejection of the agreement was the allegation that it contained a hidden “gender ideology” meant to undermine the traditional family unit and destroy the integrity of society. What does this portend for women’s rights?

**MEJÍA:** The loss of the plebiscite means that the agreement will be reviewed; there will be adjustments and clarifications. At present there is a lot of uncertainty. The risk for women is twofold. First, if a new peace agreement is not reached, the level of armed confrontation will continue and disproportionately affect women. The second risk has to do with what is now happening with the campaign and the debate that was prompted by the evangelical churches and the former general inspector of Colombia, Alejandro Ordoñez [a member of the conservative Lefebvrist-leaning group in the Roman Catholic Church], weeks and months before the vote. They alluded to a so-called “gender ideology” with the purpose of denigrating the gender approach of the agreement. The campaign had a devastating effect.

Many churches said that the “gender ideology” would change the social and family order and public policy in which the LGTBI population would acquire more rights, and therefore the churches were able to gain supporters. Our concern is the [deepening of homophobia](#) and misogyny and moving backwards to a society that ignores and denies the rights of women and LGBTI people. These churches argue that many of the “no” votes were a refusal to enable gender equality measures.

**FLISI:** What are you doing to address criticisms of the gender equality component of the peace agreement?

**MEJÍA:** We are now taking joint action between women’s organizations and LGBTI organizations, which is quite new. We are looking for ways to counter these positions of the church with dialogue. We want bridges, although we know that many of these people have positions that do not support dialogue, they do not want to hear us; and in some cases, they do not even admit our existence as human beings. As an evangelical Christian said yesterday in a tweet, “LGBTI people should know that they will be deleted in the Peace Agreement.”

Second, we are analyzing each of the occasions in which the words “women,” “LGTBI,” “gender” and “sexual diversity” is mentioned in the peace agreement. This exercise serves to explain to the country that there is not a “gender ideology” but rather a gender approach that we can explain. Third, we seek to be heard by the government and the FARC-EP because they are the parties that will take decisions regarding the observations made by the “no” voters. Finally, [we have taken to the streets](#) with a social movement, because that is where we can put oxygen into the negotiations decisions that they will consider from the propositions made from the “no” campaign.

**FLISI:** What is the role of the international community at this moment and what can be done to ensure a gender perspective and the improvement of women's rights in the new peace agreement?

**MEJÍA:** We urgently call on the international community to not stop supporting and strongly promote the incorporation of a gender perspective in the agreement. We need to work together and articulate more to address this onslaught of the evangelical church and the political right, which are trying to diminish rights. We want a society that does not cut down rights, and we demand a peace that includes women and contributes to the guarantee that there will not be a repetition of that tremendous violence we experienced for decades.