The Colombian Peace Agreement Has A Big Emphasis on the Lives of Women. Here's How.

By Roxanne Krystalli, August 19, 2016

In 2014, the government of Colombia and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) announced a new sub-commission on gender in the peace process, tasked with ensuring that the agreements had an "adequate gender focus."

In July, the sub-commission presented the results of its work to the assembled peace delegations in Havana, as well as to U.N. officials and representatives of Colombian civil society groups. While not all of the agreement's documents are final or publicly available, here is what we know from the available summaries and public statements.

The agreement gives gender issues a central role

Paying attention to gender issues requires more than just involving women in peace talks. Taking account of gender can help build peace and set the foundations of "transitional justice," including accountability and reparations for past human rights abuses.

To this end, María Paulina Riveros, co-chair of the sub-commission,announced eight thematic areas for the inclusion of a gender perspective in Colombia's peace accords:

- access to rural property for women
- guarantees of the economic, social and cultural rights of women and "persons with diverse sexual orientations and identities"
- promotion of women's participation in representation, decision-making and conflict resolution
- prevention of risks specific to women
- access to truth and justice, and measures to counter impunity

- public recognition, dissemination and countering of stigmatization of women's political work
- institutional action to strengthen women's organizations
- disaggregation of data by gender

Race, ethnicity and class are also important

Gender doesn't exist in a vacuum — it intersects with other factors that shape how people experience their lives. The gender provisions of Colombia's current peace agreement specifically mention how rural or urban positioning may affect experiences of peace, conflict and justice. Individuals in rural or urban locations may have experienced different forms of violence, and may have different access to justice, as well as different needs during transitions from armed conflict. As Virginia Bouvier has pointed out, the Colombian process also needs to pay attention to how gender intersects with race, class and ethnicity, especially with respect to the experiences of Afro-Colombian and indigenous groups.

[What will the peace process mean for Colombia's border regions? The government will have to start governing.]

Gender is about men, too

The Colombian approach focuses not only on sex and gender identities, but also on sexual preferences and orientations and the ways in which these create or enhance vulnerabilities to forms of violence.

However, public documents so far make few explicit references to masculine identities. Kimberly Theidon's research has shown that men's sense of fulfilling expectations that they — and their environment — often associate with masculinity, such as providing protection and a stable livelihood for a household, can affect their motivations to join armed groups, their relationship to violence within the group and how they experience demobilization. The tendency of some men to renew their affiliation with violent

groups after they demobilize highlights the importance of paying attention to men and masculinity as part of the gender conversation in peace talks.

Gender affects not only the content, but also the processes of peace and justice

Research in Peru and Guatemala underscores the importance of gender-sensitive training for truth commissioners and interpreters, protection for victims and witnesses, and support for those testifying. Truth and reconciliation processes often rely on sharing stories. While that can be an affirming experience for some of those affected by conflict, others may feel re-victimized by having to narrate the harms they suffered.

Colombia's approach to transitional justice reflects some of these lessons. As part of the transitional justice measures supported by the Colombian gender sub-commission, María Paulina Riveros announced the creation of a special unit to investigate sexual violence cases. This is an important step towards acknowledging the seriousness of these crimes and the lasting effects on victims/survivors.

Gender can be a "multiplier of violence"

At the same time, sexual violence is just one of many gender-based harms that require investigation, in Colombia or elsewhere.

Margaret Urban Walker, for instance, argues that gender can be a "multiplier of violence." In other words, violence can have gender-specific effects, even when women are not the primary or direct targets, or when the violence itself is not necessarily physical. The case of enforced disappearance is a prime example. Research both in Colombia and in other contexts shows that the forced disappearance of a male household member has reverberating effects on the livelihood, security and social status of women and girls.

The joint statement by leading U.N. representatives after the presentation of the work of the gender sub-commission in Colombia singled out sexual violence, spotlighting how it often is used as a tool of war, a way to subjugate and intimidate women during conflicts. Dara Kay Cohen and Amelia Hoover Green's research in Liberia has highlighted how sexual violence often receives special attention in human rights

advocacy. Sara Meger has similarly found that, in recent conversations on war and peace, sexual violence can receive anemblematic status and is treated as an "exceptional violation," worthy of different treatment than other gendered harms.
As Maria Eriksson Baaz and Maria Stern note, we also need to pay attention to the forms of gender-based violence that tend to get left out of official storylines.

Transitional justice is not as straightforward as it looks

Transitional justice relies on categorization. People are either victims or perpetrators; they are individuals eligible for reparation or individuals deemed worthy of punishment. In Colombia and elsewhere, gender analysis shows how this classification is more complex than it looks — and the resulting implications for how people experience violence, peace and justice can be significant.

First, how should transitional justice processes consider experiences that cut across categories? It will be important to examine how Colombia addresses theharms some female ex-combatants suffered *within* armed groups, or the experiences of child soldiers.

[Why free love in the FARC isn't so free. (You wouldn't know it from reading the New York Times.)]

Second, Colombia's criminal bands, or BACRIM, continue to perpetrate violence in regions of the country. Until recently, the government of Colombia hesitated to acknowledge these groups as conflict actors, instead framing their activity as merely criminal.

This has had important implications. The BACRIM were not included in the peace negotiations, their members are not eligible for demobilization under the conflict-related processes, and victims of their violence face a more complicated path to reparation. Similar issues affect gangs in Colombia, which also lack the status of armed conflict actors.

[3 things you should know about the new Colombia peace agreement with its rebels]

In May 2016, the government reclassified some BACRIM as organized armed groups. It remains to be seen how this will affect the violent actors within them, as well as those who experienced BACRIM-perpetrated harm.

Feminist theory argues against the neat separation of experiences of violence into binaries. It provides one way of thinking about how these categories — victim or perpetrator, conflict-related or criminal — can mean that some forms of violence and harm are systematically overlooked or discounted. It can also help policy makers think about how the problem of stopping male ex-combatants from returning to violence involves taking BACRIM and gangs seriously.