

## **Women's Participation in the Colombian Peace Process**

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On 24 November 2016, the final Peace Accord was signed between the Colombian Government and the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia – Ejército del Pueblo* (FARC). Internationally, this is considered to be one of the most integrated peace agreements ever achieved. Unprecedented<sup>i</sup> in arriving at this agreement was the establishment, early on, of a Gender Sub-Commission at the talks in Havana. As a result of the work of this Sub-Commission, the final Peace Accord has a strong gender focus in each of its chapters. This, alongside formal mechanisms set to guarantee the participation of civil society, and the work of Colombian Women's Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) ensured a strong, influential and pervading gender focus in the Peace Accord. This article focuses on the work of the Gender Sub-Commission and the support given to it by women's CSOs and social actors; however, it should be recognised that UN Women and the guarantor countries also played a key role.

The success of the Colombian Peace Talks in agreeing a Peace Accord was no small feat after 50 years of conflict, with over seven million victims of multiple forms of violence, including forced disappearance, extra-judicial executions, kidnappings, torture and various forms of sexual and gender-based violence. The patterns of violence studied showed that in the case of women this conflict was a continuum of violence which included a lack of economic resources for a dignified life.<sup>ii</sup>

The FARC and the Colombian Government had three previous attempts at Peace Talks, starting as far back as 1982, none of which had ended in success<sup>iii</sup>. Factors that contributed to the success of these talks were: conducting the initial stage of the Talks in secret, establishing a six-point agenda before going public, having four guarantor countries to mediate at crucial moments,<sup>iv</sup> holding the Talks outside of the country and agreeing to limit the focus to ending the armed conflict. However, despite initially agreeing not to address the root causes and impacts of the conflict, the Final Accord did in fact address some of these.

At the start of the Peace Talks none of the frontline negotiators were women. Despite the Colombian State's chief negotiator publicly stating that '*women have been the vortex in which the pain of the conflict has focused with immense intensity*',<sup>v</sup> national and international women's CSOs had to work hard pressurising the negotiators to appoint women to their frontline teams. In April 2013, the FARC appointed Judith Simanca-Herrera alias Victoria Sandino to their team. With no women on the Government side, over 500 women from CSOs united under the banner *Cumbre de Mujeres y Paz* (Women and Peace Summit) in October 2013, and called on the Government to appoint women to the frontline negotiating team and to give them a leading role.<sup>vi</sup> The following month saw Nigeria Rentería, the Government's Senior Advisor for Women, and María-Paulina Riveros, Human Rights Director, appointed; a year later (September 2014), the Gender Sub-Commission for the Talks was created.

The Sub-Commission's objective was to review the Agreements to ensure a gender perspective. There were ten representatives, with Maria-Paulina Riveros and Victoria Sandino each leading their respective five-person team. Cuba and Norway each provided a gender expert, other experts advised the Sub-Commission when requested.

The lack of value placed on the role of this Sub-Commission, at least initially, despite its formal role being derived directly from the Negotiating Table, is seen in that it was not always assigned specific meeting times and spaces. Therefore, the work of the Sub-Commission was carried out in large part due to the commitment and personal sacrifice of the women involved, who often met outside of other

programmed work they were doing at the Talks, frequently very early in the morning.<sup>vii</sup> Also, the women's access to decision-making arenas was limited. In order to ensure a strong gender focus, an interesting dynamic developed, whereby the two negotiating parties on the Sub-Commission created alliances and made agreements to work simultaneously with their own delegations to incorporate the ideas they had agreed on. Whilst the decision as to what went into the final Accord was taken mainly by male delegation heads and frontline negotiators, the gender teams on each side gave the same briefings to these negotiators, greatly increasing the probability of their contributions being incorporated into the Agreements.<sup>viii</sup>

A significant role was also played by civil society and Women's Organisations, who campaigned for the need to address patriarchal attitudes and inequality in the Accord to ensure a sustainable peace for women.<sup>ix</sup> They highlighted how societal attitudes drove gender-based violence and insisted that gender inequalities be addressed in the Accord, without which, transformative changes would not happen.<sup>x</sup> According to a Sub-Commission member, the women's organisations proposals, advocacy and campaigning work supported and enabled the Sub-Commission to keep a gender perspective and women's rights at the centre of the discussions.<sup>xi</sup>

The *Cumbre de Mujeres*, with the support of UN Women, developed and presented a document (2015) with over 800 proposals to the Negotiating Table. This document included the basic principles for the inclusion of a gender focus in the agreements. Five delegations of 60 victims went to Havana, 60% of which were women. Public forums were held across the country and over 3,000 victims participated. These forums also employed a gender focus with proposals being fed-back to the negotiators. The Colombian CSOs *Sisma Mujer*, *Corporación Humanas* and the *Red Nacional de Mujeres* developed a policy document called "*Cinco Claves*" (Five Key Points), which they presented to the Negotiating Table. These key points addressed issues of gender inequality and how conflict gender-based violence should be treated in a transitional justice system. One of these five points insisted that there could be no amnesties for conflict-related sexual violence.

This unprecedented achievement by women and for women of a strong gender focus throughout the Peace Accord, if implemented, will make a profound impact in terms of gender inclusion and promoting women's rights.<sup>xii</sup> In every chapter of the Peace Accord, as well as, in the principles outlined at the beginning of the Accord, reference is made to equality between women and men, along with references to the need to apply differential measures to address issues of inequality. The Accord also states that there is a need to design and implement plans that address the obstacles to women's participation. The Chapter on Integrated Rural Reform is a good example of this, in that it addresses equal access to land and credit programmes,<sup>xiii</sup> as well as, addressing the obstacles that have prevented women from gaining access.<sup>xiv</sup> In the chapter on political participation, the preamble recognises structural barriers in terms of women's participation, and the need to address deep-rooted discrimination and inequality; for this to happen it accepts that affirmative measures will be necessary.<sup>xv</sup>

The Gender Sub-Commission was an important and effective mechanism. However, despite the achievements, the process in reality was not one of equality. Women were mainly in the minority in formal discussions and decision-making spaces. By contrast, they were generally in the majority in areas such as thematic advisory spaces, drafting documents and activities related to assistance, communications, logistics and administration.<sup>xvi</sup> The Sub-commission was not given adequate resources. There was no equal recognition of the contribution of women and their participation largely remained "boxed".

The UN Global Study reported that Peace Talks were more successful in reaching agreements and implementing them when women had participated.<sup>xvii</sup> Women's participation, equality between men

and women, justice and reconciliation are all factors which increase the possibility that peace will be sustainable.<sup>xviii</sup> Equality is still something women will have to strive for.

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<sup>i</sup> Although the Peace Talks in the Philippines established a gender commission it only met once and was not effective.

<sup>ii</sup> International Centre for Transitional Justice, "We Want to Be Heard" 2016

<sup>iii</sup> In 1982, President Belisario Betancur Peace Talks with FARC (the Uribe talks); 1991 President César Gaviria initiated the Tlaxcala and Caracas dialogues; and in 1999, President Andrés Pastrana the Caguán process.

<sup>iv</sup> NOREF, Designing peace: the Colombian peace process, Dag Nylander, Rita Sandberg and Idun Tvedt, Feb 2018

<sup>v</sup> Presidencia de la Republica, Declaración del jefe del Equipo Negociador del Gobierno Nacional, Humberto de la Calle, 7 June 2014.

<sup>vi</sup> ABColumbia Report, *Civil Society Voices: Agendas for Peace in Colombia*, 2015 p7: citing Rosa Emilia Salamanca, Keynote Remarks UN General Assembly: "Ensuring Stable and Peaceful Societies", 24 April 2014.

<sup>vii</sup> Corporacion Humanas and CIASE, Experiences, Contributions, and Recognition: Women in the Peace Process in Havana, 2017, Section Two: the women talk about meeting at 5am in a space given to them in the Norwegian Delegation House on the complex in Havana

<sup>viii</sup> Ibid

<sup>ix</sup> For further information see: ABColumbia Report, Colombia: Women, conflict-related sexual violence and the peace process, November 2013 <https://www.abcolombia.org.uk/colombia-women-conflict-related-sexual-violence-peace-process/>

<sup>x</sup> ABColumbia, *Civil Society Voices: Agendas for Peace in Colombia*, 2015 <https://www.abcolombia.org.uk/civil-society-voices/>

<sup>xi</sup> Corporacion Humanas and CIASE, Experiences, Contributions, and Recognition: Women in the Peace Process in Havana, 2017, Section Two

<sup>xii</sup> NOREF, Designing peace: the Colombian peace process, Dag Nylander, Rita Sandberg and Idun Tvedt, Feb 2018

<sup>xiii</sup> Chapter One: *Hacia un Nuevo Campo Colombiano: Reforma Rural Integral* states, for women to "have access, on an equal footing to men, to ownership of land and production projects, funding options, infrastructure, technical services and training, inter alia; attention is to be given to the social and institutional conditions that have prevented women from gaining access to the assets of production and to public and social benefits...".

<sup>xiv</sup> In terms of implementation of Chapter One: *Hacia un Nuevo Campo Colombiano: Reforma Rural Integral* (page 18) states "mechanisms that guarantee access to justice ...with legal advice and special training for women regarding their rights and access to justice, together with specific measures for overcoming barriers that constitute obstacles to the recognition and protection of women's rights over land. The participation of women and women's organisations in the various spaces created for conciliation and the resolution of conflicts concerning land use and possession will be promoted". And (page 24) "In order to overcome poverty, specific, differentiated measures will be implemented to address the special needs of women in the countryside and achieve effective equality of opportunity between men and women".

<sup>xv</sup> The Chapter Two *Participación política: Apertura democrática para construir la paz* (p35) states: "Taking account of the fact that women face greater social and institutional barriers in terms of political participation, as a result of deep-rooted discrimination and inequality, as well as structural conditions of exclusion and subordination, there will be significant challenges in guaranteeing their right to participation, and facing up to and transforming these historical conditions will involve developing affirmative measures that will safeguard women's participation in the various areas of political and social representation."

<sup>xvi</sup> Corporacion Humanas and CIASE, Experiences, Contributions, and Recognition: Women in the Peace Process in Havana, 2017, Section Two

<sup>xvii</sup> A Global Study on the Implementation of United Nations Security Council resolution 1325, 2015 <http://wps.unwomen.org/en>

<sup>xviii</sup> Ibid