



## **Brief: The Participation and Inclusion of Women in the Implementation of the Colombian Peace Agreement**

20 September 2018

Felm together with the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland organised a seminar on the Participation and Inclusion of Women in the Implementation of the Colombian Peace Agreement. The objectives of this seminar were to deepen the understanding and lessons learnt of the inclusion of women in Colombian peace negotiations and the signing of a gender sensitive peace accord and explore the challenges and opportunities of inclusive approach in the implementation of the peace accord and long-term peacebuilding in Colombia.

### **The Negotiations for the Peace Accord**

The Colombian civil war has been one of the longest in modern history. Conflict has existed in the country in one form or another at least since 1948, but FARC has been participant since 1964 when the group took its name. The civil war has claimed 262,197 deaths and 80,514 remain missing according to The National Historical Memory Center. The actual count is believed to be severely higher, since people were generally afraid to report deaths and statistics are incomplete. Also, sexual violence was widespread, since it was used to spread terror in the communities. The Historical Memory Commission has documented some 15,000 conflict related cases. Again, this figure is believed a gross understatement, and for example Oxfam Colombia with various women's groups found that there were some 875,000 victims of conflict related sexual violence victims between 2010 and 2015 alone. It is, therefore, clear that Colombia is a highly victimized society.

The peace accord between the government and FARC was negotiated between 2012 and 2016 in Havana, and they signed it in August 2016. However, referendum voted against the agreement with extremely narrow margins, so the conflict parties had to go back to the negotiation tables. A revised agreement was signed in November 2016, after which it was ratified by the congress instead of popular vote.

At first, the negotiation process excluded women's participation, but women protested this with impactful results. Women's participation in government's negotiations team rose from zero to two and in FARC's team from one to two. The number of women in the High Commission for Peace also rose, and later in September 2014 a gender sub-commission was named as a first of its kind in the world. These efforts contributed directly to the fact that the resulting peace agreement was the most inclusive and gender sensitive to date. There was, however, a lot of work behind getting gender sensitivity accepted more widely, and a deep-rooted dialogue was imperative among the women's movement and with other stakeholders. The whole process towards gender sensitive peacebuilding would not have been possible without the support of larger civil society and international community.

The peace negotiations led to the acknowledgment of the plurality of the society and to the adaptation of gender sensitivity and, later, the differential approach. In these approaches, the main thing to ask is how to make an impact in pluralistic society and how to address different kinds of backgrounds of people. This is not a question of quantity, but quality. It is very important that the victims feel they are being heard and helped, and that a larger societal transformation exists. However, victimhood is not that simple an equation that could be defined just by gender sensitivity, since there are a lot more of groups that are discriminated in one way or another. Addressing this multi-level discrimination requires a differential approach that recognizes there being different groups (e.g. based on gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, wealth and geographical location) that have different needs. After recognizing these victims, empowerment and reconciliation should follow. Men are not excluded in differential approach, and it should be noted that men, too, can be victims. Furthermore, men can be part of larger societal transformation for example in the form of new masculinity by rethinking what it means to be a man and how they should relate or participate in the society.

After introducing such an inclusive peace agreement, one could very well ask why the referendum failed to gain support? There are several explanations for this.

- Media had a negative impact on the result since it misled its audience in the gender aspects of the peace accord. The media draw a picture of granting radical new rights for the minorities even though all the rights were based in the existing constitution. This created reluctance against the agreement especially among conservatives and Evangelical Christians.
- Political fractions fought for power disrupting severely the peace process in the process. Fabrication of information and cumulated grievances among citizens intensified this tendency.
- Gender sensitivity clauses were introduced to the agreement rather late, leaving very little time for people to familiarize with their content.
- At the time of the referendum a hurricane swept through the region that was predominantly in favour of the peace accord, which quite obviously would result in lower turnout.

Despite the setback presented by the surprising result from the referendum, the accord was ratified in the end as previously mentioned. Interesting question is, why the negotiations accomplished overcoming all the challenges this time, but not before? International support, in part, should be noted, as the climate for the process had moved a great deal favourable towards any negotiations with FARC.

However, the Colombian society at large has been the pivotal force that gives the process its momentum in the end, and the women's movement has been the constituting factor for its inclusivity.

### **Implementation of the Peace Process**

The key question of the peace process is the success of its implementation. So far, the peace accord has managed to achieve end of the war and bring FARC to table as a political party. These were not easy tasks, and it took a lot of political will and energy to transform a violent conflict to a more constructive one. International community and greater participation in the process has helped a lot in the process, and there continues a need for the civil society and the international community to mobilize in the implementation phase. Grass root level has an extremely important role in the inclusion. In the local level inclusive language and courage translates to recognition of possibilities and concrete action.

However, there is a multitude of challenges in the process. First, rights and access concerning land and property are a central issue, where dialogue between civil society and enterprises is crucial. The truth commission is a legitimized organ to arbitrate between parties and de-escalate conflicting narratives. Still, enterprises must show more goodwill for reconciliation to move forward. Another organ to arbitrate is the church, which is an important actor especially in rural areas, where state has only a limited presence. Churches have created understanding between different sides and implemented peace in the grass roots. A practical issue with land access is the weak infrastructure in the rural areas, which makes participation and inclusion harder and hinders the small farmers' transition from selling coca plant to other sources of income. Second, internal displacement remains a problem to large part of the society with about 7.4 million people driven out of their homes today. These people are very vulnerable to any kinds of societal shocks, and they are more often suffering from absolute poverty than the rest of the society. Third, political violence continues even after the peace accord with about 200 social leaders killed since the agreement. It is, therefore, important to protect the civil society and the rule of law. Fourth, there is a need for monitoring the progress of the implementation. Different organizations in local, national and international level are already participating in the monitoring activities, but resources are still lacking since the accord is so extensive. A national conference on implementation progress could prove to be useful for improving the coordination of the process.

Women's role in the implementation has grown, and they have assumed many positions in the process and are being heard. Women from FARC have also moved to different kinds of roles in the society after the war and are active all in their own way. Many have taken time for normal and domestic life, such as raising the family, because it was impossible during the guerrilla warfare. The way for women's movement have been paved for a long time so the opportunity truly should be seized whilst the civil society is being reconstructed. Chauvinism should be fought in all fronts, not just with agreements and laws, especially now that the new government have taken an unfriendly stance against feminism and the peace accord. Gender sub-commission continues to provide an arena to further the goal of equality for all. In overall women's rights have taken many steps forward though a lot remains to be done.

Building trust is imperative in Colombia's peace process. Central question here is how the society addresses justice and responsibility so that victims' rights and truth take place. Basically, there needs to be less justice in favour of truth and peace, when the society is this victimized. The temporary court is not able to address eight million cases, so symbolic prosecutions are needed to achieve reconciliation. It should be noted, however, that sexual violence was excluded from the amnesty provision by the demand of the women's movement. This means that justice will serve its normal function in cases where sexual violence has happened.

Also, existing resources must be utilized in the face of enormous reconciliation work since centralized institutions would otherwise be grossly overburdened. This means harnessing and supporting grass roots organizations in their essential role in facilitating the dialogue. For example, churches have special quality as an institution of forgiveness and understanding. Reconciliation between victims' and persecutors', hermeneutical dialogue and personal forgiveness are necessary for the civil society to get over the horrors of civil war and continue life peacefully. However, personal level reconciliation does not help if the more structural aspects are not dealt with. Enterprises play a crucial role in this, because they are largely responsible for land grabs that have driven land workers away from their lands. Churches have set an example of responsibility concerning land access, and enterprises should show goodwill by following this.

Even though the picture of Colombia might be presently in many ways troubling, there is a lot of optimism in the air. For example, the young have a lot of potential in peace building efforts, as they represent a fresh start for the country. Colombian civil society mobilizes in reconciliation and slowly re-imagines a new future for itself with international community helping with the much-needed resources to fuel the process. Ultimately one should remember that peacebuilding is a terribly slow process, and that the present process is only two years old.

## **Lessons Learnt**

As the example of FARC showcases, internal discussions before larger processes are important for peace processes. It was emphasized during the seminar, that by putting pressure, women can be included in the negotiation tables. A deep-rooted dialogue is an imperative among the women's movement and with other stakeholders. It is also very important that the victims feel they are being heard and helped, and that a larger societal transformation exists. In pluralistic societies, differential approach may help tackle various issues like multi-level discrimination.

There are multiple factors that had an impact to the failure of the referendum. Some of the factors raised included the media having a negative impact on the result since it misled its audience in the gender aspects of the accord. Furthermore, political factions and fabrication of information, timing and external factors had their role to play. It was agreed that both international support and internal societal momentum are needed for sustainable peace.

There is a lot to learn from the Colombian peace process that could be thought of in other peace processes around the world even though one should keep in mind, that practices should not be copied as such to different contexts. Instead, their suitability and adaptability should be considered in a context sensitive manner. After all, peacebuilding is a process of constant learning, development and adaptation to existing conditions.