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Andrés Gaudán

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Colombia’s Peace Negotiators Turn Their Attention to Gender Equality

by Andrés Gaudín
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Now in the final leg of a historic negotiation process that began nearly four years ago, the Colombian government and Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) guerrillas took the surprising step on July 24 of agreeing on a plan to address issues of gender equality and sexual identity once a final peace accord is signed and ratified in a national referendum.

Before the announcement, the Colombian public hadn’t been aware that the issues were even on the table. But as representatives for the two sides explained, the importance of equal rights for women and sexual minorities became increasingly apparent as the talks progressed. “We gained awareness of this crucial matter as time went on and saw that it’s more than just a problem of language—of putting ‘los and las’ [the Spanish articles used to indicate men and women] in all the documents, or an ‘x’ instead of a vowel; it’s about establishing real parity,” said Victoria Sandino, a FARC commander.

Colombian Foreign Affairs Minister María Ángela Holguín offered a similar assessment. “As we got deeper into the negotiations, we came to the conclusion that everything agreed upon had to be integral, which also meant including people with different sexual identities, people who are referred to collectively by the acronym LGBTI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersexual),” she said.

The government and the guerrillas are hoping to sign a final peace agreement before the end of the month and put it to a plebiscite at some point between late September and the middle of October. Before any of that happens, the FARC must first hold a summit to ratify everything its negotiating team signed in Havana, where the talks have taken place since November 2012 (NotiSur, Dec. 14, 2012). The sides reached a preliminary peace agreement and bilateral ceasefire in June (NotiSur, July 15, 2016).

“Once we’ve settled everything, the FARC will meet for its 10th conference since the negotiations began, this time to disband, because the peace accord, the end of the conflict, means nothing more and nothing less than the end of the FARC as an armed group,” said Colombia’s exultant president, Juan Manuel Santos.

Not everyone shares Santos’ enthusiasm for the history-making attempt to end a war—Latin America’s longest—that has dragged on for more than half a century. A significant segment of the population continues to take its cues from former President Álvaro Uribe (2002-2010), an extreme right-winger who fiercely opposes peace (NotiSur, Jan. 9, 2015). With that in mind, many observers warn that the referendum vote could be tighter than expected. Some even fear that the “Yes” option (in favor of the peace accord) could come up short.

First-of-its-kind initiative
Last month’s gender agreement, presented in Havana in the presence of top UN officials, is divided into four sections and focuses on eight subject areas. It also establishes, at various points and in
varying ways, that “crimes regarding sexual violence, abduction of minors, forced displacement of people, and the recruitment of children and adolescents will not qualify for amnesty.”

The document was compiled by a special “gender sub-commission” that included Sandino and Holguín, as well as Paulina Riveros, another government representative. The committee members said their work led to an understanding of the issues that allowed them to “build a feminist theory.” Sandino insisted that within the FARC there is “a real commitment to women” but acknowledged that “certain sectors of the organization, for whom feminism sounds like a strange theory” had difficulty understanding the sub-commission’s efforts. Holguín described a similar dynamic in Colombian society as a whole.

The document’s first section, titled “Toward a New Colombian Countryside: Integral Rural Reform” addresses the specific needs of women in rural areas, where they tend to be economically disadvantaged compared to men. The document calls specifically for establishing equal rights regarding property ownership.

Section two (“Participation: Toward a Democratic Opening to Build Peace”) contains measures to facilitate the inclusion of women in institutions that safeguard guarantees for the political opposition and strengthen organizations for women, youth, and the LGBTI population.

The third section (“Solutions for the Problem of Illicit Drugs”) calls for women to be involved as “active players in the consultation process regarding voluntary crop substitution” within the framework of the so-called Integral Substitution Strategy (Estrategia Integral de Sustitución). The program will also have a gender focus, with measures that respond to the needs and realities of consumers and take into account the relationship between drug consumption and problems of gender-based domestic and sexual violence.

In the fourth and final section (“Regarding the Victims of the Conflict”) the sides agreed to create a special gender group within the so-called Truth Clarification Committee (Comisión de Esclarecimiento de la Verdad) to shed light on specific ways the war has impacted women. At first, the gender sub-commission failed to take some of those effects into account, according to Holguín and Sandino. They later gained insight after hearing direct accounts from former combatants from El Salvador, Guatemala, Ireland, and other countries. “They shared their pain and talked about being much stigmatized, even being rejected in some cases by their families, their children,” said the FARC’s Sandino.

‘A great moment of hope’

Together the four sections touch on eight themes, with land tenancy as something of a common denominator. The areas of focus are as follow:

Access to and formalization of equal rights regarding rural property ownership. The document calls for guarantees allowing women to overcome barriers blocking their access to land, a situation that also affects LGBTI people. It specifically proposes that women who are heads of households be given priority access to a Land Fund (Fondo de Tierras) being planned as part of the overall peace agreement. Given that in Colombia land ownership has, in practice and custom, been a traditionally male domain, this focus on gender equality is nothing short of revolutionary, Holguín said.
Guarantees for economic, social, and cultural rights for women and people of different sexual identities in rural settings. The idea here is that anti-poverty programs, economic aid, and other local economic-stimulus measures respect gender equality.

Promoting equal participation in representative bodies, decision making, and conflict resolution. The goal is to have a gender balance in the entities that are to be established by the peace accords and tasked with deciding on matters such as land use and the drafting of a so-called Opposition Statute (Estatuto de la Oposición). The statute will pave the way for demobilized rebels to participate in mainstream politics by spelling out priorities and guarantees.

Prevention and protection measures addressing specific risks—including discrimination and stigmatization—faced by women and sexual minorities. The document suggests, specifically, that women and LGBTI people have access to psycho-social services.

Access to truth and justice and guarantees of non-repetition. As mentioned above, the document calls for the establishment of a special group within the Truth Clarification Committee to collect evidence of ways the conflict impacted women. The process would include sessions dedicated specifically to gender crimes and the formation of a special team to investigate sexual crimes.

Public recognition, non-discrimination, and awareness-raising efforts regarding work by women as political actors. The idea is to have improved media coverage of such work, and to eliminate content that incites discrimination and violence against women and sexual minorities.

Improvements on an institutional level to strengthen the social and political participation of LGBTI and women’s organizations.

The creation of an Integral Land Registry System with information that accounts for sex, gender, and ethnicity as a way to provide a clearer picture of land ownership and other property claims regarding women.

Among those present at the July 24 event in Havana were Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, the executive director of the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women), and Zainab Hawa Bangura, special representative of the UN secretary-general on sexual violence in conflict. In a joint statement, the two high-ranking officials praised the agreement as “a historic opportunity to transform the status of women in Colombian society through fundamental structural change.” They also called it “a great moment of hope” and a model to be emulated. “It renews our confidence in diplomacy, and strengthens our belief that other long-standing conflicts, no matter how complex and protracted, can follow Colombia’s example and ‘sign up’ for peace,” the UN officials said.

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