



UNIDIR

MANAGING EXITS
FROM ARMED CONFLICT

MEAC RESEARCH INTO ACTION

Taking Peace into Our Own Hands: Colombian Feminists Use Local Politics to Advance their Agenda for Peace

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Background

About MEAC

UNIDIR's Managing Exits from Armed Conflict (MEAC) is a multi-year collaboration that examines why and how individuals exit armed groups and sustainably reintegrate into civilian life. Employing multi-method longitudinal studies that follow the trajectories of former armed group affiliates and their non-associate peers across six countries, MEAC seeks to inform evidence-based prevention and reintegration programming. MEAC benefits from support from the German Federal Foreign Office; Global Affairs Canada; the Swiss FDFA; and the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs; UNICEF; and is run in partnership with IOM; UNDP; DPO; the World Bank, and the United Nations University Centre for Policy Research (UNU-CPR).

About this Series

MEAC produces a series of short publications aimed at policymakers and practitioners to highlight key findings but recognizes that there is relevant research on the subject that may remain inaccessible to them. In an effort to make these studies, which are often highly technical and/or sit behind academic journal paywalls, accessible to decision-makers and to connect them to the evidence base MEAC is creating, UNIDIR has introduced this interview series. In this series, MEAC takes the role of an interlocutor, bridging the gap between academic research and practical application by presenting brief interviews with scholars on pertinent topics. What follows is a short, digestible dialogue around the main findings of a recent study and their policy and practical implications for those working to prevent and respond to political violence and armed conflict.

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Overview

Our forthcoming research publication⁴ examines how feminist activism helped shape the peace negotiations between the Colombian government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia- People's Army (FARC-EP) and the resulting 2016 peace agreement. Activist efforts contributed to a historic agreement that includes over 120 provisions related to gender equality.

As Colombian feminists seek to advance a vision of sustainable and gender-equal peace as laid out in the agreement and other policy documents, however, they have faced a host of challenges. Important commitments made at the national level – for example, through the 2016 peace agreement or the recently drafted National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security – are often not translated to the local level, where gender inequality and security threats against women remain rampant. In this article, we build on our lived experiences of advancing the feminist agenda in Cauca, Colombia, to examine the ways in which Colombian feminists respond to the challenges they face. We trace how Colombian feminists have appropriated, adapted, and used global norms to influence local institutions through three processes: localization of the Women, Peace, and Security agenda; drafting of Local Development Plans; and the development of municipal Public Policy for Women in Puerto Tejada. We argue that as these examples show, localizing global norms can be effectively used as a strategy to influence the gender dynamics within local institutions in order to advance a more equitable peace. This adds to the ongoing discussions around the different strategies feminists can use to navigate in and change male-dominated and masculinized institutions in peacebuilding and beyond.

Interview

1. What inspired you to focus on the role of Colombian feminists (specifically from the department of Cauca), and how did you reconcile your different roles and experiences as researchers and activists for the creation of this research project?

Agnieszka: Colombia has been hailed internationally for its 2016 peace process, which included women negotiators on both sides of the negotiating table, and a resulting peace

⁴ Fal-Dutra Santos, Agnieszka, Sonia Cardona and Francy Jaramillo (2025). “Taking peace into our own hands: Colombian feminists use local politics to advance their agenda for peace”. *International Feminist Journal of Peacebuilding*, Forthcoming.

agreement that has a strong gender perspective. There is no doubt that these achievements were thanks in large part to the work of Colombian feminist activists – including through the historic National Summit for Women and Peace convened in 2015. Nonetheless, the implementation of the peace agreement – and in particular of its “gender approach” (*enfoque de género*) – has been slow, and the agreement has failed to transform the patriarchal norms it set out to challenge.⁵ While the progress was particularly slow under the Duque administration, which lacked the political will to implement the peace agreement, the activists interviewed for our research emphasized that the implementation of the peace agreement and its gender approach has remained marginalized within the “total peace” agenda of the Gustavo Petro government. Moreover, women and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQI+) activists and civil society leaders who are pushing for implementation have faced increasing levels of violence and attacks.⁶ Through our experiences as researchers and activists, we have witnessed a wide range of actions and strategies that local Colombian women and feminists have undertaken to advance their policy priorities in the face of security threats and other challenges including in their efforts to advance the gender provisions of the 2016 agreement. These strategies include, for example, the localization of international norms and agendas, which had not been closely researched. With this article, we wanted to document these practices and make them visible.

We come from different backgrounds and view the topic from different angles – Francy and Sonia are feminist activists in Colombia (Francy works in Cauca and Sonia works across the country), and I am an international researcher. We built on the trusted relationships we developed working on the localization of the *Women, Peace, and Security (WPS)* agenda in Cauca in developing this project. We drew on our lived experiences, as well as a review of existing sources and literature and some in-depth interviews to develop this article. We think the method we used was quite innovative and hopefully can inspire more activist-academic collaborations in the future!

2. Before we talk about implementation, can you quickly provide an overview of some of the 2016 Agreement’s gender provisions?

Agnieszka: The Final Agreement between the Colombian government and FARC-EP was innovative and groundbreaking in several ways. It is the first peace agreement to explicitly mention LGBTQI+ persons and includes specific provisions to protect their rights in the post-conflict period. It is also the only agreement thus far to have explicitly recognized the value of

⁵ José A Gutiérrez and Emma Murphy, “The Unspoken Red-Line in Colombia: Gender Reordering of Women Ex-Combatants and the Transformative Peace Agenda,” *Cooperation and Conflict*, May 30, 2022.

⁶ Global Network of Women Peacebuilders and UN Women, “[Building Peace from the Grassroots: Learning from Women Peacebuilders to Advance the WPS Agenda](#),” October 2020,; Eduardo Álvarez Vanegas, “[Los líderes sociales bajo ataque en Colombia y en el Cauca](#),” *Razón Pública* (blog), March 27, 2017

women’s care work and the need to better support it as part of the post-conflict recovery. Importantly, the Agreement also had a strong local (or “territorial” focus) with many provisions directed specifically at rural women, and many designed to be implemented by local authorities, through consultative and participatory processes with local populations.

The Agreement’s gender provisions span six chapters and touch on a broad range of issues, starting from rural women’s access to land and livelihood opportunities, through support to women’s participation in politics and strengthening women’s civil society organizations, to the inclusion of sexual and gender-based violence in the country’s transitional justice processes and institutions. The below table summarizes the key themes under each of the chapters. However, as both our and previous research has shown, these progressive provisions were often not translated into concrete actions at the local level due to a lack of resources or lack of political will and fell short of ensuring meaningful participation and transformative change.⁷

Table 1: Summary of the Gender Provisions Across the 2016 Peace Agreement.

<p>Chapter 1: Comprehensive Rural Reform</p>	<p>This chapter includes special provisions to facilitate women’s access to land, including through preferential access to the Land Fund and addressing specific barriers, such as access to bank loans and funds to effectively use land. Women are usually mentioned among other vulnerable groups, and the guarantees are given to them through “Integrated” provisions.</p> <p>It also includes provisions for improving rural women’s access to justice and other basic services, as well as provisions for women’s participation in Territorial Development Plans (<i>Planes de Desarrollo con un Enfoque Territorial</i>; PDETs).</p>
<p>Chapter 2: Political Participation</p>	<p>This chapter includes provisions to ensure women’s political participation. Notable examples include provisions to support and protect women’s organizations and women social leaders.</p>
<p>Chapter 3: End of the Conflict</p>	<p>This chapter includes provisions to ensure gender-responsiveness in the process of the reintegration of former FARC-EP combatants, and women’s participation in monitoring the demobilization and end to the conflict.</p>
<p>Chapter 4: Solution to the Illicit Drugs Problem</p>	<p>This chapter includes provisions for women’s inclusion in the development and implementation of illicit drug substitution plans. It also includes provisions for a “gender focus” in the rehabilitation of</p>

⁷ Verdad Abierta, “¿Por Qué La Violencia Se Ensaña Contra Los Líderes Sociales En El Cauca?,” *Verdad Abierta* (blog), April 18, 2020, 1; Ana Isabel Rodríguez Iglesias and Noah Rosen, “Local Participation at Stake: Between Emancipatory Goals and Co-Option Strategies. The Case of Territorially Focused Development Programs in Colombia,” *Colombia Internacional*, no. 109 (2022): 89–114.

	drug users and specific measures regarding healthcare for women drug users and women imprisoned due to drug-related crimes.
Chapter 5: Victims of the Conflict	This chapter includes provisions on transitional justice – including recognition of sexual and gender-based violence as one of the forms of violence that will be considered within the transitional justice institutions; the mandate for the Truth Commission to apply a gender perspective; and provisions for women’s equal participation in the transitional justice bodies and in discussions about reparations for victims.
Chapter 6: Implementation, Verification and Public Endorsement	This chapter includes provisions for a gender lens to be integrated throughout the monitoring of the peace agreement. It also includes provisions for women’s participation in the monitoring, including through the creation of the Special Instance for Women as a dedicated monitoring body.

3. Eight years after the signing of the peace agreement, would you say the implementation of its gendered components has been successful? What specific areas still require work?

Sonia: The progress in the implementation of the peace agreement has been slow, and gender provisions have been lagging even further behind. According to the report from the Kroc Institute located at the University of Notre Dame⁸, 52 per cent of the gender provisions were at the minimum level of implementation, and 18 per cent had not begun to be implemented. It is notable that the implementation of the gender provisions has lagged further behind other aspects of the Agreement (of which 13 per cent of the broader agreement provisions have not been initiated at all, and 37 per cent of provisions are at the minimum implementation level).

Agnieszka: The non-implementation of the gender provisions documented in research is also clearly visible in the territories, where slow implementation and continued insecurity combined have thwarted the change envisioned by the Agreement. During my recent research in Cauca, I was able to speak to local activists working throughout the department, including in the North of Cauca, where violence has been escalating dangerously.⁹ Most people interviewed were disappointed with the level of implementation: the land distribution process has been slow generally, and women specifically often still do not have access to land. Even those who

⁸ Josefina Echavarría Álvarez et al., “Siete años de implementación del Acuerdo Final: perspectivas para fortalecer la construcción de paz a mitad de camino” (2024),

⁹ Redacción Cambio, “[El Cauca y su enorme conflicto por superar | Cambio Colombia](#),” *Cambio Colombia*, May 26, 2024

received land allocations to date are not able to fully use it either due to insecurity or because there are no opportunities to market and sell their produce. As a result, both victims and former FARC-EP combatants are finding it difficult to access the job market and return to 'normal' lives.

For other provisions, there have been important policies or precedents set, but again, their impact has yet to be felt by affected populations. This has been the case with the important progress made with regard to the Agreement's provisions to re-establish truth and justice. This is especially true with regard to the September 2023 adoption of the so-called "Macro-case 11," which recognized sexual and gender-based violence as systemic during the conflict.¹⁰ These achievements, however, have been largely symbolic and there is still a long way to go to provide true reconciliation and reparation for victims.

A similar dynamic is apparent in the recent drafting of [Colombia's first National Action Plan](#) for the implementation of the WPS agenda. The participatory drafting process took place throughout 2023 and the Plan is now awaiting official adoption. Although this Plan is an important development, the women's organizations that have participated in the drafting process continue to ask for concrete actions that would advance the implementation of the WPS agenda, including the promise of women's greater participation across all levels of decision-making and a more human-centred approach to security,¹¹ and that would fulfil the promise of the Final Peace Agreement.

4. Despite significant achievements, translating national commitments to peace into local reality remains a huge challenge. Can you describe the innovative strategies that Colombian feminists have employed to make local progress against the gender provisions of the 2016 Peace Agreement?

Francy: One important strategy that feminists have used in Cauca and some other departments is the Localization of the WPS agenda, which calls for adopting and mainstreaming a gender perspective in peace processes and ensuring women's equal and meaningful participation in security-related decision-making and peace processes. Even before the country had a National Action Plan on WPS, this was an important strategy to advance some of the feminist objectives in the Agreement.

¹⁰ Jurisdicción Especial para la Paz (JEP), "Comunicado 112: La JEP abre macrocaso 11, que investiga la violencia basada en género, incluyendo violencia sexual y reproductiva, y crímenes cometidos por prejuicio," September 27, 2023, <https://www.jep.gov.co:443/Sala-de-Prensa/Paginas/-la-jep-abre-macrocaso-11-que-investiga-la-violencia-basada-en-genero-incluyendo-violencia-sexual-y-reproductiva-y-crimes.aspx>.

¹¹ Rosa Emilia Salamanca Gonzales et al., "[Miradas Feministas Para Transformar La Seguridad](#)" (Colombia: CIASE, Sisma Mujer, Colombia Diversa y Colectivo de Pensamiento Mujeres, Paz y Seguridad, October 2022),

Supported by national networks (such as the *Red Nacional de Mujeres*) and international partners (such as the Global Network of Women Peacebuilders), women in Cauca have championed the development and adoption of Local WPS Action Plans. These are policy documents, adopted by local authorities – either departmental or municipal governments – which identify concrete actions designed to implement the key goals of the global WPS agenda in the specific context of Cauca. These plans became important advocacy tools; they provided a “roadmap” for the authorities to follow and a concrete instrument for feminist activists to measure progress and hold local leaders accountable to their specific commitments. These local action plans have led to some real achievements - including the establishment of the "gender patrol" – a specific unit of the police dedicated to monitoring, documenting, and responding to gender-based violence – in the city of Popayan.

Sonia: Another key strategy Cauca’s feminists used was advocacy with local authorities to influence and shape local institutions that play a key role in implementing many of the provisions included in the Agreement, especially the Territorial Development Plans. Over the years, women's advocacy led to the adoption of the Public Policy for Women in the department, detailing how it will protect and advance women’s rights, and several public policies at the municipal level. One example that I have followed closely is the public policy for women in Puerto Tejada. It includes several specific actions to address the challenges faced by women in the municipality. For example, it establishes a Municipal Council for Women's Safety. The role of the Municipal Council for Women’s Safety will be to identify security risks and create concrete action plans to prevent violence against women. Additionally, the Puerto Tejada public policy for women includes strategies and commitments to increase women’s ownership of land and property – including by coordinating with relevant national and departmental entities.

Francy: An additional development, separate from the development of Puerto Tejada’s policy is that Cauca also now has a Women's Secretariat that coordinates the departmental-level actions to protect women’s rights, including through the implementation of the departmental public policy for women. It also serves as an entry point or a point of contact for feminist activists, providing them with easier access to local authorities. For example, during the recent drafting of the Local Development Plan – an important departmental policy that serves as a “blueprint” for all local government spending and action over the 4-year term, not only related to WPS – the Women’s Secretariat played an important coordinating role to make sure women’s perspectives and priorities were reflected in the resulting Plan. While not perfect, this institutional framework, consisting of the public policies for women and the Women’s Secretariat as the coordinating body, provides feminists with an entry point to advocate for their priorities within local institutions. As a result of all this work, and the new institutions that it has

helped establish, it is almost unthinkable today that women or gender could be ignored when developing local policies in Cauca.

5. What lessons learned can the international community take from the efforts to localize the WPS agenda from the experiences of Colombian feminists?

Sonia: A key lesson learned in Colombia is the importance of local institutions. As we already mentioned, the establishment of the Women's Secretariat and the adoption of public policies were important breakthroughs. Even though these policies and institutions are not perfect, they have made the work of women activists in Cauca easier in some ways. So, one should not disregard the importance of strengthening and engaging local institutions in peace processes. The work at the national political level can seem disappointing sometimes but strengthening municipal or departmental institutions can be useful in "normalizing" gender at the local level.

Another lesson learned is relevant to other contexts is recognizing that localization is a process that requires significant investment. It does not happen overnight, and cannot be achieved through a single workshop, or even several workshops. It is a long-term process of building relationships, raising awareness, and developing trust. It can sometimes be challenging because just as women manage to develop positive relationships with local authorities, those in power change with each election cycle and advocates need to start over in building relationships. That is why it is important to also engage with working-level civil servants who are less likely to rotate.

Finally, the experience in Cauca also demonstrates the importance of continued support, recognition, and financing for local women and feminist organizations as they are often the ones who help advance the operationalization of the Agreement's gender provisions. In Colombia, this includes both women at the departmental level, but also those working at the level of municipalities. They continue to face serious challenges, and the support they receive is often very short-term and does not allow them to organize, mobilize, and pursue their objectives in a sustainable manner.

6. Can you share three lessons from the Colombian experience with “norm localization” that could help feminists use global norms to shape local institutions in other contexts?

Agnieszka: The literature on norm localization is very interesting because it provides us with an insight into how global debates and norms can be "translated" into the local context, but also how local realities can conversely shape global discussions.

An important lesson we draw from our analysis of the work of feminist activists in Cauca is that localization is a process which can not only (re-)shape local institutions but can also raise the status and the legitimacy of feminist activists, providing them with more social capital to use in future advocacy. However, as already mentioned, we can also see that localization is not a short-term or straightforward process. It can take place through many channels, often simultaneously. It is also important to note that "localizing" a norm at the departmental level, through institutions located in the department's capital will not automatically mean that it applies in the remote, rural communities. Continued work to reach those in the most remote areas is needed. This is why we talk about the importance of constant support to local feminist groups. Localization is a process that can be supported externally but, in the end, it is all about the local actors - including local feminists. If they are not meaningfully involved - and supported over the long term - there is little likelihood of advancing the gender provisions of the Agreement or the WPS National Action Plan.

7. Colombia is set to adopt its first National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security. What role do you think this Action Plan can play in ensuring better implementation of the peace agreement, and a more peaceful & gender-equal environment at the local level?

Sonia: The drafting of the plan was a significant achievement and the result of many years of feminist advocacy. The WPS agenda has been an important framework for women's advocacy for a long time. The plan provides an opportunity to re-focus energies and resources around building peace with a gender perspective and achieving a gender-equal peace rooted in the recognition of the importance of human security in Colombia.

Although there are efforts to consolidate the institutions to improve the respect of women's rights in the territories most affected by the armed conflict, as mentioned, the processes are slow and there are limited resources dedicated to this work, which significantly affects the development of an agenda for the adoption of the Plan. Therefore, for the National Action Plan to deliver on its promise, we need much greater political commitment and investment in both the WPS agenda and gender equality more broadly (including within the peace agreement).

8. The MEAC project was founded with a commitment to understanding the unique challenges faced by women, girls, men, and boys (while paying special attention to different intersecting aspects of their identities) in conflict and post-

conflict transitions.¹² From your findings, how can the experience of Colombian feminists and activists be translated to other places to help women and girls transition to civilian life after conflict?

Agnieszka: The transition into civilian life has been a challenge for many former FARC-EP combatants, including women. While there has been some progress - including the participation of some former FARC women combatants in political roles - much remains to be done.

During my recent research, I was able to document the experiences of several former women combatants in Cauca. Many of them talk about the economic difficulties they face today. While former combatants receive some financial support from the State, they have difficulty accessing the labour market. For some of them, there are not enough training opportunities, and those that exist are often directed more towards men. Moreover, they face prejudice when applying for jobs.

While the State plays a key role in reintegration, local women and feminist activists have been supporting former combatants in their transition. For example, the association Manuelitas established in Popayan, the capital of Cauca, helps former combatants return to civilian life by providing legal assistance, job opportunities, and care for their children so that women can participate in training and events. This is one lesson that we think our research carries for other (post-)conflict processes as well. While the policy discussions are often focused on how international or national entities can advance reintegration, it is important to recognize grassroots and hyperlocal support to ex-combatants who are transitioning to civilian life.

9. Given the continued violence and criminal and dissident activity in Colombia, but also the ongoing negotiations and the government's "Total Peace" strategy, what are three key priorities to better support the work of local feminists in the country?

- a) First, it is very clear from our work that economic precarity limits the ability of local activists to mobilize and advance women's equal participation in communities. In this sense, the Total Peace strategy should include efforts to **strengthen women's civil society organizations, including by providing them with resources to continue to organize and mobilize and to travel across communities for their work.**

¹² Cristal Downing, Ángela Olaya and Sofía Rivas (2021) "[The Gendered Dynamics of Conflict and Peacebuilding in Colombia](#)", MEAC Findings Report 11, United Nations University, New York.

- b) Second, the violence women have suffered and continue to suffer has left psychosocial and emotional marks. Thus, it is essential to **integrate a strong aspect of mental health and psychosocial support for social leaders, including women, in efforts to implement the Agreement and the Total Peace strategy**. This should include both **individual and collective healing** strategies and build on the traditional knowledge and healing practices already present in the communities.
- c) Finally, it is **necessary to provide clear but flexible channels for women's (diverse and representative) participation in decision-making spaces** related to peace and security and the implementation of the Peace Agreement. Consultative processes related to the recent formulation of the Local Development Plans are a good example, but such processes could further be strengthened.