

THE IMPACT OF GRASSROOTS WOMEN'S PARTICIPATORY MEDIATION AND DIALOGUE ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF PEACE AGREEMENTS

DRAWING ON THE EXPERIENCE OF COLOMBIA

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There is a strong international consensus on the importance of involving women as a key way to support peace processes, and a growing recognition by international actors of the importance of empowering internal mediators who use a variety of informal techniques including facilitation and dialogue.

Although there has been a good deal of political and research focus on including women in peace negotiations at various levels and through various mechanisms, with an emphasis on involving women's civil society organizations, there has been much less attention paid to the ongoing role of women's groups in the implementation process and their importance for making peace accords actually work. Even more unusual is to emphasize for this stage in the conflict cycle the ongoing power and potential of mediation (broadly defined), as done by women's organizations. It is the potential high impact of such work in creating a sustainable peace that we want to emphasize here.

This policy brief is based on interviews with leaders of 14 women's organizations across Colombia engaged in this sort of work, conducted in June of 2017. Details of these groups and their work is included in the final report for this project. It also benefitted from deeper discussions with leaders of two of these organizations at a workshop held in Tampere, Finland, in October of 2017, and their exchanges with women mediators from Burundi and representatives of Finnish NGOs that support mediation, also at that workshop. Background conversations with a variety of experts in Colombia also nourished the analysis, as did a previous two years of closely following and collecting Colombian and international press coverage of struggles over gender in the peace accords. This work was funded by the Office of the Prime Minister of Finland, through the project "Inclusive Mediation and Conflict Prevention: The Finnish Model".

Picture previous page: Vest reads: women mediators for peace in the Putumayo, Weavers of life of Putumayo. Putumayo is a region of Colombia that has experienced heavy conflict. This project was organized by the Network of Women Mediators of Colombia and funded by the US Institute for Peace.

Introduction

Colombia's experience is particularly useful for thinking about how women's organizations can support implementation not only because they are currently engaged in the implementation of the peace accord formally approved on November 30, 2016 that ended 54 years of armed conflict between the parties, but also because that accord is the most inclusive peace accord in the world to date. It recognizes that those already marginalized because of age, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and other categories suffered differently during the war, and thus need targeted support to experience a true peace and security, and one that does not retrench those inequalities. The accord calls this a differential approach.

Colombia also has a strong women's movement, which played a key role in pushing for this differential approach. Only a few of these groups frame their work as mediation, insider mediation, participatory mediation, facilitation, dialogue, or the like (much less track 2 or track 3 mediation); yet in conversation many discussed how their work on implementation of the accords involved brokering differences and building consensus through facilitating

dialogues at various scales. It seems likely that this would also be true of women's groups in other countries and so the first recommendation is to look for ways that this is happening under other names. Indeed, in Colombia the word mediation can be a difficult and loaded word for some groups, and this may be true elsewhere.

Women's groups foster mediation and dialogue that supports implementation of peace accords in various ways and at different scales. Many meet to discuss aspects of the accords and the recent laws and decrees relating to implementation, and to understand what they mean on the ground for them - so that they can be involved in shaping the implementation and what it ends up looking like. In that process they face disagreements on what to focus on and what to push for that they are mediating amongst themselves. Though it is unrealistic to expect all women's groups to agree on all aspects, they are building points of consensus that then make their advocacy for implementation stronger.

They are opening spaces of dialogue, or participatory mediation, to work out these positions in (1) their own organizations, at local, regional, and national levels, and (2) in various alliances with other women's groups and mixed



Mandala ritual. Image courtesy of Convergence of Women for Public Action

gender groups, at regional and national levels, and then (3) in dialogue with various formations of the state, at local, regional, and national levels. This process will not only make specific aspects of implementation more effective, but works to rebuild the social fabric more generally, a key component of sustainable peace.

This is a continuation of the work many of these groups did to push for the peace negotiations to happen, and then to provide input for the negotiations themselves. This included specific crafted proposals, a good number of which were incorporated in the accords. Implementation is a particularly key time in the conflict cycle, where this sort of participatory mediation can have a large impact. Yet the support that these groups received for earlier stages in the cycle, such as funds for facilitated dialogue from the United States Institute for Peace (USIP), has largely ended.

The Colombian Network of Women Mediators, established with the help of funding and training from the USIP, has continued as a loose-knit unfunded group that supports this sort of work,

though far from all women's organizations who do this sort of work are involved. The Women, Peace and Security Collective for Reflection and Action also brings together various groups to exchange experiences and develop practices for this work. Financial and technical support for those sorts of knowledge exchanges, and for reflecting on what has and has not worked, could have a big impact in supporting women's dialogue and mediation work in this implementation phase.

Of course there are many different sorts of women, Colombia in particular is a country with a great deal of diversity, across region, race, class, and more. One of the major differences that some women's organizations are working to bridge through dialogue is the vastly different realities of urban and rural women, who experienced the war very differently and now have different peacebuilding needs, but often don't even know each other's realities. Rural women are often severely disadvantaged and it is much harder for them to participate in these dialogues. To use the terminology of the Colombian peace accords themselves, they need stronger 'affirmative



Women of Pangui, Nuquí, Chocó, Colombia with the fabric map they made of their village, featuring dolls they each made to represent themselves, as part of a project that was part of the Red de Tejedoras, the Network of Women Weavers. Photograph by Laura Coral y Beatriz Arias.

#MujeresEnJuntanza



Image first used for a series of events called Juntanzas – a neologism meaning something like ‘a-coming-together’ – where women’s movement activists met with both women FARC and ELN combatants to discuss peace. Later repurposed for the internet hashtag here #mujeresenjuntanza, loosely translated as ‘women in a coming-together’. This hashtag is currently being used to promote women’s groups coming together to participate in the peace negotiations with the ELN.

measures’ to help them even get to the table to speak. Several said that what they most needed was financial support for transportation to events so that they could come together to dialogue.

But they also need targeted technical support. There are 35 new Colombian government agencies being established as part of the peace accords, and thousands of new laws. Different women’s groups repeatedly emphasized that to truly have a voice in such dialogues, and for their participation in the implementation process to be meaningful, they needed support for understanding the many new and rapidly evolving implementation laws, decrees, and agencies and their impacts (in Colombia this is often described as ‘orientación sociojurídica’, sociolegal orientation). This would be

particularly helpful for those women who are marginalized and have less formal education, such as rural women.

One of the longstanding challenges in Colombia, and in many other conflict countries, has been to have a fully functional state in all areas. Armed conflict occurred largely in areas where there was not a strong state presence. It will be a challenge for these new agencies to function well, and particularly to carry out the differential approach mandated in the accords. But women’s groups are an important resource that these agencies could draw on. They are creating their own dialogue spaces that reweave broken connections across differences in society that have been aggravated by the armed conflict. Many use forms of ritual to create safer spaces for

this work that create mandalas as material manifestations of the different perspectives coming together (see photo). Others use crafts to create a safer space for dialogue (see photo). But women's groups also want more formal dialogue spaces with the state itself.

Various women's organizations repeatedly emphasized that they wanted more spaces for participation in the implementation process that were not simply for civil society to present proposals or comments to the state, but where there could be more engaged dialogue and discussion about implementation dynamics on the ground with various levels of the state, where actual decisions about implementation specifics could be made. They argued that such spaces would make implementation more effective. Women are tired of participating in spaces where they seem to be speaking into a black hole, where their voices have little impact and are not as effective in making implementation work well as they could be. This is a challenge that may well be faced in other countries, which international attention to and concern about may have some impact on.

Relatedly, there was also wide agreement amongst women's groups that they would like to see more women named to official positions on committees and in agencies involved in implementation, and many are concerned at the dismally low percentages of women named so far, at both national and regional levels (though the new transitional justice court is a notable exception). They argue that women often need extra support and training to be able to take up these positions, particularly rural women - who are even less represented in implementation spaces. As one rural woman leader told me, we are just objects of the law, rather than participating in it. Women's groups also insist that it is not only important to count how many women are on implementation boards and agencies, but that these need to be women who know about and will support women's rights.

One of the complexities and challenges of the Colombian situation is that as implementation of the peace accord with the FARC rebels is

underway, the state has begun negotiating with the smaller ELN rebel group. There is currently a process underway for determining exactly how, but civil society will be incorporated more fully into these negotiations - both as a reflection of the different make up and history of the ELN and taking into account lessons learned from the last negotiation process. One challenge for this process is that women's groups are stretched thin, given the focus of many on implementation, and reticent to participate if their voices will not be heard. This policy brief focuses on the implementation phase, but one take away from this is to highlight that in other countries there may also be multiple actors at different phases of the conflict cycle and that the call for women's groups to be engaging in these different ways is a challenge to be aware of.

When the head of the Colombian negotiation team, Humberto De la Calle, announced the inclusion of the differential approach at the suggestion of the gender subcommission, he emphasized that if these peace accords work, it would be because of the grassroots reconciliation work done by women. A great deal gets asked of women, and too often their resiliency is taken for granted, and even abused. Though women can often do a lot with very little, they need more support. Support is particularly key, but perhaps more easily forgotten, in the implementation phase. The growing literature on ways to include women in peace negotiation processes says little on how to incorporate them in making those processes stick. We suggest that supporting their mediation and dialogue work in the implementation phase is a key way to do that.

Recommendations

- *Peace accord implementation will be more successful when women's groups are involved, and implementation is a key stage of the conflict cycle during which to support women's groups.*
- *Participatory track two and track three mediation, insider mediation, and facilitated dialogues are often being done by women's groups under other names, and should be looked for more widely. This includes looking for this work at local, regional,*

and national scales – which are not so much nested as in ongoing conversation.

- *These groups could use support for knowledge exchanges to strengthen and broaden their own skills at these mediation processes.*
- *Women with fewer resources need affirmative measures to be able to fully participate in participatory mediation and dialogues, and could particularly use logistical support for transportation.*
- *All women's organizations could use technical support for analyzing and understanding the many new and rapidly evolving implementation laws, decrees, and agencies and their impacts, so that they can meaningfully dialogue about their impact on women.*
- *International attention could be paid to what spaces exist for women's organizations to have meaningful dialogue with various state entities, at all levels, about implementation and its impact on women. Attention could also be paid to the presence of women who know about and support women's rights on various implementation committees and agencies. Expressions of concern about the lack of such spaces and such representation may be helpful.*

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