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Engendered Peace Processes and Women's Political Participation: Lessons from Colombia

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There cannot be peace while there is oppression and half of humanity is still excluded from full development – women.¹

Introduction

The Colombian armed conflict has been the longest civil war in the Western Hemisphere,² lasting over fifty years and leaving almost 9,237,000 victims.³ The conflict between the state and guerrilla groups, including the Colombian Revolutionary Armed Forces (FARC) and the National Liberation Army (ELN), reached an inflection point in 2012, after the beginning of the government's peace negotiations with FARC. This process led to FARC and the Colombian government signing a Final Peace Agreement in 2016. The Peace Agreement has been recognized around the globe as a benchmark for gender mainstreaming in peace processes.⁴ This recognition stems first from the participation of women and their organizations in the negotiations and, second, from the incorporation of gender provisions in all aspects of the Agreement. The Peace Agreement thus represents a commitment of the Colombian State to the political, social, and economic empowerment of women, and to closing the gender gap between men and women.

Colombia's peace process is thus hailed as an effort towards an "engendered" peace, referring to its commitment to equal rights for men and women, the recognition of the special circumstances women faced during the conflict, and even more to the standard of *mainstreaming* gender in all parts of the agreement. Because of this, in the Women's Rights After War project, we explore the multifaceted relationship between the lives of women, the legal and institutional reforms resulting from the peace process, and the

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¹ "Las mujeres también hemos cosechado tierra para la paz," *Mujeres por la Paz*, paper presented in the Forum "Políticas de desarrollo agrario integral con enfoque territorial" on December 17, 18 and 19, 2012, http://www.humanas.org.co/archivos/3documento_mujeres_por_la_paz.pdf. Phrase in Spanish: *No puede haber paz mientras se oprima y se impida el desarrollo pleno de la mitad de la humanidad, las mujeres.*

² Lina M. Céspedes-Báez and Felipe Jaramillo Ruiz, "Peace Without Women Does Not Go! Women's Struggle for Inclusion in Colombia's Peace Process with the FARC," *Colombia Internacional* 94 (2018): 83–109.

³ Number of victims registered at the Unique Register of Victims from the official Victims Unit. Data available at: <https://www.unidadvictimas.gov.co/es/registro-unico-de-victimas-ruv/37394>.

⁴ Jakeline Vargas and Ángela Díaz Pérez, "Enfoque de Género en el acuerdo de paz entre el Gobierno Colombiano y las FARC-EP: transiciones necesarias para su implementación," *Araucaria, Revista Iberoamericana de Filosofía, Política y Humanidades* (Universidad de Sevilla) 20, no. 39 (2018): 389–414; Camille Boutron, "Engendering Peacebuilding: The International Gender Nomenclature of Peace Politics and Women's Participation in the Colombian Peace Process," *Journal of Peacebuilding & Development* 13, no. 2 (2018): 116–21.

conflict itself. In this piece, I outline the preliminary findings of our ongoing research in Colombia since the Peace Agreement of November 2016, with a focus on the election of women to political office through the implementation of the gender quota.

I argue that after six years of implementing the Peace Agreement, there are several persistent challenges regarding women's political empowerment that serve to undermine gender equality as well as the quality of the post-war peace. These challenges manifest both in the number of women elected, *who* is elected, and the striking absence of inclusive feminist policies in the quota's implementation. Drawing on my research in six municipalities with divergent experiences of conflict, I demonstrate both the instrumentalization of women through the implementation of the gender quota, as well as the political violence women faced as backlash to these reforms. My research demonstrates that the gender reforms put in place in the context of the peace agreement have not been as disruptive to the war-affected state as their advocates had hoped. In fact, we see that women's political participation is frequently determined by, and reinforcing of, pre-war and conflict-era structures of power. The continuities we observe hint that some of the underlying structural causes of the armed conflict, rooted in unequal social power relations and political capture by traditional parties and elites, remain unattended.

I trace how the same traditional families and parties that controlled the political landscape during the country's fifty-year armed conflict continue to dominate today, controlling women's access to electoral politics through three channels. Traditional parties and elites elevate internally-affiliated women in order to advance their own political and economic agendas, often as a continuation of their interests during the armed conflict; purchase the loyalties of other women seeking to enter electoral politics in pursuit of the same; and intimidate, harass, and deter external candidates with alternative visions of politics. The result is that women entering politics through the quota system represent an extension of the political and economic interests that prevailed throughout the war.

In the following sections, I first introduce the shortcomings of legal and institutional norms in effectively increasing the number of women in elected decision-making positions, highlighting the gaps that remain. I then explore *how* women participate in politics, summarizing our analysis of women's political participation in six Colombian municipalities. I highlight the political dynamics that shape women's political participation, such as maintaining patronage, elite capture, corruption, and the enduring power of status quo interests. I show how patterns of democratic electoral politics since the conclusion of the war, instrumentalized by traditional party elites, extend rather than disrupt conflict-era dynamics.

Methodological Note and Positionality

As a member of Colombian civil society and an academic researcher, I have been reflecting on women's political participation in Colombia for the past six years. During this period, I have pursued interviews – as well as countless informal conversations – with women from different backgrounds who have run for office. I have heard the same stories again and again: women who felt both empowered and disempowered when participating in politics. Women who found themselves as strong and motivated leaders willing to work towards their communities and their political ideas on the one hand, but who simultaneously expressed the profound disappointment and anxiety they

suffered after running for office, as a result of the barriers to women's political participation that I document here.

I grew up in a municipality in the South of Colombia, near the territory where the ex-guerrilla group FARC was born in 1964. The experience of growing up in a conflict-affected area has impacted my interests and reflections on peacebuilding and women's rights, carved from a constant fear of losing my family, friends, and my own life; this forced the adoption of a "securitized" way of living in response. Being a woman in this context made me even more vulnerable. But even more so, from a young age I learned that girls are not meant for politics, especially when being a politician in my hometown was a high-risk activity. As I teenager I regularly read about the assassination of councillors in the local newspapers. Additionally, growing up in a municipality where traditional politicians have remained in power and the levels of political corruption and patronage are self-evident, I approached this research with a number of pre-formed hypotheses, perceptions, and observations, stemming from my own lived experiences.

Therefore, this piece draws on my personal reflections, as well as from ongoing research with the Women's Rights After War (WRAW) project. The WRAW research involved the construction and analysis of a national database on institutional and legal reforms surrounding women's rights, as well as twenty-four semi-structured expert interviews with actors ranging from journalists to community leaders and members of civil society organizations from six municipalities.⁵ These interviews were key to understanding local dynamics, as many of our interviewees were born in the municipalities, and have observed, participated in, or worked on the economic, social, and political aspects of their territories. Some were social leaders themselves working towards gender equality. As this research project seeks to delve into the impact of gender and peace policies at the sub-national level, I want to highlight the importance of this sub-national level analysis. The peace process in Colombia was conceived from the idea of *territorial peace*, which refers to peacebuilding and peace agreement implementation from below, in local spaces and through a participatory process. Therefore, how it is implemented at the local level is key to understanding prospects for its success.

Background

The Colombian Engendered Peace Agreement and its Legal Reforms

The inclusion of a gender focus in the peace agreement is the result of the historical and persisting work that women's rights NGOs, movements, and advocacy groups did during the peace process between the Colombian government and the FARC in Havana.⁶ One of their purposes was the acknowledgment of and attention to the specific and disproportional impact that the armed conflict has had on women's lives. As the Truth Commission resulting from this peace process described in its final report:

Women and men experienced armed conflict differently. Many died and for the surviving women, the war marked their bodies, their intimacy, their social relationships, their health, their moods, their desire for living and loving. Immersed in pain, they persevered in the effort to take care of the life, their children, their roof, their territory. For this reason, a

⁵ Bagadó and Medio San Juan (Chocó), Toribio and Miranda (Cauca), Guamal (Meta) and Valparaíso (Caquetá).

⁶ Céspedes-Báez and Ruiz, "Peace Without Women."

document was necessary that recognized the experiences lived by millions of women, because war is, above all, possession, and destruction of the feminine and the care of life. (...) Many were recruited or joined an armed organization to escape hunger, domestic violence, or exclusion. (...) Others were tortured, imprisoned, and exiled. They have recognized themselves as participants in a story that cannot happen again.⁷

Furthermore, the political rights and political participation of women were significantly affected during the conflict. By the end of the 1990s, Colombia faced conflict escalation and more severe political violence due to the dispute over territorial political power, with an increased number of assassinations, threats, and attacks of politicians and civil servants – mayors, councillors, deputies and governors – which included the few women who held these positions at that time. This led to diminishing women’s already limited political participation and damaging democracy.⁸ Women who were social leaders, candidates, elected and civil servants, amidst the war, are also victims of the armed conflict.

Considering the war’s impact on women’s lives, the gender focus in the peace agreement has ensured formal recognition of equal rights for men and women, as well as recognition of the special circumstances women face that demand rights and protections. The engendered peace further recognizes a need for affirmative action to promote equality, the active participation of women and their organizations, and a recognition of the gendered victimization caused by the conflict.⁹

For example, the agreement acknowledges the importance of guaranteeing social, economic, and cultural rights in rural areas, such as accessing and formalizing land ownership equally. In the case of political rights, the agreement states the importance of promoting women’s participation in spaces of representation, decision-making, and conflict resolution. Lastly, the agreement includes a number of commitments in the realm of transitional justice, in which truth, justice, and reparations must consider gendered disparities in the effects of conflict and for conflict-affected women.

Reports monitoring the implementation of the Peace Agreement’s gender mandates show a distinct lack of progress in complying with these measures.¹⁰ The Gender in Peace Group – GPaz (*Grupo de Género en la Paz* in Spanish) reported in December 2020 that only twenty per cent of the agreement’s gender measures were implemented on time. Despite fifty per cent of the gender measures showing some engagement, implementation has been partial at best. It is worrisome that twenty-eight measures (twenty-six per cent of the total) have measured no progress at all, and for four per cent there is no information available. Most of those lacking in implementation fall under Point 1 (integral rural reform) and Point 2 (political participation).

⁷ Comisión para el Esclarecimiento de la Verdad, la Convivencia y la No Repetición, “Hay futuro si hay verdad. Informe Final de la Comisión para el Esclarecimiento de la Verdad, la Convivencia y la No Repetición” (August 2022) 14, 15 Special Issue: “MI CUERPO ES LA VERDAD Experiencias de mujeres y personas LGBTIQ+ en el conflicto armado” (Bogotá, Colombia).

⁸ Comisión para el Esclarecimiento de la Verdad, la Convivencia y la No Repetición, “Hay futuro si hay verdad. Informe Final de la Comisión para el Esclarecimiento de la Verdad, la Convivencia y la No Repetición” (August 2022): 253.

⁹ Humanas, Sisma Mujer, and Red Nacional de Mujeres, “Gender Equity and Women’s Rights in the Final Peace Agreement,” *Cinco Claves para un tratamiento diferencial de la violencia sexual en los Acuerdos sobre la Justicia Transicional en el Proceso de Paz* (Bogotá, 2017).

¹⁰ Género en la Paz (GPAZ), *LA PAZ AVANZA CON LAS MUJERES, III Informe de observaciones sobre los avances en la implementación del enfoque de género del Acuerdo de Paz* (May 2021); Iniciativa Barómetro, *Matriz de Acuerdos de Paz*, Instituto Kroc de Estudios Internacionales de Paz, *Hacia la implementación del enfoque de género en el Acuerdo Final de Paz de Colombia: avances, oportunidades y retos* (Notre Dame, IN: Universidad de y Bogotá, Colombia, 2020).

The Peace Agreement Gaps In Women's Political Participation

Historically, Colombia has had small numbers of women in electoral bodies. Presently, women comprise just twenty per cent of parliament, which in 2021 ranked the country 122nd out of 193 countries analysed by the Inter-Parliamentary Union. The lag is evident compared to the average percentage of women in parliament in other countries in Latin America and the Caribbean, which is at 31.5 per cent. At the local level, women in Colombia make up just six per cent of governors, twelve per cent of mayors, and eighteen per cent of municipal councillors and state deputies.¹¹

Despite this reality, as well as the growing trend of quotas mandating gender parity in Latin America and around the world, Colombia has a quota of just thirty per cent for women candidates. This quota is not universal, since it does not apply in all of the electoral districts for parliament. Instead, it is only enforced in districts with five or more seats in the Chamber of Representatives (Article 28 of Law 1475 of 2011). The peace agreement failed to include a mandate to reform the gender quota, despite recognizing the importance of increasing women's political participation, guaranteeing the enjoyment of equal political rights for women and in the context of the growing trend in post-conflict countries of establishing gender quotas as part of their reconciliation processes, such as Sri Lanka and Nepal.¹² Colombia's engendered peace thus represents stagnation both in terms of the low rates of women – in all of their diversity – in decision-making spaces, and the absence of a feminist public policy agenda in the transition to peace and towards the political and social transformation of the country.

A step forward in increasing women's political participation has been the first elections of the *Special Victims' Seats* created by the peace agreement as the only electoral district with a fifty per cent gender quota. In late 2021, Congress regulated these seats, which are created by the peace accord to rectify the lack of political representation of the victims of the armed conflict, by providing sixteen congressional seats over two legislative terms (2022–2026 and 2026–2030). The 16 Special Transitory Peace Districts (Circunscripciones Transitorias Especiales de Paz, CITREP in Spanish) are voted by the population located in 167 prioritized municipalities for peacebuilding, territories where institutional presence is traditionally weak, the armed actors inflicted violence against a high number of victims, multidimensional poverty is substantial, and illicit crops are predominant.¹³ On 13 March 2022, the citizens of the 167 municipalities voted for these seats for the first time. Unfortunately, of the sixteen seats available, only three women were elected, meaning that the implementation of legally mandated gender parity had failed, because the lists were composed of two candidates, male and female, but the voters could choose freely between both, resulting in the traditional low number of women being elected. Parity was only guaranteed in the composition of the list, but not in the effective election.

¹¹ Angelika Rettberg et al., "Taking Stock of Gender Equality in Colombia: An Overview," *Gender, Justice and Security Hub* (UKRI GCRF Gender, Justice and Security Hub, 2020), <https://thegenderhub.com/publications/taking-stock-of-gender-equality-in-colombia-an-overview/>.

¹² Drude Dahlerup, *Gender, Democracy and Quotas: How Do Gender Quotas Function?* (Mexico City: Instituto Nacional Electoral de Mexico, 2021), 36.

¹³ For more information, see Matthew Bocanument and Felipe Puerta Cuartas, "Victim Seats in Congress Could Help Advance Peace in Colombia," *Washington Office of Latin America*, 11 March 2022, <https://www.wola.org/analysis/victim-seats-in-congress-could-help-advance-peace-in-colombia/>.

In addition to political participation, the peace agreement strove toward the increased participation of women in other political and economic arenas. Although the agreement did not mandate gender quotas or other affirmative actions to facilitate gender parity beyond parliament, it did recognize the differential effects that the armed conflict had for women's lives. In response, the agreement established *Development Plans with Territorial Focus* (PDET),¹⁴ which formed the basis for what became known as the *integral rural reform*. The PDETs are spaces of participatory formulation, implementation, and monitoring for the rural communities of the 170 municipalities prioritized in the post-conflict. The agreement stated that rural women in PDET municipalities must be part of these processes, although it did not establish a minimum quota for women's participation. As a result, around 65,000 women (thirty-two per cent of participants) and 800 women's organizations participated in all the levels of the PDET.¹⁵ Furthermore, women had the opportunity to make proposals on gender policies.¹⁶ One of the women participating in a PDET in Caquetá informed me:¹⁷

The peace process allowed us and opened a scenario, where women with incredible strength, with recognition, went on stage and I was one of them. For example, the launch of the PDET in Colombia, that was in Morelia, Caquetá, and in my case, I represented our women and our peasants.

However, only 11.71 per cent of the initiatives (138 out of 1,778) at the sub-regional level were in fact tagged as "Women and Gender" initiatives. Given that many of the proposed initiatives by women and their organizations at the communitarian and municipal levels were dismissed out of hand by local powerbrokers at the sub-regional level, this effort proved deeply inadequate. This lack of local support exposes the weaknesses inherent in introducing gender perspectives or pursuing substantive participation without broader societal change or any accompanying enforcement mechanisms. We must look, therefore, beyond the *numbers* of women in those spaces, but rather to the substance of the gender reforms enacted. The vague language and ambiguous content concerning the political inclusion of women, as well as profound gaps in the laws and policies designed to increase women's political participation, has been a source of ongoing criticism for Colombia's "engendered" peace.¹⁸ Moreover, as I document in the following sections, the implementation of some of these reforms, and in particular the country's electoral gender quota, has served under certain circumstances to entrench rather than reverse the capture of the political arena by conflict-era elites.

Findings

How women participate in politics

The electoral competition at the sub-national level in Colombian municipalities is heterogeneous, leading to different trajectories and divergent experiences across different parts

¹⁴ Programas de Desarrollo con Enfoque Territorial – PDET in Spanish.

¹⁵ Consejería Presidencial para la Estabilización y la Consolidación, *Informe Paz con Legalidad Capítulo de Mujer y Género* (Septiembre-Diciembre 2021).

¹⁶ Género en la Paz (GPAZ), LA PAZ AVANZA CON LAS MUJERES: *Observaciones sobre la incorporación del enfoque de género en el Acuerdo de Paz GPAZ – 2019* (Bogotá, Colombia).

¹⁷ Virtual interview from Caquetá, 4 November 2021.

¹⁸ Céspedes-Báez and Ruiz, "Peace without women."

of the country.¹⁹ The reflections I present are based on the fieldwork I conducted in six distinct municipalities,²⁰ which offered me insights into different political and electoral contexts, as well as divergent political, economic, and social ecosystems of women's electoral participation. This approach permits a robust analysis of the implications and effects of the norms that have sought women's political empowerment after war in the pursuit of a durable and inclusive peace.

- (1) Few women have made it into local elections and winning depends on the rights of traditional parties, family clans or economic elites.

I first discuss the low number of women in local politics and the dynamics that have allowed them to get there. These include the influence of traditional political parties, family clans, patronage networks, corruption and clientelism, and the dominance of economic elites, which are mostly related to the same exploitation of natural resources and capture of business opportunities that characterized the armed conflict.

The presence of women in elected positions both at the local and national levels has been low. For the six municipalities explored for this study, this trend persists, shown in the following table (Table 1).

This phenomenon is well known by the members of the communities, as raised by one of my interviewees:²¹

We have there a huge problem, the fact that women haven't been considered as leaders in electoral processes. And that's why we see that in Valparaíso's history there has only been one mayoress.

Historically, Colombian subnational elections have been highly influenced by the system of traditional political parties and elites who wielded significant control during the war. Indeed, the Colombian Truth Commission has commented that there are at least five factors that explain the arrival of the great war. The Commission describes the first of these as:

... an intense competition for licit and illicit rents, which was reflected in disputes for local power.²²

The pursuit of local dominance and control in capturing these revenue streams was characterized by the traditional families who captured politics in this period. Indeed,

¹⁹ Margarita Batlle, Carlos Andrés Hoyos, and Laura Wills-Otero, "Electoral Competition at the Subnational Level: Emeralds and Politics in Colombia, 1997–2015," *Colombia Internacional* 103 (2020): 57–83, <https://doi.org/10.7440/colombiaint103.2020.05>.

²⁰ These municipalities were randomly selected. They have all been affected to different degrees by the armed conflict. Only Valparaíso is a prioritized territory for the peace agreement's implementation (known as PDET municipalities), while the others are not. They are located in different regions of Colombia: Bagadó and Medio San Juan are in the Pacific Coast, Miranda and Toribio are near the Andean Region, Valparaíso is in the South of Colombia, and Guamal is near the Eastern plains.

²¹ Virtual interview from Caquetá, 8 November 2021.

²² Indeed, the Truth Commission goes on to report that "The Truth Commission considers that the penetration of drug trafficking is due to a network of relationships, coalitions, and links between different political, economic, armed or military actors, which is based on profit and the accumulation of capital, but also on clientelist networks and family relationships. Such networks and relationships, although they are known informally or have been exposed in successive scandals, have not been thoroughly investigated or dismantled." See Colombian Truth Commission Final Report: Findings and Recommendations, *Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights*, 28 June 2022, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/statements/2022/06/colombian-truth-commissions-final-report> at 102.

Table 1. Data on elected mayors and in the councils of the municipalities in 2015 and 2019.

Municipality and Department	2015		2019	
	Women elected as mayors	%Women elected in councils	Women elected as mayors	%Women elected in councils
Bagadó (Chocó)	1	0%	0	0%
Medio San Juan (Chocó)	1	0%	0	18%
Miranda (Cauca)	0	15.4%	0	0%
Toribio (Cauca)	0	30.8%	0	23.1%
Valparaíso (Caquetá)	0	27.3%	0	18.2%
Guamal (Meta)	0	11.1%	0	22.2%

Source: Data from the National Registry, elaborated by the author.

despite reforms that opened the party system after the 1991 Constitution, and the subsequent reforms of 2016, the same elites continue to shape subnational politics.²³ Clans and political families have perpetuated patronage as the predominant form of politics in Colombia since the beginning of the country's armed conflict.²⁴ Reflective of the continuities between the war and post-war eras, these patterns are reinscribed by the gender quota's political instrumentalization by traditional elites, profoundly shaping women's political participation at the local level.

On one hand, we observe that the women who reach power usually do so through either their existing affiliations to traditional parties, or by being bought off. On the other, many women are deterred from electoral politics altogether, despite their social and political leadership in the communities, due to harassment, intimidation and gate-keeping. In its implementation, therefore, the quota has entrenched patriarchal politics and, in some cases, more overtly shorn up the interests of warlords. On this matter, one of the individuals I interviewed argued:

Speaking about electoral processes in Valparaíso, it is very hard because Valparaíso has had two political chieftom-related families: one of liberal origin, the Ciceri family, and the other a conservative one, the Plazas family. The Ciceri family, have always been the representatives of the Liberal Party. Thanks to that, Luzmila Ciceri is currently a state deputy. She's been a deputy twice. She was the mayor in 2011, her brother Orlando Ciceri Ortiz was also Valparaíso's mayor back then in 2000 or 2002, so that family has always been like the managers of the political side.²⁵

Even a liberal politician such as Luzmilla Ciceri was able to achieve political office *through* her existing familial connections, which is typical of the ways Colombia's gender quota has consolidated existing political hierarchies. Similar dynamics persist in other municipalities:

Women have been elected that way, none of them has done any outstanding work, none of them has any trajectory. Well, like with men, I don't do any differentiation. No experience with

²³ Diana Hoyos Gómez, "Evolución del sistema de partidos en Colombia, 1972–2000 una mirada a nivel local y regional," in *En Entre la persistencia y el cambio. Reconfiguración del escenario partidista y electoral en Colombia* (Bogotá: Universidad del Rosario, 2007), 21–48.

²⁴ León Valencia Agudelo, *Los clanes políticos que mandan en Colombia* (Bogotá: Planeta, 2020); Angelika Rettberg, Laura Wills-Otero, and Miguel García Sánchez, *Obra de Francisco Leal Buitrago Tomo III: Estudios sobre el clientelismo en el sistema político en Colombia La contribución de Francisco Leal Buitrago* (Bogotá: Universidad de los Andes, 2018); Francisco Leal Buitrago and Andrés Dávila Ladrón De Guevara, *Clientelismo: el sistema político y su expresión regional* (Bogotá: Tercer Mundo Editores, IEPRI, 1990).

²⁵ Virtual interview from Caquetá, 8 November 2021.

the community or anything because people those who do community or civic work, they limit them, they have no chance.²⁶

My interviews demonstrated that the majority of women who rise to power hail from these dominant political families, representing the traditional patriarchal structures that characterized the conflict period. They thereby fail to significantly transform the nature of the post-war peace. These patterns are particularly evident in regions driven by extractive economies, yet even in territories without extractive economies, we nonetheless observe how alliances between political families and traditional political parties affect the chances of winning elections. On this matter, an interviewee from Chocó told me:

Parties in Chocó, in general, have hereditary connotations, the transfer of leadership is done on a family basis. And those who do not belong to a family have a hard time, for example, being endorsed as candidates. That is a reality. Here we have a system that has been perpetuating that if people do not have the last names of political clans and all of that, they have a hard time, even if they have the conditions and the leadership capabilities like mental, moral, and ethical qualities. It is complicated for them to receive support as candidates for elected positions (...) Women that won an elected position in Chocó, I tell you honestly, I have to admit it, it is because they have started with the leadership and power from their families. They've been heiresses of a political legacy that, with other elements, have allowed them to achieve that. But it is because, in their families, they have been chosen, so they've been indoctrinated. But in no way has it been under their own will.²⁷

In addition to reinforcing the same traditional party structures that characterized the wartime landscape, corruption and political clientelism prove foundational to local politics, and shape the contours of women's political participation. One interviewee commented that winning elections involved buying votes or offering contracts, regardless of the gender of the candidates. As she expressed:

So, on election day there is a lot of money being handed out. They hand out food, house materials, contracts. That is how elections are handled here. They throw a lot of money in the last week (of the campaign), it is a fair of money and the people who win are the ones they say will win.²⁸

In regions where extractive economies predominate, the stakes are even higher, as was expressed by many of my interviewees. One commented:

In these municipalities, there is something that happens, and it is that all the development plans endorse the industry, so mayors don't even bother in managing. What they do is that, through the industry, execute social responsibility and the industry, in a perverse way, supports all of this because at the moment they needed the authorization from mayors to enter the territories ... In the oil municipalities, I think that almost all of them are touched by the extractive industry in one way or another.²⁹

Similarly in Cauca:

For example, you know that the big agro-industrial extensions in northern Cauca coerce a number of these municipalities with jurisdiction and territory limits over those large extensions of land. And, as a matter of fact, councils and women can't do much against those

²⁶ Virtual interview from Meta, 20 November 2021.

²⁷ Interview from Chocó, 21 October 2021.

²⁸ Virtual interview from Meta, 20 November 2021.

²⁹ Interview from Meta, 30 November 2021.

powers. So, we can say that there we find a negative relationship. In this case, economic power does not take women into account.³⁰

In line with this issue, existing literature argues that elections are less competitive in contexts where local economies are heavily dependent on mining and the exploitation of natural resources. Thus, success in elections is shaped by financial and political support from elites involved in the extractive economy. Using the case of the Western Boyacá Region in Colombia, where the local economy depends on emeralds exploitation, Batlle, Hoyos, and Wills-Otero argue that competitive elections emerged when local hegemonic elites lost economic and political power as a result of the decline of the emerald business, which allowed opposition parties to enter politics.³¹ One of the main problems of the electoral system is that elections are not competitive, and as a result simply extend conflict-era structures. This creates a significant barrier to women's substantive interests or, indeed, any alternative political agenda.

Accordingly, the electoral system at the local level is profoundly and visibly influenced by traditional parties, clans, and political families, as well as by economic elites and through political clientelism. This undermines the possibility for women with alternative political agendas, separated from the structural power that has sustained and coexisted with armed conflict, from accessing political power, even in spite of reforms advancing gender parity.

However, it is also necessary to acknowledge the complexity of women's leadership in these regions, given that some women have been effective in their municipalities even in spite of these structural barriers. In Valparaíso (Caquetá), Bagadó (Chocó) and Cauca, despite having won mainly due to their links with political and economic elites, some interviewees identified positive outcomes that derived from the participation of these women in spaces of decision-making. For example, one of the interviewees in Caquetá, when referring to the election of a woman as mayor, expressed that, while she was part of a traditional party elite in the region, she also had experience working with the community and was supported by her constituents, achieving infrastructure projects and public services for the population.

Hence, gender reforms for increasing women in electoral bodies are Janus-faced. They can perpetuate war structures that limit women's rights and obstruct possibilities of peace in the municipalities, but they can also represent an opportunity for women's leadership in otherwise deeply exclusionary and patriarchal systems, where women's interests were historically marginalized.

Yet it is clear that the economic and political dynamics that shaped the fifty-year-old civil war are still visibly present in the post-war setting. Economic interests around natural resources exacerbated the conflict and consolidated the country's war system. Such relationships persist in the post-war period. Women's political participation is mediated through the same traditional families that exerted power over the political landscape during the armed conflict, and extend their influence into the present day, often beneath the guise of more gender equal political participation.³² Indeed, most of the

³⁰ Interview from Cauca, 3 November 2021.

³¹ Batlle et al., "Electoral Competition."

³² Nazih Richani, "Multinational Corporations, Rentier Capitalism, and the War System in Colombia," *Latin American Politics and Society* 47, no. 3 (2005): 113–44, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4490420>.

women who have won elections represent the violence of the war system and perpetuate exclusionary dynamics. Consequently, resulting both from barriers to access, as well as a failure of implementation reflected in the low numbers of women entering politics through the quota, we see little evidence of “engendered” peace in practice, even aside from some limited successes reaped by women candidates.

(1) The unfortunate outcome of the gender quota in elections: the instrumentalization of women and violence against women in politics

In this final section, I document the forms of physical and symbolic violence that women face when they seek to enter politics, which is often exacerbated for those representing more transformative political agendas. In response to the engendered peace process and the rise of the social and political leadership of women in the territories, such violence represents a troubling backlash against the gender quotas. This serves to obstruct women’s political inclusion and participation, as well as transitions to peace. Despite activists’ commitments to progressive agendas focused on gender equality, peacebuilding, environmental protection, and reducing rural inequality, women advancing such platforms will lose their elections if they do not favour the establishments and economic interests that dominated during the war, leading to a heavy selection effect in determining which women ultimately end up in office. As one interviewee from Cauca, Colombia put it:

There are many issues with women who defend the environment, because they are against business interests in these regions – petroleum, fracking, etc. So they are threatened by armed groups. There is a judicialization of leadership who defends environmental efforts. They don’t only go to jail, they are killed by armed groups. There is another relationship between businessman, armed groups, and women.³³

Many scholars have revealed the unfortunate backlash violence against introducing gender quotas in politics, triggering resistance to women’s entry into electoral politics. During the 2019 elections, Karina García, who was running to be the town’s first female mayor in Suárez (Cauca), a conflict-ridden municipality in western Colombia, was ambushed by assailants who opened fire with automatic weapons and threw at least one grenade, killing her.³⁴ Research from Duque, Salazar-Escalante and Sarmiento, published in the Electoral Risk Maps from the Electoral Observation Mission, reported the steady increase of physical violence against women as a result of the growing political participation of women at the local and national levels.³⁵ The phenomena described show us that violence continues in the country, and the war is not over for many women.

Finally, in addition to physical violence, we also observe endemic sexism and harassment perpetuated by the instrumentalization of the gender quota, and further

³³ Interview from Cauca, 3 November 2021.

³⁴ For more information, see Joe Parkin Daniels, “Colombians Hear Grim Echo of Decades-Long War in Mayoral Contender’s Murder,” *The Guardian*, 25 October 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/oct/25/colombia-peace-deal-war-farc-karina-garcia>.

³⁵ Juan Diego Duque, Luisa Salazar-Escalante, and Viviana Sarmiento, “¿Dónde están las mujeres? Dinámicas de la violencia contra las mujeres en política y sus impactos en su participación de cara a las elecciones de Congreso 2022,” in *Mapas y factores de riesgo electoral Elecciones nacionales Colombia 2022* (Bogotá: Editorial Mision de Observacion Electoral, 2022): 409–56.

undermining women's full and equal representation in politics.³⁶ Because parties frequently recruit women to represent their political and economic agendas without considering their leadership experience, we observe a wealth of inexperienced women in office. On this topic, an interviewee in Caquetá reported:

What is the issue of women's participation? Although it is true that some women have been able to become part of the lists, generally speaking, the parties are not aware of the real importance women have in politics. You see more and more the issue of filling the lists for the gender quota and unfortunately, it is like that.³⁷

An interviewee in Cauca added:

There are a lot of women used as fillers. They only include them to fill the lists, that's it.³⁸

This narrative manifests as a form of symbolic violence. On many occasions women are aggrieved by being treated as *fillers* of the lists, and women in politics have reported that this insults their leadership. The result is a lack of support for their campaigns, and a feedback loop is created wherein they are not taken seriously, subsequently affecting their conviction for running, and reinforcing the negative perceptions of the electorate with regard to women's leadership.³⁹ In line with this argument, Krook and Restrepo describe symbolic violence operating at the level of portrayal and representation, seeking to erase or nullify women's presence in political office, and questioning their competence for politics based on the fact that they are women.⁴⁰ We observe this pattern in the context of Colombia's gender quota.

Many interviewees, particularly men, exhibited this sexism, displaying a strong resistance to gender parity for these reasons:

Now, with the reform of the new (electoral) code, there's a discussion around fifty per cent. That will become a matriarchy. What we have to do is put a stop to you, because you'll end up ruling the territory. You'll end up managing the house and the territory, and then we (the men) are gone.⁴¹

The provisions of the peace agreement have thus undermined women's political empowerment in two ways. First, women are instrumentalized by political parties and politicians, who include them only to comply with the law, not to support and invest in their campaigns, and often to extend their own power and control. Second, the outcome from this practice is the violence women experience when advancing more transformative or status quo disrupting political agendas. These dynamics do not depart significantly from the forms of violence and systems of patriarchy present during – and indeed underpinning – the war.⁴² Further, the manipulation of the quota undermines women's leadership and perpetuates the stereotype that women do not

³⁶ Mona Lena Krook and Juliana Restrepo, "Gender and Political Violence in Latin America: Concepts, Debates and Solutions," *Política y Gobierno* 23, no. 1 (2016): 125–57; Mona Lena Krook, "Empowerment vs. Backlash: Gender Quotas and Critical Mass Theory," *Politics, Groups and Identities* 3, no. 1 (2015): 184–8.

³⁷ Virtual interview from Caquetá, 4 November 2021.

³⁸ Virtual interview from Cauca, 20 June 2021.

³⁹ Luisa Salazar-Escalante, *Protocolo para la prevención y atención de la violencia contra las mujeres en política en Colombia* (Bogotá: Editorial Misión de Observación Electoral, 2020).

⁴⁰ Krook and Restrepo, "Gender and Political Violence."

⁴¹ Virtual interview from Cauca, 3 November 2021.

⁴² Betty A. Reardon, *Sexism and the War System* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1996).

“belong” in politics. Underlying dynamics of authoritarian patriarchy are left unattended in the post-war setting, and unaddressed by the engendered peace. As we observe from the reflections and patterns documented above, gender reforms themselves fail to tackle the structural causes of gender inequality in the country, which link patriarchy to other systems of violence.

Conclusions

As Céspedes-Báez and Jaramillo Ruiz describe since the beginning of the peace negotiation with FARC, the women’s movement rejected the exclusion of women from the peace process and demanded the transformation of social, cultural, and economic structures that contribute to their oppression.⁴³ Under this claim, we should be examining the implementation of the engendered peace through the lens of a holistic and positive peace that dismantles all intersecting forms of oppression that serve as barriers to women’s emancipation. As some authors suggest, *an engendered and sustainable peace* explores the structural factors related to long-term violence, which is deeply embedded in the patriarchal system.⁴⁴ The ongoing commitments to gender reforms driven by the Colombian peace process, and the expected outcomes towards women’s political empowerment, alongside a recognition of the need for a transformation of the dynamics that shaped the conflict, invite us to critically examine these reforms. In this piece, I have focused on the gender quota in the electoral process. The preliminary findings suggest that the structures that consolidated the country’s war system are still present, and they profoundly affect both women’s political participation and efforts for an engendered peacebuilding, as well as reinforce these war dynamics that sustain violence in the first place.

I first demonstrated that the peace process provisions on gender and politics have been insufficient, as Colombia has a *shy* gender quota that does not consolidate parity in electoral bodies. Colombia also preserves low numbers of women in power, both at the national and the local level. This expresses the weakness of the legal reforms, as they have not closed the gender gap in politics. Neither do they represent the opportunity for introducing actions to promote agendas on social, political, environmental, and economic transformation based on the engendered peace agreement.

Second, the reforms have failed to address the structural dynamics of the armed conflict in the post-conflict political landscape. In Colombia, war dynamics were dominated by traditional political parties, family clans, patronage, corruption, clientelism and disparities that shore up the influence and control of economic elites. These same dynamics persist today, and profoundly structure women’s electoral participation. Moreover, the political participation of women has been affected by the current patriarchal system, and narratives of submission and discrimination based on gender roles predominate. Existing reforms have proved limited in their capacity to dismantle these dynamics.

⁴³ Céspedes-Báez and Ruiz, “Peace Without Women,” 95.

⁴⁴ Úrsula Oswald Spring, “Toward Engendered-Sustainable Peace to End Patriarchal Violence,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of Global Approaches to Peace*, ed. Aigul Kulnazarova and Vesselin Popovski (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-78905-7_29; Maria Mies, *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale* (Melbourne: Zed Books, 1986).

Third, the gender quotas, unfortunately, involve forms of gendered instrumentalization, as well as other forms of gender-based violence, that undermine women's empowerment. This reveals that war structures such as violence and patriarchy continue to perpetuate symbolic – and sometimes material – violence against women. These dynamics also manifest in the intensification of political violence against social and political leaders representing transformative political agendas.

I argue that the conversations around peacebuilding in post-war settings needs to take seriously weaknesses in legal reforms, as well as other shortcomings that stifle gender provisions in their implementation. These actions require more than formal measures, like the introduction of new laws, but more integrated approaches that addresses the entire war system. Peacebuilding requires attending to all forms of oppression and violence, in order to ensure the full and effective inclusion of women.

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