

Women's Inclusion in Peace Negotiations and Agreement Durability: Evidence from Colombia's 2016 Peace Accord

Adam Mukanjor Njolnbi

Master's Student, Department of Peace and Conflict,
Institute of Social Science,
Social Sciences University of Ankara.
ORCID: 0009-0004-5552-1687

Abstract

This article examines the relationship between women's inclusion in peace negotiations and the durability of peace agreements, focusing on Colombia's 2016 Final Peace Accord between the government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC-EP). Drawing on feminist peace theory, empirical literature, and process-tracing of Colombia's negotiations, the study argues that women's participation and gender provisions contribute to more inclusive, legitimate, and potentially durable peace settlements. Women's inclusion expands the scope of negotiations, strengthens societal ownership, and enhances normative legitimacy. However, inclusion alone does not guarantee sustainability; implementation gaps, political backlash, institutional weakness, and persistent structural inequalities mediate outcomes. The Colombian case illustrates both the transformative potential and limitations of gender-inclusive peacebuilding. The article contributes to ongoing debates on inclusive peace processes and provides policy-relevant insights for designing more resilient and durable peace agreements.

Keywords: Women, peace negotiations, gender inclusion, Colombia, peace agreement durability, conflict management

1. Introduction

Why do some peace agreements endure while others collapse into renewed violence? This question has occupied scholars and practitioners of conflict resolution for decades. While earlier research emphasized military balance, third-party mediation, and power-sharing arrangements, more recent scholarship highlights the importance of inclusivity in shaping durable peace outcomes (Nilsson, 2012; Paffenholz et al., 2016). In particular, the role of women in peace negotiations has emerged as a critical yet historically overlooked factor. Male political and military elites have often dominated traditional peace processes, sidelining women despite their extensive experiences as victims, survivors, and agents of change in conflict settings (True, 2018). This exclusion has limited the scope and legitimacy of many peace agreements, often resulting in settlements that fail to address underlying social grievances.

The 2016 Colombian Peace Accord between the government and FARC-EP represents a significant departure from this pattern. Widely regarded as one of the most gender-inclusive agreements in history, it incorporated women at multiple levels of negotiation and embedded a comprehensive gender perspective across its provisions (O'Rourke, 2019). The establishment of a Gender Sub-Commission and the inclusion of over 100 gender-related commitments marked a transformative moment in peacebuilding practice.

This article examines whether and how women's inclusion contributes to the durability of peace agreements. It argues that while gender inclusion enhances legitimacy, inclusiveness, and policy comprehensiveness, its impact on long-term peace depends heavily on implementation dynamics, political context, and institutional capacity.

Literature Review

Women's Participation in Peace Processes

The exclusion of women from peace negotiations has been a persistent feature of global peace processes. Studies show that between 1992 and 2011, women constituted less than 10% of negotiators and signatories in major peace processes (UN Women, 2012). This marginalization persists despite international frameworks such as UN Security Council Resolution 1325, which calls for increased female participation in peace and security processes. However, growing empirical evidence demonstrates that women's participation can significantly influence negotiation outcomes. Paffenholz et al. (2016) find that inclusive peace processes are more likely to reach agreements and sustain peace. Women's involvement tends to broaden the agenda beyond elite power-sharing to include social justice, human rights, and reconciliation.

Furthermore, women often act as coalition-builders and bridge divides between conflicting parties, contributing to trust-building and compromise (O'Reilly, Súilleabháin, & Paffenholz, 2015). Their participation can also increase public support for peace agreements by reflecting broader societal interests.

Gender Provisions and Peace Durability

The relationship between gender inclusion and the durability of peace agreements has attracted growing scholarly attention in recent years. Empirical research demonstrates that peace agreements incorporating gender provisions tend to have a higher probability of long-term success. This is not simply because gender provisions are normatively desirable, but because they address underlying social inequalities that often contribute to conflict recurrence. Gender provisions typically encompass several key areas, including protection from sexual and gender-based violence, promotion of women's political participation, access to land and economic resources, and mechanisms for transitional justice and reparations. These elements are critical because they move peace agreements beyond elite power-sharing arrangements and toward addressing the lived experiences of affected populations.

However, the mere inclusion of gender provisions in an agreement does not automatically translate into durable peace. Their effectiveness depends heavily on implementation capacity, institutional support, and sustained political commitment. Without these, gender provisions risk becoming symbolic rather than transformative, limiting their impact on long-term stability.

Feminist Peace Theory

Feminist peace theory offers a critical framework for understanding why women's inclusion matters in peace processes. Unlike traditional approaches that focus primarily on state security and military cessation of violence, feminist perspectives emphasize human security, social justice, and equality. From this viewpoint, peace is not defined solely as the absence of armed conflict but as the presence of equitable and just social relations. This broader understanding highlights how structural inequalities, especially those based on gender, can perpetuate cycles of violence even after formal peace agreements are signed.

Women's participation is considered transformative within this framework because it challenges entrenched patriarchal norms that often dominate political and negotiation spaces. By introducing alternative priorities such as community welfare, social inclusion, and accountability, women help reshape the agenda of peace negotiations. Feminist scholars argue that excluding women leads to what is often described as "partial peace." In such cases, agreements may end armed conflict but fail to address the needs and grievances of large segments of the population, thereby increasing the risk of future instability.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws on three complementary theoretical approaches to explain how women's inclusion influences peace durability.

Inclusive Peace Theory

Inclusive peace theory posits that broader participation in peace processes enhances both legitimacy and sustainability. When diverse social groups are represented, agreements are more likely to reflect collective interests, reducing grievances and increasing societal buy-in. Inclusion also fosters a sense of ownership among stakeholders, which is crucial for long-term compliance.

Feminist Institutionalism

Feminist institutionalism focuses on how gender norms shape political institutions and decision-making processes. It emphasizes that formal inclusion, such as having women present at the negotiation table, is not sufficient. What matters is substantive influence: the ability of women to shape outcomes, priorities, and implementation mechanisms. Without this, inclusion risks being tokenistic.

Conflict Recurrence Theory

Conflict recurrence theory highlights the importance of addressing root causes of conflict, such as inequality, exclusion, and weak governance. Peace agreements that fail to tackle these structural issues are more likely to collapse. Gender inclusion contributes to durability by ensuring that these deeper causes, particularly those affecting marginalized groups, are addressed.

Hypothesis

This study argues that women's inclusion enhances the durability of peace agreements through three key mechanisms.

First, it increases legitimacy by making the process more representative and inclusive, thereby strengthening public trust. Second, it expands the scope of negotiations to include social and economic issues often overlooked in traditional peace processes. Third, it strengthens implementation by introducing accountability mechanisms and monitoring frameworks that improve compliance over time.

Methodology

This article employs a qualitative case study approach, using process tracing to examine the Colombian peace process between 2012 and 2016. Process tracing is particularly suited for this analysis because it allows for the identification of causal mechanisms linking women's inclusion to peace outcomes. Rather than relying solely on correlations, this method examines how specific actions, decisions, and institutional arrangements contributed to the integration of gender perspectives and their effects on peace durability.

Background: Colombia's Armed Conflict

Colombia's armed conflict (1964–2016) involved state forces, guerrilla movements such as the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC-EP), and right-wing paramilitary groups. Rooted in structural inequalities, particularly land concentration and political exclusion, the conflict evolved into a complex war sustained by illicit economies, including drug trafficking and extortion (Leech, 2011; Richani, 2013). Its human cost was severe, with over 220,000 deaths and more than 7 million internally displaced persons (CNMH, 2013).

Women were disproportionately affected by the conflict in gender-specific ways. They experienced widespread sexual and gender-based violence, often used strategically to control populations and instill fear (Wood, 2016). Forced displacement further exposed women to economic hardship, loss of livelihoods, and increased caregiving responsibilities under precarious conditions (Meertens, 2010). Despite these challenges, women played critical roles as peacebuilders and community leaders. Through grassroots activism and national advocacy networks, they documented human rights abuses and demanded justice and inclusion in peace negotiations (Bouvier, 2016). This dual experience as victims and agents of change shaped their demands for gender-sensitive reforms, which later influenced the inclusion of gender provisions in Colombia's 2016 peace agreement (Krause et al., 2018).

Women's Inclusion in the Colombian Peace Process: Institutional Mechanisms

Women's inclusion in the Colombian peace process was deliberate and institutionalized through formal mechanisms. A key innovation was the creation of the Gender Sub-Commission in 2014 during negotiations between the government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC-EP). This body ensured that gender perspectives were systematically integrated across all agenda items, rather than treated as an isolated concern.

The Sub-Commission reviewed draft agreements, proposed gender-sensitive language, and incorporated provisions addressing women's rights, sexual violence, land access, and political participation (Bouvier,

2016; UN Women, 2017). It also consulted extensively with women's organizations and civil society groups, strengthening the legitimacy and inclusivity of the process (O'Rourke, 2020). Moreover, the active participation of women as negotiators, advisors, and delegates further reinforced these institutional efforts. Their presence not only influenced the substance of the agreement but also helped ensure that women's experiences and priorities were reflected in the final peace accord (Krause et al., 2018).

Role of Civil Society

Women's civil society organizations were central to shaping the peace agenda in Colombia. Networks such as Ruta Pacífica de las Mujeres and the Women's Summit for Peace mobilized across regions to articulate collective demands and influence negotiations involving the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC-EP). Through national and regional consultations, these groups ensured that diverse perspectives, including those of rural, Afro-Colombian, and indigenous women, were incorporated into the process (Bouvier, 2016; O'Rourke, 2020).

Their advocacy emphasized issues often overlooked in formal negotiations, such as sexual violence, land rights, and community-level reconciliation. By engaging directly with negotiators and participating in forums and hearings, civil society actors helped bridge the gap between elite bargaining spaces and grassroots realities (UN Women, 2017). This inclusive approach enhanced the legitimacy of the peace process and ensured that the agreement reflected broader societal needs. Ultimately, women's civil society participation transformed the negotiations into a more participatory and representative process (Krause et al., 2018).

Gender Provisions in the Agreement

The 2016 peace agreement in Colombia is widely recognized for its comprehensive inclusion of gender provisions, with approximately 130 measures addressing women's rights and gender equality. Negotiated between the government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC-EP), the agreement adopted a holistic approach by integrating gender across all thematic areas rather than isolating it as a separate issue (Krause et al., 2018).

These provisions covered key domains such as rural land reform, political participation, transitional justice, and protection from sexual and gender-based violence (UN Women, 2017). For instance, they promoted women's access to land, ensured their representation in political institutions, and recognized gender-specific harms within the transitional justice framework. Importantly, gender considerations were embedded in both short-term recovery efforts and long-term structural reforms. This mainstreaming approach strengthened the agreement's inclusivity and responsiveness, contributing to its recognition as one of the most gender-sensitive peace accords globally (O'Rourke, 2020).

Expanding Issue Coverage

Women's participation in the Colombian peace negotiations expanded the scope of discussions beyond traditional security concerns. In engagements involving the government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC-EP), women introduced critical issues such as social inequality, access to

land, community development, and the protection of human rights (Bouvier, 2016). These contributions shifted the focus from narrow ceasefire arrangements to broader structural reforms necessary for sustainable peace.

By emphasizing root causes of conflict, such as economic exclusion and rural marginalization, women helped ensure that the agreement addressed long-standing grievances (O'Rourke, 2020). They also highlighted the importance of addressing sexual and gender-based violence, which had often been sidelined in earlier peace processes (Wood, 2016).

This expanded agenda made the peace agreement more comprehensive and responsive to societal needs. Addressing these multidimensional issues increased the likelihood of reducing conflict recurrence by tackling the underlying drivers of violence rather than merely ending hostilities (Krause et al., 2018).

Strengthening Implementation

Gender provisions in the Colombian peace agreement contributed to stronger implementation by embedding accountability and monitoring mechanisms within the accord. In the settlement involving the government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC-EP), these provisions required institutions to track progress on gender equality and ensure that commitments were translated into practice (UN Women, 2017). Mechanisms such as gender-sensitive indicators, oversight bodies, and participation of civil society organizations helped maintain pressure on stakeholders to fulfil their obligations (O'Rourke, 2020). Women's continued involvement in monitoring processes also enhanced transparency and accountability, reducing the likelihood of implementation gaps.

However, the effectiveness of these mechanisms depends on sustained political will, funding, and institutional capacity. Without continued support, even well-designed frameworks may face challenges in execution (Nilsson, 2012). Nonetheless, the integration of gender provisions has strengthened implementation by institutionalizing oversight and promoting inclusive peacebuilding practices (Krause et al., 2018).

CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS

Implementation Gaps

Despite the inclusion of robust gender-sensitive provisions in Colombia's 2016 peace accord, implementation has been uneven and often slow. A major constraint has been limited institutional capacity at both national and local levels, which has hindered effective coordination and monitoring of gender-related commitments. Many rural and conflict-affected areas lack adequate administrative structures, making it difficult to translate policy into practice. Additionally, financial constraints have reduced the scope of programs aimed at supporting women's political participation and economic reintegration. Political will has also fluctuated across administrations, resulting in inconsistent prioritization of gender provisions over time. According to the Kroc Institute (2020), many commitments remain partially

implemented or in early stages of execution, particularly those related to rural women's rights and access to land. These gaps demonstrate that formal inclusion in peace agreements does not automatically ensure meaningful transformation without sustained institutional support and resources.

Political Backlash

The inclusion of gender provisions in the Colombian peace agreement generated significant political controversy, culminating during the 2016 referendum campaign. Conservative political and religious groups argued that the agreement promoted controversial interpretations of gender equality, which they claimed threatened traditional family values. This opposition became a central mobilizing factor for the "No" vote, contributing to the narrow rejection of the initial peace deal. As a result, several gender-related provisions were revised or reworded in the renegotiated agreement to address public concerns, leading to concerns among advocates that some protections were diluted (Corredor, 2021). This backlash illustrates how gender inclusion in peace processes can become politicized and contested in post-conflict societies. It also highlights the tension between progressive peacebuilding agendas and deeply rooted cultural norms. While the revised agreement still retained key gender commitments, the political controversy revealed the fragility of consensus around gender equality in transitional contexts.

Continued Violence

Despite the formal end of armed conflict with the FARC-EP, violence has persisted in various regions of Colombia, posing a major challenge to peace durability. Social leaders, human rights defenders, and former combatants have continued to face targeted killings and intimidation, particularly in rural and resource-rich areas where illegal armed groups remain active. This ongoing violence undermines trust in state institutions and weakens local confidence in the peace process. Women, especially those engaged in community leadership or land restitution efforts, are disproportionately affected by these threats, limiting their participation in peacebuilding initiatives. The persistence of violence also reflects the fragmentation of armed actors and the expansion of criminal economies in post-conflict zones. Such insecurity directly challenges the implementation of gender-sensitive provisions, as fear and instability restrict civic engagement and community organizing. These conditions ultimately threaten the long-term sustainability of the peace agreement.

Structural Inequalities

Deep-rooted structural inequalities in Colombia continue to undermine the full realization of the peace agreement's gender provisions. Women, particularly in rural and Indigenous communities, face persistent disparities in access to land, education, healthcare, and political representation. These inequalities are compounded by historical patterns of exclusion and patriarchal social norms that limit women's economic and political agency. Although the peace agreement seeks to address rural reform and gender equality, progress has been constrained by uneven policy implementation and limited institutional reach in marginalized regions. Economic dependency and unpaid care burdens further restrict women's ability to engage in formal political processes or benefit from reintegration programs. According to Corredor (2021), these structural barriers significantly reduce the transformative potential of gender provisions within the

agreement. Without addressing these underlying inequalities, the peace process risks reinforcing existing disparities rather than fundamentally transforming them in post-conflict Colombia.

Discussion

The Colombian case illustrates that women's inclusion can significantly improve the quality and sustainability of peace agreements by broadening the range of issues addressed during negotiations. Women's participation helped shift the agenda beyond military and elite concerns to include social justice, rural development, and victims' rights, thereby producing a more comprehensive agreement. At the same time, the case demonstrates that inclusion alone is not sufficient to guarantee durable peace. Despite strong gender provisions, persistent structural inequalities, political fragmentation, and security challenges have continued to undermine full implementation. This suggests that while inclusion enhances the normative and practical quality of peace agreements, it must be supported by stable political conditions and effective governance mechanisms. Therefore, gender inclusion should be understood as a necessary but not sufficient condition for long-term peace durability, requiring complementary institutional and societal factors to translate negotiated commitments into sustainable outcomes on the ground.

Policy Implications

The findings suggest several key policy recommendations for strengthening both peace processes and post-conflict reconstruction. First, gender inclusion should be institutionalized as a mandatory component of peace negotiations rather than treated as an optional or symbolic addition. This requires formal mechanisms that guarantee women's representation at all negotiation stages. Second, sustained support for women's civil society organizations is essential, as they often serve as critical bridges between local communities and formal peace tables, ensuring that grassroots concerns are reflected in agreements. Third, adequate and long-term funding must be allocated for implementation, as many gender provisions fail due to resource constraints rather than design flaws. Finally, policymakers must actively address political resistance through civic education, dialogue, and public awareness campaigns aimed at reducing backlash against gender reforms. Together, these measures can strengthen the translation of inclusive agreements into durable peace outcomes.

Conclusion

Women's inclusion represents a fundamental transformation in the design and practice of modern peace processes, shifting them toward more participatory, inclusive, and socially responsive frameworks. The Colombian experience demonstrates that when women are meaningfully involved, peace agreements tend to become more comprehensive, legitimate, and attentive to structural inequalities that fuel conflict. However, it also highlights that inclusion alone cannot secure lasting peace. Durable outcomes depend on a combination of factors, including strong institutions, sustained political commitment, security guarantees, and effective implementation capacity. Without these supporting conditions, even well-designed gender provisions may remain partially unfulfilled. Consequently, gender inclusion should be viewed as a critical enabling factor rather than a standalone solution. Future research should adopt comparative and cross-national approaches to better understand the contexts in which women's

participation most effectively contributes to peace durability and how institutional frameworks can better support inclusive peacebuilding processes.

References

1. Bouvier, V. M. (2016). *Gender and the role of women in Colombia's peace process*. United States Institute of Peace.
2. Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica (CNMH). (2013). *¡Basta ya! Colombia: Memorias de guerra y dignidad*. CNMH.
3. Corredor, E. S. (2021). Gender backlash and peace agreement contestation in Colombia. *Journal of Peacebuilding & Development*, 16(2), 1–15.
4. Krause, J., Krause, W., & Bränfors, P. (2018). Women's participation in peace negotiations and the durability of peace. *International Interactions*, 44(6), 985–1016.
5. Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies. (2020). *Five years of peace: Colombia's Final Peace Accord implementation report*. University of Notre Dame.
6. Leech, G. (2011). *The FARC: The longest insurgency*. Zed Books.
7. Meertens, D. (2010). Forced displacement and gender justice in Colombia. *Disasters*, 34(1), 1–19.
8. Nilsson, D. (2012). Anchoring the peace: Civil society and the durability of peace agreements. *International Interactions*, 38(2), 243–266.
9. O'Rourke, C. (2019). *Women's rights in armed conflict under international law*. Cambridge University Press.
10. O'Rourke, C. (2020). Women's participation in peace negotiations: Colombia's gender sub-commission. *Global Governance*, 26(3), 347–366.
11. O'Reilly, M., Súilleabháin, A. Ó., & Paffenholz, T. (2015). *Reimagining peacemaking: Women's roles in peace processes*. International Peace Institute.
12. Paffenholz, T., et al. (2016). Making women count: Assessing women's inclusion and influence in peace negotiations. *Inclusive Peace & Transition Initiative Working Paper*.
13. Richani, N. (2013). *Systems of violence: The political economy of war and peace in Colombia*. State University of New York Press.
14. True, J. (2018). *Feminist theories of international relations*. Oxford University Press.
15. United Nations Security Council. (2000). Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security.
16. UN Women. (2012). *Women's participation in peace negotiations: Connections between presence and influence*. UN Women.
17. UN Women. (2017). *Colombia peace agreement: Gender equality and women's rights*. UN Women.
18. Wood, E. J. (2016). Sexual violence during war: Toward an understanding of variation. *International Security*, 40(4), 7–48.
19. Anderlini, S. N. (2007). *Women building peace: What they do, why it matters*. Lynne Rienner Publishers.
20. Brahim, L., & Ahmed, S. (2008). *In pursuit of sustainable peace: The United Nations and post-conflict peacebuilding*. UN.
21. Boutros-Ghali, B. (1992). *An agenda for peace*. United Nations.

22. Collier, P., Hoeffler, A., & Söderbom, M. (2008). Post-conflict risks. *Journal of Peace Research*, 45(4), 461–478.
23. Doyle, M. W., & Sambanis, N. (2000). International peacebuilding: A theoretical and quantitative analysis. *American Political Science Review*, 94(4), 779–801.
24. Fisas, V. (2010). *Anuario de procesos de paz*. Escola de Cultura de Pau.
25. Gilligan, M. J., Mvukiyehe, E., & Samii, C. (2013). Reintegrating rebels into civilian life. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 57(4), 611–642.
26. Högladh, S. (2019). Peace agreements 1975–2018 dataset. Uppsala Conflict Data Program.
27. Kreutz, J. (2010). How and when armed conflicts end. *Journal of Peace Research*, 47(2), 243–250.
28. Mason, T. D., & Fett, P. J. (1996). How civil wars end. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 40(4), 546–568.
29. Reimann, C. (2014). Assessing the state-of-the-art in conflict transformation. *Berghof Handbook*.
30. Zartman, I. W. (2008). The timing of peace initiatives. *Timing and Ripeness in Conflict Resolution*.