

Colombia



Gender, Justice and Security Hub

The Gender, Justice and Security Hub (GJS Hub) brings together researchers, practitioners, and activists through a collection of projects to advance gender justice and inclusive peace in conflict-affected societies. We work in seven focus countries: Afghanistan, Colombia, Kurdistan-Iraq, Lebanon, Sierra Leone, Sri Lanka and Uganda with projects in 17 additional countries across Africa, Europe, Latin America, the Middle East and South Asia.

Spanning from gendered migration, masculinities and sexualities to land rights and transformative justice, each project amplifies the voices of women and marginalised groups. The Hub's work aims to advance Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 on gender equality; SDG 16 on peace, justice and strong institutions; and the implementation of the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda.

Country Context

Half a Century of Internal Conflict

Colombia has endured over fifty years of armed conflict, largely between government forces, paramilitary groups, organised crime, and leftist guerrilla groups, such as the FARC and ELN. The roots of this conflict are complex, but inequalities in land distribution, political exclusion, and drug trafficking, and lack of state presence in some areas of the country have all been significant factors. A major milestone was the peace agreement with the FARC in 2016, which promised to end the longest-running conflict in the Western Hemisphere. Despite this, the transition to peace has been fraught with challenges, including the reintegration of former combatants and ongoing violence.

Peace and Progress?

Post-agreement, Colombia has taken steps towards reconciliation, including transitional justice mechanisms, particularly the Truth Commission and the Special Jurisdiction for Peace – to address the atrocities committed during the war. Efforts to restore land to the displaced and to substitute illegal crops have seen limited success, and violence persists in some regions where the state's presence is weak. Social leaders and human rights defenders face threats and assassinations, highlighting the fragility of peace.

The country has also taken steps to improve the representation of women in politics and to address gender-based violence. However, disparities in access to health, education, and economic opportunities for women, particularly in rural areas, remain. The Colombian government, with the support of international entities and foreign governments, has been working on policies to enhance gender equality, though real change is incremental and uneven across different parts of the country.

Ongoing Security Challenges

While the peace deal with the FARC brought hope, security in Colombia continues to be a concern, with other armed groups filling the void left in previously FARC-controlled territories. The government's efforts to demobilise combatants and extend state control to all regions are ongoing, with varying degrees of success. Initiatives aimed at development and reconciliation are being implemented, but the process is difficult and slow-moving.

The situation is especially precarious for indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities, who often find themselves caught between the crossfire of continuing conflicts. National and international bodies, including Colombia's Special Jurisdiction for Peace and the ICC, are working towards accountability for crimes committed during the conflict, but many Colombians are still waiting for justice and security.

The GJS Hub in Colombia

Gender issues in Colombia are deeply influenced by the armed conflict and by societal norms. Women and the LGBTQ+ community have faced systemic violence and discrimination, with the conflict exacerbating these abuses. Understanding the nuanced relationship between gender, justice and security is critical for Colombia's continued journey towards peace and equality.

Across the Gender, Justice and Security Hub, our projects bring together researchers, practitioners and activists applying a broad set of qualitative and quantitative methods, which includes hundreds of interviews with a wide range of stakeholders, analysis and gender-disaggregation of historical data sets, facilitating arts-based workshops with conflict-affected women, participatory filmmaking and peer-to-peer interviews by female ex-combatants, international comparative research across post-colonial contexts, and the collection and analysis of qualitative and quantitative data on the land restitution process and reconciliation.

The Challenge

Funding Challenges for Women's Organisations

Women's civil society organisations play a crucial role in advocating for public policy, addressing gender-based violence, and promoting the care economy. However, these organisations are grappling with chronic underfunding, a challenge further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Their work often focuses on areas that are not easily quantifiable, making it difficult to meet funding criteria that prioritise measurable deliverables. This issue is compounded by a tendency for donors to favour short-term projects, leaving long-term initiatives and research in these critical areas without adequate support.

Land Restitution and Transitional Justice in Colombia

Colombia's transitional justice framework includes measures to address the impacts of armed conflict on property and land tenure. Land restitution is a central component of this framework, aiming to return land to those displaced by conflict. Yet, despite its importance, the process has seen only marginal success. The failures are attributed to issues with both the design and the implementation of the restitution measures, which have not effectively reversed the injustices faced by the displaced population.

Challenges Faced by Female Ex-Combatants

The peace accord in Colombia included a focus on gender, but female ex-combatants continue to struggle with stigmatisation and economic hardship. These women find themselves with limited opportunities to establish sustainable livelihoods, leading to a sense of regression in gender equality compared to the inclusivity they experienced within the FARC. The societal reintegration process has not adequately addressed these issues, hindering the potential for long-term stability and equality.

Intersectionality and the Colombian Conflict

The concept of intersectionality is crucial in understanding the

disproportionate effects of the Colombian conflict on social minorities, including women and ethnic minorities.

Those who identify with more than one minority group face compounded forms of victimisation, such as sexual violence. Recognising how various forms of inequality intersect can lead to more effective responses to the specific challenges these groups face.

Intercultural Education and Social Activism

Intercultural education stands as a transformative force against entrenched racism and structural inequalities, which have been intensified by the conflict in Colombia. In particular, Indigenous and Black activists see it as a tool for change. While Colombia has initiated intercultural education through programmes for Ethno-education and Afro-Colombian studies, these initiatives are inadequately implemented and fail to reach their transformative potential.

Need for Gender-Disaggregated Data

A significant barrier to assessing and improving women's political and economic empowerment in Colombia is the lack of gender-disaggregated data. Many existing datasets do not account for gender differences, making it difficult to evaluate the impact of policies and laws intended to advance women's status. Without this data, it is challenging to develop effective strategies for enhancing women's roles in political and economic spheres.

Legal Reforms and Social Attitudes

Despite the establishment of several gender-sensitive legal frameworks as part of Colombia's peace process, many women remain unaware of these new rights and laws. Even for those who are informed, accessing these rights is often hindered by weak rule of law and negative societal attitudes toward gender reforms. There is a prevalent backlash against women who seek to exercise their rights, limiting the effectiveness of these legal advances.

Colonial Legacies and the Peace Process

The peace process in Colombia is steeped in the country's colonial history, which influences land claims, implementation of restitution, and conservative opposition to change. Despite its pervasive impact, the peace accords have seldom addressed the role of colonialism. Ignoring these historical influences risks undermining the peace process and jeopardising the prospect of lasting peace.

Key Findings

- **Victims of Land Dispossession and Forced Abandonment:** After 10 years of implementing the land restitution policy – designed to return land and formalise property rights – and with millions of victims of forced displacement registered, only 20.6% (26,940) of land restitution applications made it before a judge.

restitution applications made it before a judge. The slow and often flawed land restitution processes hinder peace efforts, with only a small percentage of applications reaching a judge and even fewer resulting in land being returned to rightful owners.

- **Women's Civil Society Organisations:** Over the past five years, there has been a decline in international funding and attention towards women's rights, empowerment, and gender equality. This trend has worsened in the context of challenges like the Covid-19 pandemic and global gender backlash, exacerbating issues in Colombia. With less funding available, CSOs are under pressure to alter their objectives to secure funding, leading to potential compromises in their expertise and intended impact areas.
- **Isolation and Exclusion of Female Ex-combatants:** Women who have left armed groups face many complex challenges in reintegration, while their potential contributions to societal development and peacebuilding remain largely unacknowledged, under-utilised, and undervalued. Skills they have developed, such as managing conflict in a diverse group of people or pushing for gender equality in a male-dominated environment, are useful in a wider peacebuilding context. Instead, most ex-combatants (face pressure to) return to traditional gender roles after demobilisation.
- **Intersectionality and the Socio-Demographic Impact on Reconciliation:** Experiences during conflict and current life situations, which are influenced by factors such as gender, income, and region, significantly affect an individual's perspective on reconciliation. Despite this, The Havana Peace Accord makes no reference to intersectionality. The three key Transitional Justice Institutions – the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP), CEV, and Victims' Unit – each establish intersectionality as one of their guiding principles or approaches, and yet in practice they continue to employ a differential approach.
- **Limited Intercultural Education:** The ethno-education programme is only available in areas where there is a high concentration of Indigenous and Afro-descendant communities, limiting its outreach. The Ministry of the Interior notes that less than 7% of Colombia's educational institutions have undergone the work necessary to develop the Afro-Colombian Studies programme.
- **Women's Political Empowerment:** In Colombia, women's access to power is often dependent on their connections to political elites or power brokers, both during and before the conflict. Women's rights are frequently politicised, with political entities leveraging them for gain rather than genuine empowerment, leading to a disconnect between policy and practice.
- **Women's Economic Empowerment:** Rural women encounter multiple barriers to economic empowerment, with substantial urban-rural disparities in access to education, land, credit, and health services, which contribute to sustained economic inequality. Similar barriers are faced by female ex-combatants, which is also exacerbated by social stigma and other overlapping challenges.

- **Material vs. Symbolic Reparations:** There is a profound disparity between the symbolic gestures offered by institutions and the material reparations expected and needed by communities, such as infrastructure improvements, which are necessary for material improvement of conditions but also for healing and rebuilding trust.
- **Legacies of Colonialism:** The legacy of colonialism in Colombia's transitional justice is an underexplored area that may offer insights into the current challenges facing the peace process. Although The Colombian Truth Commission's final report, The Commission for the Clarification of Truth, Coexistence and Non-repetition (CEV), refers to the colonial roots of inequalities that underpin the armed conflict, including the hacienda system and discrimination against Indigenous and Afro-descendant people, confronting the ongoing legacies of the colonial past is not included in the 74 final recommendations. This is a missed opportunity to deal with the structural causes of violence.

Recommendations

Government of Colombia:

- **Responsive Reconciliation Policies:** Create reconciliation programs that recognise and incorporate the complexities of individual experiences of conflict, focusing on providing targeted material reparations alongside symbolic acts. Ensure policies are adapted to the needs and perceptions of different social groups and experiences. For example, since women have concerns about their safety and livelihoods within the reconciliation process, this should be prioritised in reconciliation policies and efforts.
- **Economic Justice for Rural Women:** Enhance support systems for rural women, such as education and land rights, to address economic disparities and promote gender equality.
- **Transparent and Efficient Land Restitution:** Review and reform the land restitution process with a focus on transparency and efficiency, ensuring legal consistency and victim-centred outcomes. In particular, The Land Restitution Unit (URT) should review its policies and regulatory frameworks and make appropriate changes to ensure a victim-centred approach to land restitution; all cases of doubt should be resolved in favour of the victims.
- **Intersectional Approach to Justice Institutions:** The JEP, Victim's Unit, and Monitoring Committee of the CEV should prioritise an intersectional approach in their work wherever possible, to fully understand the situation of particularly vulnerable people and provide appropriate mechanisms for redress.
- **Colonial Roots of Inequitable Justice:** When evaluating the implementation of the 74 final recommendations made by the CEV, the Monitoring Committee should consider the background of colonial legacies. This should be present throughout the report, and particularly when considering structural constraints on reconciliation.

- **Local Leadership and Intercultural Education:** Indigenous and Afro-descendant communities are disproportionately impacted by conflict. Their voices and local needs must be centred in the transitional justice process. Integrate local leaders in policy design and execution to ensure that programs align with the specific needs and expectations of local communities. Strengthen and widen the two existing programmes – Ethno-education and the Afro-Colombian Studies Programme – to dismantle historic, racist attitudes that are still prevalent.
- **Reconciliation Expectations:** Conduct a national dialogue to clarify and define reconciliation, its scope, and its limits to ensure there is a unified and realistic expectation from the process.

Civil Society and International Actors:

- **Sustainable and Flexible Funding Models:** Develop funding models that provide long-term support for women led CSOs, allowing for the continuation and scaling of successful programs and for resources to be allocated in ways that respond to changing context and needs.
- **Meaningful and Diverse Participation:** Ensure the participation of a diversity of women's groups including female combatants, victims, Indigenous groups – in all aspects of peace implementation, from disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration to land rights, economic opportunity and transitional justice.
- **Capacity Building for Grassroots Organisations:** Allocate resources to strengthen members of marginalised groups and grassroots organisations, enhancing their ability to respond to community-specific needs with cultural competence and local knowledge. This includes reviewing funding eligibility guidelines to increase inclusivity of smaller/informal and grassroots organisations. Funding should be guaranteed for gender issues throughout the peace implementation process, with extended funding timeframes.
- **Intersectional and Holistic Gender Programming:** Avoid single-issue approaches to gender advocacy, which can perpetuate existing social and political hierarchies. Focus on violence perpetuated by interlinked structures of oppression experienced by minoritised women and groups, which includes programming that consider economic, social, cultural, and environmental rights.

Researchers:

- **Intersectional Analysis:** Future research should apply intersectional analyses to understand how overlapping social identities, including gender, race, ethnicity, and class, affect post-conflict experiences and long-term recovery.
- **Colonial Influences on Transitional Justice:** A gap remains in understanding how historical colonialism influences contemporary social and political dynamics within peace processes. Research that seeks to address this question should itself take a decolonial methodological approach and engage with Indigenous and Afro-descendant communities.

This country brief draws on findings and recommendations from the following projects: [Addressing Post-Colonial Legacies in Transitional Justice](#); [Political Economy of Reconciliation](#); [Women's Political and Economic Empowerment](#); [Land reform, peace and informal institutions](#); and [From Female Combatants to Filmmakers – Expanding Women's Agency in War and Peace](#).