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Alternative Report for the Evaluation of Colombia

“Gender ideology” discourse as a threat to the full enjoyment of Women’s rights and gender equality in Colombia

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Contributors:

The *Red Internacional de Derechos Humanos* (RIDH) is a Geneva-based NGO with ECOSOC Consultative Status since 2014. The organisation specialises in the promotion and protection of human rights in Latin America and facilitates the link between Latin-American civil society actors and the UN Human Rights System.

*Gender Studies for Human Rights* is an international network of academics, researchers and human rights advocates specialised in gender studies. The network was formed to begin the monitoring of anti-gender discourse within the field of education and especially raise awareness to threats against gender studies or sexual education and anti-gender discrimination educational programmes.
**Introduction:**

This report is presented for the CEDAW Committee’s 72 session and 9th examination of Colombia. It will focus on the rise and mainstreaming of the “Gender Ideology” discourse as a strategy against gender education programs and its influence on the political decisions on the recent years.

For the past two decades, Colombia has seen significant advances in its political and legal framework promoting gender equality and justice through National Action Plans, renewed commitments to strengthen gender-based approaches within the State’s various institutions and of course the provision of a gender perspective within the Peace Agreement signed in 2016. However, as it has repeatedly been highlighted by Colombia’s latest evaluations before the Human Rights Committee (2016), the CESC (2017) and the country’s 3rd Universal Periodic Review (2018), there exists a considerable gap between the legal framework and the proper implementation of these policies.

Additionally, in recent years, NGOs and other CSOs have been facing with concern a new set of rollbacks against women and gender rights. Under the name of “Gender ideology”, conservative and right-wing sectors have influenced the political agenda by implementing public campaigns and actions against ongoing gender education programs and the Transitional Justice peace process.

**Context: “Gender Ideology” and anti-gender discourse in Colombia**

“Gender ideology” is defined by the Colombian researcher Manuel Rodriguez (2017) as “a strategy of conservative Catholic activism to counteract, through the formation of citizen-believers, the politicization of pleasure and the configuration of sexual citizenships organized by feminists and activists for sexual diversity in recent decades” (p. 130). In Latin America, with the increase of followers of politically active conservative Protestant churches, this strategy has been combined under these postulates as an alliance with the catholic church against progressive gender policies.

Both churches, Catholic and conservative Protestant, argued the protection and stability of “the natural order of society” boosting the following actions: i) the coordination between local organizations and international movements of a conservative nature; ii) the use of a common hyperbolic language representing advances in gender equality and sexual diversity as catastrophes for humanity; iii) the populous urban manifestations in several countries in relevant political moments; iv) and the use of common symbols, related to the family, childhood and what it is conceived as ‘natural’ for them (Viveros & Rodriguez, 2017). All actions are represented under the stigma of “moral panic” in order to influence the public opinion and the election results.

The enunciation of a Gender perspective in the peace agreement, by the Colombian government and the guerrilla FARC-EP, was used by conservative and right-wing to delegitimate and misrepresent the original meaning and necessity of differentiated perspectives for women and LGBTI communities.

According to the Security Council Resolution 1325/00, a Gender perspective is needed to recognize the gender specific effects that armed conflicts have on women’s lives, without underestimating their capacity for peacebuilding agency (Vargas et al, 2018). In Colombian peace agreement, a Gender mainstreaming was implemented in a large sense to recognize sexual differences specific effects related to sexual orientation and gender identity. However, conservative and right-wing sectors used this definition to their political purposes, defining this perspective as “Gender Ideology”.

The rise of anti-gender discourse under the guise of fighting against “Gender Ideology” is not unique to Colombia or indeed to the Latin-American region. As it was pointed out in the Communication OL HUN 6/2018, the labelling of women’s demands for equality as gender equality is part of a “worrying global trend” that seeks to “reinforce gender stereotypes and roll back progress that has been made in achieving equality for women and girls”.

In the past three years, this notion has been used in Colombia in two particular events that affected the peace process. The first one, related to the implementation of pedagogical booklets by the Ministry of Education against homophobia and transphobia in public and private schools. The second one, associated to the popular referendum for validating the peace agreement between the government headed by Juan Manuel Santos and the guerrilla FARC-EP in 2016. Both will be explained more detailed as facts that
affected directly the gender education programs in the country and the peace agreement signature and implementation.

Facts

*The suicide of Sergio Urrego*

On 14 August 2014, a student decided to commit suicide caused by the homophobic actions from the principle and teachers of his school. Sergio Urrego, a sixteen-year-old teenager who had declared himself as homosexual, decided to end his life by giving a message about sexual discrimination in Colombian society.

His death led to a public debate and as a result of this tragedy, the Constitutional Court emitted judgment T-478/2015 which ordered to the Ministry of the education to implement preventive and responsive measures against sexual and gender identity discrimination in school manuals.

Again, despite existing national action plans, measures and policies for the prevention of discrimination on grounds of sex, gender identity or gender expression, “patriarchal attitudes” and gender stereotypes continue to negatively and disproportionately affect women and LGBTIQ persons as it was already pointed out with concern in Colombia’s previous CEDAW review as well as in its CRC evaluation of 2015.

*Gender educational booklets and backlash from the conservative sectors*

In the heat of the debate following Sergio Urrego’s suicide and the Constitutional Court’s Judgment T-478/2015, the ex-president and leader of the right-wing coalition, Alvaro Uribe Vélez, declared that “children who are taught in gender diversity have a greater propensity to hormones and to commit suicide” (Telemundo, 2016).

Conservative and protestant churches, connected with this political group, called for a protest against the implementation of Gender pedagogical booklets in public and private schools on 10 August 2016. The reasons given to the public opinion were sustained of their rejection of the implementation of “Gender ideology” in schools’ curriculums and manuals, and against the supposed general strategy of LGBTI community groups to “convert” children into being part of their community.

The protest was represented as parents fighting against the “homosexualizing” program of the Ministry of Education and was aimed directly against the minister Gina Parody, who was openly lesbian.

One of the coordinators of the protest, Samuel Ángel, founder of the Movimiento Solidaridad, a “Catholic movement against gender ideology” (as quoted from their website), argued that “we have investigated what LGBTI collectives are: they are leftist groups with a Marxist ideology. Gender ideology is leveraged in communism” (Semana, 2018). When asked to define what “gender ideology” was, Ángel declared that it was “a set of anti-scientific ideas that, for totalitarian political purposes, uproot sexuality from Nature and to explain it monopolistically by Culture”.

These conservative religious groups consider the so-called “Gender Ideology” as a new instrument from left-wing groups to unsettle the principles of the “traditional nuclear family”, based on the right-wing’s political postulates.

As the Working Group on the issue of discrimination against women in law and in practice expressed in their 2018 annual report to the HRC (A/HRC/38/46), the use of concepts such as the “protection of the family” and “traditional values” have been used by conservative pressure groups as well as governments to “undermine women’s rights and question the universality of the claim to equality and non-discrimination” while also justifying a State’s failure to comply with its obligation to eliminate discriminatory practices based on stereotyped gender roles.
Under the hashtag #NiCartillasNiDerechos, several actions were executed against the implementation of these booklets in social networks: fake news campaigns and coordination between churches for a massive debate in public opinion.

These protests and the mainstreaming of this anti-gender rhetoric in the public debate also significantly influenced the outcome of the Peace Process Referendum, whose inclusion of a gender-perspective within the Peace Agreement was a key component and thus a cornerstone of for right-wing groups advocating for the “No” that eventually won.

Eventually, the educational booklets were not implemented, and the minister quit her position after the Peace Process Referendum was rejected in October 2016.

**The peace agreement and gender perspective**

Humberto de la Calle, government chief in charge of the peace dialogues, openly admitted the importance of a gender perspective in this negotiation. By saying on July 2015 that “a gender approach touches on cultural concepts that have generated structures of historic social behavior (...) Gender evokes roles of domination, of discrimination above all to women and to different forms of sexual identity” ([Equipo paz gobierno, 2016](#)), gender-based effects in the Colombian armed conflict were recognized in the Transitional Justice Process and in the creation of a Gender sub-commission.

Again, conservative Protestant and Catholic groups led a campaign to influence the peace referendum by spreading the idea that the Colombian government wanted to impose homosexuality and the destruction of the nuclear family. This argument, as well as other messages against the peace agreement heavily influenced the rejection in the popular consultation of the peace agreement on 2 October 2016.

After that, a new negotiation of the peace agreement included these sectors and the gender-perspective component was significantly watered down: the LGBTI community was invisibilised and women were reduced as only victims, leaving behind the principle of justice and political participation that was central in the original accord.

The dramatic rise in attacks and killings of human rights defenders and social leaders has grown exponentially since the signing of Peace Agreement in November 2016, with an estimated 423 assassinations between January 2016 and November 2018. The [Colombian Commission of Jurists’ 2018 report on the killing patterns perpetuated against human rights defenders](#) reveal that while women HRDs represent roughly 15% of all assassinations, in at least 18.4% of the cases the victims’ bodies were mutilated, including with evidence of sexual violence. Additionally, threats against women human rights defenders repeatedly contained a sexual component and/or were directed to their children.

In a Transitional Justice process, where the rural regions are the most affected, a Gender perspective is necessary to guarantee the reconstruction of social structures after more than 60 years of armed conflict. Women and members of the LGBTI community have become leaders and the principal actors of this process with a weak security protection and a lack of accompaniment by the actual government. As well, promoting and maintaining a Gender Mainstreaming in all the education programs is key to understand and ensure the need of a differentiated gendered perspective in this process. So, the “Gender Ideology” strategy has directly affected women and LGBTI Human Rights by distorting the original meaning in a peace agreement and social reconciliation.

Reiterating the OHCHR’s 2017 annual report on the situation of human rights in Colombia, it is crucial for the State party to strengthen the “gender analysis in the threats to human rights defenders, as well as an analysis of threats in rural settings given the prevalence of killings in these areas” and implement adequate protection measures taking into consideration their specific needs as it was provided in the Peace Agreement.
Recommendations

- Urge the State-party to take measures to combat the attacks against gender equality in the public discourse especially under the use of so-called “gender ideology”;
- Expand capacity-building on gender equality for government officials, parliamentarians, leaders of political parties and of religious movements and public and private media actors;
- Ensure sufficient consultation and collaboration with a broad base of civil society representatives when drafting legislation, policies and programmes with regard to the elimination of gender discrimination and the promotion of gender equality;
- Institutionalise the adoption of a gender perspective in the transitional justice peace process and allocate the necessary resources to guarantee the rights of women and LGBTI communities;
- Provide adequate protection mechanisms that fully take into consideration the specific threats and needs of women and LGBTI human rights defenders as per the Peace Agreement and implement proper monitoring and follow-up.
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