

## The Religious Right and Anti-Genderism in Colombia

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RIGHT-AGAINST-RIGHTS MOBILISATIONS ARE becoming increasingly visible around the globe and are adding anti-gender campaigns to their political arsenal. Anti-genderism is a global phenomenon that seeks to roll back, reverse, or block expanding gender and LGBT+ rights. It is both an epistemological response to emancipatory claims with regard to sex, gender, and sexuality, and a political mechanism to thwart feminist and queer agendas (Corredor 2019). Anti-genderism has grown in Latin America as in other parts of the world, but without a corresponding level of attention by scholars. Most of what we have come to understand about anti-gender countermovements to date comes from the European context, where the Catholic Church undoubtedly has been leading the charge.<sup>1</sup> In Latin America, however, anti-genderism presents a more unique arrangement of religious right activity, whereby conservative evangelical churches, in addition to the Catholic Church, are major leaders (Corrales 2020). With a more complex constellation of religious engagement in anti-genderism come new dynamics of the right against rights that warrant investigation.

This chapter examines two anti-gender campaigns in Colombia that took place in 2016, one that targeted a school programme, and the other a major peace process. The first campaign, which occurred in August 2016, targeted a national anti-bullying programme that sought greater tolerance in schools for gender-variant identities and children struggling with their sexuality. This initiative was met with open resistance from the Catholic Church, conservative evangelical churches, right-wing politicians, and certain factions within civil society – all of whom claimed that the programme spread a form of ‘gender ideology’ that attacked the nuclear family and threatened ‘educational autonomy, religious liberty, and the right of

<sup>1</sup> See Anić (2015); Case (2011); Corredor (2021); Fassin (2016); Graff (2014); Korolczuk and Graff (2018); Kováts and Petó (2017); and Paternotte and Kuhar (2017).

parents to determine the education of their children' (Urbina Ortega 2016). Their campaign was successful. Just weeks after its announcement, the programme was scrapped, and the Minister of Education stepped down.

As the first anti-gender campaign was winding down, a second one emerged, this time around a landmark peace agreement that sought to end 52 years of violent civil war between the Colombian government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People's Army (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia – Ejército del Pueblo; FARC-EP), Colombia's largest guerrilla group. This second anti-gender campaign targeted the peace agreement's gender perspective, or *enfoque de género*, which sought 'the inclusion and exercise of equal rights and conditions for all of society, specifically for women and the LGBT+ population' (FARC-EP 2016, 2). Religious and political conservatives argued that language pertaining to sexual diversity and diverse gender identity threatened Colombia's legal system, traditional marriage, and the nuclear family, as well as the right to life and religious freedom (*Semana* 2016b). Unlike the first campaign, however, this anti-gender mobilisation was ultimately unsuccessful in eliminating the peace agreement's gender perspective.

This chapter takes a deep dive into these two anti-gender countermovements, showing that each was marked by loose and informal coalitions of religious leaders, civil society, and conservative politicians, who coalesced around a particular aim but did not, in the end, establish a long-standing, consolidated movement beyond these two mobilisations. The temporary nature of these countermovements, as discussed in the introduction to this volume, is characteristic of right-against-rights groups. As I will show in this chapter, however, the ephemeral style of anti-gender countermovements does not imply that their effects are minimal. In Colombia, the short-lived anti-gender mobilisations had substantial impacts on the outcomes of the anti-bullying programme and the 2016 peace agreement.

The loose and informal nature of anti-gender countermovements is also important because, as Escoffier, Payne, and Zulver (Chapter 1) note, historically Latin America's military, political, and economic elite have dominated the region's 'right wing'. As a result, much of their influence has taken place either behind the scenes or within party politics. Yet, anti-gender movements are largely dependent on the support of the masses, and thus, to influence their political worlds, they engage in mobilisation tactics that include street protests, as well as digital and social media campaigns, while also participating in formal politics. As I will show, Colombia's anti-gender campaigns were neither entirely a grassroots effort, nor staunchly operating within the realm of party politics, thus demonstrating how today's political polarisation is 'not simply a form of contentious politics driven by political parties', but is also caused by 'social conflict driven by non-institutionalised groups, grassroots movements and ordinary citizens' (Brändle *et al.* 2022, 234). These countermovements were short-lived, albeit impactful.

This chapter is organised into five parts. I begin by explaining anti-genderism, followed by a discussion of how it has manifested to date in Latin America. I then delve into the two cases of anti-gender countermovements in Colombia, where

I conduct an in-depth analysis of the actors involved, their mobilisation strategies, framing tactics, and the final outcomes. For each case study, I rely on qualitative data gathered through print and social media, as well as press releases and other public statements made available by leaders from Catholic and conservative evangelical organisations. I conclude with a discussion of how these right-against-rights groups seek to roll back the rights of women and LGBT+ groups in the name of parental rights, religious freedom, and the Colombian family. In this final section, I further discuss the implications of these anti-gender countermovements for the region at large.

### Anti-Genderism: An Overview

In the last two decades there has been a global rise of a specific type of opposition against progressive women's and LGBT+ rights, often referred to as anti-genderism. The first seeds of organised anti-gender countermovement were planted at the 1995 United Nations World Conference on Women in Beijing, where feminists and lesbian activists sought to include a definition of gender in the conference's Platform for Action that recognised gender as a social and cultural construction. The Holy See, however, was quick to respond, issuing its 'Statement of Interpretation of the Term "Gender"', where it reinforced its understanding of gender 'as grounded in biological-sexual identity, male or female', and 'thus exclud[ing] dubious interpretations based on widespread conceptions, which affirm that sexual identity can adapt indefinitely, to accommodate new and different purposes' (Glendon 1995).<sup>2</sup> Rallying support from Islamic and other conservative nations, the Vatican successfully prevented feminist definitions of gender from being incorporated into the final Platform for Action.<sup>3</sup>

Since 1995, the Catholic Church has waged anti-gender counterattacks around the globe, challenging policy that acknowledges the socially and culturally constructed notions of gender. At the heart of these movements is a rejection of queer and progressive feminist assertions that gender, sexuality, and biological sex are social, political, and cultural constructs. For Catholics, gender, sex, and sexuality are predictably correlated and 'harmoniously woven together' (Burggraf 2003, 402). As seen in Beijing, the Catholic Church does not act alone. These campaigns are driven by complex systems of conservative religious networks and socially conservative civil organisations who come together to resist the actual or perceived policy promoting women's bodily autonomy and sexual diversity (Tabbush and Caminotti 2020).

Together they tackle a wide range of policy issues, including but not limited to marriage equality; adoption for same-sex couples; domestic violence prevention;

<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

<sup>3</sup> For more on the Vatican's oppositional campaigns at the Beijing conference see Bayes and Tohid (2001); Buss (1998); Case (2019); Friedman (2003); and Garbagnoli (2016).

sex education; reproductive health; and, as seen in this case study, peace processes. The spectrum of issues that it challenges allows anti-gender camps to garner support from multiple sites of resistance. They also demonstrate immense transnational organisational and discursive power.

Anti-gender campaigns are emotionally charged, often using fear and panic that capitalise on exaggerated but credible threats to fundamental religious values (Céspedes-Baez 2016; Domínguez Blanco 2020; Rodríguez Rondón 2017; Korolczuk and Graff 2018). They espouse oversimplified and deceptive adversarial framing to delegitimise LGBT+ groups and progressive feminists in their quest for social and political emancipation. Vague terms such as ‘gender ideology’, ‘genderism’, and ‘gender theory’ (herein referred to as ‘gender ideology’) are regularly employed by these camps to promote a perceived threat. ‘Gender ideology’, according to these groups, incites gender confusion by allowing people to ‘freely determine whether they want to be men or women and freely choose their sexual orientation’ (Graff 2014, 433). It is said to be an ‘ideological aggression against girls and women’ (Rice Hasson 2019) that is rooted in the ‘rejection of the family’ and motherhood (Alzamora Revoredo 2003, 475), and promotes ‘abortion ... homosexuality, lesbianism and all the other forms of sexuality outside of marriage’ (Alzamora Revoredo 2003, 465). By using ambiguous and sweeping language, these countermovements aim to capture a wide range of complex theories on gender, biological sex, and sexuality and distil them into a single, fabricated ideology/theory that threatens the family, children, and ultimately the nation. In other words, these frames serve as ‘symbolic glue’ (Brustier 2015) for a whole host of issues culled from a diverse constellation of social and political theories and policy agendas.

Anti-gender countermovements also employ a fear-based, oversimplified ‘symbolic glue’ approach when naming those responsible for promoting ‘gender ideology’. Pointing to a contrived group of ‘gender feminists’ (Alzamora Revoredo 2003), ‘feminazis’ (Angulo 2019), or ‘fundamental feminists’ (Blabbeando 2013), anti-gender campaigns have seemingly collapsed two distinct and complex social movements – those of feminists and of LGBT+ rights – and all of their diverse subgroups into a single unit. This serves to create a single enemy that is easy to digest for the masses (Garbagnoli 2016). Campaign leaders have also shrewdly connected ‘gender ideology’ to distinct political cleavages that resonate with varying highly controversial national histories, such as communism, colonialism, and imperialism. Pope Francis has likened ‘gender ideology’ to ‘ideological colonization’ (McPhate 2016); Polish Bishop Tadeusz Pieronek stated that ‘gender ideology is worse than Communism and Nazism put together’ (Graff and Korolczuk 2017); and Guinean Cardinal Robert Sarah argued that the world is navigating ‘two radicalizations’ in which ‘we find ourselves between gender ideology and ISIS ... What Nazi-Fascism and Communism were in the 20th century, Western homosexual and abortion ideologies and Islamic Fanaticism are today’ (Pentin 2015). These analogies shrewdly incite fear around political anxieties and the role of the nuclear family; exaggerate the potency of the enemy, who are radical feminists and LGBT+ communities; and connect anti-genderism to potent, nationalist rhetoric.

## Anti-Genderism in Latin America: New Religious Right-against-Rights Formations

While anti-gender mobilisations were mostly contained within Europe in the first decade of the 2000s, more recently we have seen a rise of anti-genderism in other regions of the world. In Latin America, specifically anti-gender mobilisations have organised against abortion, same-sex marriage, and sex education programmes. In September 2016, tens of thousands of protestors mobilised in Mexico to oppose same-sex marriage and the inclusion of gender ideology in sex education curriculums in public schools. Right-wing populist parties have also used gender ideology rhetoric as a political platform, and joined forces with anti-gender groups, as seen in the presidential campaigns of Costa Rica's Alvarado Muñoz and Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro in 2018. What sets these movements apart from their European counterparts, however, is the involvement of conservative evangelical churches alongside the Catholic Church: historically considered competitors in the political arena. In a region where Catholicism has long dominated, evangelical protestants have challenged Catholic hegemony and now make up almost 20 per cent of Latin America's population (Sahgal 2017). Moreover, the majority of evangelicals self-identify as Pentecostal or neo-Pentecostal, the most socially and politically conservative factions of Protestantism (Masci 2014). Across the region, conservative evangelicals have been leaders in anti-gender mobilisations and, as a result, they are proving to be effective at grassroots organisation among the group's faithful, as well as reliable allies for other political heavyweights who share core conservative values around the social issues of gender and sexuality.

The rise of evangelicalism in Latin America is just one component of a larger regional shift toward social and political conservatism (Fassin 2020; Biroli 2020). Colombia is no exception. President Iván Duque, like other leaders in the region, represents a return to a set of conservative policies following eight years of centrist rule. Duque is a member of the right-wing Democratic Centre Party and is known for his close relationship with former president and radical-right firebrand Álvaro Uribe. As in neighbouring countries, evangelicalism in Colombia is also on the rise. In 1970, roughly 95 per cent of Colombians identified as Catholic (Pérez Guadalupe 2019). In 2018, 73 per cent identified as Catholics and 16 per cent as evangelical and/or Protestant.<sup>4</sup> While evangelical Protestants remain a minority in Colombia, their emergence has greatly aided the nation's conservative political base, as conservative evangelicals bring a renewed enthusiasm for touting traditional values such as protection of the heterosexual, nuclear family. For example, in Colombia, evangelicals are more likely to reject LGBT+ rights than members of other religious and non-religious groups (Corrales and Sagarzazu 2019). Such conditions provide fertile ground for anti-genderism.

<sup>4</sup> Data retrieved from the Latinobárometro database, 30 June 2020, <https://www.latinobarometro.org/latOnline.jsp>.

## The First Anti-Gender Campaign: Sexual Diversity Education in Schools

In the summer of 2016, an anti-gender campaign emerged to protest an educational manual entitled *School Environments Free from Discrimination*. The education manual was developed in response to a Constitutional Court ruling on an incident where a 16-year-old boy took his own life after being bullied by school administrators because of his sexual orientation. Together with the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the Ministry of Education created a 97-page manual to educate teachers about the distinctions and relationships among the terms sex, gender, sexuality, and gender identity. This manual sought to accomplish two goals. First, it promoted freedom from discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity (*Tiempo* 2016a), and second, it sought to explain the complex nature of embodiment and identity in ways that could help teachers support and foster the development of children who identify as LGBT+ (Ministerio de Educación de Colombia *et al.* 2016). These manuals, popularly known as *las cartillas*, were set to be distributed to school administrators in August 2016.

At the time of the manuals' development and release, Gina Parody, an openly gay politician, was serving as the Minister of Education for the moderate U Party. On 4 August 2016, just days before its release, a fake manual depicting a cartoon of two men having sex went viral on the internet and was rumoured to be part of the new sex education curriculum (Marcos 2016). The religious right against rights, primarily Catholic and conservative evangelicals, with the support of conservative politicians, responded with fury. For the first time in Colombian public discourse, accusations surfaced around 'gender ideology'. Together these groups organised mass demonstrations throughout the country, making claims that the educational manuals violated constitutional rights to freedom of religion, belief, dignity, and the right for parents to educate their children (Marcos 2016; *Espectador* 2016).

### **Mobilising Leaders, Forms of Protest, and Framing**

The Catholic Church and conservative evangelicals led the resistance and were supported by government representatives with varying party affiliations. Calling upon its people to 'support initiatives ... [that] protect the guiding principles of humanity, especially in defense of life, children, and the family' (Jaramilo Monsalve in Cháchara (2016)), the Catholic Church was extremely vocal. In an interview with *El Tiempo* (2016c), a leading Colombian newspaper, the then archbishop of Bogotá, Rubén Salazar Gómez, stated: 'We reject the implementation of gender ideology in Colombia's education system, because it is a destructive ideology, it destroys the human person ... It takes away from him the fundamental content of the complementarity between men and women.' Additionally, Archbishop Oscar

Urbina Ortega (2016), the vice-president of the Colombian Episcopal Conference, stated on behalf of all bishops in Colombia:

We lament that the Constitutional Court and now the Ministry of Education are abusing the law to promote gender ideology in the most diverse areas of our society ... [it is an] attack against the family as an essential institution of society, against the educational autonomy, religious liberty, and the right of parents to determine the education of their children, liberty of conscience, freedom of association, and the right of children to receive an education in accord with the ethics and morals of their parents.

On 10 August 2016, mass protests broke out across Colombia; they were organised by *Abanderados por la Familia*, or *Champions of the Family*, a civil society movement with a mission of defending traditional, Christian-based family values. The marches were attended by civil society, including community individuals, Christian-based organisations, private education advocacy organisations, and prominent Catholic and conservative evangelical leaders. In addition, the marches were attended by conservative government representatives from an array of political parties, including the Democratic Centre, the U Party, the Liberal Party, the Conservative Party, and the newly formed evangelical party *Justa Libres*.

Hundreds of thousands of people marched through the streets in more than 35 cities around the country, chanting ‘We are alive; we are present; families are here’ (*‘Se vive, se siente, la familia está presente’*). They held signs with biblical passages, as well as individually crafted messages that connected the rejection of gender ideology to familial and educational rights, such as:

In defence of children, the family, and education. No to gender ideology! (Cobos 2016)

I am in favour of divine creation. Long live the family! Resurrect family principles! (PCCMM 2016)

We reject gender ideology in schools. (*Semana* 2016a)

It is the right of parents to educate our children. (PCCMM 2016)

As demonstration organisers, *Champions of the Family* also provided people with protest signs stating ‘Family comes first.’ The protests offered a platform for Catholic and conservative evangelical leaders, as well as politicians, to give speeches and interviews in which they made statements connecting nationhood with family values. Archbishop Ismael Rueda Sierra of Bucaramanga bellowed from the stage at his local march: ‘Respect the people, respect the nation, respect the Colombian family!’ (Radio Católica Metropolitana 1450AM 2016). Ricardo Rodríguez, founder and leader of the *Centro Mundial de Avivamiento*, or *World Revival Centre Church*, the largest evangelical church in Latin America, stated that ‘it is a tremendous victory that all of the country came out to say that the Colombian family is based in principles and values and that our children are educated by [the parents]’ (*Detrás de Cámaras DTC* 2016).

At the forefront of government opposition was Conservative Party member Alejandro Ordoñez, who at the time was serving as Attorney General of Colombia. A staunch Catholic, Ordoñez stated that the Ministry of Education manuals were

‘being used to indoctrinate our children and our grandchildren in gender ideology ... to dissolve the family and erase childhood by taking away innocence and purity from children and young people’ (*Heraldo* 2016). Ángela Hernández, an evangelical state representative and a member of Gina Parody’s own moderate U Party, made claims that the Minister of Education was seeking ‘colonisation of her customs and ideas’ and was ‘try[ing] to impose [Parody’s] way of life’ upon the Colombian people (*Tiempo* 2016b). In a call to action, Yolanda Vargas, state representative of the far-right Democratic Centre Party, whose husband heads the neo-Pentecostal International Charismatic Mission Church of Barrancabermeja, stated ‘the cause that unites us is the family, because we believe in a society where the parents have the right to educate and raise their children’ (Rodríguez 2016).

On 16 August, less than a week after the mass protests, government officials convened a senate debate to challenge the legality and the context of the school manuals. The session was initiated by María del Rosario Guerra, a senator from the far-right Democratic Centre Party and a practising Catholic, along with Jimmy Chamorro, another member of Gina Parody’s party and a prominent evangelical. As a result of the debate, the anti-bullying manuals were scrapped (Las2orillas 2016), and on 30 August 2016, Gina Parody announced that she would take a sabbatical from her position as Minister of Education to work on the peace process’s ‘Yes’ campaign. On 4 October, just two days after the peace agreement failed in a national plebiscite, Parody officially resigned.

While conservative politicians played a role in the termination of the manuals, it was the religious right against rights who led the public campaign against the educational programme. Through a grassroots, populist style of organisation, these religious networks – comprising the Catholic and conservative evangelical churches – used social media, traditional media, and street protests to send out their message. They packaged and disseminated so-called gender ideology as a hostile form of left-wing ideological colonisation and an unwanted imposition that threatened traditional families and children. They capitalised on rights-based language by employing parental and educational rights rhetoric, regularly claiming that parents have the sole right to sex- and other value-based education.<sup>5</sup> Finally, they promoted the traditional Christian family as a symbol of Colombian nationhood and citizenship.

## The Second Anti-Gender Campaign: The 2016 Peace Agreement Referendum

### Background to the 2016 Peace Agreement

In the early months of 2016, prior to the first anti-gender campaign, right-wing politicians organised in opposition to the highly anticipated peace agreement,

<sup>5</sup> For more information on Colombia’s history with human rights rhetoric see Corredor (2021).



which was set to end 52 years of violent civil war between the government and Colombia's largest guerrilla group, the FARC. Former president Álvaro Uribe, the political nemesis of then President Juan Manuel Santos, led the charge against the peace efforts. Prior to the start of the peace process, Santos and Uribe were both members of the centrist U Party and were allies. In fact, during Uribe's presidency, Santos had served as Minister of Defence from 2006 to 2009. Uribe has long been suspected of having deep ties with right-wing paramilitary groups and, during his presidency, preferred to use military might over negotiation in attempts to end the war. When Santos was elected president in 2010, he took a different approach, opting to initiate peace talks with the FARC. Uribe vehemently rejected the peace negotiations with the rebels from the start. He repeatedly attacked Santos for being weak on issues related to terrorism, and in 2012 broke with the U Party and formed the neoconservative Democratic Centre Party. Together with members from his newly formed party, Uribe launched what would come to be known as the 'No' campaign against the Santos-led peace efforts with the FARC.

Political polarisation in Colombia is not a new phenomenon; in fact, intense polarity between contending elites has plagued the nation since its independence from Spain in 1810. The bitter rivalry between Santos and Uribe is thus relatively characteristic of Colombian politics. Furthermore, it is not uncommon for peace agreement processes to ignite intense political battles, as such agreements can significantly threaten the power, interests, and ideologies of political leaders and parties (Stedman 1997, 5). Thus, while the opposition to this agreement was not unforeseen, the eventual makeup of the opposition and their mobilisation strategies were less expected.

Initially, the 'No' campaign rejected the accords for reasons that are typical in such peace agreement debates. Central to their grievances were concerns regarding land rights, impunity, and political opportunities for those they considered war criminals and drug traffickers. They further claimed that the agreement did not go far enough to protect victims (Oficina del Alto Comisionado para la Paz 2016b; Feldmann 2019). Despite the growing momentum of the 'No' campaign between March and June 2016, multiple opinion polls showed significant support among the Colombian people for the peace agreement (Ideaspaz 2016). Nonetheless, the 'No' campaign charged forward and garnered the backing of former president Andrés Pastrana, the Association of Retired Officers of the Military Forces, the Colombian Federation of Victims of the FARC, and a number of former Supreme Court Justices.

On 24 June, the government and the FARC signed a monumental ceasefire agreement, signalling that a peace agreement was imminent. However, political tensions continued to rise, and in response, religious leaders from across the country organised to cull support for the ongoing negotiations. On 4 July, more than 115 Catholic and evangelical religious leaders signed a decree in the presence of President Santos expressing their hope for peace. At the signing, Colombian Episcopal Conference president Archbishop Luis Castro Quiroga publicly stated

that the Catholic Church supported the ongoing negotiations and that it would call on its people to participate in the plebiscite. Nevertheless, he stopped short of telling his parishioners how to vote on whether or not to endorse the anticipated peace agreement (Sistema Informativo del Gobierno 2016). Also at the signing was Hector Pardo, a prominent charismatic evangelical, founder of the evangelical-based political party Justa Libres, and president of the Colombian Confederation for Freedom of Religion, Conscience, and Faith (Confedirec). Pardo stated that should peace come, the churches would continue to serve as peacemakers by facilitating reconciliation, principles of non-repetition of violence, and ‘peace, freedom, order and justice for all’ (Sistema Informativo del Gobierno 2016). A few months later, Pardo would emerge as a leading figure in the anti-gender campaign against the peace agreement’s gender perspective.

On the same day, the Colombian Episcopal Conference convened its 101st Plenary Assembly, which was dedicated to discussing issues of peace and post-conflict reconciliation (*Nuevo Siglo* 2016), two issues the Catholic Church had consistently endorsed over the course of the negotiations. On the last day of the four-day summit – 8 July – Archbishop Castro Quiroga reiterated the continued need to find peace and called on people to eradicate violence and seek reconciliation and good will. In the session, the archbishop cited numerous causes for the violence in Colombia over the previous several decades, including the disintegration of the family, loss of values, and an ethics of relativism. He also stated that the family was an important site of reconciliation and peace, and a ‘sanctuary where human life and creation are protected’ (Castro Quiroga 2016, 4). The Catholic Church called on politicians not to politicise the agreement and to make sure that it did not serve as a source of division. Once again, instead of taking an official position for or against the forthcoming peace agreement, the archbishop made the following statement: ‘We call on the Colombian people to participate in the discussion of the [peace agreement] responsibly, with an informed and conscientious vote, freely expressing their opinion, as an effective exercise of democracy and with due respect for what the majority ultimately determines’ (Castro Quiroga 2016, 5).

This declaration neither publicly to endorse nor to reject the peace agreement was not simply a decision to stay outside the political fray; it also aligns with Catholic doctrine, which states that it is not in the Church’s interest to tell people how to vote and that its leadership is not directly to intervene in politics and elections (Keane 2020; Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 2002). Thus, despite its integral involvement in the negotiations over the prior four years, the Catholic Church deferred to its tradition of staying out of national elections and kept the Church on the side-lines of the second anti-gender campaign.

On 24 July 2016, the Colombian government announced the inclusion of an innovative gender perspective, or *enfoque de género*, in the forthcoming peace agreement, which would guarantee ‘the inclusion and exercise of equal rights and conditions for all of society, specifically for women and the LGBT+ population’ (FARC-EP 2016, 2). In a press release, the government acknowledged the

fundamental need for the peace agreement to ‘create conditions so that women and people with diverse sexual identities can access the benefits of living in a country without armed conflict’ (2). At a ceremony celebrating the work of the Gender Subcommission, the chief negotiator for the government delegation, Humberto de la Calle, gave a speech endorsing the gender perspective. In his talk, de la Calle stressed that gender is a socially constructed concept that ‘evokes roles of domination [and] discrimination, especially against women and different forms of sexual identity’. He cited Simone de Beauvoir’s famous quote: ‘One is not born a woman, but rather becomes, a woman’ and followed it up by saying ‘And today we could also add: “you are not born a man, you become one”’. He also emphasised the progress that women have made in becoming more than just a marker of motherhood in society, and how the Colombian Constitution recognises ‘diverse forms of configuration of the family’. Finally, he emphasised his support for the LGBT+ rights within the constitution, stating that ‘the multiplicity of identities and orientations broadens the democratic spectrum’ (Oficina del Alto Comisionado para la Paz 2016a). On 24 August, the Colombian government announced that it had reached a peace deal with the FARC. The two parties would sign the agreement on 26 September, and on 2 October the Colombian people would be asked to vote on whether or not to accept the agreement in a national plebiscite.

While the gender perspective was praised internationally by the United Nations and transnational feminist networks, it did, nevertheless, lead to the rise of Colombia’s second anti-gender campaign. Capitalising on the massive mobilisation that had recently been galvanised around the educational manuals, factions of the religious right against rights joined the ‘No’ campaign, arguing that the gender perspective in the peace agreement constituted another attempt to impose gender ideology upon the Colombian people. They argued that language pertaining to sexual diversity and diverse gender identity threatened Colombia’s legal system and its rights to marriage and family, as well as the right to life and religious freedom (*Semana* 2016b). Uribe, the leader of the ‘No’ campaign, reiterated ‘the need to stimulate family values without putting [the family] at risk. These family values are defended by our religious leaders and moral pastors/guides’ (Uribe Vélez 2016).

### **Mobilising Leaders, Forms of Protest, and Framing**

Although the ‘No’ campaign involved a strategic partnership among conservative political groups to advance their diverse agendas, the attack on the gender- and sexual-equality provisions in the peace agreement were championed by the most conservative factions of the evangelical movement with the support of far-right Catholic politicians. While the Catholic Church was at the forefront of the first anti-gender campaign – and has been the primary mobilising leader for anti-gender campaigns around the globe – it was not officially involved in opposing the peace agreement or its gender inclusions. As already noted, the Catholic Church had publicly announced that it would not tell its parishioners how to vote, but rather would

simply encourage them to read the agreement and vote with their conscience, as is its regular practice around issues of domestic elections (Rojas Herrera 2016). Thus, conservative Catholic leaders within Colombia who may have been against the agreement personally had their hands tied when it came to denouncing the peace agreement publicly as a form of gender ideology.

Thus, it was conservative evangelical churches who mobilised and denounced gender ideology in the peace agreement. Right-wing evangelical leaders included the Christian Pact for Peace, a coalition of high profile evangelical church leaders; the World Centre of Revival, a megachurch whose leaders have held political office and who currently maintain strong ties to the Democratic Centre Party; megachurch Ríos de Vida; the evangelical Confederation of Colombia; the Charismatic International Church, led by Cesar and Claudia Castellanos, founders of the Charismatic International megachurch and the National Christian Party (PNC), one of the first evangelical political parties; Pastor Marco Fidel Ramírez, a city councillor of Bogotá; the evangelical-based political party Justa Libres; and evangelical government officials, including Senator Viviane Morales and state representative Ángela Hernández. It is important to note that a significant evangelical minority favoured the agreement and its gender perspective, and did not actively participate in this campaign.<sup>6</sup> Examples of churches that did support the agreement include the Mennonite and Baptist Churches, as well as a handful of Pentecostal megachurches and the Pentecostal-based MIRA Party (*Semana* 2016c).

While the Catholic Church did not take a position on the agreement, key conservative politicians who are practising Catholics and known for their religious conservatism – specifically former Attorney General Alejandro Ordoñez and former Undersecretary for the Family Ilva Myriam Hoyos – publicly opposed the gender perspective on religious and moral grounds. However, they were speaking not as official representatives of the Catholic Church but rather as elite politicians, unlike their evangelical counterparts, who were speaking as politicians, political hopefuls, and church representatives.

While some public marches against the agreement transpired, they did not occur to the same extent or at the same scale as those against the education manual. Instead, mobilisation strategies focused on getting people out to vote ‘No’ in the referendum. To do this, movement leaders spoke from the pulpit and leveraged social media to reach the masses (Beltrán and Creely 2018). Leaders used Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and WhatsApp to spread their message, which was simple: the peace accord’s gender perspective is synonymous with the same gender ideology that permeated the educational manuals. State representative Ángela Hernández

<sup>6</sup> Much of the literature on the political involvement of evangelicals focuses on conservative groups; however, evangelicals are a diverse group with varying political leanings, and thus there are many evangelical groups in Colombia who do not identify with the political agendas of those involved in the anti-gender movements. For a more in-depth explanation of which evangelical churches supported and opposed the 2016 Colombian peace agreement see Moreno (2016).

(2016) tweeted: ‘They wanted to impose the GENDER IDEOLOGY in schools. Now we are concerned that they intend to include it in the Constitution with the plebiscite.’ Attorney General Alejandro Ordoñez (2016) professed in a YouTube video: ‘Colombia marched a month ago when the government intended to implement a manual about gender ideology in schools ... now in the [peace agreement], it appears once again with infinite intensity ... and they call it *un enfoque de género*.’ Instead of framing their arguments in terms of parental rights, in this instance the right against rights forces used fear-based language rooted in conspiracy theories about a hostile takeover by far-left ideologies. Marco Fidel Ramírez (2016), city council member of Bogotá, tweeted: ‘I just voted No in the FARC-Santos plebiscite because I do not want a Colombia in the claws of atheism, communism, and the homosexual agenda.’

On 2 October 2016, the country narrowly rejected the peace agreement. Reasons for rejecting the agreement went beyond the gender inclusions; nonetheless, there is a general consensus among media, government leaders from all sides, religious organisations, and academics that the anti-gender campaign against the gender perspective served as a tipping point for rejection of the peace agreement (Beltrán and Creely 2018). In the days following the unexpected loss, President Santos met with religious and civil society leaders, as well as members of government, to discuss revisions to the peace accord, including but not limited to those pertaining to the gender perspective. In various proposals to the government, conservative evangelical leaders and Catholic politicians argued their concerns and articulated their demands. As in the lead-up to the referendum, grievances centred on anxieties about conspiracy, and the destruction of Colombian institutions and the traditional family. However, the written proposals were far more explicit. The evangelical Confederation of Colombia (CEDECOL) issued a statement declaring that the gender perspective ‘[e]xceed[s] a guaranteed application of women’s rights and [instead] generat[es] ambiguity and confusion ... the so-called “*Enfoque de Género*” has absorbed “Gender Ideology”, whose scope promotes a new anthropology of being, which ignores sexual distinction and denies the difference and reciprocity between men and women’ (Castaño Díaz, Palacios, and Moreno 2016, 1). Former Undersecretary for the Family Ilva Myriam Hoyos (Hoyos Castañeda 2016, 24–5) stated that the peace agreement ‘recognises the LGBTI population as the architect and beneficiary of public policies’, and that ‘Institutions that are essential to society will have to be modified, such as marriage, family, adoption, kinship, civil status, all of which will not only have constitutional recognition, but will also be reinterpreted through ... diverse sexual orientations and gender identities’. Attorney General Alejandro Ordoñez (Ordoñez Maldonado 2016a) argued that the gender perspective intended to ‘redesign our legal system, the family, marriage, the right to life and religious freedom’.

In addition to their grievances, opposition leaders also demanded the elimination of all mentions of gender and other phrases that alluded to sexuality and identity. Furthermore, they sought to replace the term ‘gender perspective’ with a ‘women’s rights approach’, which would in effect remove LGBT+ protections

but retain rights for heterosexual, cis-gendered women. Finally, they demanded that the traditional family be recognised as the principal institution of Colombian society, around which all other social and legal institutions should be structured (Rodríguez *et al.* 2016; Hoyos Castañeda 2016; Castaño Díaz 2016; Oficina del Alto Comisionado para la Paz 2016b).

After reviewing religious opponents' concerns over the gender perspective 'with extreme care' (Santos 2016a), the president announced a series of changes to the language of the peace accord that he hoped would satisfy conservative activists (Santos 2016b). On 30 November 2016, Congress approved the revised peace accords, officially ending the civil war between the FARC and the Colombian government. Much to the disappointment of the religious right against rights, much of the gender perspective was preserved and, to date, still stands as the only peace agreement in the world that offers protections for LGBT+ communities.<sup>7</sup>

## Analysis and Conclusion

While conservative politicians played a supportive role in the termination of the sexual diversity educational manual, it was a broad range of the religious conservatives who led the public right-against-rights campaign. Through grassroots, populist styles of organisation, Catholic and conservative evangelical churches used social media, traditional media, and street protests to send out their message. They packaged and disseminated so-called gender ideology as a hostile form of left-wing ideological colonisation and an unwanted imposition that threatened traditional families and children. They capitalised on rights-based language by employing parental and educational rights rhetoric, regularly claiming that parents have the sole right to sex- and other value-based education. Finally, they promoted the traditional Christian family as a symbol of Colombian nationhood and citizenship.

While there was less unity among the religious right against right in its opposition to the gender perspective included in the peace accord (when compared to the case of the education manuals) – particularly given that the Catholic Church did not actively oppose the peace agreement – the critiques of gender ideology were more sweeping, going beyond the threat to the family and parental rights. In this case, framing strategies employed fear-based messaging of a nefarious LGBT+ takeover, enabling the religious right against rights to position themselves as the victim in the process, as well as the true defender of women's rights.<sup>8</sup> Nonetheless, these grievances align with Catholic-led anti-gender mobilisations not only in Colombia, but across the globe.

<sup>7</sup> For an in-depth comparison of the gender perspective within the original and final peace agreement see Corredor (2021).

<sup>8</sup> For a more comprehensive framing analysis of anti-gender opposition to the 2016 Colombian peace agreement see Corredor (2021).

As Escoffier, Payne, and Zulver (Chapter 1) discuss, recent backlash to progressive rights in Latin America often emerges in the form of loosely knit and temporary coalitions or countermovements that coalesce around a particular aim, but never exactly establish a sustained movement beyond the immediate issue. Anti-gender campaigns throughout Latin America illustrate precisely this. In Colombia, strategic yet brief right-against-rights alliances were formed among right-wing politicians; conservative evangelical church leaders; civil society groups; and, in the first campaign, the Catholic Church. These mobilisations, however, did not result in a fully fledged, consolidated, and long-standing countermovement. Indeed, since the writing of this chapter (in 2022), Colombia has not yet experienced another anti-gender campaign to the same degree. Their temporality, however, does not mean they are not impactful. As the two anti-gender countermovements in Colombia show, whether or not they were successful in the end, these short-lived campaigns had demonstrable effects on gender- and sexual-equality policy.

The Colombian case also demonstrates how these right-against-right mobilisations operate predominantly in civil society with the aid of strategic alliances within party politics. This phenomenon is a break from the past, whereby control over right-wing politics was primarily concentrated in the hands of the political, economic, and military elite. Furthermore, these mobilisations draw attention to the changing religious landscape in Colombia and within the region at large. Colombia's anti-gender campaigns demonstrate how Latin America's religious right against rights, once dominated by the Catholic Church, is fast adapting to the surge of evangelicalism and leveraging these new alliances to assert control over gendered policy in the region. This is particularly apparent in the first anti-gender campaign against the sexual diversity education programme, where evangelicals and the Catholic Church campaigned together, which led to the termination of the programme before it even got started. Evangelicals and the Catholic Church also united in their response to the ceasefire between the FARC and the government, where together they announced their support for continued efforts to reach a peace deal. While the Catholic Church would take a step back with regard to the referendum, some evangelical leaders initially in favour of supporting peace would eventually switch to the 'No' campaign because of the gendered inclusions. In other words, evangelical leaders were able to carry the proverbial torch in the second anti-gender campaign when the Catholic Church was unable to participate (although certain prominent Catholic figures did participate in their positions as politicians). In short, their united front – albeit temporarily – shows that these forces, who have historically been politically at odds with each other, are finding new ways of coming together when their political agendas align.

These cases shed light not only on the changing religious landscape in Latin America, but also on the greater bandwidth that anti-genderism can have in the region. With the inclusion of conservative evangelicals – who operate without the same structural coherency as the Catholic Church – there is greater potential to promote anti-genderism in times that the Church is unable to mobilise. Research on

anti-genderism in Latin America is still in its infancy, and thus greater attention to evangelical-led anti-gender mobilisations promises greater insight into how right-against-rights rhetoric and ideas spread among competing groups and across geographical and cultural borders.

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