

Gender in Colombian development policies (1998-2026): Continuity and change

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Abstract

This article examines how gender is constructed in development policy over time. It draws on the concept of epistemic inertia, where long-held paradigms persist despite new discursive framings. Based on this concept, we use discourse analysis to explore the (dis)continuities of gender logics within the National Development Plans (NDPs) of Colombian presidents Andrés Pastrana (1998–2002), Álvaro Uribe (2002–2010), Juan Manuel Santos (2010–2018), Iván Duque (2018–2022), and Gustavo Petro (2022–2026). We find that Colombian NDPs tend to reproduce entrenched notions of women, family, and heteronormativity. Yet these traditional gender notions coexist with rhetorical and conceptual policy innovations that rearticulate how gender is framed – particularly in recurring domains such as violence, peace, and family – by introducing intersectional language and more substantive policy design. By tracing these dynamics, the article shows how gender approaches in public policy change, often while remaining tied to enduring cultural assumptions. *Keywords:* Feminism, gender, development, public policy, intersectionality, Colombia.

Resumen: El género en las políticas de desarrollo colombianas (1998-2026): Continuidad y cambio

Este artículo examina cómo se construye el género en las políticas de desarrollo a lo largo del tiempo. Se basa en el concepto de inercia epistémica, según el cual los paradigmas arraigados persisten pese a los nuevos marcos discursivos. Partiendo de este concepto, utilizamos el análisis del discurso para explorar las (des)continuidades de las lógicas de género en los Planes Nacionales de Desarrollo (PND) de los presidentes colombianos Andrés Pastrana (1998-2002), Álvaro Uribe (2002-2010), Juan Manuel Santos (2010-2018), Iván Duque (2018-2022) y Gustavo Petro (2022-2026). Observamos que los PND colombianos tienden a reproducir nociones arraigadas sobre las mujeres, la familia y la heteronormatividad. Sin embargo, estas nociones tradicionales de género coexisten con innovaciones retóricas y conceptuales en las políticas que replantean el marco de referencia del género – especialmente en ámbitos recurrentes como violencia, paz y familia – mediante un lenguaje interseccional y un diseño de políticas más sustantivo. Al analizar estas dinámicas, el artículo muestra cómo los enfoques de género en las políticas públicas cambian, a menudo sin dejar de estar vinculados a supuestos culturales arraigados. *Palabras clave:* Feminismo, género, desarrollo, políticas públicas, interseccionalidad, Colombia.

Introduction

Across societies, feminist scholars recognise gender as a foundational axis shaping life opportunities, and have repeatedly demonstrated that gendered inequalities influence economic growth, political participation, health, and social welfare, making gender a core dimension of development policy (Ferguson, 2010). Global assessments such as the United Nations' World Survey on the Role of Women in Development have documented gender gaps in employment, income, care burdens, political representation, and the salience of gender-based violence, particularly in low- and middle-income countries (Momsen, 2008). While activism and international organisations have promoted comprehensive "gender mainstreaming" in development planning, measuring and evaluating the policy inclusion of gender is complex (Schüler, 2006). Identities such as "women" or "men" shape gendered subjectivities, but so do social norms, institutions, and power relations that interact with sexuality, race, class, disability, and other axes of marginalisation (Rathgeber, 2003). What counts as a gender issue in development policy is therefore contextual and contested (Jaquette, 2017). Since definitional and political tensions shape which gendered subjects, issues and solutions are included in the conversation. For example, in some countries, reproductive labour may be seen as a development issue, while in others, it might be framed as a private/cultural matter; similarly, countries might adopt development policies to protect women from gender-based violence, while placing little attention on gender-based violence against LGBTQ+ populations.

These debates echo concerns regarding how to integrate gender mainstreaming into public policy (Gershuny & Sullivan, 2003; Schofield & Goodwin, 2005). Here, policy design is often marked by masculine rationalities and biases which perpetuate gender inequality, ignore gender-based violence, and reproduce gender-based discrimination and oppression (Beaurain & Masclet, 2016; Rubery et al., 2005). Other studies have also critically examined the limits and possibilities of gender mainstreaming, highlighting how these measures sometimes remain at the rhetorical level without prompting substantive policy measures (Jacquot, 2017; Jenson, 2015), with limitations in addressing the needs and interests of those at the intersection of multiple social categories (Hankivski et al., 2012). Overall, gender inclusion in policy varies considerably, ranging from practices that symbolically recognise women without altering power imbalances to substantive measures that attempt to transform structures of inequality (Swers, 2005; Rubery et al., 2005).

In Latin America, domestic feminist mobilisation and international commitments have driven important legal and policy reforms, such as the adoption of femicide laws and electoral gender quotas (Cabral & Acacio, 2016; López Hernández, 2018). Yet, in this region, gender inclusion in policy often remains gender essentialist: implicitly or explicitly reinforcing traditional roles for men and women, emphasising motherhood, and treating women as a homogeneous disadvantaged group (Gideon et al., 2022). This highlights the tension between

change and persistence in gender approaches to policy. To explore this complicated evolution, we analyse the inclusion of gender in Colombia's National Development Plans (NDPs) from 1998 to 2026.

In Colombia, sixty years of internal armed conflict and pervasive sexual and gender-based violence have spurred intense conversations around gender in public policy (Kreft, 2023; Bouvier, 2016). Feminist movements, supported by international organisations, have successfully advocated for policy and legal reform, particularly in addressing gender-based violence (Lemaitre & Sandvik, 2015; Gillooly, 2023; Céspedes-Báez et al., 2024). Currently, Colombia is one of three Latin American countries that produce legally binding national development plans at regular intervals (Escobar & Escobar, 1998; Mejía et al., 2020). As consecrated in Article 339 of Colombia's 1991 Constitution, each NDP lays down "the long-term national purposes and objectives and the strategies and general orientations of economic, environmental, and social policy" (Heller et al., 2021). For the purposes of this article, NDPs provide a consistent framework for tracking the evolution of elected Colombian governments' development priorities.

We analyse the discursive formations of gender-related references in NDPs promulgated by seven Colombian presidents: Andrés Pastrana (1998–2002), Álvaro Uribe (2002–2006 and 2006–2010), Juan Manuel Santos (2010–2014 and 2014–2018), Iván Duque (2018–2022), and Gustavo Petro (2022–2026).¹ Using ATLAS.ti software, we collected gender terms derived from feminist literature (e.g., feminism, gender, motherhood, LGBT, sex, sexuality, and pregnancy).² To capture the framing of gender-related themes, we draw upon the concept of epistemic inertia, understood as a pattern in which entrenched cultural assumptions largely continue despite the introduction of new concepts and language conventions (Deer, 2014; Jaramillo Ruiz & Uribe, 2026). We show that while underlying conceptions of women and heteronormativity persist across NDPs, the adoption of new discursive formations interacts with deep-rooted gender logics to open space for new meanings and more substantive policy measures. By tracing these dynamics, the article contributes to understanding how gender gains ground in development planning even when tied to enduring cultural assumptions.

The article begins by reviewing feminist debates on public policy and outlining our conceptual framework. We then describe the computer-assisted text analysis methodology. The findings section presents key continuities in Colombian development planning regarding gender, including a narrow view of gender as women's issues and a focus on a limited range of recurring issues: gender-based violence, family, and the resolution of Colombia's armed conflict. Nonetheless, we show how change occurs through the gradual adoption of increasingly substantive measures. In the conclusion, we highlight the core contributions of our research to feminist debates on public policy and outline future directions for this line of inquiry.

Gendered continuities in public policy

The extensive academic literature on gender and policy in both Colombia and Latin America is characterised by four recurrent themes: women's engagement in politics, the enactment of gender policies, the effectiveness of gender policies, and the forces resisting gender policies. First, scholarship on women and public policy has researched how women's access to political decision-making influences policy design and implementation (López Hernández, 2018; Franceschet et al., 2016). These studies focus on the structures, processes, efforts, and driving forces that open or close women's and feminism's doors to public debate (Loprete & Rodríguez Gustá, 2021; Friedman & Rodríguez Gustá, 2023). A second group of works examines which gender issues ultimately find a place in public policies and which policy designs are privileged, such as affirmative action or gender mainstreaming (Jaramillo Ruiz et al., 2023; Blofield & Ewig, 2017). A third research angle evaluates the impact of gender-inclusive policies on women's lives and the extent to which they make a difference in issues such as gender-based violence, femicide, the gender wage gap, and women's employment (Saccomano, 2017; Bando, 2019). Lastly, to a lesser extent, some works focus on the backlash and counterforces to feminist and gender-inclusive policies (Tabbush & Caminotti, 2020; Céspedes-Báez, 2016). Despite their diversity, a nearly universal theme of gender and policy studies is that apparent policy progress coexists with, and sometimes conceals, the persistence of patriarchal structures. Progress and continuity are not opposing forces but rather dialectical processes in which attempts at reform are interwoven with existing patriarchal structures, resulting in reconfiguration rather than radical transformation.

Sociologists and Science and Technology Studies (STS) scholars have grappled with the interplay between progress and persistence, exploring how paradigm shifts rarely entail a sudden or complete replacement of one form of knowledge by another (Eyal, 2013; Joly, 2015). STS scholars use the concept of *epistemic inertia* to describe how dominant paradigms or *doxa* often resist change, adapting to new contexts and assimilating novel concepts while maintaining underlying assumptions (Littoz-Monnet & Uribe, 2023). This pattern reflects a cognitive tendency for institutions and individuals to ignore new information that does not fit their worldview and to reinterpret it through the lens of prior beliefs. Epistemic inertia does not imply absolute permanence or stasis; rather, it captures how institutions tend to change gradually and unevenly in response to external pressure (Jaramillo Ruiz & Uribe, 2026). Continuity and transformation unfold together, as prevalent beliefs are rearticulated, reframed, and subtly reconfigured across shifting political and social settings (Deer, 2014). Namely, epistemic inertia may occur as knowledge displacement while maintaining the characteristics of specific paradigms (Chadwick, 2021). This concept describes how discursive systems simultaneously sustain, reproduce, and reshape forms of knowledge – creating “truth” claims, constraining subjectivities, and granting moral authority to particular ideas (Manson, 2009). Epistemic

inertia offers a way to think about progress and persistence not as opposites but as intertwined processes.

In the public policy realm, analysing gender inclusion through the lens of epistemic inertia involves examining how traditional understandings of gender in policy documents are constantly rearticulated in response to advocacy or broader cultural shifts, rather than replaced. To examine these continuities is thus to explore how the gendered subject is constructed and redefined across policy frameworks (Dietz, 2003). Our study uses discourse analysis to identify consistencies and innovations in how gender is discussed across the seven Colombian NDPs by searching for each mention of a gendered topic and classifying it along different modes of framing the subject and modes of problematization.

Feminist literature recognises three principal modes of framing the gender subject. First, women-centred framings position women as the primary gendered subjects, valuing female experience and defining specific markers of womanhood (Bernal Olarte & Wills, 2003; Franceschet et al., 2016). Second, intersectional framings move beyond “women” as a single, homogeneous category to highlight the experiences of distinct subsets of women, such as indigenous, migrant, or disabled women (Prins, 2006; Hankivski et al., 2012). Third, expansive framings decouple “gender” from “women” to recognise the diversity of gender identities and sexual orientations (Rave Restrepo, 2020; Gregory & Matthews, 2022). These three modes of framing gendered subjects are not inherently feminist or emancipatory; governments may deploy them to reinforce or dismantle existing gender orders. Nonetheless, tracing continuities in the construction of the gendered subject can reveal whether one mode tends to dominate in policy documents.

Epistemic inertia may also be evident in the modes of problematization (Swers, 2005). As Harding (1987, p. 6) reminds us, “there is no such thing as a problem without a person (or groups of them) who have this problem: a problem is always a problem for someone or other”. We look for consistency in how problems or policy concerns are linked to gender within the NDPs, even if the language or mode of gender inclusion may change slightly. Analysing this dimension reveals whether gendered policies tend to focus mainly on certain issues while overlooking others (Espírito-Santo et al., 2018). By examining stability and change in these two dimensions – the three modes of framing and modes of problematization – we can research the evolution of discursive constructions of gender in Colombian development policy. We aim to understand how discursive innovations and transformative gender measures emerge, even when entrenched narratives persist.

Methodology

To explore the dynamics of gender discourse in policy documents, we collected the seven Colombian NDPs as searchable Spanish-language PDF files (Table 1). All quotations used in this paper were translated into English by the authors. The

analysis covers the period from 1998 to 2026, which spans through the wake of landmark international instruments calling for the integration of gender into public policy, such as the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325, which drove the creation of the Women, Peace, and Security Agenda – highly relevant in the context of Colombia’s internal armed conflict – as well as later frameworks such as the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Furthermore, we chose 1998 as a starting point, given that Colombia’s development planning process had become fully institutionalised by then. Namely, with the enactment of the 1991 Constitution, elected governments were now legally mandated to formulate an NDP. In this sense, as discussed in Lioy and Jaramillo Ruiz (2025), although the first NDP under this new stipulation was adopted during Ernesto Samper’s presidency (1994–1998), it was only in 1998 with Pastrana’s NDP (1998–2002) that development policy adopted the formal structure kept to this day (Zuluaga, 1999).

Table 1: Corpus of Colombian National Development Plans (NDP)

	Term	Law	Title of the NDP	Pages	Articles
Pastrana	1998–2002	508, 1999	<i>Cambio para construir la paz</i>	124	160
Uribe	2002–2006	812, 2003	<i>Hacia un Estado comunitario</i>	70	137
	2006–2010	1151, 2007	<i>Hacia un Estado comunitario. Desarrollo para todos</i>	87	168
Santos	2010–2014	1450, 2011	<i>Prosperidad para todos</i>	90	275
	2014–2018	1753, 2015	<i>Todos por un nuevo país</i>	105	266
Duque	2018–2022	1955, 2019	<i>Pacto por Colombia, Pacto por la equidad</i>	110	335
Petro	2022–2026	274, 2023	<i>Colombia, potencia mundial de la vida</i>	262	373

Colombia is currently one of three Latin American countries – along with Peru and Ecuador – that produce legally binding national development plans at regular intervals to outline investment strategies, goals, and policy instruments (Escobar & Escobar, 1998; Mejía et al., 2020). Furthermore, Colombia’s NDP adoption has been consistent for over twenty years, whereas in Peru this practice was dismantled during the 1990s under Alberto Fujimori, and in Ecuador it only became legally binding under the constitution enacted in 2008, during Rafael Correa’s presidency (Gustafsson & Scurrah, 2019). In Colombia, NDPs also wield significant symbolic power. Presidents often present the enactment of each

NDP as a moment of transformation and a key political achievement. For example, when President Petro introduced his NDP, he described it as the beginning of a new era of social and economic revitalisation (Presidencia de Colombia, 2023). However, in practice, NDPs are inherently aspirational: many provisions may remain unimplemented due to a lack of funding or agreement.

Our goal is not to assess which government adopted more gender policies or to measure policy implementation. Instead, we use discourse analysis to examine (dis)continuities in the rhetorical framings and discursive structures through which gender is represented over time. This approach allows us to observe how gendered subjects and problems are constructed, valued, and linked to broader development narratives, giving nuanced insight into how gender finds place in policy. In doing so, this article helps bridge discursive and implementation-focused approaches by treating the gap between policy discourse and outcomes as analytically productive rather than merely a limitation. Although we do not examine policy implementation in detail, NDPs constitute authoritative state discourse that establishes priorities, legitimises interventions, and frames policy subjects, regardless of whether specific measures are realised. The divergence between discursive emphasis and policy trajectories across administrations points to the limits of inferring the persistence or transformation of gender logics solely from implementation. From this perspective, such mismatches can be understood through the lens of epistemic inertia: new concepts may be incorporated into official discourse without necessarily displacing underlying assumptions or producing consistent material change. Analysing NDPs as discursive artefacts, therefore, enables us to trace how gender is constructed as a policy issue, even when this does not translate into coherent or sustained action.

We used the qualitative data analysis software ATLAS.ti to conduct a keyword query of 15 Spanish-language search terms derived from feminist literature on public policy. These included words and word-stems for *feminism*, *women*, *girls*, *men*, *boys*, *intersectionality*, *LGBT*, *gender*, *femicide*, *sex*, *care*, *sexual*, *pregnancy*, *fathers*, and *mothers*. This returned a sample of 152 paragraphs from our corpus that contained at least one of the initial gender-related search terms. Rather than treating frequency as a substantive finding, we used the keyword query to systematically identify instances of gender-related language, then analysed them for patterns in the construction of gendered subjects and problem representations, and interpreted them in terms of epistemic inertia. As such, rather than a contradiction, this mixed strategy allows systematic identification and interpretive depth.

The coding scheme involved two steps. First, we identified the modes of framing the gendered subject. Under the expansive framing, we coded those mentions that allude to sexual orientation or gender identity. Direct references to “women” without any references to intersectionality were coded as women-centred framing. References to women or gender with other identity categories, such as disability, ethnicity, or race, were coded as intersectional framing. We inductively coded the modes of problematization by identifying the theme or

issue to which the sentence referred, such as care work, violence, armed conflict, maternity, and discrimination. These categories were applied not only to classify content, but to analyse the relational articulation between the framing of the gendered subject and specific problem representations within policy discourse. In this sense, while this study includes descriptive counts of coded passages, our primary aim is interpretive discourse analysis rather than quantitative content analysis. Accordingly, the analysis does not interpret isolated terms, but instead examines how meanings are articulated within paragraphs, including implicit assumptions, policy rationalities, and the positioning of gender within broader development narratives. Each paragraph was assigned one mode of framing but could have multiple modes of problematization. This sequential design integrates computational text retrieval with interpretive analysis, ensuring both systematic coverage of the corpus and analytical depth.

Conceptually, the idea of epistemic inertia suggests that when one dimension changes, the others are likely to be in relative stasis. For example, NDPs might adopt new modes of framing the gendered subject while continuing to focus on a persistent mode of problematization. Conversely, NDPs might expand the modes of problematization but maintain a continuous framing of the gendered subject. If changes occur in both dimensions, NDPs are likely to be more rhetorically transformative. However, stability in both dimensions can also occur, but with slight discursive changes that gradually modify the frames anchoring the continuity of the prevalent gender logic. By comparing these patterns across NDPs, we identify the continuities, rearticulations, and breaks that shape the discursive construction of gender in development policy. Finally, we conceive epistemic inertia as a property of discourse. It is not a value judgment on whether the generated policy is good or bad. Furthermore, given this paper's discursive focus on NDPs, it is beyond the scope of this research to examine whether the axes of persistence and change in knowledge identified respond to women's lived realities, such as the endurance of gender-based violence or the strengthening of Colombia's feminist advocacy.

Epistemic inertias

Overall, we find that across the seven NDPs, most paragraphs mentioning gender terms refer exclusively to women, girls, or mothers, following women-centred modes of framing that signal relative inattention to other subjectivities. Even the word "gender" is used as a synonym for women in most NDPs. Still, the four most recent NDPs began adopting an intersectional framing – primarily encouraging region and race sensitivity in gender policies – with each successive NDP expanding to include additional intersections. Regarding the modes of problematization, most paragraphs fall under three themes: violence against women, women as victims and peacebuilders in Colombia's internal armed conflict, and women as wives and mothers in families. Although other modes of problematization come up, such as poverty, employment, and vulnerability, the NDPs have

a restricted repertoire of issues where gender is considered relevant. The most recent NDP, however, shows thematic innovation in the modes of problematization, with extensive attention to rights, gender equality, and discrimination. Despite the continuity and relative stability in the modes of framing and problematization, there has also been room for transformation through the introduction of intersectional language and more substantive policy design.

Modes of framing the gendered subject

In all of the Colombian NDPs, the gender issues raised are almost exclusively framed as women's issues: 130 of the 152 paragraphs can be categorised as women-centred. This mode of subjectification operates through the constant association of women with family, motherhood, care and violence and through silence, particularly the omission of other gendered subjects such as men, fathers, boys, and LGBTQ+ people. Quantitatively, these patterns are stark: the corpus contains almost eight times as many paragraphs referring to women (93) as to men (12). Likewise, 28 of the 35 paragraphs addressing parenting refer exclusively to mothers, a telling pattern given the use of masculine plural forms in Spanish to refer to mixed-gender groups (e.g., "fathers" for "parents").

The word *gender* is used relatively infrequently between 1998 and 2022, although its use skyrockets with Petro's NDP (2022–2026). Still, all NDPs appear to largely conflate the two terms, using *gender* to describe policies exclusively directed at women, or clarifying that "gender programs" are "for women". To illustrate, Uribe's NDPs (2002–2010) used the term "gender" only in the program "Women Builders of Peace and Development." Santos' two NDPs (2010–2018) enacted the National Public Policy for Gender Equality for Women, explicitly making "gender equality" a women's issue. Duque's NDP (2018–2022) continued this practice of using "gender" interchangeably with "woman", for example, when creating the National System of Women. This institution is described as "a set of policies, instruments, components, and processes to include priority issues in terms of advancement and guarantee of women's human rights [...] with special emphasis on promoting the mainstreaming of the gender and ethnic approach for women in national entities and on the definition of public policies on gender equity for women" (Ley 1955, 2019). Throughout the first six NDPs, "gender" functions less as an analytical framework and more as an analogue for "women".

Petro's NDP (2022–2026), presented specifically as more progressive on gender (Buelvas & Vera, 2025), also features a largely women-centred mode of framing, though with a significant quantitative expansion. As shown in Table 2, Petro's plan includes 44 paragraphs referencing "women", nearly five times the number found in most previous NDPs, and 47 references specifically to the word "gender", exceeding the combined total in all prior NDPs. While the latter might suggest a shift toward more diverse and plural forms of framing the gendered subject, the qualitative picture is more ambiguous. Petro's plan repeatedly uses

“gender” primarily to implement other policies (e.g., Article 4 of Petro’s NDP establishes that the government’s foreign policy will have a “gender focus”). Regarding the cultivation of controlled substances, it mandates that “the productive reconversion and collective industrialisation programs in the territories with coca, poppy and/or marijuana crops will have a differential, gender, territorial, participatory, decentralised, and gradual approach” (Ley 2294, Art. 9, 2023). These references invoke gender as deserving policy attention, but they fail to specify which gendered subjects are at stake, leaving this open to interpretation. As a result, it does not necessarily represent a departure from women-centred framings, especially given that one-third of the paragraphs in Petro’s NDP that mention “gender” also explicitly reference “women” (Table 2).

Table 2: Paragraphs with references to gender, women, women + gender, and LGBTQ+

	Gender	Women	Wonder + Gender	LGBTQ+
Pastrana (1998-2001)	0	12	0	0
Uribe (2002-2010)	2	16	1	0
	10	8	2	0
Santos (2010-2018)	2	5	1	0
	5	8	3	1
Duque (2018-2022)	7	8	4	0
Petro (2022-2026)	47	44	16	6

While women-centred references are the primary mode of framing, intersectional modes emerged starting in 2010. These typically take the form of noting subgroups that should receive attention from women’s programs, rather than including gendered groups as targets for broader programs. In this sense, intersectional modes modify and reinforce the overall woman-centric modes. Of the 96 paragraphs referencing “women”, 18 intersect women with other identity categories. Strikingly, almost all invoke a similar configuration, noting some combination of ethnic or racial subgroups of women, especially Afro-Colombian, Black, Raizal, Palenquera,³ and Indigenous women.

This intersection first appears in Santos’ early NDP (2010–2014), which introduces “a national public policy on Gender Equity to guarantee the integral and interdependent human rights of women and gender equality, taking into account the particularities that affect the urban and rural, Afro-Colombian, indigenous, Romani, and peasant population groups” (Ley 1450, Art. 177, 2011). The intersection of ethnicity, geographical location, and gender becomes more robust on his second NDP (2014–2018), which mandates the implementation of monitoring mechanisms for evaluating “progress in the protection and guarantee of rights for rural, Afro-Colombian, black, Raizal, Palanquera and indigenous women, contributing to their social and economic stabilisation, with a territorial, age and justice approach” (Ley 1753, Art. 129, 2015).

After Santos' presidency, Duque's NDP (2018–2022) maintained this emphasis on the intersection of gender, ethnicity, and geographic location. Article 222 of Duque's plan creates a National System for Women, which includes policies, instruments, components, and processes to prioritise women's human rights in all government branches "with special emphasis on promoting the transversality of the gender and ethnic approach for women in national entities and the definition of public policies on gender equality for women" (Ley 1955, Art. 222, 2019). Duque's plan outlines the creation of a system to gather citizen input for a Gender Equality Policy for Women, "with emphasis on rural women, taking into account an intersectional approach" (Ley 1955, Art. 221, 2019). Thus, despite ideological distance from Santos, Duque designates a nearly identical subset of women as the primary intersectional framing, suggesting that this configuration has become institutionalised and depoliticised within development planning.

Petro's NDP (2022–2026) further extends the vocabulary of intersectionality. This plan refers to "intersectionality" nine times and applies intersectional modes of subjectification to policy areas such as indigenous and Afro-descendant rights, mental health, and family police stations. Yet even here, intersectionality largely functions as another modifier of existing women-centred framings, and is sometimes mentioned without explicit reference to gendered subgroups, though it may imply a gender-aware approach. For example, Petro's NDP calls on family police stations to guarantee "the implementation and application of the gender and intersectional approaches, the prevalence of the rights of girls, boys, adolescents, and the elderly" (Ley 2294, Art. 202, 2023). Furthermore, Petro's NDP often mentions multiple approaches to address specific topics. For instance, it establishes that the Ministry of Interior must redesign and strengthen the national public policy for citizen participation through gender, ethnic, and territorial approaches, to guarantee women's parity. The frequent pairing of intersectionality with long-established policy concerns (e.g., rural women or ethnic minority women) reflects continuity rather than conceptual expansion.

Thus, across administrations, intersectionality manifests as a repeatable discursive template. While it allows for the recognition of diversity among women, it also reveals epistemic inertia in which "gender" is equated with "women" and intersectionality is largely limited to racial or ethnic subgroups of women. Rather than destabilising the dominant women-centred mode, this form of intersectional framing broadens or reiterates who merits attention as "women" without challenging the primacy of women-centred understandings of gender. In general, across the NDPs, women-centred framings emerge as a core continuity shaping how gendered subjects are constructed and recognised. "Gender" becomes synonymous with women, and although the language and thematic construction of gendered categories expand in some plans – particularly Petro's – the underlying discursive logics continue to reproduce a dominant women-centred mode, indicative of strong epistemic inertia.

Finally, expansive framings are largely absent. LGBTQ+ communities have been mentioned in only two of the seven NDPs: Santos (2014–2018) and Petro (2022–2026). This omission reinforces the equation of “gender” with women by rendering alternative gendered subjectivities largely invisible. When Santos’ second plan (2014–2018) calls for implementing and monitoring the National Public Policy to Guarantee the Rights of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Intersex persons (LGBTI), it does not describe it as a “gender” program. Petro’s NDP establishes a mechanism for “the prevention and comprehensive care of violence and acts of discrimination against the LGBTIQ+ population” (Ley 2294, Art. 71, 2023) and calls for providing legal assistance and representation to LGBTIQ+ victims of violence. However, these sections remain siloed and disconnected from the broader gender discourse in the plan, which continues to centre women as the primary gendered subject.

Problematization of women-centred framings

We inductively find eight core modes of problematization associated with the configuration of women-centred framings (see Table 3). Prior to 2022, the epistemic inertia of the modes of problematization within this framing was domestic or gender violence (12 per cent), armed conflict (13 per cent), and family (26 per cent). These recurrent themes also appear in Petro’s NDP. However, the emphasis shifts toward issues of rights, discrimination, and equality.

Table 3: Main modes of problematization in women-centred framings in the NDPs

Category/NDP # of paragraphs	Pastrana (1998- 2002)	Uribe		Santos		Duque (2018- 2022)	Petro (2022- 2026)
		(2002- 2006)	(2006- 2010)	(2010- 2014)	(2014- 2018)		
Family	14	4	7	2	4	3	11
Employment	0	2	4	0	0	2	4
Poverty	3	1	7	0	0	0	2
Rights	0	2	5	2	6	3	23
Armed conflict	1	3	9	1	0	3	11
Discrimination and equality	9	2	6	4	0	0	26
Domestic and gender violence	1	4	5	3	2	0	30
Vulnerability	0	1	6	0	0	0	8

Across the seven NDPs, violence against women generates persistent epistemic inertia in the modes of problematization. A continuous policy script emerges in which women as (potential) victims of violence become a cornerstone for how women’s development needs are constructed, as well as a primary justification for gender-related development policies. For example, Pastrana’s NDP (1998–

2002) creates a policy “aimed at promoting comprehensive care for children and the resolution of conflicts within the family and the community, under the principles of commitment, participation, gender equality and respect for cultural and regional differences, both in urban and rural areas” and calls on mobilizing society to “not tolerate domestic violence” (Ley 508, Art. 1, 1999). Similarly, Uribe’s second NDP (2006–2010) established, “the government will coordinate the implementation of the National Plan for Peace Building and Family Coexistence Policy at the national, departmental, district and municipal levels, so that actions may be developed from these bodies for the prevention, detection and attention of the different forms of gender and domestic violence” (Ley 1151, Art. 7, 2007). This same NDP calls on the government “to implement measures to eradicate women’s rights violations, establish effective public policies to promote a culture of non-violence and respect for their multiethnic and pluricultural diversity, and adopt specific actions so that all actors in the armed conflict respect women’s integrity, freedom, and dignity” (Ley 1151, Art. 7, 2007). This representational pattern continues in Santos’ NDPs (2010–2018), which instruct the adoption of the National Public Policy for Risk Prevention, Protection, and Guarantee of the Rights of Women Victims of the Armed Conflict (Ley 1450, 2011). Through these measures, domestic and gender-based violence function as a recurring anchor for defining women’s vulnerabilities, needs, and policy relevance.

The mode of problematization of gender violence is absent in Duque’s NDP (2018–2022). The term “violence” appears only three times, and never as gender-based or domestic. This plan constitutes an anomaly in a long-standing narrative that foregrounds violence as the central problem facing women. Then, Petro’s NDP (2022–2026) significantly expands this frame, marking both continuity and discursive transformation. It is the first NDP to explicitly reference femicide, aligning national development planning with feminist conceptual frameworks. For instance, it mandates that:

Family Police Stations [must] guarantee the implementation and application of the gender and intersectional approach, the primacy of the rights of girls, boys, adolescents and the elderly, as well as the standardisation of records of protection measures, orders decreed, follow-up and incidents of non-compliance reported, sanctions imposed and feminicides and risks of femicide of women with protection measures and other data in order to prevent, protect, restore, repair and guarantee the rights of those who are at risk, are or have been victims of gender-based violence and other violence in the context of the family (Ley 2294, Art. 72, 2023).

In addition, Petro declared a national emergency on gender-based violence, making it a priority of public management. His plan establishes “urgent actions to overcome the exacerbated situations of violence against women resulting from prejudices, gender stereotypes, and unequal structural power relations” (Ley 2294, Art. 342, 2023) and requires the training of police and military forces

in gender-based violence, the creation of a National System for Registration, Attention, Follow-up, and Monitoring of Gender-Based Violence, and even includes a registry of femicide victims and women at risk. Moreover, the Ministry of Information and Technology is tasked with “promoting strategies for the identification, prevention, and control of all types of violence in digital environments [...] with emphasis on women, ethnic groups, and girls, boys, and adolescents” (Ley 2294, Art. 143, 2023). In general, Petro’s NDP makes three key discursive changes to how violence against women is problematized: (1) the quantitative expansion of gender-related references, (2) the qualitative change in the understanding of gender as a transversal policy approach, and (3) the adoption of feminist terminology in the framing of specific issues.

Overall, although the instruments, language, and institutional mechanisms evolve – from Pastrana’s early calls for social mobilisation, to Uribe’s inter-institutional coordination, to Santos’ rights-based frameworks, to Petro’s feminist vocabulary and expanded registries – the framing of violence against women remains one of the most enduring epistemic inertias across the women-centred mode in Colombian NDPs. Yet, this epistemic inertia, even when followed by more substantive policy description, has not necessarily translated into actual policy implementation. For instance, Santos’ NDP explicitly created a “National Public Policy for Gender Equality for Women”, which led to its enactment and sought to advance education, health and reproductive rights, cultural change, and communication for women’s rights. Yet, as recognised by Alarcón Palacio (2012), this policy mandate was shallow, and it did not produce the systemic change it intended. That said, even during the governments that lack specific references to gender-based violence in the NDPs, the focus on gender-based violence did not stop. For example, as mentioned, gender violence is not mentioned in Duque’s NDP. However, during his presidency, the government enacted the “National Program of Empowered Women’s Houses” (Decreto 1426, 2022), which incorporated an entrepreneurial approach to gender-based violence by underscoring economic empowerment. Ultimately, while policy language and mechanisms in this epistemic inertia have evolved in the NDPs, meaningful progress against gender-based violence requires not only sustained attention but also robust implementation and a commitment to overcoming entrenched systemic barriers.

In sum, the epistemic inertia of gender-based violence is not necessarily a sign of progress or advances towards addressing this phenomenon. For instance, the OECD Review of Gender Equality in Colombia of 2017 evidenced widespread and persistent gender-based violence, with nearly 24,000 estimated cases of sexual violence, 85 per cent affecting women (OECD, 2017). Similarly, Colombia’s Femicide Observatory (2022) reported 1,881 cases of femicide in 2022. Thus, the gradual substantiveness in the NDPs and the recent exponential focus in Petro’s NDP on gender-based violence allow us to see only the continuities and changes at the discursive level, inviting us to reflect on the possible effects

in real life. It does, however, show how continuity is deeply intertwined with change.

Women and peace as an epistemic inertia

The association between women and Colombia's ongoing peace process is a second epistemic inertia consistently reproduced across NDPs. Uribe's first-term plan (2002–2006) assigned the Presidential Council on Equality for Women the duty of adopting specific actions, responsibilities, and budgets in the implementation of the Women Builders of Peace and Development policy (Ley 812, 2003). It also mandated the “direct and autonomous participation of women's organisations in the different national and local processes of dialogue and political negotiation of the social and armed conflict” (Ley 812, Art. 7.10, 2003). Uribe's second plan (2006–2010) also continued with the “affirmative policy” of “Women Builders of Peace and Development” (Ley 1151, Art. 7.7.1, 2007), without specifying concrete mechanisms or institutional commitments.

In Santos' first NDPs, gender appears in relation to conflict primarily through the adoption of the “National Public Policy for Risk Prevention, Protection, and Guarantee of the Rights of Women Victims of the Armed Conflict” (Ley 1450, Art. 179, 2011). This policy did not specify concrete actions or institutional mechanisms, a pattern that also occurs in Duque's plan (2018–2022), which only mandated the Presidential Council for Women's Equality to coordinate gender-focused methodologies for the “construction of Total Peace” (Ley 1955, Art. 250, 2019). Petro's NDP (2022–2026) likewise addresses gender and peace on multiple occasions: when establishing a non-judicial truth mechanism to ensure victims' participation through a women's rights approach; when discussing the implementation of gender indicators in the Peace Agreement; and when outlining gender-sensitive methodologies for advancing “Total Peace”. However, as in previous NDPs, most of the references linking gender to peace lack concrete mechanisms and clear institutional guidelines.

This epistemic inertia is particularly evident in its continuity and similar framing, even within administrations often portrayed as ideologically distant. For example, Duque's NDP (2014–2018) describes Territorial Pacts as tools to support regional development and “the construction of Total Peace”, promoting “the adoption of methodologies with a gender approach... through coordinated work with the Presidential Council for Women's Equity” (Ley 1955, Art. 250, 2019). Petro's NDP similarly mandates that the Ministry of the Interior coordinate Human Rights public policy “for achieving Total Peace... with a comprehensive, territorial, differential, social, and gender approach” (Ley 2294, Art. 277, 2023). Despite divergent political orientations, both plans deploy Total Peace as a discursive horizon and attach a gender mandate to it. Taken together, these recurrent formulations reveal an epistemic inertia in which “women” are symbolically linked to peace. Nevertheless, this association is rarely carried by institutional responsibilities, concrete guidelines, or precise policy mechanisms.

Instead, gender functions as a discursive add-on: acknowledged, affirmed, and attached to program titles. In this way, the inertia operates through linguistic repetition and the continual inscription of women into a normative script that positions them as intrinsic to peace, without taking action.

As with gender violence, the formation of an epistemic inertia linking women to peace at the discursive level of the NDPs does not translate into concrete policy measures, and does not necessarily signal a shift in women's participation in the different governments' peacebuilding actions. For example, as a result of the women's movement's pressure to include women in the government's peace process with the FARC, Santos created a gender sub-commission to mainstream gender into the negotiations, which, in turn, led to a peace agreement with a robust gender component (Céspedes-Báez et al., 2024). These gender measures, however, do not stem from Santos' NDP. On the contrary, although Petro's NDP establishes multiple mandates for including women in its "total peace" strategy, in practice, his government has been criticised for lacking a gender dimension in the negotiations with armed groups (Cuestión Pública, 2023). Thus, NDPs tell a partial but analytically crucial story about how gender is constructed as a policy problem. That said, identifying the epistemic inertia that links women to peace is important, as it exposes how specific gendered topics are positioned in development policy. In particular, this epistemic inertia aligns with feminist movements' efforts to advance the consideration of gender in peace, as reflected in the Women, Peace, and Security Agenda. Namely, despite differences in ideological stands and contexts, this epistemic inertia persists across the NDPs, indicating the consolidation of a specific form of gendered discourse.

Motherhood and family

In addition to problems of violence and conflict, a third major theme arises in the association between women and family. In Pastrana's NDP (1998–2002), the patriarchal construction of gender is more explicit: "National Government will have an obligation to design programs and projects that prioritise women's occupation and promote training and comprehensive development in recognition of their status as the axis of the family and, in turn, the latter as the nucleus of society" (Ley 508, Art. 4.8, 1999). In later plans, the same logic appears in a more subtle way but remains structurally intact, such as recognising women primarily as the heads of some households (Uribe's NDPs in 2002–2010), and creating programs for "community mothers" responsible for child welfare (Santos' NDPs in 2010–2018).⁴ In still others, this epistemic inertia operates by linking women's empowerment to family and intergenerational well-being, thus reinscribing the assumption that women's value lies in their reproductive and caregiving roles.⁵ However, one key departure from this inertia is that in Petro's NDP (2022–2026), issues of gender and family only come up when discussing domestic and intra-familial violence, rather than focusing on the centrality of

mothers in societal stability. Furthermore, the policy guidelines and mechanisms are more detailed and robust. For instance, it mandates:

The National Government, through the Ministry of Justice and Law, will design and implement a mandatory plan to strengthen and improve the services provided by Family Commissaries. This plan will guarantee the implementation and application of a gender and intersectional approach, the primacy of the rights of children and adolescents and of older persons, as well as the standardisation of records of protection measures, orders issued, monitoring and incidents of non-compliance, sanctions imposed, femicides and risks of femicide of women with protection orders, and other data, in order to prevent, protect, restore, repair, and guarantee the rights of those at risk, who are or have been victims of gender-based violence and other forms of violence within the family context (Ley 2294, 2023). Thus, although the family has long served as an epistemic inertia in gender policy, there have been profound changes in how its relationship to women is articulated. Gradually, women-centred approaches to family have lost their discursive anchors, focusing on women's social and reproductive capacities within the family, and have become displaced to the gendered violence epistemic inertia. This transformation has enabled the development of more precise institutional mechanisms and policy guidelines, signalling a shift from symbolic, patriarchal framings of women's roles in the family toward a more rights-based approach to address domestic and gender-based violence.

The epistemic inertia linking women with family and motherhood in the NDPs shows how long-held cultural paradigms can visibilise and, simultaneously, ignore gender discrimination and violence. In other words, although the NDPs "recognise" women's care labour, this recognition, in most cases, is symbolic, lacking concrete programs to support those in reproductive and caregiving roles. In this sense, the inclusion of mothers, for example, in the NDPs cannot necessarily be taken as progress toward gender equality. As a case in point, according to Colombia's National Administrative Department of Statistics, women tend to spend twice as much time as men in care labour (2020). Particularly, despite the focus on women's empowerment and welfare, in 2023 at the national level, 121 women were living in poverty for every 100 men (UN Women, 2023).

Conclusion

This article has examined how epistemic inertias regarding gender are discursively evident in Colombia's National Development Plans over more than two decades. By tracing how gendered subjects and associated problems are articulated, we first identified the prevalence of women-centred framings, then the gradual recognition of specific forms of intersectionality, and the persistence of three recurring themes related to the gendered subjects: different forms of violence against women, women's role in the peace process, and women as mothers and daughters within the family. The inertias around these three themes anchor the symbolic and policy relevance of "women" across ideologically diverse

administrations. While significant shifts occur, such as Petro's expansion of feminist terminology and the adoption of targeted approaches addressing rural specificities or femicide, these changes remain entangled with long-standing logics that define and often limit the possibilities of gender and development.

The analysis further demonstrates that notwithstanding the continuity of the modes of framing and problematization, it is also possible to enact gradual, transformative discursive change within policy documents. These changes occur through slight rearticulations that modify specific components while reproducing others and can also encompass the transfer of gender themes from one mode to another over time. This interplay of continuity and transformation reveals how development planning can simultaneously incorporate progressive language and maintain constraining representations of gender. It also highlights the persistent silences that shape the possibilities and limits of gender in development, as shown by the glaring absences in Duque's recent NDP. The emergence of new themes and the newfound prominence of gender in Petro's plan will also serve as an important precedent for future presidents in formulating their NDPs.

In sum, identifying epistemic inertia can help us understand why gender policy frameworks evolve by expanding in some areas, stagnating in others, and at times reworking inherited assumptions without fully displacing them. Significantly, these epistemic inertias also raise fundamental questions about topics not problematised through a gender lens and left out of development planning, as well as domains of development that continue to be imagined as gender-neutral. Moving forward, we suggest that our fellow researchers follow our example and conduct a similar analysis of planning documents and institutions in other Latin American countries, such as Peru, Ecuador, and Panama, to explore prevalent epistemic inertias in the framing and problematization of these issues. Furthermore, future research could examine how rhetoric in NDPs aligns with policy implementation and practical outcomes, offering a valuable avenue to expand current approaches and address persistent gaps in gender policy. Finally, given that NDPs' main focus is on development, the marginality of labour-related topics, encompassing poverty and employment, within gendered discourse is certainly a noticeable omission. Regardless of the need for women's economic independence, the advancement of women's roles in Colombian society will be difficult without acknowledging the effects of violence, peace, and family dynamics, which are more prominent in the policy discourse.

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Notes

- 1 For a comprehensive critical review of the literature about Colombia's National Development Plans, spanning from the 1960s all the way to the present, see Lioy and Jaramillo Ruiz (2025).
- 2 Gender-related discourse is conceived by the authors to encompass anything referring to sex, sexual orientation, or societal roles assigned to men and women.
- 3 Distinct Afro-descendant communities with unique cultural and linguistic identities in Colombia.
- 4 For example, Uribe created a housing subsidy program, "with special emphasis on serving the vulnerable population and community mothers, female heads of household, families made up of senior citizens and families of homeless people, and mothers with disabled children" (Ley 1151 de 2007).
- 5 For example, Duque's (2018-2022) NDP creates a fund to support the empowerment of "women, families, and generations of indigenous people".

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