

Panel 12: Tracing Lesbian Activism Pathways  
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My Journey: AN LGBT ACTIVIST JOURNEY FROM COLOMBIA TO THE UK

**Abstract:** This paper narrates the complex process of - a Colombian human rights activist living in exile - me - who has in recent years also come out as a lesbian. It explores the political, professional and cultural challenges inherent in this process. The paper reflects on how living in the UK has enabled me to extend my activism from its origins in civil and political rights to encompass feminism and later LGBT issues. I explore how new successes gained by the LGBT movement in Colombia are revitalising my activism before exploring the many doubts that remain as to how consolidated these successes really are, in a country where violence and stigma against LGBT people remain prevalent.

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I have lived with the complexity of human rights activism in Colombia for the last 30 years. This paper is an attempt to understand and explain how the human rights movement has developed in Colombia (a country that has suffered more than 50 years of internal armed conflict) and whether or not we can affirm, with Encarnación (2010), that the LGBT movement in Latin America (LA) constitutes a revolutionary movement in a continent that has a "new", more human, contribution to make to globalization (Guardiola-Rivera 2010). Is it possible to view the LGBT movement in LA as a New Social Movement (NSM) (Escobar 1992 and 2004, Inglehart 1997, Castro-Gomez 1998, Wade 2004) that is contributing to the advance of human rights in the region. Rather than explaining the human rights situation in Colombia I want to focus on my experience as a human rights activist exiled in the UK, on the process of coming out as a lesbian, first in the UK and eventually in Colombia, and on the circles I have moved in as an activist. Finally, I explore a set of questions that will form a part of my PhD research.

My journey started in Colombia in the 1980s when I worked with poor children in a shanty town outside Bogota while attending a secondary school run by progressive nuns influenced by Liberation Theology. I wrote the dissertation for my law degree (on human rights in Colombia) while working with the country's first firm dedicated to the defence of human rights- which produced the information that formed the basis of Amnesty International's pioneering reports on the country. Later, in 1988, I headed up the Human Rights and International Relations Office of the newly-formed left wing party the Union Patriótica (UP). The UP was initially formed in 1985 as the political expression of the guerrilla movement the FARC during peace negotiations with the government. It was later joined by human rights activists - such as me - and by other left wing activists.

My initial involvement with human rights and left wing activism focused almost exclusively on Civil and Political Rights at a time when Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ESCR) - including Women's and Sexual and Reproductive rights - were barely on the human rights agenda. My dissertation had mentioned ESCR but lacked any women's rights or gender analysis (my comrades and I used to say that we could work on women's rights after the revolution).

This focus of human rights activists during the 1980s on civil and political rights was a "classic" response to repression that was primarily carried out by the state. But as the conflict developed and its economic and social aspects became clearer, ESCR had to be included. Parallel to this, the indigenous and black movements were growing stronger, a fact recognised in the 1991 Constitution, which introduced the cultural and identity rights that eventually became a door to

introduce LGBT or gender identity and sexual diversity rights in Colombia. The 1991 Constitution is, therefore, a landmark in terms of the recognition, consolidation (and institutionalisation) of NSMs in Colombia - that have increasingly influenced the human rights agenda in the country over the last 20 years.

In 1989 I had to leave the country because of my work with the UP (more than 1,000 of whose leaders were killed between 1985 and 1989). Before leaving the country I had experienced domestic violence at the hands of my then left wing activist partner, was raped, tortured, and spent a short period of time in prison. Even after these experiences my approach to human rights activism continued to concentrate on civil and political rights.

In exile, while living in a Refugee Centre in London, I started to work with other refugee women. This was the first time I had focused on working with women and realised such activities were recognised as a vital part of human rights activism (something unimaginable on the left or in human rights work in Colombia at that time).

Additionally, on arrival in the UK, and when granted refugee status, I received several labels: I was a victim, a refugee woman, a second language refugee woman, a second language refugee woman from a developing country. It is possible that the fact I saw myself as (or that "they" made me feel like) a victim, finally allowed me to understand the effects of being a woman, and how - as a woman - my human rights were violated. I was able rapidly to retrieve the status of survivor rather than victim. It is also possible that because I was feeling safe in the UK, I was able to allow myself to become the real me, something that later contributed to my process of coming out as a lesbian.

Soon afterwards, I joined London University and started my postgraduate courses at the Women's Studies faculty (Human Rights and Education and MSc Politics of Rights). In this period the move to include women's rights in the human rights agenda became stronger. Simultaneously I was working (particularly with the Latin American community) in women-only organizations and in a women's refuge with victims of violence, consolidating my understanding of gender issues. Other human rights activism for different minority groups also came to my attention, particularly issues around LGBT groups. These experiences helped me to begin to define my sexual identity: another aspect of my life that was probably denied or postponed because of the "revolutionary" idealism I had in my teens and twenties, while living in Colombia and working as a human rights activist.

Returning to Colombia in 1997, it was clear that I wanted to continue my activism. But this time I was able to do it in a safer way, protected by my new citizenship, a British passport and the support of an International NGO. I got involved in work with internally displaced people, and later focused all my attention on working on the Children and Conflict Programme with Save the Children and on my book about Girls in Armed Conflict in Colombia (Paez-Manjarres 2002).

This work and research allowed me to carry out a gender analysis of the armed conflict in Colombia and to focus on the situation of girls from minority groups. At the same time I was also able to observe the first steps in the growth and consolidation of the LGBT movement. Initiatives like Planeta Paz, which brought together key representatives from different social movements working on conflict resolution, included for the first time LGBT representatives

(Serrano-Amaya 2004). This was probably the first time that sexual diversity had been linked to the social and political conflicts that have dominated Colombian society during the last 50 years.

However, at this stage, at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, it could not be said that LGBT activists were coordinating or liaising with human rights movements, and vice versa. For instance, the main international reports did not take violations against this group into account. Two topics that did appear on the agenda at the end of the 1990s and beginning of the 2000s was that of women and armed conflict and gender- based violence (GBV). However, the focus was primarily on violence against heterosexual women, rather acts associated with sexuality or gender identity. I have been examining the topic of GBV and LGBT groups recently (looking in particular but not exclusively at how GBV affects responses to HIV/AIDS); it will comprise a core part of my future doctoral research (Morrison 2006, Letellier 1994, Kulkin 2007, Betron and Gonzalez-Figueroa 2009)

Later (2004), after returning to the UK, I joined WOMANKIND, where I was able to focus on women's empowerment projects, and GBV. It was when I went to the Women's Human Rights Activists International Conference in Sri Lanka in 2005 that I realised how the LGBT movement was finally being acknowledged as a key part of human rights activism (Collis 2005). LGBT representatives were also invited to participate in this event. It was acknowledged that both heterosexual women and LGBT community members should be recognised as human rights activists, and that there were linkages between the women's and the LGBT movements, particularly in the area of GBV.

In 2006, I started to work at the International HIV/AIDS Alliance, with the Latin America team. The Alliance employs a stigma and discrimination approach and more recently has adopted a more human rights –HIV focus. The approach is explained by the fact the countries where I work face concentrated epidemics. It has been recognised that one way to avoid generalised epidemics in these countries is through working with and empowering the most affected population, among them gay men, other men who have sex with men, and transgender women.

This is where most of my work has been focused over the last few years. It has also coincided with me coming out as a lesbian at work. Over the last five years I have observed the growing visibility of the LGBT movement and its different manifestations within Latin American countries. Issues such as civil partnership, gay marriage, non-gender identity, sexual orientation and discriminatory access to services have been discussed and in some cases recognised by legislatures in different countries of the region. Additionally, and more recently, LGBT people have become more pro-active as human rights activists.

It appears that this increased recognition of LGBT rights and the growing visibility of LGBT people as human rights activists and members of a movement have led to increased levels of violence against the LGBT populations in Colombia. In recent years, well know activists have had to leave the country because of their gay activism; they are listed among the targeted groups that right wing paramilitaries have identified as a threat to society, alongside trade unionists and other human rights activists. Since 2005 the organisation Colombia Diversa has published biannual reports (pioneering in Latin America) on human rights violations against LGBT people in Colombia. The reports compile data on the systematic violations perpetrated against LGBT people in the country (Colombia Diversa 2005, 2007 and 2009).

It is in this context that Wanda Fox, a transgender woman human rights activist with whom I worked as part of the programme I was coordinating in Colombia, was killed in 2009. She was killed while doing her work as a human rights activist. She was working on promoting gender identity rights for transgender women with other transgender women and local authorities, as well as promoting the image of transgender women in the marginalized community where she lived. She believed that her community (predominantly very low income families, sex workers and the homeless) saw transgender women not only as sex workers but as playing a role to benefit the community. Not only did she believe they would tackle discrimination but that they had the potential for change. It is possible that this politicisation and desire to change the status quo could not be tolerated in a society that seems still to have a long way to go in assimilating changes in equal opportunities or anti discriminatory laws in Colombia (Zapata 2009)

Conclusions and research questions. This concluding section draws on my experience as a human rights activist in Colombia and following my exile. I present some areas that I think are important for future research and LGBT activism in Colombia. These include some reflections specific to Lesbian women in Colombia.

**The Colombian context for LGBT activism.** In Colombia, a country with serious human rights problems, there is a clear gap between official rhetoric and the legal framework and reality. As a consequence impunity levels are high. Other discontinuities exist too. For instance there are a number of widely recognised gay writers, who are able to participate in public debate and adopt critical positions on the armed conflict and the state responsibility. But Colombia ranks very high in the statistics for the number of transgender women killed because of transphobia.

**Tracing the emergence of LGBT activism (how much progress has there actually been?)** Things have been moved very fast in the last 10 years. For example 56 pro-LGBT regulations and laws have been published during the period (Blog Colombia Diversa 2011), 3 major cities in Colombia now have LGBT policies, and all the major political parties have LGBT policies. However, the tendencies of the movement in Colombia, or how coherent it is, are still not clear. The LGBT community only began to organise recently, in 2001, with the creation of Planeta Paz. The term LGBT was adopted from the international movement because it was clear a name was needed that would help identify them as populations working on identity and on sexual and gender diversity (Sanchez-Amaya 2005), but the learning curve has been steep as they have sought to catch up with other traditional and new social movements such as the trade union movement, civil and political human rights activists, indigenous groups, and even women's rights groups that preceded them in playing a key role in terms of human rights, (armed) conflict resolution and justice.

**The LGBT contribution to human rights in Colombia.** As in other places, the LGBT movement has a clear contribution to make in terms of identity: this is an interest that is common to each one of the four or more populations that integrate the LGBT movement. In this they have built on and extended the contribution of other NSMs such as the indigenous and black movements. Like the women's movement they have helped demonstrate how gender and sexuality are key factors in institutions that are central to society (the family, the church, school) and therefore a key area for negotiation between the state and civil society.

Of particular importance to the Colombian context is the fact that gender and sexuality dynamics are linked to the roots of the armed conflict. Further research into these aspects will

therefore eventually contribute to thinking on how to progress in the human rights agenda and peace building.

The ways in which gender and sexuality can be linked to the conflict in Colombia, are well illustrated in Sanchez Baute's latest novel *Libranos del Bien* (Sanchez-Baute 2008). Sanchez Baute is the most prominent openly gay author in Colombia. He tries to explain the conflict from the perspective of a specific region (the Caribbean), and from his experience as a gay person in Colombia. I end this section by presenting quoting explains the LGBT Agenda for the Peace Process, produced by the LGBT Sector of Planeta Paz (quoted by Jose Fernando Serrano-Amaya). The statement reflects discussion about whether or not LGBT people have a special approach to peace building. *"Body, the first territory for peace" is the name of a political agenda that is still in the process of being written by the Sector. This agenda briefly states what is considered to be particular about this approach. Instead of claiming that LGBT are citizens that experience the same conflict as other Colombians, the agenda highlights that there are several types of violence that affect LGBT people in particular but that are not recognised as being important in comparison with other kinds of violence stemming from the violent conflict. They argue that since discrimination, homophobia, and hate crimes mainly target the body it has to be the starting point for any peace proposal.*

**Lesbian human rights activism, how far we can go with visibility?** Hate crime and intolerance, added to the fact that there are high levels of impunity, suggest that lesbians should seek to raise their profile in the regions is not the solution. We have seen that increasing visibility seems to have increased levels of attacks against other LGBT members. Does the increasing visibility of the LGBT movement fit the narrative presented above about the evolution of general or LGBT human rights discourse? It is clear that in the LGBT movement, with a few exceptions, gay men tend to be more visible than lesbians. This lack of lesbian leadership is more extreme in the regions. Asked about this, one of the most prominent LGBT leaders in the Caribbean region of Colombia confirmed that leaders tend to be gay middle class men who are not native to the region. He also said that lesbians seem not to be interested in taking on leadership roles, usually because they frequently remain in the closet but also because they have felt that their invisibility ("lesbians do not exist") has allowed them to maintain their lesbianism relatively unaffected by violence. It is certainly my experience of violence against women that heterosexual women are permanently at risk; it seems lesbians do not wish to expose themselves to even more violence by coming out. How, then, might we promote a role for lesbians as human rights activists in regions where their security cannot be guaranteed? On the other hand, there is a lack of research on violence against lesbians. Reports focus principally on violence against gay men, sex workers and transgender women, who tend to be more exposed to "external" violence. But very little is known about the levels of violence against lesbians committed by their relatives and members of their close communities. Research in other countries has shown that lesbians tend to be more vulnerable to attack than heterosexual women in these scenarios.

**A methodology that might help to improve our understanding of the situation of the lesbian movement in Colombia.** Millie Thayer's article, "Identity, Revolution and Democracy in Lesbian Movements in Central America: the Costa Rican and Nicaraguan Cases" illustrates very well the particularities and differences marking two countries from the same region, reminding us that all the countries in the region are different. Thayer also uses some of the methodologies proposed by NSM writers, concluding that *social movements are built, and collective identities constructed, by particular people in particular locations at particular moments of history and*

that the reasons for this can be found by *looking beyond global structural shift or formal political institutions*. Observing the case of Costa Rica and Nicaragua I would argue that Colombia might be seen as a hybrid of both: a country with a strong history of human rights activism and conflict but also a country desperate to become, and be seen as, modern.

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