

LGBTIQ+ EXPERIENCE AND CLIMATE JUSTICE ADVOCACY IN COLOMBIA

Laura Beltrán, Colombia Diversa and Jamie J. Hagen, University of Manchester

Brief Summary

This policy brief outlines a feminist analysis of the heightened risks faced by LGBTIQ+ individuals engaged in environmental activism. Colombia, known for violent targeting of environmental defenders, is an especially dangerous place for LGBTIQ+ rights defenders due to discrimination rooted in both gender norms and neoliberal extractive development models. Importantly, as authors drawing on insights across academia as well as civil society, we highlight how LGBTIQ+ people face magnified vulnerabilities during conflicts and are often excluded from environmental advocacy efforts.

In our analysis we reveal the interconnected oppressions of gender discrimination and colonialism, particularly for rural LGBTIQ+ communities. We respond with an intersectional feminist approach that links struggles for environmental defence, the defence of sexual diversity, and human rights through the lens of *Cuerpo-Territorio* or 'the body as territory'. The brief concludes with policy recommendations calling on policy makers and feminist advocates to include LGBTIQ+ individuals in international environmental mechanisms to ensure inclusive environmental, peace, and security agendas.

This policy brief:

- Shows heightened risks for LGBTIQ+ environmental defenders in Colombia, due to the legacy of colonial norms about gender and their increased risk of targeted violence and displacement from their communities.
- Highlights the intersection of gender, sexuality, and environmental struggles linking environmental activism with the concept of *Cuerpo-Territorio* / the body as territory.
- Details vulnerabilities rural LGBTIQ+ communities face while hyper-marginalised.
- Recommends next steps for intersectional approaches to support LGBTIQ+ inclusion and protection in environmental struggles.

BODY-TERRITORY

The concept *cuerpo-territorio* was originally introduced in 2010 by Lorena Cabnal, an indigenous Xinka feminist human rights defender living in Guatemala. Since then, the framing of the body as a territory has continued to resonate with human rights defenders across diverse areas of indigenous organising including responses to sexual violence and continuing colonial exploitation in the Americas. Cabnal revisits concepts such as 'land' and 'territory' through the historical and ancestral relationship that indigenous communities have with the earth.

Many LGBTQ+ people face a loss of connection with the territory through forced displacement. This forced displacement is sometimes called 'deterritorialisation'.

References: For more on Lorena Cabnal's work see: *Acercamiento a la construcción del pensamiento epistémico de las mujeres indígenas feministas comunitarias de Abya Yala* (2010); *De las opresiones a las emancipaciones: Mujeres indígenas en defensa del territorio cuerpo-tierra* (2016); *En tiempos de muerte: cuerpos, rebeldías, resistencias* (2019). See also Canbals 2013 interview for *Feministing*: <https://feministing.com/2013/12/20/latinas-feministas-lorena-cabnal>

BACKGROUND

Colombia is the most dangerous country for human rights defenders advocating for the environment, with 79 of these environmental defenders killed in 2023 (Global Witness, 2024). Additionally, data on political violence shows LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer) rights defenders are particularly vulnerable due to discrimination based on their identity or sexuality.¹

Environmental defenders are responding to a diverse range of pressing environmental issues ranging from disaster risk management, ecosystem management and

¹See: <https://www.youtube.com/live/MM-q1zYUPZs>, or refer to directly to issue No. 68 available at: <https://www.nocheyniebla.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/NOCHE-Y-NIEBLA-68-WEB.pdf>; See panel "Human Rights and Diversity: The challenges of the LGBTQ+ leaders in Colombia" from *El Espectador* with Colombia Diversa (2024): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=sDYQnrNPRa0>

² See UN Environment and Colombia: <https://www.unep.org/topics/disasters-and-conflicts/country-presence/colombia>

conservation, climate change mitigation and adaptation to resisting extractive mining contracts.² Confronting these issues in Colombia also frequently involves the role and presence of armed actors in the territory.³

There is a long history in Latin America that considers the body as a form of territory within violent conflict, and the harm faced by these bodily territories. Here, we consider the body as a territory of those who face discrimination against those who are not straight and have diverse gender identities. LGBTQ+ people who are part of queer and trans communities are discriminated against because they do not fit socially expected gender behaviours (ie. identifying with the sex assigned at birth and conform to heterosexual gender roles).

Existing data shows the vulnerability of LGBTQ+ leaders in general, but not specifically in relation to violence due to environmental causes. LGBTQ+ people who participate in environmental struggles constitute dissident bodies not only due to discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender expression and identity but also from extractive neoliberal models of peacebuilding and development.

Organisations like Colombia Diversa recognise the need to bring an understanding of the impact of homophobic and transphobic targeting of LGBTQ+ people to campaigning to protect environmental rights defenders. Strategies to integrate these issues start at the level of who is supported in campaign work, but also must inform more holistic policy work on climate justice, women's rights and LGBTQ+ rights.

We argue the bodies of queer people also constitute a territory to defend in environmental struggles. In other words, the territory is formed by both the land and animals (both human and non) including LGBTQ+ people.

³ See: Jurisdicción Especial para la Paz de Colombia (2022) *El ambiente como víctima silenciosa. Un diagnóstico de las afectaciones en el posacuerdo de paz (2017 - 2022)*

<https://www.jep.gov.co/JEP/documents1/EI%20ambiente%20como%20v%C3%ADctima%20silenciosa.pdf>

COLOMBIA DIVERSIA

Colombia Diversa is a Colombian non-governmental organisation founded in 2004. Its mission is to promote the full inclusion and respect for the rights, recognition and mobilisation of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) people in the economic, social, political and cultural spheres, in order to contribute to the construction of a modern and democratic society with social justice in Colombia. For the past two decades the organisation has worked in collaboration with women's rights and feminist organisations through initiatives 5 Claves (5 Keys) with Corporación Humanas, Red Nacional de Mujeres, Sisma Mujer, and Women's Link Worldwide to assure a feminist response to issues that impact women in conflict in Colombia.

References: More on Colombia Diversa: <https://colombiadiversa.org/>; To see reports from the 5 Keys: <https://www.humanas.org.co/alianza-5-claves/>

UNDERSTANDING AND ADDRESSING DISCRIMINATION AGAINST LGBTIQ+ PEOPLE

Intersectional and decolonial feminisms demand a situated and critical review of discriminatory conceptions about LGBTIQ+ people within ethnic communities to confront the forced territorial dispossession imposed on rural LGBTIQ+ people. Discrimination against diverse identities and sexualities is, in many cases, a colonial legacy. Furthermore, it must be considered that vulnerabilities LGBTIQ+ people experience are magnified during times of conflict and insecurity (Colombia Diversa 2020),

Maria Lugones argues that Latin American feminists have their own situated understanding and resistances to the coloniality of gender (Lugones, 2010). Building on this, this policy brief illustrates how the unique knowledges of resistance offered by LGBTIQ+ people are being sidelined and violently targeted. This violence is an extension of the continuing colonial legacy of violence long acknowledged by feminists as part of a refusal of a more complete gender justice for all, beyond cisgender male top-down leadership.

One example of an emerging queer-feminist

⁴ The Colombian National Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security is available here: it includes a significant queer perspective, as well as a line of action titled 'Protection of the Territory from the Actions of Armed Groups and Extractive Industries Generating Violence. For the full list of 20 specific LBT recommendations for the Colombian WPS National Action Plan developed in 2023 See: <https://colombiadiversa.org/blogs/20-recomendaciones-fueron-entregadas-por-colombia-diversa-al-gobierno-nacional-para-la->

intersectional practice is the Colombian National Action Plan for the implementation of the Women, Peace and Security agenda. The plan, launched in November 2024, includes specific protection measures related to harms caused by extractive industries such as mining.⁴ As a result, civil society groups including the 1325 Alliance have reinforced their commitment to intersectionality, highlighting the need to understand and address the differential risks faced by LBT women environmental defenders⁵. An intersectional approach to gender is vital to creating comprehensive and effective environmental agendas and peace and security agendas.

LGBTIQ+ COMMUNITIES AND ENVIRONMENTAL RIGHTS

An intersectional approach helps advocates fight for the protection and inclusion of LGBTIQ+ people in efforts to address displacement caused by climate change and environmental issues. For example, transgender Colombian queer ecologist Brigitte Baptiste highlights the importance of looking at gender in relation to nature and ecology, especially in the face of increasing attacks on queer and trans communities (Smith 2016).

Organisations such as Ambiente y Sociedad (2024) are making important connections in queer ecology, offering ways forward to protect LGBTIQ+ leaders in environmental rights advocacy. The organisation seeks to protect the environment with a human rights approach, generating positive changes in regulation, policies, and decision-making. In their pamphlet 'Body and Territory: Women and LGBTIQ+ Individuals in Environmental Defense' (2023), the group highlights how discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity has resulted in forced displacement of LGBTIQ+ individuals from rural areas, leading to their exclusion in the very construction of territoriality. They have also linked forced displacement of LGBTIQ+ individuals in the Colombian armed conflict to their absence from the framework for responding to environmental struggles more broadly.

LGBTIQ+ environmental defenders are seen as doubly dissident. On one hand, they dissent from

[implementacion-del-plan-nacional-de-accion/](#)

⁵View the recording of the event by the 1325 Alliance and UN Women Colombia during COP 16 here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wrjg2lz-Zz0> (starting at 3 hours and 43 minutes into the recording).

gender and sexuality norms, and on the other, from the extractive systems that exploit nature, which reproduce colonialism and patriarchy while relying on binary frameworks. This differentiated risk presents a serious obstacle to the safety of LGBTIQ+ people who defend environmental causes.

Supporting marginalised LGBTIQ+ environmental defenders can be clearly understood and addressed from intersectional, solidarity-based, and decolonial feminisms. An ecofeminist approach informed by queer ecology also offers a way forward to transform the often inequitable and binary distribution of care which relies heavily on the labor of women (Ojeda Ojeda, 2022).

Intersectional Latin American feminists could argue *Cuerpo-Territorio* (Body-Territory) as a concept for understanding embodied sexual and gender diversity within the larger territory environmental activists seek to protect. Embracing these alternative embodied territorialities allows coalitional queer-feminist movements to oppose the patriarchal rationality that justifies the exploitation of certain bodies (both human and non: land, rivers, mountains, women and LGBTIQ+ people). This concept also avoids the reproduction of binaries such as man/woman or humanity/nature that sustain such interconnected exploitation (Plumwood 1993 in Ojeda, 2022).

Diana Carolina Ojeda Ojeda argues “hegemonic constructions of nature are based on the subordination of the feminine” (2022, 111).⁶ Ecofeminists like Ojeda Ojeda contend the domination of nature depends on dualisms sustained by binary hierarchies of the masculine and feminine including nature vs. culture, human vs. non-human, mind vs. body, development vs. backwardness, white vs. black, and heterosexual vs. homosexual. Ojeda Ojeda also highlights the harmful use of stereotypes about binary gender roles to control resources under extractive colonial approaches to environmental management.⁷ Within this binary view, the Earth is represented as feminine, available for exploitation, and local Indigenous populations are infantilised as needing control and intervention.

The use of body-maps offers a practice for sharing ‘collective and individual experiences related to displacement, territorial defence movements, exploration of ancestral traditions, and the utilisation of diverse cartographic methods aimed at recovering

and reclaiming territory-lands’ (Salgado, 2024 p. 203) through perspectives of queer ecology. The integration of LGBTIQ+ individuals within the broader ecology helps move beyond binary understandings, while ensuring that responsibility for caring for the environment is shared by everyone. This alternative view of territoriality moves away from governance of natural resources to instead embrace a more complex relationship between land, embodied queer experiences and histories of violent conflict.

TRANS WOMEN, FORCED MIGRATION AND THE ENVIRONMENT

For rural LBT (lesbian, bisexual and transgender) women, the defence of territory and the environment is also a matter of food security. In Colombia, there are communities of Indigenous women with trans life experiences who were expelled from their communities and forced to migrate from their territories, seeking refuge far from their homes. For example, Jorgina, a trans Wayuu woman, had her house set on fire due to prejudice. Similarly, Samantha, a trans Embera woman, had to leave her community after facing discrimination for being recognised as diverse which goes against the regulations of her community. She is now one of the many trans women living in the municipality of Santuario, Risaralda. Both women have found a space to be themselves while working in coffee harvesting.

REFERENCE: *Dejusticia* (2020) *Indigenous trans women: no place to be.*
<https://www.dejusticia.org/column/mujeres-trans-indigenas-sin-lugar-para-ser/>

CONCLUSION

Feminist organising informed by queer ecology presents ways forward to protect LGBTIQ+ leaders in environmental human rights advocacy. As *Ambiente y Sociedad* (2024) explains, we must build “an environmental democracy that understands gender and diversity as one of its central axes” (pp. 11).

Embracing queer ecology as a dimension of environmental justice demands recognising the very existence of LGBTIQ+ people (rather than conflating gender with cisgender heterosexual women) to then understand both their lived experiences of conflict as

⁶ Ojeda Ojeda’s is informed by what Val Plumwood (1993) calls ‘the master model.’

⁷ See also (LaDanta LasCanta 2017; Ojeda Ojeda 2019; Puleo, Segura, and Cavana 2005).

it relates to the land and their environmental needs. In refusing traditional femininity or masculinity, LGBTIQ+ environmental defenders deconstruct the gendered assumptions that women are naturally responsible for environmental care, while men hold power over natural resources.

Informed by the intersection of advocacy between environmental justice and gender justice, we conclude this policy brief with five main recommendations for policy actors to prioritise.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Directly include LGBTIQ+ individuals in environmental mechanisms such as the UN-led Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD)⁸ and the gender commitments of the Escazú Agreement⁹ (a regional environmental agreement). These are two examples relevant to Colombia, but other countries should consider the most relevant environmental mechanisms for their country.
2. Produce differentiated data on LGBTIQ+ environmental defenders in Colombia, considering the interrelationship between environmental conflicts and armed conflict.
3. Strengthen the inclusion of LGBTIQ+ people in measures to prevent forced displacement from rural areas to address discrimination, which has broken their relationship with the rural and biodiverse territory. This includes guaranteeing access to and use of land, in the implementation of Colombian peace accord.¹
4. Implement programmes to advance the shared conception of the importance of the participation of LGBTIQ+ people in environmental struggles as an essential step to create community protection for them. These programmes can then begin to address continued impunity of attacks against LGBTIQ+ and environmental defenders in all security risk investigation and response systems. This might then

⁸ The Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) is the international legal instrument for "the conservation of biological diversity, the sustainable use of its components and the fair and equitable sharing of the benefits arising out of the utilization of genetic resources" that has been ratified by 196 nations. See: <https://www.un.org/en/observances/biological-diversity-day/convention>.

lead to efforts like building community protection programmes for LGBTIQ+ leaders to promote their inclusion in feminist agendas for caring for the territory and the environment.

REFERENCES

Association Environment and Society (2024) Body and territory: Women and LGBTIQ+ people in environmental defense. <https://www.ambienteysociedad.org.co/cuerpo-y-territorio-mujeres-y-personas-lgbtq-en-la-defensa-ambiente/>

Cabnal (2010) Approach to the construction of the epistemic thinking proposal of the community feminist indigenous women of Abya Yala.

<https://knowledgehub.southfeministfutures.org/kb/acercamiento-a-la-construccion-de-la-propuesta-de-pensamiento-epistemico-de-las-mujeres-indigenas-feministas-comunitarias-de-abya-yala/>.

Colombia Diversa (2023) Contribution to the Expert's report to the 78th session of the United Nations General Assembly on the historical and current impact of colonialism on the enjoyment of human rights by lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and gender diverse (LGBT) persons.

Colombia Diversa (2020) Orders of Prejudice: Systematic Crimes against LGBT People in the Colombian Armed Conflict. <https://colombiadiversa.org/colombiadiversa2016/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/english-version-Orders-Of-Prejudice.pdf>.

⁹The Escazú Agreement is a Regional Agreement on Access to Information, Public Participation and Justice in Environmental Matters in Latin America and the Caribbean. See: <https://www.cepal.org/en/escazuagreement>.

Colombia Diversa (2020) Orders of Prejudice: Systematic Crimes against LGBT People in the Colombian Armed Conflict.

<https://colombiadiversa.org/colombiadiversa2016/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/english-version-Orders-Of-Prejudice.pdf>.

Global Witness (2024) Missing Voices: The Violence Erasure of Land And Environmental Defenders.

<https://www.globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/environmental-activists/missing-voices/>.

LaDanta LasCanta. 2017. The Phallocene: Redefining the Anthropocene from an Ecofeminist Perspective. *Political Ecology* , 53: 26-33

Lugones, M. (2010). Toward a Decolonial Feminism. *Hypatia*, 25(4), 742–759.

Ojeda Ojeda, D. (2019) La playa vacía, el bosque exuberante y el otro exótico: Herramientas para el análisis crítico del turismo de naturaleza». En *Turistificación global: Perspectivas críticas en turismo*, editado por Ernest Cañada Mullor e Ivan Murray Mas, 463-74. Barcelona: Icaria Editorial.

Ojeda Ojeda, D.(2022) Gender, Land, and Dispossession in Latin America. Universidad de los Andes.

Oyewumi, O (1997) *The Invention of Women. Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses*. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press.

Puleo, Alicia H., Cristina Segura y María Luisa Cavana, eds. 2005. *Mujeres y ecología: Historia, pensamiento y sociedad*. Madrid: Asociación Cultural Almudayna.

Salgado, A. I. R. (2024). The body as territory: a movement perspective. *Studies in Theatre and Performance*, 44(1), 201–217.

Smith, J. E. (2016) The Queer Ecology of the Colombian Civil War. <https://nautil.us/the-queer-ecology-of-the-colombian-civil-war-236266/>

Viveros, M (2023) Intersectionality. Decolonial and community turn / Mara Viveros Vigoya; prologue by Flavia Rios . - 1st ed. - Autonomous City of Buenos Aires: CLACSO; Amsterdam :TNI Transnational Institute , 2023. Digital book, PDF - (Critical Mass).

THE AUTHORS

Laura Beltrán (she/her) is a political scientist and LGBTQ+ activist with a Postgraduate Certificate in Gender and Feminist Studies. Her work focuses on the power of queer and intersectional perspectives to build social justice. Beltrán is a Women, Peace and Security leader working in the Colombian context. She is a member of the peace and transitional justice team at the NGO Colombia Diversa, where she advocates for the rights of LGBTQ+ victims of the armed conflict. She is the co-author of 'Queering Women, Peace & Security: A Practice-Based Toolkit', the book 'Feminist Perspectives to Transform Security', and the policy brief 'Recommendations to the Colombian JEP for Addressing Harms Against LGBTQ People in Colombia'.

Jamie J. Hagen (she/her) is a lecturer in Global Politics at the University of Manchester and works at the intersection of gender, security studies, & queer theory. She brings a queer feminist, anti-racist approach to bridging gaps between academics, policy, & activism. Jamie Hagen has co-edited *Queer Conflict Research: New Approaches to the Study of Political Violence* & co-developed *Queering Women, Peace & Security: A Practice-Based toolkit*.

SUGGESTED CITATIONS

Beltrán, Laura and Jamie J. Hagen, 2025. *LGBTIQ+ Experience and Climate Justice Advocacy in Colombia*. HCRI Policy Brief Series 1/25, pp. 1-6.

ABOUT HCRI

The Humanitarian and Conflict Response Institute (HCRI) is a leading global centre that is part of the University of Manchester. HCRI combines multiple disciplines from medicine to the humanities for the study of humanitarianism and conflict response, global health, international disaster management and peacebuilding.

CONTACT US

For queries regarding the HCRI Policy Brief Series, please email hcripolicy@manchester.ac.uk

For all other HCRI queries, please email hcri@manchester.ac.uk

Room C1.49, Ellen Wilkinson Building, Oxford Road, Manchester