

# Violence, toleration, or inclusion? Exploring variation in the experiences of LGBT combatants in Colombia

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## Abstract

While scholars have started to pay increased attention to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) persons serving in state security forces, little is known of the experiences of LGBT combatants operating in non-state armed groups in conflict settings. This article explores the experiences of LGBT persons from three different armed groups in Colombia. While LGBT combatants are often in a highly vulnerable position, this article reveals large differences between armed groups, as well as important exceptions within groups that contribute to LGBT combatants' varied experiences. In conclusion, I argue that understanding these variations in LGBT combatants' experiences has important policy and programme implications and provides opportunities for more inclusive peacebuilding processes in Colombia and beyond.

## Keywords

Armed conflict, Colombia, combatants, FARC, LGBT

LGBT persons have participated in wars throughout history and there is evidence of several cultures having viewed homosexual behaviour among combatants favourably dating back to ancient Greece and Rome (Burg, 2002; Goldstein, 2001). Despite this history, policies and practices governing sexual orientation and gender identities in armed forces and groups often have a legacy of discrimination and violence. Scholars have argued that conflicts and the process of militarization tend to promote hegemonic militarized masculinities, gender hierarchies and normative heterosexuality, which fuel violence and discrimination against

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LGBT persons (see Connell, 1995; Goldstein, 2001; Myrtilinen and Daigle, 2017). Indeed, armed groups of very different ideological persuasions have been reported as using targeted violence against LGBT individuals and communities, ranging from jihadist groups such as the Islamic State (IS) to Maoist groups such as the Shining Path (Myrtilinen and Daigle, 2017; Tschantret, 2018). From the British Navy in the 19th century to the Nazi SS, homosexuality has also been considered a capital offence within military ranks (Giles, 2002; Goldstein, 2001).

Over recent decades, advocacy for LGBT rights has led to changes in military policies in several countries, and in certain cases, shifts in policies of non-state armed groups. Increased attention has also been paid to the targeted violence against LGBT civilians in conflict. In 2015, the UN Security Council convened for the first time to discuss LGBT rights, and the UN acknowledged the attacks on LGBT individuals as a form of ‘moral cleansing’ (United Nations, 2015). While this has generated an increased understanding of the experiences of LGBT combatants in state forces as well as LGBT victims/survivors and people displaced by non-state armed groups, little is known of the inner workings governing sexual orientation and gender identities within non-state armed groups. In pioneering research, Albuero (2011) has described how gay cadres negotiate their sexual identity in the context of military masculinities in the New People’s Army of the Philippines following the armed group’s change of official policy on sexual relations and official recognition of same-sex relations within its ranks. However, in other non-state armed groups that do not have an official policy recognizing sexual and gender minorities within their ranks, the topic continues to be challenging to research and the experiences of LGBT combatants tend to be left unnoticed in the fog of war. Scholars have underscored this gap and described the methodological difficulties to conduct research in this area, including the engrained secrecy surrounding deviation from heterosexual norms among combatants (Mendez, 2012; Theidon, 2009). By introducing this long-overlooked topic and capturing the subjective experiences of LGBT persons from three different armed groups, this article contributes to the field of armed conflict and peacebuilding in Colombia and beyond.

## **Methods**

This article draws on qualitative data gathered through interviews with 11 ex-combatants whose self-identified sexual orientation, gender identity and/or sexual practices fall outside normative heterosexuality. Interviews were conducted with two lesbian women, four homosexual men, two bisexual men, two transgender women and one heterosexual woman who engaged in a same-sex relationship while part of the armed group.<sup>1</sup> Four of the interviewees are former members of the 19th of April Movement (M-19), two of the United Self-Defenders of Colombia (AUC) and five of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People’s Army (FARC). Interviews conducted with 44 heterosexual ex-combatants as part of a larger research project focusing on the construction of gender among ex-combatants also inform this article.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted between February and March 2017 in the cities of Bogota, Cali and Villavicencio in Colombia. One interview was conducted through skype with an ex-combatant living in exile. Given the difficulty in identifying potential interviewees, various strategies were used to locate LGBT ex-combatants. The majority of the FARC and AUC ex-combatants were identified and approached through the Colombian Agency for Reintegration (now called the Reincorporation and Normalization Agency) as they were current or former participants in the government-led reintegration programme. The M-19 combatants were contacted through the network *Red Nacional de Mujeres Excombatientes de la Insurgencia* (National Network of Insurgency Ex-combatant Women) and through a snowball selection. One man and one woman were part of the overall sample for the broader research and only disclosed their sexual orientation and non-heterosexual practices during the interviews. Their inclusion allowed me to capture experiences of ex-combatants who do not generally disclose their sexual orientation and practices. While this article focuses primarily on gender and sexuality, other social categorizations, including class, age and ethnicity create interdependent systems of power. It is important to note that there are both differences between armed groups as well as differences within the sub-groups of lesbians, gay, bisexual and transgender combatants which are important in order to understand the LGBT ex-combatants' varied experiences. My sample is therefore limited but can serve as a starting point for further exploration of experiences of LGBT combatants in armed groups.

This article is structured as follows: After providing an overview of LGBT issues in the Colombian conflict and peace processes, I analyse the variations in experiences of LGBT combatants from different armed groups. I thereafter present the strategies for survival applied by LGBT combatants followed by an analysis of exceptions in the toleration of combatants' deviation from heterosexual norms. In the conclusions, I argue that the variations between the different armed groups are important to take into consideration in peacebuilding processes.

## **Overview of the Colombian conflict**

Colombia has struggled with conflicts and challenges to exert control over its extensive and geographically diverse territory ever since the liberation from Spanish colonialism during the early 1820s. The complex dynamics of intertwined conflicts is the longest armed confrontation in the western hemisphere and has led to the emergence of a variety of armed groups. The FARC is the oldest and largest guerrilla group in Latin America, established in 1964 as a rural self-defence militia. FARC describe themselves as an organization applying the principles of Marxism-Leninism to the Colombian reality and as inspired by the revolutionary thinking of the Liberator, Simón Bolívar, by anti-imperialism, equality and the welfare of the people (FARC-EP, *Estatuto*, 2013). A second generation of guerrilla movements emerged in Colombia in the 1970s and 1980s. One of these movements, M-19, was founded in response to the political dynamics following the allegedly fraudulent

presidential elections of 1970 (Boudon, 2001). M-19 was an urban guerrilla group, which made them different from the rural guerrilla movements of the time. M-19 advocated a nationalist, Bolivarian, anti-imperialist, anti-oligarchic model and a Colombian-style Socialism (García-Durán et al., 2008). In the early 1980s, the FARC started to engage increasingly in extortion and in the emerging drug trade in Colombia. The increased funding paired with stronger military focus led to an exponential growth of the FARC and its military capacity. As the movement became stronger, it was viewed more and more as a threat to power by the country's regional elites, as well as by organized crime seeking control over the drug trade. Against this backdrop, wealthy landowners and drug traffickers started funding private militias or paramilitary groups to stop the political, social, economic and territorial expansion of the guerrilla groups (Jonsson, 2014; Mendez, 2012). In 1997, these paramilitary groups merged and formed the umbrella organization AUC. While the FARC and other guerrilla groups had for a long time carried out kidnappings, executions of civilians, and other human rights violations, the paramilitary groups applied a different repertoire of violence and made 'dirty war' tactics their *modus operandi*. Their presence in a region most often started with a wave of indiscriminate violence that included massacres, mutilations, torture, and the destruction of property. Thereafter, they switched to more selective violence, extortion and the assassination of specific targets (Gutiérrez Sanín, 2008).

### **The plight of LGBT persons in the Colombian conflict**

LGBT persons have been specifically targeted by armed groups and severely affected in the Colombian armed conflict (Amnesty International, 2011; Gill, 2009; Myrntinen and Daigle, 2017; National Center for Historical Memory, 2015; Payne, 2007; Serrano, 2014; United Nations, 2015). The human rights violations of LGBT persons in Colombia include actions aimed at establishing or maintaining heteronormative social control, such as arbitrary beating and detention and so-called 'social cleansing'.<sup>2</sup> It also includes selective threats, assaults, torture, forced displacement and assassination. Various forms of sexual violence against LGBT persons have been perpetrated, including forced nudity, rape and sexual slavery, with both opportunistic and strategic character. The human rights violations of LGBT persons have been committed by different armed groups such as guerrillas, paramilitaries, post-demobilization paramilitary groups, as well as state actors including Colombian armed forces and police, and in some cases drug-trafficking groups (National Center for Historical Memory, 2015). The Colombian National Center for Historical Memory has noted variations in the actions of different armed groups according to the historical moment, the territorial contexts, as well as the respective gender principles and ideological differences between each group. Both right-wing paramilitary forces as well as leftist guerrilla groups have been associated with human rights violations of LGBT persons, although the paramilitary AUC was by far the most excessive and frequent perpetrator of targeted violence against LGBT persons (Payne, 2016;

Tschantret, 2018). While FARC has engaged in targeted violence against civilian LGBT persons, researchers such as Tschantret (2018) have argued that the group has not systematically persecuted sexual minorities. Tschantret argues that not only do the attacks by FARC amount to a small fraction of those committed by the paramilitaries but there is also ‘considerable doubt’ that the targeting of LGBT persons reflected group policy (Tschantret, 2018: 270). However, Tschantret’s research is limited to civilian LGBT persons and does not analyse the violence perpetrated within the organization against its own members. In addition to the perpetration of targeted violence against LGBT persons in the civilian population, this type of heteronormative violence exists within the armed ranks, against combatants who deviate from heterosexual norms. Payne (2016) has described accounts of members of the paramilitary who witnessed extreme sexualized violence followed by execution against members of their own group who had deviated from heterosexual norms. However, information on the inner working of these groups is scarce and lacks the perspective of the LGBT persons who were part of these groups. The National Center for Historical Memory (2015) has not described these violations extensively and has stated that it has a pending debt to further explore the functioning of heteronormativity within the armed groups.

## **LGBT issues in the Colombian peace processes**

Colombia has engaged in peacebuilding efforts with armed groups for decades, including with the three groups that are the focus of this research. M-19 was the first of several guerrilla groups in Colombia to start a negotiation process that concluded in a final peace agreement involving its demobilization as an armed group in 1990 (García-Durán et al., 2008). Thereafter, in 2002, Colombian President Uribe initiated a highly controversial negotiation process with the paramilitaries, which, through the provision of amnesties and limited penalties for human rights abuses, would lead to the collective demobilization of the AUC (Theidon, 2009). In 2016, the government of Juan Manuel Santos and the FARC reached a peace agreement.

While issues related to gender and sexual orientation have been overlooked in previous negotiations, the peace process with the FARC made unprecedented strides in this area (Bouvier, 2016). It marks the first time LGBT voices have been included in the official peace negotiations for responding to injustices suffered during an armed conflict and has been celebrated for setting a global precedent (Hagen, 2017). The establishment and work of the Gender Sub-Commission has been described as a ‘unique mechanism in the history of conflict resolution’ by the United Nations (UN Women, 2016) and provided a platform for articulating the particular impact of the war on women, and more recently, on LGBTI persons (Bouvier, 2016).<sup>3</sup> By acknowledging the rights of the LGBTI community, the guerrilla organization has changed its policies in a remarkable way. For the purpose of this research, the leader of the Gender Sub-Committee, FARC commander Victoria Sandino, described this policy shift as a direct result of the dialogue

with representatives from social movements during the peace negotiations. The final peace agreement (2016), which ‘places special emphasis on the fundamental rights . . . of the LGBTI community’ was signed after revision by congress following a referendum to ratify the deal that was unsuccessful. It has been argued that the inclusion of gender and LGBT rights in the peace agreement prompted socially conservative voters to reject the referendum (Krystalli and Theidon, 2016).<sup>4</sup> This points to the opportunities for inclusion that peace processes can generate but also the need to work in a careful and circumspect way to avoid increasing the vulnerabilities of sexual and gender minorities or causing societal backlash. The inclusion of LGBTI rights in the final agreement is important not only for the receiving communities but also for the LGBT combatants. However, despite the emphasis on LGBTI communities in the peace agreement, FARC has not acknowledged the harm done to its own combatants.<sup>5</sup> This article provides particularly important insights as it makes visible some of the invisible, and often highly marginalized, LGBT combatants within armed groups.

### **From assassination to acceptance: Variation in practices between armed groups**

Identifying, or being identified by others, as belonging to a sexual and gender minority often adds additional layers of vulnerability to lives already under threat in conflict (Myrntinen and Daigle, 2017). This research shows that this is largely true not only for civilians but also for combatants in different armed groups. This research also demonstrates that significant differences, ranging from assassination and other forms of violence to relative tolerance and inclusion, exist between different armed groups and describe how they impact the combatants’ varied experiences.

#### *Assassinations and sexual violence in the AUC*

The paramilitary organization AUC was known for brutal violence and ‘social cleansing’ operations against LGBT individuals and communities (Amnesty International, 2011; Gill, 2009; National Center for Historical Memory, 2015; Myrntinen and Daigle, 2017; Serrano, 2014). LGBT ex-combatants attested to this picture by describing the inner working of the fierce treatment of LGBT persons within the organization’s own ranks. They described how sexual minorities were not tolerated in the civilian population and the communities where they were operating and how it was absolutely forbidden to deviate from heterosexual norms within the group. Interviewees also described incidences in which homosexual combatants were executed immediately once their sexual orientation was revealed.

Sexual violence was used as a punishment for deviation from heterosexual norms within the AUC. Payne (2016) has previously described incidents of extreme sexual violence followed by assassination against homosexual combatants within the ranks of the AUC. In my interview with her, ex-combatant Adriana<sup>6</sup> described

an incident in which three of her paramilitary colleagues subjected her partner to an anti-lesbian gang rape.

The two of us were staying together in a room when they entered. They opened the door and they were going to rape me. I didn't let them and it was at this moment she said: 'Don't do anything to her, do it to me instead!' She did everything for me. Then she was raped by three men, three of them. (Adriana, heterosexual (see Note 1), former member of AUC)

This incidence of sexual violence was interpreted by Adriana as an attack based on sexual orientation in order to impel the women to change their behaviour and adhere to heterosexual norms. Shortly after her demobilization, Adriana's partner disappeared, and she believes that she was assassinated by her former paramilitary colleagues.

### *The double threat of death in the FARC*

Among the Colombian guerrilla groups, FARC is known for forcefully upholding the prohibition of LGBT persons in their ranks (National Center for Historical Memory, 2015; Theidon, 2009). In this research, both LGBT and heterosexual ex-combatants from the FARC concurred that deviation from heterosexual norms was absolutely forbidden in the organization. They described how the common course of action when such deviation was revealed was to be put before FARC's internal 'war trial' and thereafter be executed by shooting. That LGBT combatants were condemned to death by FARC's internal war trial indicates that this violence was condoned by the organization and reflected group policy. LGBT ex-combatants described how they were living under the double fear of death: of being killed by the enemy or by their own organization if their sexual orientation was revealed.

In certain cases, LGBT combatants were discharged from the organization. Ex-combatants described that whether or not an LGBT combatant was executed or discharged depended on several factors, including their previous behaviour within the guerrilla group but also their family's history and support of the group. In my interview with him, Pablo described how he had received warnings by the commanders that he would be brought before the war trial because of rumours that he was gay. His cousin, who was the girlfriend of one of the senior commanders, played a particularly important role in ensuring his release.

My cousin was the big reason why they let me go. I never told her I was bisexual but there were a lot of rumours. . . . She told me that this cannot go on like this and that she was going to talk to the commander to find a solution. 'Because even if you are not executed here, if one day they would send you to another front you will be executed immediately', she said. Everything then depends on the structure they have. She suggests, she makes her comments with the commander, the commander meets with the



superior command. They analyse my behaviour and trajectory of my family, and the support that my family has always given to the organization for many years. It was because of this that they released me. One day a letter arrived, and the commander called me and they said to me: 'You are going home'. They didn't articulate why, just because of 'your problem'. (Pablo, bisexual, former member of the FARC)

Despite the letter of discharge, the combatant feared that he would eventually be executed. While being accompanied out of the guerrilla camp he described how he trembled as he suspected he would be shot as a way of getting rid of him discreetly. Ex-combatants described how they believed that LGBT combatants were executed not only because the organization considered them not fit for combat but because the organization didn't want them to be discharged and returned to their communities to 'spread homosexuality'. While FARC has now come to recognize the rights of the LGBT community in the 2016 peace agreement, LGBT ex-combatants I interviewed criticized the lack of acknowledgement of the violence perpetrated against members of its own organization. In my interview with Mariana, who spent 20 years within the FARC, she called for accountability and justice for the execution of LGBT combatants during the conflict. Transitional justice mechanisms and policy interventions should not only ensure that these crimes are included in truth-seeking processes but also hold commanders liable for patterns of violence against sexual and gender minorities, including within their own ranks.

### *M-19 in the vanguard of inclusion*

M-19 stands in stark contrast to both AUC and FARC when it comes to tolerance for diversity and acceptance of sexual and gender minorities in its ranks. M-19 emerged as an urban guerrilla movement characterized by insistence on equality (Madariaga, 2006) and had a particularly large number of women in its ranks (Londoño and Nieto, 2006). The large numbers of urban, middle-class and university-educated members influenced gender relations and, in comparison with other guerrilla groups in Colombia, M-19 was considered more flexible and open (Dietrich Ortega, 2017). Dietrich Ortega's (2015) research has shown how hegemonic and non-hegemonic patterns in gender relations co-existed in the group. While she did not analyse sexual minorities, my research shows a similar co-existence of hegemonic and non-hegemonic patterns governing sexual orientation.

While discrimination certainly existed, LGBT persons were not prohibited from participating in the organization. Both lesbian and homosexual interviewees described how they were openly living in homosexual relationships with other members of the M-19 as well as with people unrelated to the organization. During the time of its operation, neither gender, feminism nor LGBT rights were conceptualized by the organization, nor had it developed policy governing these areas. Elvira, who now considers herself a lesbian feminist, described how she was unaware of feminism and LGBT rights during this time. She first started



questioning herself when she developed a lesbian relationship during her incarceration in a women's prison.

At this time, this [being lesbian] was not something you talked about and it didn't seem like a possible choice in life. Now I'm questioning why one kept quiet and hid it; why we never talked about it? Perhaps because one looked around and saw that this was not something normal, right? But at that time, I had not rationalised it, nor thought about it, nor questioned it. . . . But sitting in my cell, I began to question, and ask myself what was really happening to me. I still did not have the words lesbian or LGBT. (Elvira, lesbian, former member of M-19)

Javier, who did not disclose his sexual orientation within the organization, described how he believes that the organization was a reflection of the wider society at the time, in which discrimination was prominent but where the heterogeneity of the organization's members at the same time generated an increased tolerance and respect. There were also accounts of the top leadership not only being aware of the sexual orientation and gender identities of LGBT combatants but also protecting the rights of LGBT combatants. Marcelo, who came out of the closet before joining M-19, referred to incidences in which colleagues called him derogatory names, particularly when they had been drinking. He stressed that this was not accepted by the senior leadership and pointed to one incident, which was very important for him, when the leader of M-19 and members of the superior command punished his colleagues for this behaviour. Marcelo also established a small unit comprised solely of homosexual men in Bogota. The unit operated during a short period (from 1983 to 1984) and worked closely with young male sex workers. While not formally associated with M-19, these men supported the unit in different areas, for example to hide and store weapons. Marcelo described how the unit provided him with a platform for vindicating the rights of sexual minorities:

The objective was to generate visibility within the Colombian left. As we were discriminated against, because of AIDS and other things, it was a way of demonstrating that we could earn this political space, to promote respect and set a precedent that we could be part of all the political spaces of Colombia. (Marcelo, homosexual, former member of M-19)

The formation of a unit of homosexual men within the M-19 illustrates how the organization was different from other organizations and in the vanguard of inclusion long before these issues started to be more widely debated in the Colombian society. As a comparison, almost a decade after M-19 had demobilized, the Colombian Constitutional court ruled that the prohibition of homosexuals from serving in the armed forces was unconstitutional (El Tiempo, 1999). This shows that hegemonic and non-hegemonic patterns in gender relations can co-exist in armed groups and that these organizations in certain aspects can promote more inclusive and equitable practices than the societies in which they operate.

## **Strategies for survival: From heterosexual encounters to demobilization**

The LGBT combatants interviewed applied a range of different strategies to avoid violence and discrimination within their respective armed groups. The most common, and often a crucial strategy to survival, was to hide any deviation from hegemonic heterosexual identities or practices. While some of the ex-combatants from the M-19 I interviewed didn't declare their sexual orientation openly because they considered it a private matter or because they did not consider it a feasible way of life, several of the interviewees from the FARC and AUC described how they made extensive efforts to hide their sexual orientation and gender identity to stay alive.

### *Heterosexual encounters to affirm masculinity*

A common way to avoid any suspicion of deviation from heterosexual norms led combatants to engage in heterosexual encounters. Some LGBT combatants also developed close friendships to simulate a heterosexual relationship. One ex-combatant who engaged in heterosexual encounters to avoid suspicion on several occasions described how he, as a new recruit, was approached by the girlfriend of the commander.

She approached me. Since I was new, I could not reject her because she was going to say 'No, he rejected me the first time, the second time, the third time ... well the man must be a fag!' So I made the decision [to engage in sexual encounter with her] so no one would think I'm homosexual. I thought at this moment that the only thing I can do is to do it, even if she was the woman of the commander. Really very complicated. But the only thing that could happen to me for having sex with her would be that they could punish me. They could not send me to war trial. They could sanction me, but not kill me. (David, homosexual, former member of the FARC)

Sexuality and sexual relations were regulated by the FARC and AUC (Mendez, 2012), and combatants had to request permission to engage in a heterosexual encounter or relationship. This quotation illustrates that affirming heterosexual hegemonic gender identities to avoid suspicion of deviation from heterosexual norms was more important for this combatant than potentially being punished for breaking the regulations to engage in a heterosexual encounter without permission and risking the jealousy of the commander.

### *'Cacorros' and the risk of mortal betrayal*

In all three armed groups, ex-combatants described a cultural distinction between gender roles, sexual orientation and sexual practices – in particular a distinction between perceived masculine 'activity' and feminine 'passivity'. While these

distinctions have been studied in depth in different parts of Latin America (see Gutmann, 2007; Kulick, 1998; Parker, 1999; Prieur, 1998), the implications in this particular context in the midst of conflict was described as a matter of life and death.

In Colombia, the word ‘cacorro’ is used to describe a man that maintains what is considered an ‘active’ attitude through penetrating his same-sex partner. While the cacorro does not compromise his masculinity, the penetration feminizes the partner and construes him as homosexual (Serrano, 1997). David defined the ‘cacorro’ in the following way:

The ‘cacorro’ is a man who likes the ass as we say vulgarly, but without touching, without kissing, without caressing. Who simply wants to do it. An ass, he puts it in, he comes and that’s it. That’s the cacorro. And in the guerrilla there are too many people of this type. He is not considered gay. (David, homosexual, former member of the FARC)

Cacorros were described by the interviewees to be plentiful in all three groups. Previous research by Payne (2016) has described an incident in which a paramilitary commander discovered two male combatants having sex. In this case, the man who had been penetrated was tortured, raped and killed, while his sexual partner was only punished. Payne argues that this casts the ‘passive’ sexual role as more transgressive of normative expectations. Within the FARC, my research shows that cacorros were considered a major threat, as they could report their partner to the commanders. Several ex-combatants described cases in which a sexual partner had betrayed a homosexual or bisexual combatant and this had led to their assassination. Pablo was particularly frightened when one of his sexual partners reported a homosexual combatant.

I witnessed the case of one homosexual who was shot because he had been with a guy, with whom I had also been with many times. This guy went and told the commander that the other guy was gay and that he had approached him to have sex. So the commander sent him to war trial and he was shot 8 days later. After that, I had a conversation with the guy that I had been with sexually and I asked him why he had done this. With what intention? Since he had never said anything, never reported on me. Then he answered that the truth was, that the other guy was ugly, that he was tired of him and this and that. But then I asked him why he did this if he was like this too. I mean, maybe he never thought about this part, but, well, he was also bisexual. Then I asked him why he had never reported me. And he basically told me that it was because he liked me and that whenever we searched for each other, I always pleased him, that’s why he didn’t do it to me. (Pablo, bisexual, former member of the FARC)

Several men were critical towards this distinction between sexual orientation and sexual conduct and suggested it was contradictory to consider cacorros heterosexual. Within this complex reality, ex-combatants made different choices about

whether or not to engage in LGBT relationships. While combatants such as Pablo, despite the fear of being betrayed, described how he enjoyed his sexuality, other interviewees did not engage in any sexual conduct during their time in the armed group as they knew that no one could be trusted with such a secret. Mariana, now openly living as a transgender woman, stayed in the jungle with the FARC without engaging in a sexual relationship with anyone for 20 years. In certain cases, their sexual orientation and gender identity was part of the reasons why combatants left the organization. Apart from being discharged, several combatants left the group either to follow a partner who had demobilized or because they wanted to express their sexual orientation and gender identities.

### **Analysing exceptions of toleration**

Inconsistencies and contradictions in the prohibitions against LGBT persons participating in armed forces have been noted around the world. This includes examples where prohibitions have been enforced rigorously at times, while in other eras, particularly during wars and when troops were in short supply, commanders have forced gay and lesbian personnel to remain in service even if they wanted to be discharged (Belkin, 2014). While less is known about non-state armed groups, Dietrich Ortega (2017) has described how insurgent groups enhance operational functionality for armed struggle through the reconfiguration of power relations. In her comparative study of gender arrangements in Latin American insurgencies, Dietrich Ortega has noted examples where ‘homosexual orientation was constructed as irrelevant’, when the performance of the combatants added clearly to the insurgent cause (2017: 256). My research reveals exceptions in the general practices that prohibited LGBT persons from being part of FARC and AUC. In this section I will analyse the cases of a transgender woman who was a member of the AUC and a homosexual man who was part of FARC. I will not analyse the cases of LGBT combatants who expressed their sexual orientation within M-19 as there was not a prohibition of LGBT persons within this group.

#### *Exceptions within the FARC and AUC*

Alejandra, a transgender woman, described herself as a ‘special case.’ She was working as a hairdresser in her municipality when the AUC gained control of her region. She became acquainted with several paramilitaries when they came to have their hair cut and after a while she started going to paramilitary camps to work as a hairdresser. During one of these trips she fell in love with one of the bodyguards of the commander and they established a relationship. She thereafter became more and more involved and came to work in different capacities directly with the commander of the bloc. Alejandra described how the organization gave her respect and liberty to be who she is. When she joined the organization, she was dressing as a woman, had let her hair grow long and had undergone surgeries. She completed her transition while she was part of the AUC.

Within the FARC, José provides an example of an important exception. He eventually became the medical doctor responsible for one large bloc. During his time in the FARC he requested permission from the commander to establish a relationship with another homosexual combatant and the two worked together inseparably. José looks back at his time in the FARC as a beautiful time in his life. As the experience of these two combatants stands in stark contrast to the experiences of other LGBT combatants, it leads to the question of why they were accepted within their respective groups.

A couple of factors stand out as critical for analysing these two exceptional cases. A crucial factor is the acceptance of the commanders. Being a less centralized organization, the AUC's practices, in regards to gender identities and sexual orientation, varied to a certain extent, depending on each commander (National Center for Historical Memory, 2015). In spite of the AUC being the armed group responsible for the vast majority of targeted attacks against LGBT persons, some of its paramilitary groups have been described as having shown greater tolerance towards the non-heterosexual practices of their combatants and members can recall incidences of acceptance of their transgender partners (López Castañeda and Myrntinen, 2014; National Center for Historical Memory, 2015). In the case of Alejandra, she described how she was lucky to have a commander who treated her as a daughter and protected her against any discrimination.

He [the commander of the bloc] treated me as a daughter. He told me: 'You will not have any problem here. You are well received here regardless of your gender. You will be respected. Nobody will make trouble for you and if that happens, you simply tell me and I will take care of the problem because they have to respect you as if you were a member of my family.' So I felt very protected. (Alejandra, trans woman, former member of AUC)

While the commander repeatedly demonstrated in actions that he protected her against discrimination from the combatants under his command, when meeting with other commanders of his same rank who might question her position within the group, he asked her to discreetly leave the camp and hide for a couple of days. This further illustrates how her participation in the group was fully dependent on this particular commander.

In contrast to the AUC, FARC is a more centralized organization in which the toleration of deviation from heterosexual norms was not dependent on an individual commander. José described how he was accepted by his line of commanders. It is clear from José's narrative that the commanders operated strategically as they considered that he had skills that were important for the organization.

I only once had a problem with a combatant who told me: 'you should not be here'. So I talked to a commander and he stopped him. He told him: 'We need him more than we need you. Combatants can be found everywhere, but not doctors.' (José, homosexual, former member of the FARC)

Dietrich Ortega (2017) has described how a particular skill or capacity that is considered a strategic asset to a non-state armed group can overrule stigmatization dynamics that otherwise would sanction combatants who did not conform to the group's ideals. In addition to the organization's strategic interest in José's skill set, the commanders concluded that they 'knew who he was when he was brought so he therefore should be accepted.' Other ex-combatants described how LGBT persons who openly expressed their sexual orientation should not have been recruited and could therefore not be 'blamed' for breaking the regulations. In these cases, the responsibility was placed on the recruiters who failed to adhere to the rules. The exceptional toleration of José's deviation from heterosexual norms demonstrates how the concept of enhanced operational functionality can help explain what appear to be contradictory practices of context specific toleration of deviation from heterosexual norms within non-state armed groups.

### *Gender hierarchies among LGBT combatants*

Both José and Alejandra gave examples of how their respective organizations, despite allowing their participation, did not accept other LGBT persons. This supports the conclusion that they were exceptional cases. Alejandra explained that she on one occasion had brought another trans woman to the paramilitary camp but she was not welcomed by the organization. Alejandra explains that the other trans woman was not accepted because 'she was kind of scandalous and she wanted to be the girlfriend of everyone'. Alejandra described how she, in turn, had gained respect within the organization, which led to it accepting her. In this setting, it was therefore not non-conforming gender identity but gender expression including non-conforming behaviours and practices that were considered disruptive to the group's social order and that were not tolerated. Alejandra believed that transgender women should keep a very low-key profile. This also led her to defend the violence directed toward other LGBT persons when the AUC gained control of her region, arguing that they were targeted because of their 'scandalous' behaviour and disorganized lifestyle.

As Alejandra distinguished herself from the majority of other transgender women, José distinguished himself from many other homosexual men. He saw a clear difference between himself as a 'serious' homosexual man and other 'flamboyant, effeminate queens'. Both Alejandra's and José's arguments can be interpreted as an attempt to erect gender hierarchies among LGBT persons. As sexual minorities tend to be marginalized, it seemed particularly important for these two individuals to distinguish themselves from other LGBT persons in order to enhance their own position. José's usage of feminine pronouns (for example: *una mariquita*, *una loca*) when he spoke condescendingly about other homosexual men and masculine pronouns when he spoke about himself and what he considered more 'respectable' forms of homosexuality, illustrate how femininity is considered inferior in the struggle for positioning within the framework of hegemonic masculinities. That men who assume what is understood as the feminine

'passive' sexual role are considered more disruptive to the organization's social order also illustrates how feminization is used as strategy for subordinations among LGBT combatants. This has led researchers to suggest a link between violence against sexual minorities and the oppression of women in a context marked by misogyny and patriarchy (Payne, 2016).

In certain cases, this construction of gender hierarchies proved to have a significant impact on other LGBT combatants. In addition to expressing condescending opinions, José also admitted that he had discriminated against other LGBT persons. In one case, he even threatened to kill another homosexual combatant who was making sexual insinuations while a group of combatants were showering together.

I told the commander: You have two options, you remove him or I kill him. I'm not going to be surrounded by crazy queens. The commander responded: 'Doctor'. I said: 'Yes camarada'. 'With all due respect, you are truly strange. You like to sleep with men and this guy is just like you'. I said: 'No, do not confuse me with him! He is a crazy queen, I am gay. When have you seen me going on like that? Send him back home because he is a disgrace to the organization'. (José, homosexual, former member of the FARC)

This incident demonstrates how LGBT identity was not salient among the combatants and neither trust nor support was fomented among LGBT combatants within the AUC and the FARC. On the contrary, this incident demonstrates how José's privileged position enabled him to uphold the hierarchical, hegemonic and gender-discriminatory system as he proved himself more intolerant than his superiors. It serves as another testament to the intersecting vectors of power and identities that influenced the varied experiences of LGBT combatants.

## Conclusion

This article has explored variations in the experiences of LGBT combatants in armed groups in Colombia. The research adopted a comparative perspective, incorporating insights from three different armed groups and, for the first time, listened to the heterogeneous voices of sexual and gender minorities who made up their ranks. The research revealed the following key insights: First, that there are large differences between armed groups that impact the experiences of LGBT combatants. While discrimination has been recounted in all three groups, the AUC and the FARC were reported to have subjected LGBT combatants to violence based on their sexual orientation or gender identity. Both groups were reported to have prohibited, punished and executed LGBT persons in their ranks. Within the AUC extreme sexualized violence was also described to have been used against LGBT combatants because of deviation from heterosexual norms. Within the M-19, on the other hand, hegemonic and non-hegemonic patterns governing sexual orientation and gender identity co-existed. M-19 practices that allowed for inclusion of LGBT combatants therefore stand in stark contrast to the other



two groups. Not only were LGBT persons permitted and accepted, but, during a brief period, the organization even had a special unit composed exclusively of homosexual men. While LGBT combatants tended to remain invisible as a survival strategy, the homosexual unit was formed to vindicate LGBT person's rights. Second, the research demonstrates that even in the AUC and FARC, there are important context-specific exceptions of toleration of deviation from heterosexual norms. As the AUC was a more decentralized organization, this research shows how an individual commander could allow the toleration of LGBT combatants within its ranks. Exceptions also existed in the FARC, despite being a more centralized organization. In the case of a homosexual man who acted as the medical doctor for one of the large blocks of the organization, the line of command chose to accept his sexual orientation. In this case, it seems likely to be because of his skill set being of strategic importance to the organization. This shows how non-state armed groups redefine their own gender constructions to enhance the operational functionality of waging armed struggle. These combatants obtained privileged positions within their respective groups and this research shows how their attempts to enhance their own position enforced discriminatory practices against other LGBT combatants and contributed to the construction of gender hierarchies.

The article also outlines some of the strategies of survival adopted by LGBT combatants. Hiding their sexual orientation and gender identities was the norm in all three groups. However, while former combatants from M-19 described their sexual orientation as a private matter, a question of discretion or something they did not consider a feasible way of life, in the other two groups hiding it was described as a crucial strategy for survival. In order not to generate suspicion of deviation from heterosexual norms, LGBT persons in these groups applied different strategies, ranging from engaging in heterosexual encounters to demobilizing.

This research also shows the complex cultural distinction between gender identity, sexual orientation and sexual conduct in the midst of conflict. Men who were considered heterosexual while engaging in homosexual practices (so called *cacoros*) were reported to be common in all three groups. In the FARC, this particular distinction generated a complex and highly dangerous situation for sexual minorities, as they risked being reported to the commander by their sexual partner and being executed as a result. Strengthening the understanding of the complex and culturally dependent pattern of practices, inconsistencies, and transformations within the groups emerges as a rich field for further research.

In conclusion, I argue that the heterogenic experiences of LGBT combatants and the large variations between different armed groups in Colombia are important to take into consideration in transitional justice and peacebuilding policies and programmes. While armed groups, irrespective of their different ideological persuasions, have been described as a breeding ground for violence and discrimination against LGBT persons, this article points to the important distinctions between different armed groups. This research shows that armed groups do not necessarily need to be understood as a bastion for hegemonic norms governing sexual orientation and gender identities but can in some ways, as in the example of M-19,

promote more equitable practices than the societies in which they operate. Comparative studies of several armed groups within the same country are particularly relevant as they can show the differences between the norms governing sexual orientation and gender identities within armed groups, even when these organizations operate in a similar cultural context. This invites further research to understand how the differences in norms governing sexual orientation and gender identities relate to variations in military strategies and repertoires of violence applied externally and internally by different armed groups as well as the conditions for the transformation of policies governing sexual orientation and gender identities within non-state armed groups. Understanding differences between armed groups within the same country as well as the potential for the evolution of policies and practices within armed groups is also particularly important as it indicates that things can be done differently. Regimes governing gender and sexuality are in constant transformation and peacebuilding can therefore create opportunities for change and more inclusive post-conflict societies. The Colombian peace process with the FARC has, by including LGBTI rights, made remarkable progress and is a unique example to the world. However, while the final peace agreement signed in 2016 includes an unprecedented specific focus on LGBTI rights, LGBT combatants, their rights, needs and vulnerabilities as they transition to civilian life still remain overlooked in Colombia. Understanding that violence against sexual and gender minorities in armed groups is neither ubiquitous nor inevitable suggests that transitional justice mechanisms and policy interventions should not only ensure that these crimes are included in truth-seeking processes but also hold commanders in effective control of their troops legally liable for patterns of violence against sexual and gender minorities, including within their own ranks. While scholars (Tschantret, 2018: 270) have argued that violence against civilian LGBT persons conducted by the FARC has not been systematic and that there exist ‘considerable doubts’ that this violence reflected group policy, my research shows that the execution of LGBT combatants within the organization’s own ranks were carried out in line with policies and practices condoned by the organization’s internal war trials. The interviewed former LGBT combatants called for recognition as well as accountability for these crimes. Lastly, considering how the inclusion of LGBT rights in the peace agreement between the Colombian government and the FARC prompted socially conservative voters to mobilize against the agreement (Krystalli and Theidon, 2016), points to the need to work in a careful and circumspect way to avoid increasing the vulnerabilities of sexual and gender minorities or causing societal backlash. This article contributes to unveiling the experiences of LGBT combatants and provides opportunities for peacebuilding actors to contribute to building more inclusive post-conflict societies for all LGBT persons, in Colombia and beyond.

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## Notes

1. This woman (given the pseudonym of Adriana later in this article), who self-identified as heterosexual, was included due to her experience of sexual practices that fall outside normative heterosexuality. While she was part of the AUC she engaged in a sexual relationship with another woman.
2. Social cleansing (*limpieza social*) refers to the targeted physical attacks, including murder, of socio-economically marginalized persons considered 'undesirable', such as suspected sex workers, drug addicts, people who are homeless or living on the street.
3. While the peace agreement refers to LGBTI persons (with 'I' standing for intersex people), for the purpose of this research I use the widely used abbreviation LGBT as I did not interview any intersex persons. While other formulations include LGBTQ, the sample does not include any ex-combatants self-identifying as queer either. For the purpose of this article I also use 'sexual and gender minorities' (SGMs) to refer to people whose sexual orientation, gender identity or sexual practices fall outside of traditional norms. I also refer to 'sexual orientation and gender identity' (SOGI), which does not indicate a particular group, as all humans have a sexual orientation and different gender identities.
4. The inclusion of LGBT rights made socially conservative segments of Colombia oppose the peace accords. Former Colombian President Álvaro Uribe led the opposition to the peace accords in a campaign against what was framed as attempts to promote a confused 'gender ideology' and communist dictatorship. After the Peace agreement was modified and passed by congress, Colombia's religious groups continued to be powerful actors in the post-plebiscite conversation arguing that the LGBT provisions in the agreement may infringe evangelic principles (Krystalli and Theidon, 2016). In 2018, Ivan Duque, the protégé of former President Alvaro Uribe was elected president pledging to change the peace accords (Murphy and Grattan, 2018).
5. In my interview with her, Victoria Sandino denied any claim that LGBT combatants had ever been punished or executed within the organization.
6. Pseudonyms are used throughout the article to protect the identity of the interviewees. All classifications of ex-combatants' sexual orientation and gender identity are based on their self-identification.

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