

Pride in Our Work



FONDO LUMARIA

Members of the Batucada Manada Callejera in the July 2017 LGBTI Pride Day march in Bogotá, Colombia.

Connecting Struggles

BY BILL FAIRBAIRN, LATIN AMERICA PROGRAM MANAGER



Every life is a meandering stream, with intersecting currents, challenges, and serendipity that shape the choices made and paths taken.

Growing up in southern Ontario in the 1960s, I didn't know a single gay person and remained convinced I was the only one. It was the sense of profound exclusion that led me to leave my community.

My journey took me first to Belgium and France, where I met refugees fleeing the military regimes in Chile and Argentina. The stories I heard impacted me deeply, fuelling a political awakening and engagement with Latin America that continues to this day. In the early 1980s, I spent a semester in Guatemala as a student. The country was on the cusp of the Rios Montt dictatorship, the most brutal period of Guatemala's armed conflict. I witnessed army press gangs grabbing

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Building an Inclusive Peace in Colombia



COLOMBIA DIVERSA

Staff and supporters of Colombia Diversa prepare for a rally in support of Colombia's Peace process.

It was a marriage of convenience: right-wing political forces opposed to Colombia's peace process and fundamentalist church sectors dead set against the LGBTI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and intersex) community, as it is known mostly commonly there. In mid-2016, these forces joined in an attempt

to torpedo a 5-year peace process that had resulted in a final agreement between the Colombian government and the Armed Revolutionary Forces of Colombia (FARC). Their common rallying point was what they referred to as the "gender ideology" in the peace agreement which, they argued, represented a threat to traditional family values.

Colombia's peace agreement is historic as it is the most inclusive developed to date. The advocacy work and input provided by Colombian civil society organizations – among them, Inter Pares counterparts Humanas and Colombia Diversa – were instrumental in shaping the agreement. Not only did the final version integrate a gender perspective, but it also acknowledged the particular impacts the armed conflict had on vulnerable populations, including Colombia's LGBTI community. Over 1,800 LGBTI persons are

In the Slums of Manila, Spreading Openness and Acceptance

Likhaan Community Mobilizer Mark Abellon during a Family Planning Fair for youth in Manila.



DAVID BRUER

Staff and volunteers from the Likhaan Center for Women's Health wear purple shirts because they want to be noticed in the slum neighbourhoods of Metro Manila where they work. The bright colour is recognized by many community members. But some of

the staff and volunteers are even more noticeable because of how they express their gender identity.

Mark and Vere are Likhaan Community Mobilizers, and spend much of each day in neighbourhoods talking to people about contraception and reproductive health. They both identify as transgender. As Mark put it, "I would lie if I said I never faced any problems because of the way I look, but once I explain why I am there, people respect me for my knowledge and they want to learn." They focus on reaching out to young people, finding ways to inform them about sexual and reproductive health, and in the process they are spreading a message of openness and acceptance.

officially recognized as victims of the armed conflict, but it is believed the actual number is much higher.

Colombia Diversa has documented forced displacement, assassinations and so-called “social cleansing” operations against LGBTI persons during and after the armed conflict. The organization has also been a driving force behind many LGBTI legal victories, among them adoption rights and same sex-marriage. Sadly, these victories and the gains made by transgender people in Colombia have produced a backlash of transphobic and homophobic violence.

As Colombia moves forward in implementing the peace agreement, Inter Pares counterparts are playing a key role in pressing for deep transformations to overcome the profound political, social, and economic exclusion that was at the heart of the armed conflict, including respect for LGBTI rights.

For example, our counterpart Fondo Lunaria is providing small grants to diverse and grassroots youth groups engaged in rights protection and peacebuilding. Among them are *Armario Abierto* and *Subversión Marica*. *Armario Abierto* (Open Closet) provides legal support to marginalized communities, and



LGBTI rally in Bogotá's central square Plaza Bolívar.

raises awareness by carrying out workshops on LGBTI rights. Recently it facilitated conversations between demobilized FARC guerrillas and trans women. *Subversión Marica* (Queer Subversion)'s actions challenge damaging ideas about sexual diversity as presented by mainstream culture and some religious leaders.

The forces that oppose inclusive peace in Colombia remain strong, and they dealt the LGBTI movement a dispiriting blow when they marshalled homophobic and transphobic sentiment to convince the public initially to vote against the peace agreement. But the LGBTI movement is resolved to persist, and we draw hope from their determination. ☺

Lene Ojeda is in her thirties and is an experienced Community Mobilizer. She came out as a lesbian when she was 17 and has been with her partner, a Likhaan Community Health Promoter, for the past ten years. Her parents have come to accept her: “They are fine now, but they want me to have babies and I don’t want to,” she laughs. Lene feels proud that she can help others as part of her work because, as she explains, “some women are lesbians but they are still married to men because there is no other way for them.” Lene’s presence in the community quietly offers such women an alternative model.

Since its founding over 25 years ago, Likhaan has welcomed all people, no matter how they identify themselves. They believe that everyone has a right to sexual and reproductive health services, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity. For a few years, Likhaan offered an alternative prom so that LGBTQ2 students could have a

safe space to celebrate. Strained resources led to an end of that popular event.

Likhaan strives to address issues relating to the LGTBQ2 community – no easy challenge, given both limited financial resources and a conservative religious climate that promotes homophobia and transphobia. As Executive Director Dr. Junice Melgar states, “Our LGBTQ2 staff and volunteers are helping to break down stereotypes and to build solidarity and awareness, both among ourselves and in the communities we serve, by challenging restrictive ideas about gender and sexuality – through their work and through living their identities openly.”

Each year, Likhaan staff and volunteers are present in their purple shirts at Manila’s Pride March, which is growing despite challenges presented by the country’s conservative Catholic Church. Attitudes are shifting, and the purple shirts and the people that wear them are helping to bring about that change. ☺

Our LGBTQ2 staff and volunteers are helping to break down stereotypes and to build solidarity and awareness.

Connecting Struggles

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Indigenous youth from buses and heard accounts of growing repression.

Returning to Canada, with fellow students at the University of Guelph, we formed a Latin America solidarity group. This coincided with my own “coming out” as a gay man and to a parallel engagement with the emerging movement we now call the LGBTQ2 movement (lesbian, gay, trans, bisexual, queer, and two-spirited).

As a student activist and then as staff of a Canadian human rights coalition, I helped raise awareness about the widespread

human rights violations taking place throughout Latin America. During frequent visits to Chile, Peru, and Colombia, I met with victims of torture or people searching for their disappeared loved ones, and helped bring their stories to light in places such as the United Nations Human Rights Commission.


With few exceptions, the human rights community I encountered on my trips didn't focus on LGBTQ2 issues. But the suffering was there, and in response, the movement was strengthening. These separate calls for justice – both profoundly human rights struggles – began to intersect more in my life, and more widely.



From left to right: Mildrey Corrales (PCS), Mauricio Albarracín and Marcela Sánchez (Colombia Diversa) with Bill Fairbairn (Inter Pares).

Time and time again, I've seen how every struggle is strengthened when people come together with an open heart, to listen and learn from one another.

Time and time again, I've seen how every struggle is strengthened when people come together with an open heart, to listen and learn from one another. This includes recognizing and acknowledging the privileges we have and the different layers of oppression that can impact marginalized people in distinct ways. This is intersectionality, in real-life terms. For me, coming to terms with my own marginalization, and the questioning of the status quo that this implied, were key to enabling me to identify with other social justice struggles.

At Inter Pares, my beliefs accord with the organization's ethos. Our commitment to long-term struggles, the way we build relationships, our attempt to break down silos between movements – these are central to our work. Challenging gender-based attitudes and behaviours is an important step in dismantling structural and root causes of discrimination and oppression, and bringing about dignity for all. 

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ISSN 0715-4267 • Charitable registration number (BN) 11897 1100 RR000 1
Financial support for the *Bulletin* is provided by Global Affairs Canada.

