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Queering Women, Peace and Security in Colombia

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The Colombian peace accords marked the first time lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) voices were included in the official proceedings for responding to injustices suffered during an armed conflict. Future Women, Peace and Security initiatives should be informed by this inclusion of sexual orientation and gender identity as a concern of gender security in conflict. A queer security analysis of LBT advocacy throughout the Colombian peace process highlights the need for a concerted alliance between LBT advocacy and WPS initiatives.

Most peace and security organizing in the international arena for women today stems from the powerful UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325, the first of now eight WPS resolutions, which mandates that all states include a gender perspective. Passed in 2000, UNSCR 1325 was a landmark win for feminists and continues to be leveraged by women's civil society organizations to protect women during conflict, promote women's political engagement post-conflict and include women in the peace process. But the very title of the framework of WPS begs a queering of the project as a way to investigate *which* women get to be included, since while their sexual orientation and gender identity is crucial for understanding LBT women's lived experiences and thus their experiences of in/security, their queerness remains unexamined in most gender analysis.

The question of whether women who aren't heterosexual, either explicitly or implicitly, get to be included in women's advocacy has proven to be very political in general. Political progress for LGBT human rights in Colombia, like the legalization of same-sex marriage and support for LGBT students, was met with the ideology of the far right, which has argued for a return to "traditional values" and sought to equate gender justice with imposed homosexuality along with forced abortion (Casey 2016). Many were startled by the oversized role gender and concern over "family values" played in the outcome of the Colombian plebiscite about the peace accords (Casey 2016). This argument that the peace accords would create a new "gender ideology" within Colombia served as a way to strengthen conservative opposition in the country.

But some of the tactics used to derail the debate by provoking an anti-LGBT backlash are tired terrain to lesbians who organize for women's rights. A joint report by the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission (now Outright International) and Center for Women's Global Leadership (CWGL) about the ways that sexuality are used to attack women's organizing warns that "states may find it increasingly convenient to invoke, and condemn, the specter of homosexuality in a political context: to stir fear, and to solidify support, or to detract from economic crisis or political controversy", going on to observe that, "In using sexuality-baiting as a 'cover', they can deflect or preclude criticism from civil society: they can also position themselves as representing the 'voice of the people' in projecting a national (heterosexual) identity" (Rothschild 2005: 43).

UN members have long politicized advocacy for sexuality, as well as gender, as a threat against the "traditional" family order. These political ramifications for promoting

the protection of sexual orientation and gender identity as part of human security offer security scholars an insight into what aspects of gender present the greatest insecurities, in conflict situations and elsewhere. In particular, the vulnerability of LGBTI individuals is made evident – a reality reflected in a recent UN Women report about gender and peacebuilding in Colombia, which found that “women have increasingly articulated the particular impacts of the war on children, women and more recently, LGBTI persons” (Bouvier 2016: 19).

Yet although UN reporting about LGBTI rights as part of the WPS agenda is only recent, the advocacy is not. Most of the advocacy for LBT women at the UN has been through transnational initiatives targeting the Human Rights Council. In reviewing this political history, Kollman and Waites explain that while “states and local communities still remain paramount in determining the quality of citizenship enjoyed by LGBT people, the strengthening of the global LGBT human rights movement and the access it has gained to international human rights bodies contributed to making the human rights framing of LGBT politics increasingly dominant in numerous national settings” (2009: 6). However, programmatic work to address the needs of LGBTI individuals remains outside of WPS initiatives when LGBTI people are treated as a separate and discrete third category next to “men” or “women”: adding a third category for LGBTI¹ individuals as though they are outside of the groups “men” and “women” is inadequate for many reasons, not least because of the simple fact that most lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex individuals identify as either men or women.

¹ Furthermore, a person is not “LGBTI,” but rather a person can be one, several or none of those identities depending on their sexual orientation and gender identity, both of which may also change and evolve over time.

With few exceptions (Hagen 2016; McEvoy 2015; Sjoberg and Shepherd 2012), feminist security scholars have so far done little to grapple with the insecurities of women's sexual orientation or gender identities in their gender analysis. Cisprivilege² is the culprit for some of this oversight since it can lead to the assumption that all women are comfortable with their gender assigned at birth with little need to consider their gender identity on a daily basis. Yet what is even more to blame is the continuing divide between policy and practice; the lived experiences of gender variance and the complexities of women's sexualities are neglected in women's advocacy more broadly, with all women presumed to be heterosexual and cisgender.

The perpetuation of heteronormativity in peace and security spaces has dangerous consequences. Writing about women's participation in the Northern Ireland conflict, McEvoy argues that "when that which is deemed natural is heterosexual (and by default, homosexuality 'unnatural'), I suggest that scholars of security studies should pay careful attention" (2015: 143). Colombia provides an illustration of the salience of this warning, with the aforementioned UN Women report observing that "the manipulation of gender norms and 'social cleansing' operations conducted by the paramilitary AUC and its successor organizations have affected LGBTI individuals in particularly insidious ways, often making communities complicit in the physical and emotional persecution against homosexuals and other LGBTI individuals who fail to conform to traditional gender stereotypes" (Bouvier 2016: 14). This observation is supported by other reports, including a joint NGO shadow report from Colombia to CEDAW in 2013 that included a brief section on LGBTI women citing data from the group Colombia Diversa. The report

² Cisprivilege or cisgender privilege refers to the privilege enjoyed by individuals who identify with the sex/gender they are assigned at birth.

found that although much of the impact of armed conflict on the LGBTI population is unknown, “of the known murders of LGBTI people between 2008 and 2012 (580 in total), 22 of the victims were lesbians and 107 transsexual women” (Lopez 2013: 11).

Despite the lack of consideration given to sexual orientation and gender identity in policy and analysis, the WPS architecture allows for grassroots engagement and thereby offers an opportunity for local LBT activists to define their needs on their own terms. Colombian WPS activists made this connection, recognizing the need for gender justice for LBT individuals too. Colombia Diversa activists continue to pressure the Colombian government to make visible the violence faced by LGBT individuals in the country from armed conflict but also ongoing discrimination and prejudices in the country today. Another organization leading this work is Caribe Afirmativo which engaged in “traveling forums and dialogues” in several Colombian cities in 2016 to mobilize LGBTI activists (Maier 2016: 30).

These examples also point to the ways in which ongoing WPS initiatives could support LBT women’s human rights campaigns. To take one current example from Nigeria, it would be possible to support for the rights of the Nigerian lesbians who are currently protesting for same-sex marriage rights following the 2014 Prohibition of Same-Sex Marriage Act. These lesbians live in a country with a designated WPS National Action Plan developed using the tools of UNSCR 1325, yet in November of this year Nigerian activist Ngozi Nwosu-Juba noted that in contrast to “organisations working with men who have sex with men [which] are receiving most of the attention due to HIV prevalence [...], no one has committed to studying or researching some of the issues lesbian and bisexual women face” (Collison 2016). The infrastructure developed for WPS

initiatives within Nigeria, which connects women with a transnational feminist advocacy network, could help support this study and research.

A queer security intervention into the WPS framing as outlined here offers a way to understand the gender insecurities faced not only by lesbians in Nigeria and LBT women in Colombia, but queer women everywhere. Certainly LBT activists in other conflict and post-conflict environments would have even more ideas for how to make these connections and build on existing WPS initiatives. The opportunities for bridging feminist and queer critiques in peace and security work, from both a theoretical standpoint and activist standpoint, have only begun to be explored. Including the concerns of LBT women in WPS advocacy is also a prerequisite for their claims to be taken seriously and made a visible part of the women's movement in a country where their rights are so actively denied. Making these connections between LBT women's rights initiatives and WPS women's empowerment initiatives offers one of the most powerful spaces in which to make claims for gender justice on the international stage.

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