# Exploiting Prejudice: LGBTQI+ People and Armed Groups in Colombia

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**What's new?** The changing nature of armed conflict since the 2016 peace agreement between the Colombian government and left-wing guerrillas has posed new challenges to LGBTQI+ citizens, as threats become more unpredictable and means of self-protection less available. The state has so far been unable to devise an effective response.

**Why does it matter?** Colombia will struggle to achieve lasting peace until violence against marginalised groups such as the LGBTQI+ population stops. Armed groups, often with a degree of community support, exploit the vulnerability of sexual and gender minorities to entrench territorial control, endangering these individuals and perpetuating the conflict.

**What should be done?** State institutions, including law enforcement agencies, must coordinate better to collect accurate data that can help them curb conflict-related violence against LGBTQI+ people, as well as their own discrimination. Parties to current and future peace negotiations should ensure that LGBTQI+ people can safely participate in these talks.

## I. Overview

Colombia's armed conflict has long been marked by attacks on the vulnerable and marginalised, not least lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex (LGBTQI+) people. With conservative cultural norms pervading much of the country to this day, many of these individuals have lived on the fringes of society, where violence can reach them but protection most often does not. Criminal and armed groups target LGBTQI+ people as part of their strategies of territorial control, offering their services in ridding communities of "undesirable" citizens. Picking out LGBTQI+ people for persecution is also a veiled warning to others, illustrating just how pitiless a group can be. Despite a tainted past, in which they often reinforced discrimination and selective violence, state institutions should now strive to provide protection

through better training, data collection and internal protocols to support LGBTQI+ people. The government should also recognise the importance of meeting this population's needs to building a fair, lasting peace in Colombia.

Before the 2016 peace agreement between the government and the guerrilla Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), LGBTQI+ people knew that criminal and armed groups active in the places where they lived tended to have rules dictating when to mete out violence and when not to. LGBTQI+ people could interpret these rules to figure out how to protect themselves – where they were permitted to live and work, whether they should hide their identities in certain circumstances, when and to whom to pay extortion fees. Accordingly, they could take steps to maintain at least a degree of personal safety.

But in recent years, as criminal groups have fragmented while continuing to spar for territorial control, LGBTQI+ people, especially in rural areas, have experienced far greater uncertainty about how to protect themselves. Despite the diverse origins and working methods of the multitude of violent groups operating in Colombia – whether left-wing rebels, groups with longstanding ties to right-wing paramilitaries or criminal syndicates that value financial gain over ideological tenets – these differences seem to matter little when it comes to how they now target LGBTQI+ civilians for harm.

Armed and criminal groups seek to discipline civilians as a means of acquiring legal and illegal income as well as territory. They single out marginalised groups, including LGBTQI+ people, to showcase their ruthlessness, extract information, boost their standing among conservative Colombians who resent the presence of sexual and gender minorities, and project their authority. At the same time, the local leadership of armed groups changes frequently and there is less coherence within them to dictate protocols that once would have provided civilians with stable guidelines as to how to stay safe. The violence to which LGBTQI+ people are exposed, combined with uncertainty as to what rules prevail, makes it exceptionally difficult for LGBTQI+ people to find ways to maintain even a minimal level of security.

Though laws are in place to protect sexual and gender minorities, the state has been unable or unwilling to guarantee their safety. In the 1970s and 1980s, as the conflict (and related violence against LGBTQI+ people) intensified, homosexuality was decriminalised but still suppressed in practice, often through violence including forced labour and torture involving state forces. Police and military officers were not given orders to protect or prevent violence against these minorities; nor were they trained to do so. Instead, they often engaged in further discrimination, including by associating minority sexual orientations and gender identities with left-wing ideologies and, therefore, guerrilla activity. Even now, Colombia's broad set of laws and policies to ensure that state forces and the judicial system fully respect sexual and gen-

der minorities is not reflected in their actions. LGBTQI+ people continue to see state forces as part of the problem, not the solution, as many police officers and justice officials still discriminate against them and institutions are not equipped to register and respond to their cases appropriately.

As it works toward giving marginalised groups a bigger role in efforts to build peace in Colombia, the state should provide physical and legal protection to LGBTQI+ people living in conflict-affected areas, services for survivors, and access to justice and accountability. Parts of the national peacebuilding apparatus could galvanise these efforts by supporting LGBTQI+ participation in future peace talks without putting this population at risk, recording diverse sexual orientations and gender identities in data collection, and ensuring that state security officers are better attuned to these minorities' needs. National and international political and financial backing is vital to ensure that action is taken to prevent armed and criminal groups from continuing to reinforce their territorial control by exploiting prejudice against LGBTQI+ people.

## II. Conflict and LGBTQI+ People in Colombia

During Colombia's decades-long civil war – which formally ended with the 2016 peace agreement between Bogotá and the FARC – socially marginalised groups bore the brunt of violence.[1] Afro-Colombians and Indigenous people were killed in disproportionate numbers. Armed and criminal groups in Colombia used gender-based violence, including sexual violence, against women and girls for a range of reasons, including to reinforce territorial control.[2] LGBTQI+ people were at particular risk, especially in rural areas, where the war was primarily waged.[3] The national registry of victims of conflict-related violence

[1] This briefing is based on interviews, group discussions and correspondence between 2023 and 2025 with dozens of LGBTQI+ citizens and leaders, as well as other residents and experts on the topic. Fieldwork was conducted in person in towns and rural areas in Montes de María, Guaviare, Nariño and Catatumbo, and by electronic means with individuals in Caquetá, Cauca, Chocó, Risaralda, Atlántico, Arauca and Sucre. Some meetings were also held in person or online with people in Bogotá.
[2] Signe Svallfors, "Gender Dynamics During the Colombian Armed Conflict", *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society*, vol. 31, no. 2 (Summer 2024); "Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights on the Situation of Human Rights in Colombia", UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2022; "Deponer las Armas, Retomar las Almas (Laying Down Arms, Reclaiming Souls): Sexual Violence against Men and Boys in the Context of the Armed Conflict in Colombia", All Survivors Project, June 2022; Andrea Wirtz et al., "Gender-based Violence in Conflict and Displacement: Qualitative Findings from Displaced Women in Colombia", *Conflict and Health,* vol. 8 (2014).
[3] "Mi Cuerpo es la Verdad", Colombian Commission for the Clarification of Truth, Coexistence and Non-Repetition, August 2022. See also "Los Órdenes del Prejuicio: Los Crímenes Cometidos Sistemáticamente contra Personas LGBT en el Con-

between 1980 and 2016 reported that 5,360 LGBTQI+ people died – a figure that likely underrepresents the scale of violence against this group, in part because many Colombians fear publicly identifying as LGBTQI+ due to stigma.[4]

The 2016 accord brought with it new efforts to understand the myriad ways in which the conflict affected different parts of the civilian population. The collection of testimonials through the Colombian Commission for the Clarification of Truth, Coexistence and Non-Repetition (hereafter, the Truth Commission), which was set up in the wake of the accord, provided a clearer picture of the high price LGBTQI+ people paid.[5] Violence against these sexual and gender minorities was part of armed and criminal organisations' strategies of territorial control.[6] These attacks often aimed to "cleanse" communities of supposedly undesirable elements, in this case people who transgress traditional gender and sexual identities.[7] Both paramilitaries and guerrillas meted out violence with the purported goal of making individuals conform to traditional gender stereotypes that were integral to the warring parties' cultural values.[8]

flicto Armado Colombiano", Colombia Diversa, July 2020. The Colombian conflict is commonly understood to have started in the 1960s, with the founding of the FARC, the National Liberation Army (ELN) and other left-wing guerrilla groups aiming to overthrow the state. Starting in the 1970s, state-aligned paramilitary groups attempted to quash the guerrillas, eventually organising under the umbrella of the United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia (AUC). Links between these groups and drug trafficking were common beginning in the 1990s, and indeed, groups of all ideologies have had varying degrees of involvement in illegal economies in Colombia over decades of conflict. After the AUC demobilised in 2003-2006 and the FARC drew down after the 2016 peace agreement (explained in detail below), the remaining armed and criminal groups in Colombia are the ELN (the last left-wing guerrillas); FARC dissident factions (which rejected or left the peace process); the Gaitanista Army, made up of former guerrillas and paramilitaries as well as new recruits; and several criminal groups – all seeking to enrich themselves through both licit and illicit businesses such as coca and cocaine production, illegal mining and extortion. See Crisis Group Latin America Report N°105, *The Unsolved Crime in "Total Peace": Dealing with Colombia's Gaitanistas*, 19 March 2024; and Crisis Group Commentary, "Colombia: From 'Total Peace' to Local Peace", 22 January 2025.

[4] "Mi Cuerpo es la Verdad", op. cit.

[5] The 2016 peace agreement ended the conflict between the state and the largest insurgency in the country, the FARC. The agreement aims to address a range of causes and effects of the conflict, from unequal land distribution and access to basic services to accountability and reparations for conflict-related violence. See "Acuerdo Final para la Terminación del Conflicto y la Construcción de una Paz Estable y Duradera", Government of Colombia and FARC, 24 November 2016.

[6] "Los Órdenes del Prejuicio", op. cit.

[7] "La guerra inscrita en el cuerpo: Informe nacional de violencia sexual en el conflicto armado", National Centre for Historical Memory, 2017; "Los Órdenes del Prejuicio", op. cit.

[8] "Mi Cuerpo es la Verdad", op. cit.

Anyone who did not conform to heterosexual norms was considered inferior.[9] Transgender women were forced to wear clothes traditionally worn by men. In some cases, they were subjected to rape and sexualised torture.[10] These tactics formed part of the groups' efforts to enforce a public order that reflected the conservative beliefs of the majority of residents; they took advantage of and reinforced the marginalisation of LGBTQI+ people.

Sometimes, the rationales for this practice were rooted in stereotypes about the health risks that specific groups such as gay men presented.[11] In the 1980s, when HIV/AIDS was spreading globally, right-wing paramilitary organisations carried out massacres of gay and transgender people in rural conflict-affected communities where fears of the illness becoming endemic were widespread.[12] These groups, supposedly safeguarding residents by driving such minorities away, raped and displaced LGBTQI+ people, seized their land, and burnt down or otherwise destroyed their businesses.[13]

These rampages allowed paramilitaries to entrench themselves as a moral – and violent – authority.[14] Paramilitary groups like the United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia (AUC) combined violence with a more disciplinarian approach, based on rules of social conduct for LGBTQI+ people.[15] In San Rafael, a town in the department of Antioquia, they enforced dress codes that prevented gay men and others from having certain hairstyles, wearing jewellery or painting their fingernails – demanding that they behave "like men" in conformity with traditional gender norms.[16] The paramilitary distributed pamphlets that sometimes made direct threats against LGBTQI+ people (alongside drug consumers and sex workers) who, they said, "dirtied their communities" with their presence.[17]

[9] "La guerra inscrita en el cuerpo", op. cit.
[10] "Los Órdenes del Prejuicio", op. cit.
[11] Svallfors, "Gender Dynamics", op. cit.
[12] "Mi Cuerpo es la Verdad", op. cit.
[13] Laura Ávila, "How Colombia's Conflict Intensified Violence against Women and the LGBTQI+ Community", Insight Crime, 4 August 2022; Svallfors, "Gender Dynamics", op. cit.; "Mi Cuerpo es la Verdad", Truth Commission, op. cit.
[14] "La guerra inscrita en el cuerpo", op. cit., pp. 153-157.
[15] The AUC was a coalition of right-wing paramilitary groups that were established to quell leftist guerrilla activity. These groups were known from the late 1970s onward for their extreme violence, infiltration of politics and deeply entrenched control in swathes of territory, especially Antioquia and the surrounding region. See "La expansión: el nacimiento de las Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (1997-2002)", Verdad Abierta, 20 August 2008.
[16] "Mi Cuerpo es la Verdad", op. cit.
[17] M. Sofía Luna Siachoque, "'Maricas, putas, chismosas, y compañía': género y s exualidad en los panfletos de los paramilitares de 2002 a 2010 en el Caribe", Universidad de los Andes, June 2023.

Right-wing groups calling themselves Águilas Negras also repeatedly targeted LGBTQI+ individuals in the 2000s.[18] In the Montes de María region, on the Caribbean coast, pamphlets identified gay men by name, called them "dirty" and "disgusting", and threatened to kill them if they did not leave. A transgender woman and social leader told Crisis Group that when she was a child (living as a boy) in a rural municipality of Nariño, near the border with Ecuador, individuals saying they were Águilas Negras demanded to be allowed to "make that boy into a man".[19] Her mother refused, but when conservative neighbours started harassing the family, they decided to move away.[20]

LGBTQI+ people were also targeted for forced recruitment by paramilitaries and guerrillas alike, often for short periods of time. Once in the ranks, they were generally delegated to do low-ranking jobs: they were used as messengers, cleaners or purveyors of basic medical assistance. Sometimes, they served as sex slaves in the groups' camps, to be tortured and abused at the hands of combatants.[21] After weeks or months of such harm, these individuals were at times either pushed out of the group or murdered when they were no longer needed. Armed and criminal groups of all ideological leanings appear to have viewed this population as particularly expendable, because neither community members nor state institutions were likely to follow up on LGBTQI+ deaths or disappearances.[22]

State forces also targeted LGBTQI+ people. The Truth Commission documented cases in which police and the military snatched individuals from the street in locations including Montes de María, Valle del Cauca (near the Pacific coast) and Antioquia (north west of Bogotá). These state kidnappings could often be traced to allegations that the LGBTQI+ residents were guerrilla informants. On occasion, the arrests happened during raids on places known to be gathering spots for gay men. These crackdowns occurred regularly in Colombia until 1980, when homosexuality was decriminalised.[23]

[18] Águilas Negras is a name adopted by a variety of armed right-wing interests, many of which were fragments of groups stemming from the AUC paramilitaries after their demobilisation in 2003-2006. See "¿Qué o quiénes son las temidas Águilas Negras y por qué las autoridades en Colombia dicen que no existen?", BBC, 17 April 2017.
[19] Crisis Group interview, transgender social leader, Tumaco, Nariño, 29 July 2024.
[20] Ibid.
[21] "Mi Cuerpo es la Verdad", op. cit.; "La realidad de la discriminación: Situación de derechos humanos de las personas LGBTIQ+ en Colombia", Colombia Diversa, December 2023; "Los Órdenes del Prejuicio", op. cit.; Wirtz et al., "Gender-based Violence in Conflict and Displacement", op. cit.
[22] Wirtz et al., "Gender-based Violence in Conflict and Displacement", op. cit.; Svallfors, "Gender Dynamics", op. cit.
[23] The decriminalisation of homosexuality in Colombia came on the heels of a decade of civil society activism, much of which was planned behind closed doors, as conservative cultural norms were still dominant in both cities (which have since become more liberal) and rural areas. In the 1970s, homosexuality was widely con-

Nonetheless, the police continued to harass LGBTQI+ individuals for decades afterward. To be sure, the LGBTQI+ population was not the only group targeted; residents perceived as too leftist, or who did not conform to the cultural and social norms of the majority, were assumed to be aligned with guerrilla groups and wound up in the state authorities' crosshairs.[24] Once LGBTQI+ people were in custody, members of the police or military would often subject them to abuse, including forced labour and torture.[25] The Truth Commission's 2022 report highlighted how these experiences fomented distrust of state institutions among the LGBTQI+ population.[26]

Victims of this violence learned how to survive amid the conflict, particularly in regions that, before the 2016 peace agreement, were controlled by just one group. With one authority in charge, the rules of conduct – even if violently enforced – were clear. Some survivors told Crisis Group that, even though they lived in fear, they could navigate the imposed social rules and take measures to mitigate harm. A transgender woman from Tumaco, Nariño, who now lives abroad due to threats, told Crisis Group that the FARC kidnapped and raped her. After that, the group agreed not to menace her further as long as she dressed as a man and served as an informant for the rebels.[27]

Other transgender women and gay men described how they had been able to make monthly payments to groups, including the FARC, in exchange for protection. By making these payments and hiding their sexual orientation and gender identity in accordance with armed group regulations – such as not holding hands with their partners in the

sidered an illness, a form of social deviance or an impurity that could and should be remedied. The next decade saw a degree of change in social attitudes toward LGBTQI+ people, especially in cities, for example with the first Gay Pride parade in Bogotá in 1982, but traditional conservative beliefs remained entrenched in many parts of the country, as they do to this day. See Guillermo Correa Montoya, *Raros: Historia cultural de la homosexualidad en Medellín, 1890-1980* (Medellín, 2017); "1982 o 1983: ¿cuándo fue la primera marcha del orgullo en Colombia?", *Sentiido*, 18 April 2022.

[24] In efforts to battle leftist political ideology in Colombia and elsewhere in Latin America from the 1960s through the 1980s, state forces often sought out and tried to silence those whose sexual orientation and gender identity, among other aspects of their personal identity and behaviour, differed from those of the majority or what was considered "normal". Minority sexual orientations and gender identities were perceived as liberal – and as such leftist and deserving of repression. See "La realidad de la discriminación", op. cit.; "Mi Cuerpo es la Verdad", op. cit.; and Montoya, "Raros: Historia cultural", op. cit.

[25] "Mi Cuerpo es la Verdad", op. cit.

[26] In one case highlighted in the commission's report, a transgender woman was targeted by a rebel group that alleged she had spread AIDS in her community, threatening to kill her if she did not leave. When she took the message to the police, the officer laughed at her, saying, "But what the pamphlet says is true". Realising she would not find protection from the state, she left her hometown. " Mi Cuerpo es la Verdad", op. cit.

[27] Crisis Group interview, transgender woman, Tumaco, Nariño, 29 July 2024.

street, not dressing in bright colours and not wearing their hair in certain styles – they could stay in their communities and go about their daily lives.[28]

## III. A New Wave of Targeted Violence

Since the 2016 peace agreement, the small degree of certainty that LGBTQI+ people in rural areas had about the ways they could navigate armed and criminal group codes of conduct has gradually diminished. While violence dropped sharply straight after the FARC's demobilisation, the remaining rebel groups and existing or new criminal outfits have continued to vie for territorial control, leading to a subsequent resurgence of conflict-related violence in the countryside, particularly killings, restrictions on movement and disappearances.[29] These groups constantly seek opportunities to dominate and co-opt communities through violence and by controlling the provision of goods and services.[30] Territorial disputes are frequent, and group leaders change often. As a result, relationships with local people are in constant flux, as are the tactics the armed and criminal groups use to subjugate civilians.

### A. *Entrenched Cultural Norms*

Amid this reconfiguration of the Colombian conflict, LGBTQI+ people find themselves exposed to violence because of their marginal status in rural society, the discrimination directed at them by neighbours and a lack of state protection. Historically prevalent conservative cultural norms persist. Traditional concepts of masculinity and femininity – for example, of men as protectors of the family and community and women as domestic caregivers – are entrenched in several parts of society, albeit not universally.[31] National public approval of same-sex marriage and adoption hovers at just above 50 per cent, with the former legal in Colombia since 2016 and the latter since 2015.[32]

Anti-LGBTQI+ sentiment played a role in voters' rejection of the 2016 peace agreement, which was put up for referendum on 2 October

[28] Crisis Group interviews, LGBTQI+ individuals in Colombia, 2023-2025.
[29] Crisis Group Latin America Report N°98, *Protecting Colombia's Most Vulnerable on the Road to "Total Peace"*, 24 February 2023; Crisis Group Commentary, "Tackling Colombia's Next Generation in Arms", 27 January 2022; Crisis Group Report, *The Unsolved Crime in "Total Peace"*, op. cit.; Crisis Group Commentary, "Colombia: From 'Total Peace' to Local Peace", op. cit.
[30] Crisis Group Report, *The Unsolved Crime in "Total Peace"*, op. cit.; Crisis Group Commentary, "Colombia: From 'Total Peace' to Local Peace", op. cit.
[31] Cristal Downing et al., "The Gendered Dynamics of Conflict and Peacebuilding in Colombia", United Nations University – Centre for Policy Research, November 2021.
[32] "Orgullo LGBT+ 2024: Una encuesta IPSOS Global Advisor en 26 países", IPSOS, June 2024.

2016.[33] Opponents of the accord mischaracterised efforts by the education ministry to ensure that schools were free of discrimination, primarily through materials distributed to teachers and administrators.[34] Opponents falsely argued that this initiative was a government scheme to teach children how to be homosexual. They also conflated the ministry's efforts with the extensive gender-related provisions in the peace accord, which recognised the impact of the conflict on women, girls and LGBTQI+ people, and proposed reparations and institutional reforms that would make it easier for them to participate in public life and get access to land and basic services. The opposition argued that the deal would impose a "gender ideology", with a view to upending traditional gender roles in the country. Their arguments contributed to the victory of the "no" vote in the referendum.[35]

Although the violent organisations active in Colombia today have different origins and ideological leanings, they uniformly appear to be targeting LGBTQI+ people.[36] As the groups attempt to solidify their territorial grip and control of communities, they deploy violence against LGBTQI+ people as a way to show off their muscle. Because conservative values still prevail in many parts of the country, these groups also believe targeted violence will help them be seen as serving the locals' interest in driving away "undesirable" citizens. Meanwhile, state forces continue to discriminate and even carry out violence against LGBTQI+ people, seemingly motivated by prejudices like those exploited by armed groups in rural areas.[37]

[33] The referendum on the Colombian peace agreement was held on 2 October 2016 with the goal of allowing the citizenry to endorse the accord. Those who said "no" won with 50.2 per cent of the vote, placing the accord in legal and political limbo. The negotiating parties embarked on further discussions with the political forces that had campaigned for a "no" vote, led by former President Álvaro Uribe. The result was a modified agreement that was adopted by the government and the FARC on 24 November 2016 and ratified in Congress at the end of that month. For more information on the referendum, see "Radiografía del Plebiscito y el Posplebiscito", Fundación Ideas para la Paz, 2016.

[34] The materials were the state's response to a Constitutional Court ruling in favour of the family of a young man who had killed himself after being bullied in school for being gay. "Ministerio denuncia campaña de manipulación masiva sobre revisión de manuales de convivencia para engañar a padres de familia", Colombian Education Ministry, 13 August 2016; "Desmintiendo los mitos sobre la 'Ideología de Género' en Colombia", Washington Office on Latin America, 25 October 2016.

[35] "La cruzada ideológica que une a sectores conservadores en Colombia", *El Tiempo*, August 2019; "Desmintiendo los mitos sobre la 'Ideología de Género' en Colombia", op. cit.

[36] By mentioning armed and criminal groups together in this briefing, Crisis Group does not mean to imply that they are similar in all characteristics or in legal terms. Interviews with LGBTQI+ people nevertheless revealed that violence perpetrated against them does not always clearly differ from one armed group to another. Crisis Group interviews, LGBTQI+ individuals in Colombia, 2023-2025.

[37] "La realidad de la discriminación", op. cit.

## B. *Profiting from Discrimination*

Armed and criminal groups often take advantage of conservative mores in communities where minority sexual orientations and gender identities are not widely accepted – or, in many cases, are wholeheartedly rejected. These organisations offer to get rid of "undesirable" individuals, using means ranging from forcibly displacing LGBTQI+ residents to attempting to regulate their daily lives. As targets of extortion, LGBTQI+ people are forced to pay not only for protection but also for the right to express their identities through clothing and hairstyles.[38] On top of money, they are often required to make an "extra" payment in the form of sexual acts, and when they do not comply, the punishment may involve physical violence.[39] LGBTQI+ people with whom Crisis Group spoke often referred to themselves as being in a "category" of person that fellow residents could not tolerate – they were seen as "men who wanted to be women and women who wanted to be men". Outraged locals, they said, would on occasion seek out members of armed groups to drive LGBTQI+ people away from their towns.[40]

This discrimination is widespread across Colombia. In Pereira, a city to the west of Bogotá, a criminal group known as La Cordillera allows transgender women to work only in certain areas. To gain permission to work elsewhere, they are forced to have sex with group members.[41] If gay men and other LGBTQI+ people breach the rules, rape and other forms of physical violence are often the punishment.[42] In Tumaco, a town on the Pacific coast in southern Colombia, gay men and transgender women said they were seen as a social category "even lower than women, who are seen as being only for cooking and reproduction".[43] Tumaco residents mock LGBTQI+ individuals in the street; locals have asked FARC dissident group members to drive away LGBTQI+ people who refuse intimidating requests to hand over money or change the way they dress and express their identity. Cases have been reported of LGBTQI+ individuals being forced by the dissidents to pay fines of 5 million pesos (approximately $1,250) and given a deadline of a few hours before they had to leave the area or face violent consequences.[44]

[38] Crisis Group interviews, LGBTQI+ people in Colombia, 2023-2025.
[39] Ibid. See also "Montes de María: mujeres, niñas y personas LGBTIQ+ en riesgo de violencia sexual", Caribe Afirmativo, 13 December 2022.
[40] Crisis Group interviews, social leader in Tumaco, Nariño, 13 June 2024; LGBTQI+ individuals in Colombia, 2023-2025.
[41] Crisis Group telephone interview, representative of state accountability entity in Pereira, 17 July 2024.
[42] Crisis Group interview, gay man teacher, Nariño, 29 July 2024.
[43] Crisis Group interviews, LGBTQI+ leaders, Tumaco, Nariño, 29 July 2024.
[44] Crisis Group interview, gay man, Tumaco, Nariño, 29 July 2024.

Displacement is common.[45] In a rural municipality of Guaviare, in the south west of the country, locals asked the FARC dissident Jorge Suárez Briceño bloc to remove lesbians, transgender women and gay men because they were supposedly encouraging young people to consume drugs and participate in "lesbianism".[46] Similarly, lesbian and transgender women interviewed by Crisis Group in Catatumbo, near Venezuela, said the 33rd Front FARC dissident group had forced them to leave their communities. They headed to nearby Ocaña, only to experience similar discrimination from the police.[47] Rebel groups including FARC dissidents and the ELN have beaten, threatened and raped LGBTQI+ people.[48]

Armed and criminal groups do not just react to existing prejudices within communities, but they also actively incite them. They push messages riddled with stereotypes, including that gay men are carriers of HIV/AIDS. This disinformation is then used to make residents think they are at risk, which allows the group to step in as protector.[49] In the municipality of Roberto Payán, in Nariño, the FARC dissident group Alfonso Cano Western Bloc, claiming it was trying to rid the area of illness, said all gay men had to either leave or be killed because they were perceived to be carriers of HIV/AIDS.[50] Rebels stole HIV rapid testing kits and forced men whom they suspected were gay to take the test, killing or displacing the men if the result was positive.[51] In Catatumbo, both the ELN and the 33rd Front have threatened and killed people accused of having the disease. They have targeted individuals on social media, saying they were driving them away to prevent local people from getting sick.[52] LGBTQI+ people, afraid, often leave their hometowns as a result.[53]

On occasion, armed and criminal groups have tried to distance themselves from discrimination against and targeting of sexual minorities as they look for political gain at the national level. The Gaitanista Army, for example, exploited its supposed support for the cause of

[45] Redacción Colombia +20, "La violencia en los Montes de María amenaza a la población LGBT", *El Espectador*, 21 August 2020.
[46] Crisis Group interview, transgender woman, Guaviare, 4 September 2024.
[47] Crisis Group interviews, LGBTQI+ people in Ocaña, Norte de Santander, October 2024.
[48] Crisis Group interviews, LGBTQI+ individuals in Colombia, 2023-2025.
[49] Such disinformation was rife during the COVID-19 pandemic, when rebel groups conflated HIV/AIDS and the coronavirus, saying gay men, because they were likely carriers of HIV/AIDS, were more likely to be infected with COVID-19. Crisis Group correspondence, LGBTQI+ rights expert in Colombia, 18 August 2025.
[50] Crisis Group interview, gay man in Tumaco, Nariño, 30 July 2024.
[51] Crisis Group telephone interview, health care provider in Colombia, 9 July 2025.
[52] Crisis Group interviews, LGBTQI+ people in Ocaña, Norte de Santander, October 2024.
[53] Something as simple as losing weight can be enough for an LGBTQI+ individual to get threats, due to the perception that the person must be infected with HIV/AIDS. Crisis Group interview, bisexual man in Tumaco, Nariño, 30 July 2024.

LGBTQI+ rights in a bid to engage in negotiations with the Colombian government.[54] In April 2023, the criminal group was accused of assassinating transgender leader Diana Polo, known as "La Pola", in Carmen de Bolívar, a town on the Caribbean coast, after pamphlets signed by the outfit threatened LGBTQI+ people with "extermination".[55] The Gaitanistas denied their involvement, saying LGBTQI+ people deserve respect, adding that sexual and gender minorities are part of the richness of communities that cannot be repressed.[56] Activists in the region pointed to the hypocrisy in the group's embrace of progressive language about LGBTQI+ rights and simultaneous violence against this and other marginalised groups.[57]

### C. *Interactions with Volatile Armed and Criminal Groups*

Power over communities has become a prominent characteristic of the Colombian conflict in recent years, for understandable reasons: control of local people enables groups to gain access to legal and illegal income, as well as territory.[58] Residents of areas under illicit groups' control repeatedly told Crisis Group that these organisations are more entrenched than ever before. That said, the norms armed outfits impose are constantly evolving, mirroring frequent changes in organisational leadership and modus operandi as well as inter-group disputes. An LGBTQI+ leader in the Atlántico region on the Caribbean coast attributed the increase in murders of LGBTQI+ people there to what he called "mutations" in group structure: "We're not talking about a conflict where the actors have a clear structure like the [former] FARC. Now we're talking about actors that function through networks and franchises, fighting over micro-trafficking networks. … Today [the

[54] The Gaitanistas, also known as the Gulf Clan, are a criminal group comprised mainly of former members of defunct right- and left-wing armed and criminal groups as well as soldiers from the Colombian army. They are the largest non-state armed group in the country and control large swathes of territory. See Crisis Group Report, *The Unsolved Crime in "Total Peace"*, op. cit. In Colombia, a group's legal status as either political or criminal group influences the kind of dialogue it may enter with the government. Political groups can enter peace processes that can end in agreements featuring policy reforms and transitional justice measures, possibly including amnesties for certain crimes, whereas criminal groups cannot. Armed outfits that wish to enter talks often try to position themselves as political groups in order to reap the benefits of a peace process.

[55] The Gaitanistas, however, often subcontract local gangs to quell social activism violently and enforce their rules. Six months prior to La Pola's assassination, WhatsApp messages signed by the Gaitanista Army threatened LGBTQI+ people in neighbouring Cesar department, saying they (along with drug users, police officers and others who the group said encourage children to commit crimes) should not leave their homes after 10pm. "Tras doce días de haber sido víctima de un atentado en el Carmen de Bolívar, Dania Sharith Polo 'La Pola' falleció", Caribe Afirmativo, 12 May 2023.

[56] Communiqué by the Gaitanista Army of Colombia, 13 May 2023.

[57] Ibid. Crisis Group interviews, LGBTQI+ leaders, Colombia, 2024.

[58] Crisis Group Commentary, "Colombia: From 'Total Peace' to Local Peace", op. cit.

authorities] capture a [paramilitary] leader and the next day there's another leader [in place]".[59]

In a symptom of the disjointed nature of today's conflict in Colombia, local units and even individual members decide how to approach LGBTQI+ residents. Rank-and-file members often operate independently of their unit commanders, and the commanders, in turn, frequently stray from the organisational directives issued at the national level.[60]

Hence, even if a commander in a certain location does not view LGBTQI+ people with hostility and does not call for violent action against them, there is no guarantee that the rank and file will take a similar approach. "The fear isn't just about the leadership", a bisexual man told Crisis Group. "The ones below also change the pattern and arrive with different priorities for the neighbourhood".[61] The less cohesion a group has, the more its members exploit opportunities to win the favour of locals, creating less predictable conditions for LGBTQI+ people.[62] Overall, "the changes in the rules are a terrible thing" and make it difficult to predict if an interaction with the group will be violent.[63] It is hard for LGBTQI+ people to protect themselves.[64]

The experiences of LGBTQI+ residents in Tumaco illustrate how much the rules of the game changed after 2016. A gay man and a bisexual man living in the town told Crisis Group that the FARC followed strict instructions from the national leadership. Once directives had been communicated to combatants and community members alike, they would settle into compliance even if the threat of violence was still latent. Now several factions of FARC dissident groups are vying for control of the town. They have more autonomy from their national commanders and can decide – seemingly erratically – to change how they regulate the places they control.[65]

Indeed, behaviour and identities that were not targeted one day might be impermissible the next.[66] In the words of a gay man living in Barbacoas, near Tumaco, "the price we pay [for these changes in group dynamics] is uncertainty. … Are they going to do something to me because I'm gay?"[67] A transgender woman told Crisis Group that

[59] Crisis Group telephone interview, LGBTQI+ leader, 22 July 2024; Crisis Group interview, gay man, Tumaco, Nariño, 29 July 2024.
[60] Crisis Group Latin America Briefing N°52, *Rebel Razing: Loosening the Criminal Hold on the Colombian Amazon*, 18 October 2024.
[61] Crisis Group interview, bisexual man, Tumaco, Nariño, 29 July 2024.
[62] Crisis Group interviews, LGBTQI+ individuals in Colombia, 2023-2025.
[63] Crisis Group interview, transgender man, Tumaco, Nariño, 29 July 2024.
[64] Ibid.
[65] Crisis Group interviews, LGBTQI+ individuals in Tumaco, Nariño, 29 and 30 July 2024.
[66] Crisis Group interviews, LGBTQI+ individuals in Colombia, 2024.
[67] Crisis Group interview, gay man, Tumaco, Nariño, 29 July 2024.

the FARC dissident groups in her area are now more "inhumane", using sexual violence more frequently than the former FARC did, and more often in combination with other types of physical violence such as beatings.[68]

Attitudes change from location to location, even within the same group. One example is the FARC dissident group Central Armed Command (EMC), which operates throughout Cauca, in the west of Colombia. In the town of Miranda, the EMC distributed pamphlets threatening LGBTQI+ people in a bid to prevent them from pursuing activism for gay rights and other issues. The group told the activists they were "undesirable", adding that they had to stop their work or suffer the consequences, which the victims assumed would be violent.[69] Similarly, in the nearby town López de Micay, the EMC has killed transgender people. A local civic leader contrasted the intimidation with what happens in Guapi, also in Cauca, where LGBTQI+ people have been able to hold marches to mark the International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia in recent years. There, the EMC allows LGBTQI+ people to express their identities publicly without fear of repercussions.[70]

Before the peace agreement, LGBTQI+ people could at least find a degree of safety in settings where they felt they belonged and were accepted, such as cultural or dance groups or gay bars. But these settings no longer reliably offer solace. The leaders of a regional organisation working for LGBTQI+ rights in Tumaco, Nariño, recounted how gay men or transgender women had previously found protection in their roles as *cantaores* or traditional singers at funerals. But various FARC dissident groups have attacked them at these rituals.[71]

### D. *Recruiting LGBTQI+ People*

When not harassing or displacing LGBTQI+ people, armed and criminal groups often recruit them as sources of intelligence about goings-on in the places they live. A national census that took place from February 2023 to January 2024 found that 56 per cent of LGBTQI+ people across the country were employed as day labourers or in other low-skilled informal roles, compared to 43 per cent of non-LGBTQI+ people. In rural areas in particular, a large proportion of LGBTQI+ people work in jobs that place them within earshot of conversations about what is happening in their communities, including in discotheques, bars and hair salons.[72] Rebels have forced LGBTQI+ people to act as

[68] Crisis Group interview, transgender woman, Tumaco, Nariño, 29 July 2024.
[69] Crisis Group interview, gay man social leader, Cauca, 24 June 2024.
[70] Crisis Group interview, gay man social leader, Cauca, 24 June 2024.
[71] Crisis Group interviews, gay man, LGBTQI+ leaders, Tumaco, Nariño, 29 July 2024.
[72] "Boletín técnico Gran Encuesta Integrada de Hogares", Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadistica, February 2023-January 2024.

lookouts, share information they overhear or take advantage of the workplace to ask questions during their interactions with residents.[73] In essence, information is often considered an alternative currency to money when extorting LGBTQI+ people, particularly gay men.

Given that they are discriminated against by neighbours and the state alike, and are less likely to receive protection from the authorities, many feel compelled to comply with groups' requests. "Since there's no protection from the state, the groups think they can do what they want with us. If a gay man … is thrown out by his family, society shouts 'faggot', 'ugly', 'sick' at him – those patterns of disprotection [sic] make us more vulnerable to armed actors".[74]

Of course, the sharing of information exacerbates the risks and stigma LGBTQI+ individuals face. The perception that this community divulges information only raises further suspicions in a climate that is already hostile.[75] An activist on transgender rights told Crisis Group that pressure to share information comes not just from non-state armed groups; the armed forces also see bartenders and hairdressers as "banks of information about community life" and threaten violence against LGBTQI+ people if they do not share the information they learn in their day-to-day work.[76]

In addition to shaking down LGBTQI+ residents for informal intelligence, the armed outfits also exert pressure in other ways that serve their interests. For example, several LGBTQI+ people told Crisis Group that both FARC dissident factions in Tumaco and the Gaitanistas in Montes de María had put pressure on them to store weapons or drugs at their workplaces or to transport narcotics.[77] Others had been repeatedly visited at their homes and raped by members of the armed groups themselves, or, in the case of sex workers, forced to share earnings with the local commanders.[78] Some armed syndicates have also coerced LGBTQI+ individuals, particularly transgender women, into sex work.[79]

[73] Crisis Group interviews, LGBTQI+ people in Colombia, 2023-2025.
[74] Crisis Group interview, transgender woman in Quibdó, Chocó, 29 August 2024.
[75] Crisis Group interviews, transgender woman; gay man, Tumaco, Nariño, 29 July 2024.
[76] Crisis Group interview, transgender leader in Caquetá, 17 June 2024.
[77] A gay man in Montes de María said the Gaitanistas had tried to force him multiple times to carry drugs for them. He had refused, but now he was afraid that they would kill him if he did not leave the area. Crisis Group interview, September 2023. Others recounted similar experiences. Crisis Group interviews, transgender woman in Tumaco, Nariño, 29 July 2024; gay man, Tumaco, Nariño, 29 July 2024.
[78] Crisis Group interviews, bisexual man, Tumaco, 29 July 2024; transgender woman in Quibdó, Chocó, 29 August 2024. Crisis Group telephone interviews, LGBTQI+ leader, 22 July 2024; representative of state body in Pereira, 17 July 2024.
[79] Crisis Group telephone interview, representative of state body in Pereira, 17 July 2024.

### E. *Threats from State Officials*

As mentioned above, the state is not always a trustworthy source of protection for LGBTQI+ people. In fact, some LGBTQI+ people interviewed for this briefing said they perceived greater risks from state forces than from armed groups. To be sure, it can be difficult to know whether members of the armed forces and police are working only for the state or if they have been corrupted or coerced into collaborating with violent local outfits. In rural areas of Nariño, Chocó, Guaviare, Catatumbo and Cauca, all of which are under the control of various armed organisations, locals told Crisis Group they fear that Gaitanistas, ELN members and FARC dissidents have infiltrated local authorities. When LGBTQI+ people are targeted with violence, they often refrain from reporting it to the authorities, for fear of retaliation.[80]

Beyond criminal co-optation, it is unclear whether state officials are aware of national non-discrimination directives meant to safeguard LGBTQI+ people. A lesbian woman in Ocaña, Catatumbo, near the Venezuelan border, told Crisis Group that police officers tasked with ensuring security at a gay pride march were shouting "get out of here, *marimacha"*, a pejorative term similar to "tomboy".[81] A transgender woman in Quibdó said her bodyguard, who was assigned to her by the National Protection Unit and was required to attend training sessions about LGBTQI+ rights, made derogatory comments to her all the same.[82]

Sometimes, the abuse extends beyond employing hateful rhetoric. The same transgender woman in Quibdó told Crisis Group that the army charged her a fee for carrying out sex work in the neighbourhood it was patrolling.[83] Lesbian and transgender women said police officers in Ocaña have accused them of corrupting and raping children, as well

[80] For example, a gay man from Bagadó, Chocó, described to Crisis Group how he had organised an LGBTQI+ pride parade, which most residents did not like because they thought the marchers were trying to "indoctrinate" young people into being gay. At the time, the man had a contract to work with the mayor's office, so his colleagues were aware that he was responsible for organising the march. He believed that the mayor's office had shared that information with the FARC dissident group present in Bagadó, and they had come to threaten him, eventually forcing him to flee to nearby Quibdó. Crisis Group interviews, LGBTQI+ individuals in Colombia, 2024; gay man, Quibdó, Chocó, 10 September 2024.

[81] Crisis Group interview, lesbian woman, Ocaña, Norte de Santander, 14 October 2024.

[82] Crisis Group interview, transgender woman in Quibdó, Chocó, 29 August 2024. In Guaviare, a transgender woman reported that both the mayor's office and local notaries refused to register her for public services under her new legal name, demanding instead that she be registered under her birth name. This discrimination – which she described as worse than what she had experienced from armed and criminal groups – made her reluctant to engage further with the state on matters of protection or anything else. Crisis Group interview, transgender woman in Guaviare, 4 September 2024.

[83] Crisis Group interview, transgender woman in Quibdó, Chocó, 29 August 2024.

as of having HIV/AIDS. They explained that it was common for police officers to force LGBTQI+ people, particularly gay men and transgender women, to engage in sexual acts in order to avoid paying fines for questionable charges against them.[84] In one case, a gay man was taken to the police station on accusations of insubordination, and he was forced to choose between paying a fine (which he was unable to afford) or performing oral sex on a police officer in order to leave the station.[85]

The leaders of the national police in Bogotá are aware that discrimination and homophobic attitudes affect the force's work across the country, and they told Crisis Group that they are offering training and updating their protocols to address prejudice.[86] The effects of state discrimination are particularly damaging in communities affected by conflict, where it adds to the uncertainty that LGBTQI+ residents feel regarding their safety. As they have little recourse to protection or justice, their relationship with the state is one of estrangement.[87]

## IV. Policy Responses

Violence against LGBTQI+ people continues despite initiatives by the Colombian state to enshrine their rights in law, protect them, provide accountability and support their participation in the rollout of the 2016 peace agreement and other peacebuilding measures. Colombian law requires ministries and other state bodies to work with civil society to monitor investigative, legal and violence prevention initiatives aimed at supporting and protecting the LGBTQI+ community, in a coordinated effort led by the Ministry of Equality and Equity, which was created in June 2023, toward the end of President Gustavo Petro's first year in office.[88] National and local government offices are required to lift barriers to providing services, including discrimination by public officials. The state is also supposed to lay out accountability and pre-

[84] Crisis Group interviews, LGBTQI+ people in Ocaña, Norte de Santander, October 2024.
[85] Ibid.
[86] Crisis Group interview, National Police officials, Bogotá, 13 December 2024.
[87] Crisis Group interviews, LGBTQI+ individuals in Colombia, 2024. See also "Alerta Temprana N°019-2023", Ombudsperson's Office of Colombia (Defensoria del Pueblo), 19 May 2023.
[88] Government of Colombia, Article 116, Law 2294 of 2023 requires the national defence, justice, interior and education ministries to address LGBTQI+ populations' needs and priorities in their work and not allow their personal views or biases to influence how they run "technical assistance" programs for LGBTQI+ populations. See Government of Colombia, Decree 1227 of 2015; Government of Colombia, Decree 2340 of 2015; Colombian Ministry of Justice, "Guía de Atención a Mujeres y Personas LGBTI en los Servicios de Acceso a la Justicia", 2019; Colombian Ministry of Equality and Equity, "Orientaciones de Equidad de Género y Derechos de la Población LGBTIQ+ para formulación de los planes de Desarrollo territorales"; and others.

vention policies at the national, subnational and local levels to address violence and discrimination against LGBTQI+ people, among other vulnerable and marginalised groups, not least by making sure that legal representation and other judicial assistance is available to victims of such violence.[89]

### A. *Protection and Other Measures by Security Institutions*

LGBTQI+ people in conflict-affected areas told Crisis Group that the state force with which they interact the most is the national police. For more than a decade, both the police and the military have stated there is "zero tolerance" for gender-based violence and have recognised the need to address discrimination and violence against LGBTQI+ people.[90] Leaders of the national police also encourage local police stations to seek opportunities to build trust with LGBTQI+ groups, for example by providing support and protection for gay pride parades.[91]

Members of the security forces recognise that more progress must be made to ensure the institutions they work for prevent – rather than compound – violence against vulnerable groups. National police officers and other government representatives told Crisis Group that one of the biggest challenges is changing the attitudes of police working in conflict-affected communities. Frequent rotation means there is no guarantee that officers working at a given location have been trained on this topic.[92] (Of course, some hold personal prejudices that may

[89] See the laws referenced in fn 88 above. A new bill to strengthen social protection and services for transgender people, which aims both to prevent discrimination and violence against these people and to ensure that when such violence occurs the state is better equipped to meet their needs, is under consideration in Congress. On 20 June, it passed the first of four congressional debates needed for it to become law. Some LGBTQI+ leaders hailed this event as a major step toward the bill's enactment into law, but others highlighted to Crisis Group that conservative opposition to the bill remains strong and will likely coalesce along party lines in the run-up to the 2026 presidential election. Crisis Group correspondence, LGBTQI+ leaders in Colombia, 14-16 July 2025. See also Colombian House of Representatives, "Aprobada en primer debate la Ley Integral Trans", 24 June 2025; and Fernando Alvarez-Molina et al., "Bodies That Resist: Transgender People's Health and Rights in Colombia", Health and Human Rights, vol. 9, no. 1 (June 2025).

[90] Such directives have attempted to make clear that state forces should be ready to carry out criminal investigations into the kinds of violence described above, including sexual violence, threats and extortion that draw on homophobic, anti-transgender or other discriminatory beliefs. Colombian Defence Ministry, "Política Pública Sectorial de Transversalización del Enfoque de género para el personal uniformado de la Fuerza Pública 2018-2027", 2018; Johny Hernando Bautista Beltrán and Miguel Ángel Arenas Vesga, "El rol de la fuerza pública en la protección de las identidades de género diversas en Colombia", Escuela Superior de Guerra General Rafael Reyes Prieto, 2023.

[91] Crisis Group interview, National Police officers, Bogotá, 13 December 2024.

[92] Crisis Group interviews, civil society representatives and officials from Colombian government agencies, Bogotá, December 2024. Crisis Group telephone interview, LGBTQI+ rights expert, 10 January 2025.

prevent them from following the guidelines even after undergoing training.[93]) A defence ministry official highlighted similar challenges in motivating rank-and-file soldiers to adhere to internal protocols regarding treatment of LGBTQI+ individuals.[94] A staffer of another state body also said it was difficult to motivate justice officials to attend training sessions and take them seriously.[95]

There are also challenges related to inter-institutional coordination. One recurring difficulty has to do with the differences in the ways that each institution records sex and gender – if they note sexual orientation at all. For example, the Attorney General's Criminal Notice Form, used to record cases of criminal violence (for example by criminal groups), only lists "male" and "female" options, meaning that information on sexual and gender minorities is often lost.[96] The same entity's form for recording cases of violence that should be processed in the transitional justice system, for example by armed groups such as the ELN, includes sexual orientation.[97] Furthermore, forms used to self-report cases of violence to the police are similar, but the national police told Crisis Group that they have more options on internal forms used to handle cases within the institution. In the latter case, they can record sexual orientation and gender identity, even if not all officers do so uniformly.[98]

Depending on how a case is reported, on which form and by which institution, violence against a transgender woman, then, may be recorded according to her biological sex registered at birth and not gender identity, but this decision rests solely with the officer in charge. It is therefore hard to involve the right state institutions to support the

[93] Crisis Group interviews, National Police officers, Bogotá, 13 December 2024; Crisis Group telephone interviews, government representatives, 28 August 2025.
[94] Crisis Group telephone interview, defence ministry official, 22 June 2025.
[95] Government officials pointed out that training takes place online, with the goal of reaching officers in many locations at once. It is easy, however, for officers to switch off the camera and listen half-heartedly rather than absorb the session's content. Crisis Group interviews, civil society representatives and Colombian government officials, Bogotá, December 2024; Crisis Group telephone interviews, Colombian government representatives, 28 August 2025.
[96] Crisis Group interviews, National Police officers, Bogotá, 13 December 2024; Colombian government officials, Bogotá, December 2024. See also Colombian Attorney General's Office, "Formato único de noticia criminal". For more on inter-institutional coordination, see Government of Colombia, Decree 762 of 2018; Government of Colombia, Law 1448 of 2011; "Compromiso de la Policía con la Población LGBT", Caribe Afirmativo, n.d.; and Beltrán and Arenas Vesga, "El rol de la fuerza pública en la protección de las identidades de género diversas en Colombia", op. cit.
[97] Colombia Attorney General's Office, "Formato registro de hechos atribuibles a grupos armados organizados al margen de la ley". For more on the distinction between armed and criminal groups, see fn 54.
[98] Crisis Group interviews, National Police officers, Bogotá, 13 December 2024.

victim. It also impedes the collection of accurate data regarding cases of violence against LGBTQI+ individuals at the national level.[99]

### B. *Implementation of the Peace Agreement*

Colombia's 2016 peace agreement is internationally renowned for its gender-related provisions that aim to rectify historical inequalities in access to land, political office, education and other public goods, as well as its commitment to addressing the gender-specific impact of the conflict.[100] Putting these provisions into effect has been slow, however – disappointingly so for the many representatives of women-led and LGBTQI+ organisations who were involved in the peace process.[101] LGBTQI+ people saw the accord as a beacon of hope, marking the first time that their experiences in the conflict were formally recognised by the Colombian state. Their hopes have since dimmed. A transgender leader in Curillo, Caquetá told Crisis Group that establishing equal access to land has happened at such a languid pace that "we still don't have land, either under our fingernails or on our high heels".[102]

LGBTQI+ activists were particularly hopeful that the transitional justice bodies set up under the peace accord would deliver accountability. The Truth Commission's long-awaited final report was based on research that addressed interviewees' multiple identities (including ethnicity, gender identity and sexual orientation) and was considered by LGBTQI+ rights activists to have broken new ground in representing the breadth of violence in the Colombian conflict. This recognition was welcome, and the report's recommendations as to how the state could build trust and provide redress resonated, for the most part, with this population.[103] But implementation has been sluggish, and the commission itself acknowledged that flaws in its information col-

[99] Ibid. Crisis Group group conversation, civil society representatives and Colombian government officials, Bogotá, December 2024.
[100] Camila García, "Gender Perspective in the Making: The Case of the Colombian Peacebuilding Process", *Global Policy*, vol. 15, no. 3 (June 2024); Madhav Joshi, "Does the Implementation Status of Gender Provisions Affect the Implementation of a Peace Agreement? Evidence from Colombia's 2016 Peace Agreement Implementation Process", *Policy Studies Journal*, vol. 53, no. 4 (December 2024); "The peace deal that put women first: What Colombia taught the world", UN Women, 10 July 2025.
[101] Crisis Group interviews and correspondence, civil society representatives in Colombia, 2023-2025; Crisis Group interviews, civil society representatives and Colombian government officials, Bogotá, December 2024. See also Jena O'Brien, "El tiempo se agota para la implementación del enfoque de género: avances, retos y oportunidades a seis años de la firma del Acuerdo Final", University of Notre Dame, 26 April 2023; and Joshi, "Does the Implementation Status of Gender Provisions Affect the Implementation of a Peace Agreement?", op. cit.
[102] Crisis Group interview, transgender leader in Caquetá, 17 June 2024.
[103] Elias Dehnen, "What can the humanitarian community learn from the Colombian Truth Commission's LGBTIQ subchapter?", International Committee of the Red Cross (blog), 21 March 2024; "Mi Cuerpo es la Verdad", op. cit.

lection techniques did not allow it to record the extent of violence against LGBTQI+ people.[104]

LGBTQI+ people also reported challenges in getting access to the transitional justice court, the Special Jurisdiction for Peace. Some individuals in rural communities said there was little outreach to make them aware of how they could provide their statements.[105] When there was, it at times put LGBTQI+ participants at risk. Indigenous LGBTQI+ people, for example, did not feel that they could go to the hearing held in their localities to share their testimonies out of fear that they would be outed to their peers.[106] (To be fair, after this issue came to light, some officials made testimony-sharing sessions available in nearby towns so that individuals could participate without their neighbours' knowledge.[107])

LGBTQI+ activists are also concerned that statements made by former FARC commanders both in the Special Jurisdiction's meetings and in other public forums have not yet recognised how the group targeted them with violence.[108] The perception among activists is that the FARC leadership seems to be simultaneously pushing messages that support gender equality for political gain, while denying its own responsibility for acts of violence against the LGBTQI+ population.[109]

These activists hope that the former FARC commanders will publicly admit to targeting LGBTQI+ people and that the Jurisdiction's rulings will include awareness raising initiatives to address prejudice in rural communities.[110] Of the two sentences handed down in September, one – under Case 01 relating to kidnappings – included recognition of a range of ways in which kidnappings and the violence victims experienced while in FARC captivity affected LGBTQI+ people, not least through long-term physical repercussions and psychological trauma associated with sexual and other physical violence. Neither this sentence nor the other handed down to the armed forces under Case 03 for "false positive" crimes, in which members of the armed forces

[104] Crisis Group correspondence, transitional justice expert in Colombia, April 2023. See also "Mi Cuerpo es la Verdad", op. cit.
[105] Crisis Group interviews and correspondence, civil society representatives in Colombia, 2023-2025.
[106] In Indigenous communities, the jurisdiction had to agree the terms of its engagement with the leaders, creating a perception that testimonies shared with it might make their way to the Indigenous authorities.
[107] This change was made to comply with Colombian law stating that bodies responsible for reparations and assistance for conflict victims had to take measures to ensure accessibility for people marginalised due to their gender identity or sexual orientation. Crisis Group correspondence, transitional justice expert in Colombia, April 2023. See also Government of Colombia, Law 1448 (2011).
[108] Crisis Group correspondence, LGBTQI+ rights experts in Colombia, July-August 2025.
[109] Ibid.
[110] Ibid.

murdered civilians and passed them off as guerrillas killed in combat, contained a specific call to tackle discriminatory attitudes in Colombian society.[111] Activists hope that future rulings, particularly those relating to gender-based violence, will feature such provisions.

### C. *Other Peace Policies*

President Petro's government has made occasional efforts to address LGBTQI+ people's experiences in the conflict as part of his flagship "total peace" policy.[112] LGBTQI+ leaders have figured among civil society representatives at some negotiations, including those with the ELN and the 33rd Front.[113] But those representatives express concern that their participation may have exacerbated the risks faced by their communities, as guerrillas have violently retaliated against social leaders who participated in the talks.[114] The ELN in Arauca, for example, threatened "extermination" of LGBTQI+ people in neighbouring Tibú for taking part in the dialogue with the 33rd Front. LGBTQI+ leaders, like other social leaders who have participated in recent peace talks, bemoan that they have lost influence on peace-making in Colombia since the 2016 peace agreement, when they had active roles in establishing priorities for and sending written policy inputs to the talks between the government and the FARC.[115]

Colombia's introduction in November 2024 of its first National Action Plan on women, peace and security could have provided a fresh boost to these negotiations, as well as to efforts to bring the peace accord to fruition. The plan was formulated through a multi-stakeholder consultation that included "women in all their diversity" (including lesbians, transgender women and others). Yet here, too, activists and experts have expressed frustration with slow implementation.[116] The plan prom-

[111] Colombian Special Jurisdiction for Peace, Sentencia TP-SeRVR-RC-ST-No.001-2025, September 2025.
[112] The administration came into office seeking dialogue with all the remaining armed and criminal groups in the country. It has held talks of varying levels of intensity with more than a dozen of these organisations. The government's negotiation model has focused on holding local talks to reduce violence, while working with communities to devise potential government investments in conflict-affected areas. Crisis Group Commentary, "Colombia: From 'Total Peace' to Local Peace", op. cit.; Elizabeth Dickinson, "Colombia's Stolen Children", Crisis Group Commentary, 8 May 2025.
[113] Valentina Parada Lugo, "'Vamos a exterminar a todas las maricas': los líderes LGBTI del Catatumbo denuncian desprotección luego de ser desplazados", *El País*, 18 February 2025.
[114] Ibid. Crisis Group Commentary, "Colombia: From 'Total Peace' to Local Peace", op. cit.; Dickinson, "Colombia's Stolen Children", op. cit.
[115] Crisis Group interviews, civil society representatives and Colombian government officials, Bogotá, December 2024.
[116] The National Action Plan was launched in November 2024 as a high-priority inclusive peacebuilding initiative to implement UN Security Council Resolution 1325 and subsequent resolutions on Women, Peace and Security, jointly formu-

ises to ensure the participation of women in peace processes, bolster physical and legal protections from gender-based violence in conflict, and make criminal and transitional justice more accessible to women and other marginalised groups. But at the time of writing, official rollout of the plan had still not begun. Some gender experts in Colombia attributed the delay to a lack of political will, while others noted that the state has given the plan scant financial support.[117]

## V. Strengthening Protection, Participation and Accountability

Colombia has a legal framework and policies to mitigate the effects of conflict and contribute to lasting peace. Many of these could also be used to prevent and address conflict-related violence against LGBTQI+ people. Rather than creating new protection, prevention and accountability mechanisms, the security forces as well as state bodies should improve data collection, training and investigative capacity to make what already exists more effective. These efforts can also help ensure future peace talks and other policies help safeguard LGBTQI+ people from the risk of retaliatory violence.

### A. *Peace Talks and Peacebuilding Policies*

While the future of negotiations under President Petro's "total peace" policy is uncertain, with a presidential election set to take place in May 2026, Colombian civil society groups continue to press for broader participation in peacebuilding and future accords. Advocates for gender equality and LGBTQI+ rights now find themselves facing a double-edged sword. While they are disappointed with the slow pace of change under Petro, they simultaneously fear that gender and peacebuilding policy are so associated with his administration that presidential and congressional candidates will steer clear of them as they seek to distinguish themselves from the incumbent.[118] More conservative candidates, whose constituents hold many of the beliefs that drive discrimination, may be especially likely to do so. In these conditions, such candidates are unlikely to make reduction of violence against LGBTQI+ people a priority, whether in their campaigns or once in office.

lated by national state bodies including the foreign and equality and equity ministries. These institutions and others including the defence ministry have responsibilities in seeing through the plan, including by conducting additional training on gender and women's rights at the national, departmental and local levels.

[117] Crisis Group interviews, gender experts in Colombia, Bogotá and by telephone, 2024-2025.

[118] Crisis Group correspondence, Colombian LGBTQI+ rights experts, September-October 2025. See also Juanita León, "Las Mujeres le Cobran a Petro su Machismo", *La Silla Vacía*, 16 December 2024.

Regardless of the electoral outcome, however, gender inequalities and the safety and protection of LGBTQI+ people should be addressed in peacebuilding efforts. LGBTQI+ groups emphasise that talks should provide channels for input in the dialogues. One means of doing so could be civil society roundtables or sub-committees on specific topics that send proposals to the negotiating teams, and which could be agreed to by both parties as the format of talks is established. Any such groupings should be private and confidential. Participants should be consulted about the security measures that make most sense for them, for example having a protection detail including bodyguards in place during and for a period of time after the talks, as well as established emergency safety protocols so that, if talks collapse, they are less exposed to possible reprisal.[119]

Future ceasefires should also include commitments not to carry out violence against residents, with explicit mention of marginalised groups including LGBTQI+ people. The National Action Plan on women, peace and security provides a foundation for such commitments, which should include promises from warring parties to refrain from physical violence and pledges from the state – at both the national level and among local authorities – to stop discriminatory acts against LGBTQI+ people by other citizens. LGBTQI+ leaders told Crisis Group that government officials had privately expressed willingness to make such obligations part of previous rounds of talks with the ELN and the 33rd Front, but it did not come to pass in the dialogues themselves.[120]

Colombia's international partners have a role to play, too. Foreign capitals, regional bodies and UN agencies such as the UN Development Programme and the International Organisation for Migration that have supported peacebuilding in Colombia, should, as far as funding allows, continue to back any government peace efforts that address the specific needs of historically marginalised populations.[121] Events organised to coincide with the March 2026 meeting of the Commission on the Status of Women at the UN are good opportunities to apply public political pressure on the government to follow through with the National Action Plan and other measures to support LGBTQI+ victims of conflict-related violence.

At a moment when international financial assistance for peacebuilding is dwindling, foreign partners must not lose sight of their own commitments to support gender equality in government and civil society-

[119] Colombia's National Action Plan commits the government to ensuring that women (including lesbians, transgender women and others) can meaningfully and safely participate in formal peace dialogues.
[120] Crisis Group interviews, civil society representatives and Colombian government officials, Bogotá, December 2024. See also Parada Lugo, "'Vamos a exterminar a todas las maricas'", op. cit.
[121] These include Norway, Switzerland, the European Union, Spain, Germany, Canada, the United Kingdom and others.

led peacebuilding in Colombia, for example through the UN Multi-Partner Trust Fund (whose funds have almost dried up) as well as bilateral aid. Such assistance should target partnerships that bring together national NGOs, such as Colombia Diversa and Caribe Afirmativo, with local, community-based NGOs, so that organisations can exchange information and share financial support and training. It could also enable partnerships and dialogue between local authorities and community-based NGOs, so that authorities have a better understanding of the challenges faced by the LGBTQI+ communities in their region and can work with them to design protection measures.

### B. *Better State Coordination*

Colombia needs to recommit to addressing conflict-related violence. As things stand, institutions are absent or otherwise unable or unwilling to respond to violence in places where LGBTQI+ people are being singled out by armed and criminal groups. The Ministries of Equality and Equity and Defence, as well as bodies providing social services, should seek to close this gap. As Crisis Group has highlighted before, communication and coordination among responsible state institutions in Colombia needs improvement.[122] The Ministry of Equality and Equity created a "Diversity in Dignity" program in 2024, which in theory should allow it to work with the health, education and justice ministries, as well as with sub-national agencies responsible for social services in Colombia's departments, to provide basic services to LGBTQI+ people.[123]

Several government representatives told Crisis Group that the ministry has encountered challenges in coordinating with various state bodies, including the security forces and sub-national authorities. This is in part due to perceptions in these institutions that this initiative will not survive Petro's departure from office in 2026. As a result, they regard the effort as not worth their time or resources, causing them to miss joint planning meetings and refrain from committing personnel and resources to program rollout. The initiative also lacks the financial backing to put the plans into practice.[124] Yet even if the equality and equity ministry (which is seen as closely tied to Petro and dependent on him being president) does live past the electoral cycle, institutions must continue to coordinate among themselves to ensure basic services and protection for LGBTQI+ people and other marginalised groups, especially in rural conflict-affected areas.

The state also needs to improve its methods of collecting data about cases of victimisation of LGBTQI+ people. The equality and equity

[122] Crisis Group Report, *Protecting Colombia's Most Vulnerable on the Road to "Total Peace"*, op. cit.
[123] "Diversidad en Dignidad", Colombian Ministry of Equality and Equity, 2024.
[124] Crisis Group telephone interviews, government representatives, 28 August 2025.

ministry, as the chief state body responsible for gender issues, should lead standardisation of data collection protocols so that the targeting of LGBTQI+ individuals can be consistently and accurately recorded in existing databases of cases of violence. Once formalised, the data protocols must be rolled out through training at regional and local levels so that all government bodies, from the mayor's office and police bureaus in conflict-affected communities to the Attorney General's headquarters in Bogotá, are recording cases in similar ways and can share information. Local authorities have an essential role here, in making sure that new protocols are adopted by all officials to whom a case of violence may be reported. Recommendations along these lines have already been put forth by the government and in the Truth Commission's report.[125]

Furthermore, Colombia's transitional justice system has made sharing testimony possible for some conflict-affected communities, but not all. The Special Jurisdiction for Peace, in particular, should continue to seek ways to ensure that vulnerable groups such as LGBTQI+ Indigenous people, who cannot always share their identities with their neighbours because of the power of traditional beliefs regarding gender, are able to testify before jurisdiction representatives.[126] Even though the UN Mission no longer has a mandate to verify implementation of either the ethnic chapter or the transitional justice components of the 2016 peace agreement, its continued verification of security guarantees for communities means that it can take a role in ensuring that such testimony sharing is carried out safely. This would support vulnerable groups' right to justice and accountability promised by the 2016 peace agreement and demonstrate that conflict-related violence against all groups, including the most marginalised, will not go unaddressed.

### C. *Training for State Officials*

By all accounts, training for public officials on violence against and protection for LGBTQI+ people has not been a success. Police officers, soldiers and justice officials view it as a box-ticking exercise rather than a professional responsibility.[127] National and local state representatives should work together to train officials in rural conflict-affected areas on the various forms gender-based violence can take – rather than looking exclusively at sexual violence against women. When officials understand the patterns of local violence against LGBTQI+ people and other marginalised groups, they are better po-

[125] "Mi Cuerpo es la Verdad", op. cit.
[126] Crisis Group interviews, LGBTQI+ rights experts, Bogotá, April 2023.
[127] Crisis Group interviews, transgender woman, Guaviare, 4 September 2024; civil society representatives and Colombian government officials, Bogotá, December 2024. Crisis Group telephone interviews, government representatives, 28 August 2025.

sitioned to ask the right questions, accurately record data, and call in local, regional and national bodies to respond to cases. Other ways to improve training include organising sessions in person, not online, and reinforcing those messages through other media, for example radio programs aimed at soldiers.[128] Local authorities can play a role in convening such training sessions in person at local community centres.

There should also be disciplinary consequences for police officers and other state officials who ignore or actively reject requests to address violence against LGBTQI+ people, including a written warning or another mark in their file. In order to ensure that they are independently implemented and monitored, these measures should be handled by state bodies such as the Ombudsperson's Office and the Inspector General's Office, which are outside the security apparatus and have local representatives.[129] State institutions at all levels must also investigate all cases of discrimination and mistreatment, hold perpetrators in their offices to account, and ensure that victims receive adequate support, including reparations, as permitted by Colombian law.

Security forces and other state institutions would do well to hold dialogues with LGBTQI+ organisations so they can hear and respond to these groups' concerns. LGBTQI+ leaders told Crisis Group that such an exchange might help state officials responsible for protection carry out their work more effectively. They also felt it might protect LGBTQI+ residents from both physical violence and discrimination by armed groups and community members.[130] These exchanges should include local authorities, especially in rural areas where conservative beliefs are more entrenched, with the goal of breaking down the dogma that prevents these bodies from responding to violence against LGBTQI+ people in their communities.

## VI. Conclusion

Targeted violence against LGBTQI+ people has formed part of criminal and armed groups' repertoire for establishing territorial control for generations. State forces have done little to protect them, allowing criminal and armed groups to prey upon the LGBTQI+ community's stigmatisation and vulnerability. As the conflict shifts to a new phase,

[128] For example, the Marina Stereo Radio Station run by the Colombian Naval Forces Armada.
[129] The Inspector General's Office, Comptroller's Office and Ombudsperson's Office all have responsibilities for this kind of monitoring and follow-up, but they seem to take little action to enforce it. Crisis Group telephone interviews, LGBTQI+ rights experts in Colombia, 15 July 2025; Crisis Group correspondence, LGBTQI+ rights expert in Colombia, 18 August 2025.
[130] Crisis Group interviews. civil society representatives and Colombian government officials, Bogotá, December 2024.

characterised by the fragmentation of groups and frequent changes in territorial control, LGBTQI+ people find themselves at even greater risk from fast-changing, ill-disciplined and opportunistic armed outfits. State security institutions are often part of the problem and not enough of a solution. Even when well-intentioned, they often fail to address violence or offer anything by way of real protection.

Colombia has made progress in establishing equal rights for sexual and gender minorities, as well as in putting traditionally marginalised groups at the heart of its peacebuilding policies. Many of the laws and policies needed to protect LGBTQI+ people already exist. But there is still a long way to go in putting these into practice. Stronger and more sustained support from local, national and international backers is essential to make sure that the vulnerability of LGBTQI+ people and the deeply held conservative values of many rural Colombians no longer serve the interests of parties to war.

**Bogotá/New York/Brussels, 3 December 2025**

## **Appendix A:** Map of Colombia

## **Appendix B:** Reports and Briefings on Latin America and the Caribbean since 2022

### Special Reports and Briefings

*7 Priorities for the G7: Managing the Global Fallout of Russia's War on Ukraine*, Special Briefing N°7, 22 June 2022.

*Ten Challenges for the UN in 2022-2023*, Special Briefing N°8, 14 September 2022.

*Seven Priorities for Preserving the OSCE in a Time of War*, Special Briefing N°9, 29 November 2022.

*Seven Priorities for the G7 in 2023*, Special Briefing N°10, 15 May 2023.

*Ten Challenges for the UN in 2023-2024*, Crisis Group Special Briefing N°11, 14 September 2023 (also available in French).

*Ten Challenges for the UN in 2024-2025*, Special Briefing N°12, 10 September 2024 (also available in French).

*Ten Challenges for the UN in 2025-2026*, Special Briefing N°13, 9 September 2025 (also available in French).

*Overcoming the Global Rift on Venezuela*, Latin America Report N°93, 17 February 2022 (also available in Spanish).

*Keeping Oil from the Fire: Tackling Mexico's Fuel Theft Racket*, Latin America Briefing N°46, 25 March 2022 (also available in Spanish).

*Brazil's True Believers: Bolsonaro and the Risks of an Election Year*, Latin America Briefing N°47, 16 June 2022 (also available in Portuguese and Spanish).

*Hard Times in a Safe Haven: Protecting Venezuelan Migrants in Colombia*, Latin America Report N°94, 9 August 2022 (also available in Spanish).

*Trapped in Conflict: Reforming Military Strategy to Save Lives in Colombia*, Latin America Report N°95, 27 September 2022 (also available in Spanish).

*A Remedy for El Salvador's Prison Fever*, Latin America Report N°96, 5 October 2022 (also available in Spanish).

*Ties without Strings? Rebuilding Relations between Colombia and Venezuela*, Latin America Report N°97, 1 December 2022 (also available in Spanish).

*Haiti's Last Resort: Gangs and the Prospect of Foreign Intervention*, Latin America and Caribbean Briefing N°48, 14 December 2022 (also available in Spanish and French).

*Protecting Colombia's Most Vulnerable on the Road to "Total Peace"*, Latin America Report N°98, 24 February 2023 (also available in Spanish).

*Mexico's Forgotten Mayors: The Role of Local Government in Fighting Crime*, Latin America Report N°99, 23 June 2023 (also available in Spanish).

*New Dawn or Old Habits? Resolving Honduras' Security Dilemmas*, Latin America Report N°100, 10 July 2023 (also available in Spanish).

*Navigating Venezuela's Political Deadlock: The Road to Elections*, Latin America Report N°101, 16 August 2023 (also available in Spanish).

*Bottleneck of the Americas: Crime and Migration in the Darién Gap*, Latin America Report N°102, 3 November 2023 (also available in Spanish).

*Partners in Crime: The Rise of Women in Mexico's Illegal Groups*, Latin America Report N°103, 28 November 2023 (also available in Spanish).

*Haiti's Gangs: Can a Foreign Mission Break Their Stranglehold?*, Latin America and Caribbean Briefing N°49, 5 January 2024 (also available in French and Spanish).

*Fear, Lies and Lucre: How Criminal Groups Weaponise Social Media in Mexico*, Latin America Briefing N°50, 31 January 2024 (also available in Spanish).

*Unrest on Repeat: Plotting a Route to Stability in Peru*, Latin America Report N°104, 8 February 2024 (also available in Spanish).

*The Unsolved Crime in "Total Peace": Dealing with Colombia's Gaitanistas*, Latin America Report N°105, 19 March 2024 (also available in Spanish).

*The Generals' Labyrinth: Crime and the Military in Mexico*, Latin America Report N°106, 24 May 2024 (also available in Spanish).

*A Three Border Problem: Holding Back the Amazon's Criminal Frontiers*, Latin America Briefing N°51, 17 July 2024 (also available in Spanish and Portuguese).

*Rebel Razing: Loosening the Criminal Hold on the* Colombian *Amazon*, Latin America Briefing N°52, 18 October 2024 (also available in Spanish).

*Locked in Transition: Politics and Violence in Haiti*, Latin America & Caribbean Report N°107, 19 February 2025 (also available in Creole, French and Spanish).

*Curbing Violence in Latin America's Drug Trafficking Hotspots*, Latin America Report N°108, 11 March 2025 (also available in Spanish).

*A Curse of Gold: Mining and Violence in Venezuela's South*, Latin America Briefing N°53, 29 July 2025 (also available in Spanish).

*Paradise Lost? Ecuador's Battle with Organised Crime*, Latin America Report N°109, 12 November 2025 (also available in Spanish).


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