



What can the humanitarian community learn from the Colombian Truth Commission's LGBTIQ-subchapter?

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As part of the historic 2016 peace agreement, the “Commission for the Clarification of Truth, Coexistence and Non-repetition” (hereafter the Colombian Truth Commission) was established to focus on victims and their right to the truth with an emphasis on the way different people were impacted by the armed conflicts. The findings of the Commission’s subchapter, “The truth is rainbow”, are highly relevant for the humanitarian community.

In this post, Elias Dehnen, peace and conflict studies researcher and journalist, argues that drawing lessons from the Colombian Truth Commission’s LGBTIQ-subchapter is not about ideological alignment, but about making humanitarian response truly impartial, considering particular needs of vulnerable groups.

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In its *final report* in June 2022, the Colombian Truth Commission found that during the country’s decades-long armed conflicts, state armed forces, paramilitary and guerrilla groups in Colombia had displaced, tortured, raped and murdered LGBTIQ people with the aim of annihilating them. These practices were not arbitrary, but tactical and/or systematic. Armed actors abused LGBTIQ people as scapegoats to get the approval of the rest of the civilian population, gaining greater legitimacy.^[1]

Shortcomings of generic approaches

The LGBTIQ organizations *Caribe Afirmativo* and *Colombia Diversa* speak plainly: “Our stories have been made invisible – even within the humanitarian community.” Humanitarian action that aims to target “all people” *does not necessarily achieve this goal*. The ICRC, for instance, *emphasizes* that there is an “evidence-gap regarding the needs of (...) LGBTIQ+ victims/survivors, as well as the efficacy of existing interventions for these populations”. It is no secret that some social groups are affected differently by armed conflicts than others. Victims and survivors are *diverse*, and so should be the humanitarian approaches to *effectively assist and protect them*.

In this light, the Truth Commission’s subchapter “The truth is rainbow” follows a *legal and public policy tradition in Colombia* to implement differentiated solutions to humanitarian problems, depending on the vulnerability of certain populations.[2] It is an in-depth analysis of patterns of violence of armed actors against LGBTIQ and sheds light on the survivors’ needs and acts of resistance in the period from 1958 to 2016. Never before has such a comprehensive analysis made it into the final document of a truth commission. Verified cases appearing in the subchapter were mostly provided by LGBTIQ persons from regions all across Colombia themselves.[3] This survivor-centred approach grants the document a high level of legitimacy. But what can humanitarian actors concretely learn from it?

A new methodology

The Truth Commission’s Gender Working Group developed a methodology that aimed at building trust and providing new findings on LGBTIQ victims in Colombia. By introducing sensitive interview guidelines and asking interviewees and participants about their sexual orientation and gender identity, the Commission differentiated between lesbian, bisexual, gay, trans, and intersex persons as well as men and women when collecting data. The Commission also documented the ethnicity of the participants.

According to Salomé Gómez Corrales, former coordinator of the Gender Working Group, this intersectional approach was fundamental. Regarding LGBTIQ people as a homogenous group disguises, for instance, that a middle-class, white gay man in Bogotá might have experienced the armed conflicts very differently than a Black trans woman in the countryside.

Consequently, the new methodology allowed for more accurate conclusions to be drawn about how the humanitarian crisis had affected individuals and groups of the LGBTIQ community differently.[4] In this light, humanitarian actors might critically assess their own documentation of cases – and whether their archives can cover the same level of analytical depth. Of course, the methodology would need to be adapted in countries where being queer is considered a crime, in order to protect individuals from life-threatening exposure.

Targeted assistance

It is common sense now that humanitarian assistance should be *survivor-centred*. With its rich contextual descriptions, the LGBTIQ-subchapter provides several launching pads to fulfil this goal. Three aspects are particularly crucial:

‘Corrective rape’

First, the document clarifies that due to traditional gender roles, LGBTIQ victims faced violent acts such as so-called ‘corrective rape’, rationalized as punitive measures to change their sexuality and reassert them as ‘real men’ or ‘real women’.[5] Being acquainted with specific forms of violence appearing in the subchapter, among them unwanted pregnancies of trans men, enables humanitarian health workers to provide a more effective treatment for LGBTIQ individuals.

‘Chosen families’

Second, the Truth Commission illuminated coping strategies of LGBTIQ victims who were fighting for survival and dignity. Humanitarians ought to be informed about local LGBTIQ support systems such as ‘chosen families’.[6] Moving beyond approaches that *prioritize hetero- and cisnormative family models* is not only crucial with regard to efforts to facilitate family links but equally relevant to their approach towards addressing Sexual and Gender Based Violence (SGBV). By assessing and respecting local support systems, among them ‘chosen families’, humanitarians can effectively place the needs, experiences, and well-being of LGBTIQ victims at the forefront of decision-making and service provision.

Countering mistrust

Third, the subchapter finds that the Colombian state failed to safeguard LGBTIQ individuals, resulting in an environment of impunity and recurring victimization. Moreover, humanitarian actors should consider that state entities collaborated with paramilitary groups in the past, further endangering LGBTIQ victims, which in turn heightened their mistrust towards state institutions, including healthcare facilities.[7] This underlines the importance of absolute confidentiality and safe referral systems for LGBTIQ victims, since exposing their identity might subject them to a heightened risk of re-victimization.

To mitigate the fear of stigma and enhance access to secure psychosocial and medical assistance, humanitarian personnel *sensitized to the concerns of LGBTIQ individuals* might consider wearing discreet rainbow buttons. When humanitarian professionals carry out psychosocial and medical services themselves, it would be advisable to adopt some of the Truth Commission’s confidence-building measures, since one-fits-all approaches may not reach those who are hesitant to seek help.

LGBTIQ sensitive interview guidelines

Among these measures are particular LGBTIQ interview guidelines. For example, in the Truth Commission's *guide* for the approach to sexual violence, it was clearly stated that “[d]iscriminatory treatment of transgender persons and denial of their identity [must be avoided]. When the Truth Commission contacts transgender victims/survivors, it will always use the identity name they indicate.” Since a survivor-centred approach implies creating a supportive environment in which survivors are treated with respect and dignity, this includes using proper pronouns, names and terminologies.

Prevention of Sexual and Gender Based Violence

The subchapter's findings are equally important with regard to humanitarians' efforts to prevent SGBV in Colombia. The ICRC, for instance, *states* that it “is well placed to engage in preventative action because of its privileged access to, and neutral and impartial dialogue with, armed actors”.

Engagement with armed actors

Against this background, the Truth Commission concluded that patterns of violence against LGBTIQ individuals varied depending on the actor (state army, paramilitary groups, guerrilla groups) and region. It would be advisable to thoroughly scrutinize these aspects in order to effectively address them in ongoing humanitarian dialogues with armed actors.^[8] There should be an emphasis in current and future dialogues on the fact that international humanitarian law (IHL) strictly prohibits sexual violence against LGBTIQ persons.^[9] For humanitarian actors working in other contexts than Colombia, the findings of the subchapter still provide valuable reference points in order to conduct their own analyses of armed actors' actions and how they affect LGBTIQ persons.

Moreover, the Truth Commission emphasized that many LGBTIQ persons face a ‘continuum of violence’. This is relevant for humanitarians when conducting IHL training and workshops for communities, detention facilities and state authorities aimed at preventing SGBV. Workshops provide an avenue to address current patterns of violence against LGBTIQ persons and their specific challenges and needs. This would be in line with the ICRC's and other humanitarians' goal to *bolster community resilience to sexual violence*.

Building a network

How long will the Truth Commission's findings remain pertinent to the work of humanitarian actors in Colombia? Conflict dynamics evolve rapidly, potentially decreasing the utility of the subchapter as time progresses.

Therefore, it would be advisable for humanitarian actors to follow the example of the Truth Commission and establish a network with LGBTIQ organizations, receiving current and first-hand information. This would be in line with the ICRC's *goal* to “engage in safe and ethical consultations with (...) community actors such as women-led organizations, LGBTIQ+ organizations, youth-led organizations and community leaders in developing a humanitarian response to SGBV”.

In this light, the Truth Commission's Gender Working Group took a step that had no precedent in the history of truth commissions. By creating the Technical Assistance Table in May 2018 as a space for dialogue and reflection with civil society, it opened its gate for women's and LGBTIQ organizations. The platform discussed and prepared recommendations to contribute to a gender-sensitive approach in the cross-cutting work of the Truth Commission. From May 2018 to June 2022, 55 organizations convened eleven times at the Technical Assistance Table; among them were ten LGBTIQ organizations or platforms.^[10]

Furthermore, in October 2018, the Truth Commission officially announced that LGBTIQ organizations will assist the body concerning the choice of methodologies, categories of analysis as well as the documentation of cases. Their input was essential to guarantee a broader participation of LGBTIQ individuals, ensuring that interviews with victims were conducted in a both trustworthy and dignified setting.

The essence of impartiality

In this regard, humanitarian actors in Colombia could potentially leverage the network already established by the Truth Commission. However, interviewees from *Diversa Colombia* and *Caribe Afirmativo* – two of the largest LGBTIQ organizations in Colombia – emphasized that their interactions with humanitarians have been very limited to non-existent.

Whether in Colombia or other regional contexts, there is no doubt that reaching out to these actors would be beneficial for humanitarians' endeavour to strengthen the *localization of aid*, as LGBTIQ organizations are knowledgeable about the local context, patterns of violence and adequate protection strategies.

Taking these factors into account is precisely the essence of *impartiality*: “reliev[ing] the suffering of individuals, being guided solely by their needs, and to give priority to the most urgent cases of distress” (ICRC 1986). The Colombian Truth Commission's work might be a precedent for humanitarians to reinforce one of their most important principles.

[1] Comisión de la Verdad (2022) ‘Mi cuerpo es la verdad – Experiencias de mujeres y personas LGBTIQ+ en el conflicto armado (Informe final)’, cf. p. 380; 435–436; 445; 481; 560, Available at: <https://www.comisiondelaverdad.co/mi-cuerpo-es-la-verdad>.

[2] The LBGTIQ subchapter “The truth is Rainbow” was published with the entire final report as part of the *main chapter* “My Body is the Truth – Experiences of women and LBGTIQ+ people in the armed conflict in Colombia” on 28th June 2022. The 227-page subchapter is divided into three main sections: A description of what happened to LBGTIQ victims in the context of the armed conflict (pp. 391-460), a tentative analysis of why it happened (pp. 469-483), and the impacts on and resistance of LBGTIQ victims against this background (pp. 491-564). The subchapter ends with conclusions and a number of recommendations directed mostly at the Colombian state, albeit in parts also at the Colombian society and the international community (pp. 569-580).

[3] The Truth Commission held a direct dialogue with 408 LBGTIQ persons. Due to its territorial presence and closeness to marginalized members of the Colombian LBGTIQ Community, Caribe Afirmativo was one of the organizations which were granted the responsibility to conduct several interviews themselves, using the *Truth Commission’s methodology*. The commission obtained 280 further testimonies taken by LBGTIQ organizations with their own methodologies, which were integrated, categorized and contrasted in its internal documentation system. Moreover, between September 2019 and March 2022, the Truth Commission received twelve reports by Colombian LBGTIQ organizations, providing concrete information and evidence about cases of violence against LBGTIQ people in the context of the armed conflicts.

[4] According to the subchapter, the Truth Commission identified 709 violent acts categorized as *persecution* and 369 LBGTIQ victims, 64,2% of whom were men and 35,8% women (p. 393). The majority identified as gay (54,5%), followed by lesbian (26,6%) and bisexual (12,2%). Concerning the gender identity of the identified victims, the Commission found that 8,1% were trans women and 2,2% transgender men (p. 394). Moreover, 14,6% were black, Afro-Colombian or Raizals and 4,3% were indigenous. The high number of underage victims is particularly striking: The Truth Commission emphasized that at least 34,1% of the identified persons were victimized when they were still minors. The most frequent acts of violence against LBGTIQ victims registered by the Truth Commission were threats (37,2%), displacement (33,6%) and exile (19,2%), followed by sexual violence (12%), torture (8,5%) and assaults (5,5%) (ibid.:397). With regard to the perpetrators, it was further found that 36,5% of violent acts could clearly be traced back to paramilitary groups, 30,2% to FARC-EP and 8,1% to state institutions (p. 402). The Commission assumed a high number of unreported cases.

[5] Comisión de la Verdad (2022) ‘Mi cuerpo es la verdad – Experiencias de mujeres y personas LBGTIQ+ en el conflicto armado (Informe final)’, cf. p. 380; 445; 561.

[6] Ibid. p. 516.

[7] Ibid. p. 481; 561.

[8] This approach, however, has its limitations, as the Truth Commission’s analysis does not include patterns of violence of all armed actors which are still present in Colombia, e.g. the guerrilla group Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN).

[9] ICRC (2022) ‘That never happens here – SEXUAL AND GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE AGAINST MEN, BOYS AND/INCLUDING LBGTIQ+ PERSONS IN HUMANITARIAN SETTINGS’, p. 16.

[10] In addition, prior to November 28, 2018, the date on which the Truth Commission formally began its mandate, three territorial listening workshops were held with LBGTIQ organizations and 125 participants in different territories of the country to get a clearer understanding of their expectations around the Truth Commission’s work. According to the Gender Working Group “an important milestone in this process was the meeting held with the LBGTI Platform for Peace, the first in the world of a truth commission with LBGTIQ+ people”

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