

VIEWPOINT

Bodies That Resist: Transgender People's Health and Rights in Colombia

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Colombia is witnessing a period of significant regression in the protection of trans people's rights, marked by the enactment or attempted enactment of discriminatory legislation and a surge in public hostility, amplified in particular through social media. And violence against trans individuals persists. According to the nongovernmental organization Caribe Afirmativo, in 2024 alone, 40 violent acts resulting in the deaths of LGBTIQ+ individuals were reported in Colombia. Of these, 22 involved transgender people.¹ While this piece was being written, on April 4, 2025, Sara Millery González Borja was murdered in the municipality of Bello, Antioquia, a killing that shocked the country because of the torture and public punishment she suffered.

In recent years, the trans movement in Colombia has participated in several initiatives to advocate for their rights, including successfully advocating for a speedy procedure to change the sex identifier on the national ID document in 2015; protecting the right to vote for trans people in 2020; and achieving legal recognition of non-binary people. One important challenge still faced by transgender people in Colombia is access to essential services such as health care.² As in other parts of the world, transgender individuals in Colombia face multiple barriers when accessing health care, including fear of discrimination by medical

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and administrative personnel. To address the right to health of trans people in Colombia, in 2024, with the support of senators from the Liberal and Green parties, the trans movement submitted Bill 122, titled “Comprehensive Law on Gender Identity,” before Congress.³

This bill proposal is an urgent and necessary response to the historical discrimination, marginalization, and systemic violence experienced by trans and non-binary people in Colombia, as evidenced by the country’s alarming violence statistics. It aims to create a comprehensive framework for the full exercise of trans and non-binary people’s fundamental rights, eradicating injustice and exclusion in both public and private spheres. It emphasizes autonomy and equal opportunity for these individuals and aims to close legal gaps and promote dignified living conditions through adequate protection and historical redress. A key area of focus of the bill is the elimination of barriers to the enjoyment of health and social security by people with diverse gender identities.

The bill proposal is the result of years of organizing and discussion. This organizing intensified in early February 2023 with the launch of “Comprehensive Trans Law Now!,” a campaign that emerged as a collective response to the urgent need for legislation that guarantees the rights of people with diverse gender identities. More than 100 organizations from across the country worked together to begin conceptualizing a draft bill, dividing the work up among specialized subcommittees, including a legal and methodological team that analyzed national and international human rights reports and reviewed legislative experiences from other countries. Later, the collective conducted a nationwide survey, using a snowball sampling method to reach marginalized populations. The consultation gathered data from 1,350 trans individuals, including data on life stages, sex work, rurality, ethnicity, incarceration, and disability. The results were compiled into a report that, combined with previous research done by the Liga de Salud Trans, formed the basis for a first draft of the bill. A national conference was then held in May 2023 in Bogotá, where

allied organizations provided feedback on the bill, and an official draft was finalized.

Finally, on March 31, 2024, with the support of 41 legislators, Bill 122 was formally submitted to Congress, where it is currently undergoing review.

The bill proposal addresses topics such as sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, a life-cycle approach, intersectionality, anti-ableism, and anti-racism. Among the specific areas of focus are the following:

- Health care: Ensuring access to treatment and empathetic medical care.
- Employment: Prohibiting discrimination and promoting decent work conditions.
- Education: Encouraging inclusion and preventing violence.
- Housing: Securing discrimination-free spaces.
- Recognition of care work, exemption from compulsory military service, political and social participation, protection from the effects of armed conflict, and justice, including enhanced penalties for violence against trans people.

Meanwhile, as the bill proposal is being debated in Congress, the trans movement continues to face backlash in response to its legal and policy efforts. For example, in October 2024, nationwide marches were organized by anti-rights groups and conservative politicians to protest External Circular 2024150000000011-5, issued by the National Health Superintendence, laying out guidelines for health care facilities on how to uphold the right to health of Colombia’s trans population. These marches were conducted under the motto “Don’t Mess with Our Kids,” which spread widely on platforms such as X, Instagram, and Facebook. National public figures and celebrities supported the initiative, employing moral panic tactics similar to those seen in other countries. Phrases used in the campaign included the following:

- “What’s wrong is wrong, even if they disguise it as ‘my body, my choice.’”

- “What’s wrong is wrong, even if they disguise it as rights.”
- “What’s wrong is wrong, even if they dress it up as inclusion.”

The anti-trans rights marches took place in 19 cities in Colombia and in New York City, with an estimated 20,000 people participating. Moreover, a year earlier, in 2023, a “Don’t Mess with Our Kids” bill had been introduced in Congress but was shelved due to procedural issues.

These anti-rights efforts all share common goals: to restrict medical treatments, criminalize health care professionals and organizations that support trans minors, and create an environment of fear and self-censorship. They reinforce false and negative beliefs about trans identities, perpetuate stigma and social discrimination, and criminalize support networks. These narratives pathologize trans identities as disorders, despite the medical community and the 11th revision of the International Classification of Diseases no longer classifying them as such, often using cherry-picked or decontextualized references.

In conclusion, trans people in Colombia have faced stigmatizing and violent actions fueled by anti-rights movements that aim to diminish their quality of life and deny them the protection of their rights, all under a discourse of hate and discrimination. Although transformative efforts have been developed by trans organizations, social media has often served as a platform to promote stigmatizing campaigns against these initiatives. Combined with public mobilization efforts, such as marches in major cities, this has contributed to setbacks in key areas such as health, education, employment, and other fundamental rights that should be guaranteed by the state. Nonetheless, there is a glimmer of hope in the country, thanks to Bill 122 of 2024. The fight for this bill proposal illustrates the importance of social movements in sociopolitical contexts where human rights are under threat. If passed into law, it will ensure legal protections for trans and non-binary people, improve these individuals’ quality of life in various domains, and promote a fairer and more equitable society.

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