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An Interview with Marcela Sánchez

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Director of *Colombia Diversa* in Bogotá, Colombia (Interview conducted in New York, USA)

Marcela Sánchez: My name is Marcela Sánchez, I am a social worker, a feminist, and I have worked with issues of women's participation in politics, sexual and reproductive health, and violence against women. The subject of sexual and reproductive health led me to speak about sexual and reproductive rights at *Profamilia*, which is like the immediate precedent of *Colombia Diversa* in my work. From that moment on I began to work with the issue of same-sex couples in Congress.

CM: What did you do in *Profamilia*?

MS: I was in charge of the Gender Office, I was an adviser to the executive director. I had two types of work. One was an internal one: to see that *Profamilia* carry out its work from a perspective of sexual and reproductive rights, of human and gender rights, that this be transversal among all the services offered by the organization, and that there be an internal work focused on institutional strengthening on the subject, closely related to a communication strategy. The second workspace had to do with the relationship with groups of women, with leaders working on the issue of gays and lesbians. Neither bisexuality nor transgender were such strong issues at that time. Although the office is termed Gender Office, we began to address the issue of diversity in the two spaces, both internally and externally.

CM: Is *Profamilia* a governmental entity?

MS: No, it is a private entity, a branch of the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF), whose funding is derived from the sale of services; it has a wide portfolio of sexual and reproductive health services. I worked there between 1998 and 2004.

CM: What is the current situation of the lesbian-gay-transgender and bisexual community in Colombia?

MS: The most important precedent is the 1991 Constitution. The articles related to equality and free development of personality do not mention the issue of sexual orientation, but a wide interpretation of these articles served to encompass issues of non-normative sexuality. Early on, in the first five years of the 1990s, the Constitutional Court began to recognize rights, for example the right to change one's name, to be members of the Armed Forces without any barriers derived from sexual orientation. There are very important laws of precedent associated to access to school, to university, and to teaching without sexual orientation being a restraint; this also applies to the issue of the use of the public space.

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A large part of activism was initially based on the issue of rights with a constitutional vision, and although that first judiciary impulse provided an important support to the establishment of the movement, it existed before the Constitution; we can find precedents in the 1970s, but undoubtedly, a large part of the discourse has to do with a constitutional discourse on rights.

CM: How is this discussion reflected in the street?

MS: The issue had no visibility; I remember a pioneering magazine in Colombia, *Acento* magazine, a subscription-based magazine founded in 1998, which was delivered in sealed Manila envelopes. The magazine's content had a very cutting-edge approach; the articles addressed issues related to gender, the body and intersexuality ...in 1998 Colombia!

There were groups of people, leaders who worked on the issue of HIV, AIDS. Manuel Velandia was one of the most visible ones; he also participated in the women's movement, and despite the fact that it did not address the subject in a public way because there were no lesbian leaders who could raise the question, fifteen years after the Beijing Conference a chapter on lesbian women was included for the first time in Colombia.

The issue of same-sex couples also began to be discussed at that time in Congress, promoted by Piedad Córdoba and Margarita Londoño. The first initiatives of activism had to do with individual rights; Germán Rincón promoted a large part of the writs for protection of fundamental rights. Demonstrations were implemented for the first time. But it was a movement that responded to a circumstantial situation. If marriage was approved in a country, and somebody was needed to issue a statement, those people that were more or less known were sought. Juan Pablo Ordóñez, an activist who carried out a study on social cleansing and selective murders of transvestites for Amnesty International, won the Felipe de Souza Award and tried to devise a movement that would begin to promote the subject. There we met people who did things we did not know about.

CM: What is the relationship with the movements of the 1960s and 1970s?

MS: We were in contact with the left-wing movements of that time, the women's movement, and some leaders in Medellín, such as León Zuleta, who militated in favor of what he called the Homosexual Liberation Movement, which had a magazine called *El Otro* that was installing debate in spaces so adverse to diversity as the left wing in Colombia and all over the world. He was eventually assassinated.

In Medellín and Cali there was a magazine called *Las Brujas*; generally speaking, the movement originated in the big cities, Cali, Medellín and Bogotá.

CM: What was the situation of the homosexual community, what was the level of discrimination?

MS: Sodomy was a crime until 1981, although we do not know any case of someone going to prison for having committed it. There is a book about the need to decriminalize it, and a debate that includes psychiatry, medicine, psychology and even the law regarding the issue and the need for the existence of a homosexual movement, which

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proposes that one day well-to-do people who are gay will have to become involved and promote the gay movement.

CM: How does the idea of *Colombia Diversa* originate?

MS: I had already been working on the issue of sexual diversity and had participated in some TV shows. I came publicly out of the closet in 1994, before that I appeared anonymously in the media, with a distorted voice, and in 1994 I issued my first public statement in a news program. It was on "Gay pride day", June 28. Then came *Planeta Paz*, a very important project for the movement, which included the participation of the women's sector, the labor unions sector, the African descendants sector, the indigenous sector and the sexual diversity sector. The sector they denominated women's sector, or the labor union sector had an impressive tradition; I think that *Planeta Paz* could have contributed little or not at all to that process, while for the LGBT movement it was indeed important, because it was the first time we met people from Barrancabermeja, Ibagué, Medellín, most of them men dealing with issues of HIV and other matters. It was then that we started to think about what our name would be, to try to put together a national agenda. These groups had already been working on several bills with Piedad Córdoba; when one of these was shelved, we constituted a group of political dissidents called the *Comité de Impulso* (Promotion Committee). After assessing that process, five of us decided to get together in order to fight for the rights of same-sex couples. We began to devise a strategy that would not be restrained to participating in demonstrations, in TV programs, or to having a meeting with some senator, but that would rather be a long-term effort, a true strategic plan. We sought human and financial resources and at the end of 2003 we created *Colombia Diversa*.

CM: Who are the people, where do they come from?

MS: Virgilio Barco and his partner, Andrew Dier, who had participated in the gay movement in their universities in the United States; Germán Rincón, a lawyer and a very renowned leader in matters of legal issues, and absolutely visible; Carlos Iván García, researcher in the area of gender-related issues, homosexuality and homophobia in the educational system, and myself. It was an act of confidence.

CM: What model did you follow, what were the guidelines, the theoretical tendencies that informed your work, to what did it respond from the social point of view?

MS: Human rights, the rights of same-sex couples. That issue had to be transformed into a social problem, because as it was, and according to the debate that had taken place in Congress, it was a private issue in which the State would not become involved. I refer to the State meaning Congress, for the Court had already become involved as of the early 1990s. The negative imaginaries were also obstacles for the recognition of rights, and ultimately, it was about the strengthening of the movement's political action; of what people call a movement. We use Aquila's strategy for political incidence, a model of dissidence, a *gringo* policy that everybody knows and that handles the different steps, the lobbying, the alliances, etc.

CM: Could you tell me about this change in the imaginaries?

MS: We decided to work with two strategies: one related to the media, which included monitoring the media, compiling everything that was being said on the subject, which at that time was terrible – the media supplied incorrect information, they had little

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knowledge on the subject, and besides there was nobody that could inform them. We discovered that the media were good allies, and it was like reversing the strategy; it was all right to monitor and evaluate them, but also to transform them into our allies, to have opinion leaders and columnists that insert the subject in a positive way within the public agenda and contribute to the legal strategy. The other part of the strategy was to work with homophobia in schools. Another strategy we used was investigation for political incidence, because we are not a research center, we are not an academic organization, we are not a partisan organization but a political one, we forge alliances with academicians, but we are not the academicians.

CM: What is *Colombia Diversa*?

MS: In the first place, we carry out research related to human rights; we produce a biannual report in which we document cases. We have accompanied some cases that we considered paradigmatic. The second objective had to do with the transformation of negative imaginaries, for which we used the media as an observatory. And there was a comedy novel, *Los Reyes* (The Monarchs) which included a transvestite for the first time: Endry Cedeño, who became the protagonist and the most important character in the novel. This has to do with the degree of visibility of the movement at the social and the personal level; before, it was the transvestites who were visible; now there are other kinds of visible people; the challenge, from my point of view, is that all of them are shown, not that the transvestite disappears, Far from it!

CM: What is the relationship between the movement and class inequalities?

MS: It is very difficult, because the issue of rights was a legal guarantee for all, but in terms of the real possibilities to exercise them there were many limitations, marked not only by class but also by age, location, access to an operating group, financial independence. The variables that render the actual exercise of rights impossible in practice are reflected in Colombia, just like in the rest of the world. At present we are witnessing a generational cost in the issue of couples: people who are dying during this period of legal transition are not being able to leave a pension to their partners because government officials are putting up obstacles, obstacles that will disappear in two or three years. On the other hand, if you interview people in Bogotá you will see that living in Ciudad Bolívar and being an employee in the closet in order to keep your job and being independent or a professional are quite different things.

In the upper and middle classes, people have been able to live as gay or lesbian with the lack of dignity of being in the closet, but without any problem; there have not been any great opponents raising the issue publicly. In the USA, a famous actress declares she is a lesbian and she has no problems; this does not happen in Colombia, although there are very prestigious heterosexual people who address the subject without any problem. Yamid Amat, Fanny Mickey, Carlos Gaviria spoke about the subject, people no longer fear that this will lead to the questioning of their sexual orientation; politicians address the subject, and that contributes legitimacy and contributes to social change and to making people feel more at ease.

CM: What work are you carrying out with ethnic minorities, with colored people in the Pacific and the indigenous communities?

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MS: None, it is an issue that does not concern these groups. I might say that most Afro-descendant activists declare that this is not an issue in their communities, much less in indigenous communities; they feel it has nothing to do with their tradition, their

race, or their ethnic identity. Together with the Office of the Ombudsman we had the chance to produce an antidiscrimination statute with the participation of different groups subject to discrimination: women, handicapped persons, Afro-descendants and indigenous people, all of which betted on a joint construction, but this did not imply focusing on sexual diversity from the perspective of disability, or focusing on indigenous related issues from the perspective of sexual diversity.

CM: Do people leave these communities and join the LGBT community but from a different perspective?

MS: There is a black transvestite activist in Bogotá, Diana Navarro, but her discourse is not tied to her racial identity.

CM: Is this an issue that *Colombia Diversa* would be interested to work on?

MS: We have not thought about it, I think that this is because we are still at a moment of national dissidence and we have done little work at the regional level.

CM: Transgenders and communities refer to a rainbow of transgender identity. What is the discussion in *Colombia Diversa*?

MS: When we began our work, it was still a very invisible movement, but at this moment there are female transvestite leaders, transformists who are leading a discourse, seeking a place, legitimacy, recognition and specific agendas. They do not feel represented in the agendas of same-sex couples, and they have issues associated to the body that are not acknowledged as such. The Court pronounced iteself on that subject a long time ago, but it was a very marginal event. In Colombia, any person can change his/her hir name very easily, which is not done so easily in other countries; then they can adopt a feminine name without any problem, it's a simple procedure.

CM: Esben Esther Pirelli, a Norwegian activist, enunciates 7 different “colors” or transgender identities: transsexuals, transvestites, eunuchs, interssexed persons, non-conforming gender people who do not wish to be pigeonholed within a specific category, and others....Is there a structured discussion on the subject at the moment?

MS: Yes, there is, but leaderships are not so visible; the visible ones are the prostitute transvestites, engaged in sexual work (some prefer to be called prostitutes and others want to be called sexual workers), who are practicing activism from that stand. “Why don't they let us dress as we please, feel what we want to feel, and besides, work in whatever occupation we can or want to?”; such is their slogan.

Colombia Diversa is not working on those issues, but it is clear to us that it is part of the agenda. However, this involves a political and organizational dilemma: we have no transvestites or transgender persons in our organization, and perhaps we would not be very welcome if we appropriated an agenda that is not necessarily so visible in our case. What we can do – and, actually, we are doing so – is to strengthen transvestite groups, specifically in Cali, so that they may gain power, document and denounce cases; we have carried out this work jointly with the police. There isn't an organization

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linked to this issue; there are individuals. There was a very important leader, who unfortunately died, who was about to begin moving the subject as a transsexual, not as a transvestite, not as a transformist, but as a transsexual. Transsexuality is also an invisible issue in Colombia. In the world, the community is known as LGBT, I and Q.

But my position is that, before incorporating more letters, we should analyse the agenda of intersexed people to see what we can construct.

CM: However, the Constitutional Court was the first to take a stance in regard to intersexual issues.

MS: Because many children were castrated carelessly, without any professional ethics, or respect for the rights of those boys and girls who were born with sexual characteristics of both sexes. We believe there should be a law on gender identity, but for the moment, such as things are, transvestite persons who identify themselves as men or as women can benefit from the law regarding couples, whether they have legalized their transit or not.

CM: What is happening now in *Colombia Diversa*, what are the items in the agenda?

MS: We are doing a follow-up of the rulings, we have gone to law with three cases of pension substitution in Bucaramanga, Medellín and Bogotá. We are accompanying the case of some lesbian women in Medellín, a couple that is requesting a joint adoption; we are accompanying a lawsuit filed by two citizens in Court on the issue of marriage, we continue with the issue of the investigation on fundamental rights, documenting cases; we are going to focus on three issues: a specific investigation on the issue of forced displacement on account of sexual orientation in Sincelejo, Santa Marta, Cali and Bogotá, which are cities that receive displaced persons, and we are going to produce a report focusing specifically on police abuse and other violent deaths.

CM: Is there a perspective of change in the presidential proposals at present? Is this discussed publicly as part of the presidential agenda?

MS: Presidential candidates are requested to answer questions on de-criminalization of abortion and gay marriage. There are some openly gay candidates running for Congress.

CM: Did you have support from Uribe's administration in the past few years?

MS: No, in Colombia rights were won in the Constitutional Court, and the Government, the Executive Power, has made little efforts to turn these rulings into a reality; quite on the contrary, it has opposed them: the concepts presented by the Treasury Department, the ministries of Social Protection and Interior before the Court were negative, that is, they recommended that the Court do not approve the rights of couples. They were the ministers in Uribe's administration.

CM: With a logic based on morality and religion?

MS: No, they are very smart. The Ministry of Economy based its recommendations on costs; the Ministry of the Interior on the concept of family, a moralist concept. Now we have serious concerns with regard to the Office of the Attorney General, the Attorney general and his current delegate of Family Affairs, Adolescence and Women. In these

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eight years of progress, everything has been linked to the Court, and the Mayor's Offices of Bogotá, Medellín and Cali. At the national level, there are quite few challenges; the Executive Power is an almost unexplored field.