TRANSFEMINISMS IN LATIN AMERICA

FINDINGS

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INTRODUCTION

ransfeminisms in Latin America" aims to further our understanding of the specificity of transfeminisms in this region. Through an exploratory mapping of certain initiatives, leaderships, and organizations that define themselves as transfeminist in Central and South America, this report identifies the ways in which the term "transfeminism" is understood and employed. In addition, it establishes transfeminisms' most relevant intersections, action areas, and the main challenges they face.

Among the main findings is that "transfeminism" names a heterogenous and dynamic concept traversed by many tensions. The term "transfeminism" is used to denote a series of feminist principles and practices developed principally though not exclusively—by trans and *travesti*¹ women who use an intersectional lens to question gender essentialism, transphobia within feminism, and the precariousness of migrant, racialized, impoverished, and gender-nonconforming bodies (Interview with Claudia Garriga-López, 2021).

¹ From now on, we will refer to trans and *travesti* women as key—yet not the only—actors within transfeminist movements in Latin America. The term *travesti* is claimed by Latin American people with feminine gender identities who do not identify with the sex they were assigned at birth. (Daria, la Maracx). As we explain in Section 2, "Tensions: The Political Subject of Transfeminism and Other Political Agents," travesti is above all a political identity that is the result of an ongoing process of collective redefining.

Transfeminisms understand that sexism and transphobia are interconnected, and that the liberation of trans people—in particular, trans and *travesti* women—is intrinsically linked to the liberation of all women (Interview with Garriga-López, 2021). Another key aspect of transfeminisms is that they form a movement that "comes from the streets and ends up in textbooks" (Berkins, 2007). In other words, transfeminist practices are developed in the streets and later become political strategies and epistemological frameworks which, in turn, continue to nurture grassroots mobilization and resistance efforts. (Interview with Garriga-López, 2021)

Although this notion is useful to understand what transfeminisms are, as with all definitions, it is somewhat lacking and simplifies the diversity and internal tensions of the phenomenon. For example, while the term was used in Spain in the 1980s and in the United States in 1992, and despite there being some transfeminist manifestos such as Koyama's in 2001 (Garriga-López, 2016), not all people who define themselves as transfeminist speak from the same place or for the same audiences.

Some believe that transfeminisms are movements by and for travesti and trans women (Interview with Leah Rivas, 2021). Others believe that transfeminisms should center trans and *travesti* women, but that trans men can and should be included, and alliances with cisgender people should also be made² (Interviews with Jaqueline Gomes de Jesus, Letícia Nascimento and Johanna Maturana, 2021). Finally, there are some who consider transfeminisms in a wider sense, breaking with Western subjectivities to become a movement of the masses. Such a movement includes but is not limited to multiple subjects in "transit," such as migrants, among others (Interview with Sayak Valencia, 2021).

This is just one of many differences that shows the great diversity of viewpoints within Latin American transfeminisms. Therefore, from here on, we will use the term in plural, as it does not represent a unified and homogenous movement.



In addition, as suggested by Siobhan Guerrero, transfeminisms are profoundly influenced by location. This implies certain similarities but also some important differences, as is the case between Latin American transfeminisms and those in Spain and the United States. Additionally, there are notable differences with respect to priorities and strategies between some Central American countries and countries such as Argentina and Brazil.

Despite this diversity within transfeminisms, our findings reveal a deep overlap in a common set of concerns. Among them are (1) the need to recognize the rights of *travesti*, trans, and non-binary people and demand an end to all forms of violence against them and (2) the search for better living conditions for ethnoracial minorities and impoverished peoples, many of whom are also *travesti*, trans, or non-binary.

The research also revealed considerable concern regarding growing backlash against the rights of *travesti*, trans, and non-binary people by conservative groups and some trans-exclusionary feminists who define themselves as "gender critical." Both groups seek to



² The term cisgender is commonly used to refer to people who identify with the gender which was assigned to them at birth. In other words, people who are not trans.



restrict gender identity to a binary one through essentialist perspectives on human biology that argue that anatomical differences—particularly reproductive ones—define a person's identity. They contest that these features cannot be changed, and that they determine who has access to human rights and who does not. The former group has managed to change legislation in the United States to limit trans people's access to sports teams and healthcare, among other programs and services. The second group has gained political visibility in the United Kingdom and Spain due to their opposition to trans identity laws and are growing in numbers and strength in Mexico, Argentina, and Colombia.³

Apart from its rapid advance over the last five years, it is also worrying that this trans-exclusionary narrative in feminism is having a major—and negative—impact on the recognition of the human rights of *travesti*, trans, and non-binary people. Furthermore, it is strengthening prejudices and hate speeches in areas of the world where the most cases of violence against this segment of the population occur.⁴

Travesti, trans, and non-binary organizations, along with people who self-identify as transfeminists, are responding to these attacks that reinforce prejudices, amplify hate speech, block struggles for rights, and intensify the already extreme transphobic violence in the region. Better understanding these responses and how to best support allies in their work is another key aspect of this research.

³ For more information, see: Martínez, Juliana; Duarte, Ángela María; Rojas, María Juliana. "Manufacturing Moral Panic: Weaponizing Children to Undermine Gender Justice and Human Rights". Available at https://globalphilanthropyproject.org/2021/03/24/ manufacturing-moral-panic/

⁴ A report by the Interamerican Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) concludes that the life expectancy of trans women in Latin America is 35 years. More trans people are murdered in Brazil than anywhere else in the World. 2020 saw at least 175 trans people - all women - killed in this country, which equates to a murder every two days, according to the National Association of *Travestis* and Transexuals (Antra)

METHODOLOGY



his research project was divided into three stages:

- 1. Literature Review: 20 articles in electronic media, 10 academic articles, six webinars, seven podcast episodes, and two television programs were analyzed in order to identify key figures in the region's transfeminist movements, their action areas, and how they define their struggles.
- 2. Qualitative Investigation: The team conducted twenty semi-structured interviews over Google Meet or Zoom with people who self-identify as transfeminist activists and/or scholars and well-known Latin American transfeminist leaders. All interviewees provided their informed consent, a policy of data processing, and a questionnaire based on the literature review (which contained 12 different categories, including the definition of transfeminism, work areas, coalitions and alliances, and most relevant intersections and challenges, among other topics). Each interview was recorded and transcribed to facilitate qualitative analysis. At the end of this process, all the files will be erased, as agreed in the Policy of Data Processing.
- **3. Analysis, Writing, and Editing:** After pooling the findings, the team analyzed the material and wrote the report collaboratively. To do so, the team met every two weeks to discuss findings and to revise and edit documents (the questionnaire, informed consent, other documents from the early stages, drafts, the report in its final stages and translations to English and Portuguese) throughout all stages of the process.



FINDINGS

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DEFINING LATIN AMERICAN TRANSFEMINISMS. BETWEEN PRACTICE, EPISTEMOLOGICAL PRODUCTION, AND POLITICS

Transfeminisms are a strand of feminism that centers the voices, experiences, practices, and knowledge of trans and *travesti* women as key elements in the liberation of all women, and as necessary for an equitable distribution of rights, opportunities, and resources among all people. To this end, transfeminisms consider other categories of oppression, like racialization and class.

Transfeminisms in Latin America work on three areas of action and knowledge production: (1) practical, (2) epistemological, and (3) political. These areas of work are based on strategies influenced by the life experiences of trans people, particularly trans and *travesti* women. These three dimensions nourish each other, producing a chorus of diverse but harmonic voices that are increasingly speaking up in the region. However, as a result of this growing influence, transfeminisms are also more often the target of conservative groups, the extreme right, and trans-exclusionary feminists.

The Practical Field

Transfeminisms think of themselves as popular, community-based (Interview with Charlotte Callejas, 2021; Garriga-López, 2021), and profoundly committed to social mobilization. For decades, "street activism," protests, and local community work have been some of the main tools used by trans and *travesti* women to defend their rights and raise awareness about their unmet needs. These practices were key to the emergence of transfeminisms and continue to be constitutive of contemporary movements.



Transfeminisms are spaces of struggle against, resistance to, and questioning of systems of oppression based on cisnormativity, or what transfeminists call, "cis-tems."⁵ These cis-tems are also present in different strands of feminism, including trans-exclusionary feminisms.

The Epistemological Field

Latin American transfeminisms are producers of knowledge. The fact that they were initially developed outside academia does not mean that transfeminist practices have not produced knowledge. On the contrary, within their activist pursuits, trans and travesti women have created epistemologies which draw on their own life experiences and activism (Interview with Letícia Carolina Nascimento, 2021). Lohana Berkins's *Travesti, una identidad política ("Travesti,* a Political Identity") (2006) and, more recently, Marlene Wayar's *Travesti, una teoría lo suficientemente buena ("Travesti,* a Good Enough Theory") (2019) are good examples of how trans and *travesti* activism is at the center of knowledge production and political mobilization.

Furthermore, during the first decades of the 21st century, the enrollment of trans and *travesti* women at universities along with greater access to the internet contributed to the academic and formal development of transfeminist epistemologies.⁶ These epistemologies have their roots in the intersection of trans and travesti

studies developed in the region⁷ and extensive feminist theoretical production. In this sense, for some of those interviewed, transfeminisms allow for approaches which are not only theoretical, but which also constitute ethicalpolitical reflections that seek the recognition of trans and travesti experiences and rights (Interview with Siobhan Guerrero, 2021).

This idea of critical reflection goes hand in hand with other positions that see transfeminism not only as a movement, but as an epistemology (Interview with Sayak Valencia, 2021), and as a tool for critical thinking. As such, transfeminist frameworks and praxis would allow for all voices to be heard. Moreover, it would recognize the diversity of bodies that constitute society, account for their historical power relations, and encourage more inclusive forms of memory-building by allowing trans and travesti women to tell their own stories (Interview with Elyla Sinvergüenza, 2021).

There is a consensus that transfeminisms amplify feminist struggles to acknowledge a multifaceted and non-binary understanding of gender, rooting out essentialist conceptions about biology which are still naturalized within feminist discourse (Interview with Letícia Nascimento, 2021; Garriga-López, 2021).

This stance questions the notion that there is a supposed natural and necessary link between corporality and identity. In other words, it rejects the notion that the presence or absence of certain chromosomes, genitals, sexual or reproductive organs, or hormone levels makes someone "a woman," "a man," or a person of another gender.

The Political Field

Transfeminisms have also moved into the political realm to champion key issues for trans and travesti people.

The number of trans and *travesti* candidates running in popular elections and being elected has increased in recent years. Lawyer Tamara Adrián won a seat in the



⁵ The prefix "cis," which means "on this side of," has been used to create terms such as "cisgender" to name individuals who identify with the sex assigned at birth. It has also been used to create neologisms which highlight the systematic discrimination against trans people in society. "Cis-tem" is one of these subversions of language in which the correct spelling of the word "system" has been replaced to imply that the "Cis-tem" being referred to is hetero or cisnormative. In other words, it excludes sexual diversity (lesbian, gay, and bisexual people) and gender diversity (trans, *travesti*, and non-binary people). For more information, see Martínez, Juliana, *"La obligación de ser heterosexual"* ("The Obligation to Be Heterosexual"), available at https://sentiido.com/ la-obligacion-de-ser-heterosexual/. Translator's note: This term has been translated from the original Spanish *"cis-tema*," which lends itself to the same linguistic subversion.

⁶ See section 2, "Tensions: A Movement's Journey: From the Streets to Cisnormative Academia."

⁷ For further information, see: Blas Radi, "On Trans* Epistemology. Critiques, Contributions, and Challenges," TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly 6.1 (2019): 43-63.

National Assembly of Venezuela in 2015, and in Ecuador, activist Diane Rodríguez won a seat in the National Assembly in May 2017.⁸ Though not elected, in 2021, indigenous environmentalist and activist Gahela Cari was the first trans candidate to run in elections for the Peruvian Congress, and there are other such examples throughout the continent. In the latest 2020 municipal elections in Brazil, the number of trans people elected was four times greater than in 2016.⁹ In 2016, there were just eight trans people elected compared with the 30 elected in 2020.

Political coordination is not only evident in the electoral arena. Transfeminist activism is also taking place at a community level to increase the participation of trans and *travesti* women in spaces they hardly occupied before, such as community associations, universities, and the education system in general.

Relevance of the Term "Transfeminism"

The use of the term "transfeminism" is contested and can produce mixed feelings. For example, some worry that using the "trans" prefix legitimizes the exclusion of trans and travesti people from more mainstream feminisms since they would become relegated by default to "transfeminisms," and could not identify themselves simply as "feminists."

Furthermore, not all people or organizations consulted considered the term "transfeminism" relevant or useful to their political struggle. As suggested by Mati González Gil in Colombia: "This term does not allow me to mobilize anything politically. Why am I going to name myself in a way that does not benefit me?" Mauro Cabral, from Argentina, reinforces this position stating that sometimes the term "transfeminism" "does not allow for a politically productive conversation." This is in part because, ironically, it could be co-opted by cisgender feminists in order to define themselves as trans-inclusive without having to really include trans or *travesti* people within their political, academic, or social spaces. Cabral calls these "cis transfeminisms" and warns against this new form of tokenism and appropriation on the part of supposed allies to trans and *travesti* people, rights, and causes. Despite this, others view the term as strategic, bringing certain debates to national attention, raising awareness about the difficulties faced by *travesti*, trans, and non-binary people, and mobilizing an agenda for social change.

In Spite of these differences, transfeminisms share three main characteristics: they are plural, intersectional, and decolonial.

a. Plural

Transfeminisms in Latin America vary depending on the needs and struggles of trans and *travesti* people in widely diverse ethnoracial, cultural, and political contexts. This plurality can be seen in three main areas: priorities, ethnoracial diversity, and identity categories.

Priorities

In countries like Argentina, Mexico, or Brazil, transfeminisms have created a vast intellectual production. This has been partly achieved by gaining access to academic spaces that have encouraged the emergence of trans and *travesti* epistemologies, which have then nourished the region's transfeminist movements.

In other contexts, like Central America (specifically, Nicaragua, Honduras, and El Salvador), the production of a theoretical or academic corpus has not been a priority. Given the levels of violence in the region and growing political concerns related to the increasingly autocratic nature of the region's governments, "there are other places where life must be managed" (Interview with Daniela Núñez, 2021). This is not seen as a disadvantage, but rather as a key contribution to transfeminisms: "Our discussions in relation to our feminisms vary due to the fact that there are political questions that render harder blows on our bodies" (Interview with Daniela Núñez, 2021).

Ethnoracial Diversity

Ethnoracial characteristics have also molded Latin American transfeminisms. Brazil is a case in point. A country of more than 200 million people where 49.6%

^{8 &}quot;Candidatos transgénero ganan terreno en la política en América Latina", Qué pasa magazine, 2021

^{9 &}quot;Quantidade de pessoas trans eleitas em 2020 é quatro vezes maior que em 2016", Revista Género y Número. https://www. generonumero.media/trans-eleitas-em-2020/

of the population is black or mixed-race,¹⁰ but where 80% of the victims of transphobic violence are Black or mixed-race trans or *travesti* women.¹¹

Therefore, Brazilian transfeminists speak of "Afrotransfeminism" to address the highlight the intersection between transphobia and structural racism. "Yes, we are all trans, we are all travestis, but in a structurally racist country such as Brazil, the last country in the Americas to end slavery, in a country that has a huge problem related to the fallacies of racial democracy, to only highlight our gender identity is not enough to understand what we experience in Brazilian society. To this end, I began to invest in this narrative, to think of gender and race as two dimensions which are extremely important to understand the actual trans experience in Brazil (María Clara Araújo, 2021).

Identity Categories

To understand the different transfeminisms in the region, it is essential to understand the nuances of different forms of self-identification. For many people interviewed, *travesti* identity is at the center of transfeminisms. *Travesti* is a uniquely Latin American identity category with variations in each country. Originally meant as a transphobic slur directed at trans sex workers, the term has been re-appropriated and resignified to name a political identity that asserts the right to self-identify beyond the constraints of gender normativity.

Argentinian activist Lohana Berkins explains: "As travestis, we construct our identity by challenging the meanings that the dominant culture assigns to genitals. Society reads into people's genitals and forms expectations regarding their identities, skills, social positions, sexuality, and morality. It is assumed that a body with a penis will have a masculine subjectivity, while a body with a vagina have a feminine subjectivity" (Berkins, 2007).

In other words, the use of the term travesti as a political category performs an epistemic insubordination, transforming a concept derived from a



biomedical—pathologizing— standpoint into an identity category based on one's gender identity

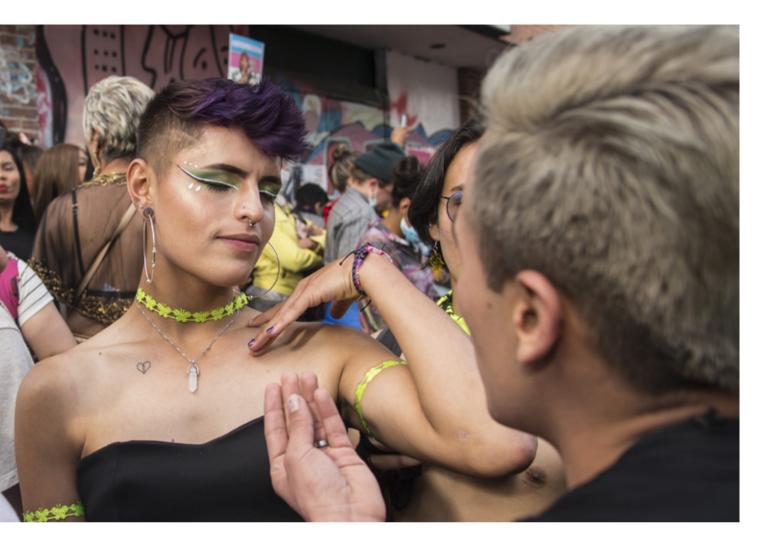
Another key aspect of *travesti* identity is that, since many travesti people do not identify themselves with the term "woman," it is a non-binary category: "*Travestis* have a feminine gender identity, but not all *travestis* recognize themselves as women, and when the term 'woman' is used as a synonym of gender, the experiences of many *travestis* who do not want to be recognized under the term 'woman' are excluded. I opt for speaking about 'woman-isms' and 'female-isms'¹² since we share the experiences of being labeled within what is defined as



Pesquisa das Características Étnico-Raciais da População, 2008. Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística, 2008.

¹¹ Bruna G. Benavides and Sayonara Naider Bomfim Nogueira, 2021. Dossiê dos assassinatos e da violência contra travestis e transexuais brasileiras em 2020. São Paulo, Expressão Popular, ANTRA, 2021.

¹² Translator's note. In the original Spanish the terms 'woman-isms' and 'female-isms' refer to the Spanish words '*mujeridades*' and 'feminilidades' respectively. Both words allude to ways of being feminine.



feminine, but not necessarily within cis-hetero patriarchal molds (Interview with Letícia Nascimento, 2021).

For this reason, *travesti* must be understood "as a strongly political, *'sudaca*¹³ identity, which is related to language, to our region, and to an entire genealogy associated with a history of struggle in which our first movements got together in the streets to say 'this is *travesti* identity'" (Florencia Guimaraes, 2021).

As stated by María Clara Araújo, *travesti* "is an identity constructed on Latin American soil, and I think that it is

important for us to ensure that we do not translate this term when we speak with European and United States institutions because our experiences as *travestis* in Cali, Rio de Janeiro, La Paz, Monterrey, or Santo Domingo bring with them aspects that are very much from our locality, from the reality in which we are immersed in Latin America. And what is particular to this reality? The experience of a violence that never ends, of a continual crisis that looks as if it's never going to end, and we are within that context that has a colonial origin" (María Clara Araújo, 2021).

As with the term *travesti*, the term *cochón* is used in Nicaragua, and it does not coincide with the binary idea increasingly attributed to the term "trans." *Cochón*, *cochona*, or *cochonx* is used to refer to people assigned male at birth, but whose identity and/or gender expression does not follow the traditional norms of masculinity or homosexuality. "*Cochón* is non-binary because it is

¹³ The word 'sudaca' is an initially pejorative term used in Spain to refer to migrants from South America. But the expression has been appropriated by the immigrants themselves and in general by people throughout Spanish-speaking South America.

attributed to someone who is neither man nor woman, but this term [non-binary] comes from the North." In addition, cochón is a term that marks intersections with race and colonialism; those who call themselves cochónes/as/xs are Black, poor, or live in marginalized neighborhoods (Interview with Elyla Sinvergüenza).

Cochón is another case of resignification of a slur, turning it into an affirming identity that brings pride beyond the categories proposed by the LGBT acronym, and establishes itself as a political subject in the fight for the rights of gender non-conforming people, particularly those with non-binary feminine and racialized identities. *Cochón/a/x* also allows those who identify with the term to distance themselves from colonial identity frameworks and categories, and to collectively construct themselves in community spaces. Hence, the term has considerable political potential.

Finally, some people also strategically use the words trans, queer, or non-binary¹⁴ because, although they are colonial and come from the "Global North", they are politically useful to engage in conversations and build common agendas with transfeminist movements in other countries or regions, but always keeping a critical perspective (Interview with Daniela Núñez; Elyla Sinvergüenza, and Florencia Guimaraes, 2021).¹⁵

- 14 In reference to the terms trans and non-binary, some of those interviewed expressed that there are debates regarding nonbinary people who are not always recognized as trans (Interview with Elyla Sinvergüenza). Translator's note: In the original Spanish, the term "non-binary: is written as *no binarie*. Given that the word *binarie* does not end in "A," which would denote it as female (binaria) and which would be grammatically correct, the term binarie emphasizes the non-binary nature, not only of the person, but of the the word itself, performing a linguistic intervention in the grammatical gender binary as a gesture of decolonizing both language and society.
- 15 The question of colonial relations within transfeminisms remains open. Some interviewees recognize an almost genealogical relation to Spain that it is not necessarily colonial due to their relationship with migrant people in the country (Sayak Valencia). For others, beyond the shared use of the term and the common frameworks proposed by the transfeminist scholars and activists who coined it, "transfeminism" is a particularly useful concept when creating intersectional, decolonial, and indigenous community-based spaces where the voices of historically marginalized peoples are heard, and alliances are built (Interview with Elyla Sinvergüenza). In addition, many others believe these constructions arise partly from the North, but they will always be transfeminisms from the Global South, born of recognizing the roots of plurality whichmake up the movement (Interview with Guimaraes and Balvin, 2021).

b. Intersectional

Racialization and class are the most relevant intersections in Latin American transfeminisms. Almost all the people interviewed, independent of their geographical location, mentioned that the majority of trans and *travesti* women in the region live in precarious conditions, due not only to their gender identity but also to their ethnoracial identity and economic situation.

The intersection between gender and racialization also includes the situation of Indigenous peoples. "There cannot be a *cochona*, *marica*, or transfeminist liberation without recognizing Indigenous peoples" (Interview with Elyla Sinvergüenza, 2021).

Charlotte Callejas, a Cuban residing in Colombia, mentions that there are also intersections with spiritual and religious practices which must be considered: those who practice religions with African roots may be discriminated against—or sometimes accused of witchcraft—due to stigmas that associate religions other than Christianity with Satanism (Interview with Charlotte Callejas, 2021). Furthermore, even when trans, travesti and non-binary people practice Christian religions, such spaces are often a source of violence against them, and LGBTQ people more broadly.

The intersectionality of transfeminisms can also be seen in the intersecting oppressions faced by those who are part of the movement: "It doesn't matter [what or] how our people are—*travas*,¹⁶ fat, thin, whores, Black, disabled—we're always the ones left out of certain sectors" (Interview with Florencia Guimaraes, 2021). Non-binary people are also a key part of the movement, as Santiago Balvin says reminds us: "Non-binary people are also here, we contribute from that position too, in fact, I have contributed from there" (Interview with Santiago Balvin, 2021).

Although an intersectional approach is important because it allows a deeper understanding of the specificities of concrete populations, some people expressed concern about the term. They feel that the way in which intersectionality is increasingly used turns it into a catalog of differences, a list of identities that



¹⁶ Diminutive colloquial term for travesti.

causes fragmentation because it does not name who benefits from the subjugation of those social identities, and loses sight of common objectives and struggles. In addition, this simplification disregards the historical, social, and political consequences of the hierarchies imposed by race and class, defining them as individual identity labels and not as categories of oppression, which would allow for the voices of those most affected by those oppressions to be heard (Interview with Daniela Núñez, 2021).

c. Decolonial

Given the shared heritage of colonization in the region, many transfeminisms see themselves as decolonial in the sense that they promote emancipation from the political, social, and cultural effects of coloniality,¹⁷ which, among others, imposes compulsory heterosexuality, and a biological essentialism that sees gender as binary and hierarchical vision of gender and obligatory heterosexuality

Racialization and class are categories that cut across the region, highlighting the social, political, and economic impact of the structures of inequality imposed by colonization, and reproduced and reinforced through coloniality. "Race," in particular, emerges as a category that appeared during the process of colonization and which continues to be used to distribute rights and resources unequally among Black and Indigenous populations. Hence, a decolonial perspective is central to Latin American transfeminisms.

As Letícia Carolina Nascimento suggests, "In Latin America, we can only get an understanding of what lives are precarious based on an understanding of María Lugones's [concept of the] coloniality of gender, and also through what Aníbal Quijano presents as a social classification imposed by coloniality according to class, race, and gender. This process results in lives that are made precarious, lives emptied of any meaning. This process of colonization robs us of our human face; it transforms us into object of pleasure, object of work (Interview with Letícia Nascimento, 2021).

According to some of the sources, decolonial thinking may also help understand the range of oppressions historically—and still—faced by different types of bodies.¹⁸

"I do believe that we need a transfeminism that involves a series of dialogues with other movements, especially with decolonial thought. Not only because the majority of trans people are racialized—and here is where lots of violence associated with hate crimes comes into play—but also because of what underlies this violence. Part of it is the idea that the bodies of men and women have always been understood in the same way throughout history, which comes from a bias in the coloniality of knowledge. I don't think that many trans-exclusionary feminists have taken the time to reflect on what they say about the history of women. By this, I don't mean to suggest that we are going to find a glorious history of inclusive societies. What I mean to say is that we are going to find accounts with different dynamics to the idea that there has always been an oppressed sex. We may find examples of equality, but

¹⁷ By "coloniality," we refer to the power structures imposed by colonialism and, more recently, imperialism – as systems of domination and/or exploitation -that remain in place once the colonial relation ends. Aníbal Quijano coined the concept of coloniality of power to explain the colonial power structures which produced social discriminations which were later interpreted as "racial," "ethnical," "anthropological" or "national," depending on the moments, agents and populations involved. "These intersubjective constructions, product of Eurocentered colonial domination were even assumed to be 'objective' categories of ahistorical significance. That is, as natural phenomena, not referring to the history of power. This power structure was, and still is, the framework within which operate the other social relations of classes or estates. (Quijano, 1992). Furthermore, we reference the concept of the coloniality of gender, coined by María Lugones, who adds that not only race, but also gender, functions as a category of domination to justify white supremacy, male superiority, gender binarism, and compulsory heterosexuality as the only possible ways of life (Lugones, 2008)

¹⁸ Researcher Viviane Vergueiro is author of the investigation "Post-decolonization of genders and bodies in disagreement: an analysis of cisgenderism as normativity", in which she analyzes how bodies and genders which are not within cisgender norms live colonized existences. "And here I use colonization in its wider accepted sense, as cultural colonisation of knowledge, existential colonisation within a system, a system-world using the terminology of Quijano, and these cisnormalisations act on the identities of non-standard genders. In this sense, such a cis-genderism is a useful analytical category for thinking intersectionality about gender identity as something valid within oppressive and anti-colonialist struggles" (interview with Viviane Vergueiro in Iberoamérica Social, 2014).

we will be able to see that the exercises of oppression have occurred in different ways, with different examples of gender organization. The shift towards decoloniality is a shift towards the appreciation of the historical nature of bodies and identities, of how oppressions also mutate and are transformed (Interview with Siobhan Guerrero, 2021).

Apart from helping to understand the complexity of the phenomenon, a decolonial perspective may also allow Latin American transfeminisms to build alliances based on their commonalities, especially since across the region trans and travesti women are victims of the transphobia and the violence against all that is perceived as feminine instilled since the colonial period (Interviews with María Clara Araujo and Erika Hilton, 2021).

"Coloniality naturalizes the notion that the function of this *cuerpa*¹⁹ is to be violated, that that is its only use. I challenge this precarization of our existences and use the colonial category to bring transfeminism closer to decolonial studies, and encourage a more productive dialogue with Latin American feminisms (Interview with Letícia Nascimento, 2021).



As with all living movements, Latin American transfeminisms are in constant dialogue and change. Within this intellectual, political, and social activity, we identified three main tensions: (1) who is the political subject of transfeminisms, (2) tension between transfeminisms and cisnormative academia, and (3) tensions within transfeminisms between those who promote the regulation of sex work ("regulationists") and those who support its criminalization ("abolitionists").

¹⁹ Some people use the Spanish term *cuerpa* (body) in its feminine form as a means of linguistic emancipation from its "colonial grammatical framework" (Elyla Sinvergüenza). The use of the terms *transgénera* and *transgénere* in a female or gender-neutral fashion, respectively, is also frequent. While other languages such as English have gender-neutral adjectives by default, Romance languages like Spanish and Portuguese traditionally default to masculine forms (Letícia Carolina Nascimento).







a. Transfeminism's Political Subject and Other Political Agents

Are transfeminisms working for the rights of transfeminine identities, non-cisgender identities in general, or for the array of discriminated and oppressed people beyond gender identities?

For several interviewees, given the extreme precarity of the lives of trans and travesti women in most countries of the region, they should be the ones at the center of transfeminisms. "Our murder rates remain alarming, and living conditions, which were already difficult for the majority, got worse due to the [Covid-19] pandemic. Sex work became impossible, cutting a lifeline that many depend on to survive. Changing such a critical situation requires a large institutional mobilization. It requires us to rethink our educational, labor, and public safety policies, and I think that political subjects should be the ones who can offer increasingly sharp analyses of their own situation (Interview with María Clara Araujo, 2021).

Nevertheless, as, mentioned before, the centrality of trans and *travesti* identities also implies an intersectional perspective that encourages coalitions that go beyond gender identity categories, and are based instead on common struggles.

Transfeminisms seek to "break the biological dominance over life, those social representations that people form from biology as if it dictated life. This work is for gender freedom, for sexual diversity, for the recognition of intersectional of identities. We cannot see a person solely as trans or cis, but rather as a trans or cis person who is also white, Black, Indigenous, old, young, with a physical disability, etc., etc...." (Interview with Jaqueline Gomes de Jesus, 2021).

This vision for the future sees enormous potential for change in transfeminisms and in their interactions with society as more cisgender people understand the importance of transfeminist work—not only for trans people, but for everyone.²⁰

²⁰ The term used in the Spanish original is "todes." This expression replaces the masculine or feminine suffixes "-o" and "- a," respectively with the gender-neutral "e." This is done because, in Spanish—a binary gemdered language—the "e" is the closest linguistic element to a gender-neutral suffix. Activists in the region increasingly use the "-e" suffix to expand the gender binary in nouns that refer to specific populations. These changes remain contentious and have not been approved by the Real Academia de la Lengua Española, a colonial institution that presides over Spanish grammar, syntax, and morphology.

Other Agents Within Transfeminisms

Another important element is the increasing participation of trans men and transmasculine people in transfeminist spaces. As other identities join transfeminist movements as agents, though not necessarily as political subjects, transfeminisms are being challenged.

Independently of the centrality of transfeminine identities, transfeminisms are perceived by some of their constituents as spaces open to all non-cisgender identities who have suffered in some way from a range of violence precisely for not being cisgender, which includes trans men.

"Trans men are very important for transfeminism because they are going to help cisgender men rethink their current model of masculinity, which is toxic. This doesn't mean that trans men shouldn't have to create their own models and change them. There are many contributions that people can make from their own social position, which are always different" (Interview with Jaqueline Gomes de Jesús, 2021).

Letícia Carolina Nascimento confirms this idea, stating that "we understand transgender identities through the experiences of these people, not as based on anyone's genitals. Identities are multiple; the body is not an accessory of identity, the body produces identity, identity is produced together with the body, and the body itself is produced in this process. We are not our bodies. As Butler says, we make our bodies" (Interview with Letícia Carolina Nascimento, 2021).

Beyond Political Subjects

Some sectors of Latin American transfeminisms, particularly in Mexico, question the idea of a subject itself and, consequently, the idea of a political subject. Staying close to the Spanish tradition, Sayak Valencia places the idea of transit and displacement at the center of transfeminisms in order to include what happens with transits between other "borders" such as class, racialization, states, and gender. As a result, Valencia prefers concepts such as "masses' in transit"—which, for her, are not traversed by neoliberal logics—to refer to the political subjects of transfeminisms (Interview with Sayak Valencia, 2021). Others feel the concept of the political subject is too attached to an idea of identity politics, which prioritizes certain life experiences over others. This begs the question: how bad would it be for feminisms to do away with the idea of an identity-based political subject, and, in instead, think in terms of prospects, tools, and struggle strategies? In this sense, Siobhan Guerrero, from Mexico, asserts the need to stop thinking about the political subject in terms of shared identities. Instead, it would be best to think of it in terms of the political projects and prospects of subjects whose identities, including those of trans and travesti people, are diverse and may change over time; "identities are historically-contingent and will be swallowed by time" (Interview with Siobhan Guerrero, 2021).

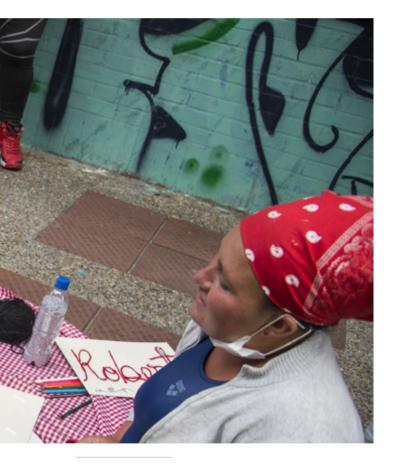


For the past six years, every July, residents of Bogota participate in the "trans march" in the city's streets. In 2021 many supporters also said "I March Trans" to demand respect and opportunities for trans and travesti women all over the country.



Similarly, Daniela Núñez, a Costa Rican residing in Mexico, feels that "transfeminism opens the door not only to trans people, but also to marginalized people who are close to these discussions," such as cisgender sex workers who share many spaces with those who identify as *travesti*. In this sense, she feels that the political subject of transfeminisms should be open to debate and construction. This, however, would not imply losing the centrality of trans experiences, and the need for anti-racist and decolonial perspectives.

Florencia Guimaraes, from Argentina, affirms this idea: "Transfeminism isn't only constructed by trans people, it is for whoever wants it, lesbians, *areperas*,²¹ Black people, *sudacas*²², whores, *travesti*/trans people; it is for whoever is willing to question all the oppressions we have normalized and to do something to change them."



- 21 Slang, initially derogatory, to refer to a lesbian woman. The term is used because, in some regions, the word *arepa*, a corn patty, is used to refer to the vagina.
- 22 Derogatory term from Spain which refers to South American people, especially South American immigrants in Spain.

This position, however, encounters some resistance given the historical debt owed to trans and travesti women, whose identities have not been recognized: "This debate is a bit too much for subjects²³ who have historically been denied their identity. We have never been allowed an identity, and now that we have the possibility of having one, will we have to skip this stage? At some point, I might come to this and say: that's enough of identities. But we travestis were always denied this, and now I want to be recognized by my travesti identity. I understand the post-identity movement academically, and I feel it is powerful and necessary, but in the current context, I still defend identity politics (Interview with Letícia Nascimento, 2021).

Puerto Rican Claudia Sofía Garriga-López agrees, and indicates that, given the way structures of oppression work, fighting for travesti and trans equality implies the creation of an equitable world in a wider sense: "The political subjects of transfeminisms are trans women. When trans women are free, all people will be free" (Garriga-López, 2021).

b. A Movement's Journey: From the Streets to Cisnormative Academia

The interaction between the movement for the rights of trans and *travesti* people, and academic work—initially influenced by Anglo-Saxon and European knowledge production—nourishes Latin American feminisms. Although largely produced by cisgender people, this work acquired its own, diverse meaning as soon as transfeminisms established themselves in the region.

The biggest tension emerges when transfeminisms' social impact and, particularly epistemological work is not recognized. "We have activists who are 50 or 60 years old and who never went to college and have no desire to go, but who have extensive experience—not only in terms of life experience, but in the construction of epistemologies in the *travesti* movement based on an understanding of our reality through the critical reflection of our identities. We

²³ In the original Spanish the term used is "sujeta," which replaces the more common and grammatically correct "o" (sujeto) with "a," which "feminizes" the expression. This is yet another cases of gender subversion through language.

don't need to go to college to produce epistemologies, however, going to college does allow us to make more connections and move into other spaces, which end up broadening trans epistemologies (Interview with Letícia Carolina Nascimento).

Many of the people interviewed, particularly those who operate within academia, demand more space for trans and *travesti* scholars, and complain that trans and *travesti* academics are not cited as often as their cisgender colleagues. In their opinion, those who can influence affirmative action policies should do so in favor of trans and travesti people who work in academia (Interviews with Jaqueline Gomes de Jesus, 2021; Mauro Cabral, 2021).

Also, some people shared their concern about the growing distance between the base movement and "internet activism." While influencers are recognized as valuable assets in shifting the way in which trans and travesti lives are seen and valued (primarily by showing trans and travesti people in a great variety of fields and spaces), the fact that most influencers are not connected to "street activism" is also questioned.

"Internet was important for transfeminism's development, but I am concerned that the debate is now happening without involvement in the grassroots movements. I also see that today's activism has difficulty transforming its critical perspectives into public policy that empowers the movement. Many activists are thinking only about the internet, about their Instagram profile. Yes, they reach a huge number of followers and change perceptions, but they are not necessarily going to have an impact on public policy because their work was not conducted within the social movement (interview with Jaqueline Gomes de Jesus).

c. Sex Work: Between Abolition and Regulation

Most people interviewed for this research advocate for sex work to no longer be an inescapable destiny for the majority of trans and *travesti* women, but rather, just one option among many others.

"We have to understand prostitution from the experiences of prostitution, and not through the experience of people who do not prostitute themselves, and who wish to judge prostitution, whether this be a moral or an academic judgement—or drawing on Marxism—it doesn't matter. We must hear the experiences of trans prostitutes seeing prostitution as compulsory. We often think about class, considering that 90% of the trans and travesti population engages in prostitution, and 80% of the annual trans and *travesti* victims of homicides are Black or *pardo*"²⁴ (Interview with Letícia Carolina Nascimento).

This tension does not occur only within transfeminisms, but also among them and other sectors of feminism, particularly white, middle-class, cisgender feminism, which frequently adopts abolitionist positions by understanding sex work as inherently exploitative of the female body.

However, for some transfeminist individuals, recognition of sex work is a basic condition of transfeminist thought: "There are no transfeminisms without us whores, all the whores" (Post by Daniela Núñez on Twitter, 2021). Also, some people feel that debates related to sex work are not always prioritized within transfeminisms and trans movements. Many are concentrated on matters related to the experiences of trans children and their families. For some transfeminist sex workers, this omission represents a type of abolitionism which affects their means of subsistence (Interview with Daniela Núñez, 2021).

Similarly, transfeminist debates around sex work incorporate wider questions about the logic of contemporary work: "We are activists in terms of the rights of sex workers, but we need a reflection around workplaces and whether we have any that are not radically exploitative. Sex work is like any other work, and that should not only be read in one sense. There are people who dedicate themselves to sex work because it goes well for them. They have us in a "defend or attack" position, but there is no reflection on workplaces outside of sex work. The precariousness of sex work is also evident in other work spaces (Interview with Siobhan Guerrero, 2021).



²⁴ Pardo is a term often employed in Brazil to describe mixed-race "people of color" whose skin tone is not as dark as Black Brazilians. In Brazil's 2010 census, 43% of the population self-identified as *pardo*.



On the other hand, are transfeminist individuals and organizations with abolitionist positions on sex work. These positions are not against those who engage in sex work, as they recognize them as victims of the "prostituting system" that bears the blame.

Lohana Berkins declared herself an abolitionist. When asked about when she had come to this position in an interview with Página 12 in 2012, she replied, "When I understood that prostitution did not only depend on me—I hadn't invented it—but rather that I was immersed in a system that was perverse and stronger than me. I started pondering these questions from a human rights perspective. And because of the hardships I experienced as a prostitute. Because it would be the bitterest account of our lives, full of pain, death, absence, and violence against our poor bodies. First was the fight to change my own life because prostitution isn't something I would wish upon anyone. But if you choose it, if you are choosing it, even if you could demand conditions within this choice: that you are not imprisoned, that you aren't forced to pay bribes or exploited. Even if I do think we need to update abolitionism, I am completely abolitionist. Recovering the body is one of the most powerful acts of freedom. It led me to find myself, declare myself, and be" (Tessa, 2012).

Las Rojas (The Reds) feminist collective in Argentina is also abolitionist and is allied with transfeminism: "Las Rojas proposes an abolitionist policy which collectively confronts the system of capitalist and patriarchal relations. For us, the only way to combat human trafficking and sexual exploitation is destroying patriarchal relations involving the submission of women, trans people, boys, and girls. We do not think it is possible to "choose freely" within this system, to put a price on one's body and sexuality without it signifying a violent and submissive practice. And we are absolutely against persecuting in any women and all those who are sexually exploited, making them responsible for their situation as victims while letting pimps and promotors of prostitution go free (Hidalgo, 2014).

On the point of rejecting persecution or punishment for trans and *travesti* women who undertake sex work, there is perhaps the area for conciliation between abolitionists and those who promote regulation. Both sides agree that trans and *travesti* women are victims of the system of prostitution.







3 PRIORITIES AND ACTION AREAS. STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE AS A GENERAL CONTEXT

Transfeminist priorities and action areas revolve around an issue that cuts across trans lives all along the region: violence. Violence against trans and *travesti* women is a concern highlighted by the majority of people interviewed as one of the most urgent—if not *the* most urgent—issue for Latin American transfeminisms.²⁵

In absolute numbers, Brazil, Mexico, and Colombia lead the statistics in terms of crimes against trans and travesti women around the world. In relative numbers, however, the situation is also critical in Nicaragua, Honduras, and El Salvador.²⁶

Nonetheless, it is difficult to pinpoint the exact number of victims as not all countries have agencies monitoring and reporting cases of violence against trans, *travesti* and/ or non-binary people, as is the case in Central America. Additionally, in most countries, the figures for these murders are not tracked, and as a result, the majority of trans femicides appear as "homicides" or murders of men.

São Paulo Councilor Erika Hilton²⁷ summarizes the situation bluntly: "stopping the genocide is urgent" (Interview with Erika Hilton, 2021).

If statistics give an idea of the size of the problem, the sheer cruelty of the murders of trans and *travesti* people underscores the hate that motivates these crimes and

the level of dehumanization they suffer. The continent is full of shocking examples, such as 33-year-old Roberta Nascimento da Silva from the city of Recife in northeastern Brazil.²⁸ In January 2021, a 17-year-old threw lighter fluid on her and ignited it. Roberta died after several days of torturous suffering.

Transfeminisms view this violence as an expression of transphobia, but also misogyny—often combined with racism—with roots in the region's colonial history. "There is hate against femininity implanted by coloniality; this produces hate, not just against women but against all that is feminine: woman, *travesti* people, or a feminine man," explains Letícia Carolina Nascimento.

Additionally, as mentioned by Florencia Guimaraes, there is not only violence on the street, but also in prisons, where many trans and *travesti* people ended up due to misdemeanor codes: "The mere act of being in a public space was grounds for being imprisoned under an article which stated that 'any person found in the public space with inappropriate clothes for their sex will be fined, prosecuted.' Because of this, we have spent days, months, and years imprisoned" (Interview with Florencia Guimaraes, 2021).

Mati González Gil lends support to this idea, stating that the majority of trans and travesti people who are deprived of their liberty are not in prison due to the direct criminalization of their identities, but due to the implementation of five types of laws: (1) laws prohibiting consensual sex between same-sex adults (in the Caribbean), (2) laws which (directly or indirectly) criminalize sex work, or where there is legal ambiguity, (3) laws against "indecency and immorality" and public space regulations that define land management and land use, (4) drug laws, and (5) identity control laws applied by the police.²⁹



²⁵ The Transrespect vs Transfobia initiative reported that 350 gender non-conforming people were murdered between the 1st October 2019 and the 30th September 2020 within the context of the global pandemic. 98% of these crimes were committed against trans women or trans feminine people; 82% of all the murders were registered in Latin America, and 42% of the total were in Brazil.

²⁶ Ibid. Between October 1, 2019 and September 30, 2020,107 murders were registered in Honduras, 55 in El Salvador and 58 in Guatemala. Many of those interviewed for this report stated that violence against trans people in these countries is significantly underreported.

²⁷ Erika Hilton is the first trans woman to be elected councilor to the Municipal Chamber of São Paulo. She was the woman with the highest number of votes in the country in 2020, with 50 million, and was ranked 6th place in the general vote ranking. She currently has two bodyguards.

^{28 &}quot;Morre Roberta, mulher trans queimada viva no centro de Recife", Ponte.org

²⁹ For further information, see: "Los cuellos de botella legales de las personas trans en América Latina y el Caribe." Translated as "The legal bottlenecks for trans people in Latin America" at: https:// volcanicas.com/los-cuellos-de-botella-legales-de-las-personas-trans-en-america-latina-y-el-caribe/

This is compounded by the militarization of urban and rural public spaces in several of the region's countries, mainly in Central America, Colombia, and Mexico. This militarization is employed in the name of security and economic development (infrastructure or ecotourism projects), but it goes hand in hand with the policing of bodies: military officers decide who can inhabit a space and who cannot. Mati González confirms this, stating that "the police and the army have the authority to control people's identity without a court order" (González Gil, 2021), which leaves trans and *travesti* people open to greater policing and potential violence from government authorities.

Considering this context of physical and structural violence, in addition to an urgent demand for the preservation of life itself, transfeminisms in the region work in several areas in which other types of violence against trans and *travesti* women occur: education, employability, comprehensive health, name correction, citizen participation, and trans identity laws.

The following areas articulate some of these action areas:

a. The Struggle Against Transfemicide

This complex and multi-faceted struggle involves strategies which address structural violence. However, in a more immediate sense, most of the work against transfemicides centers on the fight against impunity.

A notable exception was the recent ruling of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights against the Honduran State for the transfemicide of trans activist Vicky Hernández, who was murdered by state agents during during the 2009 coup d'état curfew, when only military and police were allowed outdoors.30

In addition, transfeminisms fight to change the way such cases are legally defined. As Letícia Carolina Nascimento suggests, "We must understand this violence as femicide—as transfemicide, if you wish—and we must fight for either specific legislation or demand the passage of a femicide law to punish gender crimes, and not only sexual crimes as it currently stands."

b. Depathologizing Trans and *Travesti* Identities

Ensuring that trans, travesti, and non-binary people are not defined and perceived as suffering from mental disorders or illnesses is fundamental. There is also an arduous task underway for the recognition of and respect for trans children.

c. Comprehensive Gender Identity Laws

Transfeminisms seek the adoption of comprehensive gender identity laws that are based exclusively on the self-recognition of gender identity. In other words, these laws should ensure that no hormonal or surgical treatment, nor any type of medical or psychological certificate is required as a prerequisite for the full legal recognition of a person's gender identity. Transfeminisms also aim for these procedures to be free. If not, they would be out of reach for the majority of trans and *travesti* people.

Struggles for comprehensive gender identity laws are fundamental to guarantee complete compliance with the rights of trans and travesti people, including the right to education, work, housing, and health, as explained below.

A key transfeminist issues is to expand and improve the access of trans and *travesti* people to elementary, secondary, and higher education.³¹ Another important point is the inclusion of gender and sexual diversity in

^{30 &}quot;Honduras culpable de la muerte de activista trans, Vicky Hernández: Corte Interamericana de DDHH". Seis Franjas, 2020

³¹ For more information, see Martínez, Juliana and Vidal Ortiz, Salvador (eds). "Travar el saber, educación de personas trans y travestis en Argentina: relatos en primera persona". Editorial of the Nacional University of La Plata: La Plata, Argentina. 2018. Available at: http://sedici.unlp.edu.ar/handle/10915/73755

Comprehensive Education curricula in order to prevent bullying, school dropout rates, and teen suicide.³²

Providing access to comprehensive healthcare is also considered a priority, and not only in areas related to gender affirming care. "It's not just about surgery and hormone therapy; it's cancer, COVID-19, the flu, appendicitis, etc., and in the great majority of cases, health institutions are not ready for us" (Interview with Letícia Carolina Nascimento, 2021).

Finally, expanding and improving access to all kinds of employment is also urgent. An illustrative example of translating this demand into public policy is the variety of legal tools passed in Argentina: the gender identity law approved in 2012³³; the law regulating trans and *travesti* job quotas (1% in public services) passed in 2021, and a presidential decree that includes "non-binary" as a gender category in official documents.

d. Anti-punitivism

"There are few coincidences in the world, but perhaps in Latin America there is an awareness that punitive strategies do not work for trans people" (Interview with Siobhan Guerrero, 2021). Trans and travesti women make up a disproportionate percentage of the prison population, partly due to police gender bias, partly due to the criminalization of their livelihoods, such as sex work, and partly due to anti-narcotics policies that criminalize drug peddling. As such, non-punitive and restorative alternatives are fundamental for transfeminisms.

4 STRATEGIES

a. Artivism and Self-Healing

Artivism is the use of art as a form of activism. Artivism encourages people in South and Central America to question the identity categories imposed on them through the colonial process by engaging in a critical reflection about culture and racialization. Because of its critical edge, artivism also blurs the boundaries with academia and prompts connections with other transfeminisms in the region.

Some people interviewed and/or identified for this research use performance as a form of (political) action and healing through spiritual practices that seek to recover ancestral traditions. For example, in one of her performances, Elyla Sinvergüenza³⁴ uses the term "barro mestiza," or "mud *mestiza*" as way to self-identify racially. This category resists colonial racialization frameworks without appropriating Indigenous heritage and culture. Other examples include Analú Laferal's post-porn performance art; RosaLuz's rap, photography and audiovisual art; Renata Carvalho 's theater; Ángel Mendoza's transfeminist reggaeton; the multiple performances of the Red Comunitaria Tran (Community Trans Network) in Colombia; and "TOLOPOSUNGO"35, a series of performances by trans, travesti, and non-binary people against police violence as part of the massive social protests against the government of Iván Duque in 2021.

In Nicaragua, trans and non-binary artists who are critical of the Ortega administrations have suffered from censorship and threats because of their work. For example, Elyla Sinvergüenza had to leave the country in 2018 and although she has returned, she says that she changed her ways of working for her own security.



³² The campaign against gender ideology undertaken by diverse social sectors (Religious institutions like the Catholic Church and fundamentalist Christians, as well as citizen and political groups) have made these inclusive educational perspectives politically toxic through the instrumentalization of children to create moral, particularly in reference to sexual education for children and adolescents. This is evident in campaigns such as the Peruvian 'Con mis hijos no te metas' ("Don't mess with my children") or the "Escuela sin partido" ('School without a party) movement in Brazil. For more information, see: Martínez, Juliana; Duarte, Ángela María; Rojas, María Juliana. Manufacturing Moral Panic: Weaponizing Children to Undermine Gender Justice and Human Rights. Available at https://globalphilanthropyproject. org/2021/03/24/manufacturing-moral-panic/

³³ Other countries with gender identity laws are Uruguay, Chile and Bolivia, and some states in the Mexican federation. With diverse nuances and reach, these laws establish the right to the self-recognition of gender identity, regardless of biological, genetic, anatomical, morphological or hormonal characteristics, or any other way through sex was assigned at birth. For more information, see the report of Mapeo Legal Trans.

^{34 &}quot;Sinvergüenza", the last name chosen by Elyla, means "Shameless" in Spanish.

³⁵ TOLOPONSUGO translates "All cops are assholes" and could be thought of as Colombia's version of ACAB (All Cops are Bastards)



b. Politics as a Path to Empowerment and Social Transformation

"We will not achieve meaningful change until there are more trans women in spaces of political participation, or with access to the executive branch." As such, it is important to demand differential quotas within the administrative institutions which would allow for greater trans and *travesti* representation (Interview with Charlotte Callejas, 2021).

Although popular election positions continue to be out of reach for the overwhelming majority of trans and travesti people, the recent victories of Robeyoncé de Lima and Erika Hilton in Brazil remind us of the importance of occupying the spaces where public policy is made. As mentioned before, the Brazilian municipal elections in 2020 were a historical milestone in terms of trans representation in the country: while in 2016 there were 8 trans people elected, this number rose to 30 in 2020.

Apart from the ballot box, there are other strategic actions that trans and travesti people are undertaking in the public sector. These initiatives give trans and travesti women visibility beyond the realm of LGBT policies, positioning them as experts in food security, and other policy areas. Examples include the work of Charlotte Callejas in Bogotá, and that of Johana Maturana in the predominantly Afro-Colombian region of Chocó. Maturana serves on the Women's Board of Chocó as a community leader, actively working on peace-building initiatives in a region historically plagued by armed conflict.

Finally, other transfeminist sources highlight the importance of creating a transfeminist political narrative that becomes a viable alternative to transphobic discourses. A case in point is Brazil's emerging Transpolitical National Front. Still in its initial stages, the idea of the Front is to bring together female parliamentarians, and trans and *travesti* women of diverse political parties who—in spite of their differences—share an affinity with transfeminist ideals and goals.

c. The Personal Is Political: First-Person Trans and Travesti Narratives

A significant number of trans and *travesti* women, and non-binary people use social media —mostly Instagram,

Facebook, Twitter and YouTube—to engage in transfeminist activism. The use of social media increases the visibility and presence of trans women in different social and political settings. This is the case for Leah Rivaz, who defines herself as an activist and a cyber activist for the rights of women and trans people. "I am an activist, transfeminist and feminist cyber-activist" (Interview with Leah Rivaz, 2021). This type of social media presence has been instrumental in expanding the reach of the region's transfeminisms, and in demystifying trans and travesti people by showing their everyday lives. Finally, first-person narratives are also key to avoid academic and journalistic extractivism, and epistemic violence.

5 CHALLENGES AND URGENT ISSUES

a. Lack of Resources, an Existential Threat

The main challenge facing transfeminist people and organizations is the lack of resources necessary to accomplish their goals. The precarious conditions in which the majority of trans and *travesti* people live and work in the region is widely recognized as an existential threat to both trans and *travesti* individuals and transfeminist organizations.

Barriers to secure direct funding (i.e., not mediated by organizations made up and directed primarily by cisgender people such as large LGB organizations, universities, etc.) include: complex bureaucratic processes to apply for funding from international donors, the difficulty of formally registering their organizations in order to satisfy the requirements of these donors, and the inability to cover the administrative costs associated with requesting and, in case of receiving them, managing the funds.

As noted by Miluska Luzquiños in Peru, it is difficult to imagine trans and *travesti* organizations being able to do their transfeminist work when their basic needs are not being met. The seriousness of the situation is illustrated by Miluska's dream to create a community kitchen: "Imagine a big community kitchen in the center of Lima, with a nutritionist, a place where I can feed many



sisters properly. A lack of food is something that affects a lot of them... We had already seen it during the pride marches. We took food to 15 regions in the country, and during all of them, sisters came to tell us 'thank you, thank you for bringing us food,' [their precarious situation] is something that breaks my heart" (Interview with Miluska Luzquiños, 2021).

Transfeminisms across the region could certainly benefit from mutual recognition, and collective and coalitional work. However, this type of work would require financial and logistical support that most transfeminist organizations lack (Elyla Sinvergüenza). This is why some interviewees mentioned the need to create alliances with international cooperation agencies and/or academia in order to raise awareness about the situation of trans and travesti people, and highlight the work of transfeminist organizations and leaders (Interview with Charlotte Callejas).

The situation is urgent: the lack of resources is, as said before, an existential threat to Latin American transfeminisms.



b. Trans-exclusionary Attacks

Recent attacks against trans and *travesti* people, and transfeminist leaders, organizations and movements come from historically antagonistic sectors—left- and right-wing parties, and trans-exclusionary sectors of feminism—which, in spite of their many differences, share a common set of prejudices. Among other things, they claim—with no factual evidence supporting their position—that trans and travesti women pose a threat to cisgender women in gender-segregated spaces. Transexclusionary feminists also accuse trans women and *travesti* people of seeking to "erase" cisgender women from laws against gender-based violence, among other gender-specific policies and laws (Interview with Siobhan Guerrero), and of reinforcing gender roles.³⁶

Some of these attacks, especially those coming from supposedly progressive movements and social sectors, stem from the fact that transfeminisms challenge the category "woman" at the core of hegemonic feminisms. This type of feminisms defines "woman" as necessarily cisgender, foreclosing the inclusion of trans and *travesti* women in feminists' spaces and projects; and seek to undermine and/or attack transfeminist initiatives, organizations and leaders.

However, challenging the cisnormativity of this definition of "woman" does not imply "the erasure" of cisgender women from feminism. It simply calls for an expansion of the category "woman" so that it includes multiple experiences of womanhood and femininity, and not only those of cisgender, heterosexual, white, non-migrant, and middle or high class women (Interview with Letícia Carolina Nascimento, 2021).

As Alexya Salvador explains: "I cannot say that I am a feminist if I do not include the transfeminist agenda. If I only speak of the cisgender feminist agenda, I am in a closed club; feminism without trans and *travesti* women is not feminism, it's Little Lulu's Clubhouse (Interview with Alexya Salvador, 2021).

³⁶ Faced with this accusation that trans women reify gender roles through their "hyper-feminization," Charlotte Callejas states that this is not the way in which they interpret it, and, in fact, it is the opposite because: "there is nothing more revolutionary than creating a femininity which can coexist with male genitalia" (Charlotte Callejas, 2021)

c. Others

- Working towards welcoming family environments: family support has been a major factor in the lives of trans and *travesti* women who have had access to more educational and professional opportunities, and have higher wellbeing indicators. In contrast, trans and *travesti* women who do not have family support and are expelled from their homes at an early age are almost always forced into prostitution, which significantly diminishes their wellbeing, health, opportunities, and life chances.
- Recognizing migration as a significant practice in the lives of many trans and *travesti* people in the region. This issue is not well-documented and involves extremely high levels of violence against trans, *travesti*, and non-binary people, especially in Central America. It is important to identify the stories of migrants, where they came from, what they experienced, and how they died (Interview with Daniela Núñez).
- Creating partnerships and transfeminist networks in the Latin American region (including Central America and the Caribbean). These networks would make it easier to share experiences of how to operate in colonial, authoritarian, and patriarchal contexts. They would include: social and political alliances with other strands of feminism; partnerships with international aid agencies and multilaterals in order to support transfeminist research, and capacity-building and networking initiatives to secure international funding; and collaborations with academia to engage in collaborative, non-extractivist, research projects that include trans, travesti and non-binary people as researchers, not as objects of research (Charlotte Callejas).
- Proposing and developing research with different sectors, including academia (making sure that trans, *travesti* and non-binary people are full participant of the research teams and are not only, or primarily, being included as objects of research). This research could uncover underlying dynamics in terms of the differential categories of oppression and subordination in the following areas: (1) sex work from non-punitive perspectives, (2) religion and spirituality in relation to classist and racist dynamics, (3) the growth and advancement of trans-exclusionary feminisms, and (4) the recuperation of trans and *travesti* memory through first-person narratives (Interview with Charlotte Callejas).







"[My dream is that] no woman is thrown out on the street, that no woman is separated from her family, that no woman has to prostitute herself simply because of who she is, that their transfeminist nature be respected and legitimized. That society will not punish us for being who we are. That we can walk freely in the streets, that's my transfeminist vision."

Érika Hilton councilor in the Municipal Chamber of São Paulo.

"My transfeminist dream is that when my children are my age—40—they will be able to be who they want to be in this society; that they will be able to leave the house knowing for certain they will come back. I wish that when women decide to end a relationship, they will not be murdered by their ex-partner. That they are able to say, "I do not want to be in this relationship anymore."; that they can have an abortion if they feel they cannot continue with the pregnancy. I dream of all women having a voice, opportunities and decent salaries. I dream of travestis not having to sell their bodies unless they want to."

> Alexya Salvador, Evangelical pastor, activist and mother of two trans girls.

"I hope the moment will arrive when I will not have to be challenging, resisting, or constantly demanding that our rights be guaranteed; to be able to exercise rights without any kind of violence or stigma."

> Charlotte Callejas, Cuban activist and Colombian resident).

"To find spaces for intersectional dialogue which allows people to sit down and talk to each other,37 not for them. To share experiences and knowledge, and to join forces in order to work together with respect, care, and active listening."

> Elyla Sinvergüenza, Nicaraguan activist and performance artist.

"My transfeminist dream would be for everyone to have a transfeminist perspective. I think transfeminism is useful for everyone, just like I think that Black feminism is useful for everyone. That we all become feminists and that a trans or non-binary person may be who she is and occupy all places in society; that she can be more and more things as time goes by: a teacher, a politician, a businesswoman ... [I dream that] our voices are heard."

> Jaqueline Gomes de Jesus, Brazilian academic.



³⁷ Translator's note. The term used in the Spanish original is "otres" instead of "otras" or "otros". The expression "otres" is used instead of the masculine or feminine suffixes "o" and "a" respectively. This is done because in Spanish—which is a heavily gendered and binary language—the "e" is the closest linguistic element to a gender-neutral suffix. Activists in the region increasingly use the "e" to expand the gender binary in nouns that refer to specific populations. These changes remain contentious and have not been approved by the *Real Academia de la Lengua Española*, a colonial institution that presides over Spanish grammar, syntax and morphology.



CONCLUSIONS

- Latin American transfeminisms are a component of feminism focused on the voices, experiences, practices, and knowledge of trans and *travesti* women. This component is expressed through a series of practices, and epistemological and political positions based on an intersectional perspective, which is profoundly critical of gender essentialism, transphobia within feminism, and the vulnerability of migrant, racialized, and impoverished bodies and those with non-binary gender identities.
- Transfeminist agendas come up against two main barriers: first, the lack of resources as an existential threat for transfeminisms in Latin America. Second, transphobic attacks, as much by conservative groups as by trans-exclusionary sectors of feminism that put at risk the progress made and threaten the lives and rights of trans, *travesti*, and non-binary people.
- Latin American transfeminisms are plural, intersectional, decolonial, and are organized in three fields of action and knowledge production: (1) practical (2) epistemological, and (3) political.
- The travesti identity is an essentially Latin American political identity with variations in each country and with the potential to challenge the binary logic of western societies that oppress those who fall outside of the gender binary.
- Reclaiming and resignifying the term *travesti*, which has derogatory roots, is one of many epistemological and political transfeminist contributions in the region.
- Latin American transfeminisms are in constant movement and transformation, and face internal tensions that reflect the diversity and needs of trans and *travesti* people, and the wide range of the region's political and sociocultural contexts.

- Intersectionality and decoloniality are intertwined frameworks within Latin American transfeminisms. On one hand, intersectionality allows a deeper understanding of the intersecting oppressions trans and *travesti* people face due to their racialization, gender, class, among others. Decoloniality, on the other hand, seeks to dismantle the frameworks inherited from the coloniality of power (Quijano) and the coloniality of gender (Lugones) that legitimize, naturalize and reproduce those systems of oppression.
- At the heart of Latin American transfeminisms are trans and *travesti* women as both: main actors and political subjects. However, there is an increasing participation of other actors such as trans men, transmasculine people, non-binary individuals, and cisgender allies.
- Latin American transfeminisms face internal and external tensions regarding a number of issues: (1) The definition and limits of the political subject of transfeminism, (2) the relevance of the term "transfeminism" to advance trans and *travesti* rights, (3) abolition or regulation of sex work, and (4) cisnormative academia versus transfeminist activism as legitimate producers of transfeminist epistemologies.
- Language plays a key role in questioning the gender binary and the androcentric nature of language and society. Terms like "cuerpa" instead of "cuerpo," "sujeta" instead of "sujeto," "cis-tema" instead of "sistema," "binarie" instead of "binario" or "binaria," among others destabilize naturalized cis-normative frameworks by transforming every day expressions and political discourse alike.
- The most urgent challenge Latin American transfeminisms face is the structural violence that kills trans and *travesti* women on street corners, and also denies them access to education, employment, health, housing, and other rights and opportunities necessary for a dignified life.
- Apart from the fight against transfemicide, other transfeminist priorities are: the depathologization of trans identities; access to health, education and housing; trans identity laws, and anti-punitivist initiatives and frameworks.
- Trans-exclusionary attacks are fueled by so-called gender critical feminists who provide feminist legitimation to transphobia, and ignite trans hate and discrimination in contexts already very violent for trans and *travesti* people.
- Transfeminisms see an urgent need to create collective, collaborative and coalitional transnational spaces for transfeminist integration, community-building, agenda-setting and strategic planning, but they lack the resources to do so.



LIST OF INTERVIEWS

Alba Rueda. Undersecretary of national diversity policies, president of Trans Women Argentina. Argentina.

Alexya Salvador. Activist and pastor at the Igreja da Comunidade Metropolitana de São Paulo, vice president of the Associação Brasileira de Famílias Homotransafetivas. Brazil.

Claudia Sofía Garriga-López. Academic. California State University–Chico. Puerto Rico.

Charlotte Callejas. Human rights defender, director of Transcolombia and co-coordinator of the National and District Network of Women and Transfeminist Collectives. Cuban national residing in Colombia.

Daniela Núñez García. Team member in the Instituto de Liderazgo Simone de Beauvoir in México. Costa Rican national residing in Mexico.

Elyla Sinvergüenza. Performance artist and activist. Nicaragua.

Erika Hilton. President of the Committee of Human Rights in the São Paulo Chamber, councilor with the most votes in the 2020 elections. Brazil.

Florencia Guimaraes García. Politician, in charge of the travesti and trans rights program in the Women and Genders Justice Center. Argentina.

Jaqueline Gomes de Jesus. Professor of psychology at the Federal Institute of Río de Janeiro and president of the Brazilian Association of Homoculture Studies. Brazil.

Johana Maturana. Leader and Afro-transfeminist in Chocó, creator of the Johana Maturana Foundation. Colombia.

Leah Rivas. Trans-Centennial Activist. Mexico.

Letícia Carolina Pereira do Nascimento. PhD in education, professor at the Universidade Federal do Piauí, member of the Acolhe Trans and FONATRANS organizations. Brazil.

María Clara Araújo. Educator, Afro-transfeminist, member of the teaching staff at the Pontificia Universidade Católica de São Paulo, creator of the "Pedagogia da Travestilidade" project on education and the experiences of trans children. Brazil.

Matilda González Gil. Lawyer, ex-secretary of the Women and Gender Equality of Manizales. Colombia.

Mauro Cabral. Executive director of Global Action for Trans Equality, GATE; coordinator of the free chair on trans studies at the University of Buenos Aires UBA, part of the team that wrote Principios de Yogyakarta (2006). Argentina.

Miluska Luzquiños. Director of TRANS – Organization for the Human Rights of Trans People. Peru.

Natasha Jiménez. Director of Mulabi – Latin American Space for Sexualities and Rights. Costa Rica.

Santiago Balvin. Transmasculine, transfeminist, and non-binary activist. Peru.

Sayak Valencia. Philosopher. Mexico.

Siobhan Guerrero McManus. Researcher at UNAM, team member at Simone de Beauvoir Institute of Leadership. Mexico.

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FINDINGS