

# Anti-gender Policies in Latin America: The Case of Ecuador

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## Introduction

The Gender and Politics in Latin America project (G&PAL) contributes to a transnational view of the phenomenon of anti-gender attacks both in themselves and as a vigorous line of de-democratization dynamics.<sup>1</sup> In that sense, it is interesting to briefly rescue the meaning and sense of the term “de-democratization”: unlike the processes of authoritarian regime change we have experienced in the past, de-democratization is not a classic coup and does not necessarily imply the suspension of formal democratic procedures. It is rather a gradual erosion of the democratic fiber of politics that potentially transforms the institutional architecture of democratic regimes into drills (Sonia Corrêa and Richard Parker, founders of the project).

## The Political Context of Gender Wars in Contemporary Ecuador

President Rafael Correa was the first head of state in Latin America to use the term “gender ideology.” He did so in one of his weekly presidential addresses transmitted by the media on Saturdays (popularly called *sabatinas*), on December 28, 2013. These *sabatinas* functioned as “social pedagogies” for the control and supervision of citizens, in which the anti-gender discourse of the ex-president created a group of obstacles against the rights of women, rights such as the decision to interrupt pregnancies; legal, safe abortion; and same-sex marriage, to name a few. All of this was happening during a time when anti-gender policies were increasing in the region. I explore the milestones

that mark the progress of these policies: In what political context are they found? What effect does the anti-gender offensive have in sexual and reproductive rights, including the right to abortion and sex education? Who are the anti-gender actors and how are they financed? In the midst of this entire panorama, which would seem mostly regressive, there are also instances of resistance.

Although anti-gender policies in Ecuador have a long history tracing back to the commercialization and the construction of the only “Catholic republic” or “the Republic of the Sacred Heart of Jesus” of Latin America in the second half of the nineteenth century (Espinosa 2018), it’s important to focus on the growth of anti-gender policies in Ecuador in the contemporary moment of time during the presidential period of Rafael Correa and after he left the presidency. Rafael Correa governed Ecuador for ten years (2007–2017). His movement, Alianza País (AP), appeared on the political scene as a new political proposal for change and hope. The increase in the international price of oil generated greater income that permitted more social investment. This took place with emphasis on large infrastructure undertakings: roads, schools, hydroelectric plants, and government buildings. In 2008, all the proposals for a “new country” merged in the drafting of the Constitution of Montecristi. When the paradigm of Good Living/Living Well—Buen Vivir, Sumak Kawsay, and Suma Qamaña—was discussed in the constitutions of Bolivia (2009) and Ecuador (2008), feminists in the region questioned the new orders of gender based on these concepts, using a decolonial feminist perspective (Zaragocin and Varea 2017,

<sup>1</sup> This article is based on the publication “Anti-gender Policies in Latin America: The Case of Ecuador” (2020), which is part of the Gender and Politics in Latin America project (G&PAL) by Sexuality Policy Watch (SPW), available at <https://sxpolitics.org/GPAL/>. I would like to thank journalist Ana María Acosta for the summarized article in Spanish, which has been adapted and translated into English.

1-5). It's important to make a conceptual distinction with the governmental use of the concept in order to highlight its contradictions. On the one hand, Rafael Correa's government maintained heteronormative and homophobic structures, and on the other hand, it developed homo-protectionist policies as a strategy for co-opting the most diverse sectors of society.

The year 2013 was when actions weakened the organizational fabric. In that year, Rafael Correa issued Decree 16, which authorized the government to supervise and dissolve nongovernmental organizations. Some emblematic cases from before and after the decree are the dissolution of the environmental NGO Pachamama, the beginning of the process of withdrawing the legal standing of the Ecological Action Association, and the legal attacks on the NGO Fundamedios for intervening in politics (PDDHE 2017), as well as the legal and administrative control of indigenous organizations such as the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE). There were also a number of attacks against scholars and political rivals such as Manuela Picq, a scholar and activist who was arrested and imprisoned in a jail for migrants euphemistically called the "Hotel Carrion." All of this in spite of the fact that the Ecuadorian Constitution recognizes "universal citizenship."

The weakening of civil society and institutionalism also became visible with regard to the protection of children and the rights of women and other priority groups. In the case of children, alarming numbers of cases of sexual abuse and violation of minors perpetrated by elementary and secondary school teachers as well as priests became evident nationwide. The relatively recent shift towards authoritarianism of the state has as one of its most important negative effects the appearance of groups confronting "gender ideology," based in an anti-rights, sexist, anti-abortion, and homo-, lesbian-, trans- and bi-phobic discourse.

### On Gender Ideology

In the Latin American context, the candidacy and presidency of Rafael Correa, as well as the Alianza País movement, has been wrongly classified

as "extreme socialist left." His proposals were categorized as post-neoliberal, where peoples who had been historically marginalized, such as indigenous, Afro-Ecuadorian, and LGBTTI people, would have a place and a voice in the revolution. However, as Amy Lind (2012) explains, the "citizens' revolution" and the figure of Rafael Correa never stopped being infused by heteronormativity and eurocentrism. Correa is an explicitly devoted Catholic leader who opposes abortion and homosexuality and favors the traditional model of the family. Once the 2008 Constitution was approved and after Correa's reelection in 2013, what can be called the president's "moralist agenda" became more flagrant and was supported by measures taken in public and political spheres.

This shift was reflected in the president's weekly address to the nation transmitted by radio and TV. Correa used these opportunities, sometimes lasting three hours, to directly attack persons or organizations who had expressed verbally or in written form through the media or social networks any kind of disagreement with the government (Viteri 2016). These *sabatinas* have been analyzed by researchers, such as María Paula Granda (2016), who have shown how their contents are sexist, racist, homophobic, and xenophobic, and strategically used to delegitimize opponents. The Media Observatory reported 95 grievances against women in the 152 Citizen Links (Enlaces Ciudadanos) paid for with public funds between 2013 and 2016.

These narratives contrasted sharply with the National Assembly, whose official party majority was made up of 40 percent women assembly members; and for the first time both president and vice president were women. This shows that greater political participation of women does not necessarily uninstall patriarchy in subjectivities.

During the *sabatina* of December 2013 that took place in Guayaquil, the ex-president criticized "gender ideology," affirming that "academically it does not resist the slightest analysis" because it destroys the family. This was the first time that a Latin American political leader expressed a vision regarding gender anchored on the critical elaborations of the Vatican. In the same *sabatina*,

Correa affirmed that the defense of the family and the opposition to abortion “does not have anything to do with the right or the left” but rather with moral questions. He also spoke of his disgust with the proposals of feminist movements as well as with LGBTI while emphasizing that it is wrong to think there are more than two genders, and he stated that it is necessary for “women to look feminine and men to look masculine” based on the argument that he called “natural laws,” according to which biological sex is a definite determinant that makes a man or makes a woman.

### **LGBTI Rights, Some Milestones**

Homosexuality was only decriminalized in Ecuador on November 27, 1997. Although Correa’s stand was in theory sympathetic with the demands of the trans movement, we can think about a double standard: What is at stake when on the one hand a government provides certain rights for transgender persons, as with the 2016 law that allows trans people to choose a gender on their identity card, while reiterating binary thinking related to sex and gender? This question has an answer: those flagrant contradictions of the “sexual revolution” confirm that the apparent progresses in achieving LGBTI rights during Rafael Correa’s presidency were only theatrical (Picq and Viteri 2019).

The “género en mi cédula” gender ID proposal was attacked head-on by anti-gender forces already organized in society. In April 2013, one year after the start of the “14 Million, Family Life and Freedom” campaign, it began to attack the proposal as well as other LGBTI and feminist demands arguing that it was infringing on the “vision of family” that should prevail in public policies. At the same time, there was a virtual campaign in the CitizenGO Ecuador platform under the hashtag “#Ecuador: No to the gender ID card.”

Satya Bicknell-Rothon was born in Ecuador of two British mothers who used artificial insemination. Satya was born in 2011, and the struggle to have her recognized as the daughter of two mothers reached the Constitutional Court with a final approval in June 2018. In November 2018, during Lenin Moreno’s presidency, the Civil Registry issued for the first time an ID card stating the feminine

gender of a trans girl, Amada, accepting the name that goes with her gender identity, marking a milestone in the country and in the region. In the midst of the anti-rights hurricane, equal marriage was approved by the Ecuadorian Constitutional Court in 2019. The battle for equal marriage dates back at least six years with the leadership of activists like Pamela Troya and Gaby Correa, as well as Efraín Soria, the president of Equidad Foundation.

### **Sexual and Reproductive Rights**

According to the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), Ecuador is the second country in Latin America after Venezuela with the highest rate of adolescent pregnancies. This is why a cutting-edge Family Planning National Strategy (ENIPLA) was originally developed by former president Correa in 2011, led by the ministries of education and health and focusing on prevention and family planning. Nevertheless, it was replaced by Correa with Plan Familia in 2015, and handed to a conservative Catholic woman closely related with a group called Opus Dei, a cultlike Catholic organization.

In August 2017, current president Lenin Moreno dissolved Plan Familia and submitted the “Comprehensive General Law to Prevent and Eradicate Gender Violence Against Women” to the National Assembly. One provision of this law contemplates the preparation or the updating of the “basic curriculum for all educational levels and textbooks and teacher’s guides that included gender mainstreaming, new masculinities, women in their diversity, the prevention and eradication of violence against women, role change and the elimination of gender stereotypes.” This law was attacked by the so called “pro-life” and “pro-family” groups with the slogan “ideology doesn’t conquer biology.” Faced with these scenarios and another announced march by these groups, the LGBTI organizations submitted a writ for constitutional protection.

In spite of the march, the “Comprehensive General Law to Prevent and Eradicate Gender Violence Against Women” was passed on November 27, 2017, with important changes that will negatively impact the struggle for reproductive justice and

LGBTI rights: the terms “gender,” “sexual orientation,” and “gender identities” were eliminated from the original project. Consequently, the word “gender” disappeared from the title and from other parts of the law. Currently, the 2020 government pro forma budget doesn’t include one cent for teen pregnancy prevention programs.

### **Sex Education: “A Mis Hijos los Educo Yo”**

On June 27, 2018, the Constitutional Court of Ecuador pronounced the inalienable right of children and young people to receive sex education. As a consequence, the “pro-life” and “pro-family” groups took to the streets in Quito and Guayaquil to reject the Constitutional Court’s decision. The National Assembly of Ecuador approved, with 70 votes in favor, the resolution that “ratifies the defense of the family as the fundamental nucleus of society,” with the backing of an Evangelical assembly member. In spite of the fact that this is a clear example of the religious moral principles that govern the decisions of our political representatives, the resolutions of the National Assembly have no legal bearing.

During the marches of July 2018, a new campaign and group was consolidated, named “A Mis Hijos Los Educo Yo”, with a strong appearance in social networks. This was different from “No Te Metas Con Mis Hijos”, which had entered the scene in 2017. This new group emerged in the city of Guayaquil. In this coastal city, Evangelical communities have at least 52 denominations that preach their message through eight radio stations, two television channels, newspapers, schools, and even one university.

### **Principal Actors Involved in Anti-Gender Attacks**

In 2017, “No Te Metas Con Mis Hijos” united a large number of people in different cities in the country: Quito, Guayaquil, Cuenca, Esmeraldas, Machala, and Loja. This influential group has promoted the idea of a “natural” family as the only type that should exist and be recognized. This Peruvian-inspired movement stems from the coalition of different Catholic and Evangelical religious organizations that handle a discourse against

the so-called “gender ideology”: the “pro-life” and “pro-family” network, the Red de Restauración Civil, “A Mis Hijos Los Educo Yo”, and the Red Familia (Family Network). Their general initiative has been supported by the Catholic Episcopal Conference. The networks are not solely Ecuadorian but also share slogans, names, and publications with other countries in the region, operating transnationally.

The spokeswoman and president of Red Pro Vida and Pro-Familia of Ecuador, Amparo Medina, launched a campaign opposing the bill to allow abortion in cases of rape entitled “Con Aborto No Te Voto.” This campaign and other similar efforts influenced the decision taken by Ecuador’s parliament that ended up rejecting the bill to allow abortion in cases of rape (September 2019). The fact that eight out of one hundred pregnancies of girls under fifteen end in abortion, and eight out of ten of these pregnancies are rapes was not enough to move the assemblymen and assemblywomen who voted against (Zaragocin et al. 2018).

In the middle of these attacks, there has been successful mass resistance led by women, feminists, and LGBTI organizations such as Vivas Nos Queremos, the Centro de Apoyo y Protección de los Derechos Humanos Surkuna, the Colectivo de Geografía Crítica del Ecuador, Diálogo Diverso, and Aborto Libre Ecuador, to name a few. Some of the marches united workers’ rights, students’ rights, and indigenous rights; families with children, elderly, gender nonbinary people, and male and females actively participated.

In April 2019, Christian groups—Catholic as well as Evangelicals and Mennonites, including the director of País Canela, a faith-based LGBTI organization—launched a communication in support of the depenalization of abortion with the slogan “Let Me Decide.” Feminist and queer theologian Dr. Mónica Maher of the United Church of Christ denounced violence against women and girls as morally wrong and a serious sin in an article in the *Telégrafo* newspaper (Maher 2019).

## Instrumentalization of the Concept of Gender Ideology

The rhetoric of “imperialist foreign forces” that attack secular NGOs and well-known international institutions, even United Nations agencies, is shared by “pro-life,” “pro-family,” and anti-gender groups with their apocalyptic narratives that denounce the existence of an international lobby described as “pro-gay,” “abortionist,” and the promoter of “anti-gender ideology,” which would contradictorily be the extreme left and therefore communist and/or socialist.

In keeping with the extensive investigation carried out by Annie Wilkinson (2013) on what the author calls “reparation practices,” we need to look at the history of the Christian missionary group that founded the first Christian radio station, “HCJB La Voz de los Andes”, in 1931. This group also founded the organization “Apoyo” in 1992, which has now become “Camino de Salida” (The Way Out), the group that brings the ex-gay movement and conversion therapies to Ecuador in a multimillionaire transnational industry that stems from this very active movement in Latin America, through organizations like Exodus.

Concentrating disproportionately on sexual and reproductive issues is therefore a strategy whereby conservative religious leaders focus on the intimate lives and the personal choices of women and LGBTI people. In the process, women and same-sex couples are sacrificed, because their lives are considered to be inferior, less normal, less human, less important (Maher 2019). A feminist theology that encourages plural, spiritual, and contextual thinking about multiple truths and a shared horizontal leadership (Maher 2019) could be the path forward.

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