European Coordination Via Campesina presents

EMBRACING RURAL DIVERSITY

Genders and sexualities in the peasant movement
Back in 2015, European Coordination Via Campesina opened the dialogue around gender and sexual diversity in rural areas and in the peasant movement, as part of our struggle for equity and justice in Europe and beyond. We are now proud to present this publication, hoping to inspire the movement and broader society and strengthen our joint struggle towards systemic transformation.

Rural life is often hard: full of sacrifices, overwhelming regulations, and social isolation. It becomes even harder being gay, trans, bisexual, queer, or any other (un)imaginable gender or sexual identity beyond cis-heteropatriarchy. Deeply rooted fears of social judgement, rejection, aggression, and murder silence us. A freezing feeling and the lack of role models lead us to internalised shame, desexualisation, alienation and solitude, often culminating in rural exodus.

Despite this, when our land calls us (back), we cannot stay away. Often, being a peasant, a farmer, or a rural citizen is part of our identity in the same way as belonging to the LGBTQIA+ community. This collection of testimonies shows that in our efforts for inclusion and acceptance, we can create new social structures, where we can be whole, express our feelings and emotions, play a social role, and feed our communities.

This publication calls for us to take organised action: adding colour to the peasant struggle, breaking traditional rural stereotypes, embracing inclusive languages, and acknowledging that nature itself is diverse and queer and that our perspective must play a key political role in the transformation of the food system.

Embracing rural diversity

June 2021
It is about time we speak up about the complicit silence regarding LGBTQIA+ phobia that is normalised in social relations, including within our movement. The conservative mindset of many rural areas has proven that our movement needs to join forces, uplifting all minorities in the countryside, instead of creating more divisions in our already marginalised communities.

It is time to understand our diverse identities as political identities. We are proud to be who we are and to share the value of our experiences with the peasant movement and broader society! Through diverse testimonies from Europe and beyond, we raise our voices, united, to take our place: in fields, on farms, in families, and in rural communities, to fight for FOOD SOVEREIGNTY WITH DIVERSITY!

Translators’ notes

Promoting and defending diversity means speaking—and writing—about diversity in a respectful and inclusive way. The interviews and testimonies in this publication tell the stories of non-binary, trans, and queer people from various cultures and languages. Producing the publication has therefore raised various questions about how to include everyone and respect the essential choices of authors, particularly when different languages gender people in different ways. These translators’ notes aim to show the specificities and challenges of translation and inclusive language in each of the three final languages of the publication, and are written by the translators who worked on all the testimonies.

It’s true that the English language is more flexible than many others in this regard. A speaker is not obliged to make grammatical choices that reveal their gender, or presume that of others, as is the case in so many other languages. Using “they” to refer to a singular person whose gender is unknown is a natural feature of everyday language (demonstrated by the use of “their” instead of “his” or “her” in the previous sentence). In French and Spanish, the other languages of this publication, making a comparable choice requires almost “reinventing” how the language is used, and is undoubtedly more political, contentious, and more noticeable to the reader.

That does not mean, however, that questions of gender do not exist within the English language, and the translators of this publication have had to make conscious choices to ensure that the wishes of authors were respected.

For example, gendered language was used to reinforce the feelings of identity of certain contributors. Individuals chose to begin using inclusive language or non-gendered pronouns only part way through their text to represent their journey in discovering their identity, something that they were able to explore in a new way through the project. Similarly, other contributors deliberately referred to their future children using gender neutral words that simply don’t exist in English, because “children” does not specify gender.

Language is not just a tool we use to describe our realities, but a living phenomenon that shapes us and our visions of the world. The words we use have real and tangible consequences, not just with regard to gender, but also more broadly. It is with this understanding that this publication has been written, translated, and published. The nuances linked to identity and inclusivity have been replicated and recreated to try and mirror the overall effect of the publication, and to underline that gender identity is not binary or fixed, and cannot be presumed.

The authors and translators hope that this vision will enable the reader to pause and think about the representation of gender within language, and facilitate a more inclusive and conscious approach to language use, particularly in the rural world and in the struggle for food sovereignty.

Charlotte Ford, Alisha Sesum & Alexandra Stoecker
Some terms that may help the reader

**Biological sex:** A set of biological attributes primarily associated with physiological features.

**Gender identity:** How individuals perceive themselves and what they call themselves, which may or may not correspond to the sex they were assigned at birth.

**Gender expression:** How a person publicly expresses or presents their gender.

**Sexual orientation:** Each person’s capacity for profound emotional, affectional, and sexual attraction to, and intimate and sexual relations with individuals of a different gender, the same gender, or more than one gender.

**Non-binary:** An umbrella term for people whose gender identity is not represented by “man” or “woman” (gender binary). A non-binary person can identify with some aspects of binary identities, while others reject them entirely.

**LGBTIQA+:**
- **Lesbian:** A woman who is attracted to and/or engages in relationships with women.
- **Gay:** A man who is attracted to and/or engages in relationships with men.
- **Bisexual:** A person who is attracted to and/or engages in relationships with more than one gender.
- **Trans or transgender:** An umbrella term for people who have a gender identity that is different to the sex they were assigned at birth, and for people who wish to portray their gender identity in a different way to their sex assigned at birth.
- **Queer:** An umbrella term for people who don’t identify as heterosexual or as cisgender. Increasingly used to refer to a spectrum of non-normative sexual and gender identities and politics.
- **Intersex:** An umbrella term for the spectrum of variations of sex characteristics that naturally occur within humans.
- **Asexual:** People who do not feel sexual attraction to others and have little or no interest in sexual activity.
- **+ or *:** Other genders and sexual diversities.

**Cisgender:** A person whose gender identity and expression match the biological sex assigned at birth.

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1 Adapted from the European Commission’s publication on “Legal gender recognition in the EU”, June 2020, which can be found at: https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/legal_gender_recognition_in_the_eu_the_journeys_of_trans_people_towards_full_equality_sept_en.pdf
Family farms: for an expansion of the term

When I was growing up in a village in Hesse (Germany) in the 1950s, homosexuality was still being treated as a kind of illness (even after the Holocaust, gay men were still being punished by the law until 1969, and Paragraph 175 of the German Criminal Code was only removed in 1994). My inclinations would remain a secret for the time being.

The student movement in ’68 offered a welcome alternative to bourgeois life. I went to uni, took part in squats, and lived in shared accommodation, with a female “comrade”.

Inspired by the emerging environmental movement, I left the city. I worked in forests and nurseries and lived in rural collectives. I saw agriculture as a key element of society in the future.

With this idea in mind, a Norwegian convinced me to ecologically farm a bit of rock and forest on the southern coast of Norway. I had a vision of founding an alternative society. Then reality caught up with me; we had three children, the neighbourhood was conservative, in the summer many helpers came, and the winters were lonely.

After 14 years came the decision and the divorce that cost me my share of the farm. Agriculture became a sociocritical idea again. I studied Anthropology and Development, got involved with Norske bonde-og Smabrukarlaz (NBS), a Norwegian farmers’ organisation, and organised exchanges with farmers’ organisations in Tanzania. The main reason for the divorce, however, was a woman with whom I have now been living for over 20 years.

Silent acceptance
In many countries, family is the only source of economic and social security. Norway is a welfare state that offers the individual more independence from their family and security. Democracy is a tradition and recently, the rainbow flag has been flying next to the national flag in many places. Pride Parades have been integrated as exotic shows, in a context where “family” is still considered the norm.

The majority of the population lives in cities. In rural areas, countless farms are being abandoned, but remain in the families as holiday homes. There are homosexual couples who successfully run farms. Gay people are silently “tolerated”; people do not like to talk about feelings, relationships, or sex in Norway.

A political reflection
Social structures are of great importance to our work at La Via Campesina. “Family farms” are a counterbalance to industrial agriculture. The definition of “family farm”, according to FAO, varies; it is determined by cultural contexts, and is often associated with traditional heterosexual farming families that go back generations.

We now need to rethink how to not exclude some groups or bar the way for all those who do not fit the mould of a traditional family and are therefore lost to our idealistic work. We need alternatives: collectives, part-time work, smaller corporations even. It is a question of rethinking and reorganising in order to enrich “family farms” with a diversity of social and cultural structures.

Ilona Drivdal, she/her (sie in German)
NBS, Norway
My life took a new direction when I went to work in alternative structures in Switzerland. This gave me a bit of breathing room. The collective and sustainable management of farmland and spaces for creating, reflecting, and working together brought me important answers. But clearly, there’s still a lot more to learn about social relationships, gender roles, and the distribution of power.

Of course, we’ll borrow the tractor to go and demonstrate on 8 March or at Pride. But we are far from an equitable distribution of reproductive rights, the end of male dominance in the fields, respectful use of the pronouns desired by trans and non-binary people... And above all, we have not yet finished confronting the traditional, mystified, and naturalised images of organic agriculture. One of the designs displayed everywhere in Switzerland during a campaign for food sovereignty was an image of Adam and Eve! In my cooperative, LGBTQIA+ issues affect four out of twelve of us vegetable farmers. It’s time we stop hiding and censuring ourselves! It’s time to make our diverse voices heard in our fields so we can finally take our places!

Born a girl into an average white family, I grew up in a little town in West Germany. At the time, we linguistically gendered people in two ways: male, or neutral. The neutral category applied as much to women and girls as to animals and other goods and possessions. I quickly realised that I didn’t want to be in this category. I was a “tomboy”. I hated dolls. I played football and spent my time at the pool. I was shy and assertive at the same time. In my world, I was the hero, but the grown-ups’ world scared me. I preferred to stay around people I knew or spend time in nature.

Too soon, I was too old for all of that. I had to find my place in the adult world. The lack of role models didn’t make this task any easier. However, the question of love and sexuality was quite quickly answered. I was sure that liking girls would be better and easier for me. In contrast, finding my personal and gender identity and my professional path has not been easy. In the end, I opted for farming. It offered me various things: reduced contact with other people, access to large machines and other symbols of masculinity, and the opportunity to produce tasty food!

I began my studies in conventional farming believing that I would be spending my time in an open and inspiring atmosphere before moving into the harsh reality of rural work. Oh là là, that was a shock! So much violence from the hetero-cis-patriarchal world: not a single female teacher, only old white men. Paths already laid out: the men would take over the farms, while the women would have children and help out on those farms. The continued use of the cornerstone of gender stereotypes: masculine = scientific and rational. It was intolerable, but I stayed – for years! I wanted to take my place in the world of conservative men, to show them that I was worth the same as them. I played their game until I couldn’t take it anymore.

Betty Wienforth, (no pronoun, original language: French)
Uniterre, Switzerland
1. Solitude

The path up the mountains, past the large boulder that my neighbour calls “the toad”, has been walked many times before, but in this moment I walk it alone with my animals. The countryside has gifted me something no other place could have: solid certainty in my chosen seclusion. There is no doubt, no fear when I look inside myself and follow the winding threads of my being, of sexuality and gender. Without anyone to witness it, it exists beyond boundaries, it crosses borders as easily as the animals I care for. I am and always will be queer. I feel free.

2. History

When I continue higher and wade through the river, the dogs ahead, I breathe in the mixed aromas of forest rot and spread manure that are entirely unremarkable for rural life; they fill me with joy. Miracles in the mundane. No company, but my lack of sleep, some truly stubborn sheep, clothes that don’t fit me, while being underpaid for work that nobody has explained to me. Yet I continue. I’m making mine what I longed for; but never got to have. There is comfort in knowing that I have never been truly alone. Others have had the same questions, doubts, and certain-ties, language and knowledge. Here’s a secret Mother Nature sang to me the other day with the voice of a blackbird: You will belong, you already do.

3. Outside(r)

When I study the lamb’s dead eyes and they no longer study me, when the wind blows harshly in my face and the rain soaks my bones, I remind myself not to romanticise pastoralism or the complexities of queer identity. I feel the misplaced obligation to add a footnote to this dream I’m offering you, make sure to emphasise the difficulties, the legislation, and ignorance, poverty, and uncertainty that peasant and queer people face. As if I don’t live with these daily realities, as though we haven’t already been made into footnoted lives in history, in policies and dialogues. Solitude’s potential to turn into loneliness is an old foe that greets us at every door, in every room. Why shouldn’t we dream out loud? What is queerness if not the belief that another world is possible? There is unparalleled beauty that blooms when both our worlds meet when rural echoes queer and back.

4. Communal

High above me, the migrating cranes go home again. When they shout, I return their call. I will see them again, the valley awaits me. When I told my mother I wanted to pursue shepherding, she spoke of her fear of the wolves I would certainly come across. But the ones I dread do not dwell in forests high above, and no shepherd school will teach me how to deal with those. Solitude has shown my fear of being seen is a fear of being seen as something I am not. In isolation I am whole, nature does not question me the way society does. I don’t want to explain what needs no explanation or erase myself to feel at peace. But at some point the shepherd has to return, the season demands it and people are waiting for them. People who have missed them, people they haven’t met yet. The knife of vulnerability cuts from two sides: it offers recognition too, the chance to share in the joy, in pain, in love, and to belong with others the same way I belong to myself.

Yeva Swart, she/they
Toekomstboeren, Netherlands – France
Community bonding and parish life: the emergence of LGBT neo-rural realities

LGBT movement, LGBT activism, LGBT visibility... Do they have they fixed definitions? Quite the opposite. Moreover, why are some LGBT viewpoints overlooked and neglected?

Being LGBT in a village has its pros and cons. I like to emphasise the positive elements, as the official narrative already makes a point of highlighting the negatives.

Some criteria and logic taken from the urban environment become blurred when they are applied in rural areas, and this is not because of the narrow-mindedness of the non-urban population. Beyond the urban sphere, certain logics, practices, and realities that do not understand identity segmentation, urban tribes, or ghettoised leisure still persist. In cities, coming out of the closet means coming out of one closet and entering another, such as the closet of consumer solitude, or that of an individual reality camouflaged as a collective one.

We move from the “you are worth as much as you have” of the cities to “the more you do, the more you are a part of it”, because in rural areas, although they may attract attention, sexual orientation and gender identity are relegated to second or third place. Neighbourhood comes before sexuality. You are not queer number 239, you are the one who rings the bells, organises the pilgrimage, cleans the fountain or the road, distributes the surplus from the vegetable garden, or the one who plays cards with the neighbour. This implies a strong sense of community that makes it difficult to fall out of the parish network by which we are all connected. Even if it gets in the way of your rainbow activism, you are part of a common project and the neighbourhood knows that you are an indispensable part in one way or another.

In these rural networks, there are close contacts, sometimes a lack of privacy and almost always no anonymity, but potential LGBT-phobic aggressors do not have any anonymity either. That is why villages can be, and often are, welcoming spaces for LGBT activists coming from the cities, and neo-rural activists and native activists returning to their place of origin.

In my case it is the latter. I lived in my village until I was 13, then I migrated to Alicante with my parents. At the age of 18 I came out of the closet. I started my LGBT activism in a big city and a few years ago I returned to my village. The process of readjustment is complex, because neither I nor my birthplace are the same anymore. Sometimes, nostalgia for past LGBT activism weighs too heavily, because it tries to condition the present. In the countryside, everything works at its own pace and with its own codes. “Is it crucial to open a gay bar or to create a ghettoised village? Is it vital for a group of companies to organise a Pride?”, I sometimes think. “Not at all”.

There has always been sexual diversity in villages. We are the heirs of other forms of LGBT activism and other ways of redefining spaces. Roadmaps with different coordinates, times, and strategies. We must therefore quarantine the urban LGBT worldview and readapt our objectives and expectations to our rural realities. If we do not do this, frustrations, disconnections with the environment, elusive thoughts, and rural-phobic ideas will emerge.

Ángel Manuel Amaro Quintas, he/him (él in Spanish)  
Sindicato Labrego Galego, Galicia
A queer path through the major Patriarchy of Agriculture

My name is Breda Larkin. I am a cis woman from Ireland and a member of Talamh Beo, a grassroots farmers’ organisation founded in 2017. Over the last 20 years, my country has become a much more open and tolerant society. The historical marriage referendum turned the whole country—including rural Ireland—into a place where diversity is more widely understood. A lesbian myself, I recently went back to my parents’ farm, after years in the city. Since then, I’ve met several LGBTQIA+ farmers, like Colm, who’s also active in Talamh Beo and farms dry stock and sucklers with his dad in a partnership. Or Will, who farms 80 acres in the Midlands on his own. Although none of them feel really discriminated against, Colm remembers some neighbours who at first said he was “only coming to grab the land” because they didn’t see him as a farmer.

Not being seen as a “real farmer” is something all LGBTQIA+ farmers I met experienced. Rachel, a dairy farmer from Kilkenny, has dealt with it all her working life, even though she’s the 5th generation on the farm and has always been the farmer between her and her brother. Rachel knows some people talk about the fact that she’s a lesbian but says the more pressing issue is that she is a woman. With her mother, she had to chase away an auctioneer who came uninvited to assess the farm, on behalf of some nosey neighbours. He assumed that, in his own words, “She would surely not be farming it once the boss [her father] passed away.”

For Mary, another Talamh Beo member and market gardener in Kerry, coming out as a lesbian wasn’t met with as much resistance as when she announced she wanted to take on the 14-acre farm, turn it to organic and build an on-site low-impact home. If she was spared extra discrimination as a woman working the land, it’s only because she’s not in the conventional beef and dairy market.

It’s a common joke that “coming out” as organic can be harder than coming out as gay! But we try to ignore remarks from people who are ignorant or begrudge those who are happy in themselves and on their farms.

Colm, Mary, Rachel, Will, and I, feel we are part of a new generation, building a new model. Some of us are in relationships but none of us have children or want to build a traditional family. We value extended communities and wish to create new possibilities for Irish farming, in which queer farmers also can lead. Irish farming is still traditional, to the point that with my friends we often refer to Ireland as “a major Patriarchy of Agriculture” and this important part of our economy is almost entirely run by straight cis men... Breaking traditional stereotypes is essential to encourage all current and future farmers to engage with the food system, notwithstanding their gender or sexual orientation. This would also more accurately reflect rural Ireland itself.

In our discussions for the present contribution, we re-affirmed the need for an LGBTQIA+ group in Talamh Beo and decided to propose it at our next annual general meeting. I am sure that connecting with each other throughout our organisation will make us feel less isolated and empower us to push diversity and changes forward.
Food Sovereignty with Diversity!  
¡Soberanía Alimentaria con Diversidad!  
Ernährungssouveränität in Vielfalt!  
Souveraineté Alimentaire avec Diversité!

"To hell with the fences that prevent us from living and loving"  

"A diverse, non-violent, and inclusive contryside is fundamental for La Via Campesina"  
(Euskal Herria Declaration, 2017)
North and South. Crop farmer and livestock farmer. Bisexual and trans. The stories of Ferdinand, 36, and Hugo, 26, seem different, but they reflect a single theme: sexual and gender dissent in the Spanish countryside. This space isn’t usually welcoming, but at times acts as a shelter, as Hugo says. At 17, Hugo took over his family’s livestock business that was going under due to the 2008 crisis. His family’s milk goats were a refuge during his transition. As he says, “animals don’t understand sex or gender, they only understand affection”. Ferdinand, a farmer, and service firm owner, agrees that working alone in the countryside has its advantages, although, “sometimes it helps, but sometimes it hurts”. So much time alone can be damaging, especially if you need to talk about your situation.

Both of them grew up without any local role models, but they recognise that they would see gay men on TV—although not trans people. Maybe that’s why it was easier for Hugo to come out of the “straight closet” than the “cis closet”. He knew he was a man, but he didn’t tell his family that he didn’t identify with his birth gender until he was 22. Before, at 16, he came out as a lesbian as a first step. In fact, he met with fewer misgivings the second time, although, being the only trans person in town made him the centre of attention, with people even stopping him in the street. Meanwhile, Ferdinand’s coming out was a bit later, in October 2020. Gradually, he told his friends and relatives, who responded warmly. Although, as with Hugo, Ferdinand says that there were people who used his situation as “a tool to cause damage”.

His gender identity and sexuality intersect with his job. If being LGBTQIA* isn’t easy, being a farmer complicates the situation even more. They both agree that rural environments aren’t the most enticing places, and they tend to be busy for too much of the day. As Ferdinand reflected, they are paid “prices [for agricultural produce] that make [them] slaves” to their work to survive. That’s why they both push for the right to leisure and free time for rural workers, just as in other jobs. There is also the difficulty of starting a family. Both of them want to stay where they are and have a partner and children—Hugo adds that he wants to raise his children running after the goats. However, it’s hard enough to find a partner in the countryside; for LGBTQIA* people it’s even harder: neither their schedules nor the traditional heteropatriarchal family model help.
Unlocking rural communities, opening minds

Anya Saltmarsh and Beth Stewart, two LGBTQIA+ activists and members of Landworkers’ Alliance (LWA), are separated in age by only a couple of decades. Yet, their distinct experiences as non-heterosexuals show us how recognition of diversity is broadening with time.

Beth identifies as non-binary. Born in 1984, they are a vegetable grower and grew up in an average-sized town in the West Midlands. Beth’s teenage years were marked by Section 28, the conservative law prohibiting education and promotion of homosexuality, effective until 2003 in England. “I didn’t have any role models in my local community or even on TV. I think I felt very much like ‘other’ with a lot of internalised shame”. The need to come out was strong but paralysing for an introverted person, and the gay and lesbian people around Beth didn’t fit as role models. The labels were just not right. “For quite a while I desexualised myself, until I felt stronger, found more LGBTQIA+ communities, and was able to step into my queerness.”

In contrast, for Anya, a 17-year-old from rural Dorset, coming out as a lesbian was almost a non-event. “When I was younger, the friends of my three older sisters were often at our farm, which was a refuge of sorts whilst they were discovering themselves. A lot of them were queer, non-binary, or trans. These examples helped make it not a big issue. One day my dad was dropping me off at my friend’s house and he asked ‘Are you dating her?’ I said ‘Yeah, I think so...’ and he just replied ‘Oh, cool!’.” It’s a moment she is grateful for, especially as she and Beth agree this kind of situation is still rare nowadays. Jyoti, Anya’s mother, reflects: “We noticed both sides of the family asking a lot more about my other daughters’ boyfriends but avoiding questions about Anya’s girl-

Ferdinand Cookson, he/him (el in Spanish)  
COAG, Spain

Hugo González, he/him (el in Spanish)  
COAG, Andalucía

In this respect, Ferdinand highlights the need to normalise and make their situation visible so it’s easier for future generations. He gives the example of demonstrations by farmers from UAGA (Union of Livestock and Crop Farmers of Aragon, linked to COAG, an ECVC member), where demonstrators take their wife in their tractor and states that he wants to take his boyfriend next time, along with a rainbow flag in the cabin. He wants to be an example for others that he never had. They both regret not coming out earlier, because a significant part of their lives would have been different, and they encourage young LGBTQIA+ people to be themselves, because, as Ferdinand says, “you’ve only got one life”.

Their paths meet and diverge as they recount their experiences. They share the fight for sexual and gender diversity and the peasant struggle: they have to “work hard, we can’t expect anybody else to do it for us”, in both battles, comments Ferdinand. Although they recognise that things are better than several years ago – for example, in Hugo’s town last year the first gay wedding took place between two women – there’s still a way to go. The empty Spanish countryside needs the courage of all the LGBTQIA+ people who live in it to reverse depopulation, (s)exile, and big companies’ exploitation of farmers. And, on this long path, their lives and those of so many others will continue to meet and diverge.
friend […], but we want them to grow and evaluate their attitudes, so we consciously talked about it in family spaces.” For Anya, it’s clear that at University next year, she’ll witness many people who were too scared to express themselves in the rural areas they are from coming out in their new environment.

Beth’s long and tentative ongoing process alongside Anya’s more organic experience show that an open environment makes it easier for everyone to exist without the heavy constraints of labels. To put it in Beth’s words “In the world we aspire to, nobody should be coming out, because there shouldn’t be an in and an out.” Both are actively building this new world within the framework of their farmers’ union. Beth is active in the LGBTQIA+ working group of LWA, a space that over the last two years has helped them to find their place. “Before, the agroecology movement felt quite straight and I had to leave a part of me at home to participate, whilst now I’m comfortable and able to take a complete political stance.” The need to create a sense of community is essential as struggles for food sovereignty take place in a heteronormative, patriarchal, and white world. The working group also collaborates with groups defending rights to land for people of colour. “A union like LWA is a social movement. We work not only for economic equity but also to further social change, solidarity, and equality for all of our members. Farmers are usually located in conservative rural areas, so we have even more to work on in changing social norms.” says Jyoti, also a founding member of LWA.

This kind of intersectionality is key for her daughter. “In rural areas, all outsiders are targeted in the same way. My parents – who started farming the year I was born – have experienced it also. Because my mum is a brown woman. Because they raised their kids differently. Because their farming system is different from the big farms around. The struggle is everyone’s.” Between milking her cow and studying for her final school exams, Anya participated in the creation of FLAME, LWA’s youth articulation, during the lockdown with other young activists wanting to give agriculture a central place in the climate justice debate and reminding us food equality is a human right. “Participants at our first online meeting spontaneously introduced themselves with their pronouns. I couldn’t have imagined things being different.” Anya was already a strong advocate for social justice at three, as Jyoti remembers: “She had her shoes on the wrong feet and I tried to tell her to put them on the right feet and she said ‘It’s my body, it’s my life I can wear my shoes on the wrong feet if I want to!’.” Anya has grown and she’s creating safe spaces and a new narrative, and feeding in the practices of LWA, just like Beth does. “We want to challenge people’s ideas of what it looks like to be a land worker. And we want to uplift people who are queer in the countryside, or black, or trans or whomever they are!”

Anya Saltmarsh, she/her
Beth Stewart, they/them
Jyoti Fernandez, she/her
Landworkers’ Alliance, United Kingdom
LGBTI people colouring territory and sowing pride and resistance

We, the LGBTI peasants of Brazil, have been persistently fighting against the invisibility of LGBTI existence in the countryside since 2015. We started a process of self-organisation through meetings, gatherings, and courses, which culminated in the creation of the LGBTI Collective of La Via Campesina Brazil in 2020. Its main task is to promote the inclusion of sexual diversity and gender identity in the political platform of rural organisations and question the oppression that permeates the existence of the peasant population; peasants have many political and social markers including ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, and ancestries, among many others, that define us as human beings.

Upon lifting the coloured flag with peasant struggles, we learned that it is important to come out of the closet, not just individually, but also collectively in our organisations, questioning their complicit silence regarding the violence against LGBTI people that is endemic in social and production relationships in the countryside. To stay alive, we need our organisations and our communities to respect us, to protect us, and to accept us as we are.

It is important to fight against private property in the means of production, agribusiness, and exploitation of the working class by the bourgeoisie. In doing so, we should question the structural bases of this system, and the multiple definitions expressed in economic, social, and political relations, be it in: gender roles; procreation; or power relations, and privilege of one class over another, of one gender over another, or in intolerance of other forms of relationships and sexual relations by this heteropatriarchal system.

At a time of growing conservatism in Brazil, the existence of LGBTI peasants and indigenous people has been under threat since 2018, when a fascist government was elected. At the start of this year, Fernando dos Santos Araújo was murdered. He was a gay peasant in the landless movement, one of the survivors of the Pau D’Arco Massacre in the state of Pará, in which 10 landless people were killed on 24th May 2017. He survived after hiding in the jungle for 36 hours, while he heard screams, including those of his partner Bruno Henrique Pereira Gomes, who was one of ten people to be tortured and killed by the police during this massacre. Fernando was murdered on 26th January 2021, as part of a cover-up, with a shot to the back of the head at his home in the encampment. His murder shows the extent to which violence against LGBTI people and violence by large landowners permeates the existence of LGBTI people in the countryside in Brazil.

To stay alive, we have to organise and fight, accepting our LGBTI identity as a political identity. We must take an active role in peasant struggles and denounce LGBTI-phobia as another barrier that must be broken down in the struggle to build a democratic, diverse people’s society, which has a place for all ways of being and loving, overcoming relationships based on exploitation and oppression. To this end, we declare that the peasant struggle should be truly anti-capitalist, anti-racist, anti-patriarchal, and anti-colonial.

Alessandro Santos Mariano, he/him (ele in Portuguese) Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST), Brazil
A queer farm’s journey towards visibility

As a queer farmer in rural New York, I have a unique view into the polarised political spectrum in the US. Dropping a line in conversation about growing up farming and working the land as a kid can ease the tension I receive from edgy locals quick to judge my “interesting” haircut and confusing gender presentation. Regardless of my non-binary gender identity and queerness, being both white and having a history of farming opens many doors. The delicateness with which I tread in this rural area comes from years of trial and error when it comes to being “out”. After I hosted the first joyous “Queer Farmer Field Day” in 2009, where 100+ attendees came from throughout the state of California, I was faced with death threats, alienation, and fear of my neighbors. Homophobia in the workplace followed me to the city, seeking my queer community in NYC. I was forced to leave an urban agriculture youth program for bringing too much of my identity to work, for being out, for supporting queer youth at the high school. I did not fit into the farming world – neither rural nor urban. I needed to create something that did not exist yet.

In 2015, when my partner at the time and I decided to leave NYC to farm, I was fired up to build a new type of farm, where I could bring my full self to work. But I also knew this would require caution and patience. It took three years for Rock Steady to come out publicly. Thanks to my co-founders and dozens of amazing farmers along the way, today our farm is an out and thriving LGBTQIA+ owned cooperative farm rooted in social justice, growing sustainable vegetables for a 500-person Community Supported Agriculture (CSA). We are unique in a lot of ways, with 57% of our food going to lower-income people both locally and in NYC. This is something that sets us apart from some other farms in our area and earns us respect from our economically struggling local community. People see we really care and want to make a difference in their lives, regardless of their political or religious ideologies. Our social capital far outweighs our economic capital. Relying on our diverse community is critical to our survival. We have needed to lean on our community in many ways over the years. Few occupations in today’s society offer opportunities for trust and reliance with so many different people. And farming is one of them. Small- and medium-sized farms can only survive through the continual, sometimes invisible, collective support system. Together we are all striving to put food on the table.

Our table at Rock Steady just happens to be very, very queer. A majority of our CSA and community partners, such as HIV/AIDS health centres, are from the LGBTQIA+ community. We also host workshops and events for our queer community. Even our large wholesale accounts are LGBTQIA+ friendly. As a ten-person strong queer team, we invest in professional development and stay committed to the ongoing internal work around racial justice, anti-oppression, and culture building.

Our farm feels like a new reality, but is still connected to the surrounding community. Not hiding nor pretending to be what we are not. I am thankful we have come this far, and I am absolutely sure our struggle continues.

Maggie Cheney, she/they
Rock Steady Farm, USA
What it feels like for a girl farmer boy

1996. I was eight and went to the pre-Lenten carnival celebrations, Fasching, dressed up as Madonna. It was obvious.

I was bored of village life and seized the opportunity to escape: first to a boarding school, then to study in the greater Berlin area. My peers worked out that I was gay before I did. It’s not a big deal for millennials.

My parents built up a business in post-socialist East Germany, which involved a lot of work, but made hardly any money. We did without all the things that “normal” families do: holidays, culture, renovating the house. Instead, there was the tractor noise, runaway cows, and crushing bank loans. I was aware of my parents’ desire for me to take over the farm, even though they said it was my decision to make when asked.

Thanks to state education funding, I was able to escape this life. But no amount of money could help with the battles inside me. Both Madonna and the farmer’s son vied for acknowledgment.

The farmer’s son in me stubbornly resisted modernity. In the final selection process for training in the diplomatic service, I backed out. I dropped out of a humanities course after two semesters. I thought it would be better to improve the world than to analyse its demise. I suddenly found agriculture interesting on an intellectual level. What followed was an agricultural degree so that I could work in the organic sector. However, I found it difficult to dive into the gay scene. Wouldn’t guys notice my “barn smell” and give me a wide berth?

I returned to the farm with the intention of using my knowledge to give something back to my parents and I did so quite successfully. When my father got his pension (and still continued to work!), the economic pressure began to ease. Now my inner Madonna took centre stage. Of course, it’s not like they had opened up a gay bar on the village square in the past 12 years, and every trip to the city felt like I was betraying my parents, who had to take over my work! Loyalty meant sacrifice. It was a lonely, bleak time. I almost broke down because of it.

Unfortunately, I have made myself indispensable to the running of the business. It’s too late to leave now. At the moment, however, optimism prevails and the magic words are community supported agriculture with a focus on vegetables. Soon, I will be the first gay operations manager far and wide! A small team will be created so that we can have humane working hours – and more dates! How “gay” should my farm be anyway, since my gayness has been almost invisible in everyday life, despite coming out?

In my search for role models, I once visited a farming couple. They were farmers first and foremost. Their homosexuality was confined to a sumptuous safari-themed bathroom...

So, is this the happy ending? There’s still my parents’ fear of change. New people on the farm. Economic risks. And there’s also my fear of failure or rejection – probably the primal fear of all queer people.

What gives me hope is that Madonna is a drag queen, the farmer’s son is gay, and they’re into each other.
A trade union coming out?

When I was asked to write a piece about LGBTQIA* people in rural areas, a very simple question occurred to me: “How will people around me react, and what’s the purpose of doing this?”. Even though I’ve never hidden my sexuality, I’ve always made the choice not to put it on show. It was by chance that I participated in the first meeting on gender diversity at La Via Campesina’s 7th international conference in 2017. Having found myself in the right place at the right time, I publicly expressed this aspect of myself within the movement for the first time.

Though it seemed almost easy to me at the time, undoubtedly thanks to the energy and the magic of that event, today I’m facing more difficulty in publicly owning a story that seems to only belong in my private life.

After reflection and discussions, I began writing this simple and short piece so that, perhaps, this gesture will help give other people a voice. And because, yes, you can be a peasant, be proud of your occupation, be attracted to men, actively try to move away from clichés and heteronormativity, and loudly carry your union’s message! I won’t be ashamed of who I am!

In addition, I realised that there was no point in running away. Although I was lucky enough to grow up and live in a family and environment that has fully accepted me, I still went to the city to experience its joys, its LGBTQIA* community, dates, parties... A city where the acceptance of non-heteronormative people seems much simpler. And maybe this is one of the reasons for my move far away from my native Dordogne? In the end, I felt the countryside calling me back, and I returned. Today, I live there with a man. Family, neighbours, and friends have all accepted us.

So why not express this aspect of myself officially within my union, La Confédération paysanne? The undoubtedly deeply-rooted fear of being judged... It may seem old-fashioned, but cookie-cutter judgments still exist in France today, especially in our countryside. So many times, fed up with being asked if I have a girlfriend, I’ve ended up saying that I’m living with a man. “Oh? I never would’ve guessed!” Maybe that’s exactly the problem, they never would have guessed because we don’t dare to live as simply and openly as any other person.

I think the time has come to fully embrace who I am and to make my private life a political struggle within the peasant struggle. Today, I can say with pride that I’m a peasant, I’m gay, I’m an activist for La Confédération paysanne, ECVC, and La Via Campesina. And I choose to use inclusive language because I’ve never felt at home in the binary imposed by our society. And it’s with the same pride that I sign an article for the first time with a neutral pronoun!

Jean-Baptiste Roux, they/them (iel/ellui in French)
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Disclaimer: The coordinators and translators of this publication have made every attempt to use inclusive writing throughout the text. However, given the constantly evolving nature of (inclusive) language, we highlight that if this has not been achieved at any point, it is the result of human error and not an attempt to exclude.

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Rural life is often hard, and even harder being gay, trans, bisexual, or any other gender or sexual identity beyond cis-heteropatriarchy. Through testimonies by peasant members of European Coordination Via Campesina and beyond, Embracing rural diversity shows that in our efforts for inclusion and acceptance of gender and sexual diversities, we can create new social structures. The publication calls for action to organise, so that we can make our voices heard and play a key political role in the transformation of the food system.