La búsqueda de justicia desde los microespacios de la política: organizaciones de mujeres desplazadas en Colombia

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Abstract

**Organizations of Displaced Women in Colombia: the Search for Justice from the Micro-Level of Politics**

This dissertation deals with the ways three groups of displaced women (‘mujeres desplazadas’) in Colombia have organised themselves. In these organisations women achieved different levels of empowerment and autonomy. This became a key factor for understanding the dynamics of these organisations and the ways they approached the Colombian state in their search for justice.

In Colombia, the number of displaced people is estimated at more than three million persons over the last 25 years. Many studies and Constitutional Court rulings have stressed the disproportionate impact of forced displacement on women. Indeed, women have been more vulnerable than men, especially when they became heads of household after displacement. However, vulnerability is not the only characteristic of displaced women. They are also known as talented organisers and appreciated leaders. Although we found very few exclusively female organizations, women use to be present among the leaders of mixed (male/female) organizations and they frequently obtain the support of civil society foundations that defend human rights and gender equality.

This doctoral thesis studies the way the empowerment of displaced women was stimulated by organizational processes, capacity building and political debates. It has been of particular interest to analyze how these factors enhanced—or not—the experience of justice in the daily lives of women, thus concretizing the rather abstract constitutional rulings or public policy statements. The mobilization of displaced people has obtained important results in the High Courts and the Public Ministry, and these institutions at their turn have ordered the government to guarantee the reestablishment of basic human rights for the
displaced population. These actions may have meant a step forward in judicial and legislative matters, but they did not take away the discontent among displaced women, who argue the State has not addressed their claims for justice in their daily lives. Indeed, numerous reports elaborated by human rights organizations have underpinned these perceptions of injustice. The National Monitoring Commission for Public Policy on Forced Displacement (Comisión de Seguimiento a la Política Pública de Desplazamiento) also corroborated the precarious situation of displaced women and the insufficient response by government institutions. The perception of displaced women and the commission’s report highlight the importance of investigating the structural and cultural roots of gender inequality in Colombian society. This can explain the gap between formal justice and the real experience of justice on the ground.

This study proposes to take the concept of justice beyond the judicial realm - until this moment, the predilect space for political action by displaced people’s associations - and to focus on its real experience at the micro-level of daily life, in such a way as to materialise its abstract definition into a tangible life experience.

This idea of justice as a life experience took us to Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum’s Capabilities Approach, which became our starting point for the theoretical and conceptual framework of this dissertation. In this approach, justice is not only seen as something to be guaranteed by institutions but as an experience of freedom in the personal lives of people. From this perspective, the idea of justice as equity proposed by Rawls, can not become a reality unless the individual and collective differences in capabilities are recognized. Nussbaum develops this argument further using the example of gender differences. Women in almost all societies suffer discrimination and restrictions of their capabilities. This hampers their dignity and – in the particular case of displaced women- their access to justice as a condition for rebuilding their lives. According to the authors, justice must be based on the development of basic human capabilities. The
opposite, exclusion, is seen as a lack of freedom to live with dignity or to participate in political, economic, and also personal and domestic affairs. From this perspective, we may link the concept of justice to the concepts of empowerment and autonomy, as these constitute forms of control over one’s own life. In this sense, the thesis focusses on the extent to which the gender perspective subscribed by the organizations, is translated into tangible progress in the displaced women’s autonomy (emotional, physical, economical, political and sociocultural), in both the individual, collective and primary relationships. This perspective poses a two-proned question: to what extend did displaced women and their organizations influence the political debate and public policy? And, on the other hand, to what extend did displaced women achieve a transformation of their daily lives and family relations? Finally, the empowerment and autonomy concepts are not to be seen as absolute features, present or absent in the displaced women’s lives, but more as a broad spectrum of possibilities in different spheres.

The research focussed on three organizations: the Liga de Mujeres Desplazadas (LMD) in Cartagena; the Asociación de Personas Desplazadas para la Paz y la Convivencia (ADESCOP) in Bogotá and Jueves de Paz, which is part of the Foundation Paz y Bien, in Cali. Although not all of them are exclusively female organizations, they have in common the formal inclusion of a gender approach in their discourse, goals and capacity building programs.

The findings of the research can be summarized in seven paragraphs. 1. The gender approach makes for differentiation among the organisations. Where this approach has become the organization’s dominant perspective, it orientates the political agenda, the actions and the claims that are made, in a way that is different from those that consider “gender” only as a secondary element. The contrast is very clear if we look at the terms in which “injustice” is defined when dealing with the suffering of the displaced population and claims for redress. The collective identity of the organization plays a crucial role in this process.
2. The research corroborates earlier findings that domestic life and family relationships constitute the most harsh scenario for pursuing empowerment, due to the prevalence of an unequal distribution of labour that represents an enormous burden for women and hampers their exercise of autonomy. Frequently, women herself repeat these sexist patterns with their children and this way continue unequal relationships in the new generations. We found this traditional division of labour to be a common element in all three organizations.

3. Another common element is the difficulty to achieve some kind of economic autonomy, which moreover seems to be a key element for the strengthening of other kinds of autonomy. Here we have to mention the (partial) achievements made by the LMD that developed a Project for self built houses called the Women’s City (Ciudad de las Mujeres). This Project should be exhaustively revisited as a valuable lesson for other organizations, and as an example of materialisation of empowerment with a very tangible result. But in spite of international cooperation and government subsidies, the economic situation of these women did not improve, and the maintenance of their houses turned a heavy burden.

4. On the other hand, the research revealed how personal (physical and emotional) development turned out to be the most receptive terrain for an empowerment process. In this particular case of displaced women, the basis for this process was laid during the first moments of arrival in the cities, after fleeing from rural conflict. As we could establish in this study, the women arrived in very precarious conditions and started small solidarity initiatives of mutual support for food or a roof, providing care for children and the elder, as well as emotional support to bear the traumas of violence and forced displacement. Later these actions expanded their scope towards more sophisticated help with bureaucratic procedures in order to obtain humanitarian assistance and later on compensation money for their losses and the restitution of their basic rights. The organization could build on this previous initiatives that had strengthened their internal cohesion and the role of women in this all.
5. Out of this experience of basic gender solidarity grew another process of empowerment that took the women to collective negotiations and political dialogue with national and local governments, and even towards a successful interaction with the political and constitutional authorities, which became a milestone in national history.

This three—level analysis of empowerment makes clear that an exclusive focus on the formal, collective, political arena is important but insufficient. As long as the displaced women do not significantly transform primary relationships and achieve a more equal division of domestic labour, they will not feel justice to be a real experience in their daily lives.

6. One of the most important conclusions of this study is that the gender perspective plays a differentiating role in the organizations’ framing of collective action. The clue for understanding these differences is the way the organizations define their collective identity. One of the organizations describes their collective identity in terms of “displaced women” (mujeres desplazadas) and they consequently understand “injustice” as rooted in the patriarchal elements in society that historically made women victims of rights violations, subsequently limited their capabilities and exacerbated their vulnerabilities in the midst of conflict. Therefore, the political agenda of these organizations is oriented towards a transformation of the structural conditions of women’s vulnerabilities and a search for justice beyond the reparations for harm and losses caused by armed conflict and forced displacement. In contrast, the members of the other two organizations call themselves “displaced persons”. Their agendas focus on the ways to overcome the specific impact of violence and to reestablish conditions previous to the displacement. So gender issues became only secondary themes for training programs or political agendas. However, to define yourself as displaced “persons” suggests homogeneous needs and conditions for women and men and overlooks the gender inequalities previous to the conflict. Female leaders in these organizations subordinate their gender
identity to the more general concept of “displaced person” – in the patriarcal tradition represented by a masculine figure.

7. Finally, the research corroborated the importance of two issues related to women’s rights beyond armed conflict and forced displacement. First, the survey held amongst displaced women in the three cities showed that their vulnerabilities are not exclusively due to the violent experience. On the contrary, historical conditions have always limited the development of capabilities for these women; the resulting vulnerabilities being exacerbated by violent conflict. A second issue concerns the discussion on the concept of women headed households, considered a special category for constitutional court rulings, humanitarian assistance and other policy measures. The survey confirmed that many women became heads of households after forced displacement: 86% of the interviewees. However, 55% of them reported a husband or partner and 46% said they only work in domestic tasks. For the Colombian state, the female headship constitutes a risk factor, but these rather contradictory survey results may indicate different interpretations. Indeed, the displaced women themselves see their headship sometimes as an expression of empowerment; or of a joint Enterprise; or the proof of the incapacity of men to provide for survival; or simply a mechanism to assure government’s priority assistance. In this study we do not elaborate on this issue, but it might be an interesting theme for future research in conflict and postconflict areas.

In short, this study confirmed the importance of organizations in their search for justice, but also showed the gender approach to be crucial for the dynamics and interactions with government. In spite of the results obtained in the realm of judicial procedures and political pressure, displaced women’s claims for justice in daily life have not been fulfilled. A more active political participation by women might change this situation, but for this to happen they should develop the capabilities to transform deeply rooted social practices. To achieve this, the organizations need to strengthen the empowerment processes of their women associates and promote autonomy in all spheres of their lives.