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Protecting Internally Displaced Women Leaders in Colombia: From Policy to Practice

Alice Taylor

In Colombia, a remarkable number of leaders have emerged among internally displaced persons (IDPs), despite experiences of violence, uprooting, and on-going risks. The risks associated with socio-political activism in Colombia are well known, including that of IDP leaders. Less, however, is understood about the specific ways in which these risks transform the kinds of activism and leadership practiced. Drawing on fieldwork in Colombia, this article discusses in particular the phenomenon of IDP women's leadership and the implications of this leadership for policy and protecting the rights of women leaders as well as other IDPs.

The nature of displacement in Colombia shapes the kind of leadership and collective groups that can emerge. Fifty years into internal armed conflict, Colombia has the second highest number of IDPs in the world (after Sudan) estimated in the range of 3.3 to 4.9 million (IDMC/NRC 2010). There is a disproportionate representation of women, indigenous, and Afro-Colombian IDPs. Displacement is largely individual rather than collective, protracted, and urban in nature; inter- and intra-urban displacements are tied to on-going insecurity and poverty in cities. Yet despite great odds, and in many cases motivated to act because of the challenges they confront, some IDPs have emerged as leaders. From neighbourhoods to the national level, IDP leaders have created organisations, joined local and national committees, and influenced policy to an exceptional scale when we consider other countries with forced migrants. There are an estimated 2,000 IDP organisations in Colombia, and several large political demonstrations and sit-ins have taken place in the past decade, including one in which over 1,800 IDPs took over a park for five months in 2009.¹

Examining leadership among IDPs forms part of a gradual trend in the forced migration field. Policymakers, practitioners, and researchers seek to engage IDPs and refugees in 'participation' or 'consultation' for programming, policies and participatory research, often by capturing forced migrants' 'voices' in testimonials and narratives. The Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement also address IDP participation in programs and decision-making processes that involve their interests.² An aspect that is less considered is recognising forced migrants' 'social agency' in reconstructing their lives and the lives of other forced migrants through collective

¹ For five months in 2009, around 1,800 IDPs staged a sit-in at Tercer Milenio city park in Bogotá, living in tents and demanding respect for their rights in what was one of several takeovers of its kind (the most well-known was the 1999 Red Cross sit-in). Leading up to the 2010 presidential elections, IDPs protested in front of government buildings, advocating for their rights to be taken into account in political platforms.

² See for example, Brookings-Bern 2008 and UNHCR 2006; Donà 2007; and Cohen 2008, IDMC/NRC 2007, *IDP Voices* 2010, and Molano 2005. Several articles in the Guiding Principles also relate to IDPs' and women's participation. For instance, IDPs have the right to participate fully and equally in public affairs at all levels and have equal access to public services (29(2)). "Authorities concerned shall involve those affected, particularly women, in the planning and management of their relocation" (7(d)) and to "ensure the full participation of women in the planning and distribution of basic supplies" (18(3)). The Guiding Principles are non-binding; therefore, the protection of IDPs rests in the hands of states.

action, organisation and leadership.³ There has been little exploration of leadership as an expression of agency or as an analytical focus for research – despite the presence and influence of leaders among forced migrant populations, especially in protracted camp and urban settings.

One function of leadership is that it serves as a means through which IDPs advocate for their rights to be included in policy, and to claim rights entitled through those policies. In Colombia, the Constitutional Court has contributed to what are considered the most advanced policy developments of its kind on internal displacement, a ‘prime example’ of application of the Guiding Principles (Carr 2009). *Writ 092* of 2008 has been the result of one significant ruling. It has received much attention for recognising the disproportionate impact of the conflict and displacement on women, and orders the government to create thirteen programs for IDP women. With over 100 rulings since 2004 alone, the challenge to the government (Acción Social, the coordinating body responsible for IDPs in particular) is one of effective implementation rather than *lack* of policy. In many countries, a strong civil society has been recognised as crucial in pushing for the implementation of IDP policy (Carr 2009). In Colombia, these policies have in fact opened up spaces for IDPs to participate and exercise leadership that did not exist before.

IDPs, however, face enormous disincentives to becoming leaders, particularly when it comes to influencing policy. In contrast to the Constitutional Court, which has advocated strongly on behalf of IDPs, the executive branch of government does not recognise ‘armed conflict’ as such and has provided limited humanitarian assistance, much less longer-term protection for IDPs. State, guerrilla, and most recently paramilitary actors have heavily persecuted IDP leaders, along with union and peasant leaders, and human rights defenders. The risk of socio-political activism is well known and has been tracked internationally (OHCHR) and nationally (CODHES a, b), with increasing threats to women leaders (Working Group on Women and Armed Conflict).⁴

³ The notion of agency among forced migrants counters most literature on armed conflict and political violence, where the focus is on victimhood, particularly when it comes to women (Cockburn 2001). Re-positioning IDPs as social agents does not however deny they are victims. In fact, recognising victims as subjects with legal rights, including those related to reparation, has become particularly salient in Colombia. Within forced migration research internationally, Grabska’s (2006) study of urban refugees in Cairo is an important exception in placing forced migrants’ agency as the central unit of analysis. A few related studies examine how forced migrants reconstruct their lives in urban areas by, for example, focusing on their livelihood strategies or social integration.

⁴ CODHES, a prominent Colombian human rights and displacement NGO, documented 28 assassinations of IDP leaders between 2002 and 2009, with an increasing trend. There is a tendency not to register assassinations in official government statistics (CODHES b), making it impossible to guarantee protection to these leaders and the IDPs they represent. Since 2001 the Working Group on Women and Armed Conflict has reported sociopolitical violence against women leaders in annual reports, in which threats and assassinations of women leaders have intensified since 2007. In terms of threats, CODHES reported 255 threats to IDP leaders in 2008, with the greatest number in Bogotá (83). Threats are also seriously underreported. According to the Committee for Strengthening IDP Organisations, only 70 of the 255 threats were brought forth to authorities, and only 30 per cent of those have been addressed (CODHES a).

Consistent with these documented threats, fieldwork from 2009 to 2010 in Colombia demonstrates escalating persecution of IDP women leaders.⁵ In spring 2010, this persecution provoked regional attention: the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights (IACHR) for the first time granted provisional protection measures to seventeen Colombian IDP women leaders, due to the government's failure to protect them. Paramilitaries, primarily the *Aguilas Negras* group, were responsible for death threats, committing acts of sexual violence and intimidation (including a few cases involving women's daughters), following women to their homes and organisations, and otherwise threatening them in person, by telephone and e-mail. A few women leaders and their family members were assassinated. The Colombian government responded with limited protection measures for the women leaders as of mid-2010 (for instance, by offering some material forms such as cellular phones and bullet-proof vests, but without more substantive measures). At the time, it had yet to be determined how regional or international human rights systems would intervene further.

Persecution undermines civil and political rights, restricting women leaders' freedom of movement and freedom of expression. It also transforms the kinds of activism and leadership IDP women can practice, and their ability to protect a wider range of IDP rights. First, persecution influences the types of work in which IDP women leaders engage. They overwhelmingly facilitate humanitarian assistance, including finding mattresses or food for newly arriving IDP families. These activities respond to acute needs for IDPs and are less risky as compared to other leadership roles identified such as explicit 'defence of human rights', and direct involvement in policy visible at the national level, which is more politicised, and therefore often represents greater threats.⁶ Since the IACHR measures, many of the women leaders have been required to document and follow up with these measures, reducing the time they have to carry out their wider agendas.

⁵ Field research was conducted in 2009 and 2010 in Bogotá and its neighbouring city of Soacha, which are together two of Colombia's top receiving cities of IDPs. Taking ethnographic, participatory, and gender analytic approaches, the purpose was to analyse the emergence and practices of leadership among urban IDP women: which women emerge as leaders, how they practice leadership among all-women and mixed groups, and opportunities and constraints they face as influenced by gendered structures and patterns. Just as women face unique risks and threats in armed conflict and expulsion from their territories (*Writ 092*; Meertens 2010), there are similarities and differences among and between groups of women and men regarding leadership, including family and household responsibilities, on-going risks and decision-making. The first encounters with leaders occurred through mobile health clinics led by the NGO Profamilia, serving urban areas with high concentrations of IDPs, as well as in shelters and NGO and IDP organisations. The analysis centres on the perspectives of IDP women leaders through 19 in-depth interviews, complemented by over 50 interviews with IDP men leaders, IDP women and men in positions other than leadership, and government and NGO representatives. During two return visits in 2010, the findings were presented and discussion groups were held with IDP women leaders, government and NGO groups.

⁶ The study indicates six types of roles IDP women leaders take on: (1) guiding IDPs in obtaining humanitarian assistance (includes a minimal three-month package of food, housing, and stipend to begin an income-generating project for which IDPs must continuously re-apply); (2) legal assistance, such as filing legal complaints when humanitarian assistance is denied; (3) activism, including marches and sit-ins; (4) good governance and holding institutions accountable; (5) defending IDP and women's human rights; and (6) IDP policy and politics, such as by presenting material to the Constitutional Court. These roles typically overlap, and roughly correspond with short-term, to longer-term and systemic activities. Some focused on a certain issue, for instance in promoting health, through one or several of these avenues.

Second, women leaders who seek to engage in policy face limitations in terms of the depth of their involvement. For instance, IDP women leaders were instrumental in drafting and advocating for the passage of *Writ 092*, but have felt largely excluded from the process of implementing the thirteen programs it demarcates for IDP women. The leaders involved in this writ have also been among the most heavily persecuted. The Court sought to protect IDP women leaders from persecution through a dedicated program of *Writ 092*—and another, *Writ 200*, among others. Though important theoretical advances, these policies were not sufficient to prevent or respond to persecution taking place, nor have they established reliable procedures. By the same token, persecution detracts from leaders' ability to influence Colombian IDP policy and to otherwise advocate for IDP rights.

The research also suggests that IDP women leaders lack two sets of skills fundamental to influencing policy to a greater degree: (1) negotiation, consensus-building, and public speaking with mixed and all-women groups of IDPs and policymakers; and (2) running organisations according to democratic principles of accountability and shared decision-making. Most IDP women leaders receive some form of training and are knowledgeable about IDP rights and policies, but could greatly benefit from developing skills in order to, as women leaders, represent IDPs and their organisations.

Third, women leaders encounter contradicting forms of risk and protection from the organisations in which they engage, and in the urban areas in which they live. Various IDP organisations have been threatened, burglarised, and made targets of arsenal attacks throughout Colombia. Women who are active as leaders most often convene in several organisations, working groups, or committees. National level organisations generally offer greater visibility and therefore more risk for IDP women leaders. Yet national organisations also have protected women leaders by, for example, facilitating their refuge in another city to escape persecution, which some national organisations are better equipped to handle than the vast majority of small, local IDP organisations. The urban environment can also be a double-edged sword. For some, it means a greater concentration of urban armed actors and exposure from frequent walking, given that leadership requires considerable mobility, and women leaders can rarely afford transportation from shantytowns in urban peripheries where they live. For other women, cities represent desirable 'anonymity', access to services, and possibilities of networks not available in rural areas. These networks with other IDPs, NGOs and government professionals may offer some degree of protection, recognition, and access to opportunities for themselves, their families, and other IDPs.

In addition to socio-political violence and the targeting of IDP women leaders, it is important to pay attention to widespread domestic violence, tensions, and entrenched gender inequalities which deeply shape women's leadership opportunities. Several women interviewed separated from their husbands after suffering domestic abuse, one ceased being a leader altogether, and another was hospitalised because of the high levels of anxiety and stress she suffered. Some women described jealousy and resistance on the part of their spouses and children for being away from home for many hours or days, and exposing themselves and their families to greater insecurity in some instances. The women leaders interviewed were predominately middle-aged and single, divorced, or widowed heads of household with several children. Structural gender inequalities also affected women's access to, representation, and power in diverse IDP organisation and policy settings. For

instance, the extent to which women and men supported or disregarded women as leaders influenced their leadership.

In spite of the risks, IDP women leaders demonstrate that they are willing to work in and around insecurity, and are committed to IDP rights and greater justice. To date, these leaders have contributed to the earliest stages of policy formation, such as with *Writ 092* and others. Policymakers and practitioners, however, must consider the best ways to leverage women leaders' existing efforts, including promoting effective implementation and monitoring of policy. Women should be supported in policy-oriented and systemic work they increasingly take on through negotiation and consensus-building with diverse policy and IDP audiences, and in running organisations. As IDP women engage in more powerful and consequential leadership roles, they require greater protection. Women leaders should be engaged in setting protection strategies to ensure these strategies align with what they find to be realistic and effective. Protection strategies should be consistent with policy, but enforced with a level of commitment beyond what the government has provided to date.

Meaningful policy implementation—including addressing persecution—requires at a minimum regarding the matters at hand as policy-worthy and politically significant. In Colombia, the rights of women, the internally displaced, and civil society leaders share a common attribute of not being taken seriously at the executive level (where 'hard' security is, for instance).⁷ Reversing this trend in part means ensuring policy and legislative developments from the Constitutional Court and national level transfer to local and municipal levels, where the current lack of accountability and rule of law often pose the greatest protection gaps for women and IDPs. Expanding the IDP policy scope beyond short-term aid to encompass development, urban planning, and transitional justice would better respond to the protracted and urban nature of the displacement context in which IDP women leaders operate.

Alice Taylor is a U.S. national who holds a Masters in International Affairs from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University, where she concentrated on human security and gender studies. She conducted research on leadership among urban IDP women in Colombia, and has worked and consulted with several research institutions and NGOs in the areas of forced migration, gender, and education and health policy.

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⁷ Internationally, the extent to which policymakers and practitioners give political weight to forced migrants' voices remains unclear, as Donà (2007) and Cohen (2009) discuss. For instance, Cohen's analysis of refugees found that even if voices are collected through established committees – these voices are often not *listened* to; practitioners rationalise that they must work quickly, 'know better,' or fear being taken advantage of by migrants' demands.

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