

Identity struggles during resettlement: An ethnographic approach of internally displaced adolescent mothers in Bogotá

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Many internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Colombia are teenage mothers, who experience unique gendered identity struggles in the rural areas where they were born and during processes of displacement and resettlement. We chose an ethnographic approach both to collect the life stories of 20 displaced adolescent mothers who had resettled in Bogotá and to conduct eight workshops. The analysis shows that the participants struggled with their identities as ‘women’ in the rural areas in the context of violence and armed conflict when they faced motherhood while still being adolescent and becoming displaced and when they embraced the formal ‘displaced person’ identity while enduring difficulties with the receptor communities during resettlement. The new identity status as ‘displaced’ that they wished for as a basis for benefits does not imply that the identity struggles are over. Our analysis shows that the gendered struggles of adolescent IDP mothers with multiple identities that are not easily aligned are accumulating, resulting in a complex challenge during resettling.

Keywords: Colombia, migration, motherhood, pregnancy, youth

Introduction

Colombia has one of the world's highest rates of internal displacement and migration (Rolon Salazar 2018; IDMC 2019), and it is estimated that 7.7 million Colombians have been permanently displaced within the country since 1985. According to United Nations Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, internally displaced persons (IDPs) are defined as 'Persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized State border'. Displacement in Colombia predominantly involves movement from rural areas to large urban cities (especially to the capital, Bogotá) as a result of the armed conflict that has persisted for more than five decades (Ruiz-rodríguez and Wirtz 2012; Rolon Salazar 2018; IDMC 2019). The primary actors in this conflict are illegal guerrilla forces and paramilitaries, the Colombian government and its army, and civilians and peasants in rural areas (Ruiz-rodríguez and Wirtz 2012). The guerrillas and paramilitaries have committed crimes of extreme violence, including kidnapping, rape, murder, and massacres of entire villages; they have also engaged in drug cultivation and trafficking (Ruiz-rodríguez and Wirtz 2012; Wirtz *et al.* 2014). Despite the 2016 peace agreement, illegal armed groups remain active and continue to cause displacement (IDMC 2019).

IDPs in Colombia encounter specific challenges when they arrive in large cities, including poverty, little access to social and health services, and family breakdowns (Hynes *et al.* 2016; IDMC 2019), and they often have difficulty accessing government aid, such as food, temporary housing, and economic subsidies (Lemaitre and Sandvik 2015). As a result, 92 per cent of Colombia's IDPs live below the poverty line, with 33 per cent in extreme poverty (IDMC 2019). Moreover, due to bureaucratic barriers, an estimated 30 per cent of the IDPs who live in urban slums are unable to access public healthcare (Ruiz-rodríguez and Wirtz 2012). In addition, some IDPs experience discrimination due to their rural origins or their presumed connections with guerrillas, paramilitary groups, and drug trafficking (Lemaitre and Sandvik 2015). Tensions with host communities and local populations have also developed due to competition for public services, jobs, and facilities (Quintero and Culler 2009; Ruiz-rodríguez and Wirtz 2012; Ramos-Vidal 2017). Moreover, IDPs' relationships with their host communities have been found to be very important for their ability to construct a sense of identity and experience a feeling of belonging during their migration processes (Bello 2000; Kiely *et al.* 2005; Vieten 2006; Anthias 2009; Oliver 2011; Lambo 2012; Sibel, 2013 ; Kabir 2014; Vila Freyer 2017).

The national government is responsible for handling displacement issues during armed conflicts, but over the decades of conflict, the Colombian government has arguably failed to protect its citizens' rights (Naranjo Giraldo 2001). The government has sought to rectify this by creating policies and laws to help IDPs; for example, the 2011 Law of Victims (El Congreso de la República 2011) sought to

provide IDPs with early and adequate attention and to bring safety to IDP communities and leaders (Rolon Salazar 2018). However, according to organizations like the International Displacement Monitoring Centre and Amnesty International, Colombia has not yet achieved these goals, and there remains a lack of support for IDPs who are trying to re-establish their lives (Amnesty International 2019; IDMC 2019).

Rural women in particular experience many challenges when they first arrive in the new environment of a big city. Many regions in rural areas in Colombia are characterized by *machista* and a patriarchal structure (Quevedo-gómez *et al.*, 2012). The men are the heads of the houses, and women are in charge of children and food. Nevertheless, this pattern changed for women when they became displaced, and took the role of heads of the house (Cubillos, 2018). However, the women lack the tools to deal with the challenges in the cities. For example, being practically skilled in rural areas, their education level is presented as lower than the cities' average. Not being able to rely on their skills deeply affects their personal and social lives (Galindo-Cubillos and Guavita Moreno 2018). In addition, some authors have pointed out how women experience different kind of violence, including sexual violence in the context of armed conflict and internal displacement. Moreover, many internally displaced women (IDW) first become pregnant during their adolescence, and they often arrive in Bogotá as single young mothers and experience particular difficulties with resettlement.

Theorizing Gender Inequalities and Gender Violence

Violence against women during and after an armed conflict is globally recognized. The United Nations reports explain how armed conflict exacerbates patterns of violence against women in different ways, increasing the incidences of everyday violence, particularly domestic violence, and increasing as communities break down during and after conflicts (Haeri and Puechguirbal 2010). In Colombia, these patterns of violence against women in rural areas have been documented. More recently and with regard to Sentence T-025 of 2004, the Constitutional Court of Colombia has stated that 'the diverse expressions of the violence exercised in the context of the Colombian internal armed conflict distinctly and pointedly affect women' (Osorio Pérez 2008). It has also pointed out that 'women's gender imposes specific features and extraordinary burdens in the context of the armed conflict leading to displacement' (Osorio Pérez 2008).

Violence against displaced women has been documented worldwide as well (El Jack 2003). It has been described how women are particularly affected in the context of migration, of a different kind of violence and in different regions. Alsaba pointed out how even new forms of violence have emerged and existing patterns of violence are often amplified and intensified as sexual violence (Alsaba and Kapilashrami 2016). As victims of violent acts, they are forced to take on familial, economic, and social roles that differ from their usual ones, and this implies material and psychological burdens of an extreme and sudden nature.

Several authors have discussed how gender roles can be modified due to migration. Boehm (Boehm, 2013) explained how women's changing roles during migration push the boundaries of gender ideologies in her work within a transnational Mexican community. She exposes how migration results in a complex interplay between males and females, 'a series of negotiations through which women exercise increased autonomy in some circumstances but also face the reassertion of male dominance in which males reproduce patriarchal power even as they create new ways to express masculinity'. Meertens (1995) studied how women suffer the consequences of political violence as they are in charge of the family as displaced households and all the issues related to the consequences of war in their families.

In the present research, we specifically focused on how young mothers from rural areas struggled with identity formation and feelings of belonging during displacement and resettlement. We studied how IDW struggle with the construction of identities as women, adolescent mothers, and displaced individuals in a context of armed conflict and gendered violence. In the next sections, we introduce theoretical debates about identity and belonging, and gender inequalities and gender violence, drawing from these discussions to make sense of the complexities of displacement and resettlement for IDP adolescent mothers in Bogota. We next explain our methodology and then present our results and conclude with a discussion of our findings.

Background

Theorizing Resettlement, Belonging, and Identity

Forced resettlement, leaving one's roots and adapting to a new region can all affect feelings of identity and belonging (Hiruy 2009). (Galbally, 1978) using a multiculturalism approach, defined resettlement as a complex process of adjusting to a new environment following migration. He underscored that resettlement is a long-term process that affects all migrants but particularly those who come from different cultures than that of their host community. Moreover, resettlement implies both IDPs' acceptance by the host community and IDPs' feeling that they belong to the host community; as such, it requires changes by both the migrants and the host society (Hiruy 2009).

Somewhat similarly, Andersson (2006) defined 'resettlement' as a migrant's process of exploring new ways of 'living placemaking' that is established by comparing their new life to their former life in their place of origin, especially its traditions, customs, and social relations. A number of studies have since used this approach to study resettlement in the UK (Wessendorf 2019), Canada (Kobayashi and Preston 2014), Australia (Kabir 2014), Kenya (Sibel, 2013), and New Zealand (Vodanovich 2009). These studies have found that during resettlement migrants struggle with memories of their home of origin. Gupta and Ferguson, cited by Lambo, consider this act of remembering 'home' among displaced communities as a symbolic anchor. Migrants use these memories to

construct their new world, and the concept of a shared ‘homeland’ remains one of the most powerful unifying symbols for mobile and displaced people (Lambo 2012). However, as noted by Hiruy (2009), if displacement has occurred as a result of war, people may not want to return to a place where they witnessed horrendous acts of violence and may have lost friends or family.

For decades, the relationships among people, place, and identity have been the subject of much debate among social and cultural anthropologists. The debate centres on the notion of the territorialization of identity. While some scholars have argued that people and place have a deep and lasting natural bond (Knez 2005; Hernández *et al.* 2007; Hiruy 2009), others have advocated a deterritorialized notion of identity, which argues that a robust identity can exist without a strong attachment to place (Lambo 2012). While the former considers displacement as a cause of huge distress, as it forces people to be disconnected from their roots, the latter—while acknowledging the pain of forced resettlement—sees opportunities for displaced persons to develop new identities in their new environments (Lambo 2012).

More recently, migration studies have given a lot of attention to the concept of ‘belonging’. Hiruy (2009) defined belonging as the will and determination to integrate into the host community, and Lambo (2012) argued that struggling with feelings of belonging is the main emotion associated with resettlement. However, Hiruy (2009) also noted that the construction of ‘belonging’ is not a unidirectional process; an individual’s willingness to belong must receive a response of acceptance from the host group to enable a feeling of firm belonging. On a similar theme, Ager and Strang (2008) identified a number of key domains related to migrants’ successful integration and belonging to their new communities: access to employment, housing, education, and health; citizenship and rights; and social connection within and between groups within the community, for example, related to language, culture or the local environment (Strang and Ager 2010). Others have pointed out that belonging is not exclusivist; an individual can feel a sense of belonging to multiple groups simultaneously, such as groups based on gender, social class, and religious or political values, as well as ethnicity (Anthias 2009).

Discussions about resettlement and belonging are highly relevant to understanding the identity experiences of IDW. Migration affects identity, and some authors have even gone so far as to call migration an identity crisis, in which migrants are caught between the culture they left and the culture they have found (Anthias 2009). This view holds that identity hinges on the family, culture, and religion that one is born into and that it is integrally shaped by one’s community and life experiences (Anthias 2009). Kiely *et al.* (2001) identified 10 identity markers that people typically use to claim or attribute identity: place of birth, ancestry, place of residence, length of residence, upbringing and education, name, accent, physical appearance, dress, and commitment to place; notably, all of these are directly or indirectly related to one’s place of origin. However, other concepts of identity associate identification processes with others or groups of others, and this is linked to feelings of belonging (Anthias 2009). In this sense, belonging is related to the place at which a migrant arrives.

In addition, identity is defined not only by who we are and with whom and what we identify but also by who we want to be and how we wish to be seen by others (Douglas 2009). How displaced persons are seen by their host community and by the government is therefore highly relevant to the study of belonging and identity among IDPs. Labels like ‘migrant’, ‘refugee’, or ‘displaced person’ may be quite important for an individual’s identity formation. For example, Hiruy (2009) noted that it is only after a displaced person receives a paper with an official ID number that they finally accept their new identity as a refugee. However, other authors have described identity as a more fluid process that is shaped according to circumstances and opportunities (Douglas 2009; Kabir 2014).

Adolescent motherhood represents another unique challenge to the construction of identity. Adolescence is a critical period for self and identity development (Tanti *et al.* 2011; Topolewska-siedzik 2018), and pregnancy during adolescence represents an even a bigger challenge. A teenage mother ‘... has crossed the line between childhood and adult experience, without the usual process of time that gives her the opportunity to pass from one to the other in the adjusting period of adolescence’ (Koffman 2015). Moreover, teenage motherhood is socially constructed as a predominantly negative experience that denies the ways in which motherhood can be a positive and fulfilling experience for many young women (Shea *et al.* 2016). (Oberman and Josselson 1996) proposed a ‘model of mothering’ that comprised a ‘matrix of tensions’, and they argued that mothering involves ‘a maintenance of tensions, a balance of conflicting emotions, attitudes, experiences, or states of mind’ (Ali *et al.* 2013). Displacement and experiences of trauma and violence can complicate feelings of identity among teenage mothers, especially because displacement often leads to shifts in gendered roles and responsibilities that result in women becoming the heads of their households (Amnesty International 2019). This can create new opportunities for women, but it can also further marginalize their place in society (El Jack 2003).

Some authors, such as Siha *et al.* (Sinha *et al.*, 2017), have explained how structural violence influences the construction of identities and becomes an impediment to women’s empowerment. The authors explained how in India women face the challenges of an outdated and repressive governance structure, an inefficient legal justice system, a weak rule of law, and sociopolitical structures that are heavily androcentric.

Structural violence is a term used to explain ways in which structures embedded within a society may limit an individual’s ability to reach their full potential; it has been considered a mechanism for inequalities among populations. Farmer (Farmer 2009) describes how large-scale social structures, such as racism, sexism, political violence, war, and poverty, can constrain agency and determine an individual’s life choices. In doing so, these structures can lead to avoidable suffering and result in individuals not being able to reach their full potential (Farmer 2009). These social structures, rooted in historical events, are often propagated by economic interests and do not usually affect those who perpetuate them. (Galtung 1990) coined the term structural violence to describe such social arrangements. They are structural in the sense that they are a result of the political and social

organization that brings them about, and they are violent since they result in harm to the people negatively affected by them (Farmer 2009). Against the background of these theoretical debates about feelings of identity and belonging during displacement and resettlement, and paying special attention to the gender dimension of violence during the Colombian civil war and displacement, we sought to analyse the life stories of internally displaced adolescent mothers who lived in Bogotá, as told from their perspectives.

Methods

Study Design

This research used a qualitative ethnographic approach to try to understand identity construction and feelings of belonging among displaced adolescent mothers in a context of gender inequalities. We collected their life stories and also conducted fieldwork and participant observation. In addition, we organized workshops with these women that enabled them to share and exchange experiences and reflect on their identities and the process of resettlement.

Study Setting

This research was conducted in Ciudad Bolívar, a neighbourhood in Bogotá, Colombia that contains the majority of Bogotá's IDPs (Secretaría Distrital de Planeación 2017). Moreover, 94 per cent of the people who live in Ciudad Bolívar are of the lowest socioeconomic status, and the area is one of the most violent in Bogotá, with high incidences of murders and other violent acts (Murillo Mojica 2008). Members of illegal armed groups, including guerrilla or paramilitary groups, also operate or reside in this area (Alzate 2008; Meertens 2010; Wirtz *et al.* 2014). The fieldwork for this research was carried out between June 2015 and May 2016, during which the first author, YC, visited Ciudad Bolívar two or three times per week. She also continued to visit twice per month in the following 2 years.

Data Collection and Sampling Methods

The participants consisted of 20 IDW who had become mothers during adolescence and who lived in Ciudad Bolívar at the time of research. Their ages at the time of this study ranged from 18 to 35 years old. Their places of origin were rural areas of different departments of Colombia, where armed conflict is present from different groups. The departments include Guaviare, Vichada, Guainia, Choco, Tolima, Cundinamarca, Valle del Cauca, and Meta. The women's occupations in their places of origin were mostly farmers; some of them worked in the coca crops or as cooks. Their race varied as well, with the majority being mestizo, but we had women from the black and indigenous communities as well. The length of time in Bogotá varied from 20 years to 3 months; all of them were of low socioeconomic status and were unemployed or worked as housecleaners.

The study's inclusion criteria were that the women had been forcefully displaced and had first become mothers during adolescence. We defined adolescence in accordance with the [World Health Organization \(2018\)](#): 'young people between the ages of 10 and 19 years'. Most of the participants had their first child at the age of 14 and had a total of one to six children. The displacement occurred during or after their first pregnancy.

All participants were individually interviewed in Spanish by YC once, twice or three times, and all of the interviews were recorded. All interviews were open, giving participants the freedom to talk about their life stories.

YC has worked in Ciudad Bolívar since 2006 as part of a social extension programme through the Pontificia Universidad Javeriana called the *Vidas Móviles* project, which seeks to help internally displaced families in a variety of social capacities, such as health, housing, and living conditions. Since she had links to people from the neighbourhood, we were able to choose key informants to recruit participants, via a snowball sampling strategy, until reaching a saturation point ([Tong et al. 2007](#)). The majority of participants were part of the *Vidas Móviles* programme, but this was not an inclusion criterion; notably, the *Vidas Móviles* participants needed to have received official government displacement status, while this was not required for participants of the present research.

During the first year of fieldwork, YC, who was familiar with the research context and had experience in the field, used in-depth interviews to collect the life-story narratives of 20 IDW who had been pregnant during their adolescence and who lived in Ciudad Bolívar. YC also observed the participants during her visits to the neighbourhood and took notes about her informal conversations with people from the community, including visits to some of the participants' homes. Finally, YC also organized eight workshops with the 20 participants that allowed them to elaborate freely on their experiences and the ideas that they had brought up in the interviews. These workshops engaged the women through creative activities, such as painting, writing, writing on the wall, singing, and role-playing. During the last two workshops, participants' feedback was sought about the research results. The first six workshops took place in the *Vidas Móviles* project building, and the last two were held in the houses of two participants. The workshops were not audio recorded. The first author took notes, and those notes along with the resultant materials of the workshop were analysed.

Data Analysis

All of the participants' life stories, interviews, and workshops were first transcribed in Spanish and then translated into English. Their life narratives began during their childhood in the countryside and continued up to their situation at the moment of the interview in Bogotá. The objective of having the participants relate their life stories was to understand all aspects of each participant's life. The telling was incentivized by the presence of a researcher, and the resultant story is thus the outcome of these interactions ([Pujadas 1992](#)). We used [Pujadas's \(1992\)](#) definition of life story:

It is a story about the self-life, which is obtained by the researcher through different interviews. The objective is to show the subjective testimony of a person. It includes the experiences but also the perceptions that that person made of his/her own existence.

Life stories, or biographies, seek to cover all times and places from childhood up until the moment the life story is told and to include different aspects of self (Chárriez 2012). They therefore vitally allow for the identification of ambiguities, changes, and critical moments in the establishment of an individual's self, and they permit the identification of the subjective perspective of the individual as well as the individual's interpretation of their own acts. Crucially, they allow an understanding of social phenomena that can only be grasped through the concrete personal experiences of individuals (Chárriez 2012).

In the present research, each participant's life story was subjected to comprehensive analysis that took into account the participant's life cycle and experience and the interview itself (Pretto 2011). We started by familiarizing ourselves with each participant's narrative. Subsequently, we analysed the narratives for themes of identity and belonging related to the processes of displacement, resettlement, and motherhood during adolescence. In order to reduce bias, all data and interpretations were regularly discussed with the other members of the research team, most of whom were not part of the *Vidas Móviles* project. The analyses were also discussed with the participants themselves in the final two workshops in order to confirm their accuracy.

Limitations

The majority of participants were recruited from the programme *Vidas Móviles*, although it was not an inclusion criterion; thus, we discuss the differences we found among participants who were part of the programme (with IDP status) and those who were not (without IDP status).

People from the neighbourhood were already familiar with the first author due to her work as a physician and as part of the *Vidas Móviles* project. Participants in the study expressed that this familiarity was an advantage because they already trusted the researcher and felt that they could share their experiences with her, including medical issues.

Ethical Framing

Research and ethics approval were granted by the Ethics Committee of the School of Medicine of the Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, Bogotá (Act 21/2015.FM-CIE-8744-15), and all research protocols and methods were in compliance with Colombian law. Although all participants had given birth to their first baby during adolescence, at the time of the interviews their ages ranged from 18 to 35 years. Participants were fully informed about all aspects of the project and were aware that they could withdraw at any moment, without providing a reason, and that withdrawal would not affect their relationship with *Vidas Móviles* in any way.

Participants were also informed that upon withdrawal all recordings would be destroyed and transcripts would be stored, in accordance with Dutch law, in a secure location at Maastricht University for 10 years. All participants signed a written document of informed consent.

This research followed the ethical recommendations of the American Anthropology Association and continuously reflected on possible ethical concerns beyond informed consent during the study. Participants' names have been changed to protect their identities. We also chose not to identify the violent groups that were mentioned by participants as having caused their displacement. After finishing all of the research interviews, we stayed in contact with the participants by conducting monthly workshops and helping them to navigate various difficulties that they encountered, such as helping them access government aid, finding schools for their children, and attending to health issues.

Results and Analysis

This section shows how the IDW in our study struggled to construct identities and feelings of belonging, and how those are shaped by gender inequalities, beginning in their villages during childhood and continuing during their adolescence, pregnancies, and throughout the processes of displacement and resettlement in Bogotá. Our findings and conclusions are presented in the context of current scholarly debates.

Becoming a Woman and a Mother While Still a Child

All participants described being mistreated during their childhoods, and through hearing their life stories, we identified how these childhood experiences affected their identities and their senses of belonging. Many of them lived with only one parent and/or were mistreated by stepfathers or other family members. They experienced physical and emotional violence; some of them were raped. Their stories also testified to the influence of their childhoods on their identities. They expressed how their experiences of mistreatment manifested in different aspects of their lives, such as low self-esteem. During their childhoods, they struggled with feeling like they belonged in their homes and families, and they wanted to leave.

Participants also perceived that their childhood mistreatment was primarily responsible for their early pregnancies. When asked why they thought they became pregnant at such young ages, all participants listed their childhood experiences as a primary reason: they felt that the solution to their difficult childhood family circumstances was to find a man and start a new family. For example, Alejandra told her story as follows:

Well, I used to live with my uncles, and they mistreated me a lot. I suffered from hunger and a lot of need. My father had passed away, and my mom left me with my uncles. They hit me all the time, I had to do many tasks like ironing or washing the clothes. It happened from 8 to 14 years old . . . When I was 14, I escaped from home

... when I met the father of my first two children. I got pregnant at 15... I fell in love with him, but after my second child, he told me that he liked another woman. He left us. (Alejandra)

This is consistent with several studies that have found links between child abuse, including sexual abuse during childhood and adolescence, and pregnancy during adolescence (Roosa *et al.* 1997; Blinn-Pike *et al.* 2002; Tremblay *et al.* 2004; Pallitto and Murillo 2008; Young *et al.* 2011; Knowles 2013; Tlapek *et al.* 2017).

For almost all of our participants, their pregnancies were unwanted. Most participants first conceived when they were 13 or 14 years old. They described receiving judgement and criticism because of their pregnancies, and expressions such as 'whore' were common in their narratives as they described family members' reactions to their pregnancies. Olga said the following:

My brother began to tell me, 'you are pregnant again!', actually all the people started to talk about me... She is a single mother! And who is the father? No one is going to come for that baby.... (Olga)

Previous authors have described how young mothers experience moral judgements that are related to specific cultural expectations and ideals with respect to motherhood. For instance, Ali *et al.* (2013) studied the romanticized ideals of motherhood and noted that in American society, for example, the typical view of a mother is of a white, middle-class woman who stays at home full-time and is fully engaged with her role; women who do not fit this ideal are often stigmatized. Common subjects of the so-called 'deviancy discourses' are poor mothers, mothers of colour, unwed mothers, teenage mothers, and mothers receiving public assistance (Ali *et al.* 2013). However, while all of our participants can in this sense be categorized as 'deviants', their life stories showed how, despite being stigmatized because of their early pregnancies, they all found happiness and joy in their motherhood.

Another important point from Olga's narrative is the cultural legitimization of female subordination in the home also justified structural violence outside of the home, in the form of profound institutional discrimination against women. This affected the experiences of pregnancy and motherhood as a young displaced woman.

Additionally, as noted before, identity is related to not just who we are but to who we want to be (Kabir 2014). According to self-discrepancy theory, people are motivated to achieve congruity between their self-concept (how they see themselves) and their ideal self (the self they think they should be or desire to be; Ali *et al.* 2013). The presence of a child can produce a discrepancy between these two facets of identity, and the birth of a baby can also change a new parent's conception of their ideal self (Ali *et al.* 2013). In the case of our participants, they expressed that even if their pregnancies had been initially unwanted, they still wanted to have an 'ideal family' composed of a mother, father, and children. This desire was expressed, for instance, by Julia:

I want with all my heart to have a family. A home. I don't think I am a bad woman ... you know? So, I met Dani. He wanted another baby, so I accepted him. I know he is an alcoholic, but I think everybody has something ... problems ... It is hard sometimes, but I still live with him. (Julia)

However, despite their efforts to have 'ideal' families, participants described their relationships with their partners as difficult. Many participants stated that their partners were unfaithful and sometimes violent towards them. Nevertheless, many of them expressed how they engaged in new relationships in order to find stability or to again seek an 'ideal family', leading them to have different children with different partners. For example, Jenny described her case this way:

My first pregnancy was when I was 13. I had sexual relationships with a boy, but I was not a virgin because my uncle raped me ... We were at a party, but he did not take any responsibility, even though he was 20 years old ... so I left my son with my father, and I started to work in cleaning ... then I met another boy, he worked in a coca crop, I was 17 when I got pregnant again. At the time, this boy had another woman, and he said that he was not the father ... I lost the help from my father, so I started to work in the streets as a recycler. One day, someone called me from the Welfare Institute and the Institute got my children. They took my children away from me. (Jenny)

At the time of our interview, Jenny had five children in total, each with a different partner. She conveyed a sense of sadness when she talked about her children. They were in the Welfare Institute (a governmental institution for the care of Colombian children who are in need, vulnerable, or without support) for many years, and two were in jail before the age of 18. Some of our other participants also stated that their children were taken by the Welfare Institute. For several participants, this experience of being separated from their children evoked feelings of sadness and frustration. This resonates with the work by [Grundetjern \(2018\)](#), who found that mothers who were separated from their children and lost custody felt sadness as well as anger with child welfare services, which they believed to have worked against them.

Motherhood, as [Florescu \(2013\)](#) noted, is defined by expectation. Mothers are expected to provide physical care, nurture, love, socialization, and education for their children. 'While maternal expectations vary according to nation and class, mothers are assessed by their society's standards, and their children are the measure of their success or failure' ([Florescu 2013](#)). Our participants' life stories suggest that in Colombia and particularly in rural, conservative communities, motherhood is seen through this lens. However, a mother's ability to meet societal expectations is often contingent upon factors beyond her control, such as physical or mental illness, competing obligations, poverty, death, or her own family history. Nonetheless, mothers remain subject to societal definitions, expectations, and assessments, and mothers who fail to meet societal expectations are seen as 'selfish, wilful, aberrant, abusive, strange, eccentric, or monstrous' ([Florescu 2013](#)).

From their stories, we identify how financial dependency, the age difference between partners, unequal decision-making power, and abuse are all examples of power asymmetry between the male and female in these relationships, representing the subordination of women within their home life. Such cultural practices are rooted in historical processes which facilitated and justified these differences in power and status.

While many studies on pregnancy among adolescents have highlighted feelings of ‘hardship and reward’, others have identified feelings of strength and positive life chances as a result of motherhood, as well as increased social status (Shea *et al.* 2016). Our participants expressed that they experienced both of these feelings. For instance, Ana referred to her children in the following terms:

I will never leave my children, never. I am suffering because I want to give them food, and I don't have it, but I will be there with them, forever. I pray that God helps me, and I can have them always in my heart. I am working hard, and I will put the oldest one in school next year. (Ana)

Ali *et al.* wrote that many women's lives can be characterized by an absence of goals for the future, and mentioned that ‘motherhood is the pitilessness of the present tense’, pointing to the disruptive influence of the tasks of motherhood, not only to career or long-term plans but also to daily life (2013: 601). For our participants, women's options in their home villages were largely focused on motherhood, learning how to cook and being good housewives. Several participants expressed that education was unimportant:

I went to school without food, notebooks . . . But to be honest, I did not like school too much . . . finally, you will be a mother, at the farm, and cooking . . . you know? At that time, I did not think school was useful. (Alejandra)

I helped my mom with the cooking . . . and actually I did not like to go to school . . . I was more of a rebel . . . I did not see things like now. (Maria)

My father did not like that we went to school . . . he said that we could find a *mozo* (boyfriend) there, and then get pregnant. (Oliva)

Notably, the Colombian programmes that aim to prevent teenage pregnancies focus on giving girls education in order to avoid early pregnancies (Quintero Rondón and Rojas Betancur 2015). However, our participants' life stories make clear that this approach is not easily applied to the real situations of girls in rural communities.

A Village Girl Arriving in a Big City

IDPs in Colombia are a very heterogeneous group. They come from different regions, ethnic groups, religions, and political and economic backgrounds, and they have different relationships with various armed groups (Naranjo Giraldo 2001). Categorizing their identity labels is, therefore, a complex task.

All of our participants expressed that their towns were essentially war zones. They explained how different armed groups (guerrillas or paramilitaries) controlled different villages and how they, as residents of the villages, had different relationships with the armed groups—as victims or escapees, as the wife or relative of a member of an armed group or even as an active member themselves of an armed group. Despite these differing relationships, all of the interviewees were forced to leave their towns; in almost all cases, the violence drove them to leave home without packing anything. These complex factors led the women to struggle continuously with the feeling that they belonged.

Despite their differences, however, they shared similar stories about the process of displacement. Jenny's story provides an example:

My husband arrived in a panic. He told me that we had to leave the town immediately. *They* (armed group) would come for us . . . We spent many years helping them, but we could not do it anymore . . . We just couldn't . . . So, they were angry, and they wanted to pick us up to become a part of their group. We did not want that kind of life for our children . . . And if you disagree with them, they kill you. There was no option. So, I packed some clothes for the children, and something for us. I told him why don't we take other things with us? He answered no, because we cannot be here at midnight; if we are here, they said that will be 'very bad'. So I remember that I brought some food from the kitchen, and we took the horse to go down to my parents-in-law's house, we arrived at 3 a.m., my mother-in-law cried, and that day my husband got some money for the bus, and we came here to Bogotá. (Jenny)

All participants also conveyed similar feelings of sadness about being forced to leave their places of origin. For example, Elizabeth described her situation:

My brother was in the *armed group* because he suffered a lot as a child, like me, without food and mistreated by our stepfather. So, the *armed group* was an alternative. And I also joined them . . . But there was an encounter with the army, and there was a helicopter shooting . . . Killing a lot of people . . . My brother told me that I had to escape with my mom . . . without anything. We couldn't. (Elizabeth)

Participants also expressed that they were used to working in the countryside and that they missed that life, and they compared their living conditions in their home villages to the city. Many things were new for them, even simple things such as obtaining food. This is the case of Mariza:

We used to work on the farm. There, the food is different. There are many crops, you do not need to go to the supermarket, and you just go to the field . . . Of course, I would love to come back to the village! This weather here is very cold. (Mariza)

Participants also described missing their relatives who remained in the villages. This is consistent with research that has shown that when migrants leave their entire social network in their home community and begin new lives in a new place, their social networks must be rebuilt (Knap *et al.* 2009). Furthermore, in addition to missing their relatives, our participants also experienced difficulties relating to

the host community. For example, Margaret was living in a rented small room in Bogotá and stated that:

At the village I could see my mother, we had a bed, television, washing machine, a home, a family, we did not pay rent, and here no . . . here we need to pay the rent and pay for the bus to go to the hospital. I usually cry a lot because I miss everything. We also have problems with the people. Here, the woman who I live with, she has a washing machine. I used it for my girls' clothes, and then the clothes disappeared. Once, the man of the house where I live brought things for his child, and my girl wanted those things, so she cried, and I couldn't give her those things . . . here you just get used to this life. It has been hard; you do not know how to take a bus, or things like this . . . I wash the clothes by hand, and we eat food the same day we buy it, because it is spoiled the next day. (Margaret)

Various studies have reported poor living and health conditions for IDPs residing in urban host communities (Ruiz-rodri guez and Wirtz 2012). The host community in Bogot a also lives in poverty, and its inhabitants compete with IDPs for jobs, housing, and other facilities and services. Research has shown that the immediate locality in which migrants live and the nature of their social interactions with other residents can crucially impact their sense of inclusion or exclusion (Wessendorf 2019). IDPs compete for public resources with local populations, and their low economic status makes them vulnerable while also reinforcing their status as unwanted and stigmatized (Ruiz-rodri guez and Wirtz 2012). Our participants' experiences were largely consistent with these findings. However, some participants also expressed that, despite the difficulties they had experienced during the resettlement processes, some people from the host community had also helped them. For example, Maritza described how she was crying on the street, without a place to spend the night with her children, when a local woman found her and offered her a place to stay:

She saw me in the street. I was crying with my children. She invited us to have coffee with milk and bread. We chatted a little bit, and because it was so late at night, she offered for me to stay with her and her sons. So, I helped her with the cleaning, and she let me stay there. She told me: 'the only thing I ask is you, is don't have relationships with my sons'. They were quite old, the youngest was 40. But the only thing she asked me was the first thing I did . . . (smiling). One of them started to talk to me, and give me presents, diapers for my children, milk . . . He said to me, 'let me help you'. I worked very hard, and I made the house very beautiful. I also ironed the clothes, cooked and did everything she asked me. And I started to hang out with her son . . . (Maritza)

This example shows how IDW struggled to belong to the host community and experienced hostility, but also received help from some community members.

Another important aspect of identity and belonging for IDPs relates to their experiences with governmental and non-governmental organizations during resettlement, and our participants' experiences with these factors are examined in the following section.

Resettling and Receiving a Formal Identity While Struggling for Acceptance

The Colombian government formally recognizes the status of displaced persons, but achieving this formal status can be difficult. When IDPs arrive in a big city, they must first declare the reasons for their displacement at an Attention and Orientation Unit office in order to receive government benefits such as food, money, or temporary housing. The validity of their declaration is then investigated; if accepted, the displaced person will receive a letter formally confirming their status as a displaced person.

Although this status is very much needed, as it often is the basis for government help and contributes to the process of resettlement, many participants felt that the process of attaining the status was a negative experience. Remembering their displacement entailed a painful process of revictimization. In addition, some participants struggled with bureaucratic procedures, including corruption, that were necessary to obtain the letter of displacement. Julia described how her testimony at the office was sold to others:

I went to the office and I did my declaration, but they rejected it. I told them everything I went through, about the armed groups and all the things that happened in the village. But there were some people who bought the testimonies. It is convenient to have the letter of displacement, I know. But that was my testimony! Those people bought it for 1 or 2 million pesos. I noticed that because when I went to the office, in the papers there was another signature, not mine! I do not know how to write and read. But I can recognize my signature! I told them, but they ignored me. They stole from me. That is not fair at all. You cannot trust anyone. (Julia)

Other interviewees also described misunderstandings at the office that prevented them from receiving the letter. This is the case of Alicia, as told by Mildred:

She didn't receive the letter . . . She was born in a very small village, so in order to get the ID she had to go to the office that is located in the big city, the capital of the region. When she declared the story of displacement to the government officers, they denied the letter because of what she said happened in the village . . . where she lived. The officer said nothing matched up because her ID said that she was from the city . . . not from the village . . . This is unfair! That is ridiculous! (Mildred)

Some participants also noted that, even with the letter, it was difficult to get the help provided by the government. Monica explained that she received her letter quickly because she knew the mayor of her town. Nevertheless, they received only temporary help:

When we arrived was easier because the mayor of our town told us that we would receive help. We had to go to the Unit of Attention, and we told the story . . . so they had to check, and then we received a letter of displacement and economic assistance so we could buy some dishes and blankets, and they gave us food . . . but we have not received anything else since that time. My husband works so he cannot go there to ask, and I do not have my ID so I cannot go. Nothing else . . . (Monica)

In addition to these types of bureaucratic challenges, the process of gaining formal status as an IDP entails adopting a new identity. 'They give you a paper that says so . . . and finally you succumb to the new identity' (Hiruy 2009). Our participants expressed that they felt stigmatized if they identified themselves as an IDP and that it was a barrier to employment and housing. Moreover, discarding their old identity and replacing it with a new IDP identity moved them from victims to actors; they become stigmatized and 'responsible' for their own situation (Naranjo Giraldo 2001). Monica and Sandy provided two examples of this:

The owner of the house where we are living now said that she doesn't want any displaced people . . . so we need to find a new place this week. (Monica)

I understand other displaced mothers who arrive because if people know that you are displaced, they will think . . . why? Maybe you are a bad person. (Sandy)

From these narratives, we can see how they struggled with accepting their new identity as IDPs; on the one hand, it was necessary to obtain government benefits, but on the other hand, it brought stigmatization and reduced their acceptance by the host community.

Belonging is about emotional attachment, feeling 'at home' and feeling safe; yet, for many people in many places, feeling 'at home' does not generate only warm and positive feelings (Sibel, 2013). Displacement and resettlement can trigger radical transformations due to their abrupt contextual changes that put individuals in positions that may be unsafe, uncertain, and confusing, to the detriment of their identities (Bello 2000). Research has also shown that there are important mental health concerns among populations who have been displaced by conflict (Siriwardhana and Wickramage 2014). Our participants expressed how hard it was to leave their memories of war in their villages and how the displacement itself was also traumatizing. The government provides IDPs with two appointments with a psychologist, but Sandy argued that these were not enough to deal with all of the trauma she had experienced:

I still have nightmares . . . I went through many things, and I have seen many things . . . I was in the massacres; they (armed group) killed my family in front of me . . . I am like a clown, sometimes I smile, but I suffer a lot inside . . . (Sandy)

In addition to mental healthcare, the provision of optimal reproductive and maternal healthcare is critical for ensuring both the immediate and long-term health and well-being of refugee women and their families. Moreover, access to maternity care also affects refugees' integration, attitudes towards health and health-seeking behaviours, and it has ramifications for intergenerational health (Pangas *et al.* 2019). However, our participants described their experiences with healthcare services as being very chaotic. Many shared that they could not receive medical attention even when they had serious medical conditions:

I went to the health services and I couldn't receive anything because they asked me for the papers, which I don't have. My health ID is from the village, but they do not

allow this . . . So, what can I do? I spent time, effort and money . . . but they did not take me. They said that I needed to go here and there . . . (Monica)

Others received care but were mistreated by medical professionals. Research has found that adolescent mothers may experience ‘obstetric violence’ at the hands of medical professionals due to stigmatization and the moral positions taken by the professionals (Pacheco-Sánchez 2016). Some of our participants’ experiences were consistent with this, such as in this story told by Lucia:

I had preeclampsia, I almost died . . . Well you know, they think that you should not be pregnant so early . . . So I felt that I was sick because it was my fault . . . Some doctors are grumpy . . . and some nurses quarrel too . . . (Lucia)

Our participants also experienced difficulties finding employment, which was especially vital since the majority of our participants were single mothers and the sole provider for their children. For example, Margaret was still looking for employment at the time of our interview:

It is very difficult for me. I want to work, but no one wants to hire me because I did not finish my school, and I don’t have any experience . . . (Margaret)

Likewise, Julia expressed that the only option she had was prostitution:

I am ashamed to say this . . . I had to work as a ‘happy life girl’ (prostitution) because I had to pay the rent, to feed my children . . . Because I was younger than 18, I could not find any job and also because I am black. You can feel a little of racism . . . nowadays it’s getting better, but some time ago, it was even worse. (Julia)

Although our participants experienced many challenges interacting with the government and integrating with their host communities, many were able to receive aid from various non-governmental organizations and churches, whose volunteers listened to them and provided extremely valuable help with their resettlement processes. For example, Sandy expressed gratitude for the workshops developed during this research:

I always will be grateful to you because you listened to us, and helped us deal with all our fears, memories and bad experiences . . . (Sandy)

As we see, all participants had problems in order to receive aid from the government. Nevertheless, we can see that the situation was getting better for those who had status as IDPs, with the letter provided by the government. For those participants who still do not have the IDP status, the situation is more complex, taking into account that some of them will not receive the IDP status due to different reasons, including bureaucratic ones.

Other participants shared that the workshops encouraged them to overcome difficulties and that it was helpful to hear testimonies from other IDW who went through similar situations of displacement and teenage pregnancy. They felt that

the workshops provided opportunities to overcome their hatred of their situations and their experiences with armed groups in their home villages.

Discussion

It is clear from the analysis of the life stories that the lives of the participants were disrupted in several different ways and that these disruptions caused continuous struggles with identity and belonging. As adolescents, they had to deal with complicated experiences of armed conflict and displacement; our participants were exposed to trauma, persecution, fear, and loss due to armed conflict. This is consistent with previous research which has described how during forced migration women often experience violence, separation from loved ones, displacement, poverty, and human rights violations (Pangas *et al.* 2019). Displacement itself also brings radical changes in the context of relationships with others, and displaced persons may experience first violence and then stigmatization (Meertens 2002).

In particular, our participants' experiences as young displaced mothers entailed three specific identity tensions. First, they experienced being a 'woman' in a context of armed conflict in rural areas and during displacement, they were rather vulnerable and often were the main victims. Second, they faced the tensions of being an 'adolescent mother', a complex identity between childhood and motherhood. Their desires for a safe and caring family for their children were stimulated by their need to escape from violent homes and led them to engage in relationships that further led to unexpected pregnancies. While the ideal self for village girls was a life of motherhood and housewifery, our participants were forced to undertake initiatives that did not fit that ideal: motherhood arrived unexpectedly, and, although they were largely happy with their pregnancies, they experienced negative judgements and stigmatization from others. The challenges of motherhood and the expectations of others, as well as their own expectations, also were an important ingredient of identity struggles. Moreover, instead of being an 'ideal' housewife, they were young mothers on the run. As Ali *et al.* (2013) noted, it is necessary to identify the gap between dominant 'ideal' motherhood discourses and the lived experiences of real mothers and to explore how marginalized women negotiate and construct their own identities as mothers.

Third, our participants experienced the tensions of being formally 'displaced' and the complicated ambivalent feelings about their home villages, bringing back good and bad memories. Despite their violent home situations, they appreciated the places where they were born and remembered good things. Forced displacement and leaving their towns, family members, and belongings led to feelings of grief and sorrow. When comparing their home villages to their place of resettlement, they saw advantages and disadvantages to both places. Moreover, research has shown that the impacts of displacement are diverse and depend on the specific characteristics of the violence that caused the displacement and the context of the displaced persons' resettlement (Bello 2000). Our participants' relationships with their host community were largely difficult, and this hampered new feelings of 'belonging'. Nonetheless, despite the considerable difficulties of resettlement and

host community acceptance encountered by our participants, many had also had some positive experiences with some individuals from the host community who had helped them in the process of resettlement.

Resettlement forced our participants to adopt the formal identity of a ‘displaced person’ in order to obtain government recognition and aid. This formal identity gave them new opportunities and led to hostility from their host community due to the competition for scarce resources. The struggle to belong was also intensified by fears of armed group cells that were active in the host community. The gendered struggle with the multiple identities did not develop in closure during resettlement. Neither displacement nor resettlement caused the participants to discard their previous identities, memories, and experiences from their original homes. The analysis underlines the idea that identity creation is not a static process (Vila Freyer 2017); it is composed of multiple, often ambiguous facets and includes a struggle between multiple identities that may not align very well. Identity struggles do not develop into one harmonious closure but articulate an internal accumulation of experiences and belongings that are developed through social interactions in different communities and contexts. Gendered violent contexts affect this development in a very specific way.

Becoming pregnant at this age according to these women’s experiences gave examples of structural violence in the form of an uneven distribution of resources and power and their legitimization according to cultural values and practices. The unequal opportunities brought about by mass institutional and interpersonal discrimination as well as the culturally perpetuated prejudices towards young mothers contributed to the difficulties of motherhood they experienced as IDW.

Conclusion

This study focuses on the life stories of individual IDW to highlight the complexities of their struggles with identities during displacement and resettlement, especially in a Colombian context that in some regions still is considered as a *machista* and patriarchal one (Quevedo-Gómez *et al.* 2012). It is important to understand that IDW are dealing with an accumulation of unresolved struggles and that resettlement does not simply entail closure and harmony. Professionals and policymakers need to be aware of the complex realities of IDW’s experiences in order to fully engage with this population. The present analysis of IDW’s life stories has shown that the process of resettlement is even more challenging if forced displacement due to armed conflict is further complicated by difficult childhoods and teenage motherhood. IDW’s struggles with identities during the process of resettlement are linked not only to the dynamics of violent displacement but also to experiences during childhood, adolescence, and motherhood. More attention should be given to the systematic disadvantages and inequalities that have resulted in adolescent pregnancy in the situation of displacement and resettlement.

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