



# GENDERED VISIONS OF INJUSTICE AMONGST DISPLACED WOMEN'S ORGANIZATIONS IN COLOMBIA

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## Abstract

*The search for justice is at the core of the process through which victims of armed conflict try to overcome its devastating effects. However, "justice" -usually put in singular as one unique concept- may be understood in a number of ways, according to different definitions of "injustice" suffered by the victims. In consequence, the search for justice may embody a variety of actions and expectations regarding the State response. Gender may be one of the differentiating factors, as the Colombian case shows. There, forced displacement has affected women in a disproportionate way, but at the same time the displaced women have taken active part in organization building and collective struggles for justice. The kind of injustice they demand to be redressed depends on the definition of collective identity that guides their situational analysis and political agendas. This article is part of a comparative study of three displaced people organizations, all lead by women, but differentiated in the way they define the place of gender and women's rights in their organizations: Just as a secondary element or as a main focus that helps to reveal the impact of displacement and war on women's lives. This investigation is a combination of techniques is both qualitatively and quantitatively complementing itself. A study that analyses multiple scenarios which are real and allows the comparison between the three different organizations mentioned previously. The sources from which the information is acquired are two: the women, and documents, both written and digital from the webpages of said organizations. Given that most of the women in the investigation have security problems, the names and places of the interviews have been changed.*

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**Keywords:** Gender, Displaced women, gender justice, women empowerment, women organizations

The Journal of Internal Displacement (JID), established July 2009, is the only scholarly journal committed to all displacement concerns worldwide. Thanks to the generous voluntary contribution from the advisory board and editorial team - manuscript submission, peer-review and publication of the JID is **FREE OF CHARGE**. The JID does not charge authors to submit articles.

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**Archives:** <http://journalinternaldisplacement.webs.com/archives.htm>

**Submission (January 2014 Edition):** <http://journalinternaldisplacement.webs.com/submission.htm>

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**DISCLOSURE:** Opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and not necessarily those of the Journal of Internal Displacement and its editorial team.

**DATE of ACCEPTANCE:** This manuscript was submitted on 06 October 2013 and accepted for publication on 30 November 2013.

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**CONFLICT OF INTEREST:** The author has indicated that she has no conflict of interest and/or financial relationship related to this article to disclose.

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Diana Britto Ruiz, PhD

## Introduction

Injustice tends to be conceived as a matter of the transgression of laws, as a violation of rights that is also clearly defined in the codes. However, injustice, as the present study demonstrates, can be read in different ways depending on the lens through which it is seen. One could simply believe that a violation like forced displacement in the framework of the armed conflict is itself the injustice, but things might not be that simple if the exercise of thinking about it includes the gender angle.

From the theory of social movements there are three frameworks that provide meaning for its actions: injustice, identity and action; and using these, I inquired about injustice in three organizations of women in situations of forced displacement. To begin, I will briefly describe these organizations: the first is exclusively an organization of women, created over ten years ago and located in Cartagena on Colombia's Caribbean coast but with nationwide influence. The second is a mixed organization led by women, created over ten years ago, located in Bogotá and because of this, also with national influence. The third is the most recent one and is mixed, but arose from the base organization of women, who are the 'receiving' community.

First, I intend to inquire how these women perceive their relationships with the males of the same organizations. Three aspects are noteworthy: first that relations between women and men inside the organizations occur in the context of traditional patriarchal practices, except where there is an effort to include the gender perspective in their thinking and relations.

*... In the committee more of us were women, with only two men ... there were more displaced men, but they did not concern themselves with getting organized. But these two gentlemen were concerned, but took the role of machista men: 'I am a man and you a woman so I will be president and you secretary', and so it was (E. Cartagena 2009).*

Second, women arrived to organizations created by men because the latter considered political work to be a clearly masculine space, good to solve the subsistence of the families in their care. In that sense, their main effort was job training and not training for political action.

*We were all desperate, we had no kind of help ...with José Vega and Ober, we met and created the organizations for the purpose of getting houses, a company, projects, success ... for the benefit of all our families ...and now there are about seven hundred of us, men and women, that are in this organization ... the achievements of these years have been training sessions at SENA (the Government jobs training agency) ...we have friendly relations among ourselves (V. Bogotá 2009).*

Third, when political thinking and training avoids the gender perspective, women are erased even from the discourse, which tends to become 'gender neutral', that is masculine.

*When I arrived (to the organization) people were all mixed, then they began to divide us into colonies... and everybody would introduce himself and say 'I come from Nariño, from Antioquia', and so on. Then, when someone would say 'I come from Nariño' we would say 'Sit here', and we would all sit together. To be with those from your colony is like being less lost... it is like a*

*sisterhood, everybody with the same feeling, which is of displacement, which is very hard* (N. Cali 2009).

These three testimonials make it possible to establish an interesting contrast with what happens with women in organizations of displaced persons, if they are mixed. Despite the fact that displacement strikes both men and women brutally, when organizations are established social and cultural patterns that marginalize are set up, and these subordinate and exclude women because the interpretation of injustice and its causes and the ways of transforming it all erase the issue of women's rights. The demands of justice and reparation are focused on 'recuperating what was lost', that is housing and income and re-establishing some level of everydayness, but there is no consideration of other, gender-based injustices. In mixed organizations there is asymmetry in the power of men and women. Women, when they do not experience a sustained process of awareness-creating education in gender issues, tend to submit in discussions about the goals of organizations and to consider, as indeed men do, that there are 'first-order' issues that do not relate to gender, and that once these claims are achieved there will be time for things considered 'secondary', like those women claim.

Let us now examine what injustice looks like in each of the organizations we are observing. For the League of Displaced Women:

*Our mission is the defense of Fundamental Human Rights, the constitutional, individual and collective rights of displaced and 'receiving' women and of their families, and the implementation of International Humanitarian Law. In this sense, the League's fundamental goal is to fully develop all the projects it undertakes, to achieve dignified levels of historical truth, justice and reparation, in the local and also regional, national and international dimensions.*

From this we can extract that the framework of injustice that the League of Displaced Women refers to the **violation of the human rights of women**, in the framework of the armed conflict and outside of it, because it refers to the two groups that make up the organization, displaced women and 'receiving' women. The State is held responsible for this injustice, as is society in general, including the international community because women are searching to transform injustice by achieving truth justice and reparation, not only in the local and national sphere but also in the international dimension.

For ADESCOP,

*ADESCOP Mission: To obtain emergency assistance and access to complete solutions that are lasting, with truth, justice and reparation, contributing to solve the displacement of associates, all according to rights recognized by national and international laws and in the framework of building a peaceful society with social justice.*

ADESCOP identifies as *forced displacement* as the Framework of Injustice and in this sense the justice they seek is 'to overcome the situation of displacement'. By way of contrast with what the League states, in the ADESCOP mission statement there appears to be a past when they enjoyed rights and stability, that was cancelled by the violence of displacement, and so the rights they invoke for the transformation of injustice refer to this type of violation in particular.

In the case of *Jueves de Paz (Thursdays of Peace)*, their vision of injustice can be seen in the following testimonial:

*...To accompany people in different places of the Colombian Southwest, building new models for a dignified life in the rural area and not crowded into cities. We continue denouncing and*

*pressuring the government so there should be a true policy for reparation for the displaced population, because it is no use to simply continue to give handouts. We must continue to empower people so they can lay claim to their rights with dignity, and build a different country (AS, Cali 2009).*

The Framework of Injustice identified by *Jueves de Paz* is, like in the case of ADESCOP, *forced displacement* and they focus their work on two strategies: to offer humanitarian aid (the program offers from shelters to psychological and social counseling); and to provide legal aid for claiming their rights as displaced persons. The goal is to re-locate people in rural areas under a model called *eco-aldeas* (eco-villages). Despite the fact that all these organizations concentrate their work on forced displacement, it is quite interesting that there are variations in how they define the Framework of Injustice, depending on whether the lens of gender is used or not. When the political ideas are created from the gender perspective, the frameworks become more ambitious and question society at its base.

Let us now examine the Agency Framework. The Agency Capacity of an organization can be understood as the development of a strategy, tactics and goals focused on changing the conditions of injustice. This framework must contain a proposed solution to the problem and an action plan for resolving it. First the League:

*...maximum in five years: relocation in houses for 300 women in Turbaco ...in the framework of comprehensive development and the restitution of fundamental and constitutional rights, ...food security ... access to sufficient goods and services for sustaining a dignified life ...and in ten years ...present to the courts ...cases based on these crimes committed during forced displacements against the members of the organization ...to find truth, justice and comprehensive reparation.*

The work of the League in favor of the rights of women looks to the post-conflict, with living standards with no violence against women, through two strategies: first, through designing and executing political, economic, social and cultural projects. Second, through litigation in national and international courts to show that displacement is only one of the forms of violence, and is often a result or a channel when women are forced to cope with other forms of violence in areas in conflict. With this definition of the Framework for Injustice, it is easy to understand that the League as an organization should focus on working with the feminist movement in Colombia and internationally.

Let us now see how ADESCOP sees the Agency Framework:

*Vision: The families associated with ADESCOP are comprehensively re-established and share a Colombia in peace, with social justice, where the Human Rights of men and women are respected and there is free and peaceful coexistence.*

The focus of all their efforts lies in overcoming displacement and they define themselves collectively as ‘associated families’. They also mention human rights ‘for men and women’ in the search for peaceful coexistence, in accordance with their objectives, that is, to include displacement in negotiations on the conflict, lead society to awareness of the problem of displacement, and promote access for ADESCOP families to housing programs, urban re-integration and rural programs, among others. In their thinking, all the persons who belong to the organization have had similar experiences in regard to forced displacement, and thus the solutions fall under a single idea. There is no thinking about the phenomenon in the context of Colombian society, thus their goals are focused directly on overcoming this particular form of

violence. Their strategies, even though this cannot be inferred from this declaration, were revealed in interviews and through observation. Basically they cover two points: the strongest is legal, expressed through actions of *Tutela*, a provision of the 1991 Constitution under which citizens can claim that their rights are not being protected and thus demand emergency aid and also the guarantee of reparations. The second is political mobilization to pressure the government and make public opinion aware of the need to overcome forced displacement.

#### Agency for *Jueves de Paz*

*With the problem of forced displacement we have to assist ...77% of women and 30% of older adults who are not suitable for recruitment who lost the property they had through their lives. We work from the gender perspective ...in the sense that we have made visible violence against women and the alienation of women and we make it evident. Many of these displaced women, who arrive here with their partners in conditions of submission and marginality, discover little by little that someone can hear them out and talk with them about what they have lived through. In the rural area they do not have these spaces (AS, Cali).*

It is interesting that for *Jueves de Paz* the gender perspective is part of the assistance plan: to make women aware of gender injustices. But this is not, as is the case with the League, the lens through which they see the violence they have suffered. One of the principal characteristics of *Jueves de Paz* is psychological and social assistance, and in this sense they work for awareness regarding the gender issue, as the way of offering a more dignified life to women; but it is not a goal in the political struggle.

#### **Identities in Tension: Women/Displaced**

As was made explicit in the preceding point, the definition of the framework of injustice in the organizations we are studying varies, according to whether it was formulated in a mixed context or in one that includes women exclusively. We could say that feminine silence continues because symbolically the world continues to be masculine, and perhaps that is what occurred in the women's organizations of this study. Let us see how the League of Displaced Women defines its identity:

*...the League of Displaced Women is a base organization made up of women, many of them young, widowed and/or single mothers, of different races and cultures, who in the framework of the Colombian armed conflict, have been the victims of the crime of forced displacement and its connected crimes, or that belong to 'receiving' communities ...They fight for the restitution of their fundamental and constitutional rights, which have been violated, and whose guarantee is no longer assumed by the Colombian State, despite their being its responsibility ...This organization, apolitical, independent ...supports sustainable social development and the task of organizing, as a basic format for women and their families to gain access to everything to which they, as women citizens and in this case displaced persons, have a right.*

For the League, it is fundamental to be women and though they recognize diversity, their identity as women always clothes them. It is interesting that they should self-define as apolitical, even though their work is entirely political. This may answer to the particular interest of distancing the organization from party politics with its vices of corruption and clientele politics. Even so, it is paradoxical that they should insist on being apolitical. There is a characteristic of this organization that for me is fundamental in its political stance: that some of the women who belong to it are displaced persons and the others are 'receiving' persons. Though the initial call was made to displaced women, these, except for the violence they suffered in the armed conflict,

in general had the same needs and shared similar life experiences in their families and economic, social and cultural lives as the ‘receiving’ women. In this way, the political idea is constructed based on a central reflection on gender-based violence. Their feminine identity prevails over their ‘displaced person’ identity, and for ADESCOP:

*It is a social organization of Colombian men and women, victims of forced displaced. It was constituted ...to represent the interests and needs of this population, to agree political, legal, social and civil actions making it possible to respond comprehensively to the problems that people face every day, and pursue vindication for the rights that were violated.*

The predominant identity in ADESCOP is of displaced persons, and in that sense everything turns on demanding protection for their rights as displaced persons. However, they have an interesting experience, as this testimonial shows:

*With the Corporación Casa de la Mujer (House of Women) we began a process of learning to which several ADESCOP women have adhered, and we have made alliances with other organizations, especially women’s organizations, because I believe that it is women who are the least protected by the government and society, because we have less opportunities, have the least education – because that does not mean that we are good for nothing, it’s not that, but that society and the government see us that way... (C. Bogotá, 2009).*

The women of ADESCOP, though they have received training in the gender issue, merge this into the organization and so their identity as ‘displaced women’ is concealed by their identity as a ‘displaced population’. Despite the fact that the present Board is made up of women exclusively, the issue of gender is secondary and pertains exclusively to women in other spaces, in feminist organizations. The organization’s agenda does not include gender because the males do not accept it, and this could divide the organization. Some women even said that the males get upset and tell them, “Go somewhere else with your chatter about gender,” and they forbid their daughters and partners to attend talks or activities related to the topic. Thus the gender issue is not just secondary but rejected in the organization.

Also, for *Jueves de Paz* there is no reflection or discourse on identity:

*It is a meeting of different aspects of knowledge ...we seek to build social networks so that displaced persons should have somebody they can count on ...we offer advice and training in rights and the law, to motivate them to look at a different life, not remain in their grief but believe that it is still possible to see a light on their path.*

It could be said that there is no collective identity but only a space where they gather. And this makes sense because *Jueves de Paz* is not an organization created by displaced persons, it is a program that arose in a base-level women’s organization offering a welcome, support, advice and training for persons that were forcibly displaced. And this deeply marks the relations of displaced women with the organization, because they do not control it but remain as ‘beneficiaries’. Even so, the displaced women support the political actions of the women in the base-level organization. They are convened and participate in mobilizations of feminist groups, union groups, etc. The question is: do they join the action as part of their own struggle or is it just a commitment to the women from whom they receive help?

### **The Framework of Collective Action from a Gender Perspective**

The analysis of the Collective Identity Framework of the three organizations makes it possible to see the plural character that emerges from them, despite the appearance that they are all engaged in a common struggle. It is also evident that the frameworks of justice, agency and identity are coordinated and provide meaning to the work of the organizations and the actions they undertake, without there necessarily being awareness of these aspects.

It is interesting to note that the influence of the leaders of the organizations is decisive in the definition of the frameworks: in the League the struggle of women has been at the forefront because the promoters of the organization are women with a clear feminist militancy and this has provided a lens for analyzing, understanding and proposing treatments for the complex problems they deal with. In the case of ADESCOP, despite that fact that some of the women that direct the organization have had awareness training on the gender issue, they have not managed to coordinate this with the organizations' political ideas. The organization was created by males and this established a masculine style of leadership that women have been unable to transform, even now when they have become the leaders themselves. It is striking that gender remains a separate project: they do not see it as an injustice tied to displacement. Even though economic difficulties are an obstacle for the organization's work, there still is progress. However, in the gender topic, economic difficulties become an obstacle that cannot be overcome, because based on their experience, gender equals training and for *Jueves de Paz*, gender is a topic for training but not an engine for collective action or a lens through which injustice can be seen. It is important to note that of the three organizations, the last to engage with forced displacement was *Jueves de Paz* and this helps considerably to explain where its work lies. Women from the base that accompany displaced women have given them the role of 'receivers of assistance' and not managers or leaders of *Jueves de Paz*.

The definitions of the Frameworks for collective identity, agency and injustice, decisively mark the goals of a social organization. These can be pointed and concrete, such as 'overcome forced displacement' or they can be broad and ambitious, such as 'defend the rights of women'. The results indicate that for women it is much easier to deal with gender-based injustice in a space where they can debate and construct and that is exclusively theirs. The patriarchy imposes its weight and logic in any mixed space.

In the cases we have explored we can affirm that the framework of identity is basic for the definition of the framework of injustice. As we have seen, when collective identity is based on gender, the way injustice is read has particular connotations, and specific strategies that define a path for the organization stem from there, whereas if collective identity is defined based on displacement, the organization's proposals and actions change and have different goals and a different scope. When a mixed organization proposes a reading of injustice from the perspective of gender, constructs a panorama of different interpretation - and possibly subordinate - between men and women.

What could be seen from the analysis is that when the main focus of political incidence of an organization is to overcome the violence related with forced displacement, it would result in a "neutral" agenda in relation to gender. In this order of ideas, the demands will be formulated in such way that it supposes answers from the State and the society will have the same conditions for everyone. As expressed by Felisa (Bogotá, December 2009) in the opening testimony of the chapter there are obstacles for the real inclusion of women in the work of the organization, and thus it is not identified.

Given that the interpretation of the phenomenon of violence in forced displacement is done under the perspective of gender, the demands are different and challenges society in their most profound basis. As it has been evidenced when gender is the mainframe of the analysis, the lecture made on the injustice has its particular connotations; from then on there are derived specific strategies that will establish a path to the organization with the purpose of transforming structural and cultural elements (that is a vision of justice as “nyaya” (Sen, 2010) in the sense of criticizing society itself) that can limit a major development in the capacities and construction of the real citizenship of women. Given so, if the collective identity is defined in reason of displacement, the actions and proposals of the organizations will be different and simultaneously they are aimed at different proposals and outcomes that in reality, permit the inequity of gender existences with no modification whatsoever.

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### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

I would like to thank Professors Dr. J.M. Baud, and Dr. D.J. Meertens; also want to thank all the women who participated in the study.