

Integrating Afro-descendant and indigenous internally displaced women in Colombia through their own cultural practices

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Supporting Afro-descendant and indigenous internally displaced women to develop initiatives based on their particular culture could contribute to their integration and to host communities.

Colombia has one of the largest populations of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the world, with approximately nine million people displaced by decades of internal armed conflict, of which four million are estimated by the government to be women. Contrary to other countries, Colombia's IDP population has largely settled in urban areas rather than camps and depends almost exclusively on governmental assistance. Although the country has a solid legal framework for the provision of assistance and is well-regarded in comparison with other nations suffering from internal displacement, the assistance provided to internally displaced women is often inaccessible, insufficient or unsuited to their needs.

This article discusses some of the findings of research conducted in the cities of Cartagena and Villavicencio between 2014 and 2019. It highlights the importance of considering the particular needs of Afro-descendant and indigenous women, as well as their process of resilience in attaining better integration outcomes. The research revealed that a) governmental assistance is not achieving its intended aims and b) focusing on these women's process of resilience when distributing assistance may be a way to foster socio-economic integration. Resilience refers to a process resulting from an interaction between the characteristics of an individual and their social ecology (environment), and resources which are supplied in a culturally meaningful way.¹ This process helps women to give a new meaning to their experience of displacement, and to move from victimisation to active agency in the reconstruction of their life.

In Colombia, internally displaced women very often assume the role of household

providers and face various risks, as well as discrimination based on their gender, ethnicity and displaced status. Consequently, efforts to improve socio-economic integration should take into account the particular culture of Afro-descendant and indigenous women and their unmet needs. Initiatives based on their areas of expertise (such as handicrafts, alternative medicine and knowledge of agriculture) may be more sustainable than training them to undertake unfamiliar tasks which require skills and abilities that they do not necessarily possess (such as professional or specific language skills). By building initiatives based on their culture and know-how, policymakers can help foster a culture of entrepreneurship rather than one which encourages internally displaced women to take jobs which are either foreign to their culture (such as cleaning houses or washing clothes), or which are unstable and short-term, or badly remunerated and exploitative.

It is essential to acknowledge the specific needs of Afro-descendant and indigenous women to understand ways in which they could better integrate. As part of the research, it was possible to notice that many of these women lack housing, a 'Territory' (a piece of land where minority groups coexist in accordance with their particular socio-economic structure), and opportunities to generate an income. These unsatisfied needs compromise women's resources and expose them to other risks such as malnourishment, violence and enduring hardships due to their displacement. In this sense, it is important to provide women with sustainable income-generating opportunities and to support their involvement in associations or organisations where they can

build a support network in order to improve their socio-economic situation.

The role of urban agriculture and greening initiatives

Considering that Afro-descendant and indigenous women have a special relationship with nature, initiatives based on urban agriculture or greening initiatives can cover those needs for food security, traditional medicine, and opportunities for income generation. In one community of returnees called *El Salado*, women demonstrated being able to contribute to the economy of their village by focusing on collective work and developing economic initiatives of their own. The women's first productive project was a communal garden in which they cultivated corn and sesame seeds. They then accessed more land and continued working with crops. Through this project, they were able to better integrate by actively engaging in a sector that had traditionally been only for men, as well as providing their community with an alternative means of income.²

Greening initiatives contribute to empowering not only women but the whole community. Urban agriculture constitutes a form of community entrepreneurship for social development generated through the work of community initiatives, together with institutional support.³

The Afro-descendant and indigenous women interviewed for this research expressed wanting to work with the land in order to produce their own food and so be able to feed their children. They were aware that by having a space to cultivate food, they could even collect some of the products and sell them to the host community. Some were already trying to survive by offering traditional medicine services and making traditional food, but they all lacked external support to enable these activities to improve their socio-economic stability. For instance, one non-profit organisation that supports displaced indigenous women in Villavicencio – the Corporación Indígena Indígena desplazados de la Orinoquía Amazonía Colombiana – has ten indigenous food production centres to commercialise, but the organisation has not found the resources to create a micro enterprise and thus expand its activities.

Supporting integration using cultural insights

The ability of Afro-descendant and indigenous groups to develop initiatives themselves based on their cultural knowledge, in agriculture or other areas, can also support their integration and bring value to host communities. As stated by an indigenous leader interviewed during this research: by "...having a territory, we could harvest and sell to Cartagena. We could grow *cañaflecha* [a plant] and make handicrafts and sell them here". The relationship of indigenous and Afro-descendant groups with nature and their work with plant seeds can also have a positive impact on the local environment, given that women in both groups take on the role of creating and tending to gardens that are used to cultivate a wide variety of vegetables, fruits and medicinal plants for household consumption.⁴

Promoting the socio-economic integration of Afro-descendant and indigenous internally displaced women requires policymakers to have a greater understanding of their context and culture, their unsatisfied needs, and their community-led initiatives, in order to provide relevant assistance and resources that lead to sustainable solutions. Only with this approach will it be possible for women in these groups to promote their role as active agents, increase their resources and by doing so, take steps to enhance their resilience. Furthermore, ideas for income generation involving green initiatives, because of the relationship of Afro-descendant and indigenous women with nature, certainly constitute a viable option for their socio-economic integration in Colombia.

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