Colombia’s displaced indigenous women
Gina Escobar Cuero

Indigenous peoples are one of the most vulnerable groups within Colombia’s internally displaced population, and a lack of understanding of their culture and needs constitutes a major challenge to their protection and assistance.

Of Colombia’s estimated population of more than 49 million, 1.5% are indigenous peoples. Under the Constitution of 1991, indigenous peoples are entitled to own the lands where they practise their culture. These indigenous territories, which are usually located in isolated parts of the country, tend to be rich in natural resources – and therefore attractive to different actors involved in Colombia’s armed conflict. Over the years, increasing numbers of indigenous peoples have been displaced by violence or threat of violence.

Losing their territory is a major problem for indigenous peoples. Communities are divided and families separated. In many cases, indigenous women end up alone and/or as heads of household after their partners are killed. Afraid of being found by the perpetrators, many flee towards the cities where they are forced to settle in slum conditions. All of these reasons contribute to the “...de-structuralization of entire communities and the risk of disappearing as distinct and different peoples.”

The case of Zenu women
Zenu indigenous people are mainly located in the north of Colombia. Their principal economic activities are the production of handicrafts and the exchange of agricultural products with other indigenous groups. Within the family, women are responsible for the creation of a garden known as el patio where vegetables, fruits, medicinal plants and domestic animals are kept for the use of the family. From a community’s perspective, women help create a ‘reservoir of biodiversity’, with some patios reported to include as many as “…28 species of vegetables, 30 species of fruits and more than 70 species of medicinal plants”.

Women are also responsible for traditional medicine and knitting. In these ways, Zenu women have a great impact on the survival of their communities – and land is crucial to their role.

In displacement, the role of Zenu women changes abruptly. In many cases they face challenges such as lack of housing, food security, education and employment. Since many Zenu women have little more than primary-level education, most employment opportunities for them are lowly paid and temporary, and nearly all displaced women and families are forced to live in rental accommodation. Lack of land to create a patio compromises the family’s food security, and the need for women to work outside the home affects their ability to take care of their children – which leaves the children more at risk of becoming involved in gangs. In this manner, internal displacement drastically changes the role of Zenu women and compromises the survival of the whole community.

Inadequate government response
Colombia’s Law 387 of 1997 was designed to prevent internal displacement and assist those who had been displaced. Each of the country’s 32 departments was expected to decide its annual budget for implementing relevant programmes but the lack of government oversight has led to wide variations in implementation and hence in the assistance provided. In the case of indigenous people, local governments have failed to understand and address their specific needs.

In order to access assistance, Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) need to register with the Colombian Registry of Victims. If successfully registered, IDPs have the right to receive Emergency Humanitarian Aid which aims to cover their immediate basic needs; a second stage concerns economic and social stability for which income generation and housing assistance are available. Findings
from interviews with Zenu women from the Pasacaballos community in the city of Cartagena indicate that the registry system makes it difficult for indigenous women to access aid. These difficulties proceed from circumstances including women having been displaced more than once and no longer being eligible for assistance. For those who have received aid, it has generally been insufficient, of poor quality or delayed. For instance, some women received financial assistance to cover their rental costs two years after requesting help. Another woman was promised financial assistance but received part of the payment in the form of food (of poor quality), four chairs and a set of spoons. Many years later she is still owed 40% of the funds promised. This type of assistance represents a waste of resources for the government considering that it does not provide women with the tools they need. Poor organisation of assistance by the government and a lack of understanding of the real needs of displaced indigenous women are proving damaging both to the short-term survival of internally displaced Zenu women and their families and to the longer-term survival of their community and culture.

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Triggers of internal displacement in Guatemala

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More than 20 years since the end of the civil war, Guatemala is once again experiencing an upsurge in internal displacement. The causes are multiple, and demand attention.

The signing of peace agreements in 1996 ended 36 years of civil war between the Guatemalan government and the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unit. An estimated 200,000 people were killed during the war, while about one million people were internally displaced or fled the country. More than 20 years have passed since the end of the war but today this Central American country is again experiencing high levels of homicide and generalised violence, with significant levels of new displacement.

At the time of negotiating and approving the Peace Accords, including the Agreement for the Resettlement of Uprooted Populations by Armed Conflict, the government introduced economic structural adjustment measures. Although some progress has been made, there has been little impact on economic inequalities. For example, there has been no comprehensive fiscal reform, so the State has few resources to invest in education, health, social protection, housing and job creation. The indigenous population continues to be denied their rights and access to the justice system. And in terms of compensation, lack of state resources means that few families who were victims of war have received comprehensive compensation.

All this, combined with the uneven implementation of the peace agreement’s provisions, has led to a deepening of inequality and poverty in the country and to greater State fragility, providing fertile ground for armed groups, criminal gangs, organised crime and drug trafficking. Guatemala currently has high rates of crime, creating fear and uncertainty in the general population.

Research undertaken in 2016 identified a wide range of factors driving internal displacement in Guatemala: violence, extortion and threats; organised crime and narco trafficking; the expansion of large-scale business activities (such as the cultivation of sugarcane and oil palm, cattle raising, mining and hydroelectricity production); and natural and climate-related events. Added to these are other risk factors that trigger forced migration, such as the deterioration