

Family breakdown in Bogotá

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Forced displacement not only disperses and uproots families but also fractures their framework of beliefs, identities, daily routines, relationships and social fabric, and causes physical, emotional and psychological breakdown.

A study of displaced populations in Bogotá shows how forced displacement due to political violence has had a profound impact on the family unit in Colombia.¹ When forced displacement occurs, some family members – mainly adults and young men – are killed or ‘disappear,’ are forced to flee or recruited to fight. Some 47% of families living in Bogotá following such displacement break down as a result, with the average family size of 6.2 people prior to displacement reduced to 5.2 people afterwards.

Approximately 77% of those displaced originated in rural areas where the patriarchal traditional Colombian family was the predominant model. Family breakdown reinforces certain family structures while it weakens or eliminates others. New forms of arrangement have appeared such as: single female heads of household with children under 18 years of age; restructured families made up of people from previous unions; and homes with children living with relations other than their parents or with non-blood relations. In our study we found that 50% of displaced families had an intact nuclear structure, compared with 60% of families amongst the non-displaced population in the same residential or host areas; there were 37% female heads of household amongst the displaced, compared with 30% in the host population; the percentage of families with children cared for by their father was 9.2% in displaced families, compared with 6.5% in host families; and single female heads of household with children numbered 17% and 10% respectively.

Families experience abrupt change and new challenges. The weakened social fabric of their new, urban environment leads to precarious situations – most live in overcrowded conditions – and

the schisms and difficulties they face as displaced people force some couples to separate and leave their children. In the traditional family the woman’s role is focused on reproduction and the socialisation, education and care of children, while the man is the producer and provider. Following displacement, many women have to assume the role of provider, due to the change in context, lack of opportunities for the partner if still present, or the absence of the father due to abandonment, death or disappearance. These women take on outside domestic work consistent with traditional female roles: caring for children, cleaning, producing food. Most of the men are poorly educated small-scale farmers who only know how to work the land – a skill the city does not need.

Women see their opportunities for daily interaction with their children and husbands greatly reduced, and their absence from home causes problems with partners and impacts negatively on child development. For the women, their absence from home creates a responsibility overload, a loss of self-esteem and authority, and a feeling of guilt for failing to fulfil their family obligations and duties:

“A woman suffers more when her husband is gone and she has to play the role of father, mother and everything... Yes, most of us are left carrying the load.” (Displaced family workshop, Bogotá, October 2005)

Many of the adult and adolescent women who find themselves on their own suffer from depression:

“If you had a partner beside you, then you would have someone to help you get on, but on your own... it is all down to you, whether you want it or not. You often feel there is no one to help you, to give you a hug. ... everything makes you want to cry, you become very sensitive

and sad, bad tempered, not wanting to do anything... Then the problems really start – they get bored of you and leave.” (Workshop for displaced women, Nueva Esperanza neighbourhood, Rafael Uribe, Bogotá, September 2005)

When men lose their role as provider, they believe they lose their status as father and husband. This can provoke an identity crisis, a loss of self-esteem, and often leads them to abandon or respond violently to their family:

“After displacement, many men up and off because they can’t see any other way out, they can’t find work, they have nothing to do and the children are crying because they are hungry. They take the easiest way out, which is to leave, and who is left with all the work? The poor old mum – because when you’re a mother, it breaks your heart to up and dump your children.” (Workshop for displaced women, Ciudad Bolívar, Bogotá, October 2005)

Before displacement, rural children played an active part in the family.

In the city, many abandon their responsibilities, opting instead for a form of independence that denies kinship bonds and family authority in favour of relationships within their peer group. Some believe they will achieve social inclusion in the new context by joining armed groups or urban criminal fraternities:

“When the conflict began, the children started to change how they acted, and that was reflected in their games and the way they behaved with us, their parents. They are more aggressive, they don’t respect us.” (Workshop for displaced women, Bogotá, Ciudad Bolívar, July 2005)

These changes are compounded by factors including: reduced protection from the family due to abandonment by one or both parents; unprocessed grief for the loss of a loved one; lack of opportunities; invisibility as a ‘lost’ generation; and peer group influence. All of these increase levels of vulnerability and generate problems that were rare or simply not there before, such

as prostitution, drug addiction, alcoholism, unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases.

The schisms and living conditions generated by forced displacement change family dynamics and structure. As nuclear families reduce in number and there are more broken families, as single women are left to bring up children alone and as new family structures are created, women and children experience increased vulnerability and displaced families face an impoverished quality of life.

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