Policies in practice: The relationship between Street-Level Bureaucrats and Displaced Colombian and Venezuelan migrant adolescent mothers in Bogotá, Colombia

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Abstract. Colombia hosts the world's largest population of internally displaced people (IDPs) and has received over two million Venezuelan refugees and migrants since 2015. Refugees, migrants, and IDPs who become mothers during adolescence are subject to innumerable challenges. The Colombian government has developed policies to aid internally displaced people and refugees from Venezuela and we aim to get insight into the execution of these policies specifically in regard with internally displaced and Venezuelan adolescent mothers. We will draw from scholarly discussions about street-level bureaucracy theory which aims to understand the relationship between policy goals and execution. We performed ethnographic fieldwork among professionals and displaced adolescent mothers - participatory observations, interviews, and a focus group discussion - in Bogotá. The analysis reveals challenges faced by street-level bureaucrats related to public policies and tensions in their relationships with clients. The patterned decision-making that results from the relationships between street-level bureaucrats, the women and public policies is central to the findings. The study's inclusion of both displaced Colombian and Venezuelan migrant adolescent mothers advances the understanding of the dynamics between street-level bureaucrats, their clients, and public policies in a community that includes both internally displaced and migrant populations.

Keywords: Internal displacement, migration, adolescent mothers, street-level bureaucracy, ethnographic fieldwork, co-responsibility

Introduction

Worldwide, 114 million people were forcibly displaced by the end of September 2023 (UNHCR). Women and children constitute the majority of displaced people and are at greater risk of vulnerabilities during and after displacement, such as adolescent pregnancy, than their non-displaced counterparts (Fielden, 2008; Parker et al., 2018). The additional responsibilities that displaced adolescent mothers bear only magnify their position of vulnerability (Fielden, 2008). This phenomenon is particularly visible in Colombia.

Bogotá, Colombia's capital city and most common reception center, hosts a high volume of internally displaced Colombians and Venezuelan migrants fleeing years of internal conflict and devastating socioeconomic crisis, respectively. In Colombia, adolescent IDPs become pregnant at disproportionate rates (Cadena-Camargo et al., 2020). Between ages 17 and 19, 36.4% of adolescent IDPs experience pregnancy compared to 19.5% of their non-displaced peers (Cadena-Camargo et al., 2020). An increased rate of adolescent pregnancy among Venezuelan refugees

and migrants has also been reported (Bahamondes et al, 2020). Considering the unique challenges they face, the current study focused on adolescent mothers who were displaced within Colombia or who were Venezuelan migrants.

The Colombian government has developed different policies to aid internally displaced and Venezuelan migrant populations. The policies that apply to internally displaced people include Law 387 of 1997 and Law 1448 of 2011 which provide humanitarian assistance, "psychosocial care and comprehensive health care," and comprehensive reparations to IDPs (Gov.co, n.d.). CONPES 3950 addresses rights of Venezuelan refugees and migrants by establishing a 10-year temporary protection status (TPS) and guaranteeing rights to healthcare, education, and inclusion within the labor force. The policies for both types of refugees offer the same level of national subsidies under the same conditions. However, as of March 2021, Venezuelans are only able to access such benefits after successfully obtaining their TPS.

While the content of Colombia's public policies guarantees comprehensive social services and reparations to displaced adolescent mothers, reports from displaced and migrant adolescent mothers reveal that they struggle to rebuild their lives in Bogotá after resettlement (Cadena-Camargo et al., 2020). An important question, therefore, is how these public policies are implemented in practice. According to Lipsky's theory on street-level bureaucracy (2010), street level bureaucrats, the professionals who provide the services laid out in policies, play an important role in answering this question as they often face challenges that prevent clients from receiving the benefits promised to them (Lipsky, 2010). Street-level bureaucrats are "public service workers who interact directly with citizens in the course of their jobs" providing services and enacting policies (Lipsky, 2010, p. 3). Lipsky (2010) argues that while policies are written far from the local reality, street-level bureaucrats continue to create the policies through their interactions with citizens and by exercising discretion to guide the allocation of services to the public. According to the theory, public policy cannot be understood only by reading policy documents but through the interactions and tensions between street-level bureaucrats and policies, their agencies and allocated resources, and their clients in practice.

The purpose of this study was to investigate the ground-level execution of Colombian policies that aim to help adolescent mothers who are internally displaced or migrants from Venezuela using the street-level bureaucracy theory as the theoretical framework (Lipsky, 1980).

Methodology

Study Design

This study was conducted using a qualitative method and an ethnographic fieldwork approach and was conducted in Ciudad Bolivar, a southern neighborhood of Bogotá and a common reception location for IDPs and Venezuelan migrants. An interview guide was developed using core themes from Lipsky's street-level bureaucracy theory including the dilemmas in the relationships between IDPs and migrants and street-level bureaucrats. Interviews were conducted until data saturation was reached. Ethical clearance was granted by the Maastricht University Programme Ethical Review Committee and was cleared under the formal approval granted by the Ethic Committee of the School of Medicine of the Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, Bogotá (Act 21/2015.FM-CIE-8744-15).

Data Collection

Inclusion criteria for this study were adolescent mothers 18 years or older who were internally displaced in Colombia or migrated from Venezuela, and street-level bureaucrats who were 18 years or older and who work with adolescent mothers who were internally displaced or displaced from Venezuela. Between June and August 2023, 15 semi-structured were conducted. Participants included seven adolescent mothers (five IDPs and two migrants from Venezuela) who were living in Ciudad Bolívar during the study and who became mothers as adolescents. They were between 24 and 60 years old at the time of the study and had arrived in Ciudad Bolívar between five years and two months before the interviews took place. The participants also included 8 street-level bureaucrats who were working with internally displaced and displaced Venezuelan adolescent mothers in Ciudad Bolivar at the time of the study. The professionals had been working with the community for between one year and twenty years. The group of street-level bureaucrats included psychiatrists, public health nurses, a dentist, a social worker, and an administrator. Participants were recruited through snowball sampling. Interviews were recorded with consent from participants.

Data Analysis

Miles and Huberman's (1994) three-step thematic analysis model was used to analyze the interviews and focus group observations. Guided by the research questions and the theoretical background, we reviewed interview and focus group transcripts, and identified key themes, placed the themes in a data analysis chart that consisted of topics derived from the street-level bureaucracy theory (i.e. dilemmas faced by street-level bureaucrats and policy implementation). Relevant quotes and observational notes were then organized into the different themes in the chart (Miles and Huberman, 1994). To analyze and draw conclusions, the chart was reviewed, themes were identified, and the themes were analyzed in conjunction with the concepts put forth by Lipsky's (2010) street-level bureaucracy theory. All participants signed written informed consent forms before participating in the study. Furthermore, participants were assigned pseudonyms, and no identifying information was transcribed to protect anonymity.

Results

In this section, we will analyze the implementation of policies to support internally displaced people and Venezuelan migrants and the relationship between policies, street-level bureaucrats, and clients.

Experiences of accessing help after displacement

Both internally displaced and displaced Venezuelan adolescent mothers identified key experiences that prevented and facilitated their access to assistance in Ciudad Bolivar after displacement. Francesca described the difficult process of registering as a displaced person with the government upon her arrival.

'When we arrived here… we did not feel the support from anyone. After we arrived, we made the declaration that we were displaced. But it's not that there is someone to accompany the community when you arrive in Bogotá. No, there is a lot lacking.' (Francesca)

Julian explained that she lacked the government support she expected while searching for food and shelter, although such assistance is guaranteed by Law 387. Furthermore, Hester

identified a need for support *after* resettlement in Bogotá. Even after completing her technical training certification, Hester struggled to find a job and could not find a daycare to take care of her children.

'We need a lot of help and not just support with things like food and shelter. Lots of people don't know how to read, right? How can people help us use a computer or help us with things related to education, those are the things we really need.' (Hester)

The need for support during different stages of displacement and resettlement shows that, not only did participants want to settle comfortably, but they also expected to develop skills to continue moving forward and build a dignified life for themselves and their children. In this process, however, they need support from the professionals and the government.

Although Gabriela has felt left behind by the government and street-level bureaucrats in Ciudad Bolivar, she trusted her friend, who was also displaced as an adolescent mother, to support and guide her. Community engagement was identified by some of the participants as an important source of support. When they lacked relationships professionals, other women who had similar displacement and migration experiences were able to provide guidance and emotional support.

Experiencing obstacles providing help

*T*he street-level bureaucrats recognized the needs of their clients but described the obstacles they faced that prevented them from assisting internally displaced adolescent mothers and Venezuelan refugees and migrants. Tension and limitations in the professionals' relationships with public policies, logistic and systemic barriers, and tension between street-level bureaucrats and their clients were identified as barriers to providing help by the professionals.

Professionals have come to understand public policies as 'nice on paper,' but complained that they do not translate into real benefits when applied on the ground. Emilio, a psychologist who also works closely with displaced women, expressed his frustration that the policies he reads are not translated into tangible benefits for the women with whom he works.

'The public policy appears very nice. You can go look for it on the internet and you say, wow how wonderful! And then you think, why are the women referenced in the policies not living decent lives? Because when they go and try to access the services, there are barriers that stop them.' (Emilio)

Laura agreed that the public policies do not translate into 'concrete responses' in the community.

Logistic and systemic barriers such as distance, the cost of public transportation, long wait times, and inefficiency of service delivery were also identified as significant barriers to providing help to clients.

'When people arrive here, they have to report themselves to the displacement office…But from here the closest office is in Olaya … They spend two hours doing this trip… And the transport is … expensive for them if they are displaced… If they are going to go to the office or stay to sell food, they prefer to stay and continue working so they can feed their children and forget about going on the trip to the office.' (Andrea)

The street-level bureaucrats explained that many internally displaced and migrant women work informal jobs and live in precarious financial situations. Paying for transportation and missing an entire day's worth of earnings to attend only one appointment is often unfeasible. These barriers in the lives of the women shape the local meaning of the public policies to both the professionals and the clients as ineffective and unreliable.

Street-level bureaucrats identified the tension they experienced between their perspective of their roles as professionals and the expectations of them held by their clients as the final barrier to providing help. First, they passionately explained that they do not treat adolescent mothers from Colombia differently from adolescent mothers who migrated from Venezuela. Bella answered insisted that she and her coworkers 'receive all of [the women] with the same love and the same affection' (Bella).

'We know that they are Venezuelan because it is formal … We guide them and orient them, but we do not discriminate. Not at all. All are equal, we receive everyone equally.' (Bella).

The street-level bureaucrats emphasized the value of their personal connection to the women, but they also described the tension that exists between the way they defined their role as a professional and the expectations of aid held by the IDPs and Venezuelan migrants. Most of the professionals felt that many internally displaced or migrant women arrived in Bogotá assuming that they were entitled to receive resources.

'The vast majority of the people do not have the autonomy, or they don't have the desire to solve their situation… Instead, they function off of what others give them. They always come asking for things.' (Laura)

While they consider providing guidance, accompaniment, and empathy to be central to their responsibilities, they also recognize the tendency for their clients to expect too much from street-level professionals.

Co-responsibility of professionals and women from the perspective of street-level bureaucrats

The street-level bureaucrats consistently mentioned the importance of establishing co-responsibility, a reciprocal relationship in which both parties remain accountable to appointments or tasks, with the community. The objective of the co-responsibility approach is to prioritize relationships with women who are dedicated to receiving services. In this narrative, co-responsibility played a role in the street-level bureaucrats' decision-making. The limited services available at Matthew's foundation, for example, forced him to choose which clients will receive benefits. Those who demonstrate a consistent co-responsibility are more likely to receive said resources. Co-responsibility also plays a role in Laura's decision-making as a psychologist in Ciudad Bolivar. However, Laura invests more of her time in clients who demonstrate a lack of co-responsibility.

'The families that have less co-responsibility are the ones that we want to impact the most. Because it is with those families that children have many problems.' (Laura)

Both Matthew and Laura use the presence or absence of co-responsibility to address a dilemma in their jobs as street-level bureaucrats. They chose where to distribute their limited time and funding based on the populations' co-responsibility and their level of need.

The street-level bureaucrats also connected the concept of co-responsibility to their understanding of public policy. Emilio expects the women he works with to demonstrate co-responsibility because he does not trust the government to provide the services and resources that it promises. By teaching the women how to find assistance or by empowering them with the knowledge and information to become self-sufficient, he is protecting them against the uncertainty of the government's provisions.

Throughout their professional experience, the street-level bureaucrats have formed expectations of the public policies targeting internally displaced and Venezuelan migrant adolescent mothers. They have grown to distrust and expect failures from government initiatives - especially domestic policies and funding. Professionals placed more trust in international interventions and funding directed at Venezuelan migrants but felt that organizational failures in domestic plans to support IDPs were 'the norm' (Kathleen).

As explained by Emilio, the expectation of co-responsibility is connected to the mistrust street-level bureaucrats have developed over time based on their experiences working in Ciudad Bolivar. The theme of co-responsibility connects the professionals, the women, and the public policies, and it shapes the ways in which the professionals understand and perform their role as a street-level bureaucrat. The professionals made decisions about resource distribution based on the responsibility of the women, and the professionals' distrust in the public policies motivate them to demand a co-responsibility from the women to encourage them to establish independence.

Discussion

In this study, we aimed to analyze relationships between street-level bureaucrats, displaced and migrant adolescent mothers, and public policies that guide the treatment of and services allocated to IDPs and migrants in Colombia. We aimed to identify the meanings of public policy "on the ground" and how the discretion used by street-level bureaucrats has created that policy.

On the relationships between professionals, clients, and policies, Lipsky (2010) argues that street-level bureaucrats reconcile conflicts between written policy and the needs of their clients by exercising discretion. He asserts that street-level bureaucrats' decision-making directly impacts the lives of citizens and shapes the way citizens see the government and themselves (Lipsky, 2010). This study confirms Lipsky's arguments and contributes to the discussion surrounding the street-level bureaucracy theory.

First, on the experiences of IDPs and Venezuelan migrants and their experience accessing help after displacement, adolescent mothers described the lack of support they felt from street-level bureaucrats and from the government after coming to Bogotá. Notably, they use cognitive and social power to improve their lives despite barriers and limitations they face. This study's findings concur with Zamora-Moncayo et al.'s (2021) description of the role of cognitive power and social power in the lives of internally displaced women. By strengthening social networks and empowering other women within their community, IDPs use social power to continue moving forward (Zamora-Moncayo et al., 2021). Participants also used community support to navigate limitations in relationships between the women and street-level bureaucrats (Zamora-

Moncayo et al., 2021). Both IDPs and Venezuelan migrants noted that they found emotional and practical support through community ties.

On the relationship between professionals and public policy, the street-level bureaucrats in this study expressed their frustration with the policies applied to displaced and migrant populations. Deeming the policies ineffective and only 'nice on paper', they devote their attention and act on the needs of the clients. The professionals identified with the role of a citizen-agent as opposed to a state-agent, consistent with an argument presented by Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2000) in which professionals "make judgements first about the citizen-client and then turn to rules and procedures to" provide a solution to the *person* in front of them (p. 347). This impacts the local meaning and implementation of public policies. Instead of advocating for the implementation of policies themselves, the professionals identified the needs of the adolescent mothers and used the policy as a tool to provide a solution.

Furthermore, this study adds to the discussion of the dilemmas of street-level bureaucrats who work with migrant populations. Tension between local and immigrant populations is well established in the literature, but the relationships between internally displaced and refugee and migrant populations are not often studied (Ullah et al., 2020; Ulutas, 2021). This study adds that the internally displaced and migrant adolescent mothers residing in Ciudad Bolivar did not report the same tension often found between local and migrant populations. Their shared experiences of displacement were more significant than differences in nationality. Street-level bureaucrats echoed this sentiment by declaring that they welcome every client equally and feel the same responsibility towards Colombian and Venezuelan women. However, the tension between the local community and refugees and migrants was reflected in the relationship between the street-level bureaucrats and the Colombian government. The professionals reported that the services supported by international aid were more effective than services sponsored exclusively by the Colombian government. The street-level bureaucrats expressed their frustration that the internally displaced women they were trying to assist were less likely to receive benefits promise by public policies than the Venezuelan migrant and refugee population. This could have resulted in a difference between the assistance offered to Colombian and Venezuelan mothers by the professionals due to their perception of the domestic and international aid being offered.

Finally, street-level bureaucrats explained that the co-responsibility between themselves and their clients was influenced by their perception of public policy and was used to guide policy implementation. In his theory, Lipsky (2010) argued that *routinized d*iscretion exercised by street-level bureaucrats be used to reconcile dilemmas and cope with limitations. In this study, all participants explained that they use an expectation of co-responsibility, a form of patterned discretion, as a part of their decision-making process. Effectively, the expectation of co-responsibility has become a pattern in the work of street-level professionals and a part of the policy as it is understood locally in Ciudad Bolivar (Brodkin, 2012; Lipsky, 1980). While their aim is to empower and support the population, the street-level bureaucrats' collective responses to their professional limitations have the potential to systematically discriminate against certain groups of clients. Biases held by individual professionals or collective moral assumptions influenced by sociocultural or political factors could disadvantage particular groups within the community. For example, women who are, culturally, more reserved or women living in extreme poverty who must work every day to feed their children might be less likely to interact with and form relationships with the street-level bureaucrats. Identifying these "informal patterns of practice" is key to

preventing discrimination and understanding the local implementation of public policy in addition to the dilemmas and limitations that plague the work of street-level professionals.

Strengths and Limitations

To our knowledge, no previous studies have examined the relationships between internally displaced women, refugee and migrant women, and street-level bureaucrats in the same context. While the results cannot be generalized to other localities, the results presented may be relevant to understanding dynamics related to street-level professionals, displacement, and migration in other contexts. All interviews were conducted in Spanish, which is not the primary investigator's first language. To mitigate this limitation, an audio recording was taken of each interview which allowed for detailed transcriptions. Furthermore, the second author, a native Spanish speaker, was available for consult.

Conclusion

To conclude, street-level bureaucrats experience tension and dilemmas in their jobs and in their relationships with clients and public policies, and the nature of these relationships should be considered and reflected in policies going forward. As demonstrated by this study, the relationships between professionals and the community impact the formation and implementation of policies, and these factors must be considered during the initial creation of policy. Moreover, street-level bureaucrats should be aware of the impact that their systematic decision-making has on their clients. Responses to limitations and barriers, over time, may lead to unintentional discrimination towards a certain sector of the community. By consulting street-level bureaucrats and displaced women in the creation of policies that apply to their daily lives, policies could better reflect the lived reality of the women and the limitations and barriers faced by the professionals in their jobs. This would provide more relevant support to the bureaucrats while they attempt to support their clients and more relevant services and benefits to the displaced women as they work to rebuild their lives after displacement.

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