

## **Humanitarian activist citizens: The emergence of a ‘victim’ political subjectivity in Colombia**

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# **Humanitarian activist citizens: The emergence of a ‘victim’ political subjectivity in Colombia**

This article develops the concept of ‘humanitarian activist citizenship’ to analyse the political work of grassroots organisations representing groups and individuals displaced during Colombia’s civil conflict. In Colombia, the armed conflict has led to the forced migration of around 8 million internally displaced persons (IDPs). In response, self-identified IDPs and other victims of violence have formed organisations and staged protests to claim collective rights. This article emerges out of a narrative analysis of interviews conducted with members of IDP grassroots organisations in Bogotá between 2017 and 2018. Building on insights from the ‘acts of citizenship’ literature, it argues that the political work of these organisations must be understood as a form of ‘humanitarian activist citizenship,’ through which groups and individuals victimised by violence in Colombia mobilise humanitarian policies and discourses to redefine the relations that exist between them and the state.

Keywords: humanitarianism; Colombia; internal displacement; acts of citizenship; grassroots organisations.

## **Introduction**

For over half a century, Colombia’s civil war has been associated with severe human rights violations and forced internal displacement, affecting millions of citizens (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica 2013; Comisión para el Esclarecimiento de la Verdad, la Convivencia y la No Repetición 2022). This violence has disproportionately afflicted members of Black and Indigenous communities (Escobar 2008; Sachseder 2020). In response to the conflict, the Colombian government has recognised what it calls ‘victims of the armed conflict’ (henceforth ‘victims’) as a group entitled to rights-restitution and state-provided humanitarian assistance (El Congreso de la República de Colombia 2011; Forero-Niño 2012). The victim label includes both internally displaced persons (IDPs) – whom the state has provided with humanitarian aid since 1997 (Abrisketa 2009) – and others who have suffered violations of human rights or

International Humanitarian Law because of the conflict (El Congreso de la República de Colombia 2011).

IDPs and victims have become an important part of the political landscape in Colombia, forming grassroots organisations that pressure the government for increased rights and recognition (García-Godos and Lid 2010; Krystalli 2019; Osorio Pérez 2007; Rettberg 2013), and staging high-profile protests and occupations (Olarte Olarte and Wall 2012; Osorio Pérez 2007). Victims were included in the negotiations between the state and the largest guerrilla group, the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) in 2016 (Calderon 2017) and the subsequent peace agreement called for the creation of dedicated seats for victims in the House of Representatives (Ríos Sierra and Morales Correa 2022).

In June 2022, Francia Márquez, an Afro-Colombian activist who originally entered the political stage as a representative for victims in the 2016 peace negotiations (Ortíz Franco 2016), was even elected vice president of Colombia (Avoine 2022). Commentators have therefore pointed to the existence of a ‘politics of victimhood’ in the country (Krystalli 2019), whereby those affected by political violence have become significant political subjects in their own right (Lemaitre and Sandvik 2015; Rettberg 2013; Vera Lugo 2016).

In this article, I analyse the ‘politics of victimhood’ (Krystalli 2019) in Colombia as an instance of what I call ‘humanitarian activist citizenship.’ I borrow Isin’s (2008; 2009) concept of ‘activist citizenship,’ and ‘acts of citizenship,’ developed to investigate struggles which ‘question the givenness’ (Isin 2009, 383) of established modes of political recognition. I apply this concept to analyse interviews with Black female leaders of IDP grassroots organisations, who have mobilised humanitarian identities, policies, and discourse in their political work. I argue that, through their

activism, these organisations challenge what it means to be a humanitarian subject, rupturing existing modes of political belonging and representation. They do so by contesting the state's authority to decide the boundaries of humanitarian categories and calling into question pre-established 'hierarchies of suffering' (Krystalli 2019), particularly connecting their experiences of violence caused by the armed conflict to structural and historical forms of racialised and gender-based violence experienced by Black women in Colombia (Cárdenas 2018; Sachseder 2020). At the same time, these organisations also create solidaristic networks, which constitute sources of support for newly arrived IDPs, serving as alternatives to top-down humanitarian aid (Schwiertz and Schwenken 2020).

This article makes two contributions. Firstly, it adds to the critical literature on humanitarianism. Much of this literature has focused on humanitarianism's disempowering and depoliticising effects (Agier 2011; Cabot 2019; Fassin 2009; Harrell-Bond 2002; Malkki 1996; Ticktin 2016), and this article builds on this literature by also exploring the citizenship struggles that humanitarian projects enable, and how aid targeting victims of violence in Colombia has been strategically used by, amongst others, Black social movements to contest historical forms of marginalisation (Cárdenas 2018; Ng'weno 2007; Paschel 2016).

Secondly, the article builds on the 'acts of citizenship' literature (Isin 2008) and on the literature on the politics of victimhood in Colombia (Krystalli 2019; Lemaitre and Sandvik 2015; Vera Lugo 2016), as well as on the growing literature on 'citizen humanitarianism' (Jumbert and Pascucci 2021), all of which have detailed challenges to the power involved in humanitarianism. The article builds on these bodies of work by theorising the important role that humanitarian policies and discourses play in the

collective organisations of Colombia's IDPs and victims – so that their 'activist citizenship' (Isin 2009) is distinctly humanitarian.

In the next section, I situate the discussion within the existing literature on humanitarianism, citizenship, and forced displacement in Colombia. Then, I discuss the methods used in the research. In the final section, I argue that the political work of IDP and victim organisations must be analysed as a distinctive form of 'humanitarian activist citizenship.' The 'humanitarian' nature of this is evident in how these organisations have mobilised the IDP and victim categories in their work. Yet, this work does not simply mimic humanitarian discourses. Instead, it uses them to challenge the oppression facing marginalised communities in Colombia.

## **Theoretical background**

### ***Victims and IDPs in Colombia as 'humanitarian citizens'***

One of the legacies of political violence in Colombia has been the emergence of self-identified victims and IDPs as political subjects, included in Colombian politics on humanitarian grounds (Krystalli 2019; Rettberg 2013; Vera Lugo 2016).

Colombia's civil conflict has left 9.3 million victims, 8.3 million of whom have been internally displaced (Unidad para las Víctimas 2022). The Colombian state has been at the forefront of the humanitarian response to the human suffering caused by the conflict, taking on the responsibility for providing IDPs with relief since 1997 (The Congress of Colombia 1997; Vidal 1999). In 2011, it introduced an ambitious transitional justice policy targeting victims through Law 1448 (El Congreso de la República de Colombia 2011; Forero-Niño 2012; Mora-Gómez 2016). Meanwhile, a law passed in 2021 set aside 16 seats for victims in the House of Representatives

(Galindo Vácha 2022), incorporating this group into representative politics based on their status as victims.

Through these processes, citizen relations between the Colombian state and the groups and individuals that it recognises as victims or IDPs have become reoriented around humanitarian- and transitional justice- lines. Cabot (2019)'s concept of 'humanitarian citizenship' captures these dynamics. This term denotes a situation whereby access to social and human rights becomes provided according to 'humanitarian logics and sentiments' (Cabot 2019, 747).

In this article, I explore the citizenship implications of this reorientation in Colombia. I approach citizenship as an institution 'mediating rights between the subjects of politics and the polity to which these subjects belong' (Isin and Nyers 2014, 1). My concern with citizenship, however, extends beyond mere formal institutions and legal status. Instead, I analyse citizenship 'as a form of politics, an exercise of power, a relationship that involves the governing of others as well as oneself' (Rygiel 2010, 12).

To study how humanitarian values and discourses shape citizen relations in Colombia, I draw on Fassin's (2009, 50) conceptualisation of humanitarianism as a 'mode of governing' that goes beyond high-profile emergency relief by international organisations to also include any action administering humans in the name of saving lives. Humanitarianism is recognisable by its moral concern with saving lives (Fassin 2009, 2011), usually in response to a perceived crisis or emergency (Redfield 2005). However, it frequently extends beyond a temporary crisis response to become entrenched in ordinary life (Feldman 2012).

Critical voices suggest that 'humanitarian citizenship' can be profoundly disempowering (Agier 2011; Dadusc 2019; Fassin 2005, 2011; Harrell-Bond 2002; Malkki 1996; Novak 2022; Pallister-Wilkins 2017; Ticktin 2016). Humanitarianism's

concern with saving lives often comes at the expense of human dignity, with humanitarian actors engaged in ‘an endlessly temporary defense of minimal existence’ (Redfield 2005, 342). Additionally, populations who are not vulnerable enough, risk exclusion from attention (Sözer 2019; Ticktin 2016). Where access to rights is provided along humanitarian lines, this generates inequality between those seen as worthy of assistance and those who are not (Cabot 2019; Ticktin 2016).

Additionally, humanitarianism can become entangled with social control (Agier 2011; Dadusc 2019). Humanitarian actors often silence those receiving aid, denying their political agency (Agier 2011; Harrell-Bond 2002; Malkki 1996; Rajaram 2002). Recipients of assistance are usually expected to react to aid with gratitude and passivity and to refrain from claiming rights (Fassin 2011, 2020; Harrell-Bond 2002; Olivius 2014).

In Colombia, the exclusionary and depoliticising effects of the ‘humanitarian citizenship’ (Cabot 2019) occupied by IDPs and victims have been extensively documented (Aparicio 2012; Mora-Gómez 2016; Zeiderman 2016). Poor implementation of existing policies means access to humanitarian assistance and transitional justice measures has been limited (Carrillo 2009; Ibáñez and Moya 2010; Ibáñez and Velásquez 2009; Weber 2020). At the same time, commentators have emphasised how the victim category creates ‘hierarchies of suffering’ (Krystalli 2019) and renders invisible other forms of pervasive violence affecting large swaths of the Colombian public, including criminal and racialised violence (Cárdenas 2018).

The victim category has also been argued to shape the political subjectivity of those it includes (Aparicio 2012; Meza and Ciurlo 2019), restricting the demands they can articulate to only those that fit easily within a discourse of victimhood or transitional justice, and encouraging passivity (Jaramillo 2012; Krystalli 2019; Vera

Lugo 2016). As Krystalli (2019, 22–23) puts it, the politics of victimhood in Colombia has therefore come to ‘delimit not only the violence that matters, but also the terms of political claim-making, understandings of citizenship, and boundaries of solidarity.’

***What is missing: Acts of citizenship***

Others, however, have pointed to the way that humanitarianism is resisted and contested (Feldman 2007, 2012; Holzer 2015; Jumbert and Pascucci 2021; Olivius 2019; Vandevordt 2019). Refugees, internally displaced persons, migrants, and other recipients of humanitarian aid frequently stage protests (Moulin and Nyers 2007; Schouw Iversen 2022a), claim rights that transcend relief (Ataç 2016; Erensu 2016; Ilcan 2014; Mehta and Napier-Moore 2011), and contest the way they are governed by humanitarian actors (Agier 2011; Jakil 2020; Mim 2020; Tyszler 2021).

To grasp the political implications of ‘humanitarian citizenship’ (Cabot 2019), we consequently need to pay attention to resistance. This is emphasised by the ‘acts of citizenship’ school of thought (see Andrijasevic 2013; Isin 2008; Isin and Nielsen 2008; Jakimów 2022), which argues for the need to see citizenship as ‘a site of social and political struggle’ (Bassel and Isin 2022, 361). The concept of ‘acts of citizenship’ captures these struggles, denoting the moments when subjects challenge the current rules, boundaries, and content of citizenship by laying claim to a political status or set of rights that they do not formally possess (Isin 2008, 2009; Müller 2022; Nyers and Rygiel 2012). Through ‘acts of citizenship,’ subjects position themselves as what Isin (2009) calls ‘activist citizens.’ Unlike active citizens, ‘who act out already written scripts such as voting, taxpaying and enlisting, activist citizens engage in writing scripts and creating the scene’ (Isin 2009, 381).

Indeed, the literature on ‘citizen humanitarianism’ has highlighted how the entry of grassroots organisations into humanitarian aid delivery can constitute ‘acts of



citizenship,' challenging and contesting established aid modalities, while potentially also creating new forms of belonging based on solidarity (Jumbert and Pascucci 2021; Miralles Vila 2021; Schwiertz and Schwenken 2020; Vandevooordt 2019). This has been captured by terms such as 'subversive humanitarianism' (Vandevooordt 2019) and 'activist humanitarianism' (Miralles Vila 2021). Nevertheless, this literature has focused almost exclusively on aid provided to migrants and refugees by volunteers (Jumbert and Pascucci 2021), dedicating less attention to how humanitarianism is contested by humanitarian subjects themselves. This article builds on this literature by theorising the 'acts of citizenship' (Isin 2009) of IDP-led grassroots organisations in Colombia.

In Colombia, IDPs and victims have frequently resisted the marginalisation facing them through 'acts of citizenship' (Isin 2008), emerging as important political subjects (Cronin-Furman and Krystalli 2021; García-Godos and Lid 2010; Lemaitre and Sandvik 2015; Sandvik and Lemaitre 2013; Schouw Iversen 2022b; Tapia Navarro 2019; Vera Lugo 2016). This is reflected in the proliferation of grassroots and umbrella organisations representing IDPs and victims from the 1990s (Osorio Pérez 2007; Zulver 2022). It is also evident in the dozens of high-profile protests and occupations staged by these groups to target the state's humanitarian apparatus or international organisations (Olarte Olarte and Wall 2012; Osorio Pérez 2007; Schouw Iversen 2022a; Zeiderman 2013). Famous examples include a two-year occupation of the headquarters of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) (Osorio Pérez 2007), and two occupations of the Tercer Milenio park in the centre of Bogotá, which was occupied both in 2009 (Olarte Olarte and Wall 2012) and in the summer of 2020 (Doria 2020).

In addition to engaging in confrontational collective action, self-identified IDPs and victims have also turned to 'legal activism,' drawing on a language of rights and transitional justice in claiming rights (Lemaitre and Sandvik 2015; Sandvik and

Lemaitre 2013; Vera Lugo 2016). A famous example is the legal mobilisation by 1150 IDP families in the early 2000s, which led to a ruling in 2004 where the Constitutional Court declared the state's treatment of this group 'unconstitutional' (Sentencia T-025 quoted in Aparicio 2012, 116).

For these reasons, commentators have noted that Colombians victimised by violence have become an important 'political actor' (Rettberg 2013), a phenomenon captured by terms such as 'victim-activists' (Vera Lugo 2016, 27), and the 'politics of victimhood' (Krystalli 2019). Krystalli (2019, 25) defines the latter as a 'politics that is made possible through victimhood, that reflects and reshuffles its hierarchies, and that shapes subjectivities and relationships during transitions of violence.'

### ***Towards a humanitarian activist citizenship***

The extent to which such a 'politics of victimhood' (Krystalli 2019) has emancipatory potential – or, in the language of critical citizenship studies, can be seen to constitute a form of 'activist citizenship' (Isin 2009) – has not been fully addressed. There is considerable disagreement about whether collective mobilisation drawing on the victim label challenges existing power relations or simply constitutes a 'mimesis,' (Meza and Ciurlo 2019, 7) in which self-identified victims and IDPs internalise pre-existing humanitarian- and transitional justice- discourses that are ultimately disempowering (for an overview see Tapia Navarro 2019).

On the one hand, commentators have been quick to highlight the potential downsides to Colombia's 'politics of victimhood' (Aparicio 2017; Jaramillo 2012; Krystalli 2019; Meza and Ciurlo 2019; Vera Lugo 2016; Vidal López 2007). According to this view, the way disparate groups affected by violence have come to align their citizenship struggles with humanitarian values and discourses backed by the Colombian government, may be nothing but another manner in which the state ultimately

determines what it means to be a citizen (Aparicio 2010, 2017; Jaramillo 2012). For Roosbelinda Cárdenas (2018, 74), for instance, the adoption of the IDP label by Black activists ‘flattens the complexity’ of their experiences. There is a risk that the ‘politics of victimhood’ (Krystalli 2019) constitutes what Tianna Paschel (2016, 155) has called ‘social movement absorption.’

On the other hand, others have pointed to the agency that such a ‘politics of victimhood’ reveals (Olarte Olarte and Wall 2012; Sandvik and Lemaitre 2013; Tapia Navarro 2019). As argued by Tapia Navarro (2020, iii) victims and IDPs have not simply adopted humanitarian language uncritically, but instead ‘infuse this language with meanings that support their particular struggles.’ Similarly, Carolina Olarte Olarte and Illan rua Wall (2012, 333) have convincingly argued that IDP occupations of public space in Bogotá have worked to contest the historical invisibility of their predicaments, so that, by extension, ‘IDPs are refusing the very terms of their inclusion.’

The concept of ‘humanitarian activist citizenship’ intervenes in this debate. It emphasises the distinctly *humanitarian* nature of the political claims made by groups and individuals drawing on the victim and IDP label in Colombia, echoing those who have pointed out how these groups adopt humanitarian and transitional justice discourses in their work (Aparicio 2017; Jaramillo 2012; Krystalli 2019; Meza and Ciurlo 2019; Vera Lugo 2016; Vidal López 2007). Framing the political work of IDPs and victims in Colombia as a form of humanitarian ‘activist citizenship’ (Isin 2009), however, highlights how these claims do not uncritically reproduce pre-existing humanitarian discourses and values, established by the state and the international humanitarian community. Instead of acting out ‘already written scripts’ of ‘humanitarian citizenship’ (Cabot 2019), victims and displaced groups in Colombia are

engaged in ‘writing the scripts and setting the scene,’ to borrow Isin’s (2009, 381) terminology. In the next section, I discuss the methods underpinning this argument.

## **Methods**

The argument that the ‘politics of victimhood’ (Krystalli 2019) in Colombia constitutes a form of ‘humanitarian activist citizenship’ is based on fieldwork conducted over 11 months in 2017 and 2018 in Bogotá, Colombia. This research included 95 semi-structured interviews and 8 focus groups with individuals who had been internally displaced, and who self-identified as victims, and 11 individual interviews and 3 focus groups with state officials and NGO workers who worked with this group. To protect the identity of the people I interviewed, all names cited in this paper are pseudonyms, and all names of specific grassroots organisations have been omitted.

Of the self-identified victims interviewed, 43 individuals and 3 focus groups belonged to grassroots organisations representing victims and IDPs, and 59 individuals and 6 groups had also participated in occupations or protests demanding collective rights for these groups. This meant that the study participants were not representative of IDPs and victims more broadly – rather they were selected because of their participation in activism mobilising humanitarian identities.

Additionally, because I adopted a snowball sampling method in my research (Bryman 2012, 424), I interviewed several members of a few grassroots organisations that were tightly interconnected. This meant there was an overrepresentation of Black participants and women among those I spoke to. Black women in particular have been disproportionately affected by violence in Colombia (Sachseder 2020), and this group made up 32 of the 95 interviewees I spoke to and led most of the organisations I worked with.

The analysis I develop in this paper reflects the positionality of those I interviewed. The interviews were analysed by adopting a constructivist narrative approach, privileging the interviewees' own understanding of their political work, identities, and experiences of humanitarian and transitional justice policies (Gubrium and Holstein 2002; Yuval-Davis 2006). In narrative analysis, the focus is on how participants author their own experiences and '*construct* versions of reality interactionally' (Gubrium and Holstein 2002, 13; emphasis in original). For studying 'activist citizenship' (Isin 2009), this is ideal, as it emphasises the varied frames of reference and subject positions interviewees adopt, privileging how participants position themselves in relation to categories such as IDPs, victims, and activists, amongst other identities such as those based on gender or race (Yuval-Davis 2006). In doing so, it allows us to tease out how their understanding of these categories differs from official narratives, by extension 'refusing the very terms of their inclusion' into the Colombian polity (Olarte Olarte and Wall 2012, 333). In the next section, I draw out how the participants narrated their political work, arguing that this work should be theorised as a form of 'humanitarian activist citizenship.'

### **Humanitarian activist citizenship in Colombia**

Interviews I conducted with self-identified IDP- and victim- activists revealed that they drew on humanitarian discourses and policies in their political work. However, a narrative analysis of these interviews also highlighted that they did not adopt humanitarian discourses uncritically. In this section, I draw out three important ways in which the interviewees called into question the terms of reference of Colombian IDPs and victims' inclusion into politics: 1) by reclaiming the IDP and victim labels and questioning the state's authority to decide the boundaries of these categories, 2) by contesting official narratives of political violence in Colombia, and 3) by establishing

horizontal and solidaristic modes of belonging, serving as alternatives to humanitarian aid.

### ***Reclaiming the victim and IDP labels***

By adopting the IDP and victim labels in their political work, grassroots organisations in Colombia have come to challenge the state's right to decide what these labels mean. The case of Lina exemplifies this. A Black woman in her forties, Lina was forced to leave her home after a massacre in the Antioquia Department in the mid-1990s. After her displacement, she moved to the peripheries of Bogotá where she went to the local authorities to declare her displacement, a prerequisite for official recognition as an IDP. The state official who took her declaration, however, told Lina that she could not be an IDP, because she was 'elegantly dressed' (interview, 26 July 2018), reflecting humanitarian 'vulnerability' criteria (Sözer 2019).

The failure of the authorities to grant Lina official status as an IDP, however, did not prevent her from identifying with this category, nor from joining an IDP grassroots organisation. The same day her declaration was rejected, Lina met the leader of an organisation working for Afro-Colombian IDPs and victims, whom she ran into in the very same office where she was denied official recognition as a humanitarian subject. She asked to join the organisation and has worked with them since. When I interviewed her, Lina was the organisation's leader.

In addition to leading an IDP organisation, Lina has also participated in several protests and occupations meant to claim collective rights for this group and she has frequently resorted to legal mobilisation to demand rights for the members of her organisations, drawing on the legal frameworks for humanitarian attention and transitional justice established by the Colombian state. She, for instance, participated in the Tercer Milenio occupation, in which over 2000 self-identified IDPs occupied a park

in central Bogotá for four months, demanding humanitarian attention and access to other social entitlements from the state (see Olarte Olarte and Wall 2012).

By mobilising around a victim and IDP identity, despite not officially being recognised as such, Lina rejected the state's authority to decide who is and who is not a humanitarian subject. She explicitly positioned herself as part of these categories, telling me she faces 'a triple victimisation, for being a Black woman, IDP, and a victim' (interview, 26 July 2018). She questioned the authority of the state official who took her declaration, arguing that her elegant clothes did not give them the right to claim she was not displaced. In doing so, she reclaimed these categories, unsettling the state's control over their content. Through this process, a 'humanitarian activist citizenship emerges,' in which humanitarian categories, policies and discourses become the starting point for 'acts of citizenship' (Isin 2008) that ultimately challenge the very terms upon which IDPs and victims have been included in the Colombian polity.

### ***Reassessing political violence***

A central way in which self-identified IDP and victim activists in Colombia have challenged the foundations of the relationship that exists between them and the state is by questioning the official narrative of armed conflict in the country.

In delineating the official IDP and victim categories, the Colombian state has drawn sharp distinctions between political and other kinds of violence in the country, constructing displacement within the armed conflict as an 'emergency,' (Calhoun 2004) that breaks with normality. In Law 1448, the state defined victims of the armed conflict as:

those people who individually or collectively had suffered damage by events occurring after January 1 1985, as a consequence of infractions to the International Humanitarian Law or severe and manifest violations to the international norms of

Human Rights, occurred as part of the internal armed conflict (Law 1448 quoted in Mora-Gómez 2016, 31).

The law introduced a cut-off date, excluding anyone displaced before 1985 from official recognition. It also distinguished between those victimised as part of the ‘internal armed conflict’ and ‘victims of common delinquency,’ (El Congreso de la República de Colombia 2011, art. 3) even if the latter is associated with rights violations. The law therefore reflects an ‘emergency imaginary’ (Calhoun 2004), constructing violence facing victims as a distinct and temporally bounded phenomenon.

In Colombia, where violence has been endemic since its colonisation (see Rojas 2002; Safford and Palacios 2002), this ‘emergency imaginary’ (Calhoun 2004) is problematic. As argued by Roosbelinda Cárdenas (2018), the historical roots of contemporary forced displacement run much deeper than those suggested by the state’s framing of forced displacement. This framing must therefore be understood as the ‘product of a discursive shift [...] meant to separate those who fled the armed conflict from other itinerants (such as economic migrants), and to signal the emergence of a “new” problem in the historical and geographical continuum of human mobility’ (Cárdenas 2018, 75).

Reflecting these concerns, the state’s narrative of violence was rejected by the interviewees, who instead framed forced displacement as an endemic and structural issue, linking it to the violent legacies of colonialism, as well as broader patterns of both gender-based and racialised violence.

Esperanza, a Black woman I interviewed from Colombia’s historically marginalised Pacific Region (see Escobar 2008), for instance, started the interview by positioning herself vis-à-vis the official victim category, but then immediately went on to discuss race relations in Colombia, noting that ‘Colombia is a pluricultural and pluri-



ethnic country, but with a high degree of racism and discrimination’ (interview, 28 June 2018). According to her, present-day displacement was intimately linked to Colombia’s history of slavery and colonisation, and the violence she faced was a continuation of earlier colonial forms of violence.

Similarly, Adelaida, another Black woman from the same region, saw her displacement as symptomatic of a broader phenomenon, in which Black communities in Colombia have been subjected to violence for centuries. She recounted how the local politicians in her town had worked closely with narcotraffickers: ‘They brought death to our region. Because they not only used the mayor’s office to rob us, nor just to enslave our people, but they also used it to wash their dirty narcotrafficking money’ (interview, 18 July 2018). Here, she drew historical parallels between the violence of slavery and the violence facing communities related to illicit crops.

Colombia’s vice president, Francia Márquez, has framed displacement similarly. During a presentation on the Colombian peace process, which she attended as a victims’ representative, she told the assembled crowd that the armed conflict ‘for us did not begin 60 years ago, but instead for us it has been going for 400 years since we were uprooted from our mother Africa and taken to this content, we have been living through systematic violations of our rights’ (Márquez 2015, my translation). She connected contemporary displacement to a broader continuum of racial violence facing Black communities in Colombia, calling into question the state’s narrow framing of political violence.

Others I interviewed drew connections between violence occurring before displacement, and other types of violence facing them in their daily lives afterwards. Luz María, also a Black woman displaced from the Pacific Coast, related how her organisation lobbied for a wider understanding of violence that included the gender-

based violence many women encounter after being displaced. This violence is caused by the frequently marginal position these women occupy caused by discrimination in the workplace, as well as racial discrimination. In some cases, such discrimination leaves the women with no choice but to take up sex work in unsafe conditions, but this is not recognised as gender-based violence by the Colombian government.

Luz María's organisation aimed to challenge this. She complained that Colombia 'focuses on the armed conflict, and displacement, and the other victimising acts, but it doesn't look at what happens after this' (interview, 9 May 2018). This, she held, was inadequate. Drawing connections between the violence facing women during the armed conflict, and the marginalisation and structural violence facing them after displacement, she challenged the state's construction of the armed conflict as an 'emergency' (Calhoun 2004) existing separately from other forms of 'everyday' violence encountered by Colombians in their daily lives. Consequently, she called into question the very foundations of the state's recognition of IDPs and victims – the notion that displacement can be easily separated from other kinds of violence.

### ***Reforging solidarity***

This broader understanding of violence and displacement – in which the predicaments of IDPs and victims are conceptualised as the result of marginalisation deeply embedded into Colombian history and everyday life – also shaped the activities of the grassroots organisations I interviewed.

These organisations did not limit their activism to lobbying for humanitarian aid or transitional justice measures. Instead, they engaged in a diverse set of actions aimed at tackling the marginalisation facing them in their daily lives. Lina's organisation, for instance, worked with youth involved in drug trafficking, helped young people go to

university, helped women get abortions and exit sex work, promoted knowledge around Afro-Colombian ancestral medicine, and even had a dance group.

Esperanza's organisation was engaged in equally diverse activities. Her organisation's main goal was, in her own words, 'reconstructing social networks through the life experiences or ancestral knowledge of the [Black] population' (interview, 28 June 2018). This meant its members came together to share experiences of displacement, as well as their knowledge of food, ancestral medicine, history, and music. They also had a sports club, teaching local youth in peripheral areas of Bogotá to play basketball.

Crucially, these organisations also pursued activities that created horizontal and solidaristic networks of support. Discussing the work of Esperanza's organisation, David – one of its members – told me it was originally 'created to offer or strengthen a network of support for those who came from the areas that we were from' (interview, 11 August 2018).

Similarly, Angela, a Black IDP and victim activist, related how her organisation's focus was helping others in similar situations. When she first arrived in Bogota after having been displaced from the Pacific Coast, she felt completely abandoned by the government. 'The government doesn't even know where we live. It doesn't notice if Black youth... if they have electricity where they live, if they have water, they don't notice anything. So, seeing the magnitude of this problem and these circumstances we felt obliged to work for the community' (interview, 18 July 2018).

Initially, Angela worked to secure public services for the local community where she lived. Later, she branched out to helping local youth in the area, promoting cultural activities, as well as assisting newly arrived IDPs in the city. When she first arrived, no one wanted to rent her a flat because of her race, and she did not want others

to go through the same struggles. ‘These things make you go... when your situation is more stable, then you help the other people arriving, saying “come here, here is a place you can rent,”’ (interview, 18 July 2018). As she put it, ‘we who arrived first because of the violence, who were displaced, have been opening paths for others who arrived later, and in this way, because we are so united, we are helping others’ (interview, 18 July 2018).

Consequently, the organisations were also engaged in acts of solidarity through which new, horizontal, modes of belonging, based on mutual support, have emerged (Miralles Vila 2021; Schwiertz and Schwenken 2020; Vandevooordt 2019). Here, the vertical power relations implicit in state humanitarianism are overlaid by power relations that – while they are frequently characterised by internal forms of inequality or fragmentation – are based on ‘reciprocal ways of relating to one another’ (Schwiertz and Schwenken 2020, 415).

This, of course, should not be romanticised – these relations of care have emerged precisely because of the failure of the state to provide for the displaced upon their arrival, as hinted at by Angela’s story. Nevertheless, they signal the emergence of a ‘humanitarian activist citizenship,’ drawing on humanitarian discourses and categories to establish new and solidaristic forms of political belonging.

## **Conclusion**

Official humanitarian categories were central to how the self-identified IDP and victim activists interviewed framed their work. Nevertheless, it would be premature to conclude that they uncritically adopt humanitarian frames of reference created by the state, allowing it to tame their subjectivity and obtain consent for its policies, as suggested by some (Jaramillo 2012; Meza and Ciurlo 2019).

Instead, the interviewees refused to accept the state's narrow understanding of what the IDP and victim categories include, particularly the exclusion of those not seen as 'vulnerable' enough to be worthy of assistance (Sözer 2019; Ticktin 2016). Some, like Lina, even identified with these categories despite having been denied official recognition as part of them. In doing so, she engaged in 'acts of citizenship' (Isin 2008) calling into question the state's authority to decide the terms upon which the displaced are included in the Colombian polity (Olarte Olarte and Wall 2012).

The respondents' narratives also revealed a much broader understanding of their suffering than the one held by the state, connecting their experiences to historical forms of racialised violence, as well as to contemporary forms of gender-based violence. Consequently, they made visible violence that had been hidden by the government's narrow framing of the armed conflict, calling into question the 'hierarchies of suffering' this framing creates (Cárdenas 2018; Krystalli 2019).

This broader understanding of violence also shaped the activities of the grassroots organisations. Instead of limiting their work to claiming humanitarian aid and transitional justice measures, these organisations were engaged in a diverse set of activities that aimed to challenge the daily marginalisation facing their members, establishing horizontal and solidaristic relations of care in the process (Schwartz and Schwenken 2020). Hence, they challenged the vertical and authoritarian power relations often seen in humanitarianism (Harrell-Bond 2002), in similar ways to those documented in 'citizen humanitarianism' (Jumbert and Pascucci 2021; Miralles Vila 2021; Vandevordt 2019).

The 'politics of victimhood' (Krystalli 2019) in Colombia must therefore be understood as a form of 'humanitarian activist citizenship,' which is not wholly depoliticising. While self-identified IDPs and victims in Colombia draw on the

blueprints of state-provided humanitarianism in their activism, this activism none-the-less questions ‘the givenness’ (Isin 2009, 383) of their relationship with the state, challenging exclusionary categories based on vulnerability (Sözer 2019), contesting ‘hierarchies of suffering’ (Krystalli 2019), and establishing horizontal and solidaristic networks of support that serve as alternatives to vertical forms of humanitarian aid (Schwiertz and Schwenken 2020).

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The author reports there are no competing interests to declare.

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