

The Lives of Migrant Children in Colombia: Between Recognition and Invisibility

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I developed an interest in the anthropological study of children, particularly those who are affected by processes of migration, as a result of my own life experiences. When I was eight years old, I migrated from Tocaima, the small town where I grew up and was living with my parents and younger sister. I was to continue my primary schooling in Bogotá, where my two older sisters were already studying. It was a significant change in the life of a young girl. As in most middle-class Colombian families in that era, a child's opinions and desires were not taken into account; I was simply told that I was going to live and study in Bogotá and that was that. I have relocated several times since then, although usually on my own initiative. In any case, I continue learning about both the changes and continuities, the losses and the gains that are part of the migration process, and have endeavored as an applied anthropologist to lend voice to migrant children whose lives are so rarely considered.

My doctoral dissertation (Duque-Páramo 2004) was based on a participatory study with Colombian children who had migrated with their families to the United States. I have also studied children who remain at home in Colombia but have to deal with the long-term absence of their parents who live in other countries (Duque-Páramo 2012).

In the early 2000s, research on international migration affecting Colombians focused on issues of remittances and demographics. The transnational family was typically considered from the viewpoint of adult women as wives and mothers. Research with children was considered relatively unimportant, as children were not seen as having agency in the process of migration. Children were discounted in the formulation of public policy as well as in academic research. The only specific migrant-related policy in which children were considered dealt not with international migration but with internal displacement (Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar – ICBF 2016).

In recent years, there has been an increase in the number of vulnerable migrants from Venezuela — Colombians who had been living in Venezuela as well as Venezuelans themselves. Since 2017, the Colombian state, with the support of international organizations, has endeavored to meet the needs of the many Venezuelan migrant children and to the ones born in Colombia to Venezuelan parents. As a consequence of this recent migration, various well-meaning politics on attention to refugee, unaccompanied, and separated children and the rights of life, identity, health, and education of migrant children have been issued at the local, regional, and national levels in Colombia. Policies on emerging issues, such as statelessness and xenophobia have also been issued.

Although these policies have contributed significantly to guaranteeing some rights and promoting the integration of thousands of Venezuelan children in Colombia, they are insufficient to address the serious current realities that have overwhelmed the capacities of the Colombian

state. The growing deterioration of the social and economic situation in Venezuela, together with the effects of Covid, are determining an increase in the migratory flows of families and unaccompanied children in 2021 and 2022. They are very vulnerable people who travel in precarious conditions and are easy victims for drug traffickers, human trafficking networks, and other criminals.

At the same time, migrant children and their families, as well as unaccompanied migrant children, have captured the attention of academics from various disciplines, as well as from non-governmental and international organizations. In this context, my experience and knowledge as a researcher with Colombian children in migratory circumstances, starting in 2017, when I retired, began to have greater visibility and recognition by those in Colombia who sought to understand and care for children from Venezuela. I have been invited to talk about migrant children in various academic events and interviews in non-academic magazines and radio and television programs. In addition, from 2019 to 2021, I participated as a consultant and teacher, providing training on migration in general and migrant children in particular to police personnel, professionals working with the International Organization for Migration (IOM), family advocates, and other professionals. This work reflects the latest efforts under the auspices of the Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar (Colombian Institute of Family Welfare).

Migrants, including migrant children, have become noticeably more visible and recognized as part of the reality of Colombia today. But even so, the prevailing political ideology focused on humanitarian attention continues to relegate the emotional and developmental needs of migrant children—both Colombian and Venezuelan to the margins. Now, starting a new career as a writer, I hope to make known to audiences beyond the academy the voices, stories, sufferings, joys, dreams, and lives of the girls and boys who generously told me about their experiences related to migration.

Author's note

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