
TRANS VOICES IN COLOMBIA: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS OF THE BARRIERS TO IDENTITY CORRECTION

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Summary

This study explores the barriers faced by trans people in Colombia during the process of correcting their identity components in legal documents, based on a qualitative ethnographic research approach. Through in-depth interviews, focus groups, and participant observation, narratives and experiences were collected that show how the costs of the procedure, the lack of clear information in public and private entities, and direct and indirect discrimination limit effective access to gender identity and legal personality. The results reveal that trans people, especially those in situations of economic vulnerability, face significant obstacles to accessing their fundamental rights, reinforcing the need to implement inclusive public policies and awareness programs. The study highlights the importance of recognizing the voices of trans people and building a social justice system that guarantees their right to the free development of their personality and their full integration into Colombian society.

Keywords: Trans people, gender identity, social justice, ethnographic research, Colombia, fundamental rights.

INTRODUCTION

In Colombia, trans people face significant challenges in accessing legal and social recognition of their gender identity, particularly with regard to the correction of their identity components in official documents. These procedures include updating names and gender markers on identification documents, academic records, and employment documents, which is essential to guarantee their right to free development of personality and avoid situations of discrimination and violence. However, despite regulatory advances, such as Judgment T-063 of 2015 of the Constitutional Court of Colombia, which facilitates the change of name and sex in the civil registry without the need for judicial or medical procedures, structural and cultural barriers persist that hinder effective access to this right.

The economic costs associated with these procedures, the lack of clear information in public and private entities, and discriminatory attitudes on the part of the personnel in charge are common obstacles that trans people must overcome to achieve a complete and coherent identity correction. This situation has a direct impact on the daily lives of trans people, affecting their access to education, employment, health and, in general, their fundamental rights. In addition, institutionalized discrimination reinforces the social marginalization of this population, perpetuating a cycle of exclusion and vulnerability.

From a qualitative ethnographic approach, this study aims to explore the experiences of trans people in Colombia during the process of identity correction, compiling their voices and testimonies to understand the social and cultural dynamics that perpetuate the barriers to access to their rights. In-depth interviews, focus groups, and participant observation techniques were used, with the aim of documenting not only individual experiences, but also the collective strategies of resistance and empowerment that trans people have developed to confront discrimination and claim their rights.

The study is framed in a context in which, despite legal reforms, significant challenges persist for the full inclusion of trans people in Colombian society. Institutions often lack specific protocols for the care of this

population, and the lack of awareness of administrative staff contributes to situations of symbolic violence, where trans people are forced to justify their identity or are treated with contempt and distrust. This research seeks not only to make these problems visible, but also to propose intervention strategies based on a focus on social justice and respect for the diversity of gender identities.

The analysis of the barriers to identity correction of trans people in Colombia is based on various theoretical approaches that allow us to understand the dynamics of power and social exclusion that affect this population. Among the main theoretical frameworks used are Pierre Bourdieu's (1998) theory of symbolic power, Judith Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity, and Howard Zehr's (2002) restorative justice approach.

Bourdieu's theory of symbolic power holds that social institutions and structures exert a form of symbolic violence when they impose norms and expectations that exclude or subordinate certain social groups. In the context of trans people, this symbolic violence manifests itself in complex and costly administrative procedures, ambiguous institutional policies, and everyday discriminatory practices that force trans people to constantly justify their gender identity. This theory is fundamental to analyze how bureaucratic barriers and negative attitudes of administrative staff become obstacles to the full exercise of the rights of trans people.

From a feminist and gender studies perspective, Judith Butler (1990) proposes the concept of gender performativity, which suggests that gender is not a fixed essence, but a performative act repeated within a normative framework. This theory allows us to understand how trans people challenge hegemonic gender norms through their expression of identity, and how the legal and social system, by not fully recognizing their identities, reinforces the marginalization and invisibility of this population. Butler also points out that resistance to gender norms can be a subversive act, which is reflected in trans people's strategies to make their rights visible and demand fair treatment.

Zehr's (2002) restorative justice approach, on the other hand, offers a framework for analyzing how public policies can repair the harm caused to trans people through inclusive and participatory processes. This approach emphasizes the importance of listening to victims' voices, acknowledging their experiences and promoting restitution and empowerment processes. In the context of identity correction, restorative justice advocates for the implementation of inclusive policies that not only facilitate the change of name and gender marker, but also ensure an environment free of discrimination and violence for trans people.

In addition, the intersectional approach of Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) is crucial to understand how multiple social identities (gender, sexual orientation, social class, ethnicity) interact and condition the experiences of trans people in the process of identity correction. This approach allows us to identify how trans women of African descent, indigenous or in situations of poverty face additional barriers due to the intersection of multiple systems of oppression, which must be considered in the design of inclusive public policies.

The theoretical foundation presented provides the basis for a critical analysis of the experiences of trans people in Colombia, allowing not only to identify the structural and symbolic barriers that limit their access to justice and identity recognition, but also to make visible the strategies of agency and resistance that these people develop to claim their rights and transform social structures.

METHODOLOGY

This study is part of a qualitative ethnographic research, whose objective is to explore the experiences of trans people in Colombia during the process of correcting their identity components. The ethnographic methodology is characterized by its immersive and contextualized approach, allowing access to individual and collective narratives and understanding of the sociocultural dynamics that influence access to gender identity rights.

Population and Sample

The study population was made up of trans people over 18 years of age who had begun the process of correcting their identity components in official documents. A sample of 30 participants was selected through purposive sampling, ensuring the diversity of sociodemographic profiles, including rural and urban trans people, from different socioeconomic contexts and with varied experiences in accessing public and private services.

Data collection techniques

To develop an in-depth and detailed analysis of trans people's experiences, the following qualitative research techniques were used:

1. In-depth interviews: Semi-structured interviews were conducted, allowing the life stories of trans people to be explored, with a focus on their experiences during the identity correction process. The interviews included questions about:
 - Motivations for initiating the process of identity correction.

- Economic, administrative, and social barriers encountered in the process.
 - Perception of the institutional response and treatment received in public and private entities.
 - Personal and collective strategies to overcome barriers to access to gender identity.
2. Focus groups: Four focus groups were held with an average of 7 participants each, promoting a space for dialogue and collective reflection on the structural and cultural barriers faced by trans people. The focus groups identified common patterns in experiences and documented community resistance strategies developed to confront discrimination and demand fair treatment.
 3. Participant observation: The researcher participated in activities organized by trans collectives and human rights organizations, documenting social interactions and community practices related to access to gender identity. This technique facilitated the understanding of how trans people build support networks and articulate their political demands from a social justice approach.
 4. Documentary analysis: Regulatory documents and public policies related to identity correction in Colombia were reviewed, including Constitutional Court Ruling T-063 of 2015, as well as reports from organizations that work with the trans population. This analysis made it possible to contextualize the experiences of trans people in the Colombian legal and institutional framework.

Data analysis

The analysis of the information was carried out through a thematic content analysis, using an inductive and participatory approach. The interviews and focus groups were recorded and transcribed with the consent of the participants, guaranteeing the confidentiality and anonymity of the data. Open source was used to identify emerging themes in trans people's narratives, focusing attention on the administrative, economic, and cultural barriers they face during the process of identity correction.

The use of Atlas.ti software facilitated the organization and categorization of data, allowing the development of concept maps that showed the relationships between the different dimensions of gender identity and the experiences of exclusion or inclusion lived in institutions. Special attention was paid to institutional and community discourses, identifying both the mechanisms of discrimination and the inclusive practices that favor access to gender identity.

Ethical criteria

The research was carried out following the ethical principles of qualitative research, ensuring:

- Informed consent: Participants were informed in detail about the objectives of the study, the procedures and the use of the information, signing an informed consent prior to the interviews and focus groups.
- Confidentiality and anonymity: Pseudonyms were used and security measures were implemented to protect the identity of the participating trans people, especially considering the risk of discrimination and violence.
- Non-revictimization: A trauma-sensitive approach was adopted during interviews and group activities, avoiding reliving painful experiences and providing psychosocial support when necessary.
- Active participation: A participatory research approach was promoted, where trans people not only shared their experiences, but also validated the preliminary results and contributed to the critical analysis of the findings.

Validity and Reliability

To ensure the validity and reliability of the results, the following strategies were applied:

- Data triangulation: Interviews, focus groups, participant observation and documentary analysis were combined, which allowed contrasting and complementing the information from different perspectives.
- Theoretical saturation: Data collection continued until significant new themes emerged, ensuring that the analytical categories comprehensively reflected the experiences of trans people.
- Participatory validation: Feedback sessions were held with the participants, promoting critical feedback and ensuring that the interpretations made faithfully reflected their narratives.

RESULTS

The ethnographic analysis of the in-depth interviews, focus groups, and participant observation allowed us to identify the structural, symbolic, and cultural barriers faced by trans people in Colombia during the process of correcting their identity components. The results were grouped into four main categories: administrative and economic obstacles, institutional discrimination, psychosocial impact, and resistance and empowerment strategies.

1. Administrative and Economic Obstacles: Structural Barriers to Access to Gender Identity

The study revealed that trans people face multiple administrative hurdles when trying to update their identity documents. Among the main barriers mentioned are:

- High costs of legal procedures, especially for people in situations of economic vulnerability.
- Lack of clarity in administrative procedures, which generates confusion and delays the process of identity correction.
- Unnecessary or contradictory requirements, such as the requirement of medical documents or psychological tests, despite the fact that Judgment T-063 of 2015 establishes that these are not necessary.

"They asked me for a medical certificate that justified my change of name. When I told them that the law does not require it, they looked at me with suspicion and told me that without it they could not continue the process." (Interview 12)

This testimony reflects how bureaucratic barriers not only prevent access to gender identity, but also reproduce dynamics of exclusion and discrimination, by requiring trans people to constantly justify their identity. From the perspective of Pierre Bourdieu (1998), these obstacles represent a form of symbolic violence, where institutions impose conditions that reinforce the subordination of trans people.

2. Institutional discrimination: Exclusionary attitudes and practices in public and private entities. Direct and indirect discrimination emerged as a recurring theme in interviews and focus groups. Many trans people reported experiencing discriminatory treatment in institutions such as registries, banks, educational centers, and health services. Forms of discrimination included:

- Refusal to use the correct name and pronoun.
- Derogatory comments and mocking attitudes.
- Difficulties in accessing basic services, especially when identity documents do not reflect their actual gender identity.

"I went to get a certificate at the university and, although my name was already updated, the official insisted on calling me by my previous name. I felt humiliated and exposed." (Focus Group 3)

This situation shows how discriminatory attitudes of administrative staff can generate situations of symbolic and psychological violence, affecting the self-esteem and emotional well-being of trans people. From Judith Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity, this discrimination reflects how institutions reaffirm hegemonic gender norms, invalidating diverse gender identities and reinforcing a system of social exclusion.

3. Psychosocial impact: Consequences of discrimination and lack of identity recognition

The psychosocial impact of administrative barriers and institutional discrimination was evidenced in reports that showed how the lack of identity recognition affects the mental and emotional health of trans people. Some of the consequences identified include:

- Social isolation and difficulty accessing employment and education.
- Increased levels of stress and anxiety, especially in contexts where gender identity is constantly questioned.
- Distrust in institutions, which limits the reporting of situations of discrimination and reduces opportunities for legal protection.

"Every time I have to show my ID I feel a knot in my stomach. I never know if I'm going to be accepted or if I'm going to be asked uncomfortable questions in front of everyone." (Interview 18)

The study also revealed that everyday discrimination can generate a feeling of social invisibility, where trans people feel excluded from public and private spaces, reinforcing structural marginalization. From a restorative justice approach (Zehr, 2002), this highlights the need to implement inclusive policies that not only allow for identity correction, but also promote a safe and respectful environment for trans people.

4. Strategies of resistance and empowerment: Support networks and social justice

Despite the barriers and challenges, the study identified various resistance strategies developed by trans people to confront discrimination and claim their rights. Among the most effective strategies are:

- Participation in trans support groups and networks, which provide information, legal advice and emotional support during the process of identity correction.
- Use of social networks and digital platforms to make trans experiences visible and denounce discrimination.
- Collaboration with human rights organizations, promoting institutional awareness and political advocacy to improve inclusive public policies.

"I found in the trans collective a place where I can be myself without fear. I learned about my rights and, with their help, I was able to update my documents without so many obstacles." (Interview 24)

From the intersectional approach of Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), these support networks allow trans people to recognize the multiple dimensions of their identity and develop a collective agency that contributes to transforming exclusionary social structures.

SUMMARY OF THE RESULTS

The qualitative data obtained allow us to conclude that administrative barriers and institutional discrimination significantly limit trans people's access to a complete and coherent identity correction. However, the strategies of resistance and empowerment developed from community networks show the transformative power of active participation in the construction of a more inclusive and just environment. These findings reinforce the need to implement inclusive public policies, including training and awareness-raising for public officials, simplification of administrative procedures, and psychosocial support for trans people during the process of identity correction. In addition, the importance of adopting a restorative justice approach is highlighted, where trans people are not only recognized in their identities, but also actively participate in the construction of community solutions to discrimination and social exclusion.

DISCUSSION

The results of this ethnographic study allow us to understand the administrative, economic, and cultural barriers faced by trans people in Colombia during the process of correcting their identity components. From a theoretical approach, the findings are aligned with the proposals of Pierre Bourdieu (1998) on symbolic violence, Judith Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity, and Howard Zehr's (2002) restorative justice approach, providing a critical perspective on the dynamics of exclusion and resistance experienced by trans people.

1. Administrative barriers and symbolic violence

The study revealed that trans people face significant administrative obstacles during the identity correction process, which manifests itself through complex procedures, high costs, and unnecessary requirements. These obstacles represent a form of symbolic violence, as defined by Bourdieu (1998), since institutions impose unjust conditions that reinforce the social subordination of trans people.

Symbolic power theory holds that institutional structures can legitimize inequality through bureaucratic norms that, while seemingly objective, perpetuate social exclusion. In the case of trans people, the requirement of medical or psychological documentation not required by law demonstrates how institutions can exercise veiled social control, forcing people to justify their identity and undergo external validation processes.

2. Institutional discrimination and gender performativity

The results showed that institutional discrimination occurs both directly (denial of care, mockery, derogatory comments) and indirectly (delaying procedures, omission of inclusive protocols). Judith Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity allows us to understand how institutions reinforce hegemonic gender norms, invalidating diverse gender identities and limiting access to fundamental rights.

Butler suggests that gender is constructed through repeated performative acts, and when institutions deny trans people the possibility of being recognized according to their gender identity, they are reinforcing a normative performativity that makes dissident identities invisible. This is evidenced in the testimonies of trans people who reported situations of public humiliation and psychological violence when interacting with officials who refused to use their correct names and pronouns.

3. Psychosocial impact and restorative justice

The psychosocial impact of the lack of identity recognition is reflected in the high levels of stress, anxiety and social isolation experienced by trans people. From Zehr's (2002) restorative justice approach, it is essential that public policies and institutional practices not only seek to correct the gender name and marker in official documents, but also promote an inclusive and restorative environment for trans people.

Restorative justice advocates for processes that listen to the voices of victims, promoting reparation of harm and the transformation of social relations. In the context of trans people, this implies not only facilitating identity correction, but also guaranteeing access to psychosocial support services and educating institutions to offer dignified and respectful treatment. In addition, human rights training and gender diversity awareness are key elements in preventing institutional discrimination and promoting social inclusion.

4. Strategies of resistance and collective agency

Despite the barriers identified, trans people have developed strategies of resistance and empowerment that demonstrate their capacity for agency and self-affirmation. These strategies include active participation in trans collectives, the use of social networks to make their rights visible, and collaboration with human rights organizations to demand changes in public policies.

Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1989) intersectional approach allows us to analyze how multiple social identities (gender, ethnicity, social class) condition the experiences of trans people and how community support networks can help mitigate the negative effects of discrimination. Collective agency not only facilitates

access to information and accompaniment during administrative procedures, but also strengthens trans people's sense of belonging and self-esteem, contributing to their full integration into society.

Implications for practice and public policy

The findings of this study have important implications for the design of inclusive public policies and the implementation of institutional awareness programs. Some key recommendations include:

- Simplify administrative procedures for identity correction, eliminating unnecessary requirements and reducing the associated economic costs.
- Train the staff of public and private institutions in gender perspective and human rights, promoting respectful and discrimination-free treatment of trans people.
- Implement a restorative justice approach in public policies, ensuring that trans people not only access their legal rights, but also that the harm caused by institutional discrimination is repaired.
- Strengthen community support networks, providing economic and technical resources to trans groups working to defend human rights and promote social inclusion.
- Encourage the active participation of trans people in the formulation of public policies, ensuring that their experiences and perspectives are heard and valued in decision-making processes.

The qualitative ethnographic research developed in this study shows that symbolic violence, institutional discrimination, and administrative barriers significantly limit trans people's access to a complete and coherent identity correction in Colombia. However, the strategies of resistance and empowerment developed from community networks show the transformative power of active participation in the construction of a more inclusive and just environment.

It is hoped that these findings will contribute to raising awareness in society, strengthening public policies and improving institutional practices, promoting a culture of respect and social justice that allows trans people to live in safe environments free of discrimination.

CONCLUSIONS

The results of this ethnographic study show that trans people in Colombia face multiple administrative, economic, and cultural barriers during the process of correcting their identity components. These barriers not only affect access to fundamental rights, but also perpetuate dynamics of symbolic violence and institutional discrimination, limiting the social integration of trans people and affecting their emotional and psychosocial well-being.

From a theoretical perspective, the findings are aligned with Pierre Bourdieu's (1998) theory of symbolic power, who suggests that institutions can exercise a form of indirect violence through bureaucratic norms that reinforce social exclusion. In the case of trans people, the imposition of unnecessary requirements for identity correctness and the discriminatory attitudes of administrative staff represent an exercise in symbolic control that forces people to constantly justify their gender identity.

Likewise, Judith Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity allows us to understand how institutions reaffirm hegemonic gender norms, denying the validity of trans identities and limiting access to a coherent legal and social identity. The stories of trans people showed how the incorrect use of names and pronouns, as well as institutional revictimization, generate a negative impact on self-esteem and reinforce a feeling of social invisibility.

Howard Zehr's (2002) restorative justice approach provides a transformative perspective to address the identified barriers, proposing processes of reparation of harm, restitution of rights, and promotion of social justice. In the context of identity correction, restorative justice advocates for the implementation of inclusive public policies, which not only facilitate access to the correct legal documents, but also promote a safe and respectful environment for trans people.

Despite the barriers and challenges, the study identified various resistance and empowerment strategies developed by trans people, from active participation in collectives and support networks to the use of digital platforms to make their rights visible. These strategies not only strengthen individual and collective agency, but also contribute to the transformation of exclusionary social structures, promoting a culture of inclusion and respect for the diversity of gender identities.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE AND PUBLIC POLICY

The findings of this study have important implications for the design of inclusive public policies and the implementation of institutional awareness programs. Some key recommendations include:

1. Simplification of administrative procedures for identity correction, eliminating unnecessary requirements and reducing associated costs, especially for people in situations of economic vulnerability.
2. Continuous training of staff of public and private institutions in gender perspective and human rights, guaranteeing respectful and discrimination-free treatment of trans people.

3. Implementation of a restorative justice approach in public policies, promoting reparation for the harm caused by institutional discrimination and ensuring that trans people actively participate in the construction of community solutions.
4. Strengthening community support networks, providing economic and technical resources to trans groups and human rights organizations that work to defend the rights of trans people and promote their social inclusion.
5. Encourage the active participation of trans people in the formulation of public policies, ensuring that their voices and experiences are heard and valued in decision-making processes.

LINES OF FUTURE RESEARCH

Based on the results of this study, several lines of future research are identified that could contribute to deepening knowledge about the experiences of trans people in Colombia:

- Longitudinal studies that evaluate the impact of inclusive public policies on the quality of life of trans people, analyzing how identity correction influences their access to education, employment, and health.
- Comparative research between regions of Colombia, with the aim of identifying good institutional practices and successful models of inclusion and social justice.
- Analysis of the psychosocial impact of institutional discrimination, exploring how administrative and cultural barriers affect the mental health and emotional well-being of trans people.
- Studies on the effectiveness of resistance and community empowerment strategies, assessing how support networks contribute to the resilience and empowerment of trans people.

In conclusion, this study provides empirical evidence on the barriers and challenges faced by trans people in Colombia during the process of identity correction, as well as on the resistance and empowerment strategies developed from community networks. It highlights the importance of adopting a comprehensive approach that considers the cultural, social, and economic dynamics that influence access to fundamental rights for trans people, promoting a culture of peace, equity, and respect for the diversity of gender identities.

It is hoped that these findings will contribute to raising awareness in society, strengthening public policies and improving institutional practices, ensuring that trans people in Colombia can live in safe environments free of discrimination, with full access to their gender identity rights and effective social integration.

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