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“Eroding trust in the state and in frontline workers can become a catalyst for the rise of populism”

1. February 2024 | Jutta Winters

Gabriela Spanghero Lotta, Professor of Public Administration and Government at Getulio Vargas Foundation (FGV) in São Paulo, Brazil, gives a Special Lecture at the IAB on 5 February 2024. In this accompanying interview, Lotta explores the dynamics of citizen-state interactions in Latin America, outlines the role of frontline workers in dealing with – and being embedded within – situations of vulnerability, and discusses the consequences of eroding trust for the rise of populism.

Your research, which is based on streetlevel-bureaucracy theory, focuses on frontline workers such as health workers, teachers, and social workers in Latin America. What are the conditions and the challenges that these civil servants face in their work?

The theory of street-level bureaucracy has already identified numerous challenges that street-level civil servants commonly encounter in their work, including a high workload, high pressure, a shortage of resources, and a lack of information. However, when examining the surrounding contexts, particularly those in the global south and specifically in Latin America, we observe extremely challenging working conditions. Firstly, these identified characteristics persist but are exacerbated by, for example, an increased workload and fewer resources. Secondly, additional factors come into play, such as violence, a lack of trust in the state, weak institutions, the politicization of frontline roles, endemic corruption, high levels of inequality, extreme poverty, and social vulnerabilities, to name a few. All these elements make the work of street-level bureaucrats even more difficult, as they have to face ordinary work-challenges but also challenges related to their political and social context, which directly affects their capacity to implement policies.

The citizens that you focus on in your research are “vulnerable” citizens. What kind of vulnerabilities are most prevalent?

I have been researching policies implemented in the most vulnerable territories, where residents face a confluence of intersecting vulnerabilities. These individuals experience poverty, health issues, limited or no access to education, an unstable income, and precarious employment conditions. They depend on public services for accessing healthcare, education, and cash-transfer programs. Additionally, many reside in precarious housing which further compromises their health and overall well-being. Furthermore, these territories are marked by pervasive violence, often dominated by militias and drug dealers. And finally, in Latin America, there are additional vulnerabilities linked to race and gender. Typically, women and black individuals bear a disproportionate burden of these challenges, experiencing them in a more pronounced and adverse manner.

> Frontline workers find themselves exposed to the positions of vulnerability which they seek to address.

What is the environment like in which frontline workers perform their jobs?

When we delve into the work of frontline workers in these situations, dealing with this population, we encounter a rather paradoxical scenario. On the one hand, they are tasked with implementing policies aimed at alleviating conditions of vulnerability, which in turn means that citizens have lofty expectations and demands on their work. The clientele they serve is incredibly diverse and unequal, making “one size fits all” policies ineffective.

On the other hand, frontline workers find themselves exposed to many of the conditions of vulnerability which they are seeking to address. Firstly, because often they share the same social status as the citizens they assist – for instance, a majority of health and social workers are poor black women. In a paper published in 2023 in the journal Governance, we delved into the status of inequality amongst frontline workers and the challenges for them in aligning with the citizens they serve . Secondly, they operate in the very territories where vulnerabilities are prevalent, exposing them to the same challenges as the local citizens. For instance, when a frontline worker operates in an area dominated by a militia, they also face situations of violence, have to negotiate with criminal organizations to carry out their duties, and must adapt their tasks to this context – deciding on the kind of information to provide or withhold from the state.

How do frontline workers cope with these challenges?

This dynamic leads frontline workers to develop mechanisms to "survive" these contexts in order to effectively deliver services. They must adjust their language to align with what citizens legitimize or understand, adapt their tasks to meet the acceptance criteria of criminal organizations, and cultivate social relations that legitimize their presence in these territories. Consequently, they exercise a significant amount of discretion in making necessary adaptations, resulting in varied policy implementation.

> In these contexts, it is almost impossible for frontline workers to adopt standardized procedures, to act impartially and to strictly follow the rules.

Yet, despite these adaptations, frontline workers, as representatives of the state, wield a source of power that citizens lack. Consequently, we discovered that frontline workers often find it necessary to differentiate themselves from citizens and resort to bureaucratic procedures – which appear less discretionary – as a means to protect and legitimize their work. For instance, in interviews, it is common for frontline workers to invoke bureaucratic procedures, languages, and rules as a shield when interacting with citizens, asserting statements like "this is the norm, I can't do anything about it, I am only following the rule." While this might not precisely align with the stated rules, activating their bureaucratic status becomes a protective measure. What my research shows is that, in these contexts, it is almost impossible for frontline workers to adopt standardized procedures, to act impartially and to strictly follow the rules. As a consequence, as frontline workers are also social actors, policy implementation is very much influenced by the social dynamics of each context.

What effect does that have on reducing or reproducing existing inequalities or accessing public services?

Policies are usually designed to tackle and decrease social inequalities. And if you analyze the policy design, you can clearly find an expectation that inequalities should be reduced. However, often policy implementation ends up increasing or creating new inequalities. Why? The answer is based on my previous comment. If policy implementation, and by extension, frontline workers, are deeply embedded in social contexts, they inevitably are influenced by the dynamics prevalent in these contexts. This phenomenon becomes evident when examining the Brazilian context. In 1988, with the introduction of the new constitution, Brazil laid the foundation for a welfare state rooted in liberal and highly progressive ideals. These ideals encompassed equal rights, human rights, gender equality, and policies against racism. Numerous policies were designed to translate these principles into action. However, Brazilian society, despite these progressive policies, is still very conservative, particularly concerning gender, race, and various other elements. Consequently, frontline workers find themselves in the challenging position of implementing liberal and progressive policies while engaging with citizens who often disagree with these policies.

> If the implementation of policies is deeply entwined with elements of social dynamics, even policies designed to fight inequalities may inadvertently perpetuate them.

Adding to the complexity, many frontline workers, as social actors, may themselves disagree with the policies. It might seem perplexing, but this is the reality. Our research exemplifies scenarios where frontline workers are unable to implement policies addressing gender or race issues due to opposition from citizens, consequently perpetuating existing inequalities. Additionally, our data illustrates situations where frontline workers resist the implementation of policies protecting the rights of LGBTQ+ citizens, resulting in the exclusion of this group from public services. The central conclusion is: if the implementation of policies is deeply entwined with social dynamics, even policies designed to fight inequalities may inadvertently perpetuate them.

Do frontline workers treat highly vulnerable citizens and less vulnerable citizens differently?

We have been comparing the interaction of frontline workers with different social groups to analyze differences in their treatment. To explore potential differences, we used experimental vignettes involving teachers, social- and health workers, and police officers. The outcomes paint a worrying picture. We would expect that the most vulnerable citizens would be prioritized by frontline workers – as this is also required in the regulations. However, we found exactly the opposite. Rather than prioritizing the most vulnerable citizens, frontline workers often feel less able to address such cases. Consequently, they feel less responsible for them – they usually blame the social conditions, they are even more judgemental of the citizens' situations, fall back on stereotypes, and they invest less effort in these cases.

> Our findings regarding the treatment of the most vulnerable cases are disheartening.

Do teachers, nurses or health workers all show the same pattern regarding how they perform their jobs?

Surprisingly, the only exception we identified was among nurses. Nurses – in contrast to other health workers such as doctors or midwives – tended to adopt a more paternalistic approach toward the most vulnerable cases. This entailed more intervention, offering citizens fewer choices and less agency, and enforcing policies and health measures as if the citizens lacked sufficient knowledge to make their own decisions. As mentioned earlier, our findings in relation to the treatment of the most vulnerable cases are disheartening. What emerges is a cycle of vulnerabilities. Citizens in vulnerable conditions find themselves being deprioritised by policies intended to improve their situations, perpetuating their vulnerability even further.

How do vulnerable and other citizens react to this treatment?

In Brazil, similar to many countries in the global south, there's a widespread lack of trust in the state across all social groups. A significant reason for this mistrust is that people, in general, feel their demands and expectations are often left unmet by the state. This scepticism extends to frontline workers as well. The reactions to this lack of trust vary, depending on the type of citizens involved. For citizens facing severe vulnerabilities, reacting proactively to the actions of frontline workers is challenging. In such cases, they tend to adopt a more passive approach and may even disengage from services. There's a prevailing belief that they aren't integrated in public services, and that the state will not provide them with quality services. It is a feeling of non-belongingness and non-citizenship.

> The declining levels of trust are leading to a vocal and, at times, violent reaction from citizens against frontline workers.

On the other hand, citizens in less severely vulnerable contexts often fight more for services, holding frontline workers accountable, but also creating conflicts. In recent times, this situation has been aggravated by strong polarization within Brazilian society. In addition to the existing lack of trust due to unmet expectations, conflicts have arisen between citizens and frontline workers. One example that I studied was the conflict around vaccines. A segment of society, influenced by Jair Bolsonaro, the then president of Brazil, opposed vaccinations and opposed health workers – some of them even using violence. Another ongoing study of mine explores conflicts related to human rights. Parts of society criticise teachers who discuss gender, race, or other human rights issues at

schools. The declining levels of trust are leading to a vocal and, at times, violent reaction from citizens against frontline workers.

What effect do the dynamics in citizen-state interactions have on the citizens' trust in state institutions?

Over the years, the trust issue has worsened, making it really difficult for frontline workers to implement policies. The breakdown of trust within a society and between citizens and frontline workers has far-reaching consequences. As citizens perceive that the state consistently fails to meet their demands and expectations, their trust and satisfaction decline, fostering disenchantment. Populist leaders capitalize on the grievances of those feeling neglected, promising radical solutions, framing society as divided and spreading the idea of "us" versus "them".

> Eroding trust in the state and frontline workers cultivates an atmosphere of conflict and disenchantment that can become a catalyst for the rise of populism.

In this narrative, civil servants, including frontline workers, are often portrayed as part of a corrupt elite which is compromising services and using the state in their favor. This narrative exacerbates societal polarization, generating more conflicts between citizens and frontline workers that further reinforce populist agendas, in a vicious circle. The resulting environment perpetuates a cycle of mutual distrust and animosity. The eroding trust in the state and frontline workers cultivates an atmosphere of conflict and disenchantment that can become a catalyst for the rise of populism, as citizens turn to alternative ideologies that promise change and address their grievances.

What can be learned from your research on Latin America for the European context of labor market administration?

For numerous years, South American countries have viewed European policies as ideals that could inspire our own. While this remains true, I believe that amidst the emerging challenges in the European labor market, the reality of South America, along with our reflections on it, could now serve as inspiration for European labor market policies. South America presents a diverse array of labor market challenges, including informality, economic disparities, inequalities, vulnerabilities, societal polarization, and the politicization of the frontline. Interestingly, these challenges, albeit smaller in scale, also exist in the global north.

> Labor market policies need to be intricately connected to responses addressing vulnerable conditions.

Can you give us concrete examples of how your research findings could be applied in the context of European labor market administration?

My studies, for instance, demonstrate that labor market policies need to be intricately connected to responses addressing conditions of vulnerability. This involves implementing additional social protection and welfare policies to support workers grappling with precarious employment. This implies that labor market policies need to be implemented in a cross-sectoral manner, collaborating with frontline workers from various policy areas. Such collaboration is essential to ensure inclusion and sustained participation in the labor market.

Furthermore, our research shows that considering the intersectionality of vulnerabilities (gender, race, class, etc.) is crucial. Policies need to account for these intersectionalities in order to comprehend the nuances of policy implementation — for instance, the differential treatment of black and white individuals by both the state and the market. Linked to this, our research delves into how citizen-state interactions are influenced by social dynamics such as social exclusion and racism. It elucidates how frontline workers can unintentionally perpetuate these dynamics during interactions with citizens, leading to increased inequalities in policy implementation and impacting citizens' own perceptions of citizenship.

> The prevalence of the informal economy in our policies is another area that may offer inspiration to European countries, particularly with the rise of informal labor markets.

Another significant aspect is the growing politicization of frontline work. We've observed an increase in the interference of political actors in the roles of frontline workers, influencing their interactions with citizens and the decisions they make. This situation gives rise to specific responses to political pressures by frontline workers and may contribute to heightened inequalities. The surge of populism worldwide poses a challenge that European countries are also grappling with.

Additionally, the prevalence of the informal economy in our policies is another area that may offer inspiration to European countries. Our research demonstrates how frontline workers must navigate informalities when implementing policies, effectively becoming an extension of the state. This discussion gains relevance in Europe, particularly with the rise of informal labor markets.

I understand that these elements are all critical and, unfortunately, quite disheartening. Nevertheless, it's crucial to acknowledge that the labor market is grappling with numerous challenges worldwide. Examining these issues from the perspective of South America may offer insights that could assist European policies in preventing potential problems.

More about the person

Gabriela Spanghero Lotta is professor and researcher of Public Administration and Government at Getulio Vargas Foundation (FGV) and was visiting professor at the University of Oxford (Blavatnik School of Government) in 2021. She is coordinator of the Center of Bureaucratic Studies (NEB), professor at the National School of Public Administration (ENAP), researcher at the Center for Metropolitan Studies (CEM) and an affiliated researcher at Princeton's Brazil.Lab. She works mainly in the areas of public policy, bureaucracy, implementation and government management. In 2021 she was nominated one of the world's 100 most influential academics in the field of government by the organization "Apolitical".

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