

HUMANITARIAN CRISIS AND GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE AGAINST VENEZUELAN WOMEN ¹

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Abstract

Venezuela faces a Complex Humanitarian Emergency, a type of humanitarian crisis that stretches through time, that often has a political origin, and also results in forced displacement (Villa, Basser & Ravinetto, 2007). This humanitarian crisis –characterized by food and medicine scarcity, hyperinflation, widespread violence, and widespread violations of human rights– has the displacement of approximately 6,038,937 Venezuelans by the end of 2021 (ACNUR & OIM [UNCHR & IOM], 2021), thus becoming the biggest migration crisis seen in the Americas, and until today, only surpassed in the rest of the world by the forced displacement crisis in Syria.

Key words: Venezuela, Humanitarian Emergency, displacements, hyperinflation, violence.

1 Opinions are personal. They do not represent those of the Organization of American States (OAS).

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Resumen

Venezuela se enfrenta a una Emergencia Humanitaria Compleja, un tipo de crisis humanitaria que se prolonga en el tiempo, que a menudo tiene un origen político y que también provoca desplazamientos forzados (Villa, Bassier & Ravinetto, 2007). Esta crisis humanitaria -caracterizada por escasez de alimentos y medicinas, hiperinflación, violencia generalizada y violaciones generalizadas de los derechos humanos- tiene como consecuencia el desplazamiento de aproximadamente 6.038.937 venezolanos para finales de 2021 (ACNUR & OIM [ACNUDH & OIM], 2021), convirtiéndose así en la mayor crisis migratoria vista en las Américas, y hasta hoy, sólo superada en el resto del mundo por la crisis de desplazamiento forzado en Siria.

Palabras clave: Venezuela, Emergencia Humanitaria, desplazamientos, hiperinflación, violencia.

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Venezuela faces a Complex Humanitarian Emergency, a type of humanitarian crisis that stretches through time, that often has a political origin, and also results in forced displacement (Villa, Basser & Ravinetto, 2007). This humanitarian crisis –characterized by food and medicine scarcity, hyperinflation, widespread violence, and widespread violations of human rights– has caused the displacement of approximately 6,038,937 Venezuelans by the end of 2021 (ACNUR & OIM [UNCHR & IOM], 2021), thus becoming the biggest migration crisis seen in the Americas, and until today, only surpassed in the rest of the world by the forced displacement crisis in Syria. Like in every crisis, this humanitarian and migration crisis affects women in a differentiated way. However, the analysis of political decisions and public policies to address the crisis have generally excluded women (Kohan & Rendon, 2020). This is despite the fact that including their points of view and perspectives is essential to improve the lives of women and girls, alleviate the situation of the population in general, as well as ensure better human development indicators in the country. All of this, ultimately, is crucial to guarantee the sustainability of Venezuela's long-term progress.

Taking into account that humanitarian and forced displacement crises disproportionately affect women, and aggravate existing gender inequalities, it is fundamental to understand the differentiated impact that the crisis is having on women. Women have been particularly affected in the access to their civil and political rights, as well as their socio-economic rights. For example, as a result of the collapse of the healthcare sector, maternal mortality and teen pregnancies keep rising, and due to the rise in food safety, women have become the main cushions of the food deficit in their families. The accumulated effect of the violation of their rights ends up becoming a factor of expulsion. In their migration process, women face the hardships of being migrants, and of being women, being victims of gender violence in their country of origin, in the transit countries, as well as in the destination countries.

This article reviews some of the violence that Venezuelan women face in their home country, and focuses on the situation that Venezuelan migrant women face, especially those who are victims of the dangerous combination of xenophobia and misogyny. While the first part reviews the rise of maternal mortality, the second part explores the limited access to contraceptives as a transgression to the sexual and reproductive rights of Venezuelan women, which is also another manifestation of violence. The third section reviews the violation of the right to food safety of Venezuelan women, and how, from that perspective, women are also violated. The next section delves into the situation of Venezuelan migrant women, and the various dimensions of gender violence they face in their migration journey, and once in the host countries. The last section offers some recommendations as to where political discussions, and Region's policies discussions should focus on this issue.

Maternal mortality

In 2017, the last time the rates for epidemiological surveillance were published, Venezuela had a maternal mortality rate of around 65.8% (Banco Mundial, World Bank). In 2018, the rate of child mortality, generally related to maternal mortality, had risen to 21 deaths for every 1000 live births (Banco Mundial). These high rates of mortality both maternal and child reveal the differentiated impact that the collapse of the healthcare system has had on women.

The crisis in the healthcare system has sharply violated women's right to health access. In practice, this manifests as a lack of critical access to prenatal attention, including regular check-ups, access to prenatal vitamins, prenatal vaccines and tetanus screenings, anemia, malnutrition, and sexually transmitted diseases. Although these are standard protocols in most countries in Latin America, they are rarely available for pregnant women in Venezuela. The access to this type of assistance has been affected by the lack of coverage, infrastructure, and access to basic medicines, as well as hospital supplies that reduce health entities' capacity to guarantee this right to women.

A key element for the prevention of maternal deaths is the resumption of epidemiological surveillance to monitor occurrences, identify potential risks and prevent them, just as to guarantee postpartum health services. Therefore, it must be central to the public policies' responses (Schwarcz & Fescine, 2000). Not having access to these services in Venezuela is pushing pregnant women to search for them outside of the country. In fact, many future mothers have not had another choice but to head to Colombia and Brazil to give birth (Doce, 2018). In November 2019, almost eight of every ten children born in Cúcuta were born to Venezuelan mothers. Thus, addressing maternal mortality is key to improving Venezuela's human development and reducing the pressure on Brazil and Colombia's already fragile healthcare systems.

Venezuelan women without sexual and reproductive rights

In Venezuela, access to birth control is almost non-existent. Nowadays, they are not available in public hospitals and, in the few cases where they are provided, they are sold by private providers at extremely high prices. Family planning generally reduces the number of pregnancies women have and allows them to control the time of these pregnancies, distancing them from the high-risk ages, and allowing for longer intervals between births.

In Venezuela also happens that most unwanted pregnancies end in abortions, performed clandestinely, and without proper health conditions. As previously mentioned, the absence of adequate obstetric care, added to an ever-increasing number of unwanted pregnancies –than often end up in abortions–, is producing, as a result, an unprecedented rise in maternal deaths. An illustrative element of the violation of this right on Venezuelan women is the extremely high levels of teenage pregnancies; which not only add to the increasing numbers of maternal mortality, but compromise the future of young Venezuelan women, and of the country itself.

According to the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA, 2017), Venezuela has the highest rate of teenage pregnancies in the region, with one of every four babies born to teenage mothers.

Women: the cushion of the food scarcity

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) estimates that, in 2018, around 21.2% of the Venezuelan population, or 6.8 million Venezuelans, were malnourished (FAO, 2019). These high rates of food insecurity have a differentiated impact on women. The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights 2019 Report documented that food scarcity is having “an especially adverse impact on women, some of them informed that they spend 10 hours a day in lines to buy food,” (OHCHR, 2019). Given that women are the head of around 40% of homes (Kohan & Rendon, 2020), they are responsible for generating the income to buy food and stand in line to buy them –when they are available.

Similarly, a study by the organization CEPAZ found that in 60% of homes in Venezuela’s poorest districts, women also work as a cushion to dampen food scarcity by postponing and skipping meals so that other family members can eat. Public policies’ response to food insecurity would have to deal with structural factors. While the strategies to alleviate the effects of scarcity must center on the delivery of humanitarian help, with a differentiated focus, especially on women and children.

When migrating is the only option: violence against migrant women

The humanitarian crisis has been a pushing factor for Venezuelan migration. While migrants were once mostly men, women now are migrating at relatively similar rates. Thus, it can be argued that there has been a feminization of Venezuelan migration. In 2020, women generally represented 40% of the migrants that entered Brazil, while in Colombia, around 49% of the 1.5 million Venezuelan migrants were women¹. Being a migrant or refugee automatically places people in a state of vulnerability: new country, new costumes, the need for work, for housing. However, this vulnerability especially accentuates in the case of women, who face the same inequalities that many migrants face plus other inequalities just because they are women.

The same inequalities and violence they face in their countries of origin continue during the migration process, and once they settle down in their countries of migratory destination. The wage gap persists, and women are haunted by gender stereotypes and social roles assignment, gender-based discrimination, gender-based violence, and street harassment, as well as the limited access to sexual and reproductive rights. Another manifestation of gender-

¹ Information available at: <https://datosmacro.expansion.com/demografia/migracion/inmigracion/colombia>

based violence associated with migratory processes that affect women in a differentiated and more pronounced way is human trafficking.

According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), nearly 25 million people around the world are still victims of forced labor, human trafficking, debt bondage, or labor in conditions similar to slavery (ILO, 2020). Of these people, 1.2 million are located in Latin America and the Caribbean. This situation is alarming because, in the middle of the 21st century, human trafficking is one of the most significant violations of human rights, and the reality for many people in our region. Additionally, it is a silent criminal activity, difficult to identify, which we can all be a witness to without realizing –and that is also related to other types of illicit activities such as drug trafficking and arms smuggling, with similar profitability.

A significant worry that emerges from the analysis of this phenomenon is that human trafficking also ends up increasing inequalities, particularly to those in bigger states of vulnerability, who are the most susceptible to becoming victims of this crime. Thereon, according to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), over 70% of detected trafficking victims are women and girls, and one of every three victims is a boy or a girl (UNODC, 2018).

On the other side, it is also worth noting, with worry, the serious impacts the COVID-19 Pandemic had in terms of job losses and the rise of poverty –effects that will certainly intensify the situation of vulnerability that human trafficking victims were already a part of. Particularly, quarantine measures and social distancing have caused trafficking victims to have even fewer opportunities to escape and ask for help.²

This global reality is occurring in our region, and it is also the reality of many Venezuelan migrant women. According to a report by Cepaz, Venezuelan women suffer double and triple vulnerabilities as migrants, with 43% of Venezuelan migrant women, who were objects of study, were exposed to discrimination by their age and gender –as well as stigmatization as “provocative” in some countries. Likewise, the report documents that, during their journey to the destination country, Venezuelan migrant women, teens, and girls are exposed to situations in which they are forced to undress, or have forced sex, to be able to make the journey by truck or access a bus ticket, or to be able to pass through frontier posts, among other forms of violence. Overall, the specific stigmatization of Venezuelan women as sex objects also criminalizes their migration.

Finally, migrant women also face the manifestation of gender-based violence that directly infringes on their lives: femicide. Data from the United Nations show that while the world average is 3 of every 10 women, in Venezuela the proportion is 10% higher, being part of the list of 15 countries with the most femicides in the world. Moreover, the NGOs *Centro de Justicia y Paz* (Peace and Justice Center, CEPAZ by its acronym in Spanish), from the *Observatorio Venezolano de los Derechos Humanos de las Mujeres* (Venezuelan Observatory for Women’s Human Rights), *Fundamujer*, and *Asociación Larense de Planificación Familiar* (Lara’s Association for Family Planning) also placed Venezuela among the 15 countries with

2 UNODC, [IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON TRAFFICKING IN PERSONS, 2020.](#)

most femicides in the world. This violence also relocates with them. It is known that in 2020, at least 14 Venezuelan migrant women were victims of femicide (CEPAZ, 2020). CEPAZ confirms that, on average, a Venezuelan migrant woman was killed every 4 days in the last 4-6 months of 2020.

Recommendations for action

The main challenge to fight the violence that migrant women from Venezuela face is to be able to bring awareness of their reality. Awareness begins with the identification of the gaps in gender inequality. In other words, the exclusive practices and discriminatory obstacles that affect women, and this requires the availability of data disaggregated by sex. This must be the priority to bring awareness to the violations of women's human rights, and the instances of violence to which they are subjected.

In the particular case of combat and elimination of the scourge of trafficking and violence against migrant and refugee women,³ as stated by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), it is key to continue working in the next lines:

1. Fundamentally, the countries in the region must improve in the coordination and articulation of adequate and cross-border responses, among transit and host countries, as well as in the reinforcement of the institutional and financial capacities to implement sustainable policies against human trafficking in contexts of high human mobility.
2. It is equally fundamental to start protection and assistance mechanisms for trafficking victims, which includes not only facilitating access to the labor market, but also legal and psychosocial assistance. As noted by the international regulations for trafficking victims' protection –and to a greater or lesser extent by national-level public policies– this attention must be offered independently from the migratory status of the people who have survived these trafficking situations.
3. It is vital to keep open the shelters and hotlines, as well as ensure access to justice and prevent people in situations of vulnerability from falling into traffic networks. In the same vein, the law enforcement in charge must remain vigilant to new forms of human trafficked victims capture and adapt their responses to those scenarios.

Finally, it is also essential to highlight the leadership of Venezuelan migrant and refugee women. IOM's recent study (2020: 19) titled *Organizaciones de Personas Migrantes y Refugiadas Venezolanas en Latinoamérica y el Caribe* ("Venezuelan Migrants and Refugees' Organizations in Latin America and the Caribbean") confirmed that half of the leadership in organization of the diaspora of Venezuelan people are women. Considering their important participation in

3 UNODC, [IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON TRAFFICKING IN PERSONS](#), 2020; OIM, [Analytical Snapshot #14: Human trafficking](#), 2020.

leadership roles, it is also important to capitalize on their perspectives and strengthen their capacity and leadership as women in the humanitarian space, to bring humanitarian help to those who need it the most –including fighting gender-based violence against migrant women, educating other women, and becoming spokeswomen of the reality of Venezuelan migrant and refugee women.