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CORRUPTION:
impact in girls and women in the Venezuelan human mobility context

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Legal Deposit: DC2021000339

ISBN: 978-980-7956-01-7

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Rif J-41161592-7

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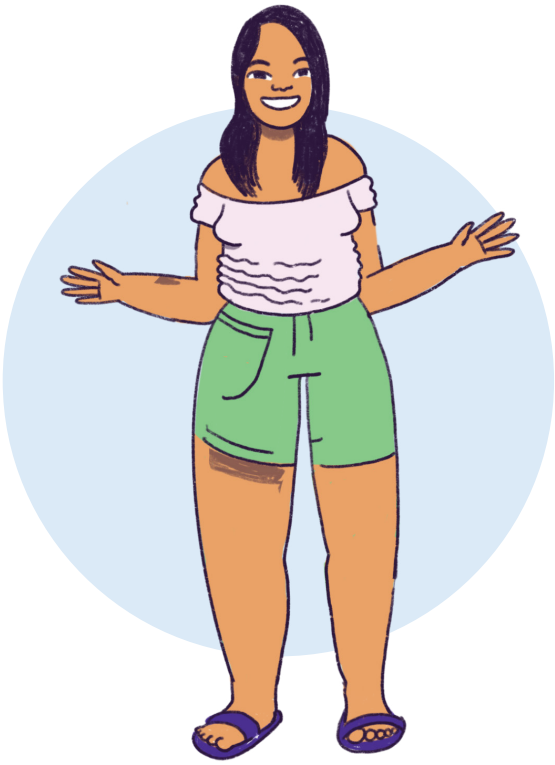
Corruption: impact in girls and women in the Venezuelan human mobility context

by: **Norma Ferrer González**[1]



Human mobility is a phenomenon that has been studied mainly from the demographic point of view, as well as the implications for the exercise of the human rights of migrants or persons in need of international protection. Corruption, for its part, is an aspect that is often neglected in this type of analysis, but it must be kept in mind that it can cause mobility or cause risks that during the journey affect the integrity of women and girls.

The risk of abuse and exploitation appears to be higher among women and girls in need of international protection and irregular migrants; therefore, the research aims to analyze the forms and effects of corruption that directly and indirectly affect Venezuelan women and girls in mobility, developing recommendations on how to integrate human rights, gender and intersectional approaches in the fight against corruption.



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I) What is corruption and how it can be linked to human mobility?

We begin this analysis by giving a basic concept of corruption, and we can affirm that corruption is any abuse of power deployed for personal or third-party gain. According to J.L. De La Cuesta (2003), corruption is associated with any irregularity committed in the context of a decision, or in the framework of an abuse of power, provided that the corrupt action pursues the objective of obtaining an illicit profit (De La Cuesta Arzamendi, 2003). Transparency International defines corruption as the abuse of the power conferred to obtain a private benefit (Transparency International, 2009), generating inefficiency, by diverting resources devoted to the satisfaction of rights and needs from satisfying the tastes and pleasures of unscrupulous civil servants and, by affecting human rights such as the right to life, health, food, housing and in general, the possibility of a decent life, especially for the most vulnerable groups (Transparencia Venezuela, 2019).

This last criteria on corruption incorporates consequences that can be derived from corruption at the highest levels of government, known as grand corruption, by deteriorating stability, independence and impartiality of public institutions called upon to guarantee human rights affects the quality of life of individuals who, in search of job, economic and social stability, can make the decision to migrate or flee the country, seeking international protection, corruption being a cause of forced human mobility. In this sense, Dimant examined the impact of corruption on migration in 11 countries between 1985 and 2000, indicating according to the evidence gathered that corruption is one of the factors of migration, especially the migration of qualified persons, arguing that corruption tends to diminish educational returns, which is particularly relevant for people with better education (Dimant, et al., 2013).

This study reveals the impact of corruption on the migration of a specific sector of the population, separated from the rest by educational conditions. In Venezuela, the flow of Venezuelans abroad has occurred in different stages or waves from the year 2000 to the present date (Semana, 2020), the migration from 2000 to 2010 was characterized by an orderly exit in which the characteristics of migrants were middle and upper class with a high level of education, motivated by the political climate in the country, mass dismissals in the oil sector and political persecution, which showed, already from that moment on, the lack of independence of some institutions and the silence of others, bringing us closer to the theory expressed by Dimant. However, as corruption escalates in Venezuela, the institutional and economic deterioration to what we know today as the Complex Humanitarian Emergency (CHE), the characterization of the flow of Venezuelan people leaving Venezuela drastically changed, as well as the countries of destination.

According to the report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, corruption is an element of the Venezuelan crisis, with a nexus between corruption and serious human rights violations (OHCHR, 2020), precisely, this scenario shows the weakening of the rule of law in Venezuela and therefore of democracy, lacking the protection and guarantees that must be provided by the State to which they belong.

When people do not feel protected by their own State or are victims of human rights violations or persecution, they are forced to flee to another country, which can provide them with protection[2]. It is then necessary to conclude that corruption (specifically grand corruption[3]) can be a cause of human mobility, as it impacts directly on the quality of life of people, eroding the entire democratic system of the State, weakening the rule of law, creating a nexus between corruption and human rights violations, stealing the future from people by destroying the economic, educational and health system, thereby generating the forced migration of millions of people and the need for international protection in many others.

2 En la investigación se aborda la movilidad humana, abarcando la migración propiamente dicha, como las solicitudes de protección internacional como una consecuencia de la corrupción generalizada dentro del Estado de origen.

3 Gran corrupción consiste en actos cometidos en los niveles más altos del gobierno que involucran la distorsión de políticas o de funciones centrales del Estado, y que permiten a los líderes beneficiarse a expensas del bien común.

II) Risks of corruption associated to human mobility

In contexts of human mobility such as the Venezuelan, it should be taken into account the risks associated with the exodus of Venezuelans across land and sea borders, which may be related to the corruption of public officials, or may be more complex and associated with transnational crime and its many expressions, with the smuggling of migrants and trafficking in persons being relevant for this research. It must be kept in mind that any border represents a benefit and a problem for States. Eastern Colombian and Western Venezuelan Border is affected by corruption and intensive smuggling (Albornoz-Arias, et al., 2019). In this regard, Tarek Williams Saab, noted with respect to the shipwreck that occurred in December 2020, in Guiria, Sucre state, that it is a "mafia" of human trafficking and they have requested the arrest of seven officials of the National Guard for extortion (DW, 2020).

María[4] 26 years old, indicated that one of the most frequent risks of corruption is the request for some benefit by migration officials at the borders to allow the passage of foreign persons, as well as the screening of baggage and subsequent removal of objects to allow the entry of nationals.

These facts were revealed in the surveys conducted for this study, which will be analyzed later. The request for a benefit that most of the time is due to an economic benefit arises when women and girls in mobility do not possess their travel documents, a situation that is very present in Venezuela, due to the Administrative Service for Identification, Migration and Aliens (SAIME) does not issue passports or extensions on a regular basis (BBC, 2018), a situation that continues to this day and that was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, generating risks of corruption within the institution itself, where public officials have found corrupt incentives to facilitate the printing of passports and extensions to users. These acts of corruption have been reported by different organizations and by social media (BBC, 2018). Added to the increasingly unattainable cost that the Venezuelan population has to pay to access the passport or to the extension of the passport that varies from 200 USD to 100 USD, approximately (Transparencia Venezuela, 2019).

It should also be kept in mind that women in human mobility are at risk of facing other types of problems when dealing with corruption, such as sextortion or sexual extortion, as officials may apply for a benefit that is not precisely economic in content and that violates the sexual integrity of women and/or girls in their care.



4 Los nombres en todos los testimonios han sido cambiados para proteger la identidad de las mujeres que colaboraron con esta investigación.

III) Risks of corruption in the humanitarian system

The decision to apply for international protection is very difficult; persons who obtain refuge from a foreign State often lose the opportunity to return to their country of origin, even temporarily, because it is a measure that must be fulfilled if the life of the person who requests it is in danger. Refugees do not decide to become one, they are in a situation of total vulnerability to their State and seek protection in a foreign country, without losing such vulnerability.

Staff in the humanitarian sector must have the sensitivity and understanding of these conditions in order to avoid the abuse of their power in front of persons in need of international protection. In one of the psychosocial studies of asylum seekers conducted, Verkuyten (2004) noted that hostile reactions to asylum seekers were associated with anger and the perception that economically motivated migrants unfairly exploited the refugee system, while genuine political refugees provoked sympathetic emotional reactions (Louis, et al., 2007).

The meaning, limits and effects of corruption have been studied, particularly in the domain of the State and relations with citizens. The scope of humanitarian relations has important similarities with that of relations between States, in particular with regard to concerns about the provision of social assistance and beneficiaries (Feldman, 2018).

The language of corruption unites a wide range of bad practices, including fraud, nepotism, misuse of resources and duplicity, and identifies them as similar failures. In this sense, only the idea of corruption in the humanitarian system goes against the principles of creation of this system, or the so-called **dehumanization of the humanitarian system.**

Despite the evident inequality of conditions and vulnerabilities between a woman asylum seeker and an official of the humanitarian system, few studies on this subject have been conducted in the region with Venezuelan human mobility, so we are in the need to take examples and references from other latitudes, due to many of the conditions they go through are similar.

Women in mobility may experience different forms of corruption in the context of humanitarian assistance or when living in refugee camps, a situation from which Venezuelan migration has not escaped. Countries affected by emergencies such as natural disasters and conflict are often poor and face high levels of corruption (Chêne, 2009).

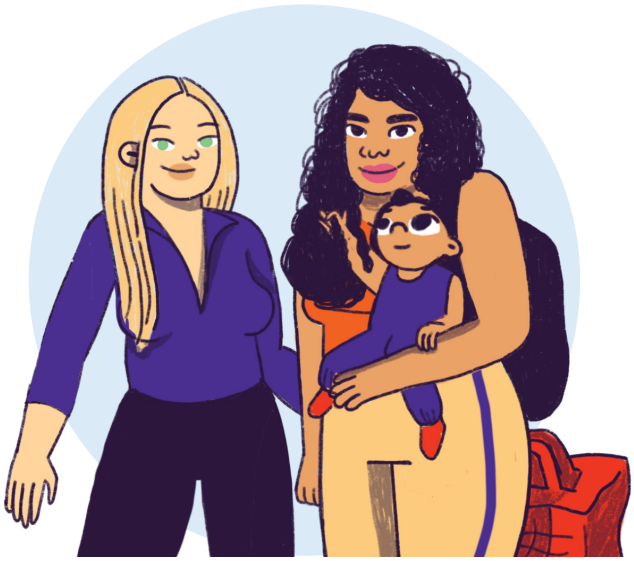
Aid resources can actually increase corrupt practices, which have a negative impact on the quality and quantity of humanitarian assistance, and women are the most affected by such emergencies, especially because they are often responsible for the care of other members of the family. They are therefore also the most affected by corruption in the context of humanitarian aid. For example, Syrian refugee women in Lebanon reportedly had to pay bribes for humanitarian aid (OCCRP, 2014).

Women in need of international protection due to limited financial resources are vulnerable to sexual exploitation (sexual abuse, sexual slavery, trafficking for sexual exploitation, forced prostitution, sextortion), in particular due to patriarchal attitudes, gender discrimination and the fact that basic services are often provided by men, so transactional sex can become a survival strategy (Chêne, 2009; ACNUR y Save the Children, 2002; Ghosh, 2009; Amnesty International, 2016). Single women and widows are most vulnerable to sexual exploitation for help because they are not protected by male household members (Chêne, 2009).

In addition to these risks of gender-based violence against women and girls, for whom the complicity of officials is required, details a list of offences to which women in mobility may be victims both at the stage of applying for refugee status and during their stay in a refugee camp:

Tipo de Corrupción	Definición	Ejemplos
Extortion	Abuse of power to constrain or induce someone to give or promise, for himself or for another(a), a sum of money or any other undue gain or gift	Bribe, kick-back
Bribery	Payment given or received in a corrupt relationship	Bribes, gratuities, business arrangements, payments, fast money.
Eembezzlement	Use of State resources earmarked for a specific cause.	Institutional robbery
Abuse of authority	Abuse of functions, for the purpose of ordering or executing, in damage to any person, an arbitrary act which is not specifically provided for as an offence or misdemeanor by a provision of the law	Damages to persons in abuse of power
Influence peddling	the use of power or influence on someone else's behalf in return for money or favors	Pulling strings
Sextortion	Request for sex as an exchange currency, in abuse of power and through psychological coercion	Sexual extortion, blackmailing, extortion, sexual abuse, sexual harassment.

Taking into account this description of types of corruption, it is noted that they can all occur in the humanitarian context, as well as within the State, precisely one of the solutions to avoid the appearance of these very bad practices is in its origins and is the respectful treatment of the person with international protection, especially that of women, adolescents and girls.



IV) Corruption and Human Smuggling

The smuggling of migrants is considered an organized crime offense, this according to Venezuelan legislation (LOCDOFT, 2012) and the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (UNTOC), in which the smuggling of migrants is defined as follows:

> ***"Smuggling of migrants" means facilitating the illegal entry of a person into a State Party of which that person is not a national or a permanent resident for the purpose of obtaining, directly or indirectly, a financial or other material benefit;***

Therefore, to be in the presence of this crime requires:
1. A public official having the authority to allow entry to a foreign person;
2. Willingness to facilitate entry for a person who does not possess the necessary documentation to enter that State;
3. Obtaining a benefit through the use (abuse) of the conferred authority.

For this crime to be defined, we find that the same elements are present in the definition of corruption, namely: abuse of power by an official to obtain a benefit for himself or a third party, that is, without corruption there is no smuggling of migrants.

The smuggling of migrants is considered a transnational crime, requiring the interaction of parties from at least two States and the crossing of a border for it to be configured, which leads us to observe the appreciation that global crime and corruption are connected, since this activity would be inconceivable, without the intervention of corrupt officials in the immigration control points, who will receive payments to look the other way (Sampson, 2010). It should also be kept in mind that high levels of corruption in transit countries significantly contribute to human mobility (Shelley, 2014).

The risk of being a victim of smuggling of migrants is closely linked to the lack of travel documents such as passports or visas requested by the country of transit or destination.

It is necessary to understand that these processes of corruption always occur under schemes where one person has power over another, power conferred by the public administration, therefore corruption intervenes. In conclusion, *corruption is essential to commit smuggling of migrants and the conditions under which women, girls and adolescents have been forced to migrate can determine their vulnerability to these risks.*



V) The role of corruption in trafficking in women and girls

Global crime cannot exist without the intervention of corruption, it is therefore that trafficking in persons (TIP) is an organized crime and according to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, is one of the most lucrative illicit businesses (UNODC, 2012) and for every 10 victims globally, 5 are adult women and 2 are girls (UNODC, 2021), being mostly sexually exploited and in domestic work. According to this report, traffickers use as an advantage the systemic corruption of certain States for transnational trafficking in persons, as has been the case in the Asian region, where criminal gangs exploit these weaknesses to obtain fraudulent documents from ships.

Corruption is increasingly cited as a key reason for TIP and its impunity. Corruption facilitates trafficking and fuels the flow of people by destabilizing democracies, weakening a country's rule of law and halting the development of a nation. At the same time, trafficking, which may involve global or regional networks, contributes to a country's corruption. To function, TIP depends on the remuneration of the police, judges, judges and ministers/ministers at all levels (Tremblay, 2011).

However, in this section, corruption is studied as a cause of TIP and as a facilitating agent of its commission, observing each of the elements of this crime, to this end the concept of TIP given by the Palermo protocol to prevent, to suppress and punish trafficking in persons, especially women and children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime:

> ***"Trafficking in persons" shall mean the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation.***

From the above definition, we can affirm that TIP is a composite crime, it is constructed with the commission of several actions such as: capture, transport, transfer, receipt of persons, in addition to different means, some of which are crimes individually such as: threats, use of force, coercion, abduction, fraud, deception, abuse of power or position of vulnerability, payments or benefits to obtain consent for the ultimate purpose of exploitation, so we will analyze one by one to identify the risks of corruption at each stage, as follows:

- **Recruitment:** It is the form of recruitment of victims of human trafficking, whose strategies will vary depending on the purpose of the exploitation in question (Polaris, 2017). The way of recruitment will not be the same if the purpose of trafficking is sexual exploitation, in which often the one who captures the victim, most of the time a woman, is her partner and some others, a woman who uses her feminine condition to use empathy to gain the trust of the victim (GTEMV, 2019). Another way of attracting them are the deceptive job offers that can occur through cybernetic channels, through social networks, groups of Venezuelans abroad, means that are taking more and more boom. In the case of Venezuela, the increase in the number of women moving to the south of the country to engage in illegal mining is a matter of concern (Transparencia Venezuela, 2019). According to a report by Insight Crime, human trafficking in the Bolívar state, shows that forced labor camps and sex trafficking networks seem to grow in the illegal mines of that region (Insight Crime, 2021) and one of the most frequent ways of recruitment has been the offer of deceptive work, women agree to "work" in the mines to cook and wash, however they are involved in a situation of sexual exploitation (UCAB, 2020). Corruption makes its appearance in the forms of recruitment when these facts denounced by organizations, political actors and victims, are invisibilized and silenced, the lack of actions, the prosecution and investigation of the authorities creates a climate of impunity that encourages all existing recruitment mechanisms and the proliferation of new forms of recruitment.

- **Transportation:** For the transport of persons (understand it as the means used to transport them, whether terrestrial, aquatic or aerial), in an illegal or irregular way, the intervention of officials is necessary that allow this activity, or that receive a benefit to "look the other way", especially when victims lack documentation to enter a foreign State, thus being linked to the smuggling of migrants. Large corporations and local businesses can be complicit in the process by allowing the use of their transportation to help the TIP network in exchange for bribes and other illegal payments (ILO, 2005).

- **Transfer:** In the transfer, understood as the act of uprooting the victim from his or her place of birth or residence, corruption may or may not be involved. In transnational trafficking, this transfer can be illegal and involve different actors to facilitate it.

- **Receipt of persons:** this stage occurs with the arrival of the victim at the place of exploitation (or place of transit, if transport and/or transfer to a place other than that continues), where the trafficker will exercise various forms of control or coercion over the victim and whose site may be operating clandestinely or have a legal facade under the consent of authorities and complicity of companies, in addition to how it was previously pointed out the security on the part of the traffickers to have impunity, exerting influence on officials of the System of Administration of Criminal Justice.

- **Exploitation:** The main objective of TIP, which can take the form of sexual exploitation, forced labor, slavery and servitude, traffickers often resort to networks of trustworthy hotels or people willing to rent accommodation for them. Very often, these people pay bribes or are bribed to allow the trafficking network to set up operations, receiving a percentage of the money generated by the victim (Tremblay, 2011).

Corruption acts to facilitate the implementation of all or some of the stages of trafficking in persons, in addition to being a fundamental factor for the maintenance of criminal networks, which are engaged in this illicit business, through the use of corruption installed in a State, which has corroded its institutions of law enforcement and protection of guarantees and human rights.

However, returning to the data revealed by the recent UNODC report, it is noted that there is a relation between the increase in trafficking in persons in Venezuela and the decrease in the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), since 2014, Venezuela has experienced significant GDP contractions, with estimates suggesting broad sectors of the population below the poverty line, noting that in 2018, 430 Venezuelan victims of human trafficking were identified in 21 countries in South America, Central America, Western and Southern Europe and South-Eastern Europe, and that the regression analysis confirms that there is a significant relation between the contraction of GDP and the increase in Venezuelan TIP victims worldwide (UNODC, 2021).

This means that we have an explanation of an economic factor as a cause of the emergence and/or increase of TIP victims in a given region and behind that economic factor there can be a more perverse cause such as corruption, which indicates a decrease in GDP, that according to UNODC statements is closely related to the increase in victims of trafficking in persons and that is evident from the economic crisis that corruption and bad practices have brought to Venezuela, causing the forced migration of millions of vulnerable Venezuelans, exposing them to human trafficking.

In this context, it is necessary to understand that the effective fight against trafficking in persons requires addressing related forms of transnational crime organizations and corruption.

VI) Testimonies of migrant women and identification of risks of corruption during their route

To obtain the testimony of Venezuelan women in mobility, a questionnaire was applied to determine whether they had witnessed acts of corruption during their migratory route and upon arrival in the country of destination, being answered by eight Venezuelan women.

It was found that the ages of Venezuelan women studied ranged from 26 to 50 years, 50 per cent of those surveyed entered the country of destination accompanied by family members and only 25% travelled with children or teenagers, and of this number, 37.5% indicated that these children or teens were economically dependent on them.

100% of those surveyed left Venezuela by official routes and had travel documents (passport/ extension). 62.5% had family or friends in the country of destination and 25% had dual nationality. The maximum journey time to their destination was five months and 50% were engaged in economic activities in transit countries and/or cities.

2.5% replied that the greatest difficulty for their mobility was obtaining a Venezuelan passport, while another 12.5% indicated the risk of trafficking as a difficulty and attributed the cause to xenophobia. 12.5% more said that the culture of the country of destination was an obstacle, while another 12.5% mentioned that the biggest obstacle was to go through so many needs and not have the proper, fair and free treatment of everyone. On the other hand, 25% responded not to find any difficulty.

25% of those surveyed replied that they had returned to Venezuela and 66.6% found the Venezuelan border with Colombia functioning properly and managed to enter the country through a regular route. 33% of those surveyed responded that they observed acts of corruption when entering Venezuela, carried out by officials of the Bolivarian National Guard at border checkpoints. 25% of respondents reported that they were victims of discrimination in the country of destination. 12.5% of respondents indicated that they suffered abuse and abuse of authority by police officers in the country of destination (Colombia).

Angela, 38, left Venezuela in search of a better future and thought she would find it when a job offer from a joint venture offered her competitive working conditions and wages with benefits to work in seasonal fruit picking. The real situation was very different: *"we slept in trailers, overcrowded, I had to get up at 3:00 a.m. to be able to bathe, there was no rest, they never paid what they promised, we decided to organize, but the complicity of the authorities in these acts and the discrimination against Venezuelan migrants when trying to denounce were noted."*

Laura, 30, witnessed trafficking in children for the purpose of begging by others in Bogotá, she saw parents of children "rent" them so that other Venezuelan migrants could climb into public transport units to ask for money using them: "The police often persecuted these people, threatening to take the children to social services, I also saw how many Venezuelan women and teens were forced to prostitute themselves in the streets of Bogota."

From the responses of Venezuelan women in mobility surveyed and their complementary comments, the profound need for knowledge about their human rights as migrants was noted, as well as the need for protection from gender discrimination and xenophobia in countries of transit and destination.

The risks of corruption that emerge from the testimonies have been: extorsion and abuse of authority, specifically by police forces at the borders and within the countries of transit and destination, and risks of trafficking in persons for the purpose of sexual exploitation, labor and begging of others.

Conclusions

There is a link between corruption and human mobility, being corruption a catalyst for mobility processes or as a factor of impact, increasing the risks on the migration route.

Political corruption or grand corruption undermines in such a way the democratic foundations of a State, which weakens or eliminates the rule of law, creating a nexus between corruption and human rights violations, forcing millions of women and girls to escape from a system that exposes them to the risk of exploitation, to face the reality of carrying this vulnerability wherever they go.

It was determined that corruption is indispensable and inherent to the global crime in that the smuggling of migrants and trafficking in persons need it to continue to exist to the detriment of Venezuelan women and girls, who are victims of this crime that violates human dignity and leaves lasting consequences.

In search of relief for their needs, many women turn to the humanitarian system where they may also encounter risks of corruption, which leads to exploitation, if not for the attention that these institutions should pay to the preparation of their staff and the good practices that they as organizations implement.



Recommendations

States of origin, transit and destination

- Awareness-raising and information campaigns on the risks of corruption that women and girls in mobility may encounter, as well as on their human rights.

- Training of officials with competence in the care of people in mobility, with emphasis on understanding the conditions of vulnerability of women and girls, to avoid discrimination and expose them to risks.

- Train officials on sextortion in the context of human mobility.

Venezuelan Parliament

- Criminalization of Sextortion as a crime of corruption, a form and crime of gender-based violence against girls and women in the Organic Law on the Right of Women to a Life Free from Violence.

Member organizations of the Humanitarian System in Venezuela

- Assess the impact of corruption within the Humanitarian System in Venezuela on girls and women.

- Training on ethics for officials of the Humanitarian System and staff of social organizations, as well as the impact of acts of corruption in this sector on girls and women.

Civil Society Organizations

- Use the corruption approach in its research and work field, establishing the relationship and impact with the protection risks to which women and girls in mobility are exposed.

- Create sensitization and training spaces on the impact of corruption in women and girls.

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Who to call?

In case of emergency, you can call the following numbers:

Colombia: 123 (Police)
155 (Gender Based Violence hotline)

Ecuador: 911 (Emergency hotline)

Perú: 105 (Police)
100 (Woman emergency center)

Brasil: 180 (Women's assistance hotline)
181 (report criminal information)
190 (Military police)

Chile: 133 (Police)
134 (Investigation police)

Argentina: 911 (Emergency hotline)
144 (Buenos Aires Gender Based Violence hotline)

Venezuela: 911 (Emergency hotline)

AVESA: (YEI) (+58) 0424-166.22.20 (text messages)

Dilo aquí: (+58) 0412-312.26.29

Mulier: (+58) 414-625.41.25

Voces de Género: (+58) 0424 217.19.28

Éxodo: (+58) 0412 885.42.81



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