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VENEZUELAN WOMEN AND GIRLS:

Between gender-based violence, pandemic and human mobility

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Venezuelan women and girls: between gender-based violence, pandemic and human mobility

by: **Verónica Mesa**[1]



In the context of the Venezuelan exodus that has taken place in recent years as a result of the complex humanitarian emergency (CHE) in the country, a considerable number of women and girls have been displaced in search of a better quality of life. In conditions of human mobility, added to the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, these girls face tensions in the encounter with new spaces that become very hostile to them. Teenagers who move with their abusive partners, women who flee carrying their children, girls who leave or move around the country all alone.

In addition to the problems related to the conditions in which mobility is exercised in these contexts, the deepening of gender-based violence (GBV) is observed, especially sexual violence. We are talking about GBV because women and feminized bodies (children, adolescents and LGBTTTIQ+ population) are violated due to patterns that prescribe the objectification and erotization of their bodies. To this is added the xenophobia and the imaginaries that have been ascribed to Venezuelan women where their sexual objectification prevails (CARE, 2019).

The precariousness of their new mobility condition, the need to support themselves and their sons and daughters, the desire to send remittances to their loved ones makes Venezuelans more vulnerable to GBV. A report by the United Nations High Commissioner indicates that risk factors, coupled with hypersexualized stereotypes, increase the vulnerability of migrant women and girls (WG) to trafficking, sexual exploitation and other forms of gender-based violence in transit and the place of destination (ACNUDH, 2019).

COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 signifies the paralysis of economic, commercial and productive activities, in addition to the almost complete cessation of school activities. This situation exacerbates existing problems and deepens inequalities. Similarly, confinement and mobility restrictions exacerbate situations of GBV, especially domestic violence, sexual and child violence (Red LAC, 2020). Worse still, measures to stop the spread create even more obstacles for the usual ones to identify victims of GBV. Resources normally used to prevent, detect and care for girls and women in situations of violence have been diverted to address the COVID-19 pandemic.

The purpose of this research is to map the most common forms of GBV, to which Venezuelan women can be exposed in their human mobility routes. More than a horror story, this text is a mirror to the cruel reality of the roads and a small guide to learn to recognize and overcome the obstacles that arise in transit.

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Types of gender-based violence (GBV) in human mobility context

Although we will make an effort to characterize the different forms of GBV that occur in these contexts, sometimes the line between them becomes blurred, as they usually happen in an escalating way or several types of violence are configured simultaneously. For example, sexual harassment can escalate to sexual assault or rape. A scene of domestic violence can be combined or happen at the same time as a situation of trafficking or sexual exploitation.

• Sexual Violence

There are various forms of violence that include sexual violence. These include sexual harassment, sexual abuse and rape. We will go punctually on each of them to distinguish their nuances and conditions of occurrence.

• Sexual harrassment

According to UN Women sexual harassment is a form of sexual violence that can happen with or without physical contact in the form of sexually suggestive looks, stalking, sexual comments, exposure of sexual organs from one person to another, pinching, touching in a sexual manner, among other behaviors of a similar nature. Venezuelan women in a situation of internal mobility suffer sexual harassment by drivers when they ask for a drive[2]. Estos suelen insinuarse a las chicas que recogen y tocarlas de forma indebida (UNFPA, 2020).

The great absence of public transport on internal routes, which may include the mobilization of one State to another or the transfer within a region to reach the destination, forces women to move "asking for a drive", facing all the risks that derive from it:

> ***"...The [internal] mobility is risky because there is no public transport, they usually allege that they have to go en una cola, that is ask other people, unknown even to drive them from one place to another. We are not talking about a transfer that is complete [...] they are making stops to be able to buy these products. They spend the night in places of friends, relatives, even sometimes they stay in police stops in the route, they wake up in places that are populated, squares that they can stay for a while there and then return." (Interview with non-governmental organization,*** *granted to UNFPA, 2020:24)*

Outside the country, Venezuelan women are marked by the stigma of their hypersexualization, in addition to their growing occupation in sex work (or victims of forced prostitution). A symbolic imprint follows her and once she is identified as Venezuelan, she is more susceptible to sexual harassment.

2 Pedir la cola in spanish from Venezuela. It is a way to move in the drivers are asked on the road to bring the person to their destination. In other countries it is known as "pedir el aventón" or "hacer autostop"

• Sexual abuse

Sexual abuse refers to any act carried out by one or more persons in order to impose itself on another and to limit their sexual freedom without the latter having the capacity to consent. The abuse does not involve the use of physical violence, but the abuser takes advantage of a condition of power or situation that puts his victim at a disadvantage to achieve his goals. Among the acts that could compose the abuse are touching, masturbation, forcing the victim to show parts of his body, forcing to observe sexual activities, etc. If someone is in a position of power over you -such as an authority figure- is sexually conducted with you, this constitutes sexual abuse.

• Rape

It comprises different forms of non-consensual penetration that one or more persons impose on another. If there is use of force to make you to commit this act then a sexual assault is set. In contexts of human mobility such as Venezuela, these are often perpetrated by armed individuals belonging to both illegal groups and security forces or other actors.

The closure of borders due to the COVID-19 pandemic forces the majority of Venezuelans in conditions of human mobility who need to enter or leave the country to pass through trails[3]. On the border with Colombia, the control of these crossings is exercised by multiple groups including paramilitary structures, dissidents from the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), the police and members of the Bolivarian National Guard of Venezuela (Funda Pares, 2020).

The Venezuelans who cross through that trail are at risk of being raped, falling into trafficking networks, being disappeared or dying. The trails are spaces that by their own configuration are propitious for this type of violence. The need to travel to one side or the other leaves women at the mercy of the criminal gangs that operate there, without having authorities to which they can turn because the nature of their own transit is understood as illegal. In fact, witnesses affirm the knowledge of the Venezuelan authorities of the dynamics that happen there:

> ***"The trail is run by several groups, the guerrillas, the paracos, the police, the same national guard. Of course, the National Guard and the Colombian authorities know about these crossroads. They eat... They receive money from it"[4]***
> ***Veronica [...] mentioned the "covered face" said the day they were raping the woman shouting for help, she saw them.***
> ***— I looked over the bridge and saw them, they were down there, like hiding in some bushes. They were several.***
> ***He also mentioned that she saw some knives. And then she said she saw them talking to the police.***
> ***— Colombian or Venezuelan police?***
> ***— That's why I say this is like a business. I saw Venezuelan guards and Colombian police talking to those men.***
> ***— Do you think that Migration Colombia and authorities know that women are raped there?***
> ***—Yes, I do, because that's business, because what I saw in that moment there is business. I am afraid a lot of Migration Colombia.***
> ***— Do you live with fear?***
> ***—I do. I stay up every day and I ask God for one more day".*** *(Aldana, 2020).*

3 In Spanish Trocha and it is the term to refer to cross-borders clandestine crossroads.

4 Anonymous testimony collected by the investigator of a taxi driver who makes transports Merida - San Cristobal and to the border. Personal interview, 2020.

At the beginning of the pandemic the passage through the tracks was complex. Armed groups were firmly in control, as the pandemic progressed, it became more flexible. By September 2020, the price of passing through the trail ranged between 100 and 120 thousand pesos [between 26-31 dollars], depending on the inputs you want to pass to one or the other side of the border[5]. However, many are the abuses to which people are exposed, especially if they do not have to pay the fees.

> ***"Gabriela had to choose. There is a world in which women have to choose between being raped by seven men or disappearing. It's not a metaphor. I'm talking about forced disappearance.***
> ***—They tell you, so, you already know what you get. They say: "If you cooperate, you go back to Colombia or Venezuela, wherever you want, but if you don't cooperate, you don't appear ever again".***
> ***— Do they tell you that?***
> ***—Yes...***
> ***—And then... They take you to a place and you have to be with all of them and when you start screaming... They get their knives out. They are the most disposable, the most disgusting people... And if you don't scream much and cooperate and don't hit them or anything, and you have sex with them, then they ask you if you're going to go back or you're going to leave. And they tell you that you cannot say anything that "think about your family".***
> ***— Did they threat your family —Yes... That has happened to many women, many Venezuelan women.***
> ***— Do this occur daily, Gaby?***
> ***—Yes, I was saved that day and like three more. But there were others that were got inside, very deep and we never saw them again. I don't know if they were disappeared. Many women have disappeared in that trail[6]"*** *(Aldana, 2020).*

Worse still, the context marked by the economic vulnerability of Venezuelan women, which is exacerbated by the pandemic, favours an increase in situations of child sexual abuse. Among the risk factors is the confinement of girls and adolescents with their aggressors; the mobility of their representatives who leave them in the care of third parties who often become their abusers; and the recruitment by illegal armed groups who use them for begging, recruit them as informants, and also often sexually abuse them (UNFPA, 2020).

• Survival sex

It is a type of sexual violence suffered by women and girls in contexts of mobility, particularly within the national territory. Women are repeatedly forced into such situations in order to satisfy clothing, work, transport and food needs.

The research Deadly Gold (Transparencia Venezuela, 2019) shows how the internal mobility towards the Orinoco Mining Arc (AMO) has shaped a context where the development of illegal mining activity, gives rise to all kinds of violations. In the absence of a public transport system some of the girls interviewed admit survival sex as payment for the transfer to the mines.

The field work shows other curiosities, such as the reading of these transactions by the men who incur them. Sometimes they do not consider them violent or criminal but as a form of support or help: "I have done it. If I have given them, the need is fucked. I have taken them to make love because I know they are hungry" (Men's Focal Group, Wayuu community, Maracaibo municipality, Zulia state. UNFPA, 2020).

In the case of survival sex in Venezuelan girls and teenagers, there is a component of family

5 Ibídem.

6 The witness refers to one of the trails of Ureña which connects directly the Venezuelan municipality with the barrio La Esmeralda in Cucuta.

participation that may vary from case to case. Among the different modalities that they may suffer are the exchange of sex for basic resources; the sale of girls by their parents and other persons in exchange for money (commercial sexual exploitation, trafficking in children and teenagers); and child marriage with older men in order to ensure safety or to free oneself from the financial responsibility of the girl (Save the Children, 2020).

• GBV executed by authorities

There is a particular violent component that is formed when the girl and/or woman is violated by her gender status by the security forces that are supposed to protect her. Throughout this text, testimonies have been presented of how the authorities can abuse their power to harass, threaten, ill-treat, assault, sexually abuse girls and women in conditions of mobility.

In Venezuela: As a country of origin, the authorities are aware of all the vicissitudes suffered by Venezuelan women in conditions of mobility and take advantage of irregularities in the processes to demand difficult requirements to obtain and then submit them to their will. Within the national territory because of the restrictive measures that include the pandemic, police officers and State security forces may engage in violence such as harassment in the police stops in route (Interview to the lawyer Norma Ferrer of Transparencia Venezuela). Reports indicate how requisitions are used by officials to make improper touches, undress and humiliate girls (UNFPA, 2020).

In transit and host countries: Outside the country, police and migration officials abuse their power, fall into xenophobia and sometimes flagrantly violate the law by subjecting Venezuelan women to all kinds of harassment, especially if they are in a situation of migratory irregularity.

> ***"—Migration is bad for us Venezuelan women, because they humiliate us so much. One day they grabbed us and took us to a court and threw water on us as if we were animals. They have a cell where sometimes they catch us and they put us all day. People pass on the bikes, they pass in busetas, and they see us. Many people spit on us, throw fruit shells at us, tell us: "Venecas, go to your country". And they there, laughing at us.***
> ***— Migration exposes you to that?***
> ***— For me it's migration, because they have us there at least from eight in the morning until four or five in the afternoon, there in that thing, and then comes the truck and takes us."*** *(Aldana, 2020)*

One of the obstacles to combating these abuses is that, even if testimonies are collected, it is difficult for them to make a formal complaint. Women fear reprisals from officials in Venezuela and fear deportation if they are outside the country. Even in the case of agencies or non-governmental organizations, they do not denounce in a particular way nor can they be attached to collective statements denouncing the facts, because they fear that the governments will withdraw their permits to operate in the field.

• Domestic violence

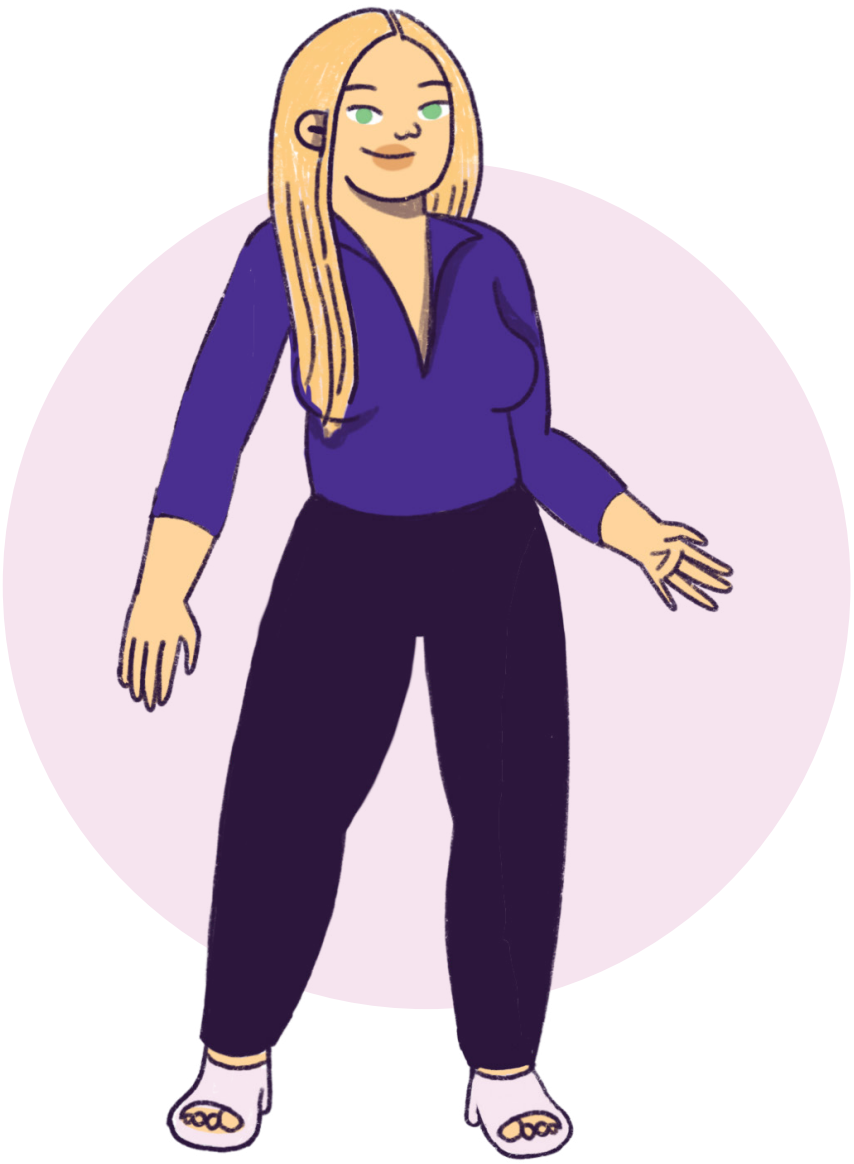
It is a type of violence that often persecutes Venezuelan women and girls in conditions of human mobility no matter where they move. Includes verbal, psychological, physical and sexual assaults. Domestic violence increases with mobility and related difficulties. For many abusers, the frustration of mobility leads them to take revenge in their homes. For others, the absence of support networks emboldens them to attack.

Conversely, mobility leaves the women and girls experiencing domestic violence in a greater situation of lack of protection from its aggressors. Far from their support networks they are more likely to remain in the cycle of violence and degrade it in more extreme situations such as femicide. Because even when protective and restraining measures are imposed they are often not effective in preventing further violence (UNFPA, 2020).

The research “Girls in Mobility” by Save the Children (2020) collected the testimony of a teenage mother who emigrated to Colombia with her partner, who referred to feeling insecure in her home due to cases of domestic violence.

> ***“I feel insecure and in danger when I am not accompanied (by my partner) ... I feel bad, because I do not understand why he hits me, when I am not doing anything.” ,*** *comments 17-year-old Maria Antonia to Save the Children (2020).*

For adolescent migrants far from their families and whose social networks are limited, there is a risk of a rapid escalation of violence. Social isolation increases their vulnerability to violence, especially if they have children.



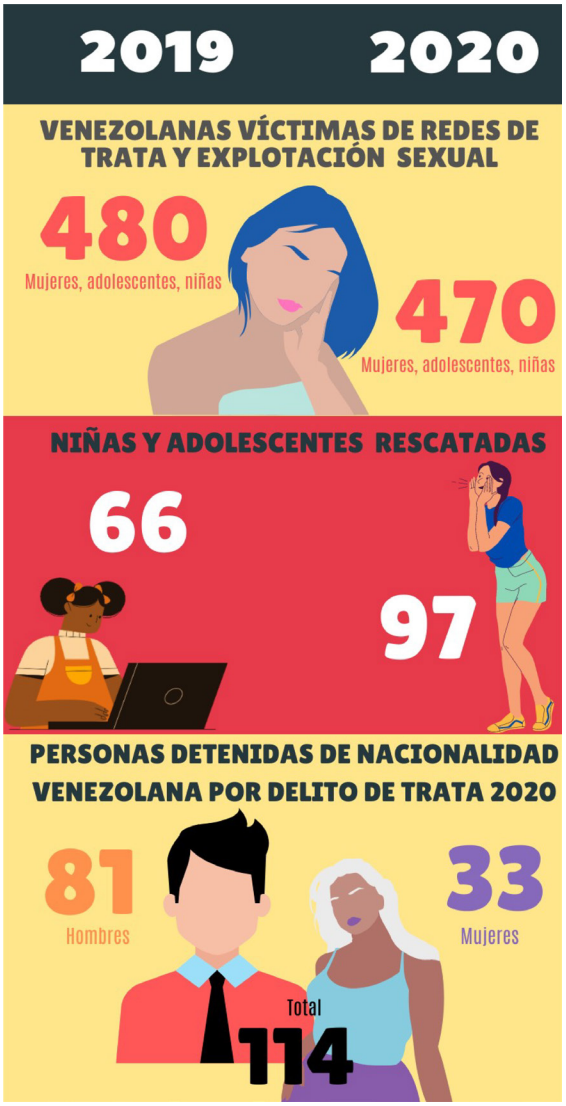
• Trafficking in persons

Trafficking in persons is a form of modern slavery that involves recruiting, transporting and/or receiving a person for the purpose of exploitation. It is the third most lucrative illicit business in the world, just below arms and drug trafficking. Trafficking can be external when it occurs in a country other than the country of origin; or internal when it occurs in the same country, you can even suffer a trafficking situation in your own city.

Human mobility contexts present conditions of vulnerability that facilitate human trafficking. In addition, scenarios of sudden loss of income such as that resulting from the pandemic can lead to increased smuggling of migrants and trafficking in persons, as the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime warns (UNODC, 2020).

As has been denounced by various feminist organizations, trafficking in Venezuelan women is a situation that in recent years has been on the rise. Although trafficking tends to pursue different purposes, the most common to which Venezuelan women are subjected are sexual exploitation, forced prostitution and forced labor.

These forms of exploitation of the Venezuelan women and girls in conditions of mobility coincide, for example, in Bolivar state. According to research by the Human Rights Center of the Andrés Bello Catholic University (UCAB) (2021)) *From labor to sex: modern forms of slavery, 74 per cent of the victims of labor and sexual exploitation living there are women, 25 per cent of whom are girls and teenagers. Miners admit to preferring girls and teens because they have more "useful time"* (CDH UCAB, 2021). The pedophilia that involves the sex trade in the area makes traffickers charge a higher price[7], the lower the age of the victim is.



According to figures presented in the "Media monitoring of Venezuelan women and girls rescued from trafficking networks in migratory contexts" of the Mulier Organization, we can see how this crime has behaved in the last two years. The highest incidence of cases is in Latin American and Caribbean countries, which are those with the largest influx of Venezuelans in conditions of human mobility. With the exception of Spain, where despite the distance important linguistic and colonial links are shared, in addition to being this traditionally a destination country for the traffickers who capture their victims in Latin American nations, African or Eastern European.

Although there is a small decrease in the numbers of women and girls rescued from trafficking networks, this should not be interpreted as the crime being reduced or having a lower incidence. One of the perverse effects of the pandemic on trafficking cases is that it has made victims more vulnerable, while making them less visible to the media and institutions that need to address them.

7 The Price of little girls and teens varies from 5 or ten grams of gold. Two grams of gold values approximately 100USD. The youngers cost around 250USD and 500USD.

As we see in the figure above, the people who engage Venezuelan women and girls to exploit them can be both men and women. In fact, from the work of various civil society organizations we have testimonies of women who exploit women. Transparency Venezuela's Deadly Gold Report (2019) features testimonies of women offering girls to gold mining unions.

At the beginning of 2020, the sisters Ana and María González, were caught under deception by a woman from their neighborhood to go to Colombia. The offer was to work as domestic workers. Upon arrival they were told that they were actually going to engage in forced prostitution. According to their testimonies, they were forced to have sex with clients who paid about 30,000 pesos [about $8]. Half of this money was taken away "as payment" for the room. If they didn't pay the lady who was holding them, she would take their clothes. They could not go out because they were not left alone and if they went out, they were accompanied by someone else to watch them. Finally, they managed to escape in the middle of that year and were received by civil society organizations. One of the girls became pregnant as a result of this situation.

Traffickers seek to gain the trust of their victims, know their desires and interests, offer them an opportunity for a better life. Under deceptions that often take the form of courtship and infatuation or an attractive job offer these groups manage to attract women and girls to make them move within their city, to another or outside the country and once under their control begins the exploitation.

• Forced Prostitution

Prostitution is the exercise of sex work. First of all, as its name indicates, sex work is work, an income-generating activity. When it is exercised of free will[8] we talk about prostitution. There are Venezuelan women and adolescents who in these contexts of human mobility are directly offered sex work that they accept. However, even if they are aware in advance, if the agreed conditions are not met or are misleading, then forced prostitution or exploitation of the prostitution of others that falls within the spectrum of trafficking in persons. These girls cannot have their own time at will, their income is largely expropriated, breaks are reduced. In addition, they are obliged to incur expenses as protection so that the clients (but also the authorities and the dealers themselves) do not harm them.

• Patronage

In contexts of human mobility while their representatives move, return or settle, in another place, girls or adolescents often remain in the care of someone who offers education and the promise of a better life in exchange for collaboration in housework. When this promise is broken, the child and/or adolescent falls victim to a situation of exploitation. CDH UCAB (2021) recorded the case of a 12-year-old indigenous teenager who would receive education in exchange for internal care for a girl with cognitive problems. After six months without knowing about the girl, his family had news that she was sold in the mines of the AMO for 12 grams of gold (CDH UCAB, 2021).

• Femicides and disappearances

Although they are not comparable, **they are violence that means the annihilation of women and girls, the definitive silencing of their voice.** In contexts of human mobility, the risk of under-reporting of disappearances and femicides is highlighted, since these often occur in areas where the authorities do not arrive, do not exercise real control or are complicit in the violence that happens. In addition, the absence of official figures is a bonus.

8 There is a broad discussion among feminisms about whether sex work can be conceived as voluntary. Some postures indicate that it is a decision about your body and a job that some women take. Other positions affirm that there cannot be a decision when it is your environment that objectifies you and conditions you, offers you so few possibilities that prostitution ends up presenting itself as the only option.

However, there are organizations that make significant efforts to provide us with data on what happens to these crimes. From FundaRedes in its observatory of the Curve of Violence 198 disappearances were documented in 2020 in the six border states of the country, precisely 68 in Táchira, 53 in Bolívar, 45 in Falcón, 18 in Zulia and 14 in Apure (El Impulso, 2020).

From Utopix they advance an important count of femicides. Femicides in Venezuela alone in the national territory have increased from 1 femicide every 72 hours in 2016 to an alarming femicide every 34 hours in 2020, for a total of 256 femicides that year (Zambrano, 2020).



What to do?

Despite the dark panorama, all is not lost. On the contrary, in difficult situations we have more to do. The more we learn and recognize ourselves susceptible to this crime the more we can do to defend ourselves. There are guides developed by civil society organizations that identify the violence to which we can expose ourselves in contexts of human mobility. Among them the “Guide for the Prevention of Trafficking in Women and Girls in Migratory Contexts #LibresYSeguras”, published by Mulier.

A recent success story in January this year is that of Venezuelan Jenny Meizas who was being trafficked into the Bahamas. Through a video published in Persicope she asked for help and gave details of her location. Hours later, the local authorities managed to rescue her.

Another factor that we as people must attack is the stigmatization of women and girls in conditions of human mobility that are in situations of GBV. It is common to blame these women for “exposing themselves” instead of questioning the situations that push them to mobilize in the most adverse conditions.

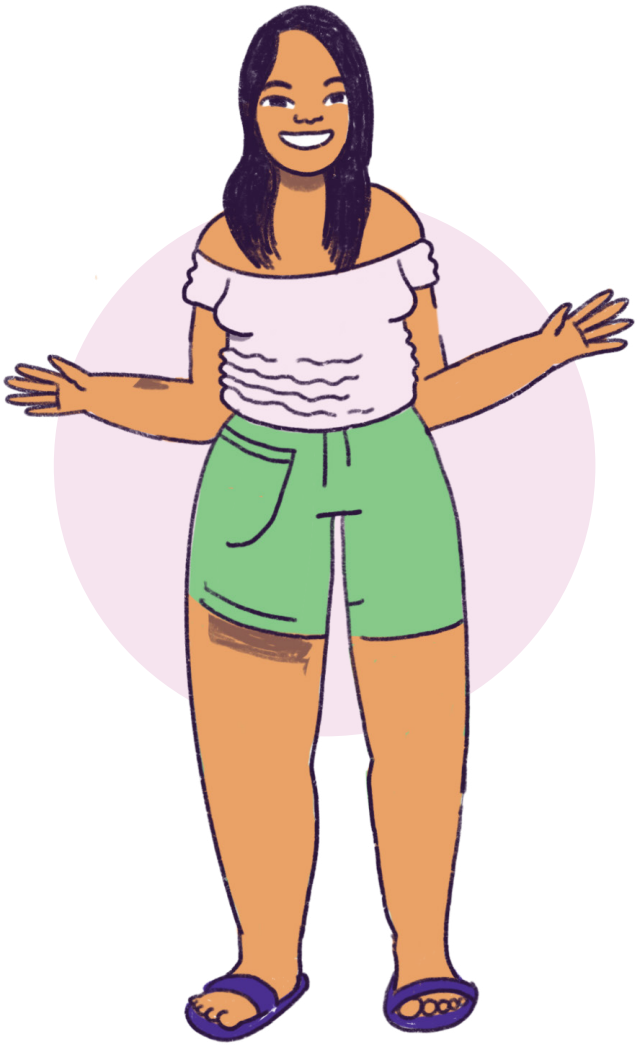
Although as individuals or organizations of civil society we are committed to this task, it will be impossible to change the stigmas, mobilize the public agenda and have a positive impact on the reduction of the GBV to which Venezuelan women are exposed in contexts of human mobility, if we do not achieve a firm commitment from States and institutional organizations. Although as individuals or organizations of civil society we are committed to this task, it will be impossible to change the stigmas, mobilize the public agenda and have a positive impact on the reduction of the GBV to which Venezuelan women are exposed in contexts of human mobility, if we do not achieve a firm commitment from States and institutional organizations.



Conclusions

The research highlights some of the most common forms of gender-based violence, to which girls and women are exposed, including sexual violence, sexual harassment, sexual abuse, rape, survival sex, trafficking in persons, femicides and disappearances, among others, which may be executed by the couple, relatives, officials or officials of the States of origin, transit and destination.

Although discourses on human mobility tend to focus on harmful aspects, we cannot fail to recognize the complexity of human mobility that simultaneously offers opportunities and risks. We must move away from the dichotomies that build Venezuelan women in situations of mobility only as victims, which would hide their resilience; or only as all-powerful migrants, which would obscure the various GBVs that converge in these transits and free the authorities responsible for this situation from responsibility.



Recommendations

To Civil Society Organizations:

- Unite wills and reiterate the call to declare a Feminist Emergency to sound the alarms of the different forms of VBG that affect Venezuelan women.

To the media:

- Sensitization and training of journalists in addressing human mobility and protection risks from a human rights perspective.

To States of origin, transit and destination:

- Public awareness campaigns on the various forms of gender-based violence to which girls and women are exposed in contexts of human mobility.

- Training of civil servants on the human rights approach to human mobility.

- The authorities in Venezuela and the transit and receiving countries must have a human rights approach to care for girls and women, where the main objective is the repair of the damage and the deployment of strategies to keep them away from these violences.

- Develop mechanisms for the evaluation and adjustment of existing public policies so that they operate more effectively.

- Offer alternatives that discourage law enforcement officials from falling into corruption, GBV and human trafficking schemes.

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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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