

A PROTECTION CRISIS: TESTIMONIES FROM CHILDREN, ADOLESCENTS AND YOUNG REFUGEES AND MIGRANTS FROM VENEZUELA

(SUMMARY)

Ten-year-old Romaly is excited about her new school in Chile, while Ricardo, 30, is motivated by seeing his young daughter again. Helena*, 16, traverses countries hoping to send money back home to fulfil her mother's dream to have her own restaurant, and Ema, 20, hopes to return to studying soon. Despite their different ages and backgrounds, all four have the same dream: To one day return to Venezuela and rebuild their lives.

Between June and July 2019, Plan International's Regional Response team for the Venezuela Migration Crisis visited a total of seven cities in Colombia, Ecuador and Peru. There they met with refugees and migrants to learn about the challenges they face during their journeys and to analyse their needs concerning protection mechanisms, violence prevention and sexual and reproductive health. ***A Protection Crisis: testimonies from children, adolescents and young refugees and migrants from Venezuela shares first-hand accounts from 17 Venezuelans, ranging in age from 10 to 54, who left their homes to escape the political and economic crisis in Venezuela.***

Venezuela, once a safe place for thousands of migrants escaping violence, is today ranked as the most violent country in Latin America. In 2018 alone, over 23,000 violent deaths were reported. Carlos*, 18, who used to protest against the government, decided to leave the country after receiving death threats. "Some came and told me face-to-face that they would kill me. It was a personal threat." Meanwhile Vanessa*, a 16-year-old unaccompanied adolescent, observes ***"Venezuela is not the same now. Today you can be taken and they hit you without reason, even when you are a minor."***

Almost ***4.5 million people have left the country***, making it the second-worst migration crisis after Syria. Venezuelans are so desperate to find jobs and send money to their families that they often undertake dangerous journeys. The experience of many starts by crossing the border into Colombia using illegal paths known as *trochas*. The presence of illegal armed groups aggravates their vulnerability and exposure to danger. Ema*, 20, recalls the advice she was given. "Before leaving I was told not to straighten my hair or style my eyebrows when crossing the border. 'Try not to look attractive, because there are armed men and they can fall in love with you and you will have to do whatever they want'."

Moreover, refugees and migrants are also exposed to common crime and extended violence abroad. Daniel*, 17, was a victim of a xenophobic attack in Ecuador: "We thought that we would need to spend the night in the plaza when people started screaming 'Get out Venezuelans, we do not want you here!' Then, they start attacking us with a club while telling us to leave their country. We started running, fearing that they would kill us."

"People just do not understand that we do not do this because we are lazy. If we do this, it is because of the situation in our country. Because we really need help," emphasizes Luciana, a young woman that left Venezuela a month ago. Ricardo has been walking for three weeks in search of work so he can send money to his wife and his 18-month-old daughter Ana Sofia, who is still in Venezuela. "I always think of my daughter, because she gives me strength. Sometimes I want to give up, but then I remember her."

Like Ana Sofia, over 800,000 children and adolescents from Venezuela have been separated from their parents. In addition, there is an increasing number of unaccompanied children, who are

especially vulnerable. Mathías, 25, planned to travel directly to Chile, but decided to alter his route so he could accompany thirteen adolescents that were travelling alone and help reunite them their families. “I had never slept in the streets before, and I felt very scared the first time I did it. Then I thought about those children and the bad people that could hurt them, and I knew I had to do something,” he explains.

The situation is particularly worrying for girls and women. **Sexual violence and gender-based violence have become systematic forms of oppression and intimidation in Venezuela as well as abroad.** Helena, a 16-year-old unaccompanied adolescent, recalls when she travelled in a truck with another migrant woman and her baby. “We never talked with the driver. Once we arrived, the woman tried to leave with her baby but the driver took her hand and told her that she had to pay. That she could not leave without having sex with him.” For Luciana*, harassment has become a frequent situation: “When you say no to them, they treat you like a dog. Some girls have had their faces spit on, as if they had an obligation to have sex with these men just because they were migrants.”

Misinformation concerning rights adds to refugees’ and migrants’ vulnerability. **“To be honest, we did not know what to do if we were abused. We did not even know where to receive guidance or how to prevent an unwanted pregnancy”**, shares Paola*. And when it comes to employment rights, Gabriela* advocates for the need to educate the host communities. “Aid organizations told us that we are allowed to work, but people are not well informed, and they think that our documents are not enough. So we always have to bring a copy of the law to demonstrate our right to work.”

In 2018, Plan International decided to undertake a Regional Response in Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru to improve the life and conditions of the Venezuelan refugees and migrants during their transit and settlement. **Over 180.000 individuals and families have been supported across the countries, yet new actions will continue to be undertaken to allow them to rebuild their lives in a violence-free and sustainable environment.**

NOTE: Names marked with (*) have been changed for security and/or by request of the interviewees