

A young child in a blue jacket with a robot on the back, pushing a stroller with luggage, in a crowded outdoor setting.

# VENEZUELA MIGRATION CRISIS

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



**PLAN**  
INTERNATIONAL

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Venezuela is facing the worst socioeconomic, political and human rights crisis in history. Almost 4.5 million people have left the country, making it the second worst migration crisis after Syria. It is estimated that over 20% of the refugees and migrants are children and adolescents. According to the United Nations, around 57% of Venezuelans living abroad are settled in Ecuador, Colombia and Perú.

In 2018, Plan International began implementing a Regional Response in Colombia, Brazil, Ecuador and Perú to improve the life and conditions of the Venezuelan refugees and migrants during their transit and settlement. Later, in 2019, the organization decided to undertake actions inside Venezuela focusing on protection, education in emergencies and WASH, through local partners. The regional strategy focuses on protection as a main area of action. Our activities include legal advice, psycho-emotional support, and advancement of knowledge and skills related to rights, prevention of violence, reporting methods and sexual reproductive health, among others.

Between June and July 2019, the Regional Response team visited a total of seven cities (between Colombia, Ecuador and Perú); in order to listen to the refugees and migrants as well as to analyse their needs concerning protection mechanisms, violence prevention and sexual reproductive health.

**The following document reflects some of the risks and violent situations that millions of Venezuelans face daily, from the testimonies and experiences of 17 refugees and migrants.**

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

# 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

# ESCAPING: A LIFE-SAVING OPTION

## Testimonies: Carlos\* y Gabriela\*

**Carlos**<sup>\*1</sup> was 16 when he decided to become a *guarimbero*, the name given to those who protest against the Government of Venezuela. Despite the risks, he took to the streets, advocating for change. For months, he heard about threats and extrajudicial prosecutions by authorities. He had even witnessed how people's houses were marked by red or by written threats, without being sure of who painted them. Carlos never imagined that he would end up living the same nightmare as them.

"Some came and told me face-to-face that they would kill me. It was a personal threat," says Carlos. Two days later, he left his country with his parents, who were both more than 50-years-old. "I felt very sad because I left the country where I had always lived".



"What I miss the most from Venezuela is what it used to be. It is not the same now.

**Today you can be taken and they hit without reason, even when you are a minor.** Parks and zoos are not the same anymore. If you go to the zoo today you will not see many animals, and the only ones remaining are starving to death."

Vanessa\*, 16, unaccompanied adolescent

Venezuela, which was once a safe place for thousands of migrants escaping violence, today leads the highest rates of violence in Latin American. In 2018 alone, over 23,000 violent deaths were registered in the country, but the actual number could be higher. The Venezuelan Observatory of Violence highlights that over **7,500 people were killed that year by members of the National Forces, of which 287 were children and adolescents, 158 more than in 2017**<sup>2</sup>.

**Manuel**<sup>\*3</sup> (25) and his wife **Gabriela**<sup>\*4</sup> (24), were threatened and forced to live the country. Gabriela holds her 11-month-old baby Nicolas<sup>\*5</sup>. Despite the complex situation, she dreamed of raising her child in Venezuela. However, her dreams faded once Manuel arrived home and said 'Love, we need to leave the country now, or something terrible may happen.'" Gabriela didn't understand and asked him to explain, but his only answer was **"There is no other option."**

<sup>1</sup> Names marked with (\*) have been changed for security and/or by request of the interviewees

<sup>2</sup> Observatorio Venezolano de Violencia <https://observatoriodeviolencia.org.ve/ovv-lacso-informe-anual-de-violencia-2018/>

<sup>3</sup> Names marked with (\*) have been changed for security and/or by request of the interviewees

<sup>4</sup> Names marked with (\*) have been changed for security and/or by request of the interviewees

<sup>5</sup> Names marked with (\*) have been changed for security and/or by request of the interviewees

Gabriela and Manuel managed to pack three bags containing the little food left in their house, their baby's clothes and some personal items. They began walking that night, burdened by a fear of being discovered, lack of money and sadness of leaving without saying goodbye. In less than 24 hours, they went from feeling calm to looking for a safe place for their son.

Due the impact of the crisis on girls, boys and adolescents, Plan International decided to undertake actions inside Venezuela, to enhance child protection in emergencies, education in emergencies, and WASH, working through local partners.

## WALKING A DANGEROUS ROAD

**Testimonies: Carlos\*, Gabriela\*, Janeth, Luis, Wilson**

Around 5,000 Venezuelans leave their country every day[1], and of those, hundreds begin the journey on foot. The number of people walking has multiplied considerably in 2019 due to the closure of borders and the escalation of the crisis in Venezuela [2],[3]. The Colombian Red Cross finds there is also a significant increase in the number of pregnant and breastfeeding women walking, and that children and adolescents now represent 22% of the walkers.

Dreaming of a new life, these *caminantes* travel long distances over mountainous terrain in temperatures varying between 0-35°C. **Wilson** and **Janeth**, who are both 40-years-old, take a rest



“I am a boy who came from Venezuela because I felt unsafe. That is why I am in Ecuador. I came walking. And I came in order to change my life. I felt happy to meet a new country and I thought everybody was going to treat me well, but no. I have been ill, I have suffered from loneliness because of not being with my family. I came by myself and, unfortunately, now my dream to be a baseball player will cut short. But I still have another: to become a lawyer in order to help people. My dream is to go to Chile, study at university, so that I can work and send money to my mom. Right now I don't feel happy because my family is not near me. I wish I could have a little bit of peace, I could close my eyes, look back and only be HAPPY. That is what I wish.” Mateo\*, 17 (supported by Plan International Ecuador)

[1] UN News: <https://news.un.org/es/story/2019/05/1456331>

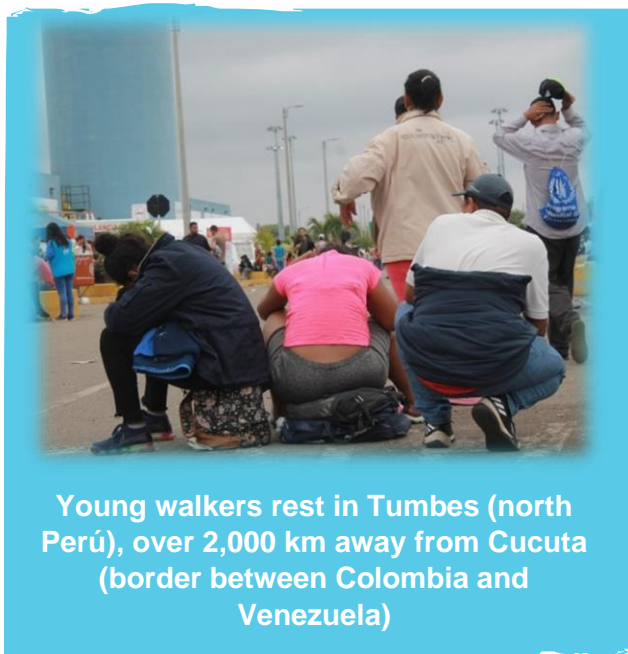
[2] UN News: <https://news.un.org/es/story/2019/05/1456331>

[3] Human Rights Watch: <https://www.hrw.org/es/news/2018/09/05/los-caminantes-venezolanos>

at one of the spots where Plan International Colombia<sup>6</sup>, with support of the Red Cross, delivers food kits to the walkers. The partnership between the organizations has allowed the delivery of hundreds of kits to refugees and migrants at five locations along the 340km road between Pamplona and Tunja.

After five days of walking, the *caminantes* start to lose strength. The journey has been particularly arduous for Janeth, who has a knee injury. Despite the difficulties, they keep moving forward, hoping that they will find a ride to help them cross through *el páramo de Berlín*, where the height exceeds 4,200 meters. “Some say that the temperature can drop below -5°C.,” mentions **Wilson** while pointing to his map. “We hope to find a ride to here... we have heard that some Venezuelans have died in the mountain. There was even a woman whose baby died while she was carrying him in her arms.”

Eighteen-year-old **Luis** tells a similar story. “I crossed *el páramo de Berlín* walking. I was with a woman and her baby. **The baby was too cold and her mother started crying. We thought that we would not survive that night.**”



Young walkers rest in Tumbes (north Perú), over 2,000 km away from Cucuta (border between Colombia and Venezuela)

**Carlos**, who escaped Venezuela after being threatened, recalls with horror the narrow passages of the road. “I was travelling with my parents, and I was always telling them to be careful. I was very afraid a truck would kill us,” explains Carlos. The worst moments for him were the two nights when they did not find shelter or a gas station where they could sleep. “We had no choice but to stay very close to the road and wait for the sunrise. My mum has scoliosis, so we let her rest those nights while my father and I stood guard, in case we needed to avoid a car.” Carlos arrived to Tumbes, North of Perú, after walking for 37 days. He admits that he could have arrived earlier if he had travelled alone; however, his parents health was delicate and they could not move very fast.

While Carlos and his family took some rest during their journey, other Venezuelans are so desperate to find a job and send money to their families that they decide to undertake the trip at a sometimes deadly pace. When crossing through Colombia, Gabriela and Manuel met a 22-year-old man. “He was so anxious, he always wanted to be the first to leave and walk without a stop. He never took a rest. We told him to wait, to take a break. But he always answered ‘No, I cannot. My family is starving to death in Venezuela. I need to start working.’ He died before arriving to Bogota,” tells Gabriela.

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<sup>6</sup> Fundación Plan in Colombia

# CROSSING “TROCHAS” THE LIMBO OF THE BORDERS

Testimonies: Carlos\*\* y Ema\*

The ordeals of the *caminantes* have become some of the most dramatic stories to emerge from the crisis. When recalling the risks they faced during their journeys, most of the walkers identified their experiences on the *trochas* as the most challenging. Between February and June 2019, the borders between Colombia and Venezuela were closed due to the breakdown in diplomatic relationships between the countries. As a result, thousands of people were forced to cross the border using more than 300 *trochas*. Described by some as “no man’s land,” *trochas* are isolated paths surrounded by dry and leafy trees, providing plenty of places for illegal armed groups to hide. Impunity rules and silence conceals on the *trochas*, and hundreds of refugees and migrants found themselves at the mercy of these guerrillas.

**Exposed to the presence of illegal armed groups, the picture at the border becomes ever more precarious for the refugees and migrants as well as for the local populations.** In their most recent reports, Human Rights Watch warned the world of the abuses carried out by these illegal armed groups against both the Venezuelan population in transit and the 25,000+ Venezuelans that have settled in the Catatumbo area of north-eastern Colombia. The crimes include murder, forced disappearances, labour exploitation at cocaine plantations, and sexual abuse and exploitation of girls and adolescents<sup>7</sup>.

Refugees and migrants are aware of the risks faced when crossing the borders through the *trochas*. However, their despair, fear and hunger, as well as their dreams of starting a new life, motivates them to undertake these dangerous journeys. **Ema**<sup>8</sup> was 20-years-old when she took the risk of crossing in April. Before leaving, she heard many rumours about people that died drowned when crossing the river, while others had been victims of extortion and kidnapping. With these stories in mind, Ema closely followed the instructions of the guide that led the way through the *trochas*. “The rules were explained: You must take off your shoes and if you are a man, your t-shirt as well. You cannot wear hats or caps. You cannot look at any fixed points around you, or look anyone in the eyes. You cannot talk to anyone, walk too fast or lag behind,” Ema recalls. **She travelled with thirty other Venezuelans, including three children under six and three pregnant women.**

At the deepest part of the jungle, Ema felt intimidated by the aggressive looks of some men watching the group from the trees. Suddenly the voice of one of the group members interrupted the silence. “Someone screamed, we all turned around and that’s when we saw the men who were watching us earlier. They closed in on a guy who had stayed behind and we heard a gunshot.” A few months later, Ema found stability in Perú. She currently works in a restaurant and dreams of studying again so she can get a well-paying job.

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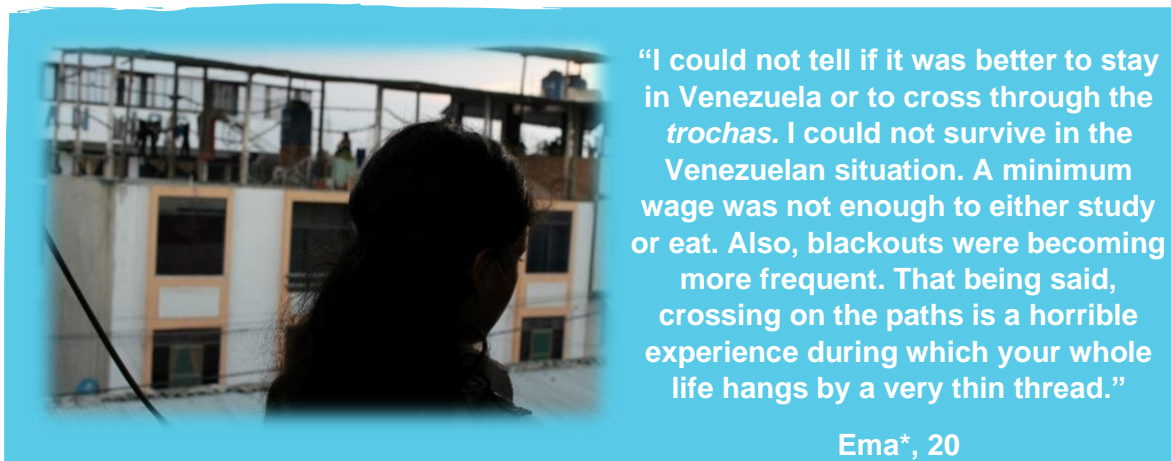
<sup>7</sup> Human Rights Watch: <https://www.hrw.org/es/news/2018/09/05/los-caminantes-venezolanos>

<sup>8</sup> Names marked with (\*) have been changed for security and/or by request of the interviewees



**Carlos** has just arrived in Perú where he was reunited with his brother Fabian<sup>9</sup>, who left Venezuela alone when he was only 17-years-old. “He is well, he did not have any problem during his journey, and he has found a job. His work is informal, because he is a minor, but he works,” Carlos says.

Like Ema, Carlos remembers his passage through the *trochas* as one of the most horrifying periods of his life. “My parents passed the border legally due to my mother’s disability. However, because of my threatened status, I had to cross on the *trochas*. Once there, I encountered a group of armed man. They asked me for money, but I did not have the amount they wanted. They said that they would recruit me or kill me if I did not pay. I asked them to let me continue, I told them about my mother and my brother... and they had mercy. They allowed me to leave by paying them the little money I had.”



## UNACCOMPANIED CHILDREN: AN INVISIBLE REALITY

**Testimonies: Carlos\*, Helena\* y Mathías**

Fabián, Carlos’ brother, decided to travel to Perú so he could send money to his family in Venezuela. His parents, who had not seen him for three months, sadly remember the day he left. “It was really hard for us, especially because he was leaving alone. But he did it because he wanted to help us. He told us that he was leaving because there is a crisis and we had to get ahead... We were very scared, but we knew that he would work and help us. When talking to him by phone, we knew he was fine

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<sup>9</sup> Names marked with (\*) have been changed for security and/or by request of the interviewees

and that gave us peace,” his father recalls while taking his wife’s hand. His mother’s eyes sparkle at the thought that they will meet again in a few days. “He is a good son. I know he won’t get in trouble.”

**While the exact number of unaccompanied children is unknown, it is clear the situation is getting worse.** UNHCR Ecuador registered a substantial rise of reported cases. Before the emergency, between 50 to 70 cases were reported, but from **2018 to 2019, the number of unaccompanied children rose to 180 and 250 cases, respectively**<sup>10</sup>. Plan International Perú has registered 282 cases between February 1 and August 14, 2019.

**Helena**<sup>\*11</sup> is 16 years old. She arrived alone at the CEBAF in Perú after traversing Colombia and Ecuador through a combination of walking and asking for rides. “I needed to get to Lima,” she explained. “My cousin had a contact there and I was told I could find work in a pants factory.”

Protection specialists from Plan International Perú provided close socio-emotional support for Helena and refer her to child care services. They also explained to her that because she is a minor, she cannot legally work in Peru, and alerted her about her risk of being exploited for work as well as about the existent support services and mechanisms to report any rights violation. This was the first time Helena became aware of her rights as girl, and also as refugee and migrant. “I decided to come because I have many friends that are also minors who got jobs selling shoes and glasswork. My mother always dreamed of having her own restaurant and I want her to achieve that dream,” Helena explains. When asked about the salary conditions of her friends, she admits to not knowing how much they are paid. “They just told me “Come to Perú, you can easily find a work here,” she says.

Helena recovered her strength at one the facilities that Plan International provides to refugees and migrants in Perú. For the first time in days, she was able to shower and eat a proper meal, something she had only been able to do six times since she left Venezuela. “In some places they gave us bread, tuna or biscuits and with that I continued... In a way I was used to it, because sometimes we did not have food in Venezuela. Many times I gave my dinner to my four-year-old sister,” she says.

Conscious of the risks of sleeping on the streets and the motorway, Helena spent many nights walking until she found some shelter. Twenty-five-year-old **Mathías** recognizes the risks faced by the unaccompanied children. Since he decided to make his way to Santiago, Chile, he has experienced a series of dangerous episodes. He heard stories related to the *trochas*, and he witnessed how bus and truck drivers consumed drugs and other narcotics before picking up passengers. He also saw instances of Venezuelans being humiliated by civilians and local authorities. **“Sometimes it is difficult to trust people and you feel very lonely. Even the police treated us like dogs when we asked for information,”** he remembers.

When leaving Venezuela, Mathías had only one dream: travelling over 7,000 km to Chile, the native country of his mother, so he could claim his nationality and start a new life. However, his priorities changed once he met unaccompanied children. “I had never slept in the streets before, and I felt very



<sup>10</sup> Information provided by UNHCR to Plan International during a meeting in July 2019.

<sup>11</sup> Names marked with (\*) have been changed for security and/or by request of the interviewees

scared the first time I did it. Then I thought about those children and bad people that could hurt them, and I knew I had to do something.”



*“I am Manuela\* and sometimes I feel sad because I feel guilty for my dad’s death. I opened the door and those bad people entered and killed him in front of me. But life must go on. I went to Puerto La Cruz and to my grandmother’s, then to Colombia for a year. Then I came to Ecuador very sad since I had to leave my family alone and I left walking.” Manuela\*, 13, (supported by Plan International Ecuador)*

Throughout his journey, Mathías has accompanied more than ten adolescents. “I am afraid that they might have problems with migration authorities or that something bad will happen to them... This is the reason why I try to approach them. It is important that they trust me and they feel comfortable. Later, I accompany them to the place they want to go and I make sure that they are okay, till their family can meet them. I feel like a big brother,” he says.

When staying in Ecuador, Mathías met **Daniel**\*<sup>12</sup>, a 17year-old unaccompanied adolescent that travelled to Peru. They both arrived to the Binational Border Assistance Centre (CEBAF) in Tumbes, North Peru, where Plan International actively works on accompanying and supporting vulnerable children and adolescents. They stayed three days there, during which the organization supported Daniel and facilitated his re-encounter with his older sister. Minutes after the meeting, Mathías continued his road to Chile. Since August 2018, Plan International Peru has facilitated the accompaniment and family reunification of 600 children and adolescents in Tumbes.

## FAMILY SEPARATION AN OVERWHELMING TREND

### Testimonies: Ricardo y Romaly

Since the crisis began, at least **800,000 children and adolescents from Venezuela have been separated from their parents, according to CECOPAD**<sup>13</sup>. A survey of over 12,000 Venezuelans in

<sup>12</sup> Names marked with (\*) have been changed for security and/or by request of the interviewees

<sup>13</sup> The Washington Post: [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/the\\_americas/childhood-disrupted-venezuela-is-in-danger-of-losing-a-generation/2019/05/26/748f0b3c-6136-11e9-bf24-db4b9fb62aa2\\_story.html?noredirect=on&utm\\_term=.5876043d5590](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/the_americas/childhood-disrupted-venezuela-is-in-danger-of-losing-a-generation/2019/05/26/748f0b3c-6136-11e9-bf24-db4b9fb62aa2_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.5876043d5590)

Colombia between April and May 2019 suggested that almost 45% of the refugees and migrants travelling alone and having children, left them in Venezuela<sup>14</sup>. Family separation may have serious implications on people's mental health, especially for children and adolescents, such as the syndrome known as "migratory mourning".

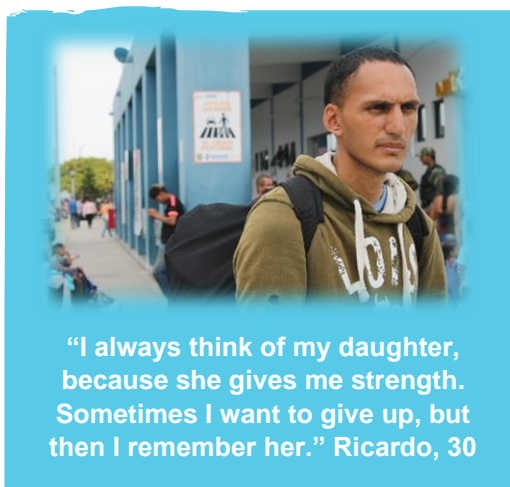
**Romaly** is 10-years-old. She sadly remembers when her parents left the country, leaving her alone for few months with her uncles. "I used to close my eyes and imagine that I was with them," she recalls. When thinking on all those families facing the same dilemma as her parents, Romaly says "I understand that sometimes it is difficult to travel with your children, but you have to take them with you. There are bad people that can mistreat them, like their aunts and uncles. Do not leave your children alone, because they can feel bad. Or it is even possible that they do not love you as much when you come back..." explains Romaly.

With a broken voice, **Ricardo**, 30, remembers his 18-month-old baby, Ana Sofía. Despite working as technical supervisor for a delivery company, his wage in Venezuela only allowed him to buy one diaper bag every month. "My monthly work was not even enough to buy the milk pot that my baby needs weekly," he shares.

Plunged into sadness, Ricardo decided to undertake the journey out of Venezuela on foot, looking for better opportunities for him and his family. "It was not easy to make this decision. However, we knew that the best solution would be that I leave and stabilize, then reunite with my family. I did not want my wife and daughter to live in this situation. It is very hard."

Ricardo has walked without rest. "The journey has been very tough," he admits. "I left Caracas 18 days ago. Since then, I have been living an continuous struggle to find some stability for my family... This situation is very sad, I had to sleep under a bridge. I never thought this could have happened."

Despite the difficulties, remembering his daughter and longing to see her before her second birthday keeps his hope alive. Because he is traveling by himself, silence is often his only company. Alone with his thoughts, Ricardo has found a strength he did not know he had. "I am happy with who I am, because I know myself to be an honest man that is not likely to be tempted by easy, harmful solutions. Even if I feel bad because I have not been with Ana Sofía and have not provided her with economic



"I really like this place because they taught us beautiful things. I met new friends here that are very nice. Here we play music, make castles with legos and do fun things. The teachers have taught me many beautiful things and I will miss them a lot when I leave." Romaly, 10  
(Plan International Perú)

<sup>14</sup> Mazuera-Arias, R., Albornoz-Arias, N., Morffe Peraza, M.A., Ramírez-Martínez, C. y Carreño-Paredes, M.T.  
<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1vZzvQcJyPQr9CFJJpkqjtLqOjwAplZtR/view>

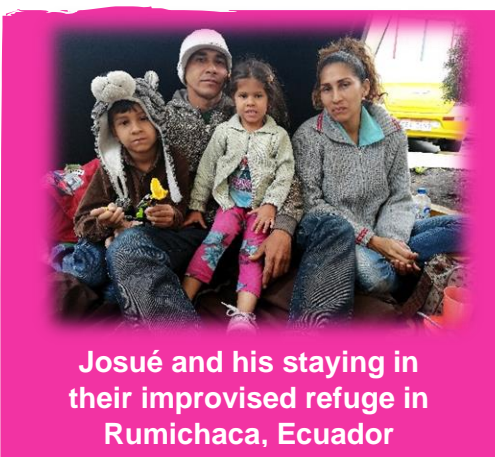


stability, I know I am a good father. I will never stop fighting for her welfare,” Ricardo concludes before continuing on his road to Lima.

# DANGERS ASSOCIATED WITH AGE AND GENDER

**Testimonies: Helena\*, Josué, Luciana\* and Paola\***

Sitting on a quilt 15 meters away from the highway, **Josué** cuddles with his children. They arrived five days ago in Rumichaca, near the border between Colombia and Ecuador, and are still waiting to receive help with their documents in order to enter Ecuador legally. Along with other Venezuelan families, they have created an improvised shelter next to the border. The temperatures vary between 6° and 15°C. Josué’s wife takes a nap, covered by the few blankets they brought with them. “We must take advantage of every opportunity we have to sleep, because during the night none of us sleeps, unless we are in a refuge,” he explains. “I always try to be vigilant. I am afraid of falling asleep and something happening to my children.”



**Josué and his staying in their improvised refuge in Rumichaca, Ecuador**

Since they began their travel a few weeks ago, Josué’s family has witnessed all sorts of violence against refugees and migrants, mainly women and children. “We have shared time with other Venezuelans and we have heard many stories. We have met people that died later, and others whose partners were sexually abused.”

Always keeping an eye on his children, who are ages six and four, Josué continues his story. “Once we talked to a man whose two daughters were kidnapped. He met some people on the road and he asked them to take care of the girls while he went to the toilet. When he came back, they were all gone. He asked many people and we walked to another place, where he found them. The people wanted to take his girls to Bogota, I do not know why. **Girls and**

**boys are usually kidnapped to be sold. There are some who use them to beg, and others who use them for sexual purposes.** This is why I am always taking care of my children.”

Violence against girls and women from Venezuela is becoming more common as the crisis continues. In addition to extended violence, the government’s lack of capacity to respond to females’ needs<sup>15</sup>. Venezuela also faces a “100% shortage” of all types of contraception in some cities. As a result, **adolescence pregnancy has risen by 65% since 2015**, while close to 20% of maternal deaths in the country are associated with unsafe abortions.

<sup>15</sup> CEPAZ: <https://avesawordpress.files.wordpress.com/2017/11/mujeres-al-limite.pdf>

The situation has become so desperate that around 1.7 million girls and women have left the country looking for a new dignified life, even knowing the risks they could face<sup>16</sup>. **Emma**, who witnessed a killing, recalls the advice she received before leaving Venezuela: “There were many concerns related to sexual exploitation. I was told not to straighten my hair or style my eyebrows. **Try not to look attractive, because someone can fall in love with you and you will have to do whatever they want.**”

Sexual exploitation of Venezuelan girls and women is an escalating problem, for which a solution seems unattainable. According to civil society data, **the number of girls and women who have been sexually exploited in Venezuela jumped from 200,000 cases in 2016 to 600,000 in 2018**. It is expected that the number will triple by 2020<sup>17</sup>. In Colombia, between 2013 and 2018, 422 cases of human trafficking of Venezuelans were registered, of which more than 200 involved the sexual exploitation of girls and women<sup>18</sup>. And in Perú it is estimated that close to 10% of the victims of sexual exploitation are Venezuelan<sup>19</sup>. Despite the seriousness of the situation, the international community warns about the lack of mechanisms for preventing and reporting in the region. As consequence, there is no clear data concerning the situation of the Venezuelan women when migrating to other countries.

In addition to the sexual trafficking networks, girls and women from Venezuela are highly exposed to survival sex conditions. **Helena**, who travels alone despite being only 16, remembers with fear when she had to ask for rides. “I met a woman who travelled with her baby. We asked a truck driver to take us to the closest city. He told us to sit in the front. During the trip, I spoke to the girl. 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...** I left and ran. I was very scared.”



That was not Helena’s first exposure to harassment. “When I was travelling inside Venezuela, I went in the front of a truck. My friends that I was travelling with were in the back. The driver stopped and I

<sup>16</sup> Refugees International <https://www.refugeesinternational.org/reports/2019/8/2/searching-for-safety-venezuela-trafficking>

<sup>17</sup> World Crunch: <https://www.worldcrunch.com/world-affairs/another-consequence-of-venezuela-crisis-a-sex-trafficking-boom>

<sup>18</sup> Refugees International: <https://www.refugeesinternational.org/reports/2019/8/2/searching-for-safety-venezuela-trafficking>

<sup>19</sup> Reuters International:

saw my friends leaving, so I decided to go. However, when I tried to open the door, I noticed that the driver had locked the truck. He tried to touch me. I was very scared, but I pushed him and I jumped out the window,” Helena recalls.

Given the social and cultural stereotypes in the region, Venezuelan girls and women are highly stigmatized and potentially vulnerable to sexual violence<sup>20</sup>. **Luciana\***, 24, has been a victim of insults and sexual advances related to her gender and nationality. “They have told me ‘stay two days with me’, but I know what they mean... Then, when you say no, 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.**”

**Paola\***<sup>21</sup>, 18, started traveling with Luciana some days ago. They met in Guayaquil, Ecuador, and decided to continue together. When they arrived at the border between Ecuador and Perú, they encountered a van. “I told Luciana that I needed Wi-Fi to communicate with my family. Then a guy came to us and told us that he had a Wi-Fi connection in his car, and that he could help us to enter illegally to Perú without problems. He also told us that we could come with other women if we wanted. We said no... in a proper way because you never know how they will react. **These are risks that you face since you are woman.** I am sure that a man would never be in danger after saying no to those kinds of propositions,” Paola says.

## MISINFORMATION CONCERNING RIGHTS AND SERVICES

**Testimonies: Daniel\*, Gabriela\*, Helena\*, Paola\***

When recalling her previous experiences, **Paola** adds: “**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.**” People’s status as refugees and migrants increases their vulnerability since their rights are often ignored in the countries they travel through. **Gabriela**, who escaped with her husband Manuel and their baby, weeps when she recalls her first days in Quito. “We went to a National Institution to ask for help with the visa process. We did not have any place to go because we didn’t have any money. A security guard approached us and told us that he could help and that we could stay at his house. I thought it was suspicious, but we had no choice and we didn’t know if he was really bad,” recalls Gabriela. “A few day later, the man started touching my hand and caressing my hair. I prayed to God so my husband would get a job soon. I was very scared, that man was getting too close.”

Despite the warnings, Manuel did not recognize the risks faced by his wife. “I told him ‘Love, I am afraid when you leave and I am alone with him, because this is his house and he can block the door if he wants,’” Gabriela recalls. “We, as women, have special instincts, but my husband would say ‘You

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<sup>20</sup> Cepaz: <https://avesawordpress.files.wordpress.com/2017/11/mujeres-al-limite.pdf>

<sup>21</sup> Names marked with (\*) have been changed for security and/or by request of the interviewees

always make up stories...you are exaggerating.' I insisted and told him more than once 'Let's go out of here, please,'." Without going into details, Gabriela will only say that one day they decided to leave.

Gabriela and Manuel decided not to report the man, as they feared possible retaliations or being deported, since they were not able to regularize their migration status. After this experience, they travelled to Perú, where they could legalize their refugee status, given Manuel's persecution in Venezuela.



In June 2019, regional staff organized four focus group discussion with adolescents and young Venezuelans related to protection and sexual reproductive rights in Tumbes (Perú)

Most of the refugees and migrants that were interviewed by Plan International or participated in the focus group discussions between June and July 2019 **admitted to having little or no knowledge on how to prevent and report violence against them in other countries.** One of the main reasons for this is the lack of preparation and information prior to their departure from Venezuela. "I trusted the rumours and I never tried to confirm the information. The place I used to live is very isolated and there is no communication. I focused on working only, I was desperate," explains **Ema**, who had to cross illegally into Ecuador since she did not have the right documents.

Likewise, there is a permanent fear of questioning the rules and norms of other places. This was the case for Gabriela, who suffered labour exploitation for over a month. "I worked in a beauty salon as manicurist. When the man first hired me, he told me that he would pay me

around 40% of the legal wage, since hiring Venezuelans was a risk for him. Once I calculated, I realized that he was paying me only 25%. He also forced me to work all night. He used to close the door at ten and pull down the metallic curtains, then ask us to clean and organize. Those hours were not paid, and no one outside would notice that we were locked in there..."

Gabriela did not report this. "I thought that this was the way things were done in Perú, that people work for so little. Moreover, I would have needed lawyers and money to make complaint... If I was in Venezuela, I would have reported it, but when you are outside your own country you are not sure on how things work," she explains. As refugees, Gabriela and Manuel can legally work inside Perú, but they have faced lots of difficulties when looking for jobs. "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," she shares.

In addition to unawareness, there is **mistrust of the national authorities.** On one side, there is the spectrum of abuses committed in Venezuela. On the other side, refugees and migrants are filled with terror of being deported because of their irregular migration status. **Daniel\***, who was accompanied by Mathías to Perú, became reluctant after being victim of a violent attack in Ecuador. "We arrived to the city centre. It was late and we could not find shelter with my friends. We thought that we would need to spend the night at the plaza when people started screaming 'Get out Venezuelans, we do not want you here!' We were very nervous, we thought they would lynch us." Then, they started attacking us with a club while telling us to leave their country. We started running, fearing that they would kill us."



# A LONG RUN

**Testimonies: Daniel\*, Gabriela\*, Helena\***

**Gabriela\*** was scared and confused when she first knew that she had to leave her country. However, the threats against her, Manuel and Nicolas, her husband and baby, were serious. While packing, she never imagined how difficult would be her journey across Colombia, Ecuador and Peru. Being in Quito, Gabriela felt intimidated by her landlord who tried to approach her several times. Despite her worries, her husband did not realize the danger she was exposed to.

The day they went to Peru; Gabriela had conflicting feelings. She first felt relieved; then she felt fear and guilty for forcing her family to move again. When talking with the staff from Plan International Ecuador, Gabriela was able to better understand her emotions: "Many people told me that what happened with that man was sexual harassment, but I did not see it that way. I thought that he was just expressing his intentions, that maybe I had exaggerated... Now I know that it was wrong, and that I have the right to make a complaint against him," she concludes.

After their time in Peru, Gabriela and Manuel have decided to return to Ecuador, to a different city, to raise their child. These experiences have strengthened their union, while exchanging their thoughts and feelings has endorsed their empowerment. "When you are out you think you do not have rights. No matter your condition, if you have an irregular status or you are asylum seeker. You think that the only you can do is to obey, but you are wrong. You have rights", she explains. Gabriela feels confident. She now knows how to recognize risks, while Manuel has learned to listen and respond to all her warnings.

**Plan International's support and provision of information through trust building has been key to empowering Venezuelan girls and women in the region.** After traveling alone across three countries, **Helena\***, who had never shared her experience before, expressed her feelings inside our facilities for children and adolescents in Peru. "Many organizations give you food, Wi-Fi or shelter. But here I feel secure." **Daniel\***, who is sitting next to her, highlights the psychosocial support provided by Plan International. "I felt alone many times, because my family was very far. But here the workers are very attentive and the friends I made are like brothers."

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.**

**Plan International**

Regional Office for the  
Americas (ROAH)  
City of Knowledge, Bld 155  
A&B, Panama City, Panama

[https://plan-  
international.org/es/latin-  
america](https://plan-international.org/es/latin-america)

**About Plan International**

Plan International strives to advance children's rights and equality for girls all over the world. We recognise the power and potential of every single child. But this is often suppressed by poverty, violence, exclusion and discrimination. And it's girls who are most affected.

As an independent development and humanitarian organisation, we work alongside children, young people, our supporters and partners to tackle the root causes of the challenges facing girls and all vulnerable children.

We support children's rights from birth until they reach adulthood, and enable children to prepare for and respond to crises and adversity. We drive changes in practice and policy at local, national and global levels using our reach, experience and knowledge. For over 75 years we have been building powerful partnerships for children, and we are active in over 70 countries.