



# **GIRLS ON THE MOVE** **IN VENEZUELA AND COLOMBIA**



Save the Children



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Most importantly, the recommendations for this study are taken from the lived experience shared generously by the girls who participated in this research. Their contribution should improve our understanding of their reality, and move us to advocate more loudly with them, for change that realizes their rights to being protected, fulfilling their potential, and ensuring their survival. We sincerely appreciate their willingness to make their own voices heard, despite the associated risks and discomfort.

*\*The names in this report have been changed to protect their identities.*

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[www.prinsdesign.co.za](http://www.prinsdesign.co.za)

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# ACRONYMS

**CSE:** Commercial Sexual Exploitation

**GBV:** Gender-based violence

**HIAS:** The Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society

**PEP:** Special permit for permanency, in Spanish *Permiso especial de permanencia*

**UN:** United Nations

**UNFPA:** The United Nations Population Fund

**UNHCR:** The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

**UNICEF:** The United Nations Children's Fund



Photo: Miguel Arreategui / Save the Children



## FOREWORD



Given the current pandemic that we are experiencing, the findings, conclusions and recommendations of this study remain valid as long as they address the basic protection needs that girls and adolescents require in a humanitarian and development context. ”



**During the last few years, the international and regional migratory context has experienced significant changes in reasons for leaving, the routes taken and the composition of the migration flows. These impact groups in vulnerable circumstances, such as girls and adolescent women, in both varying and specific ways.**

At the same time, concrete analysis of these new movements and of the capacity of international organizations and of individual states is necessary so that they can support the needs of the migrating population from a rights and gender perspective.

This study encompasses the Central America to Mexico context and is framed within the global series “Girls on the Move” led by Save the Children Sweden. We want to look directly at the experiences of girls and adolescents in the region and gather information to improve the programmes of international organizations and of states. In this sense we hope that this study will bring with it a transformation of programmes that will guarantee, not only equal access to services and development, but the foundations for a change for migrant girls and adolescents.

Given the current pandemic that we are experiencing, the findings, conclusions and recommendations of this study remain valid as long as they address the basic protection needs that girls and adolescents require in a humanitarian and development context. From a gender perspective, the structural reasons for leaving, the risks of transit (especially for unaccompanied or separated girls) and the challenges in the communities of destination give us important recommendations as well. These findings show us the necessity to invest in girls during the whole migratory process, preparing and equipping them for their journey, strengthening services and making them more child friendly and with a gender sensitive. Programmes need to be adapted to the diverse needs of different groups of girls and special attention needs to be given to the prevention of gender-based violence. Most of all, we need to listen to and learn from the girls themselves.

Lastly, I want to thank the brave girls and adolescents who took part in this study; they expressed their experiences and yearnings without fear. We trust that the reflections that have come from their sincere testimonials will contribute to the work of all actors as well as contribute to reaching the goal of more inclusive, equitable and transformative programmes and services.

—Victoria Ward  
*Regional Director for Latin America and the Caribbean*  
Save the Children



Photo: Ximena  
Zambrana /  
Consultant

**THESE FINDINGS SHOW US THE  
NECESSITY FOR INVESTING  
IN THE GIRLS DURING THE WHOLE  
MIGRATORY PROCESS**



# FOREWORD

A significant number of international human rights instruments such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the 1951 Convention on the Status of Refugees, the 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees, the Declaration of Cartagena of 1984, the 2014 Declaration and Plan of Action of Brazil, and the Global Compacts on Migration and Refugees determine the norms that regulate and guide national and international institutions regarding the international protection of all children and adolescents in migration contexts, for the full and effective guarantee of their rights. Said protection must be extended both in their countries of origin, as well as in the countries of transit and destination, for all girls, boys and adolescents regardless of their immigration



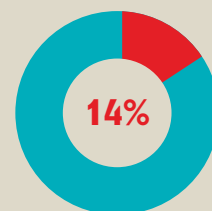
Photo: Jenn Gardella / Save the Children

or protection status. The American Convention on Human Rights, the American Declaration of the Rights and Duties of Man, and the Convention of Belém do Pará, establish legal duties for States regarding the eradication of violence and discrimination against women, girls and adolescents. This is done with the objective of providing special protection to this vulnerable population, which is also clearly formulated in the Inter-American System for the Protection of Human Rights - in particular, in Advisory Opinion No. 21/2014 of the Inter-American Court.

In numerical terms, according to data from the United Nations, in 2019, migrant children (19 years of age or younger) represented **14% of the total migrant population**. In addition to the fact that there is an increased number of children on the move in the region, there are also gender patterns in child migration and different factors that generate displacement, such as violence, poverty, hunger, conflict, persecution for reasons such as race or belonging to a social group, which have a serious impact on their development and well-being. Girls face a higher risk of violence, abuse and exploitation during their journey, especially if they travel alone. Furthermore, when they arrive in a host country, they face the risk of humiliation and harassment, physical attacks and sexual abuse. In these contexts, girls are unable to access the protection to which they are entitled.

The study “Girls on the Move” represents a great advance in the process of guaranteeing the effective protection of the rights of girls and adolescents in migratory contexts, since it is only by documenting their testimonies, hearing their voices and learning from their experiences that institutions can achieve success in the protection response. The IACHR recognizes that, to this day, it remains a great challenge for authorities, institutions and society in general, to create spaces for listening and leading participation by girls, boys and adolescents. However, it is especially important to ensure their full and effective participation, with the aim of guaranteeing their full development and construction of their social citizenship.

You are invited to read this publication thoroughly, and to use it as a tool that will undoubtedly lead to the construction and concretization of strategic actions in the promotion and protection of the rights of girls who are migrants, refugees, stateless or in other contexts of human mobility.



In numerical terms, according to data from the United Nations, in 2019, migrant children (19 years of age or younger) represented **14%** of the total migrant population

— Esmeralda Arosemena de Troitiño  
*Rapport on the Rights of the Child*  
*Inter-American Commission on Human Rights*

# 1. INTRODUCTION

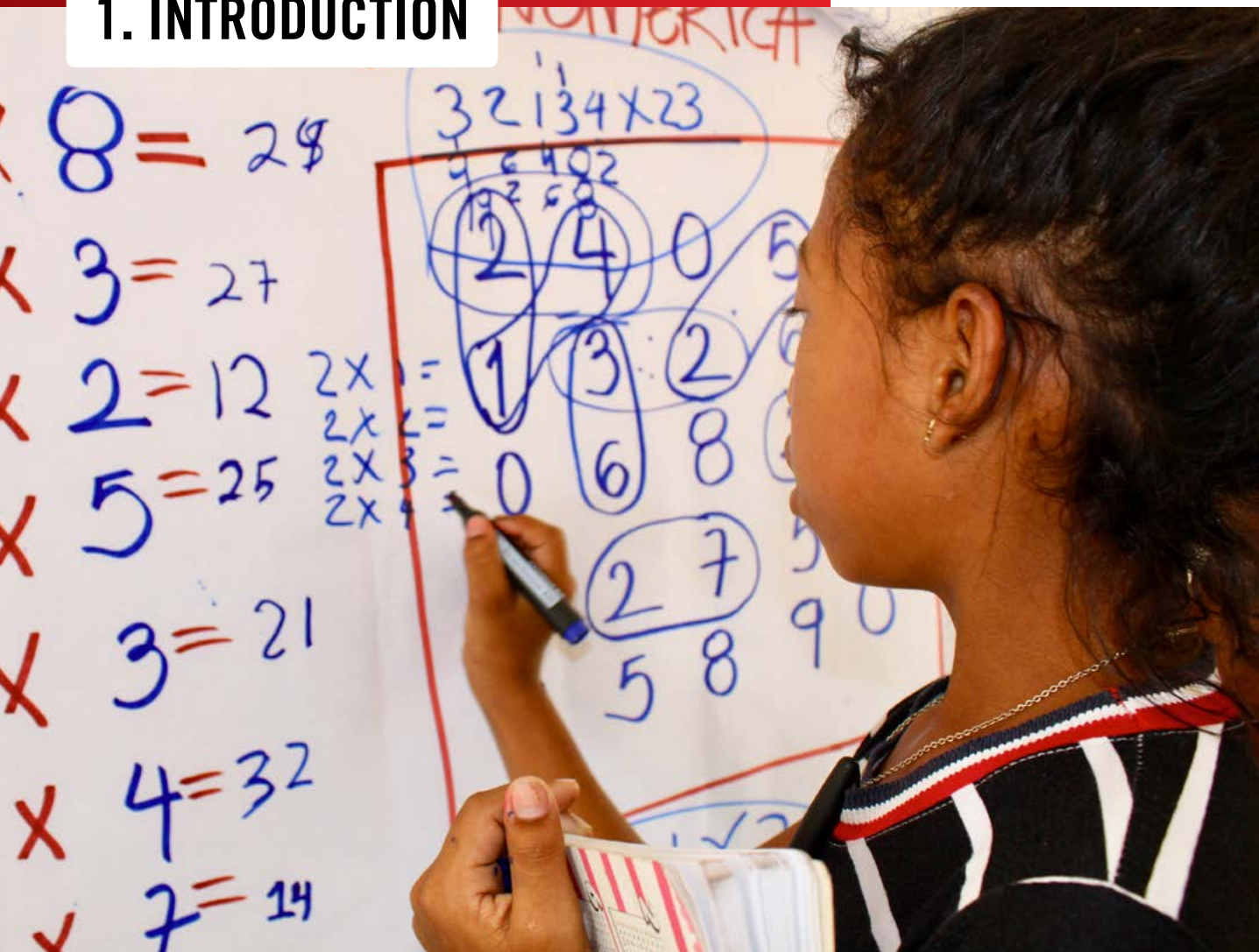


Photo: Jenn Gardella / Save the Children

## 1. INTRODUCTION

*Save the Children's global ambition is that all children survive, learn and are protected by 2030. To accelerate progress towards this goal for the most vulnerable children, the organisation's 2019 – 2021 Global Work Plan<sup>1</sup> strives to leverage and enhance existing knowledge and expertise to close the gap for five groups of children who are likely to be among the most deprived and vulnerable in any context:*

- Girls
- Children with disabilities
- Children affected by conflict
- Children who are migrants or displaced
- Adolescents

Girls on the move are represented in at least three of the five categories listed above, and in some cases, in all five. Despite the well documented ripple-effect of enhanced wellbeing for families and future generations when development or humanitarian efforts invest in girls, interventions that target adolescents or children in mobility often continue to neglect thorough gender analysis during design and monitoring stages, with the result that far too often, girls on the move are absent in programme data and their needs and rights are not sufficiently addressed.

Reports and lessons learned from even long term extensive migration interventions indicate that girls tend not to be reached as effectively as boys. Very little evidence exists in contemporary migration literature to guide gender-sensitive programming for improving migrant girls' prospects to survive, learn and be protected. This knowledge gap has serious implications for girls on the move during humanitarian crises, whose survival, protection and education outcomes are often in the hands of government actors, non-governmental agencies and other community or faith-based organizations that design and implement programming to promote realization of their rights.

### **SAVE THE CHILDREN'S GLOBAL RESEARCH SERIES ON GIRLS ON THE MOVE:**

The Girls on the Move Initiative is a global series of **action research** conducted across different regions within existing Save the Children programmes. Each regional study generates targeted evidence to address knowledge gaps in current literature and programme approaches, and engages Save the Children teams to **immediately strengthen ongoing interventions for girls** in different stages of migration, notably during transit and arrival. Research for the series was conducted during 2019, in Southern Africa, Latin America, Greece and the Balkans.



Reports and lessons learned from even long term extensive migration interventions indicate that girls tend not to be reached as effectively as boys. ”

<sup>1</sup> Save the Children (2019). Closing the Gap: Our 2030 Ambition and 2019 to 2021 Global Work Plan. Available at: <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/library/closing-gap-our-2030-ambition-and-2019-2021-global-work-plan>



“Where do the most vulnerable migrant girls reside in the greatest numbers, based on the assessment of risks?”

## 1.1 Objectives

This report consolidates findings from a rapid participatory consultation with: (1) migrant girls in the Northeastern Colombia border region, (2) front-line practitioners providing services to migrant children and their families, and (3) Save the Children teams in Colombia.

### The aim of the research was to:

- a) Elucidate how gender and gender norms impact girls' decision-making and motivations to migrate from places of origin (for the purpose of this study: Venezuela);
- b) Unpack protection risks that girls face during transit, and upon arrival at destination (for the purpose of this study: Colombia), and which coping strategies girls employ to navigate, mitigate and respond to these risks;
- c) Identify which sub-populations of migrant girls face the greatest risk. Where do the migrant girls in the most vulnerable circumstances reside, based on the assessment of risks?
- d) Assess the availability of, and barriers to accessing, gender-sensitive services (protection, education, healthcare including sexual and reproductive healthcare, etc.) for migrant girls along targeted migration corridors;
- e) Identify protective factors that can be strengthened through programming in order to attain gender equality in programme outcomes and better protect and support migrant girls during the different stages of the journey.

### Researchers followed a three-pronged approach:

- 1) **listen and learn from girls;**
- 2) **highlight practitioner expertise navigating the highly dynamic circumstances** that girls encounter while traveling from Venezuela to Colombia;
- 3) **In collaboration with implementing field teams, identify programme and policy interventions** that can build on existing successes and gaps to protect and promote girls' rights prior to and during movement within the region.

Finally, Save the Children **seeks to compare and contrast findings** from research in four major migratory “hot spots” to deepen the global evidence base on girls' movement. With this and a companion report on girls' migration within Central America and Mexico, Save the Children hopes to better understand how **age and gender shape the experience of girls' migration within the Americas**. Girls' experience of migration differs from that of women, men, and boys yet their voices are largely absent from existing literature shaping programme and policy. The goal is to use “real-time” information from girls to **produce actionable recommendations** that address the needs and promote the rights of girls on the move.

## 1.2 Consultation

Consultations occurred within two sites of Latin America following an initial literature review. Consultation with 21 Venezuelan girls, over half from the indigenous Wayuu<sup>2</sup> community, were carried out in September 2019 in Maicao within the Guajira department of Colombia. The Guajira Peninsula Region is located in Northeastern Colombia, an arid territory along the Caribbean Coast located to the West of the Gulf of Venezuela. Girls were between the ages of 10 and 19 years old. All participants were Venezuelan, from Caracas, Maracaibo, or Zulia. One participant was a mother. None of the girls had a valid passport. Half of the consulted girls lacked any type of documentation whereas the other half either had Venezuelan ID cards or birth certificates or – in three cases – Colombian documents (PEP). Thirteen participants identified as Wayuu, three as mixed, and the rest did not self-identify. The Wayuu represent the largest indigenous group in Colombia; with twice as many Wayuu living in Venezuela<sup>3</sup>. Most consulted girls traveled with family members. Consultation was also carried out with 13 Central American girls (from the Northern Triangle countries of Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras, as well as Nicaragua) in October 2019 in Tapachula, within the Southern Mexican state of Chiapas.

“Half of the consulted girls lacked any type of documentation.”

Venezuelan girls on the move participants			
Age Range	10-13 years old	14-16 years old	17-19 years old
Girl Participants	8	8	5

**Semi-structured individual and group interviews** took place with 34 stakeholders in Colombia and Mexico. Key stakeholders in Colombia included government officials from the Colombian Institute for Family Welfare, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs; Save the Children teams; non-governmental organizations; and representatives from Inter-Agency Groups on Migration and Child Protection. **Save the Children teams in Mexico and Colombia** met to analyse results, review existing programmes, and brainstorm solutions. This workshop included discussions on gender norms; a review of existing programming within the targeted geographic regions of Chiapas, Mexico and La Guajira, Colombia; and a gap analysis for programming and advocacy. After the workshops, the consultation team compared initial findings and inputs from local teams in Latin America with existing regional research and emergent “Girls on the Move” findings from other regions. Results present a snapshot of current:

- motivations that fuel girls’ migration;
- risks that girls experience during their journey;
- barriers that limit access to services;
- and programme and policy recommendations.

<sup>2</sup> The Wayuu ethnic group has legal rights to double nationality, thus freedom of movement across Colombia and Venezuela.

<sup>3</sup> Save the Children (2019). “Venezuelan Regional Migration Crisis: Who are the Children most at Risk?” Save the Children Colombia. [https://www.savethechildren.org.co/sites/savethechildren.org.co/files/resources/STC\\_Venezuela%20FINAL%20web%20ENG%2025%20julio.pdf](https://www.savethechildren.org.co/sites/savethechildren.org.co/files/resources/STC_Venezuela%20FINAL%20web%20ENG%2025%20julio.pdf)



### 1.2.1 Limitations

Consultations occurred with girls of different ages in a single geographic location, though girls came from distinct communities in Venezuela. Indigenous girls represented more than half of the sample. Only one of the girls was a mother with a child of her own, but several girls engaged in sibling care. Reaching more young mothers would have provided greater perspective on how mothers face specific challenges, including the economic pressures of providing for themselves and their dependents. None of the girls identified themselves as survivors of trafficking or commercial sexual exploitation.

Other factors or intersecting identities were not specifically explored during the sessions. Consultations occurred over a period of two days for three hours per day. Venezuelan girls were less likely than girls in other regions to tell detailed personal narratives about their experiences. This could reflect a guardedness that serves as a coping strategy within highly unsafe environments. Additional time for consultation and greater age differentiation within the groups may have opened a space to discuss more sensitive topics and situations of abuse, such as sexual violence or trading sex for basic needs and resources. This created limitations in understanding girls' experience with violence, particularly sexual violence.

Permission for consultation was secured from parents and family members but they were not present during interviews.

The Findings Section of this report includes issues surfaced by girls that were confirmed by stakeholders and/or secondary literature. Girls' inputs organize the findings and the way the report is structured; it is not intended as a full situational analysis of all issues affecting Venezuelan girls on the move. Rather, it is taking girls' own narratives and experiences as the starting point.

## 1.3 Girls on the Move

The Girls on the Move Series highlights key findings from global research on girls and child migration. The movement of girls between countries challenges strongly held norms around gender, childhood, and citizenship. Migrant girls, and particularly unaccompanied girls, do not fit within pre-assigned social categories. As migrants they are 'out of place' within the nation-state, as females they exist outside the domestic domain, and as children they are unprotected by the institution of family<sup>4</sup>. Nevertheless, girls do migrate, often crossing thousands of kilometers and multiple borders, alone, with family members, or in groups. Their needs and capabilities differ from those of women, boys, and men yet few studies focus on the complex interplay between agency, exploitation, connection, and opportunity that girls and young women experience. The Girls on the Move series seeks to highlight this complexity. It recommends actions that meet girls where they are—targeting interventions to “weak points”<sup>5</sup> and building from existing efforts of parents, families, communities and girls.

Literature review for the series surfaced several key themes that should inform programme and policy decisions around girls' migration. They include:

<sup>4</sup> Temin, Miriam, Mark R. Montgomery, Sarah Engebretsen, and Kathryn M. Barker (2013). “Girls on the Move: Adolescent Girls and Migration in the Developing World.” A Girls Count Report on Adolescent Girls. The Population Council

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

- **Migrating girls often experience agency, empowerment, and opportunity alongside harm, exploitation, and curtailment of freedoms.** Discourse on girls' migration often focuses on the detrimental aspects without acknowledging a far more complex reality for girls—that movement generates opportunities as well as risks. Discourse about girl migrants tends to gravitate towards opposite poles. The “girl as victim” portrayal may hide the capabilities and benefits that girls bring to travel, as well as advantages they gain from leaving their home communities. Conversely, a “victor” mentality, while highlighting girls' agency, may not hold duty-bearers to account in ending systemic failures around girl's safety, well-being, education, and health<sup>6</sup>.
- **Girls employ various coping strategies.** The region's socio-political complexity, high levels of violence, both structural and direct, and escalating poverty limit girls' options for self-protection and personal advancement. Within those narrow parameters, evidence of girls' coping strategies emerged. Coping strategies may aid girls in navigating immediate risks while exposing them to other long-term risks.
- **The body as transaction:** Throughout the various Girls on the Move studies, girls' bodies become a basis for transaction, in context-specific ways. Within the Venezuelan context, three types of sexual exploitation were noted, all involving transactions, to various degrees, around the girls' body. These include: trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation, whereby girls are taken or sold by their families or others for money; trading sex for basic needs and resources and early marriage or unions with older men, whereby girls enter into partnerships with older men in order to secure safety and emotional or financial stability. Familial involvement in these transactions can vary across cases. Confirming the scope and scale of these practices remains a global challenge.



Throughout the various Girls on the Move studies, girls' bodies become a basis for transaction... ”

Photo: Victor Leiva / Save the Children



## 2. BACKGROUND: MIGRATION WITHIN LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN



## 2. BACKGROUND: MIGRATION WITHIN LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN



If current trends continue,

**6.5 MILLION  
VENEZUELAN**

could be outside the  
country by the end of

**2020**

In Latin America, three primary migratory routes exist: from Haiti to the Dominican Republic; from Venezuela to various South American destinations; and from Central America to the United States via Mexico. As of December 2019<sup>8</sup>, an estimated 4.5 to 4.7 million individuals<sup>9</sup>, or approximately 15-19 percent of the population<sup>10</sup>, had fled the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela. According to the UNHCR, “if current trends continue, 6.5 million Venezuelans could be outside the country by the end of 2020”<sup>11</sup>. The majority of Venezuelan migrants have migrated to other South American countries.

As of June 2019, Colombia hosts over 1.4 million Venezuelans, one third of the total population having left Venezuela. The majority cross from the Venezuelan states of Zulia and La Tachira to the Colombian states of Norte de Santander and La Guajira, in the La Guajira Peninsula on the Caribbean. However, the exact number of Venezuelan migrants in Colombia is difficult to estimate as many migrants enter Colombia through informal border crossings and host countries may only count “regular” migrants. It is estimated that 70 percent of the migrants who leave Venezuela do so through informal border crossings<sup>12</sup>.

While Venezuelan migration to Colombia increased within the last five years, the regions surrounding the 2219-kilometer border between Colombia and Venezuela share a long history of upheaval from drug-trafficking, illegal mining, and armed conflict associated with the fifty-two year Colombian civil war. Currently, an increasing number of children and their families are ‘trapped at the border’, in makeshift camps, lacking basic services and located in flood-prone areas. Many are at risk of eviction.



The majority of Venezuelan migrants have migrated to other South American countries.”

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/figures-at-a-glance.html>; <https://data.unicef.org/topic/child-migration-and-displacement/displacement/>

<sup>8</sup> R4V (2019) “Coordination Platform for Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela” <https://r4v.info/en/situations/platform>.

<sup>9</sup> IOM (2019). This figure reflects the sum of Venezuelan migrants, refugees, and asylum-seekers reported by host governments.

<sup>10</sup> Wyss, Jim (August 13, 2019). “A nation is vanishing: Has Venezuela lost almost 20 percent of its population?” Miami Herald. <https://www.miamiherald.com/news/nation-world/world/americas/venezuela/article233947387.html>.

<sup>11</sup> UNHCR press release, US\$1.35 billion needed to help Venezuelan refugees and migrants and host countries, <https://www.unhcr.org/news/press/2019/11/5dcdb7284/us135-billion-needed-help-venezuelan-refugees-migrants-host-countries.html>

<sup>12</sup> Save the Children (2019). “Venezuelan Regional Migration Crisis: Who are the Children most at Risk?” Save the Children Colombia. [https://www.savethechildren.org.co/sites/savethechildren.org.co/files/resources/STC\\_Venezuela%20FINAL%20web%20ENG%2025%20julio.pdf](https://www.savethechildren.org.co/sites/savethechildren.org.co/files/resources/STC_Venezuela%20FINAL%20web%20ENG%2025%20julio.pdf)



**Between 2016 and 2018, 21.2 percent of the Venezuelan population, or approximately 6.8 million Venezuelans suffered from malnutrition.”**

## 2.1 Reasons for leaving Venezuela

Political unrest, lack of basic necessities (food, medicine etc), and increasing violence are all factors that have fueled the emigration from Venezuela, with a significant increase since 2015. Petroleum dependency; falling petroleum prices; sanctions against Venezuelan companies; insufficient investment in health and human services; failing infrastructure; corruption; and hyperinflation contributed to the current social and economic crisis within Venezuela<sup>13</sup>. The crisis intensified during 2018 and 2019 when purchasing power dropped and scarcity of food and medicine reached alarming levels. A recent UN report noted that many families' household income only allowed them to purchase 4 days worth of food per month. Purchasing power in Venezuela continues to deteriorate with 10 million percent increase in projected consumer prices anticipated for 2020<sup>14</sup>. According to the UN, about 7 million people in Venezuela need critical humanitarian assistance or protection.

### 2.1.1 Food and Malnutrition

Between 2016 and 2018, 21.2 percent of the Venezuelan population, or approximately 6.8 million Venezuelans, suffered from malnutrition<sup>15</sup>. Food shortages and decrease in purchasing power due to hyperinflation limit family's ability to purchase sufficient food. In June 2018, the Ministry of Food reported that 84 percent of items in the basic food basket were not available in supermarkets<sup>16</sup>. In Venezuela's poor neighborhoods, 65 percent of children were malnourished with 13 percent suffering from moderate or severe acute malnutrition<sup>17</sup>. Within those same neighborhoods, 28 percent of pregnant women had moderate acute malnutrition and 21 percent had severe acute malnutrition, creating risks for cognitive problems, nervous system damage, gastrointestinal disorders, and chronic diseases in children<sup>18</sup>. Although access to food in supermarkets has improved, particularly in urban areas, the increase in prices while salaries stay the same still result in many Venezuelans not being able to afford basic items, including food and water. Migrants, particularly pregnant women and young children, continue to experience the aftershocks of food shortage within Colombia, with an increase in low birth weight infants and acute malnutrition in children under the age of five, documented by the Departmental Secretary of Health in La Guajira<sup>19</sup>.

<sup>13</sup> ACNUDH (2019). "Informe de la Alta Comisionada de las Naciones Unidas para los Derechos Humanos sobre la situación de los derechos humanos en la República Bolivariana de Venezuela". Oficina del Alto Comisionado de las Naciones Unidas para los Derechos Humanos sobre la situación de los derechos humanos en la República Bolivariana de Venezuela. <https://www.refworld.org/es/docid/5d1e31224.html>

<sup>14</sup> International Monetary Fund (2019) "República Bolivariana de Venezuela" <https://www.imf.org/en/Countries/VEN>

<sup>15</sup> FAO (2019) "Hunger now affects 42.5 million people in Latin America and the Caribbean". FAO Regional Office for Latin America and the Caribbean. <http://www.fao.org/americas/noticias/ver/en/c/1201480/>

<sup>16</sup> Van Praag, Oriana (September 13, 2019) "Understanding the Venezuelan Refugee Crisis". Wilson Center. <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/understanding-the-venezuelan-refugee-crisis>

<sup>17</sup> Cáritas Venezuela (2018) "Monitoreo de la situación nutricional en niños menores de 5 años" <http://caritasvenezuela.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/7mo-Bolet%C3%ADn-Saman-Abril-Julio-2018-compressed.pdf>

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> In June 2019, Departmental Health Secretary of La Guajira registered 979 cases of acute malnutrition in children under the age of five with 342 cases of low birth weight infants. Mapa Epidemiológico. Secretaría de salud. <http://www.salud-laguajira.gov.co>

### 2.1.2 Reduced services

Adolescent girls, women, and pregnant women are unable to access sexual, reproductive, or maternal health services, including a lack of pre or postnatal care or delivery services within Venezuela. The cost of contraceptives has increased by 25 times over the last five years and family planning services are not available<sup>20</sup>. UNFPA estimates an unmet need for contraceptives at 80 percent<sup>21</sup>. Many women go to Colombia and return the same day in order to secure medical assistance during their pregnancy, increasing risks as they travel frequently. Access to education is also affected. UNICEF estimates that one million children are out of school in Venezuela<sup>22</sup>. For girls, pregnancy is the primary reason for dropping out of school, as lack of access to contraception and sexual and reproductive health services are contributing to an increase in adolescent pregnancy<sup>23</sup>. Economic difficulties, scarcity of food, lack of proper infrastructure and psychological distress amongst students and teachers are other reasons girls, as well as boys, do not access education as noted in the Section *Barriers to Schooling*.

“  
The cost of  
contraceptives has  
increased by 25  
times over the last  
five years and family  
planning services are  
not available.”

### 2.1.3 Violent crime

Over the last twenty years, violent crime, including assaults, kidnappings and extortion, has risen in Venezuela<sup>24</sup>, intensifying in line with the economic crisis<sup>25</sup>. Differing statistics on violence exist, as the State does not widely publish official statistics. For 2019, the Venezuelan Observatory of Violence estimated a rate of 60.3 violent deaths per 100,000 inhabitants<sup>26</sup>, the highest in Latin America given falling rates of homicide in El Salvador and Honduras<sup>27</sup>.



For 2019, the Venezuelan  
Observatory of Violence  
estimated a rate of 60.3  
violent deaths per

**100,000**  
inhabitants

<sup>20</sup> Care (2019). “Rapid Gender Analysis Latin America & Caribbean: Venezuelan Migrants & Refugees in Colombia” CARE. [https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/CARERapidGenderAnalysis\\_Colombia\\_May2019.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/CARERapidGenderAnalysis_Colombia_May2019.pdf)

<sup>21</sup> UNFPA (August 26, 2019) “Amid economic exodus, left-behind women begin to feel safe in Venezuela” United Nations Population Fund. <https://www.unfpa.org/news/amid-economic-exodus-left-behind-women-begin-feel-safe-venezuela>

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/venezuela-unicef-providing-more-300000-children-education-supplies-help-keep-them>

<sup>23</sup> UN High Commissioner for Human Rights in their 2019 report on Venezuela. <https://www.refworld.org/es/docid/5d1e31224.html>

<sup>24</sup> Reuters (March 11, 2010) “Venezuela murder rate quadrupled under Chavez”. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-venezuela-crime/venezuela-murder-rate-quadrupled-under-chavez-ngo-idUSTRE62A44A20100311>

<sup>25</sup> Official statistics were rarely shared by the Venezuelan government so non-official sources are often used as proxy.

<sup>26</sup> OVV (2019) “Informe anual de violencia 2019” Observatorio Venezolano de Violencia. <https://observatoriodeviolencia.org.ve/news/informe-anual-de-violencia-2019/>

<sup>27</sup> Statistics on sexual violence in Venezuela are not available at the moment, for more information visit: <https://evaw-global-database.unwomen.org/en/countries/americas/venezuela-bolivarian-republic-of>





# 224 km

of border within La Guajira was considered as porous, remote, and with significant gaps or unmarked paths for crossing the border through places where there are no checkpoints

Adolescent girls under the age of

# 14

are most sought after for exploitation

## 2.2 Characteristics and risks in cross-border movement

Several important aspects characterize movement within this region. Cross-border movement was frequent in the past, particularly in Wayuu territory. Stakeholders noted that the 244 kilometers of border within La Guajira was considered as porous, remote, and with significant gaps or unmarked paths for crossing through places where there are no checkpoints. Currently, various types of migration exist: individuals who cross the border into Colombia for less than a day or up to eight days to purchase basic goods (gasoline, food, etc.), including Wayuu children who live in Venezuela but attend schools in Colombia<sup>28</sup>; individuals who work in Colombia temporarily including agricultural Labourers and sex workers; permanent migrants leaving Venezuela; and transit migrants crossing Colombia to reach more distant countries – sometimes crossing the entire country by foot (the so called *caminantes*, or walkers).

Migrants have experienced a significant deterioration of conditions, particularly affecting women and children, in the last two years, with the following trends noted:

- **Higher numbers of migrants in vulnerable situations:** In initial phases of the Venezuelan crisis, healthy individuals, both men and women, left to work. Earlier migrants were often professionals and had some resources to fund their travel<sup>29</sup>. As the crisis escalated and the Venezuelan government limited remittances, the number of women – including pregnant women –, children, elderly and sick migrants increased. Families arrived to reunite with family members already in Colombia or had to travel significant distances on foot, thus requiring greater assistance on arrival than initial waves of migrants<sup>30</sup>.
- **Greater risks at clandestine border crossings:** As migratory flows increased and regular migration routes were locked down, illegal border crossings, many already affiliated with illegal economies, became characterized by threats including: conscription by illegal armed groups; armed groups charging crossing “fees” to migrants, confiscating contraband, robbing passports or identity documents; an increase in sexual or physical assault.

<sup>28</sup> CARE (2019). “Rapid Gender Analysis Latin America & Caribbean: Venezuelan Migrants & Refugees in Colombia” CARE. [https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/CARERapidGenderAnalysis\\_Colombia\\_May2019.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/CARERapidGenderAnalysis_Colombia_May2019.pdf)

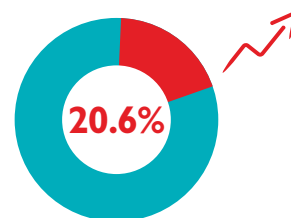
<sup>29</sup> WRC (April 2019). “The Time to Act is Now: Addressing Risks of Exploitation for VZ Women and Children Seeking Refuge”. Women’s Refugee Commission. <https://www.womensrefugeecommission.org/resources-refugee-protection/1716-the-time-to-act-is-now>

<sup>30</sup> Save the Children (2019). “Venezuelan Regional Migration Crisis: Who are the Children most at Risk?” Save the Children Colombia. [https://www.savethechildren.org.co/sites/savethechildren.org.co/files/resources/STC\\_Venezuela%20FINAL%20web%20ENG%2025%20julio.pdf](https://www.savethechildren.org.co/sites/savethechildren.org.co/files/resources/STC_Venezuela%20FINAL%20web%20ENG%2025%20julio.pdf)

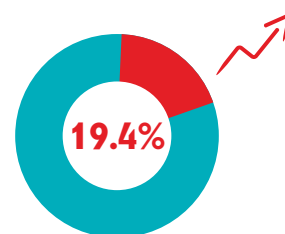
<sup>31</sup> ICBF (June 2019) “Estrategia niñez migrante”. Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar. [https://www.icbf.gov.co/sites/default/files/presentacion\\_estrategia\\_ninez\\_migrante\\_0.pdf](https://www.icbf.gov.co/sites/default/files/presentacion_estrategia_ninez_migrante_0.pdf)

<sup>32</sup> HIAS (December 2019). “Living Day by Day, Having Nothing, Feeling You Are Alone. A Multi-State GBV Assessment in Venezuela”.

- **Increase in cases of child labour, neglect, and violence:** Save the Children identified several types of child labour including selling goods in the streets, begging, and recycling. Smuggling, commercial sexual exploitation, trading sex for basic needs and resources and drug trafficking have also been reported, as have cases of children traveling alone or with groups of other children. The Colombian Institute of Family Well-Being reported significant increases in cases of child labour (7.1%), neglect (20.6%), violence and sexual abuse (19.4%), and abandonment (4.5%) between 2017 and the first three quarters of 2018<sup>31</sup>.
- **Gender-based violence and targeting of adolescent girls:** A recent HIAS Multi-State Gender-Based Violence Assessment<sup>32</sup> detected three overarching themes in the Venezuelan and migrant context. First, an increase in the scale and scope of the sexual and physical violence against women and girls. Second, lack of accessible services for gender-based violence survivors and insufficient programming to prevent violence. Third, the ripple effect of violence against girls and women, as noted earlier, with decreasing physical and mental health as well as restricted access of movement and schooling. Adolescent girls were noted to be at high risk for trafficking, sexual exploitation, and forced unions, with adolescent girls under the age of 14 as most sought after for exploitation. These trends continued within destination communities of Colombia and are also confirmed by Save the Children staff.



The Colombian Institute of Family Well-Being reported significant increases in cases of neglect



The Colombian Institute of Family Well-Being reported significant increases in cases of violence and sexual abuse



Photo: Sacha Myers / Save the Children

### 3. FINDINGS: GIRLS ON THE MOVE IN VENEZUELA



Photo: Victor Leiva / Save the

### 3. FINDINGS: GIRLS ON THE MOVE IN VENEZUELA

Within the Venezuelan context, the deteriorating economic, social, and political situation creates a series of risks and circumstances that interact and reinforce one another within girls' lives. Three primary themes, detailed below, emerged from consultations and secondary research around mutually reinforcing risks.

- **Unsafe survival strategies trigger health and protection needs for girls:** Poverty and hunger, compounded by girls' lack of control over household resources, increases girls' engagement in unsafe labour and exploitation<sup>33</sup>. Food and cash shortages contribute to the necessity of trading sex for basic needs and resources. The lack of health services—particularly the lack of contraception—leads to more unwanted pregnancies as well as an increased risk of sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV. Since 2015, adolescent pregnancies have increased by 65 percent<sup>34</sup>. Pregnancy triggers school drop-out in adolescents, with pregnancy listed as the primary factor for school dropout within Venezuela<sup>35</sup>. Malnutrition in girls and young women generate high-risk pregnancies that require specialized services and create additional health risks for both mother and baby. Maternal mortality increased by 66 percent in just one year<sup>36</sup>. These patterns appear to continue within Colombia, though more study is needed.
- **Violence and gender-based violence affect all aspects of girls' lives in Venezuela and Colombia:** The “ripple effect” of violence within the public sphere reduces mobility and decreases use or access to services, such as education. Reduced mobility and avoidance of unsafe public spaces, including during frequent power outages<sup>37</sup>, increases loneliness and disconnection. Mental health issues flourish under these conditions, exacerbating disorders that may emerge during adolescence as well as pre or post-partum depression. This fuels child neglect that continues within destination communities of Colombia.
- **Lack of essential services for girls in Venezuela increases needs upon arrival in Colombia:** High out-migration hollows out origin communities, further reducing already precarious social services and support networks within Venezuela. Girls reported that schools lack teachers. Estimates indicate that approximately 65,000 teachers, or 60% of the workforce<sup>38</sup>, have left Venezuela. Hospitals lack doctors and medicine. Women, especially pregnant women, migrate to secure pre-natal services. One pregnant woman waiting for hours for medical services in a Colombian border city commented, “But thank God I’m not trying to get services in Venezuela, because there aren’t any”<sup>39</sup>. Girls arrive in Colombia with urgent unmet needs. Challenges in meeting increased demand for services, compounded further by xenophobia, results in girls lacking the fundamental services needed to guarantee their well-being.



“

The “ripple effect” of violence within the public sphere reduces mobility and decreases use or access to services, including school.”

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> ACNUDH (2019). “Informe de la Alta Comisionada de las Naciones Unidas para los Derechos Humanos sobre la situación de los derechos humanos en la República Bolivariana de Venezuela”. Oficina del Alto Comisionado de las Naciones Unidas para los Derechos Humanos sobre la situación de los derechos humanos en la República Bolivariana de Venezuela. <https://www.refworld.org/es/docid/5d1e31224.html>

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Jorge M., Maria Emilia. “Gobierno admite que se disparó 30% la mortalidad infantil y 66% la materna”. El Estímulo. <https://elestimulo.com/gobierno-admite-que-se-disparo-30-la-mortalidad-infantil-y-66-la-materna>

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Kurmanaev, Anatoly and Isayen Herrera (November 30, 2019). “Students Fainting from Hunger in Venezuela’s Failing School System”. The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/30/world/americas/venezuela-students-hunger.html>

<sup>39</sup> Janetsky, Megan (February 26, 2019) “Maternal mortality up to 83% along Venezuela border as migrants flee country” Women’s Media Center. <https://www.womensmediacenter.com/women-under-siege/maternal-mortality-up-83-along-venezuela-border-as-migrants-flee-country>



## 4. GIRLS IN CIRCUMSTANCES OF HIGH VULNERABILITY

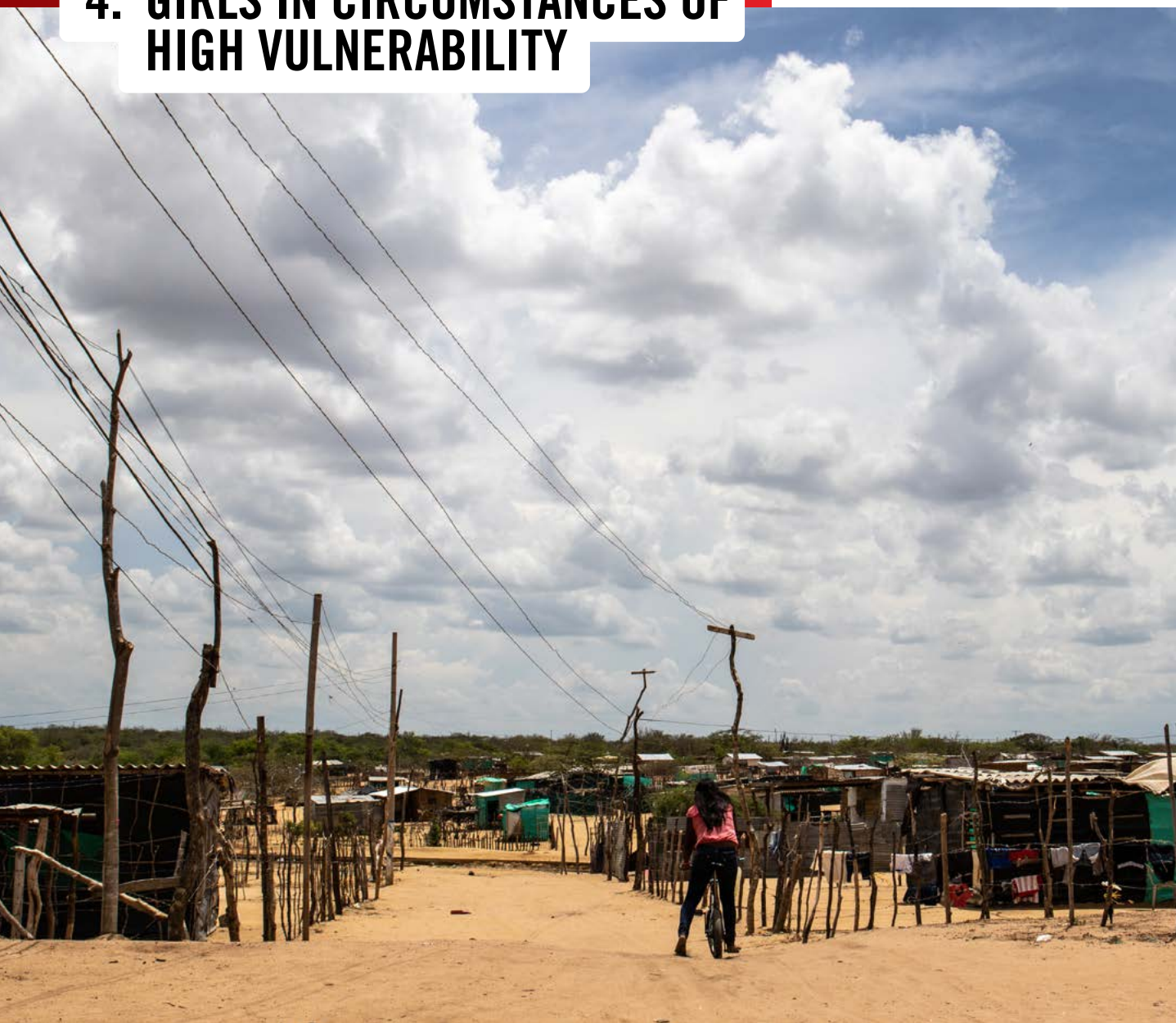


Photo: Sacha Myers / Save the Children

#### 4. GIRLS IN CIRCUMSTANCES OF HIGH VULNERABILITY

All girls experience conditions of vulnerability in both the Venezuelan and Colombian contexts. Certain circumstances exacerbated vulnerability at origin, transit, and destination. These included: lack of legal documentation, pregnancy, childcare (either for siblings or their own children), and fewer financial resources. As poverty intensifies within Venezuela, girls and their families travel in more precarious states. They arrive to Colombia with diminished personal, financial, and social resources to navigate the transition to a new place. Particular groups of girls may experience overlapping vulnerabilities, most related to sexual and other forms of gender-based violence. These girls are often “hard to reach” with services and targeted programming. Save the Children teams identified the need to enhance programming to the following girls: adolescent girls; young mothers, pregnant girls, married girls (including from within the Wayuu community where child marriage is culturally accepted) girls with childcare responsibilities; survivors of violence and sexual exploitation; girls living in the street; and girls with disability.



Save the Children teams identified the need to enhance programming to the following girls: adolescent girls; young mothers, pregnant girls, married girls, girls with childcare responsibilities; survivors of violence and sexual exploitation; girls living in the street; and girls with disability.”



Photo: Luca Kleve-Ruud / Save the Children



## 5. FINDINGS: MOTIVATIONS FOR MIGRATION



Photo: Sacha Myers / Save the Children

## 5. FINDINGS: MOTIVATIONS FOR MIGRATION

**“We came due to the situation in Venezuela.”**

María, 17 years old

Girls noted that they lacked the ability to fulfill their most basic needs within Venezuela. Several girls mentioned the common experience of hunger, lack of services and the political situation in Venezuela as motivating migration. One girl, 17 years old, also specifically mentioned pregnancy as the reason for migrating.

### 5.1 Lack of food, malnutrition, and inadequate housing

Girls consistently mentioned the lack of access to food in Venezuela. They also indicated lack of basic services, including appropriate housing, with one girl noting that she lived in a space covered in plastic bags in Venezuela. The dire living conditions that Venezuelans face, including shortages of food, has led to negative coping mechanisms, such as reducing food portions, skipping meals or basing their diet on carbohydrates or beans exclusively<sup>40</sup>. Not surprisingly, being able to eat three times a day, was the one thing girls said they appreciated the most in Colombia.

“  
One girl, 17 years old, also specifically mentioned pregnancy as the reason for migrating.”

**“We left because of how things are there, we only ate dinner, we didn’t have breakfast or lunch.”**

Alejandra, 13 years old

**“Here at least we can search for things to eat several times a day.”**

Soraya, 10 years old

**“In Venezuela, I didn’t have a home, I lived [covered] with plastic bags... [that was] my house.”**

Inés, 12 years old

<sup>40</sup> United Nations (03/2019), Venezuela Overview of Priority Humanitarian Needs, p. 15.



**Reduced services and adolescent pregnancy also leads to girls dropping out of school**

## **5.2 Barriers to schooling**

Girls reported barriers to education as motivating their departure. Barriers stemmed from multiple causes: lack of consistency in teacher attendance; lack of teachers due to migration; and family care responsibilities interfering with school attendance. As highlighted above, reduced services and adolescent pregnancy also leads to girls dropping out of school.

**“Sometimes we had classes, sometimes we didn’t.  
Many of the teachers left as well.”**

Romina, 12 years old

**“I could never go to school. My grandmother was sick and I took care of her, my grandfather worked and arrived late.”**

María Antonia, 17 years old

Despite this situation, many of the girls specifically highlighted their schools as safe spaces, which made them feel calm. Many expressed a wish to continue studying.



Photo: Sacha Myers / Save the Children

### 5.3 Insecurity, violent crime, and sexual violence

Girls shared a high degree of awareness about risks related to sexual violence and other forms of violent crime and insecurity within their origin communities. Girls indicated that their houses felt safe but the streets, parks and communities – the public spaces – were not. Girls explicitly mentioned rape, sexual exploitation and kidnappings. These risks were not unique to origin communities, but formed part of their overall lived experience in origin, transit and destination communities.



**Girls indicated that their houses felt safe but the streets, parks and communities – the public spaces – were not**

**“My mother and my house felt safe, I am scared of sexual and commercial abuse.”**

Yanire, 16 years old

**“I was very scared of violence. There are a lot of kidnappers and criminals, bad people. I was very scared of the street at night... rapes.”**

Carmen, 16 years old



Photo: Sacha Myers / Save the Children



## 6. FINDINGS: GIRLS IN TRANSIT

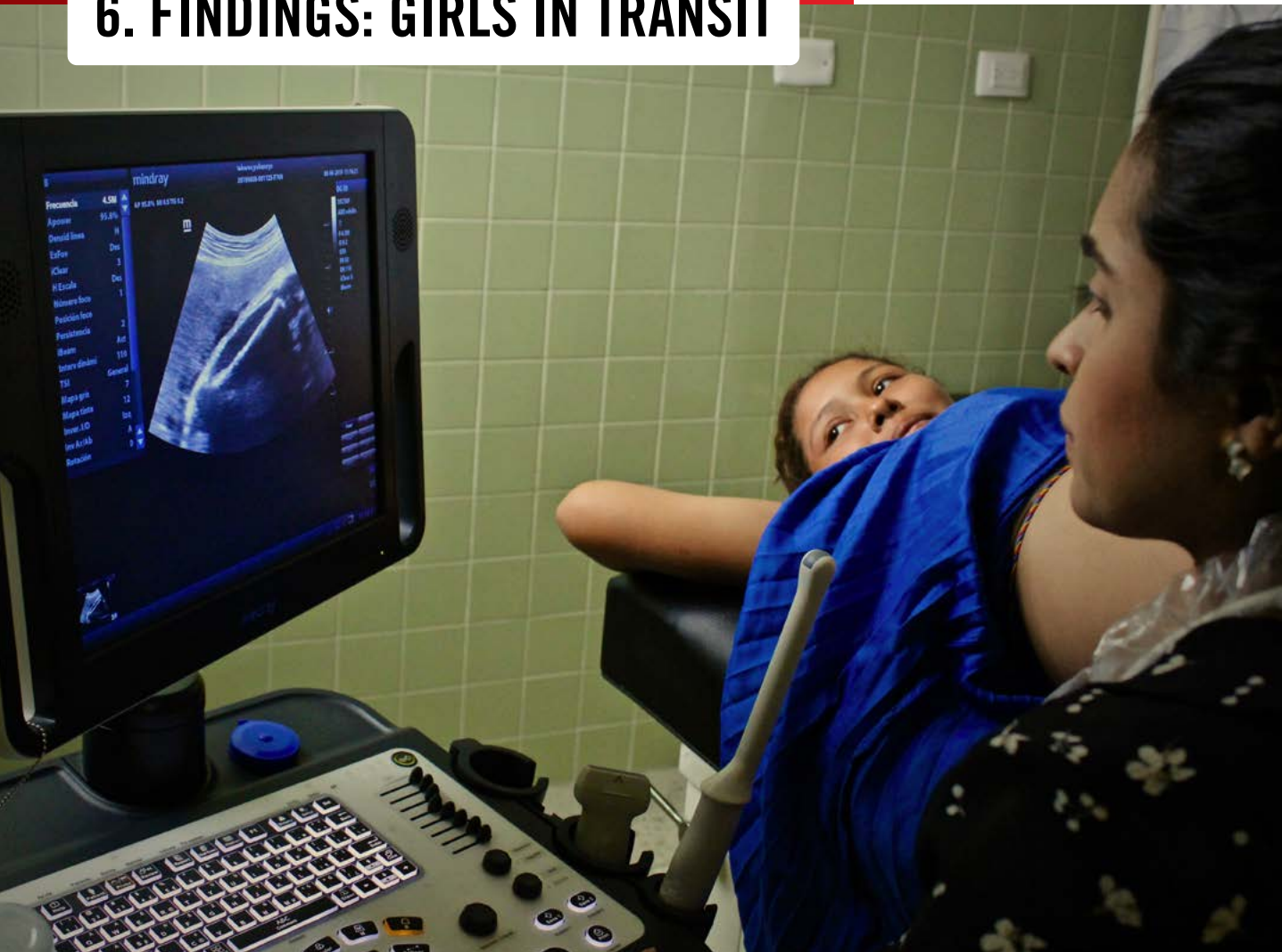


Photo: Jenn Gardella / Save the Children

## 6. FINDINGS: GIRLS IN TRANSIT

**Girls indicated a high degree of awareness about certain risks during travel, many of those similar to risks encountered within origin communities. For instance, both in origin communities and during transit, girls experienced limited freedom of movement. Due to safety risks, they did not consider public spaces accessible for girls, particularly at night.**

Distance traveled varied between consulted girls. Those originating in Caracas would have traveled approximately 700 kilometers more than those originating from the State of Zulia or Maracaibo, the largest Venezuelan city in the State bordering La Guajira in Colombia. Several girls related traveling toward the border region by using buses from town to town.

Those originating in Caracas would have traveled approximately

**700 km**

more than those originating from the State of Zulia or Maracaibo, the largest Venezuela city in the State bordering La Guajira in Colombia

### 6.1 Hunger, discomfort, sleeplessness, and anxiety during travel

Anxiety pervades all aspects of travel. Girls reported intense experiences of hunger, sleeplessness, and discomfort particularly during the night. Given the multiplicity of risks, including robbery, physical and sexual assault, and criminal groups, migrants reported rarely sleeping during nights when they did not have safe lodging. Girls also reported the need to maintain a high degree of alertness at all times.

**“When you’re traveling it’s hard to deal with the hunger and exhaustion and everything, and its worse when its raining.”**

Karina, 14 years old

**“During the journey we have to be alert all the time, looking around constantly, because you never know.”**

Ximena, 12 years old

### 6.2 Physical and sexual violence put girls at great risk

Violence permeates every aspect of transit, ranging from physical to sexual violence. Four groupings of sexual violence affecting girls were identified after consultations with girls, key actors and the literature review. These included: trafficking for commercial sexual exploitation; trading sex for basic needs and resources; forced and early unions or child marriage with an older man (often as a strategy to secure protection, legal documents, food, and economic support); and sexual and other gender-based violence within the household context.



Several girls noted that sexual violence was almost indiscriminate, affecting both boys and girls, whereas younger girls identified older girls as being at higher risk. Older girls within the group declined to discuss this. Girls noted specific strategies they used to try to reduce risks of sexual violence, such as covering their bodies, despite the hot terrain.

**Sometimes they rape everyone (not only the women),  
it is dangerous for all, all children get kidnapped.”**

Fernanda, 14 years old

**“When you’re a woman they take and steal everything  
from you, even children get raped.”**

Ximena, 12 years old

These border-crossings are controlled by various criminal entities that charge a small fee for crossing, approximately

**5,000**

Colombian pesos  
(equivalent to USD 1.50)



**“There are more risks for Señoritas [young women],  
I saw how they brought a young woman into a car  
and they hurt her.”**

Rosa, 14 years old

### 6.3 Trochas: sites of high vulnerability

Even if they are carrying documentation, underage children traveling on their own or with someone who is not their parent face more difficult challenges in entering legally. Thus, girls traveling in non-familiar groups have to take more dangerous routes, increasing their vulnerability.

All girls, including those originating closer to the border, declared the “trochas”<sup>41</sup> or clandestine border-crossing paths, as spaces of significant fear and apprehension. Time to cross the trochas near to Guajira range from five to ten hours. These perceptions appeared to be formed based on lived experience, observations, and stories circulated within migrant groups. These border-crossings are controlled by various criminal entities that charge a small fee for crossing, approximately 5000 Colombian pesos (equivalent to USD 1.50).

Activity of armed splinter groups, including former combatants of illegal armed groups, has increased along the border region, increasing a sense of insecurity.

<sup>41</sup> InSight Crime (March 19, 2019) “Trails Along Colombia-Venezuela Border are Criminal Enclaves” Venezuela Investigative Unit. <https://www.insightcrime.org/news/brief/trochas-colombia-venezuela-criminal-enclave/>

**“Right there, in the *trochas*, they kill people, or they rape them, or they threaten them.”**

Inés, 12 years old

**“In the *trocha*, my mom saw a boy do something and they cut him. They also raped a little girl.”**

Rosa, 14 years old

**“Many go in *trochas*, that’s the dangerous part.”**

Kenisa, 11 years old

**“People from armed groups are also at the border and kill Venezuelans too.”**

Xunita, 17 years old

**“I had the proper documents but we had to pay the police to let me pass because I am a minor and I had no permission letter.”**

María Antonia, 17 years old



Photo: Miguel Arreategui / Save the Children

## 7. FINDINGS: GIRLS AT DESTINATION



Photo: Jenn Gardella / Save the Children

## 7. FINDINGS: GIRLS AT DESTINATION

**Girls continue to experience poverty, unmet human needs, and similar risks of violence upon arrival in Colombia, with some exceptions. Girls report xenophobia and discrimination; lack of education and health services; and fears for their safety in certain spaces. Girls also report improvement in their access to basic goods and a significant difference in the affordability of food. Accessing public services remains a challenge. The lack of services is particularly limiting for girls and family members whose health, nutrition, and overall vulnerability to rights violations increased due to the challenges of travel and the precariousness of life within Venezuela.**

The majority of consulted girls indicated that Maicao was not a final destination, often naming other cities in Colombia where they hoped to settle, such as Cartagena or Barranquilla. However, few could specify plans to arrive in those destinations and many end up living in the makeshift settlements close to the border, lacking basic infrastructure and services.

### 7.1 Greater accessibility of food and continued security issues within Colombia

**“We came here with my mom and my little brother and here we found breakfast, lunch and dinner. We found everything, clothing.”**

Alejandra, 13 years old

**“Here at least we can find things to eat a few times per day.”**

Soraya, 10 years old

Girls acknowledge greater opportunity to access basic goods in Colombia. They especially mentioned the lower cost of food, and the possibility to eat three meals a day as a notable aspect of life in Colombia.

Girls did not report significant improvements in security within the informal settlements of La Guajira. They report limited movement, a sense of being closed-in, particularly at night. Stakeholders reported that inadequate water, hygiene, and sanitation services meant that many girls and women would use plastic bags inside the house, rather than the outdoor latrines that are considered unsafe, particularly at night.

Girls also noted the role that services, namely child-friendly spaces, played an important role in enhancing their ability to form friendships and feel secure. For girls coming from the service-poor environment of Venezuela, Child-Friendly Spaces (organized in the “tent” referred to below) provides access to age-appropriate services and security.



**Girls acknowledge greater opportunity to access basic goods, namely food, within Colombia**



**“What I like about Maicao is the park, and to be in the tent and play with my friends. It is easy to live here because everything is cheaper.”**

Aurora Julia, 12 years old..

### **7.2 Lack of appropriate housing and hygiene**

Despite improvements in access to some services, arrival in Colombia also entails continued dire living conditions, particularly for migrants with an already limited or depleted economic capacity before leaving Venezuela. Several girls reported sleeping on the streets upon arrival in Maicao. Temporary settlements lack basic services such as water or electricity, and lack of hygiene and trash removal creates sanitary issues. For adolescent girls, the lack of adequate water, sanitation and hygiene facilities poses additional challenges in terms of managing menstrual hygiene.

**“When I got to Maicao I slept on the street.”**

Lorena, 15 years old

**“Here, where we live, there is no electricity or water.”**

Inés, 12 years old



Photo: Luca Kleve-Ruud / Save the Children

### 7.3 Lack of health and education services

Girls report limited access to education and health services as irregular migrants. In 2018, Colombia reiterated their commitment to providing education to Venezuelan children. Nevertheless, access is still difficult, due to over-crowded schools, Venezuelan students lacking certificates of previous studies, girls' mobility, and the failure of schools to comply with national statutes.

**"We want to study here, but we can't. I really want to study and finish school and... be a doctor."**

Paula, 15 years old

**"If we get sick, they don't receive us at the hospital because we need to have a Colombian identity card, so I can't go to the hospital. If I get sick, we need to buy medicines. I haven't gotten sick so far. I just had the flu, but that's all."**

Lorena, 15 years old

### 7.4 Continued exposure to violence, including sexual violence

Girls report continued exposure to violence, including sexual violence, within Colombia. Girls are able to identify both safe and unsafe spaces. Within temporary settlements, girls feel especially vulnerable. If they do not have the proper documents, they are more prone to feel prejudices and racist attitudes, and being subjected to sexual violence. This ever-present threat of violence entails an important restriction of their liberty of movement and access to the public space. Girls and women reported being afraid to go out at night and lacking access to safe toilets or hygiene facilities.

**"We want to study, but they tell us we are not allowed to because we are Venezuelans."**

Yanire, 16 years old

One girl, an adolescent mother who migrated together with her partner, also reported instances of intimate partner violence and stated she was feeling unsafe at home. For migrant adolescent girls, with family members far away and limited social networks in Colombia, situations of gender-based violence may rapidly escalate. Social isolation, which may be further compounded if they have children of their own, reinforces their vulnerability to violence at the same time as they may not be detected by formal and informal protection mechanisms. Moreover, as identified by Save the Children stakeholders, there is a lack of investment in the protection system and support to survivors of gender-based violence, particularly outside the large cities. Girls also lack access to information about existing services, both during transit and upon arrival, and when such information is available, it is mainly found close to the border control zones, where irregular immigrants do not pass. Survivors of sexual and other forms of gender-based violence are moreover unlikely to report given their irregular status and fear of reprisals or deportation.

**"Here in Colombia, I like everything, there are no bad things... what I don't like here are the hoods, because some are dangerous, they rob you and shoot. Last night I heard 14 shots, yesterday morning they stole a motorbike. I don't like that."**

**When I go to the toilet at night it is dangerous, it is dark."**

Alejandra, 13 years old



**“I feel unsafe and in danger when I am accompanied (by my partner)... I feel bad, because I don’t understand why he hits me, when I am not doing anything.”**

Maria Antonia, 17 years old

Girls also indirectly mentioned sex in exchange for access to basic needs and resources. This has been documented by secondary literature as a prevalent strategy among girls, with few or no other options available<sup>42</sup>. However, this issue was not covered as part of this study and further research would be needed.

### **7.5 Care-taking and financial responsibilities limit girls’ participation**

Patterns around gender and age emerge in girls’ responsibilities for sibling and child care. Several girls report taking care of younger siblings or, in the case of the adolescent mother, her own child. The role of girls as caregivers emerge both in origin, where they care for siblings or elder family members, and upon arrival in Colombia. The older girls also report assuming responsibilities in order to earn money. Child labour within informal markets is common, with begging and recycling noted as income-generating opportunities.

Caretaking and financial responsibilities may become an important barrier to girls’ access to services and activities due to scheduling or lack of childcare within existing programming. Adolescent mothers are in a particularly vulnerable situation and lack of adapted programming may further increase their isolation and vulnerability to gender-based violence.

**“When our little siblings get sick, it’s difficult. We (girls) have to stay here and take care of them because the adults leave to work and try to find some money, they go to the market to beg for money.”**

Ximena, 12 years old

**“Life in Colombia isn’t easy, we can’t get a job because we’re Venezuelans. Here, if you don’t work, you don’t eat. We need to recycle to eat.”**

Yanire, 16 years old

<sup>42</sup> Care (2019). “Rapid Gender Analysis Latin America & Caribbean: Venezuelan Migrants & Refugees in Colombia” CARE. [https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/CARERapidGenderAnalysis\\_Colombia\\_May2019.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/CARERapidGenderAnalysis_Colombia_May2019.pdf)

## 7.6 Xenophobia

Girls mentioned challenges around discrimination as affecting certain aspects of their lives. Stakeholders reported sexual stereotyping of Venezuelan girls and women throughout the region<sup>43</sup>, exacerbating protection risks and even leading to expulsion of Venezuelan women within host communities. Stakeholders confirm that girls sense and are affected by the climate of xenophobia. This complicates social integration, especially in school environments, where sexualized stereotyping by peers as well as some male teachers results in girls experiencing schools as places where they cannot feel safe.

“  
Stakeholders confirm  
that girls sense and  
are affected by the  
climate of xenophobia.”



Photo: Jenn Gardella / Save the Children

<sup>43</sup> WRC (April 2019) “The Time to Act is Now: Addressing Risks of Exploitation for Venezuelan Women and Children Seeking Refuge” Women’s Refugee Commission. <https://www.womensrefugeecommission.org/resources-refugee-protection/1716-the-time-to-act-is-now>

## 8. DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS



Photo: Sacha Myers / Save the Children



## 8. DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

**Venezuelan girls describe a series of unmet needs and a breakdown in basic service provision within Venezuela. They describe a lack of food and inadequate housing, schooling and health services. In addition, insecurity limits their lives in profound ways — in origin, transit and upon arrival. Sexual violence limits girls' lives, mobility, and access to support in interconnected ways.**

Young girls indicate that they live in a state of near constant apprehension. Even the youngest girls describe a high degree of awareness of a multiplicity of risks including rape, kidnapping, and theft. The constant threat of sexual violence limits girls' mobility and restricts their access to the public space. For older girls and young women, the lack of food and purchasing power given currency failure means they may be forced into trading sex for basic needs or resources or engage in informal or forced unions as a way to secure food for themselves and family members. As households experience intense economic crisis, the girl's body is viewed as a resource for transaction. Trading sex for basic needs and resources and high levels of sexual violence, coupled with the lack of contraceptives and sexual and reproductive health services, raises the potential for unwanted and high-risk pregnancies, sexually transmitted infections and unsafe abortions.

Girls and young women find their life trajectories dramatically altered by the “ripple effect”<sup>44</sup> of unmet human needs in Venezuela. Their decision to migrate is unsurprising, particularly for those living within close proximity of the Colombian border. Upon arrival in Colombia, girls find it easier to secure food. Although the work they engage in remains exploitative and dangerous, their labour yields currency that can be used to purchase food, an improvement from Venezuela. They describe mixed experiences of security within Colombia and nostalgia for their home communities. They report lacking access to basic needs such as housing, hygiene, and school—but they are no longer as hungry. Potential rise of xenophobia and lack of documentation threatens the improved security. Insecurity and different forms of violence, including various forms of sexual violence, continue to be an important risk and reality.



They describe a lack of food and inadequate housing,



schooling and



health services



Photo: Sacha Myers / Save the Children

<sup>44</sup> HIAS (December 2019). “Living Day by Day, Having Nothing, Feeling You Are Alone. A Multi-State GBV Assessment in Venezuela”.



**Investing in relevant government departments to ensure that the Colombian government entities responsible for health, protection, and education programming have sufficient resources and human capacity to respond to Venezuelan migrant needs**

## 8.1 Opportunities previously identified

Save the Children Colombia's March 2019 Report, "Venezuela Regional Migration Crisis: Who are the Children Most At Risk?" provides comprehensive recommendations for programmatic interventions. Below, several programming recommendations are highlighted given their relevance to girls.

- **Provision of Education in Emergencies programming** to provide "catch-up" programming for Venezuelan children whose access to school has been limited prior to migration or children recently out-of-school after migrating.
- **Development and implementation of adolescent programming** to provide alternatives to trading sex for basic needs and resources for girls and gang involvement for boys. A focus on menstrual hygiene management and sexual and reproductive health and rights are also important.
- **Addressing grave violations of children's rights** to identify, monitor, and intervene to prevent commercial sexual exploitation or forced recruitment occurring within informal settlements.
- **Investing in relevant government departments** to ensure that the Colombian government entities responsible for health, protection, and education programming have sufficient resources and human capacity to respond to Venezuelan migrant needs.
- **Strengthening community-led coping mechanisms and resilience** to reduce child neglect, promote recreation critical to positive child development, and create opportunities for safe child care. Girls identified Save the Children's Child Friendly Spaces (CFS) as places of safety, but parents need longer-term childcare options.
- **Enhancing a gender-transformative approach** to generate more equitable gender relations, including strengthening women's organisation efforts in settlements; gender-transformative adolescent programming for girls focusing on self-esteem, body awareness and sexual and reproductive health and rights; mixed interventions for girls and boys which highlight gender-specific risks and counter the objectification of women and girls; specific work with boys and men to promote gender equality, including redistribution of reproductive and care work. Building upon the consultation with girls, efforts to engage boys and men should also focus on preventing sexual and other forms of gender-based violence.



These recommendations would contribute to the wellbeing of children, adolescents, and youth, including girls. Girl-specific recommendations surfaced from testimonials of consulted girls are discussed below.

## **8.2 Invest in girls in origin, transit, and at destination**

The primary recommendation is to take action for girls, with a particular focus on adolescent girls and young women who live or travel outside the care structures of close and caring family members. A few ways to prioritize investment are detailed below.

## **8.3 Prepare girls prior to travel**

**Simple awareness-raising and information, education, and communication materials and sessions can prepare girls for travel and life transitions.** Informing girls about risks related to the *trochas*; implications of changing policy environments in host countries such as Brazil and Ecuador; risks of remaining “trapped” at the border; as well as strategies to maintain communication with family members, both in Venezuela and Colombia, would facilitate their passage. Awareness-raising, information and education materials need to be designed in such a way as to identify practical, gender-sensitive and age-appropriate tips for travel, without intensifying the fear and apprehension that girls already experience, using child-friendly and gender sensitive visuals.

## **8.4 Strengthen the delivery of girl-friendly sexual and reproductive health services**

Sexual and reproductive health services emerged as a high priority within both the Colombian and Venezuelan context. Girls seek non-judgmental and supportive sexual and reproductive health services as well as water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH); medical services; protection; and greater food security<sup>45</sup>. Save the Children has global experience supporting governments and partners to deliver adolescent-friendly, gender-sensitive health services, often in tandem with economic programming designed to address the economic issues at the heart of sexual exploitation<sup>46</sup>. Sexual and reproductive health services can be used as an entry-point to reach adolescent girls and particularly adolescent mothers, who often face access barriers for other services and activities.

## **8.5 Consider gender-based violence prevention and response as a core aspect of programming that targets children**

The prevalence of sexual and physical violence as a daily reality for girls who participated in this study, as well as its broadly cited eminence in secondary literature focusing on this context, needs to inform the approach of any intervention aiming to improve the situation for girls in Venezuela/Colombia, regardless of the thematic sector/nature of the intervention. An urgent need remains, especially in the post-COVID era, for programming that prevents and reduces gender-based violence. Programming should target men and boys, as well as women and girls, at origin, with programming for the prevention of



Sexual and reproductive health services emerged as a high priority within both the Colombian and Venezuelan context. ”

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> See: Save the Children (2008). Partnership Defined Quality for Youth: A Process Manual for Improving Reproductive Health Services through Youth-Provider Collaboration. <https://www.savethechildren.org/content/dam/global/reports/health-and-nutrition/pdq-y-manual.pdf> OR <https://www.savethechildren.org/content/dam/global/reports/health-and-nutrition/Young-Adolescent-Sexual-Reproductive-Health-2015.PDF>



Central American girls consulted by Save the Children under the age of 10 years old reported more safe spaces and happy memories, such as parks, schools, or interactions with nature, within their communities of origin than Venezuelan girls.”

**Girls are especially at risk of exploitation**

gender-based violence, promote access to information about existing services for survivors while in transit, and increase availability and access of these services along the route, as well as in Colombia. Girls are especially at risk of sexual exploitation, gender-sensitive programmes for children on the move need to approach interventions for children with this in mind, to address their need for information about risks and strategies to stay safe. Greater emphasis needs to be placed in funding and programming for girls on the move, on interventions that improve socio-economic wellbeing, and in order to reduce the need for forced unions or harmful work. Social networks of girls can be strengthened, at origin and in transit, to increase support and provide strategies for mitigating risks related to gender-based violence.

### 8.6 Provide safe spaces and psychosocial support to counteract toxic stress

The testimonials of girls indicate toxic stress given lack of security. Even young girls indicated a high degree of awareness around risks within their environment. They also felt that it **was their responsibility to maintain vigilance over their bodies and belongings**: a problematic proposition as it permits a narrative of self-blame, often linked with post-traumatic stress disorder, for individuals who survive violence or abuse<sup>47</sup>. This finding differed from the narratives of Central American girl migrants in Southern Mexico. While both sets of girls come from origin communities with high levels of violence, Central American girls indicated more forewarning or targeted events around violence, such as puberty, targeted conscription, attacks on family members, extreme domestic violence, or extortion as triggering migration. Both types of violence are highly problematic, yet Central American girls<sup>48</sup> consulted by Save the Children under the age of 10 years old reported more safe spaces and happy memories, such as parks, schools, or interactions with nature, within their communities of origin than Venezuelan girls. Within Venezuela’s context of “disorganized” crime and desperation, even young girls experienced threats as constant, with hyper-vigilance needed at all times, including for sexual and other forms of gender-based violence.

Recent literature on adverse childhood events highlight how **high levels of toxic stress in childhood have significant implications for both short and long-term physical and mental health of migrant populations**<sup>49</sup>. The continuous triggering of the “flight or fight” syndrome from chronic stress redirects the body’s energy away from biological and cognitive processes associated with healthy child development. Hyper-vigilance is a coping strategy that girls employ at cost to their own healthy development. Stakeholders also noted that these socio-emotional challenges occur when girls are separated from family members and those they trust to care for them. One stakeholder commented, “we see how complicated it is for girls when the emotional bonds are broken with family members...it has a significant impact on their self-esteem, emotions, and mental health.” The consequences of toxic stress intensify if the girl becomes pregnant. Toxic stress is linked to post-partum depression affecting the girl’s own mental health and limits healthy development of infants<sup>50</sup> and parental capacity to care for children. High levels of child neglect reported by Save the Children teams managing cases within Colombia is unsurprising given the combination of toxic stress, early pregnancy, and lack of health services.

<sup>47</sup> Kline, N. K., Berke, D. S., Rhodes, C. A., Steenkamp, M. M., & Litz, B. T. (2018). Self-blame and PTSD following sexual assault: a longitudinal analysis. *Journal of interpersonal violence*, 0886260518770652. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/29683081>

<sup>48</sup> These are only preliminary findings from a small sample of girls that require further testing, though they may indicate patterns of how different types of violence affect the psychosocial status of children in different contexts.

<sup>49</sup> Murray, J. S. (2018). Toxic stress and child refugees. *Journal for Specialists in Pediatric Nursing*, 23(1), e12200. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/29155486>

<sup>50</sup> Drury, S. S., Scaramella, L., & Zeanah, C. H. (2016). The neurobiological impact of postpartum maternal depression: prevention and intervention approaches. *Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Clinics*, 25(2), 179-200. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4794751/>

Given the unique needs of adolescent girls, **current programming should be extended with greater intentionality on the age and gender-specific psycho-social needs of adolescent girls.** Girls need safe spaces characterized by the absence of trauma, excessive stress, violence (or fear of violence), or abuse<sup>51</sup> to counteract the deleterious effects of living in homes, communities, and countries saturated by violence — including different forms of gender-based violence. Moreover, gender inequalities place girls in a subordinate position in terms of gendered power relations and translate into different forms of discrimination, which may be perpetuated in mixed spaces. Girl-centred programming, often delivered through girls' clubs or life skills programmes, provide girls with safe spaces, trained mentors, and guided peer learning and age-appropriate skills acquisition. They have been proven to change discriminatory gender norms and practices, provide psychosocial gains, and increase knowledge<sup>52</sup>. Some programmes have reduced the share of girls reporting having sex against their will<sup>53</sup>. The social support fostered within girl-centred programming can provide an important source of emotional security to girls deprived of family members, easing feelings of loneliness and disconnection associated with poor mental health. Peer learning can build key skills girls will need for migration, livelihoods, self-protection, and sexual and reproductive health. Girls may also strengthen certain skills, such as assertiveness, communication, decision-making, and refusal, to which they may have had less exposure than boys, due to restrictive gender norms.



**Current programming should be extended with greater intentionality on the age and gender-specific psycho-social needs of adolescent girls**

## 8.7 Integrate child care as part of programming and target young caregivers

Parenthood and sibling-care responsibilities keep girls within the home, increasing girls' invisibility and limiting their access to important services and programming. Save the Children has begun to integrate childcare functions into programming, making it accessible to a broader range of children, who are mothers themselves and girls responsible for children care. **Such efforts should be examined for replicability with a broader range of contexts.**

## 8.8 Develop and offer positive parenting to parents on the move

Such efforts also benefit parents and other caregivers. Moreover, parents, particularly from female-led households, could benefit from interventions specifically focused on their needs. Positive parenting programmes that strengthen parent capacity to protect children and reduce abuse within the household have been shown effective at improving parent-child communication. Responsive, consistent styles of parenting have been shown to play a protective role for children, even in low-income or conflict-affected contexts<sup>54</sup>. **Globally, parenting programmes often integrate thematic issues such as financial literacy, reproductive and sexual health, and education topics in an effort to address root causes that limit parents from performing a protective role.** Moreover, parenting programmes should to a greater extent involve men as equitable caregivers and include specific modules related to gender equality. Such efforts have proven to benefit children, women and men themselves.

<sup>51</sup> UNFPA (2015). "Women and Girls Safe Spaces. A guidance note based on lessons learned from the Syrian crisis". UNFPA Regional Syria Response Hub. <https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/UNFPA%20UNFPA%20Women%20and%20Girls%20Safe%20Spaces%20Guidance%20%5B1%5D.pdf> Citing Wendy Baldwin (May 2011) "Creating 'safe spaces' for adolescent girls" Population Council. Series: Promoting healthy, safe, and productive transitions to adulthood. [https://www.popcouncil.org/uploads/pdfs/TABriefs/39\\_SafeSpaces.pdf](https://www.popcouncil.org/uploads/pdfs/TABriefs/39_SafeSpaces.pdf)

<sup>52</sup> Marcus, Rachel; Nandini Gupta-Archer; Madeleine Darcy and Ella Page. (September 2017) "Girls' clubs, life skills programmes and girls' well-being outcomes". GAGE: Gender and Adolescent Global Evidence. <https://www.gage odi.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/GAGE-Girls-Club-Report-FINAL.pdf>

<sup>53</sup> Bandiera, Oriana; Niklas Buehren; Robin Burgess; Markus Goldstein; Selim Gulesci; Imran Rasul; and Munshi Sulaiman (2018). "Women's Empowerment in Action: Evidence of a Randomized Control Trial in Africa". World Bank and DfID. <http://www.homepages.ucl.ac.uk/~uctpimr/research/ELA.pdf>

<sup>54</sup> Puffer, Eve S., Annan, J., Sim, A. L., Salhi, C., & Betancourt, T. S. (2017). The impact of a family skills training intervention among Burmese migrant families in Thailand: A randomized controlled trial. PLOS ONE, 12(3), e0172611. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0172611>



## GLOBAL RESEARCH SERIES: GIRLS ON THE MOVE

### SUMMARY

*The Girls on the Move Initiative is a global series of **action research** conducted across different regions within existing Save the Children programmes. Each regional study generates targeted evidence to address knowledge gaps in current literature and programme approaches, and engages Save the Children teams to **immediately strengthen ongoing interventions for girls** in different stages of migration, notably during transit and arrival. Methodology and emphasis vary according to context, but research is mostly qualitative. In all contexts, it includes the **literature review, participatory research** with girls on the move in countries of origin, in transit and/or at destination, participatory **programme review and capacity building** with country and regional office teams directly responsible for implementing programming that reaches girls on the move. Through this initiative, we hope to cultivate a more nuanced understanding within and beyond Save the Children of how gender impacts experiences and outcomes for children in migration and displacement. The research reports are published as a series with a global summary that presents interventions for quick uptake to accelerate our collective ability to seek out and reach girls on the move and achieve **Ambition 2030**.*

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