

## Report Summary

More than 3 million people have fled Venezuela since 2015 due to widespread insecurity, the collapse of the economy, lack of food and medicines, and fears of violence, discrimination, and persecution. They have sought safety throughout Latin America and the Caribbean region. Ecuador and Peru are two of the countries hosting the largest number of Venezuelan refugees and migrants. Both countries experienced a huge spike in arrivals in 2018; compared to 2017, there was a fourfold increase in Venezuelan arrivals in Peru, and an almost 300 percent increase in Ecuador (although more than 80 percent were in transit, mainly to Peru).

The profile of arrivals to these host countries has changed over time: in contrast to earlier arrivals, many of whom were able to support themselves, many of those now seeking refuge have limited financial resources to safely navigate displacement, and there is a higher percentage of women and children. More young women are traveling alone, and many children are unaccompanied or separated from their parents. Venezuelan women and girls fleeing Venezuela are at particular risk of sexual exploitation, especially those who are in an irregular migratory situation and/or undocumented. There are persistent reports of survival sex, sexual exploitation and assault, and sex trafficking. Survival sex is often the only option available to Venezuelan women and children, in order to ensure their own survival and that of family members.

In January 2019, the Women's Refugee Commission (WRC) conducted a two-country assessment, visiting capital cities and key border crossings in Peru and Ecuador. WRC spoke with UN agencies, government ministries, and social protection authorities, international and local NGOs, faith-based organizations, and Venezuelan women and children. Our findings and recommendations are based on what we learned.

### What we found

1. **There is an urgent need to address challenges with documentation.** In Ecuador, the costs and documentary requirements involved in obtaining visas are prohibitive for many Venezuelans. In Peru, a new process is needed now that the temporary stay permit scheme has ended. The difficulties in accessing the necessary documents for entry and for regularizing status are an incentive for refugees and migrants to gain informal entry and live without documents, exposing them to extra risks, such as having to rely on survival sex, and compromising their protection.
2. **Most countries in the region have been dealing with the Venezuelan influx primarily as a migrant situation rather than a refugee situation.** UNHCR has encouraged states to consider using the regional definition of refugee from the 1984 Cartagena Declaration in the case of Venezuelan asylum seekers, and to consider using a group-based assessment, or accelerated or simplified case processing. States should also ensure that a system for prioritizing vulnerable applicants is in place and connected to protection services, particularly for sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) survivors, children at risk, and LGBTI individuals.
3. As the result of an operational focus on addressing the large numbers of new arrivals at formal ports of entry, combined with insufficient resourcing of systems, **most of the protection systems for Venezuelans focus principally on documentation rather than on comprehensive protection.**
4. **There has been an increase in the number of children (mostly older teenagers) arriving in Ecuador and Peru alone or with relatives who are not their parents or with unrelated adults.** These children are at heightened risk of abuse and exploitation, including trafficking for the purposes of sexual exploitation, labor, and begging, and they require protection systems adapted to their needs.
5. **Many Venezuelan women and children are at high risk of sex trafficking, sexual exploitation, and other forms of GBV.** At the main ports of entry, along primary transit routes, and in key cities, the GBV referral and response procedures vary in their implementation, with major capacity problems, especially outside of capital cities—all require strengthening through support for host government systems. The few shelters that exist for trafficking victims and those for GBV survivors do not have enough qualified staff with the necessary technical abilities, including psychologists.
6. **Venezuelan women traveling alone, despite their high vulnerability, are not prioritized for specific assistance.** For example, unless they are pregnant, women traveling alone at the Colombian-Ecuadorean border are not eligible for humanitarian transport for highly vulnerable undocumented groups or for WFP food. WRC was informed that pregnant women and women with children are prioritized for services and assistance, which means that young women traveling alone who are not pregnant often cannot find safe women-only places to sleep at the border.
7. **Not much attention has been paid to the specific needs of LGBTI Venezuelan arrivals in Ecuador and Peru.** For example, there has been no specific focus on identification of LGBTI trafficking victims, and LGBTI survivors of SGBV can face challenges accessing services.

8. **Xenophobia against Venezuelans is a growing concern, and it is highly gendered.** Host communities are concerned about increased demands on services that were resource constrained before the increase in Venezuelan arrivals. Backlash against Venezuelans who are seeking employment and accessing services, including schools, is a concern.
9. **Migrants and refugees identified access to livelihoods as the most important factor in ensuring their protection, but also as a source of risk,** including sexual harassment, pressure to provide sexual services at their workplace, labor abuses relating to their pay, and concern about increasing resentment of host communities by “undercutting” them when taking informal employment and “displacing” local people.

## Our top recommendations

### To the governments of Ecuador and Peru:

- Implement the September 2018 Quito Declaration and its Plan of Action, which articulates a regional coordination plan regarding the migratory crisis of Venezuelan citizens in the region.
- Use the wider Cartagena Declaration definition of a refugee when deciding on refugee status for Venezuelans.
- Institute a registration of undocumented Venezuelans and a regularization process, in order to provide some option for applying for legal status for those without passports and other requirements for visa applications.
- Work toward developing emergency family-based alternative care for unaccompanied and separated children and other children at risk.
- Ensure that state officials are trained on the standard operating procedures and referral systems relating to GBV response.
- Increase investments in shelter capacity for victims of all forms of trafficking and for GBV survivors.
- Support access to clinical management of rape and sexual and reproductive health services for Venezuelans.
- Support training for the police and the judiciary on labor rights for refugee and migrant women.

### To the government of Ecuador:

- Reduce the cost of visas for Venezuelan applicants and the level of the fine for overstaying a visa.
- Reinforce the capacity of the Ministry of Economic and Social Integration and the junta de protección (protection group) with specialized personnel who are available on a 24-hour basis to ensure protection for unaccompanied and separated children arriving into the country.
- Establish specialized shelters for teenage girls at the border.

### To the government of Peru:

- Institute a registration of undocumented Venezuelans and reopen a regularization process now the temporary stay permit process has ended.
- Develop a protocol on unaccompanied and separated children with UNICEF, UNHCR, and other key agencies.
- Strengthen the child protection reception system, with further resourcing of the Special Protection Unit (UPE) and the Temporary Residential Attention Centres (Centros de Atención de Residencia).

### To the United Nations and international cooperation agencies:

- Prioritize young women (aged 18–24) traveling alone as high-risk cases, ensuring that they are prioritized for receiving assistance such as safe spaces to sleep at the border, and are eligible for services such as humanitarian transport for the most vulnerable groups.
- Focus a higher percentage of assistance on programs supporting longer-term socio-integration, including income generation programs and anti-xenophobia campaigns.
- Reinforce host government systems on counter-trafficking and on multi-sectoral support services for GBV protection and response.

### To international donors:

- Support the Regional Platform’s appeal of US\$738 million for response to the needs of Venezuelan refugees and migrants.
- Provide funding for local civil society organizations and invest in strengthening national GBV services and social protection systems that will benefit both the displaced population and host communities.
- Support the establishment of UNHCR’s Regional Safe Spaces Network to further enhance access to services for SGBV survivors and children at risk.

## Women’s Refugee Commission

The Women’s Refugee Commission improves the lives and protects the rights of women, children, and youth who have been displaced by conflict and crisis. We research their needs, identify solutions, and advocate for programs and policies to strengthen their resilience and drive change in humanitarian practice. Since our founding in 1989, we have been a leading expert on the needs of refugee women, children, and youth and the policies that can protect and empower them.

The full report is available at <https://wrc.ms/Venezuela2019>

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