



The double challenge of migrant women

The situation of women in the recent migration wave of Venezuelans to Colombia has been the focus of solid academic work by Universidad del Rosario. It evidences the institutional and social challenges the country faces to move towards a policy with a differential approach in which women can get rid of the burden of gender discrimination that is evident in most places around the world.

By: Magda Páez Torres
Photos: Milagro Castro y Ximena Serrano

Juana is Venezuelan, and now she lives in Colombia for the sake of survival. She arrived in Cúcuta in 2016 with her husband and two children, seeking a better present. But she encountered the cruel side of mankind, for whom she represented two unforgivable “sins”: being a woman and being a migrant.

Migrating per se implies an enormous challenge for societies and for those who embark on the venture of being hosted—with guarantees—in a foreign homeland. But it takes on major dimensions when it is a woman who packs her life in one or two suitcases, cherishing the illusion of finding better opportunities in other lands.

Just like Juana, there are 272 millions migrants in all the planet; out of them, 48% are women, according to data from

the *World Migration Report 2020*, by the IOM. It fell to them to walk uphill against stereotypes, obstacles, collective imaginations, and social prejudices.

Precisely, the double vulnerable condition of being a woman and a migrant inspired professor María Teresa Palacios, director of the **Human Rights Research Group** at Faculty of Law of Universidad del Rosario, to lead many studies which have shed light on this phenomenon.

“Unfortunately, in our contextual structure, I mean not only Latin American countries, but also in general in the world, there is still a deeply rooted patriarchal structure, since in the territories, especially in destination and transit countries, we find concepts that have tended to turn women into instruments,” pointed out professor Palacios.



↑ “The research made in four cities in Colombia concludes that the rights needing more protection are health, regularization, right to work, to food and to education. The access to such rights is strongly linked to the migration status”: Maria Teresa Palacios, researcher, Faculty of Law.

Human trafficking, labor exploitation, migrant trafficking, and the violation of human rights, are among the long and heavy list of dangers to which migrant women are exposed. “Sadly, there is a sexualization of woman’s body; that happens to nationals and foreigners. But indeed, when you are in transit migration, that fact is increased, because as there are rings of traffickers, dealing with migrants or with people, women and girls are more at risk of becoming victims. A factor of vulnerability appears there: the revictimization of women,” emphasizes the expert.

Yes, we talk about revictimization, bearing in mind that most women leaving their countries have already suffered the hardships of barriers and unfairness due to their gender. “We found difficulties for women in their place of origin, the problems we have in our society: inequality, for example, in access to work, lack of equality and distribution of roles in people’s and home care,” she adds.

Besides that, in her view, migration can spring from many sources: political persecution, ethnic persecution, systematic violations of human rights. “That’s where we could find those women who see refuge, for example,” she underlines.

According to her analysis, a migration can also be triggered by economic conditions such as in Venezuela, where social insecurity, the lack of opportunities, and the lack of institutional networks “lead to a large number of violations to rights, both of men and of women.”

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The Colombia case: The Venezuelan migration wave

Colombia has been the country receiving most of the Venezuelan migrants. By September 2020, based on data provided by the Colombian Migration agency, there were 1,715,000 Venezuelans in the country. According to the Administrative Registry of Venezuelan Migrants completed in 2018, the share of women in these migrational flows accounts for 49.67%. Such an exodus has triggered a series of social and institutional reactions, and women have their own history in that scenario.

Professor Palacios lead one of the researches that explore the Colombian case. It is a study titled “*The voice of women in the migration processes: A look at the Feminization of Venezuelan Migration*,” carried out in four cities: Bogotá, Cúcuta, Pereira and Santa Marta.

Through workshops, they identified scenarios of risk, threat, and vulnerability of the rights of migrant women and their protection routes. To that end, two methodological tools were used: the rights’ top five and the Migrant Big Report Card. “We developed this sort of tool that we termed “migrant big report card,” in which women could personally identify what rights were most violated in their personal experiences. We had different types of participants: officials from entities and organizations whose role was to attend the migrant population,” explained the researcher.

As part of those workshops, interviews were conducted with migrant women; that was when Juana could tell the details of her stay in Colombia. She revealed some barriers to access to health and education which were harder because she had no identification doc-



uments. Many of the women included in the research agreed on this matter.

“We cross-interpreted the workshops we carried out in the cities, both with officials, social organizations and the migrant population, and with the university, and we found that the rights that needed more attention, more protection, were health, regularization, the right to work, feeding, and education; the prior rights. We reached one of the most important conclusions of the analysis: **the access to rights depends on migration status**,” described professor Maria Teresa Palacios.

For Xiomara Ramírez, researcher at Universidad Simón Bolívar, who led the study in Cúcuta, there is another factor that weighs on migrant women, which is linked to this migration situation: the socio-economic condition. “We worked in four columns, two belonging to strata 3 and 4; and the others to 1 and 2. The barriers are very different depending on the place where they settle down. The women in strata 3 and 4 had the resources to travel, or had relatives; they could obtain the identity documents that gave them the advantages of a Colombian; they did not undergo so many hardships. On the contrary, most of the women in strata 1 and 2 have irregular conditions and therefore, are working in informality,” reveals the researcher.

In the same way, Ramírez verified that, in Colombia, as in many parts of the world, the woman's role is associated with care or housework, and, even, prostitution. "Given the condition of being a woman, on many occasions it is harder to find a job in some sectors, and their roles are stereotyped," explained professor Palacios, who continued to say that "in our case, the Venezuelan woman is related to house work, baby-sitting, or caring for the elderly; and perhaps sexual work, but she would hardly get an opportunity for other types of occupations, although it is worth mentioning, they have also worked in the informal economy, in the hotel industry, and restaurants."

Let's strengthen the institutions!

One of the main challenges both researchers refer to, in view of the protection and hosting of women and the migrant population in general, is training of officials, as some of them usually do not know that foreigners, under the Constitution of Colombia, have almost the same rights as nationals.

For example, Article 100, states "foreigners shall enjoy in Colombia the same civil rights granted to Colombians (...). Likewise, foreigners shall enjoy the territory of the Republic, the guarantees granted to nationals, except for the limitations set forth in the Constitution or the laws." Article 13 also refers to equal treatment of people by the authorities without any discrimination on the grounds of gender, race, family, or country of origin, among others.

"There is a need for very important training for officials from all the areas involved, from the Police, the migration authorities to the workers of the EPS, schools; all that front line of attention that the migrant population turns to when they seek access to rights. That would contribute to the reduction of xenophobic and discriminatory outbreaks as well as violations of such rights," warned Palacios.

In the same line, professor Ramírez expressed that it is urgent "that officials understand what the adequate process is, because many times they do not clearly know the attention procedure. And that women are not only included in training programs or receive humanitarian help, but also access to a follow-up program, and urged to do a better planning to attend both the current situation and the future that they receive guidance on how to start their own business, so they stop being informal."

Although researcher María Teresa Palacios highlights the *Statute of Temporary Pro-*

tection for Venezuelan Migrants, as an important link, she warns that, in practice, conditions for women do not change. "Initially, it would be beneficial for all people in irregular situations under the conditions stated by Decree 216, but it has no clear differential approach, so I think we still have that task yet to complete."

"In fact, she continues—the differential approaches in Colombian migration policies are quite scarce; we have actions that indirectly benefit women, such as those aimed at children, but none of them causes a direct impact."

Based on this status, the researcher warned that it couldn't be used to replace the refugee condition. "It should be noted that such a condition grants more rights, so we should raise a red flag: it is necessary to regulate other things, strengthening the figure of refugee, and do not substitute the concession of the refugee condition, to replace it by granting the status of temporary protection."

He called for better planning to address both the current situation and future migration waves. "It is appropriate, for example, to open participation spaces for migrants, so as to

know first-hand what their needs are in terms of access to human rights, because that can help as a basis for a more participative construction of public policy, which may be more sustainable. If we know what expectations are migrant permanence, we will surely be able to plan in a different way, one that may transcend the short term," recommended professor Palacios.

Finally, the researcher stressed the importance of recognizing the role of woman in the migration processes. "Until the early days of the decade of 2000, it was believed that the woman was simply a companion to man, that it was only the men who pushed the migration processes. Well no! It is a mistake found

One of the main challenges the researchers mention, in view of the hosting of women and the migrant population in general, is training of officials, as some of them do not know that foreigners, under the Constitution, have almost the same rights as nationals.



in the academic literature. In fact, the migrant woman is a protagonist of her migration movement, because she plans for a life project, either because she wants to send money to her origin country, because she is head of a family and needs to respond for everybody and then bring them together by means of processes of family reunion, or simply because it is her life project and she wants to go and look for international protection or better economic opportunities."

This being so, she underlined the importance that women have in the economy "because they send money, because they produce, because they work tirelessly, but additionally, because they perform an invisible work, which is caring, that kind of unpaid job. All of this should be compensated economically or socially, and the results be revealed in the migration studies."

These researches provide valuable information on the role women play in the migration waves that are happening in the country and around the world. Its academic production ranges from articles to a book titled "Women's rights: migrant women in Colombia." The contents present an x-ray of the local migration phenomenon, which becomes a great tool for making decisions based on evidence in the pursuit of new sustainable public policies. It is clear that, like Juana, thousands of women travel along strange lands today, seeking to claim their importance, their potential, and their value. They are the faces of a silent, historical discrimination, that is made visible today by the academic world, in the hope that the voice of equality—silenced for years—rumble, and that gender equality finally have a place in the agenda of governments, international agencies, and in many societies marked by the burden of prejudices. ■

*The name of the person who offered the testimony was changed to protect the identity.

PROYECTO DE INVESTIGACIÓN
FEMINIZACIÓN DE LA MIGRACIÓN VENEZOLANA EN COLOMBIA: ANÁLISIS REGIONAL CON ENFOQUE DE DERECHOS HUMANOS 2014-2018

TARJETÓN DE LOS DERECHOS

Enumere de 1 a 5 los derechos que usted considera necesitan mayor atención en su región, siendo 1 el que más atención necesita y 5 el que menos:

- Salud
- Integridad personal
- Trabajo
- Acceso a la justicia
- Vivienda
- Vida Libre de violencia
- Cuidados en el hogar
- Unidad familiar
- Libertad expresión
- Igualdad
- Debido proceso En actuaciones administrativas y/o judiciales
- Alimentación
- Educación
- Regularización de la situación migratoria
- Acceso y trámite de documentación migratoria
- Integración cultural

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TARJETÓN DE LOS DERECHOS

Describe, mediante palabras o dibujos, una situación de la que usted haya tenido conocimiento, que implique discriminación hacia mujeres migrantes provenientes de Venezuela, en el periodo comprendido entre los años 2014 y 2018, sin brindar datos personales.

Fecha: _____ Región: _____

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Practical guide for migrant women coming from Venezuela