



# THE IMPACT OF COVID - 19 ON REFUGEES AND MIGRANTS FROM VENEZUELA VULNERABLE TO HUMAN TRAFFICKING AND SMUGGLING:

## Key messages to government authorities and law enforcement agencies

Human trafficking and smuggling of migrants<sup>1</sup> are crimes with serious human rights implications that are accentuated in crisis times. With the outbreak of COVID-19, women and men refugees and migrants from Venezuela may face specific vulnerabilities to those crimes due to the circumstances of their journey and their poor living and working conditions. Unprecedented travel and mobility restrictions intended to prevent the spread of COVID-19 have multifaceted impacts which, in combination, foster an environment where refugees and migrants, particularly those in irregular situations, could be abused and exploited, along with challenges to identify, protect and prosecute. As a result of the outbreak, refugees and migrants previously less at risk of trafficking may become victims, while vulnerabilities of persons already at risk of trafficking may be further exacerbated, for example, for women and girls who disproportionality have fallen victims to this crime.

The human trafficking and smuggling of migrants' subsector calls for attention to the challenging situation of refugees and migrants from Venezuela vulnerable to trafficking and smuggling. This document provides the impact of COVID-19 on Venezuelan refugees and migrants, increased risk factors for human trafficking and smuggling of migrants, and key messages for government authorities and law enforcement agencies. This document can also be used by practitioners to adapt ongoing counter-trafficking efforts - in prevention and/or provision of assistance - in the context of COVID-19, to elaborate messages for targeted community groups, or as guidance for advocacy to engage with authorities and law enforcement agencies.

## I. The impact of COVID-19 on refugees and migrants from Venezuela, increased risk factors for human trafficking and smuggling of migrants

### 1. Restriction of movements

- **Increasing border closures and measures to restrict the movement of people often results in many refugees and migrants stranded in border areas.** For those on the move or stranded in densely populated areas and/or in shelters, social distancing and/or limiting outdoor activities are virtually impossible to implement, thereby increasing the likelihood of contracting or spreading the virus.
- **Movement restrictions can increase reliance on smugglers and illicit groups.** Taking advantage of the current situation even with the militarization of many borders, and abusing the vulnerability of refugees and migrants, smugglers already operating at informal border crossings may charge even **higher fees for their services or use extortion.**

<sup>1</sup> The subsector uses the terminology of the United Nations Convention against Transnational Crime (UNTOC) on the term migrant smuggling, but recognizes that this crime also affects refugees.



- With increasing closures of porous borders with Venezuela, desperate Venezuelans are compelled to resort to more **risky migration** and informal border crossing via ‘trochas’. Experience from previous epidemics suggest that restrictions on movement and other contingency measure can create opportunities for sexual exploitation and abuse.
- Unable to make ends meet, there are **reverse flows of desperate Venezuelan refugees and migrants returning from neighboring countries to Venezuela**.
- Some governments restrict windows of time for people to move only for grocery shopping and **require the possession of ID/passport and movement permission documentation**. Vulnerable women and men refugees and migrants without valid documents are reluctant to go out for fear of being identified by authorities.

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## 2. Overstretched State capacity to address human trafficking and smuggling of migrants

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- **The COVID-19 outbreak puts a major strain on State capacities at all levels, and resources may be diverted away from counter-trafficking and counter-smuggling of migrants efforts** due to pressing public health priorities. The provision of protection and assistance for victims, as well as the investigation and prosecution of perpetrators can be affected by the closure of public institutions and support organizations, or situations of employees working from home, and the closure of borders.
- **Organized crime networks could take advantage of this disruption of State functions and capacity**, which would increase the risk of human trafficking and smuggling of migrants in the region.

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## 3. Lack of safety and limited access to health care

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- Refugees and migrants are **often denied access to national health care systems** even when such systems are not overwhelmed with the response to COVID-19; some are compelled to continue working despite high risk contexts or already being sick.
- Due to the strains imposed by the pandemic – isolation, reduced access to basic services, potential victims of trafficking, in particular those in irregular situations, may be **unwilling or unable to report health conditions for medical expenses they cannot afford, or for fear of being identified, detained, and/or deported by authorities**.
- Those working in the informal sector or in irregular situations may face **more exposure to contracting the virus due to precarious work conditions without sufficient preventive measures**.

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## 4. Loss of income leading to negative coping strategies and exploitation

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- Refugees and migrants, in particular those in irregular and precarious situations, **who are losing income have become the most vulnerable to exploitation and human trafficking**. Those relying on daily incomes, of the low-skills and low-wages in the informal sector, are hardest hit by the economic impact of COVID-19: layoffs, movement restrictions, reduced access to markets, no access to social safety nets, stigmatization, inflation, and a spike in prices.
- **Loss of income significantly increases the reliance on various negative coping strategies**, including living in overcrowded space with other refugees and migrants who have been evicted, selling off of assets, lower food consumption, survival sex for food, forced prostitution, early/forced marriage, labor exploitation, and illicit selling of drugs, to name a few.



- **In populations where women are head of household, increased food insecurity places them under heightened pressure and could expose them to reliance on negative coping mechanisms.** Many livelihood opportunities that women rely on will be at risk due to movement restrictions and government response strategies. Cross border traders, often women, will be unable to continue their trade activities as borders are closed. Informal sector and daily wage workers will also be at risk of disrupted livelihood activities that will negatively impact their subsistence and greater risk of trafficking (IASC, 2020).
- Those working in the informal sector, many of them women, often have very limited or no savings or access to credit. Desperate people may incur **debts with very high interest rates via informal-market financing or loan sharks**. If unable to repay, they might be subject to **bonded situation and forced labor**.
- **Women domestic workers, cleaners, construction, caretakers, tourism, hotels, taxi drivers, street vendor sellers, bars and restaurant workers, as well as those engaged in prostitution are amongst the most vulnerable to labor and/or sexual exploitation and abuse.**
- **Women, girls, and LGBTI persons, in particular those engaged in prostitution, have become even more vulnerable to exacerbated forms of sexual exploitation.** While many night clubs, brothels, red-light district, and other places are curtailed or closed, the demand for prostitution does not cease. Vulnerable women are pushed underground without support networks and access to protection and assistance services. The COVID-19 lockdown is also likely to fuel trafficking for sexual exploitation through online recruitment.
- **Identification has become even more challenging as the exploitation happens in hidden places. Invisibility is aggravated by confinement.** Some may not be even aware of what is happening outside or the symptom of the virus that they or exploiters have, as they have been isolated. Some are left with no alternative but to endure forced prostitution, in exchange for food and accommodation. They often live in places where they work. When losing their jobs, they also lose their housing.
- **Domestic workers, most of them women informal workers, may be acutely affected.** They are often living in their employers' homes and when losing their jobs, they also lose their accommodation.
- Migrant workers may be **compelled to continue working to fill labor shortage in the workforce left by nationals** who stay home or their own safety. The risk of labor exploitation is compounded by **the lack of labor inspections** and thus the difficulties to detect cases.
- While most industries are closed down, refugees and migrants in certain sectors (agriculture and food manufacturing, etc.) continue working to maintain the supply of essential items. **Those on the job currently in those essential sectors may be forced to work for long hours without compensation** to meet the demand and without additional staff due to movement restriction.
- The COVID-19 measures may create opportunities for **non-state actors to exploit people's frustration against governments**, thereby increasing the risk of **forced recruitment of adults, adolescents, and children into illicit activities or armed groups**.
- **Loss of remittances** from breadwinners could leave families at home vulnerable to similar negative coping strategies



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## 5. Children, family unity

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- Measures taken in response to COVID-19 affect **family unity and family support networks**. Children and adolescents losing or being separated from primary caregivers due to quarantine or confinement measures for longer periods are at increasing risk of **neglect, abandonment, abuse, exploitation and violence, including sexual and gender-based violence**.
- **Suspension of education activities can also increase the risks for adolescent girls of different forms of sexual exploitation and abuse**. Adolescent girls who lose education will be compelled to accept exploitative job offers as coping mechanism and support family; unscrupulous brokers may approach those adolescent girls who lost education opportunity and offer them false promises to recruit them to become victims of trafficking.
- With children and adolescents spending more time online, it may increase the risk of perpetrators preying on them for **sexual exploitation and abuse**.

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## 6. Identification of victims, provision of protection and assistance

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- Movement restrictions and containment measures also impact the **ability of service providers who are currently providing assistance to victims of trafficking** to maintain their operations (safe house/shelter, legal assistance, food and other basic needs, health and psychosocial support, livelihoods, face-to-face interviews, etc.).
- More exploitation happens in hidden places. Invisibility is aggravated by confinement. As a result, it has become more challenging to rescue persons currently exploited and provide immediate protection, assistance and safety.
- **Shelter capacity is limited, some are full**, or have to restrict access due to COVID-19 measures as there are not sufficient facilities for separation, not to put other people staying at a higher risk.

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## 7. Stigmatization, discrimination, racism, and marginalization

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- Refugees and migrants face additional **stigmatization, discrimination, racism, and marginalization by host communities**, including negative perceptions associated with a fear that refugees and migrants spread the virus. Already stigmatized refugees and migrants from Venezuela can be exposed to increased risk of exploitation and abuse as they are denied access to livelihood opportunities.
- **Victims, most of them women and girls, can be stigmatized and isolated from the support of their communities** and left with no means of shelter and livelihood. In addition, **orphaned children are at particular risk of being shunned from their community** and leaving them vulnerable to exploitation and abuse without income or adult support.

## KEY MESSAGES TO GOVERNMENT AUTHORITIES AND LAW ENFORCEMENT AGENCIES

- **Ensure access to testing and national healthcare services** (preventive and curative) for refugees and vulnerable migrants regardless of their nationality and migration status and with a gender, age and ethnic and diversity approach.
- **Build solidarity and strengthen a cooperative approach** among Latin American and the Caribbean countries in response to the COVID-19 and in assisting those in vulnerable situations, particularly in a context where assisted voluntary return and reintegration may not be possible in the short-term, requiring humanitarian support for refugees and migrants in destination and transit.
- **Do not wait for the data to be available.** Quantitative information about impacts of COVID-19 on human trafficking and smuggling of migrants may not be immediately available. The number of reported cases might even drop because exploitation is happening in hidden places, service providers are reducing or suspending their activities, and potential victims are under additional fear of being identified. The risk of human trafficking is increasing as a result of COVID-19.
- **Give waivers of movement restrictions for humanitarian actors and service providers who are providing vital assistance** and emergency support services to women and men refugees and vulnerable migrants, regardless of their nationality and migration status.
- **Incorporate gender equality and women empowerment as a crosscutting issue in an effort to combat human trafficking and in response to COVID-19.** Specific measures for women and children such as livelihood and income enhancement activities, including a gender analysis, could improve the provision of services and prevent the risk of human trafficking.
- **Prioritize the provision of personal protective equipment for service providers** who are directly exposed and provide immediate assistance to victims of trafficking and exploitation (e.g. running safe house/shelter, food and other basic needs, case management staff, psychosocial support).
- If law enforcement and other State functions must prioritize law and order in response to COVID-19, **ensure anti-trafficking operations can continue, and that front-line law enforcement are informed of and prepared to identify the heightened risks of human trafficking and exploitation.**
- **Allow express provision of refugee status or regularization measures and grant temporary and/or permanent stay permit** to reduce the vulnerability, risk of exploitation, and social exclusion of refugees and migrants in irregular situations, including access to the national healthcare services, work permit, bank account, and social safety net. Prioritize access to health services and information, food, cash transfers, and other humanitarian responses for the most vulnerable in the context of COVID-19, based on a gender and diversity-sensitive perspective.
- **Recognize training and degrees, especially of health professionals,** who are urgently needed in response to the COVID-19 outbreak. Women and men health professionals including paramedical whose degrees are not recognized could also be subject to exploitative work in the absence of access to formal healthcare system.
- **Carry out inspections of working conditions in sectors at high risk of labor exploitation and unsafe working conditions,** ensuring that refugees and migrant workers, including women domestic workers, are supported in accessing information and preventive and assistance measures.
- **Take targeted measures to address particularly inadequate living conditions** in refugee and migrant reception centers and safe houses/shelters, etc. including measures to alleviate overcrowding, establish spaces for isolation in line with public health guidance, improve hygiene measures, increase awareness on rights and pathways, and access to health care / referral to health systems in line with COVID-19 responses.
- **Carry out strategic public communication with a gender approach to alleviate stigmatization, discrimination, and xenophobia** against refugees and migrants being perceived as source of or spreading the virus, working directly with families, communities and civil society. Engage with private sector and media for public communication.