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# Now and the Future

## Gender Equality, Peace and Security in a COVID-19 World

### Colombia Briefing

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#### 1. Introduction

This report is part of the global 'Call to Action: Now and the Future, Gender Equality, Peace and Security in a COVID-19 World' project with Gender Action for Peace and Security (GAPS). The project is supported by the UK government's Conflict, Security and Stabilisation Fund (CSSF) and was researched and developed by GENFAMI, a Colombian women's rights organisation (WRO), and supported by CARE International Colombia. The **report** assesses the impact of COVID-19 on women and girls in Colombia, highlights the needs of women, girls and the LGBTI community during the COVID-19 pandemic, and prioritises actions to address them. GENFAMI, supported by CARE, spearheaded this research involving 20 civil society organisations (CSOs).

#### 2. Changes in the COVID-19, peace, security, and gender equality situation

Since the report was prepared, the Colombian government has announced an initiative to grant temporary legal status for one million Venezuelan refugees and migrants. The status would provide Venezuelan refugees and migrants 10-year permits that will give them legal access to the labour market, education, and healthcare systems, as well as other government services. The status would significantly address many vulnerabilities mentioned in the report, as the irregular status exacerbates many of the risks that women and girls in particular are facing.

#### 3. Summary of findings

In Colombia, a very high percentage of women, adolescents and girls face challenges such as inequality, poverty, a lack of opportunities, and a patriarchal society that normalises gender stereotypes. These gender inequities exacerbate the existing risks to human rights, which include: 1) the long history of armed conflict; 2) the increase of mixed migration flows

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from Venezuela, which is considered one of the largest current displacement crises in the world; and 3) the impact of the pandemic on public health, the national economy situation, access to services (particularly sexual and reproductive health (SRH) services); and 4) the rise of gender-based violence (GBV).

The incidence and prevalence of GBV was high in Colombia before the pandemic. In a context where the armed conflict has increased GBV, it is widely underreported.

COVID-19 and its knock-on effects have led to an increase in different forms of GBV, including human trafficking and sexual exploitation. During the lockdown, fewer investigations and court procedures were conducted as Colombia's institutions focused on the emergency response to COVID-19, which did not prioritise addressing GBV. The closure of commercial establishments such as bars and clubs where exploitation took place, due to COVID-19 lockdowns, resulted in victims and survivors being exploited in private spaces (including homes) and the proliferation of sexual exploitation in virtual spaces.<sup>1</sup> A major concern in Colombia is the threatening and killing of women who are active civil society leaders and human rights defenders; during the pandemic, threats and violence against women activists have continued.

Colombia currently hosts more than 1.7 million Venezuelans, of whom at least one million do not have the required documentation to regularise their stay,<sup>2</sup> constituting the largest number of Venezuelan migrants worldwide. Migration has multi-dimensional effects both on refugees and migrants, as well as on host communities, especially in a country with pronounced inequalities.<sup>3</sup> Venezuelan nationals face multiple risks during the process of transit and on arrival at their destination (including exploitation and abuse, and sexual violence against Venezuelan children and adolescents). These risks are exacerbated by lack of documentation. Refugees and migrants from Venezuela also face multiple unmet needs related to SRH and barriers to accessing healthcare due to their migration status. CARE's 'Rapid Gender Analysis (RGA) of the Impact of COVID-19 on Latin America and the Caribbean' (2020)<sup>4</sup> highlights the disproportionate impact of the COVID-19 crisis on refugees and migrants, specifically on women and girls.

Colombia has developed a broad legal framework related to WPS, which includes a commitment to human rights through the ratification of international treaties and normative instruments. The government has also developed policies, programmes and projects that seek to respond to the country's needs in relation to WPS and COVID-19. Despite these steps, there is a gap between commitments and implementation. There is inadequate action to guarantee: lives free from violence; gender equality, peace and security for the population; and safe and protective environments.

<sup>1</sup> Anfitti, Miranda and Ramirez (2020) 'Characteristics of human trafficking in humanitarian contexts in the South America', International Organization for Migration, Regional Office-R4V-Buenos Aires (forthcoming)

<sup>2</sup> Migración Colombia 'Venezuelans in Colombia'

<sup>3</sup> World Bank (2018) 'Migración desde Venezuela a Colombia' Page 90: 'El diseño de políticas diferenciadas para poblaciones vulnerables será clave para asegurar que las vulnerabilidades de los migrantes no se conviertan en trampas de pobreza y marginalización'. ('Migration from Venezuela to Colombia : Short- and Medium-Term Impact and Response Strategy' (Page 90) 'The development of policies for vulnerable populations will be key to ensure that the vulnerabilities of migrants do not turn into traps of poverty and marginalization.'

<sup>4</sup> CARE (2020) 'An Unequal Emergency: CARE Rapid Gender Analysis of the Refugee and Migrant Crisis in Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and Venezuela'

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## 4. Recommendations

### **Recommendation 1: Ensure access to sexual and reproductive health (SRH) services**

Guarantee access to SRH services for women and adolescent girls in Colombia (with a special focus on migrants and refugees, host communities, indigenous women and girls, and women and girls in rural areas), through health services adapted to their specific situation and needs and ensuring sufficient coverage and quality. Develop information, education and communication strategies that help women and girls understand the Colombian health system, how to access services and how to exercise their rights; and strengthen safety conditions in areas affected by armed conflict. Full evidence for this recommendation can be found on page 11 in [the country report](#).

### **Recommendation 2: Ensure comprehensive prevention of violence against women, adolescents and girls**

Strengthen general, specific and targeted measures for the prevention of all forms of violence that affect women and adolescents and girls, transforming the social determinants that cause and maintain them. This involves developing strategies at the individual, family, community, social and institutional level to prevent and mitigate risks for highly vulnerable girls, adolescents and women (victims of armed conflict, refugees and migrants, and indigenous, Afro-Colombian and LGBTI populations). It is important to apply gender, differential, intersectional and intercultural approaches that address the specific protection needs of diverse population groups. Full evidence for this recommendation can be found on page 13 in [the country report](#).

### **Recommendation 3: Enact a comprehensive protection response**

Develop timely, effective, comprehensive response mechanisms to protect women, adolescents and children against all forms of violence that affect their dignity and physical and sexual integrity; and ensure the exercise of rights, the access to comprehensive justice, security and protection, and health services, with an intersectional, intercultural and inter-institutional approach. Full evidence for this recommendation can be found on page 15 in [the country report](#).

### **Recommendation 4: Provide comprehensive response services for populations at high risk in emergency settings**

Strengthen comprehensive emergency responses to ensure access to humanitarian aid for the populations at higher risk in emergency in Colombia, with a gender-sensitive approach that guarantees the exercise of the rights of women and girls. In affected areas with a weak institutional capacity, lack of public services and insufficient levels of preparedness and response capacities, pre-existing vulnerabilities tend to be exacerbated during emergencies. Full evidence for this recommendation can be found on page 16 in [the country report](#).

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**Recommendation 5: Support gender-sensitive knowledge management and research**

Promote research and knowledge generation and management to enhance evidence-based public policies related to topics such as: prevention of, and response to, all forms of violence against women, adolescents and girls; SRH; and psychosocial support and mental health – particularly in emergency contexts applying a differential, multi-ethnic and intersectional approach, and considering the current situation caused by COVID-19. Full evidence for this recommendation can be found on page 18 in [the country report](#).

**Recommendation 6: Support women to strengthen their livelihoods**

Position women at the centre of public policies aimed at the country's economic recovery, involving them in building responses through initiatives to strengthen their autonomy and rebuild their livelihoods, prioritising the most vulnerable populations. Specific actions could include support to entrepreneurship and multi-purpose cash and voucher strategies for women's livelihoods to reduce dependency on spouses and male family members, financial vulnerabilities and gender inequality. Full evidence for this recommendation can be found on page 19 in [the country report](#).

**Recommendation 7: Ensure meaningful participation of women and girls in social and political spaces**

Support the formulation of policies that promote women's equitable participation in all spheres of life and address factors related to labour legislation and access to decent work. Labour legislation should aim to close inequality gaps at local and regional levels by: protecting women's rights; promoting flexible schedules and the involvement of their support networks; and supporting women to strengthen capacity and be empowered on topics related to SRH rights and services, labour law and economic rights. Ensure the safety and protection of female community leaders, activists and human rights defenders. Full evidence for this recommendation can be found on page 20 in [the country report](#).

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## 5. Partners

**CARE International** is an international non-governmental organisation founded in 1945 that is working in more than 90 countries around the globe. The organisation has a dual mandate, working on poverty eradication and humanitarian assistance with a focus on the needs of women and girls. CARE has been working in Colombia for many years, but in 2019 established a legal presence, offices and programmes in Bogota, Norte de Santander and Nariño. The focus has centered around the response to humanitarian needs of refugees and migrants, Colombian returnees and marginalised host community members, providing a package of SRH and protection services together with local partners, and applying a unique women leaders in emergencies approach.

**GENFAMI** is a Colombian organisation that was established in 2009. It is specialised in strengthening the capacities of service providers to effectively prevent and address GBV. GENFAMI has developed methodologies for capacity building of health and protection service providers to strengthen approaches to prevent and respond to GBV of both women and men. The capacity building focuses on ways to support survivors of sexual violence,

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and approaches to providing sexual and reproductive health in emergency settings, and includes self-care for service providers and first responders. GENFAMI also has experience in policy, advocacy, and research at the national level in Colombia.

**Gender Action for Peace and Security (GAPS)** is the UK's women, peace and security (WPS) civil society network. It is a membership organisation of NGOs in the fields of development, human rights, humanitarian assistance and peacebuilding. It was founded to promote WPS, including United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325. GAPS promotes and holds the UK government to account on its international commitments to women and girls in conflict areas worldwide.

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