

Overcoming Barriers to Venezuelan Women's Inclusion and Participation in Colombia

**Olivia Woldemikael, Stephanie López Villamil,
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Abstract

This paper aims to present the main barriers Venezuelan women face to access to the labor market and participation in Colombia. First, we did a literature review and concluded there is a gap in qualitative studies on the obstacles faced by Venezuelan women when they arrive to Colombia. Based on a survey and interviews with Colombian, binational, and Venezuelan women, some of them participants of the *Escuelita de Incidencia para Mujeres Migrantes*, we found they face gender-based barriers and other barriers that affect the Venezuelan population in general. We also investigated how women manage to overcome these barriers. Furthermore, the study showed that there is leadership and broad participation among Venezuelan women. This leadership facilitates the access to the labor market and other services provided by the Colombian State. The paper concludes with recommendations aimed at the Colombian government, donors, civil society organizations, international organizations, and multilateral banks to improve the inclusion of Venezuelan women in the Colombian labor market.

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Overcoming Barriers to Venezuelan Women's Inclusion and Participation in Colombia

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Foreword: Center for Global Development

This policy paper is part of the “Let Them Work” initiative, a three-year program of work led by the Center for Global Development (CGD) and Refugees International and funded by the IKEA Foundation and the Western Union Foundation. The initiative aims to expand labor market access for refugees and forced migrants, by identifying their barriers to economic inclusion and providing recommendations to host governments, donors, and the private sector for how to overcome them.

In October 2020, the initiative launched its first case study, focusing on Colombia.¹ In the country, Venezuelans face a range of barriers to economic inclusion, most notably, xenophobia and discrimination on the part of host communities, host governments, and employers. As a result, the initiative partnered with El Derecho a No Obedecer (DANO) to support migrant-led and -serving organizations in Colombia, bring these organizations together with host communities, and attempt to reduce such prejudice.

To learn more about the initiative, please visit cgdev.org/page/labor-market-access and get in touch.

Helen Dempster

Project Manager for the “Let Them Work” initiative and Assistant Director, Migration, Displacement, and Humanitarian Policy
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Foreword: El Derecho a No Obedecer (DANO)

In 2018, El Derecho a No Obedecer (DANO) launched the “*Your Flag is My Flag*”² campaign aimed at promoting social and cultural integration between migrants, refugees, returnees, and their host communities in South America, to change the harmful narratives of xenophobia. To date, the campaign has impacted 115,000 people using diverse tools including protests, symbolic actions, artistic and cultural interventions, community dialogue and integration spaces, and innovative communication strategies. Our project covers nine Latin American cities, six of which are in Colombia, and is implemented with the support of 75 partner organizations.

Within the campaign, DANO launched a project called “*Escuelita de incidencia para mujeres migrantes*” (Advocacy School for Migrant Women). We provided advocacy and leadership workshops for migrant women, to strengthen the capacities of women leaders who work

¹ Graham, Jimmy, Martha Guerrero Ble, Daphne Panayotatos, and Izza Leghtas. 2020. *From Displacement to Development: How Colombia Can Transform Venezuelan Displacement into Shared Growth*. Washington DC: Center for Global Development (CGD) and Refugees International. <https://www.cgdev.org/sites/default/files/from-displacement-to-development-112.pdf>.

² More information about the project can be found here: <http://derechoanoobedecer.com/tu-bandera-es-mi-bandera/>.

at organizations that serve migrant, refugee, and host community members in Colombia. Within their neighborhoods, these women lead support networks that promote positive contact between Venezuelans and host communities. The scope of the project reflects the important role women play in migrant-focused nonprofits: according to an initial mapping by DANO, out of 194 migrant-led organizations operating in Colombia, 89 are led by women. These women leaders, however, cannot often effectively mobilize and advocate for social change, in addition to the task of assisting migrants overcome substantial social, cultural, and economic barriers to integration. Identifying and responding to these capacity barriers would help organizations push for policy change, supporting migrants and refugees in gaining access to the Colombian labor market.

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Director
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Introduction

The crisis in Venezuela has displaced millions of migrants throughout Latin America, with the greatest number ending up in Colombia. Since the crisis began, the Government of Colombia (GoC) has prioritized the economic inclusion of Venezuelan migrants. Its inclusive and integrationist policies have been lauded internationally and domestically: Venezuelan migrants were granted special work permits (the *Permiso Especial de Permanencia*, or PEP),³ access to emergency medical care and primary and secondary education, and the freedom to move and settle throughout the country. In March 2021, President Ivan Duque, signed a 10-year temporary protected status for Venezuelan migrants (the *Estatuto Temporal de Protección para Migrantes Venezolanos*, or ETPV)⁴ with more comprehensive benefits and rights.

In spite of these integrationist policies, the economic inclusion of Venezuelans remains limited, and has further declined in recent years due to the spread of COVID-19 and mitigation policies. Limited migrant incorporation into the labor market is evidenced by the low employment rate of Venezuelans. In 2020, a report estimated the employment rate of Venezuelan migrants who arrived more than a year prior, presumably granting them the time to seek employment.⁵ The overall labor participation rate of men was reported at 70.7 percent and for Venezuelan women, it was even lower, with only 48.1 percent employed. In addition to difficulties accessing work, there are additional barriers to finding satisfactory employment. For example, even when employed, studies have shown Venezuelan women work more hours while making less than half of the wages of Colombian women⁶ and face significant labor abuses and discrimination.⁷

The determinants of this economic exclusion of Venezuelan migrant women are well documented. Studies enumerate the various challenges migrant women face both finding employment and accessing formal sector jobs: a lack of legal documentation, limited knowledge, low availability of resources within the host community, perceptions of household gender roles and a gendered division of labor, and xenophobia (employer

³Unidad Administrativa Especial Migración Colombia. Resolución 5797. 31 de julio de 2017. “Por medio de la cual se crea un Permiso Especial de Permanencia.” https://www.cancilleria.gov.co/sites/default/files/Normograma/docs/resolucion_minrelaciones_5797_2017.htm.

⁴Presidencia de la República de Colombia. Decreto 216. 1 de marzo de 2021. “Por medio del cual se adopta el Estatuto Temporal de Protección para Migrantes Venezolanos Bajo Régimen de Protección Temporal y se dictan otras disposiciones en materia migratoria.” <https://dapre.presidencia.gov.co/normativa/normativa/DECRETO%20216%20DEL%201%20DE%20MARZO%20DE%202021.pdf>.

⁵Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadística (DANE) and Ladysmith. 2021. Nota estadística. Población migrante venezolana en Colombia, un panorama con enfoque de género. <https://www.dane.gov.co/index.php/servicios-al-ciudadano/servicios-informacion/serie-notas-estadisticas>.

⁶Proyecto Migración Venezuela. 2021. “Brecha de Género de Migrantes En El Mercado Laboral Antes de La Pandemia.” <https://migravenezuela.com/web/articulo/brechas-de-genero-de-los-migrantes-venezolanos-en-colombia/2514>.

⁷IOM, 2021. DTM, Employment and education: obstacles and capabilities of migrant and refugee women from Venezuela. <https://migration.iom.int/sites/default/files/public/reports/2-employment%28V2%29ML.pdf>.

preference for native workers).⁸ Far less is known, however, about how Venezuelan migrant women have been able to overcome these barriers and even attain leadership positions in their communities.

Recent scholarship in other contexts yields potential insight, finding that strong informal migrant leadership,⁹ coordination of services by migrant-led organizations,¹⁰ and close ethnic networks¹¹ can enable migrants to better integrate, access employment, organize and advocate for their rights, as well as receive essential services. Additionally, studies of migration and gender find that migration can fundamentally alter community relations and family structures, such as household composition, gender roles, and power dynamics, which can create new possibilities for women's agency, inclusion, and participation.¹²

Building on this existing literature, we examine the main challenges Venezuelan migrant women face in their process of socioeconomic integration in Colombia and the strategies they use to overcome them. Within this topic, we specifically seek to: (1) shed light on how, and which aspects of, migration shape gender roles in the household and public life; (2) identify the main barriers to, and factors that promote, social and economic inclusion; and (3) understand the opportunities for leadership and social participation of migrant women.

This paper is divided into five main sections. The first section provides a summary of the policy background, literature, and data sources. The second section explains the methodology of the research. The third section addresses the different barriers Venezuelan women face when accessing the labor market, underlining their use of networks and the resources they mobilize while looking for job opportunities as well as their expectations for the new protected status, ETPV. In the fourth section, we present our analysis of the social participation of migrant women, documenting how migrant women organize information, provide services to their communities, and undertake informal leadership positions. In our conclusion, we provide policy recommendations for decision-makers and donors interested in supporting Venezuelan migrant women's leadership and promoting socio-economic inclusion.

⁸CUSO. 2020. "Dinámicas Laborales de Las Mujeres Migrantes Venezolanas En Colombia." <https://empleosparaconstruirfuturo.org/nuevo-dinamicas-laborales-de-las-mujeres-migrantes-venezolanas-en-colombia/> and Banco Interamericano de Desarrollo. 2021. "La Migración Desde Una Perspectiva de Género: Ideas Operativas Para Su Integración En Proyectos de Desarrollo." <https://publications.iadb.org/publications/spanish/document/La-migracion-desde-una-perspectiva-de-genero-Ideas-operativas-para-su-integracion-en-proyectos-de-desarrollo.pdf>.

⁹Clarke, Killian. 2018. "When Do the Dispossessed Protest? Informal Leadership and Mobilization in Syrian Refugee Camps." *Perspectives on Politics* 16 (3): 617–33. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592718001020>.

¹⁰Alexander Betts, Louise Bloom, Josiah Kaplan, and Naohiko Omata. 2016. "Refugee Economies: Forced Displacement and Development." Oxford: Oxford University Press.

¹¹Martén, Linna, Jens Hainmueller, and Dominik Hangartner. 2019. "Ethnic Networks Can Foster the Economic Integration of Refugees." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 116 (33): 16280–85. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1820345116>.

¹²Antman, Francisca M. 2018. "Women and Migration." In: Susan L. Averett, Laura M. Argys, and Saul D. Hoffman. *The Oxford Handbook of Women and the Economy*. DOI:10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190628963.013.31.

Background: Venezuelan migrant women in Colombia

The Government of Colombia's (GoC) response

As of 2021, Colombia has received an estimated 1.8 million Venezuelan migrants fleeing an ongoing humanitarian, political, and economic crisis. Since the start of the mass displacement in 2015, the GoC has sought to facilitate the socio-economic integration of its migrant population.

An initial special stay permit (the *Permiso Especial de Permanencia*, or PEP) was created in 2017 to give documented status to Venezuelans who entered Colombia regularly, enabling them to conduct legal activities, seek work, access financial services, and receive government-provided services, such as health and education, for up to two years. Since it was first passed, the PEP was renewed and revised several times, with each successive round becoming more expansive. The first two rounds of the PEP (2017 and 2018) applied only to Venezuelans who regularly entered the country, under which around 182,000 permits were issued. In late 2018, the GoC revised the policy to include undocumented Venezuelan migrants who had previously not been considered for the PEP, implementing the PEP-RAMV.¹³ This created a registry of Venezuelans¹⁴ and granted them permits regardless of their legal migration status.

The PEP was designed to accommodate the short-term needs of migrants in different sectors including health services, the labor market, and the public education system.¹⁵ As a result, these policies were insufficient to facilitate medium- to long-term integration. Some of these shortcomings resulted from the initial design (such as the PEP's limited duration, two years) and others from the execution (e.g., the official document migrants received could be printed unofficially with no means to verify it). Furthermore, the implementation of the PEP was also hampered by a widespread lack of knowledge of the policy and enforcement from public officials and institutions.¹⁶

In light of these obstacles, the GoC created a new policy instrument that is both long-term and more expansive, making the majority of Venezuelan migrants—all regular migrants and

¹³ Unidad Administrativa Especial Migración Colombia. Resolución 2033. 2 de agosto de 2018. “Por la cual se implementa la expedición del Permiso Especial de Permanencia (PEP), creado mediante Resolución número 5797 de 2017 del Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores, para su otorgamiento a las personas inscritas en el Registro Administrativo de Migrantes Venezolanos, de conformidad con lo dispuesto en la Resolución número 6370 del 1 de agosto de 2018.” <https://www.migracioncolombia.gov.co/normativa/send/17-resoluciones-2018/82-resolucion-2033-del-2018>.

¹⁴ The Government of Colombia carried out a registration exercise in 2018 Venezuelan migrants called the Registro Administrativo de Migrantes Venezolanos (RAMV).

¹⁵ Departamento Nacional de Estadística (DANE). 2021. Encuesta Pulso de la Migración. <https://img.lalr.co/cms/2021/10/14170420/presentacion-ext-pulso-migracion-jul21-ago21-1.pdf>.

¹⁶ A study found the PEP was being falsified by persons in transit and that there was a necessity to promote campaigns on the characteristics and the validity of the PEP as a work permit. Observatorio de Venezuela. 2018. “Retos y Oportunidades de La Movilidad Humana Venezolana En La Construcción de Una Política Migratoria Colombiana.” <https://www.kas.de/documents/287914/287963/Retos+y+oportunidades+de+la+movilidad+humana+venezolana+en+la+construcci%C3%B3n+de+una+pol%C3%ADtica+migratoria+colombiana.pdf/bcee4a33-9677-4405-bc16-b10dc4565937>.

irregular migrants who entered the country before January 31, 2021—eligible for protected status for up to ten years. The permit, the *Estatuto Temporal de Protección para Venezolanos* (ETPV), grants migrants’ access to formal sector jobs, health insurance, financial services, and education.

The GoC has also taken additional steps to encourage integration, outlined in national guidelines (CONPES 3950¹⁷) and has provided the right to citizenship for children of Venezuelan parents born in Colombia.¹⁸ Plus, a new migration bill was approved by Congress in August 2021,¹⁹ outlining a general framework for migration management, though this has yet to be implemented.²⁰ With particular attention to employment, the government’s 2019 Income Generation Strategy identifies the main integration challenges for Venezuelans and coordinates government implementation of policies to address these gaps. In summary, the GOC has a multi-pronged approach to socio-economic inclusion of Venezuelan migrants with a number of different policy instruments and legal guidelines.

Venezuelan women migrants in Colombia

In 2020, the Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadística (DANE) surveyed Venezuelan migrants throughout Colombia. They found that these migrants are predominantly young; 56 percent are under 25, and 41 percent are between 25 and 54 years old. Half of migrants are women (51.6 percent), and women head 52.9 percent of migrant households in the country. When asked why they migrated to Colombia, 55 percent of women reported they were accompanying other members of their household, compared to 41 percent of men, and only 17 percent cited seeking employment as a reason to migrate compared to 32 percent of men.

In the labor market, disparities exist between Venezuelan men and women in Colombia that are likely a result of gendered barriers. For example, unemployment is much higher for recent migrant women (34.6 percent),²¹ compared to recent migrant men (14.3 percent).

¹⁷ Departamento Nacional de Planeación (DNP). Consejo Nacional de Política Económica y Social República de Colombia (CONPES). 23 de noviembre de 2018. Documento CONPES 3950 “Estrategia para la atención de la migración desde Venezuela.” <https://colaboracion.dnp.gov.co/CDT/Conpes/Econ/percentC3percentB3micos/3950.pdf>.

¹⁸ Congreso de la República de Colombia. Ley 1997. 16 de septiembre de 2019. “Por medio del cual se establece un régimen especial y excepcional para adquirir la nacionalidad colombiana por nacimiento, para hijos e hijas de venezolanos en situación de migración regular o irregular, o de solicitantes de refugio, nacidos en territorio colombiano, con el fin de prevenir la apatridia.” <https://dapre.presidencia.gov.co/normativa/normativa/LEY%201997%20DEL%2016%20DE%20SEPTIEMBRE%20DE%202019.pdf>.

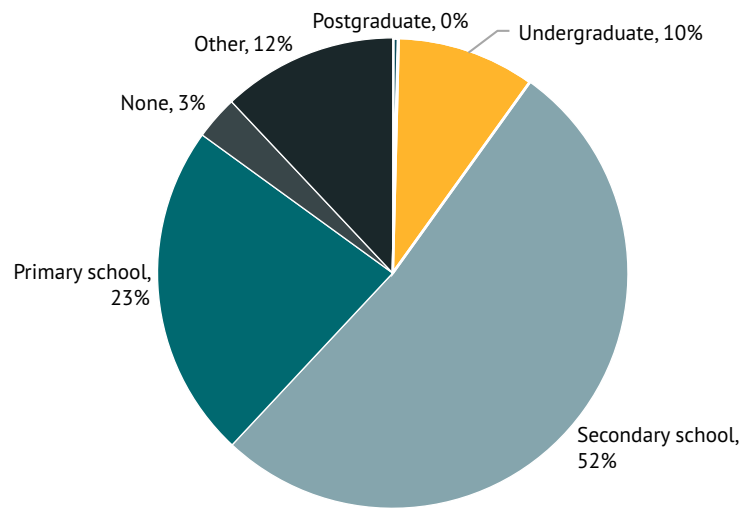
¹⁹ Congreso de la República de Colombia. Ley 2136 de 2021. 4 de agosto de 2021. “Por medio de la cual se Establecen las Definiciones, Principios y Lineamientos para la Reglamentación Y Orientación de la Política Integral Migratoria del Estado Colombiano—PIM, y Se Dictan Otras Disposiciones.” <https://dapre.presidencia.gov.co/normativa/normativa/LEY%202136%20DEL%204%20DE%20AGOSTO%20DE%202021.pdf>.

²⁰ The migration law includes the principles, definitions, objectives and rights of the migration policy among other subjects related to refuge, statelessness, Colombians living abroad and international protection.

²¹ For DANE, recent migrants are those who arrived in Colombia in the past 12 months.

However, there are no significant differences in educational attainment between migrant men and women: almost equivalent numbers of migrant women and men have completed secondary school (52 percent of women and 53% of men), similarly 23 percent of women and 27 percent of men have completed primary school, and 9.5 percent of women and 6 percent of men possess an undergraduate degree.²² Furthermore, even when migrant women are more highly educated, they earn less than migrant men on average. Finally, women are on average paid less than men. While the median income for Venezuelan migrants in 2021 was at around US\$180 (700,000 COP), migrant women earned around US\$25.60 (100,000COP) less than their male counterparts.²³ In Figures 1 and 2, we display relevant characteristics of Venezuelan women migrants in Colombia.

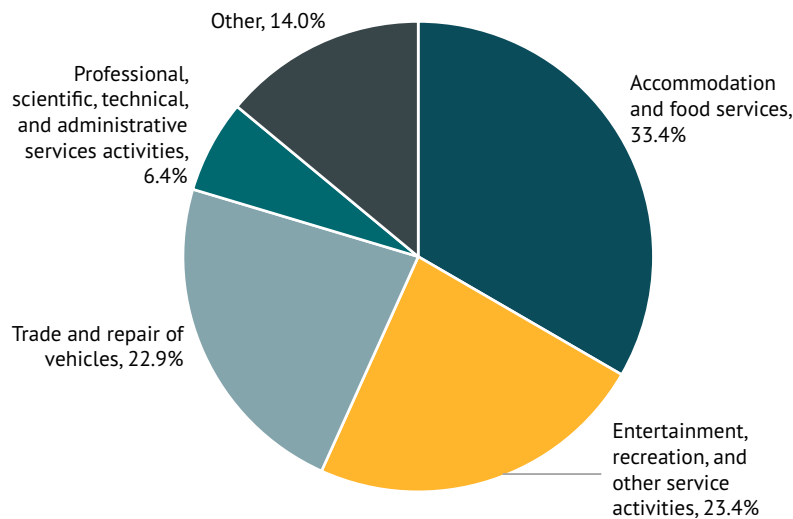
Figure 1. The education profile of Venezuelan migrant women in Colombia



²² DANE and Ladysmith. 2021.

²³ Ministerio del Trabajo. Noviembre de 2020. “Migrantes Venezolanos: ¿Dónde están, sus características, qué hacen, dónde se emplean?”. <https://www.serviciodeempleo.gov.co/spe/media/documents/pdf/estudios/Boletin-Migrantes-venezolanos-2021.pdf>.

Figure 2. The occupations of Venezuelan migrant women in Colombia



Source: DANE and Ladysmith. 2021. Nota estadística. Población migrante venezolana en Colombia, un panorama con enfoque de género. <https://www.dane.gov.co/index.php/servicios-al-ciudadano/servicios-informacion/serie-notas-estadisticas>.

In addition to the data provided by DANE, there is a growing literature focused on Venezuelan women's labor market access in Colombia. CUSO, a Canadian NGO, published a study in 2020 documenting the barriers Venezuelan women face in the labor market.²⁴ They enumerate the main obstacles migrant women encounter in seeking employment including a lack of legal documentation, difficulty in validating their degrees and qualifications in Colombia, and preferences for native workers, in addition to the gendered barriers of child care responsibilities, lack of support from their networks, and discrimination based on gender. CGD and Refugees International also published a more general study on labor market access finding that Venezuelan women face a double disadvantage due to their gender and nationality.²⁵ This report notes these disadvantages result from a lack of access to childcare services, risk of sexual harassment and gender-based violence, and limited local social networks, and are more pronounced for migrants compared to Colombian women. A subsequent study published by Proyecto Migración Venezuela in 2021 analyzed gender gaps in the labor market for Venezuelan women before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.²⁶ Their findings underscore gaps in salaries and differences in employment conditions encountered by Venezuelan women compared to Venezuelan men and Colombian women. Inequalities in access to job opportunities and decent work result in lower wages for migrant women. In particular, the same study found migrant women are also more likely to work in the informal sector than male migrants or Colombian women, and are less likely to participate in the labor market, with even lower employment rates for young women and

²⁴ CUSO 2020.

²⁵ Graham et al. 2020.

²⁶ Proyecto Migración Venezuela. 2021.

women over 59. Similar to the conditions in the host community, there is evidence of a segmented labor market for migrants.

The DANE study points to the difficulties encountered by Venezuelan women to access the formal labor market. Whether formally or informally employed, these women have care obligations and suffer sexual harassment. The study quotes other studies which have identified a significant number of Venezuelan migrant women engaged in sexual activities for survival and/or in other situations of sexual exploitation.²⁷ The majority surveyed were employed in low-income sectors with few labor protections or job stability: in the food and hotel industry (33 percent), entertainment and recreation (23.4 percent), and commerce and transportation (22.9 percent).

The precarity and vulnerability that migrant women face is reflected in the prevalence of gender-based violence (GBV). Between January and September 2020, according to information from the Ministry of Health and Social Protection, 4.2 percent (i.e. 3,197) of the 76,366 victims of GBV in Colombia were from Venezuela.²⁸ Concerningly, a study conducted by the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) reported that Colombian authorities have seen a growth in GBV victims among migrants in recent years: 187 cases in 2017, 463 cases in 2018, and 691 cases in 2019.²⁹ This growth is linked to the growth of the Venezuelan population in Colombia in 2018 and 2019. Most cases of GBV are intra-familial and in 92 percent of cases the victims are women.³⁰

Finally, Sierra et al. (2020) conducted a study focused on the Colombian-Venezuelan border that analyzed the socio-economic and labor conditions of Venezuelan women.³¹ Their report concluded that Venezuelan women's inclusion was negatively impacted by their conditions of extreme poverty, discrimination, and xenophobia. In addition, their report found that being informally employed, coping with low wages, and experiencing a lack of access to healthcare services affected their physical, mental, and emotional wellbeing.

In summary, research on Venezuelan women's access to the labor market is currently growing, with additional ongoing studies in Colombia as well as in other hosting countries,

²⁷ The study underlines these women report they are afraid of the authorities. Therefore, it is unlikely they appear in quantitative employment data.

²⁸ Proyecto Migración Venezuela. 2021.

²⁹ A study from CGD suggests this growth in GBV cases has been exacerbated during the pandemic. See: Shelby Bourgault, Amber Peterman, and Megan O'Donnell. 2021. "Violence Against Women and Children During COVID-19—One Year On and 100 Papers In A Fourth Research Round Up." <https://www.cgdev.org/publication/violence-against-women-and-children-during-covid-19-one-year-and-100-papers-fourth>.

³⁰ Banco Interamericano de Desarrollo. 2021. "La Migración Desde Una Perspectiva de Género: Ideas Operativas Para Su Integración En Proyectos de Desarrollo." <https://publications.iadb.org/publications/spanish/document/La-migracion-desde-una-perspectiva-de-genero-Ideas-operativas-para-su-integracion-en-proyectos-de-desarrollo.pdf>.

³¹ Sierra, Olga M., Luz K. Coronel, and Erika T. Ayala. 2020. "Perspectiva de Género En Los Fenómenos Migratorios: Estudio Socio-Económico y Laboral de La Frontera Colombo Venezolana." *Espacios* 41 (47): 198–212. <https://doi.org/10.48082/espacios-a20v41n47p15>.

including Ecuador and Chile.³² However, the current state of literature reflects a focus on the obstacles migrant women face in accessing jobs and in employment conditions without much attention to how such obstacles can be overcome. There is therefore a pressing need for research on how women achieve socioeconomic integration to better inform policies targeting migrant women in Colombia, and in all countries hosting Venezuelans.

Methodology

Despite the availability of data from official and non-official sources about the characteristics of Venezuelan women, little empirical information is available regarding their social, economic, and political participation, and the strategies they use to integrate. For this reason, we designed our study using qualitative methods: one-hour semi-structured interviews with 22 women (see Table 1) and a 15-minute survey administered to 67 women. We selected semi-structured interviews as these enabled us to gather precise information around our key areas of interest, while remaining flexible enough to allow participants to partially guide the interview process, thereby collecting additional information. Our survey questionnaire and interview guide include specific questions about the Venezuelan migrant women's perceptions of barriers, documented status, and their political actions.³³

Table 1. Number of women interviewed by nationality and city

City	Venezuelan	Colombian	Bi-national
Bogotá	8	4	1
Cali	1		
Cúcuta	4	3	1
Total	13	7	2

Our sample consists of 22 women leaders, both community leaders and leaders working in migrant serving organizations. We chose to focus on this specific population because our main objective is to generate understanding and policy recommendations based on the successes of integration, and document the actions and strategies available to migrant women to overcome socio-economic marginalization and exclusion.

To recruit our sample, we issued a call for voluntary participants for a set of leadership workshops, “*Escuelita de incidencia para Mujeres Migrantes*,” led by DANO in collaboration

³² In Ecuador: Robalino Molina, Andrea Vanessa. 2018. Estrategias emprendidas por las mujeres migrantes venezolanas calificadas en Quito para enfrentar los desafíos y dificultades en su inserción laboral. Tesina de especialización, Flacso Ecuador. <https://repositorio.flacsoandes.edu.ec/handle/10469/14624>. In Chile: Rodríguez Salazar, Juliana; Martínez Villarroel, Taís. 2020. “Análisis del rol laboral: profesionales migrantes venezolanas y su inclusión en el mercado laboral chileno.” <https://repositorio.uchile.cl/handle/2250/179534>; Carvallo Gallardo, Valeria Sabina. 2019. Mujeres migrantes trabajadoras: Estudio sobre experiencias laborales de mujeres colombianas y venezolanas en Santiago de Chile. <https://repositorio.uahurtado.cl/handle/11242/24515>.

³³ See Annex 1.

with other nonprofit groups in July 2021.³⁴ These workshops were specifically designed to train migrant and Colombian community leaders to increase their participation in three cities with high levels of Venezuelan migration: Cúcuta, Bogotá, and Cali. The women were selected based on their role at a nonprofit organization and the level of diversity of the population they served. In each city, 20 women leaders were selected for the workshop. Of the 60 women, 15 of these women chose to participate in the study across the three cities. To expand our sample, we recruited an additional seven Venezuelan women leaders. In total, we interviewed 13 Venezuelan women, seven Colombian women that work with migrant communities who served as key informants, and two women with dual nationality (Table 1).



Group of women participants of the Escuelita de Incidencia para Mujeres Migrantes. (Photo: Alexa Rochi)

On average, the migrant women who took part in the interviews arrived in Colombia 3.8 years ago, were 39 years old, were from *Estrato 2*,³⁵ and had around three dependents. This was a very similar profile to those Colombian women who took part, the only difference

³⁴ A database with information on women was taken from a previous version of the program “*Tu Bandera es mi Bandera*” and also from other organizations working with migrant women in the selected cities. Pieces were sent by WhatsApp, mail and Instagram to inform them that we were making a call to be part of “*La escuelita de incidencia para mujeres migrantes*”, in order to know which people were interested in participating in this process. A mapping of the organizations and women leaders working on migration and gender was also carried out and the information of the program was sent to them directly, asking them to share it with whoever they considered might be interested.

³⁵ Colombian society is stratified on a scale of 1 to 6 where people living in stratum 1 are at the base of the socio-economic pyramid. This stratification is used by the government for service provision and social protection policies.

being the average age (41 years). Other characteristics including the highest level of education and marital status are included in Table 2.

Table 2. Characteristics of women interviewed

	Venezuelans	Colombians
Age	39.19	41.43
Stratum	2.23	1.86
With children (%)	53	71
Number of Dependents	2.69	2.67
Power Position (1–10) ³⁶	4.73	5.57
Power Position before migrating (1–10)	5.40	–
Years since arriving to Colombia	3.87	–
<i>Highest level of education (%)</i>		
Postgraduate	20	29
Undergraduate	27	29
Primary school	13	14
Secondary school	27	0
Technologist	7	0
Technician	7	28
<i>Marital status (%)</i>		
Married	7	14
Divorced	7	14
Single	13	29
Cohabitation	67	43

Source: Own calculations based on the survey of participants.

Challenges to inclusion for migrant women and strategies to overcome them

Migrant women face distinct disadvantages concerning employment and integration into the labor markets of their host countries. Globally, the International Labor Organization (ILO) finds that migrant women are less likely to be employed than male migrants.³⁷ Other studies, primarily from Europe, show the employment that migrant women find is often in different sectors of the economy—household service provision such as cleaning and childcare—than

³⁶ The question asked to the women was: “Please imagine there’s a ladder with 10 rungs where at the bottom rung, there are people who lack agency and rights, and on the highest rung, the tenth, there are those who have a lot of power and rights. Which rung of the ladder would you place yourself on today?”.

³⁷ ILO. 2020. “Who are the women on the move? A portrait of female migrant workers.” <https://ilostat.ilo.org/who-are-the-women-on-the-move-a-portrait-of-female-migrant-workers/>. Accessed November 30.

that of migrant men.³⁸ Similar to the conditions of Venezuelan women in Colombia, these roles are more likely to be informal and low-paid, exposing migrant women to increased risks of exploitation and abuse,³⁹ in addition to other gendered discrimination and vulnerabilities.

In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic has created new challenges for migrant women. A recent report from Friedrich-Ebert Stiftung (FES) finds that the conditions of migrant women have worsened during the pandemic, which has exacerbated their marginalization and precariousness.⁴⁰ Similarly, a study by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) finds that migrant women, particularly those involved in domestic labor, were more likely to lose income and their employment than other workers during the pandemic.⁴¹ The same document states that these women also faced increased xenophobia and discrimination, making them an easy target for violence and limiting their possibilities of accessing satisfactory employment.

In this section, we build on these studies that have outlined generalized conditions of migrant women as well as advance the academic and policy work on migrant women in Colombia by probing more deeply into the barriers Venezuelan migrant women encounter during the process of socio-economic integration in Colombia. We corroborate the results of other studies, finding that gendered barriers exist for women migrants including GBV, stereotypes, and norms and gender roles within households and communities, in addition to structural factors and gaps in knowledge and information that prevent Venezuelan migrants from finding employment and exercising their socio-economic rights. We then present our results on the strategies women migrants employ to overcome these barriers. We document the resources Venezuelan women use to find jobs as well as their responses and adaptation in order to integrate into the Colombian labor market, finding that informal labor and migrant networks play critical roles.

³⁸ Lyberaki, Antigone. 2011. "Migrant Women, Care Work, and Women's Employment in Greece." *Feminist Economics* 17 (3): 103–31. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13545701.2011.583201>; Williams, Fiona. "Converging Variations in Migrant Care Work in Europe." *Journal of European Social Policy* 22, no. 4 (October 2012): 363–76. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0958928712449771>; and Lyon, Dawn. 2006. "The Organization of Care Work in Italy: Gender and Migrant Labor in the New Economy." *13 Indiana Journal of Global Legal Studies* 207 (2006) 13 (1). <https://www.repository.law.indiana.edu/ijgl/vol13/iss1/7>.

³⁹ Murphy, Clíodhna. 2013. "The enduring vulnerability of migrant domestic workers in Europe." *International and Comparative Law Quarterly* 62 (3): 599–627. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020589313000195>.

⁴⁰ Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES). 2020. "How COVID-19 affects Women in Migration." <https://www.fes.de/en/iez/international-week-of-justice/article-in-gerechtigkeitswoche/how-covid-19-effects-women-in-migration-1-1>. Accessed November 30.

⁴¹ UNDP. 2020. Nota Técnica: Los impactos económicos del Covid-19 y las desigualdades de género recomendaciones y lineamientos de políticas públicas. <https://www1.undp.org/content/undp/es/home/librarypage/womens-empowerment/the-economic-impacts-of-covid-19-and-gender-equality.html>.

Gendered barriers to inclusion

Gender-based violence (GBV) and reporting

No, Venezuelan women, we have not normalized abuse, we are aware that there are violent men. There are girls and women who, due to the reality that they have, had to accept partners here [in Colombia] who manipulate them economically and sexually and this process of not having emotional support here, makes them psychologically very vulnerable.

In our interviews, GBV was an issue commonly addressed, the above quotation is one example of GBV against Venezuelan migrant women. One of the main concerns among the women leaders was the lack of existing resources enabling Venezuelan women to report GBV, as well as difficulties in prosecuting GBV due to the legal procedures. One of the women interviewed stated:

Venezuelan women are told that in Colombia, a woman who is mistreated by her partner must carry out an “acción de tutela” [an application for the protection of human rights] because the local authorities will not receive the complaint if the woman reporting is of Venezuelan nationality. The authorities tell them that the complaint is not valid if the injuries were not severe enough to be sent to a hospital or cause death.

According to this interviewee, Venezuelan women often go above and beyond the usual procedures for reporting GBV, using a Colombian tool of legal recourse called “acción de tutela” in which they make a case for a human rights violation against the Constitution to be decided upon by a judge.

Beyond the difficulties of reporting, other interviewees mentioned barriers in knowledge. Some stated that migrant women have little information about the available channels to report GBV, such as hotlines, and the assistance services that the GoC has provided for these cases. This was a concern echoed by other interviewees who regretted not knowing where to go to report domestic violence, sexual abuse, or any type of discrimination for themselves or other victims. Moreover, a lack of knowledge and available resources is compounded by the complexities of navigating the Colombian legal system and a reported lack of willingness to assist Venezuelan victims of violence or discrimination. An interviewee stated:

There is no process to report, if there is a case of violence we cannot report it, it must be the same person who is attacked and they are not called to conciliation, there is no prevention policy. Nobody calls them to conciliation, so they go to the family police station and they send the children's and adolescents police, or they send them to the police station but no one receives the complaint, there is no organization or a state policy to manage that.

The Colombian laws and procedures are complex for Venezuelan women. Another woman told us she tried to report GBV to the authorities but they denied her claim. The combination of institutional complexity and perceived indifference from public servants results in few Venezuelan women receiving assistance or having options to pursue justice in these instances.

Compared to Colombian women, Venezuelans have a lack of knowledge of the laws, the public policies and in general of the judiciary system, plus, they lack documentation which makes it more difficult to access the system.

Stereotypes and discrimination

Our interviews reveal common negative stereotypes about Venezuelan migrants, and in particular about migrant women. During the interviews, many of the Venezuelan women reported experiencing discrimination due to prejudices related to their gender and nationality, and our Colombian key informants confirmed the existence of gendered and anti-Venezuelan biases among the host community. One example of such, is that migrant women are stereotyped as “prostitutes” and other preconceived ideas that overly sexualize Venezuelan women and characterize their sexual behavior as promiscuous. Such beliefs and the negative valence attached to them can be an obstacle to social integration and finding employment. An interviewee told us about how Colombian society views Venezuelan women:

Venezuelan women have uncontrolled sexuality and therefore are threatening the workplace.

This interviewee thus perceives that Venezuelan women are sometimes denied job opportunities because of prejudices against them. In addition, other interviewees mentioned additional stereotypes about Venezuelans: for example, in one of the interviews, a woman disclosed that she heard dismissive statements from Colombians in her community about migrants:

Get them out of this country, kill them all, if they are useless, what are they doing here? Those are the guilty ones and they come here to take our jobs, they came to be prostitutes and to steal.

As suggested by this interviewee and our other participants, there is a common set of stereotypes that may lead to discrimination against both Venezuelan women and men. Some perceive that these biases from employers make it difficult for Venezuelans to find jobs matching their experience and capacities.

Cultural norms

Cultural factors were an additional barrier mentioned by our study participants. Some interviewees stated that language, tone of voice, and customer service patterns in Venezuela differ from those in Colombia, which can complicate social and economic interactions between the groups. According to a migrant woman leader who has lived in Colombia since 2018:

Most Venezuelan women only have a high school diploma which makes it difficult for them to have proper access to information about cultural norms in Colombia. For example, the appropriate work attire, communication styles, and other cultural differences affect their chances of accessing jobs.

Another cultural difference mentioned is that Venezuelans tend to be more open and straightforward in their interpersonal relations, while such behavior is considered rude or informal by some Colombians. This could be a potential issue in customer service industries which employ the majority of Venezuelan women.

Domestic roles

A third factor preventing Venezuelan women from accessing employment cited by migrant women and Colombian key informants was the mental burden or load of the household duties and childcare. For example, one of our interviewees described:

Together with my sister and mother, we supported each other to take care of the children, but when I arrived in Colombia I no longer had that help and if I had to leave, the neighbors were aware of my children and the eldest daughter assisted me with the care of the children.

This interviewee notes how she lacks access to the same network of support, preventing her from job-searching. This woman, like some of the other Venezuelan women we spoke to, had traveled with her children and nuclear family. However, other relatives and acquaintances stayed behind or migrated elsewhere leaving some of these migrant women with little additional support or resources from their extended networks. Furthermore, many of these women also feel pressured to contribute economically to their parents or relatives that stayed in Venezuela, which places an even greater burden on them.⁴²

Other interviewees described how domestic work distribution changed once in Colombia. While some interviewees' situation improved following their migration, the majority of women continue to shoulder the lion's share of household responsibilities.⁴³ This was corroborated by several of the women we interviewed who cited their childcare duties and domestic labor around the household as one of the principal reasons they were not looking for work.

⁴²DANE and Ladysmith. 2021.

⁴³ A recent study analyzes the role of migrant women in Colombia as heads of the household: R4V. GIFMM Colombia. 2021. *Análisis de Jefatura de Hogar Femenina*. <https://www.r4v.info/es/document/gifmm-colombia-analisis-de-jefatura-de-hogar-femenina-abril-2021>.



Session of the “Escuelita” in Cúcuta. (Photo: Alexa Rochi)

While, in some cases migrant women are confronted by a choice between taking care of children and income-generating labor. In other cases, women have no option but to perform both roles as provider and carer. For example, a woman referred to herself as both “the father and the mother of her children,” because she couldn’t rely on the father of her children; she had to work even up to the date she was about to give birth. This strain of household labor and supporting the family may be particularly acute for migrant women who do not have the same social networks they had in Venezuela.

General barriers to inclusion

Issues around documentation and the PEP

While half of the Venezuelan population is in an irregular situation in Colombia, the majority of women we interviewed had legal documentation, likely because they were community leaders or worked at organizations and were perhaps better informed about Colombian policies than the average migrant. Instead, a major concern of many of these migrant women we interviewed was about documentation for the women they assisted. For example, some mentioned the difficulties of obtaining an official certification of documents often required in Colombia, an apostille, for their diplomas and the cost of that process. Others mentioned the need for PEP for the women they helped so that companies would hire them.

However, even those we interviewed with the PEP or formal legal status in Colombia cited issues with accessing formal employment. They noted a lack of knowledge or familiarity among potential employers concerning work permits for Venezuelans. For example,

some companies would not accept the PEP or a foreign passport as a valid document. An esthetician living in Bogotá, who arrived in Colombia in 2019, stated,

I have PEP, which is a valid document but there is a lot of ignorance about its function which causes many barriers to arise. A broken bridge between business and the state has made many Venezuelans have barriers to access the labor market.

This unfamiliarity with PEP has led to a reluctance among some in the private sector to hire Venezuelans. This may be because the private sector is largely disconnected from the state bodies that administer the PEP, giving employers a high degree of discretion as to whether they will accept the document. For example, one of the interviewees from Cúcuta mentioned that:

Having the PEP does not make a difference in employment possibilities, the only difference is that it is known that the person is regular and has access to health, otherwise it is useless because they do not give employment to them even if the person is regular.

While this has been a concern since the first PEP permits were granted—whether in practice it facilitates Venezuelans’ access to the labor market and the right to work—these issues persist despite attempts to educate employers. To assist this effort, the GoC, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and the Tent Partnership for Refugees, created a guide to help employers through the process of hiring Venezuelans.⁴⁴

However, knowledge is limited as a recent survey by the Fundación Ideas para la Paz that analyzed Colombian companies’ perceptions on migration, revealed only seven percent know about the ETPV.⁴⁵ Predictably, the Venezuelan women we interviewed had pessimistic expectations regarding the ETPV’s ability to enable them to access the formal labor market. Part of this cynicism may be directly related to their experience with the PEP.

High unemployment rates

In addition to lack of documentation on the one hand, and the lack of recognition of the PEP as a valid document to hire Venezuelans on the other, there are additional barriers. The low general availability of formal jobs in Colombia is a particular problem for migrants seeking employment. While there are variations in employment rates across cities, unemployment in the country has significantly increased due to COVID-19. While the economic shutdown due to the pandemic affected all populations, it had a larger effect on the

⁴⁴ TENT, UNHCR, HIAS, Ministerio de Trabajo, and Unidad del Servicio Público de Empleo. September 2021. *Guía para la contratación laboral de refugiados y migrantes venezolanos en la República de Colombia*. https://www.tent.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Tent_ColombiaHiring-Guide_Update_2021_V6-SP-1.pdf.

⁴⁵ Fundación Ideas para la Paz. November 2021. *Entendiendo La Mirada Empresarial Frente Al Fenómeno Migratorio En Colombia*. https://empresaspaiddh.ideaspaz.org/sites/default/files/documentos-micro/FIP_KAS_EmpresasMigracion_Web_FINALV1.pdf.

employment of women migrants, whose unemployment rate skyrocketed to 34.6 percent in 2021 up from 29.5 percent in 2019, which is a higher rate than for Colombian women during the same period.⁴⁶

When asked about job opportunities for them in Colombia, some of the interviewees complained there are few available. One woman, for instance, who has experience looking for job opportunities for her fellow nationals described this issue:

The job search is difficult because of the fact people do not know that the PEP is enough to employ a Venezuelan person, as well as because of the prejudices that exist towards Venezuelan people, and that there are few opportunities available. The high demand for jobs for the little supply that exists, is decisive because there are many companies where they hire you and others where they don't. The field has already been opened to Venezuelans but the offers are few and unemployment is very high, this affects Colombians and even more, the people who are not from here.

This interviewee lives in Cúcuta where unemployment rates were higher than the national average even before the arrival of Venezuelans. Joblessness, coupled with the high rates of informality in the city, make it even more difficult for women to find formal employment. Additionally, the pandemic had a higher impact on women's employment, creating a "female staircase fall."⁴⁷ This expression refers to women's transition to informal jobs, to unemployment, to inactivity as well as a shift towards more women in domestic work or unpaid care work.

Labor exploitation and reporting

When Venezuelans do find jobs, often, they are not under the same conditions as Colombians. In our interviews, many women report being exploited by their employers primarily through underpayment. Their vulnerability and desperation for a job are taken advantage of by employers who pay them lower wages, even when they hold the PEP or other legal documents which provide them the same labor protections as Colombian nationals.

While some of the women we interviewed are aware of the labor exploitation, they informed us that they often do not report abuses to the Colombian authorities, either because they fear losing their jobs or they don't know how to report them. Among our interviewees, we found there is a perception of a generalized lack of information on the specifics of Colombian regulations and the options available for addressing violations for migrant women. One leader told us:

⁴⁶ DANE and Ladysmith. 2021; and Proyecto Migración de Venezuela. 2020. "Desempleo en mujeres migrantes." <https://migravenezuela.com/web/articulo/desempleo-en-mujeres-migrantes-llego-al-31-por-ciento-dane/2315>.

⁴⁷ García-Rojas, Karen, Herrera-Idárraga, Paula, Morales-Zurita, Leonardo Fabio, Ramírez-Bustamante, Natalia and Tribin-Urbe, Ana María 2020. *(She)cession: The Colombian female staircase fall*. Borradores de Economía N° 1140. Banco de la República. <https://repositorio.banrep.gov.co/handle/20.500.12134/9928>.

There is no way to report if they are not paying well, there may be a way but it is false because then they [the employers] will throw her out of work and badly recommend her everywhere and as they have networks it is more difficult because they put the photo of people and destroy their image, they make a network but for negative things.

This leader also mentioned there is labor exploitation in the flower farms where many Venezuelan women work long hours without enough time for lunch or breaks:

They do not want to pay the right salary, they give them a schedule but they do not respect it, in Venezuela, you did not see that because the working hours were respected as well as the right to lunch and recreation.

This woman compares the situation in Colombia with the one she had in Venezuela, arguing in her home country rules were respected regarding labor rights. This might be because of their nationality but it could also relate to a major structural problem in Colombia: when persons are employed in the informal market they are usually paid by the day and the wages can vary significantly depending on the activity, a phenomenon that may also be experienced by Colombians employed in these sectors.

Overcoming barriers to integration

Informal labor as a stopgap

In the interviews, we asked Venezuelan women about their previous occupations in Venezuela and how these changed following their migration to Colombia (see Box 1). Regardless of education or previous professions, many of the women had a common narrative. They arrive in Colombia and they immediately begin work in the informal sector doing work including recycling, childcare, selling coffee at an outdoor stand, or in tailoring.

Box 1. Beyond stereotypes: Venezuelan women struggling to thrive in their communities and workplaces

One of the leaders we interviewed is a geographical engineer and daughter of Colombian parents. Even though she has wide professional and academic experience back in Venezuela, she has struggled to find a job in her own field, stating that she had faced “all difficulties of the planet” in her job-hunting process as a migrant in Colombia. In spite of having a diploma officially recognized in Colombia, she has not been able to find a position commensurate with her experience and knowledge. Instead, she has resorted to call center positions to have some financial stability. From her point of view Colombia’s legal system and labor culture are barriers for migrant women’s inclusion. Her strategy to thrive and make a living in Colombia has involved networking skills and training. She has continued her education process in formal and non-formal institutions and acquired social capital in her workplace and community. This has enabled her to find new opportunities and develop her own leadership role inspiring other Venezuelan migrants to find their own paths in Colombia.

This work allows them to pay for accommodation and their immediate needs. A woman leader in Cúcuta stated,

Recycling is a job that finds you. When you first arrive in Colombia without a peso in your pocket and you have to eat, Venezuelans who've been here longer than you first get your food or otherwise help you, and they tell you about work in informal recycling so that you can eat and pay your daily rent. What recycling consists of is walking for hours, and all the material you gather has to be carried on your shoulder because you can't even afford a cart. It causes pain and you have to walk two and a half hours to get to the recycling site plus seven hours walking through the city and two hours back home.

Like the interviewee we quoted, the majority of women we interviewed work in informal jobs and are paid by the day. While this work enables them to pay for their household expenses, it may also be accompanied by precarity and uncertainty. Lack of formal employment can also affect their overall well-being as informal workers are not provided health insurance. They can however, can apply to SISBEN⁴⁸ which is the subsidized social protection system but only if they hold a PEP, which a majority of migrants' lack. Only some are able to achieve employment in the formal sector, and often after an arduous process (Box 2).

Box 2. Finding a formal job for a Venezuelan lawyer in Colombia

We interviewed a Venezuelan lawyer who entered the country lawfully with the required certification of the apostille for her diplomas. When she arrived in Colombia in 2019, she first started earning income by babysitting for a few months. Three months after her arrival she was granted the PEP and was given a stamp on her passport. In the following period, she could not find work for over eight months until she decided to sell coffee on the street corner. At the same time, she underwent several recruiting processes for different Colombian companies. She was ultimately hired by a newspaper where she carried out different administrative tasks and after six months there, she was able to transition to a role as a lawyer. Now, she is able to help her family by sending remittances and would like to bring her mother to Colombia.

Migrant networks provide employment opportunities

In our interviews, Venezuelan leaders and Colombian key informants reported Venezuelan women usually find job opportunities through their networks: social media, friends, family, and migrant associations. We found that some migrant women, particularly migrant women leaders have sizable networks. These networks of friends, acquaintances, or social media groups help them find work opportunities in addition to helping resolve care-related issues. One such example was recounted to us, as this woman found employment through the other participants in the “Escuelita:”

⁴⁸ Sistema de Identificación de Potenciales Beneficiarios de Programas Sociales—SISBEN is in English the System for the Identification of Potential Beneficiaries of Social Programs. More info: <https://www.sisben.gov.co/Paginas/que-es-sisben.aspx>.

I had not worked but last week I started in a garment workshop because of a friend who also works there. I met her at the Escuelita and I now work as an apprentice in the workshop. I was told I could bring other girls who were interested and could sew to the workshop.

As indicated by this interviewee and others, these virtual and real-life social networks can sometimes be a lifeline for women migrants who have little access to other opportunities. While some of these networks of migrants are through informal connections and associations when migrants encounter each other in different spaces, other networks are virtual. Many of those we interviewed, for example, mentioned belonging to different Whatsapp groups, some of which were created during the pandemic. In these groups, migrants and Colombians working in migrant communities communicate about job opportunities.

Despite the resources and the mobilization of their networks to find jobs, there are still many gaps between the jobs migrant women hold and the jobs they aspire to hold. Some of the leaders we interviewed, for example, stated that many of the women they help would like to have their businesses in areas such as beauty salons, bakeries, and cake shops and in Colombia, some organizations offer training related to these areas.⁴⁹ Yet many women can't access loans or the financial system to start their own businesses due to a lack of experience or because they do not have a credit report in Colombia. This is a potential barrier preventing them from attaining financial independence and working in the industries they desire.



Session of the “Escuelita” in Bogotá. (Photo: Alexa Rochi)

⁴⁹ Besides, for instance the UNDP and UNHCR, the National Learning System (SENA) provides training, more info here: <https://www.mintrabajo.gov.co/prensa/comunicados/2020/agosto/sena-abre-oferta-de-cursos-virtuales-a-migrantes-con-permiso-especial-de-permanencia-pep>.

Leadership and social participation of migrant women

The process of migration is often destabilizing for individuals and communities, impacting personal identity, social, and economic opportunities, in addition to political participation. In certain circumstances, it can also be an opportunity and present new possibilities for agency. While many of the effects of displacement contribute to migrants' marginalization and vulnerability, the attention of academics and policymakers on *barriers* may overshadow simultaneous processes of *opportunities* for migrant mobilization and their active role in overcoming these barriers. Examples of migrant leadership and political participation exist all over the world. In East Africa, Pincock et al. (2020)⁵⁰ document the important role refugee leaders play in participating in collective action and supporting the vulnerable members of their communities, while Johnson (2012)⁵¹ shows how non-citizen migrants take advantage of the limited opportunities they're presented to engage in activism in Australia, Spain, and Tanzania.

In this section, we contribute to the literature on migrant and refugee leadership by examining the role Venezuelan migrant women leaders play in their communities and how they perceive their political agency in Colombia. We find that women address an important gap, filling roles for the Colombian state in providing direct services to migrants, assisting migrants with finding jobs, and being a focal point for information. Additionally, we find that women leaders do not necessarily perceive themselves as more empowered in Colombia, however, a perception of their lack of rights pushes them to take on leadership roles in their communities.



Presentation of the outreach project “Ensororadas.” (Photo: Alexa Rochi)

⁵⁰ Pincock, Kate, Alexander Betts, and Evan Easton-Calabria. 2020. *The Global Governed?* Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108848831>.

⁵¹ Johnson, Heather. 2012. “Moments of solidarity, migrant activism and (non) citizens at global borders: Political agency at Tanzanian refugee camps, Australian detention centers and European borders.” In *Citizenship, migrant activism and the politics of movement* (pp. 121–140). London: Routledge.

Women leaders organize information

The majority of Venezuelan migrant women interviewed working at nonprofit organizations or as community leaders in another capacity mentioned that their primary roles were (1) to help migrants navigate the Colombian systems; (2) provide information and orientation to migrants; and (3) provide direct aid such as food support or other assistance for migrants' basic needs.

For example, in her role as a community leader, one participant in Cúcuta who has resided in Colombia for the past three years works with migrants who lack access to healthcare. She informed us that she collects their data and sends their information to the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in order to help them receive medical attention and formal affiliation within the Colombian health system. A Venezuelan woman leader in Cali we interviewed performs a similar role in her community. She shares information about the ETPV, helps guide Venezuelans to the right resources such as where to go if they need help with a legal issue and how to access social services under the Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar (ICBF).⁵² She stated,

I applied what I learned with my family, many of whom are Colombo-Venezuelans and are uninformed, and now I take the opportunity to explain policies to other migrants. I also encourage them to educate themselves and help find the right people and resources to guide them.

Another Cúcuta-based leader who works with recently arrived migrants similarly describes her community leadership role as primarily consisting of information-sharing. Additionally, she mentioned that she volunteers her time accompanying migrants through the processes of seeking care from the Colombian health system. As indicated by these interviews and the broader participants of *La Escuelita*, women leaders can play vital roles in communities providing decentralized information to migrants who arrive without an understanding of Colombian policies and the rights they possess or the ability to exercise them, with the majority of this work uncompensated.

From our study, it emerged that the process of acquiring knowledge may have a gendered dimension, with women emerging as community leaders and focal points of knowledge. In an interview, a Venezuelan migrant who runs a social media group that helps answer migrants' questions about legal processes and rights in Colombia noted:

The majority of people we serve are women, women are more active in looking for information for their spouses, for their children.

Several other women we interviewed also mention the importance of social media, particularly WhatsApp groups as we described above. Certain groups are reserved only for women's participation and others serve the broader migrant community.

⁵²The Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar—ICBF is the institution in charge of the protection of children in Colombia.

For instance, a leader of a small women's organization in Cúcuta runs a WhatsApp group with migrant women, returnees, and some Colombian women to share knowledge about rights, health, education, and general resources for migrants. This migrant leader from Cúcuta shared:

We've created a network of support where we share information, when there are daylong medical fairs where children can receive vaccines, or migrants can be signed up for the government health insurance. All this information we share on a Whatsapp group, it's called ... and there everyone posts information and if someone has a question, they ask it in the chat and we help guide and support each other.

Many of the other women interviewed also spoke of the importance of WhatsApp groups as support networks in which migrants post information about the PEP, how to access healthcare, questions, and job postings, among other things. One Bogotá-based founder of an organization that works on violence against women stated she was part of a WhatsApp group specifically dedicated to women's empowerment. Suggested by our interviews, women leaders can sometimes play a central role both as conduits of information and as the primary gatherers of information for their families. A founder of nonprofit serving migrants in Cúcuta summarized the sentiment as part of her organization's principles:

The assistance that helps a mother helps the whole nuclear family. "To educate a boy is to create a man, to educate a girl, is to educate a family."

Women leaders provide direct services to their communities

Existing policies may also fall short of fully addressing the immediate and basic needs of migrants such as housing, food, education, and general medicine. This pushes certain migrants to make demands on public institutions and learn the legal codes of the state. One of the leaders living in Cali informed us that the lack of help and information she received, prompted her to help other women access the labor market:

Sometimes you can't get a job, many people have had to learn the hard way and that's why you have to inform people, ask about how to help, what places you can go to help them.

Another Venezuelan woman leader working with a foundation explained a case where a woman had cancer and was unable to receive medical attention because she lacked the PEP and health insurance. Cancer is not seen as an "emergency", therefore, for irregular migrants, the state doesn't provide treatment, and her family was unable to afford private treatment. The foundation the leader works with helped the women receive attention at a hospital, threatening to implement an "*acción de tutela*"—the petition process that individuals can activate to guarantee the protection of their rights.

Another woman leader helps fill gaps in educational access for children. While migrant children possess the right to attend Colombian schools, many schools lack the capacity and do not have the funds or the staff to accommodate these children. Together with other

women at her organization, she helps teach the Venezuelan children in her area who are out of school:

We teach the basics to children, multiplication tables, vowels, and what is necessary so that they don't lose their love of studying and enthusiasm because without education they won't be able to achieve anything.

Migrant women have mixed responses to political participation and empowerment

The process of migration for some Venezuelan women we interviewed has been one in which they can participate more politically and socially, while others we spoke to describe the challenges to participation in Colombia. In some interviews, women reported that community organizing and participation are seen as potentially threatening in Venezuela and stated there is a lack of political space to organize. One interviewee who used to work making desserts for a living back in Venezuela said:

In Venezuela, I didn't do anything political, and if I wanted to, it had to be in a closed space. In Venezuela, if you're not in agreement with [them/the government], if you don't speak well of them in the videos, or have campaigns supporting them, you can't participate or be a leader.

Given the political closure in Venezuela, actions like organizing communities or participating in social organizing were perceived as risky. However, migration can prompt these leaders to gather more knowledge. A Cali-based leader under age twenty stated:

Before migrating, I didn't feel that I had rights or that I was informed. But in Colombia, I feel that I have rights and power.

Other women we interviewed had a different perception of their agency and ability to exert their political agency in Colombia and Venezuela. One woman, for example, who worked with formal political offices in Venezuela, including the municipal council or the mayor's office, complained that she was not able to have the same opportunities in Colombia.

In Venezuela, I worked for what I studied with the mayor's office and the President's office. I could participate and choose. In this country, I can't offer much.

The same idea was expressed by an older and highly educated leader who stated she found it difficult to contribute meaningfully to social and political life in Colombia. These differences perhaps indicate greater possibilities for participation in the formal area of politics in Venezuela compared to the informal leadership positions held by the women in our study. Lack of documentation and political incorporation may perhaps be a barrier to migrants' formal political participation, though more research is needed on the subject.

Conclusions

Despite the measures taken by the GoC over the past six years to promote Venezuelan migrants' socio-economic inclusion, many challenges remain. These can arise for a variety of reasons: structural factors linked to the Colombian labor market migrants' lack of familiarity with government policies in the private and public sector, and discrimination against Venezuelans. For migrant women, these difficulties are compounded as they encounter prejudices against both their nationality and gender, experience labor exploitation, and shoulder childcare and other domestic responsibilities. In light of these obstacles, Venezuelan women have developed strategies to access the services they need and find employment using migrant networks, and joining or founding community groups and organizations, and relying on informal employment as a stopgap measure.

Over and above these women's integration successes, perceptions of disempowerment and exclusion have prompted some of these migrants to assume leadership roles in their communities and become active participants in civil society, working towards the inclusion and well-being of other women and migrants in Colombia. However, it should be noted that the findings of this report are limited to the experiences of a subset of Venezuelan migrant women, and do not capture the additional barriers, experiences, and/or opportunities for many other women, including Afro-Venezuelans, indigenous-Venezuelans, and trans-women. Furthermore, the challenges outlined and strategies used to overcome them are likely not limited to the Venezuelan migrant population and may also apply to other marginalized groups within Colombia.



Knitted Colombia – Venezuela Bridge. (Photo: Alexa Rochi)

In summary, this paper first outlined the migration policies adopted by the GoC and provided a general overview and profile of Venezuelan migrant women in Colombia using data from DANE and through a review of the academic and policy literature. This initial work makes clear the need for a gender-centered public policy. For instance, the high level of education of Venezuelan women we describe demands improved procedures for the recognition of their skills and credentials in Colombia. A more effective system to validate Venezuelan degrees would allow these women to earn higher salaries, reducing the current gender wage gap. Crucially, the higher unemployment rate among Venezuelan women, compared to both Colombian women and Venezuelan men, must be addressed to reduce gender disparities in their inclusion.

Subsequently, we present our findings on the gendered barriers to Venezuelan women's socioeconomic inclusion from interviews. These interviews revealed various obstacles to reporting and prosecuting GBV cases, which is a threat to both migrant employment and overall wellbeing. We found that migrant women often lack the knowledge of Colombian reporting procedures and that at the time of reporting, they may encounter discrimination by public officials. In other cases, we found that cultural differences and gender stereotypes may be limiting Venezuelan women's opportunities as they possess different cultural norms from Colombians, as well as face biases related to their work ethic and sexuality. Finally, our interviewees suggested that migrant women are often tasked with a greater share of household duties for which they are not remunerated. Occasionally, our interviews revealed that family dynamics and the distribution of domestic tasks can change with migration; for some it becomes more equitable, and for others, it increases their labor without their extended network of family and friends.

We then analyze barriers mentioned that are potentially faced by the broader migrant population, identifying more general challenges to migrant inclusion. Our interviewees report a lack of documentation, high unemployment rates among the local population, a low availability of job opportunities for Venezuelans, and wage inequality.

Additionally, our interviews shed light on a couple of the strategies migrant women use to overcome barriers to economic inclusion. We found that migrant social networks, both physical and virtual, are a key tool for finding jobs and accessing services. The community-based networks and Whatsapp groups play an important role for women and other migrants for finding job opportunities as well as providing information about their rights, government policy, and helping them receive aid and access to basic services.

Lastly, our interviews point to the important role Venezuelan migrant leaders, particularly women, play in their communities, complementary to those of the state and policy implementers. In interviews, women leaders discussed their work providing information about Colombian policies such as the PEP and ETPV as well as disseminating information on how to access services like healthcare and education. They also referenced their role as direct providers of basic services and assistance to other women and their broader communities. In the service of this work, we document the creation of networks and informal communication channels that help circulate information and coordinate action. Examining these leaders' previous experience in community organizing, our study suggests a

mixed experience of migration, with the process of migrating sometimes prompting women to take on leadership positions they've never held before and in other cases acting as a limitation to social participation. Overall, we document migrant women's ability to adapt and perform vital roles in their communities, which reveals their resilience and drive as well as points to the potential of migration to reshape community dynamics.

In conclusion, our report outlines the many challenges migrant women face during the process of socio-economic integration in Colombia related to a wide range of issues—gender, structural problems, and discrimination and xenophobia. Nevertheless, Venezuelan women have adopted multiple strategies to overcome them both personally and work to promote inclusion at the community level. The social participation and leadership of the Venezuelan women we interviewed have had direct consequences on the lives of other women they help, including in the areas of accessing state services, searching for a job, or gaining relevant aid or information. With a comprehensive regularization process ongoing, consideration should be paid to the role of these women leaders in working alongside policy actors in often uncompensated and unrecognized roles who have and will continue to advance the development of Colombian society and promote social cohesion within their communities.

Recommendations

Our findings shed light on different issues to be addressed both by the GoC, as well as by donors, NGOs, international organizations, and multilateral banks who want to promote Venezuelans' socio-economic inclusion in Colombia. These include the necessity to incorporate a gender-responsive approach in migration policies and to invest in programs oriented to women's livelihoods, among others. In this regard, the UNDP recently launched a planning guide regarding migrant women and livelihoods with recommendations about how to plan with a gender perspective and how to design equitable public policies.⁵³ These recommendations should be adopted both at the national and local level of governments, giving special attention to the lessons learned at the community level. Here we propose some recommendations that can be the first steps to move forward on Venezuelan women's inclusion and participation in Colombia.

To the Government of Colombia (GoC)

Despite the generosity of the GoC and its constant efforts to promote the socio-economic inclusion of Venezuelans, our study finds many challenges remain for women to access the labor market. We recommend the following:

⁵³ UNDP. 2021. "Guía de Planificación: Mujeres Migrantes y Medios de Vida." https://www.latinamerica.undp.org/content/rblac/es/home/library/womens_empowerment/guia-de-planificacion--mujeres-migrantes-y-medios-de-vida.html.

1. Strengthen institutional support and protection from the Public Ministry and other national and local authorities responsible for the prevention, protection, and response regarding Venezuelan women's rights.
2. Involve Venezuelan and Colombian women leaders in public policy design and programming. The community-based knowledge of the leaders will result in better responses addressing barriers to the inclusion of women.
3. Increase actions to prevent the risk of labor exploitation through the Ministry of Labor and the Interior Secretary at the local level and inform Venezuelan women about their labor rights widely with the collaboration of CSOs engaged in women's access to the labor market. Joint efforts between local authorities and community leaders engaged in preventing labor exploitation would result in fewer cases, more reports and more judicializations.
4. Disseminate information about assistance routes for victims of GBV and particularly trafficking and provide training to public servants through the Ministry of the Interior and local institutions. The information available on the prevention of trafficking for women migrants is scarce, creating more specific routes and communicating their existence would prevent many women from being victims of trafficking.
5. Provide more information to the private sector regarding formally hiring Venezuelan women with regular permits, particularly with the new ETPV, and information on migrants' rights and regulations through wide communication campaigns. Creating a joint strategy to hire vulnerable Venezuelan women in formal jobs, according to their expertise.
6. Facilitate loans through the existing entrepreneurship programs to Venezuelan women. Designing better products and reduce discrimination by service providers in the financial market would boost the projects of this population, adding to the local and national economy and empowering women to be independent.
7. Facilitate credentialing. Even if the GoC has already advanced in the apostille requirement, the high costs involved in the recognition of credentials prevent Venezuelan women from obtaining higher incomes. This would allow many professional women to access the labor market formally and contribute to the Colombian economy.

To donors, NGOs, international organizations, and multilateral development banks

The integration sector of the 2022 Venezuelan Regional Refugee and Migrant Response Plan (RMRP) will need US\$134 million for Colombia, of the US\$803 million needed overall.⁵⁴ With the implementation of the ETPV, the GoC has raised concerns about the need to fund projects and programs tackling the integration sector. Recently, the World Bank loaned more

⁵⁴ Venezuelan Regional Refugee and Migrant Response Plan (RMRP) 2022. <https://www.r4v.info/en/document/rmrp-2022>.

than US\$500 million to the GoC to address integration⁵⁵ and the European Union donated another €8 million.⁵⁶

We consider donors should keep largely funding initiatives for socio-economic inclusion. Particularly, we recommend the following:

1. Support and prioritize projects aiming at Venezuelan women's livelihoods and entrepreneurship at the local and community level through civil society organizations. It is key to involve community leaders in livelihood projects since they have already created networks and trust relationships with other women, getting to know their needs and expectations.
2. Support programs that address GBV both on prevention, protection, and response at the local level, involving the host communities.
3. Support programs addressing the prevention of xenophobia and discrimination towards migrant women and aiming at social cohesion within local communities. Creating programs that support both Colombian and Venezuelan women could improve gender equality.

⁵⁵ World Bank. 2021. "World Bank to Provide Strategic Support for Social and Economic Integration of Venezuelan Migrants in Colombia." <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2021/11/16/apoyo-estrategico-del-banco-mundial-para-la-integracion-social-y-economica-de-los-migrantes-venezolanos-en-colombia>. Accessed November 23, 2021.

⁵⁶ Delegación de la Unión Europea en Colombia. 2021. "#EuropaCreeEnColombia: una apuesta común por la integración y las oportunidades de la migración." https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/colombia/107695/europacreecolombia-una-apuesta-comun-percentC3%BAn-por-la-integraciC3%B3n-y-las-oportunidades-de-la-migraci-percentC3-percentB3n_es. Accessed November 23, 2021.

Annex 1. Survey

Question	Format	Options
Name		
Family name		
Gender	Multiple-choice	Woman/trans woman/nonbinary/other
Age		
ID	Multiple-choice	C.C./Passeport/C.E./PEP
ID number		
Nationality		Colombian/Venezuelan/Other/Both
City of residence	Multiple-choice	Bogotá/Cali/Cúcuta
Address		
Phone number		
Mobile phone number		
Type of housing	Multiple-choice	Leased/Own/Family/Shelter/Daily Pay
Stratum	Multiple-choice	1–6
Membership of SISBEN		Yes/No
Do you know your SISBEN score?		Yes/No
SISBEN score		
Are you a beneficiary of an assistance program from the GOC?		Yes/No, ¿which one?
Do you have children?		Yes/No
How many children do you have?		
Civil status	Multiple-choice	Single/Cohabitation/Married/Divorced/Widow
Number of dependents		(if you don't have any please mark 0)
Do you share the care tasks of dependents?		Yes/No, ¿with whom?
Do you have any disability? Which one?		Yes/No, ¿which one?
Do you identify yourself with any of these populations?	Select more than one	Women/Youth/LGTBIQ+/People of African descent/ROM/Indigenous/Migrants/Palenqueras/Raizales
Last level of studies	Multiple-choice	Primary/Secondary/Technical/Technology/Undergraduate/Postgraduate
Name the organization, collective you lead		
How long ago did you arrived to Colombia?		
In which city/state did you live in Venezuela?		
Which was your latest occupation in Venezuela?		
Role within your organization		
Is your role/position paid?		Yes/No
Describe what your organization does	Open	
Neighborhoods, localities, communities where your organization has an impact		
Sectors of the population that impact your organization	Multiple-choice	Children and adolescents/Women/Youth/LGTBIQ+/Afro-descendants/ROM/Indigenous/Migrants/Elderly/Palenquera/Raizales/Other, which one?

Question	Format	Options
Do you hold another role outside the organization?		Yes/No, ¿which one?
Please imagine there's a ladder with 10 rungs where at the bottom rung, there are people who lack agency and rights, and on the highest run, the tenth, there are those who have a lot of power and rights. Which rung of the ladder would you place yourself on today?	Multiple-choice	1 to 10
And which rung were you on before you migrated?	Multiple-choice	1 to 10
Why do you perceive your capacities in such a manner?	Open	
Have you participated in popular elections processes?		Yes/No, ¿which one?
Have you been elected in popular elections processes?		Yes/No, ¿which one?
Do you think you've been a woman with opportunities at the personal, community and work development?		Yes/No, why?
Can you name any obstacles you have encountered in developing your personal, work and community potential?		
Can you name any obstacles you have encountered in developing your employment potential?		
Can you name any obstacles you have encountered in developing your community potential?		
Can you name the enhancers you have found to develop your personal potential?		
Can you name the enhancers you have found to develop your employment potential?		
Can you name the enhancers you have found to develop your community potential?		
In the last year, have you taken any of the following actions with the intention of changing your environment/helping the migrant population? Did you contact the media?		*Yes: frequently (more than once a month)/a couple of times a year/once a year/Never
Did you contact the government? (local, national)		*Yes: frequently (more than once a month)/a couple of times a year/once a year/Never
Did you participate in a demonstration or protest?		*Yes: frequently (more than once a month)/a couple of times a year/once a year/Never
Did you organize a citizen dialogue?		*Yes: frequently (more than once a month)/a couple of times a year/once a year/Never