



# Girls and adolescents, migrant, refugees and displaced in Latin America and the Caribbean

## An urgent reality in the care agenda

This policy brief explores the situation faced by migrant, refugee, and displaced girls and adolescents in Latin America and the Caribbean from a human rights, gender, generational and intercultural perspective.

*“The trip was a surprise. They never told me anything. I didn’t know how or where we were going. My dad just told me to pick up some things and put them in a bag. I had to leave my grandmother and my dog. I still miss them a lot. I don’t know what happened to my dog... and my grandma died. I have cried a lot for both of them...”<sup>1</sup>*

Girls and adolescents represent around 20% of the flow of female human mobility in the region (UNDP, 2020).

Among the most vulnerable groups are unaccompanied and/or separated girls and adolescents, including those traveling with young children (their own or siblings), pregnant girls, girls at risk, or girls living in the street. Their situation tends to be less visible because very little information has been collected on the specific needs and threats they face, as they are less likely to seek help and support. Migrant, refugee, and displaced girls and adolescents exist while facing realities of dispossession, expulsion, and separation from their individual communities. They are forced to adapt to cross-border and pendular migration situations. Their roadmaps are woven within contexts of fear and violence, and their rights and lives are at high risk.

<sup>1</sup> Testimony of a migrant adolescent in: Cartografías afectivas “Migrar es como volver a nacer”. Niñas y adolescentes migrantes, desplazadas y refugiadas en América Latina y el Caribe. UNICEF HIAS 2022.

The mourning of migrant girls and adolescents is recurring.<sup>2</sup> It is a process that affects their relationship with their environment and that fragments memory into two dimensions: “here,” the place where they arrive, and “there,” the place left behind. This perception is reinforced by the bureaucratic procedures of public administrations that often prevent the accessibility of essential services such as health and education.

Those who are not in a legal situation or accompanied by close relatives are the ones who suffer the most from the violation of their rights, especially if they are teenage mothers. They must add to their emotional burden the fear of losing the guardianship of their daughters and sons. They travel by land, water, and air and frequently use small boats, pack animals, trucks, buses, or trains, or walk along dangerous roads where they sometimes encounter illegal armed groups. They often live in situations of confinement worsened in the context of the pandemic. More so, there is evidence that shelters are not safe places for girls and adolescents since many reinforce violent gender patterns. Overcrowding is the main characteristic of their housing, and the standards of femininity continue

<sup>2</sup> The notion of migrant mourning is used to indicate the process of uprooting and disconnection suffered by migrants and displaced people. In this scenario of forced migration and displacement, this mourning intensifies and lengthens. The separation from the place where one has grown up and lived affects the concept of time and space and the sense of belonging.

to focus on the areas of care and the stereotypes widely disseminated by the media, schools, and religions. All this limits the potential for change for girls and teenagers.

Most of them have no information about their rights. Many work outside the home in street vending, caring for other children or animals, cleaning, and in beauty salons. They are exposed to child labor and situations of exploitation, street harassment, and xenophobic attacks. Social networks are often their only alternatives for socialization and entertainment, but they often depend on their partners, relatives, or acquaintances to access online services. This entails the risk of blackmail and extortion against them and their families. They have little access to protection measures and digital security. They do not know the policies, programs, and services they can turn to or how to access the health, education, justice, and housing systems. However, in one way or another, they all know that there are principles of equality, dignity and non-discrimination that should protect them.

### The role of caregivers of refugee, migrant, and displaced girls

*"They tell me I must do the chores because I'm the girl. My brothers don't have to do them, although they're older than me." "My time is not mine." "Being a teenager is awful. I am used to attention and care. Since there are younger children now, I have to take care of them" (Adolescent, 13 years old). (Testimonies of girls/adolescents in group interviews)*

Care is an essential dimension in people's lives. It has to do with the daily persistence of life itself. Nevertheless,

the way in which care is organized is a tight knot in the prevalence of inequality. In the narrative of the girls and adolescents interviewed, one can see that global care chains are the only guidelines for "being a woman" instilled from childhood to adolescence. The multiple meanings of being a girl or adolescent are adapted to the internalization of gender-generational, sexual, and racial norms. Girls are assigned care environments between the ages of seven and nine. Simultaneously the pressure to maintain an image of femininity increases.

Most migrant girls expressed that being a girl implies substantial differences: when compared to boys, they have to spend more time on care and household chores, while boys can enjoy being outside the home more, especially in sports-related activities. Both those who are alone in shelters or migrate with their families experience daily situations of gender inequality linked to care tasks. Many responsibilities mark the rhythm of their lives, and they have little room for play and leisure to the detriment of their needs, desires, and goals.

This process of social preparation for being a woman is constantly reinforced through violent practices. The family, school, social networks, recreational spaces, and peer relationships, among others, reject any gap in the assumption of the gender pattern. They assume the responsibilities of adults and often are forced to marry or live with men twice their age to guarantee the care of the family system. This often hinders their possibility to plan for their own lives.

Girls and adolescents thus assume the assigned division of labor, reinforcing gender roles and the differences between men and women. But who takes care of them?

## THE CHALLENGES

1.

The lack of data disaggregated by sex, age, ethnicity, and disability, among others, and the few migration policies with gender and generational perspective do not protect the rights of girls and adolescents. Gender inequalities mean they have less information, fewer resources, fewer opportunities, and at the same time, more exposure to risk, violence, and poverty due to care roles. The reproductive work carried out by migrant and refugee girls and adolescents and its impact on their life projects has never been quantified.

2.

The general perspective of public policies for girls and adolescents is adult-centric and based on welfare. It lacks tools to encourage management capacity and autonomy and does not consider their needs, dreams, and perception of migration as a way of improving the lives of their families in their country of origin or their own life where they live now.

3.

Girls and adolescents have reduced and limited networks and spaces for social and cultural participation. They are forced to live through prolonged migratory processes. The trips last months and even years, and the condition of being permanently "in transit" structures their identities.

## THE CHALLENGES

4.

The reception systems must be transformed to facilitate the integration of the population requesting refuge. It is necessary to improve management and coordination capacity to find solutions for health, education, housing, work, food, legal and psychological care, translation and interpretation services, language teaching, leisure, and recreation.

5.

Girls and adolescents, including refugees, migrants, and displaced persons, are not considered in the care agenda of the region. Therefore, policies that respond to this reality and generate protection mechanisms for them in their role as caregivers and in their right to care are not guaranteed.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

1.

Data and information

To produce comparable data disaggregated by sex, age, ethnicity, and disability, among others, from the corresponding State agencies and national and regional institutions, to have accurate knowledge of how many girls and adolescents make up the universe of migrants, refugees and displaced persons in the region, and to implement effective policies and programs. As ECLAC proposes, "... a universal approach is needed, which requires coordinated action in areas such as the dynamics associated with migratory movements and global care chains (cooperation pillar)." (ECLAC, 2021) ♦

2.

Reception systems

Urgently transform reception systems to facilitate the integration of the displaced and migrant population requesting international protection. It is necessary to improve management and coordination capacity to find solutions in health, education, housing, work, food, legal and psychological care, translation and interpretation services, language teaching, leisure, and recreation, among others.

3.

Housing

Formulate policies and programs (low-cost rents, government control of the quality of supply, access to a lawyer in case of abuse) to facilitate the inclusion of the migrant, displaced, and refugee population, their access to decent housing and to care services in which migrant, refugee and displaced girls and adolescents, including teenage mothers, can turn.

4.

Food

Produce more effective food support programs that respect the dignity of migrants and refugees. Create specific programs for migrant, refugee, and displaced girls and adolescents in coordination with educational systems to address nutrition and food needs and the incorporation of culinary traditions of their countries of origin.

5.

Health

Create primary care programs oriented to the specific needs of refugee, migrant and displaced girls and adolescents. Generate specialized protocols in situations of violence and abuse. Provide resources on sexual and reproductive health rights that are adaptable to their demands and needs, guaranteeing comprehensive services that ensure access to mental health, including the clinical management of rape. Sensitize health staff regarding intercultural and ethnic-racial diversity to promote care that respects ancestral experiences, knowledge, and traditions.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## 6. Education

Coordinate educational and migration policies between the countries of departure and arrival so as not to limit access to the educational system based on regular migratory status or refugee status, facilitating the procedures of validation or approval of studies.

Raise awareness and train teaching staff about the rights of refugees, migrants, and displaced persons. Have clear reporting protocols and comprehensive protection and justice systems in violence cases. Promote school coexistence considering legal, intercultural, gender, and anti-racist perspectives. Encourage the participation, expression, and decision-making of migrant girls and adolescents in the mechanisms provided by schools. Facilitate translation and access to learning in countries where they speak a language other than their mother tongue.

## 7. Work

Pay special attention to the ministries of labor and social protection regarding the conditions in which migrant and refugee girls and adolescents work outside the home since they are exposed to situations of labor and sexual exploitation for commercial purposes, child labor, harassment, and xenophobic attacks. It is necessary to maintain a fluid dialogue between the justice system and the education system, as well as with employers, unions, and associations, to achieve synergies that improve these conditions.

## 8. Justice

Generate information campaigns so that refugee, migrant, and displaced girls and adolescents know their rights and where to go in cases of violence and mistreatment. Carry out trainings in the judicial, prosecutorial, and police systems to provide a close and effective service, eliminating barriers to access justice. Collaborate with civil society organizations that support girls and adolescents, generating fluid information and rapid responses in urgent situations.

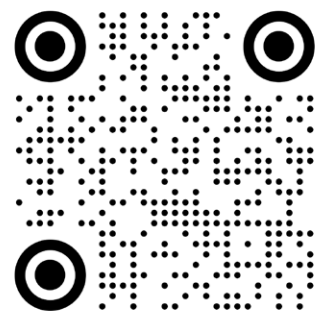
## 9. Leisure and recreation

Publicize the resources available from local governments in terms of physical education, sports, artistic, and cultural spaces that foster empathy between residents and new arrivals. Generate safe and equal spaces for community coexistence.

## 10. Media and social networks

Invite the media to be part of the change in the collective perceptions of migrant, refugee, and displaced populations to build a culture of social inclusion and respect for human rights. Generate protocols that prevent the overexposure of private lives, intimacy, and issues related to data protection. Promote the production of programs and campaigns in the media and social networks to disseminate non-stereotyped gender images and raise awareness about the condition of migrant, refugee, and displaced girls and adolescents.

*The stories of girls and adolescents who migrate alone or are pregnant and flee from situations of hunger, exclusion, and sexual violence in their countries of origin are stories of courage and bravery, of rooting in the midst of uprooting. Despite the adverse contexts of migrants live within and the violence they are exposed to, these girls and adolescents seek alternatives to preserve their dreams and life journeys.*



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