

Mulier Monitoring Report #FreeAndSafe 2021



Introduction



In our monitoring of 2021, we were faced with a scenario that is both pandemic and post-pandemic. At the beginning of the year, the mobility restrictions to stop the spread of COVID-19 remained, a restrictive scenario that favored human trafficking nonetheless due to the reduction in economic income and the furtiveness exacerbated by controls and border closures.

For the second half of the year, the reopening of the land borders began, without this implying an effective reduction in the number of people who resort to irregular crossings or trails for their transits.

Mulier is a civil society organization created in 2016 to promote and defend women's rights through initiatives such as #LibresYSeguras (Free and Safe), a program that seeks to prevent the trafficking of women and girls in the context of migration, ensuring free psychological care for women in situations of gender-based violence, and carrying out different activities to keep the demand for women's rights on the public agenda. You can learn more about our work on social media [@muliervenezuela](https://twitter.com/muliervenezuela)

2021 Monitoring Report



In this context, Mulier presents its third annual report to mark World Day Against Trafficking in Persons. For the 2021 monitoring report, we identified some 85 cases related to the trafficking of Venezuelan women, including interventions to rescue victims and the arrest of involved individuals. During this period we registered some 415 Venezuelan women rescued from trafficking networks, including 138 girls and teenagers.

Socioeconomic precariousness persists in Venezuela, a country that receives assistance from the United Nations (UN) in recognition of the humanitarian emergency it is going through, which involves hyperinflation, impoverishment, structural failures of public services, lack of opportunities and, in many cases, family violence. The impoverishment left by the pandemic has different expressions for women. For example, the National Survey on Living Conditions (Encovi) reflected that 67.1% of the female population does not have a stable job. This reality is a direct consequence of the overload of housework that women experienced due to the confinement measures derived from the prevention of COVID-19. Exiting the labor force only makes women more vulnerable to a state of need and structural poverty that has historically been used by trafficking networks to recruit new victims.

The number of rescued girls continues to rise

The number of Venezuelan girls and teenagers rescued from trafficking networks has been increasing since 2019, from 90 in that year to 138 in 2021. This situation responds, in addition to the pedophilic logic that intersects human trafficking and is detailed in our 2020 report, to the increase in the numbers of unaccompanied Venezuelan girls and teenagers in a situation of human mobility. Regarding the perpetrators of the crime, we found some 295 detentions, 149 men (51%) and 57 women (19%). Compared to previous years, the percentage of Venezuelan nationals arrested for these crimes increased. In 2019, Venezuelan nationals represented 26% of the total number of people detained. By 2021, the percentage nearly doubled to 45%.

In general, the indicators showed a decrease in the number of Venezuelan women rescued in 2021 compared to previous years of monitoring, and although this could be taken as an indication of a decrease in the practice, we fear it could mean less effectiveness of the public in the dismantling of trafficking networks and the rescuing of victims. In contrast, the increase in people arrested for this crime stands out as a positive balance of the police operations carried out for a more effective fight against the crime of trafficking. However, it is not possible to have access to information regarding the follow-up of these arrests by the institutions in charge of administering justice. It remains unknown how many of the detainees end up with a final court sentence and how many simply go free.

The new reality of human trafficking modalities

According to the UNODC, the modality of trafficking that affects women and girls to a greater extent is trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation: for every 10 victims detected in the world, 5 are adult women and 2 are girls.



Precisely, there is a modality of trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation that has been discussed in previous reports but remains important to problematize. This is webcam modeling, an activity consisting of representing or performing acts of a sexual nature in front of a webcam. This work allows those who exercise it to achieve a kind of significant sexual and labor freedom in which they can choose their working hours and the type of content they want to produce, through an activity that is legal in countries like Colombia.

Border restrictions and their impact on trafficking dynamics

That is one side of the coin. On the other hand, however, webcam modeling can serve as a front for trafficking for sexual exploitation. It is common for victims to voluntarily agree, at first, to a webcam modeling job where they are offered a platform with a network of followers where they can post sexual content with the promise of juicy salaries. However, after entering the business, conditions change. The remuneration does not match the promises, the victims lose control over their working hours, they are forced to perform sexual acts that they do not want to do, and they are not allowed to resign under the threat of sharing the videos among their relatives.

In Cúcuta, Norte de Santander, important cases of rescue of Venezuelan women and girls came to light, including the dismantling of 1,000 houses of sexual exploitation of Venezuelan girls via webcam.

Border restrictions and their impact on trafficking dynamics

2021 saw a shocking increase in the number of irregular migrants of Venezuelan nationality seeking to reach the United States through the Mexican border. According to statistics from the United States Citizenship and Immigration Service, the irregular crossing of Venezuelans increased from approximately 5,000 in 2020 to more than 100,000 in 2021, including at least 675 unaccompanied minors. These official figures reflect the behavior of a trend in migration, mostly carried out irregularly, that involves paying migrant smugglers or "coyotes" in the vicinity of the Rio Grande in Mexico.

Due to this situation, the Mexican government announced that starting January 21, 2022, it would require visitor visas for Venezuelan nationals who do not possess a U.S. visa. Despite the perils of this border, the measure implemented by the Mexican government only added new difficulties and risks for an important part of the Venezuelan migrant population that, after the implementation of this visa policy, has turned in large quantities to the dangerous journey through the Darién jungle in Panama, with the terrible consequences that have been recently reflected by the media and reports from international organizations.

The vulnerability of women and girls is not limited to these cases. We also documented their situation in Brazil and Colombia, with an emphasis on the population vulnerable to situations of displacement, forced recruitment, and human trafficking for labor and sexual exploitation.

The action of the Venezuelan authorities

Since we started monitoring the actions of the Venezuelan state towards the crime of trafficking in 2018, official figures have been largely absent, the only regular source being the Attorney General of the Republic, Tarek William Saab, who in December 2020, faced with the shipwrecks in the state of Sucre, recognized an increase in the crime of trafficking. During a declaration in December 2020, Saab pointed out that 4 cases were documented in 2017 and 7 in 2018, a figure that rose to 41 in 2019 and 66 in 2020. This is relevant because on July 30, 2021, to mark the World Day Against Trafficking in Person, the Attorney General communicated new figures indicating that, during his administration, 330 cases had been recorded, accounting for 696 victims of trafficking, with 411 people charged and 114 arrest warrants issued.

The timeline of the figures communicated by the Attorney General corresponds to the administration that began in August 2017; but considering the 118 cases reported between 2017 and 2020, 212 cases would correspond to the period January-July 2021. This would mean the recognition by the Public Ministry of a 221% increase in cases detected in the first seven months of 2021.

We must emphasize that the exercise of making conjectures from the official figures to try to understand the dimension of the crime of human trafficking in the country would not be necessary if the Venezuelan State complied with its obligation to keep accurate statistics on the matter, with disaggregated data and due periodic publication.

The National Plan against Trafficking in Persons, approved in Decree No. 4,540 and published in the Official Gazette on July 21, 2021, is yet to be implemented. In this regard, different organizations have requested the publication of the content of the plan, to no avail so far.

Figures for the first half of 2022

The figures continued to be worrying in the first half of 2022. As of June, we registered 154 Venezuelan women rescued from trafficking networks, including 20 girls and teenagers. The trend of an increasing number of arrests was also maintained, reaching 70, including 34 people of Venezuelan nationality.

Given this reality, it is becoming increasingly necessary to prevent and make visible the crime of human trafficking and its consequences for Venezuelan women and girls. In this sense, Mulier presents in its report a set of conclusions and recommendations from our work of activism to continue the fight against human trafficking in our country.

Conclusions

The exercises of documentation developed from civil society in Venezuela have the mission of registering our reality and its complexities, but they are also a testament to how those responsible were in time to act to change the reality and failed to do it. We make visible the risks that were experienced in the Mexican Rio Grande in 2021 at times when terrible nightmares are being experienced in the Panamanian Darién in 2022. And although a retrospective vision may seem to facilitate the answers, the reality is that the recommendations during all these years have remained the same. The increase in obstacles to migration only generates contexts of illegality and risks. Hundreds of thousands of people will continue to cross the Mexican border into the United States, except that now they come from further away, with a greater loss, and after experiencing unspeakable horrors.



The cost of political decisions continues to be borne by the most vulnerable people. In the face of political conflicts, the obligation to guarantee the human rights of the population is increasingly ignored, needs worsen, and the human urge to seek a better life intensifies. Our ability to reinvent ourselves and prosper as a modern and democratic society based on respect for and guarantee of human rights depends on our ability to ensure the life and well-being of the most vulnerable today.

This text is a summary of our 2021 monitoring, you can consult the full content and our previous reports at the following link:

biolinky.co/muliervenezuela