



Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women

# MIGRATION, HUMAN TRAFFICKING AND ORGANISED CRIME IN THE AMERICAS

## A Gender Perspective

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The Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women (GAATW) is an international network of more than 100 NGOs from all regions of the world that advocates for the rights of migrants and trafficked persons. GAATW members provide direct assistance to migrants and trafficked persons, run information campaigns, and engage in policy advocacy at the national and regional levels.

The International Secretariat of the Alliance is based in Bangkok, Thailand and supports its members with research, knowledge building and sharing, and international advocacy. We focus on women's rights to mobility and decent work.

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# Introduction

The Latin American and Caribbean Network (REDLAC) of the Global Alliance Against Trafficking in Women is made up of 14 civil society organisations operating from nine countries in the region. Its areas of work include prevention and direct assistance to victims of trafficking, addressing the commercial sexual exploitation of children and adolescents, defending the human rights of migrant women and sex workers, and the labour rights of workers in different sectors. As a whole, REDLAC carries out information campaigns and participates in political advocacy actions at the national and regional levels.

The current socio-political context in which organisations operate is highly complex and multifaceted, characterised by institutional crises, social inequalities and the growing influence of organised crime – all of which have a direct impact on the lives of millions of people. The region continues to face structural challenges, such as corruption, violence and economic instability, exacerbating social vulnerabilities in countries such as Venezuela, Argentina, Ecuador, Bolivia, Chile, and Peru. With frequent changes of government, these countries have faced acute political instability that has eroded democratic institutions and led to a decline in human rights and civil liberties.

The weakness of state institutions has allowed non-state actors such as criminal organisations to exercise significant control over territories and populations, leading to an erosion of trust in governments and facilitating the expansion of illicit activities, including human trafficking and migrant smuggling.

Migration is one of the most visible consequences of this crisis. Violence, poverty, natural disasters and the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have amplified existing vulnerabilities and posed serious challenges to the stability and development of the affected countries.

This report focuses on the challenges that REDLAC faces in this dynamic regional panorama and the responses that the various organisations have implemented to overcome them, both at the organisational level and within the framework of the network.

# Social, political and economic context in Latin America, Central America and the Caribbean

Latin and Central America present a complex and diverse socio-political landscape, marked by deep social inequalities, political instability and the impact of global phenomena such as climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Inequality is one of the most distinctive features of Latin American economies (Gasparini, 2022).<sup>1</sup> Currently, the richest 10% of the population has an average income 12 times greater than the poorest 10%, far exceeding that of the OECD countries, where the **difference** is 4 times.

In Colombia, Chile, and Uruguay, around one percent of the population controls up to 40% of total wealth. Countries such as Brazil, Colombia, Guatemala, Panama, and Honduras have extremely high income inequality, while Bolivia, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, and Uruguay have income gaps similar to those in the United States.<sup>2</sup>

Latin America is also **the most violent region in the world** in terms of homicide rates, with levels of criminal violence that, in some cases, exceed those observed in past civil wars. This high-intensity phenomenon has worsened considerably in recent years, even affecting countries such as Chile and Uruguay, previously considered stable and safe.

Behind this extreme violence are powerful criminal organisations, which often resort to violence against the state. Let us not forget that *drug trafficking* is particularly relevant in this context, presenting itself as fuel for criminal violence; however, other illicit activities such as human trafficking and migrant smuggling fuel the wave of violence throughout the region.

The political system of some Latin American countries, including Ecuador, Peru, Colombia, Venezuela, Chile, Argentina, Guatemala, and Mexico, is facing a severe **crisis of representation**. Citizens are increasingly dissatisfied with their governments and taking to the streets to demand social change, public policies, and security.

In this complex context, the recent migratory dynamics of the region have led to the **displacement** of millions of people.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.undp.org/latin-america/blog/changing-picture-inequality-latin-america-evidence-three-decades#\\_ftn1](https://www.undp.org/latin-america/blog/changing-picture-inequality-latin-america-evidence-three-decades#_ftn1)

<sup>2</sup> Bachelet, The complexities of inequality in Latin America and the Caribbean, Fact Sheet , March 06, 2024

- In *Argentina*, unemployment and economic recession have led to the suppression of welfare policies in public education, culture, and science, defunding many of these programmes. The current government has been characterised by its strong opposition to guaranteeing the rights of the LGBTQI+ population, equal marriage, gender policies, and safe and free access to abortion. Human rights are devalued, creating a risk for democracy. Dissent is repressed and protests are criminalised. The budget allocated for the prevention of gender-based violence programmes has suffered significant cuts and, by 2024, the government had eliminated the agency in charge of combating it. Likewise, the Ministry of Women, Gender and Diversity was transformed into a sub-secretariat and, in June, its definitive elimination was effected.
- *Brazil* faces a series of complex challenges ranging from social inequality, violence, structural racism to human trafficking, migrant smuggling and environmental problems – all this in a context of intense political and economic polarisation. Much of the progress that had been achieved in alleviating extreme poverty was reversed by the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Millions of Brazilians have returned to very severe situations of vulnerability, such as people who live in favelas, *quilombola communities and indigenous peoples*.<sup>3</sup> Informality within the labour market and unemployment has increased, making the living conditions of a large part of the population precarious.

Urban and domestic violence, fuelled by drug and gun trafficking, has been aggravated by police corruption and deep social inequalities, while racism and discrimination severely affect the Afro-descendant, indigenous, and LGBTQI+ populations.

- In *Colombia*, while peace negotiations have begun with dissident guerrilla groups of the FARC, recruitment and forced displacement continue, especially in areas disputed or controlled by these armed groups. At the end of 2022, there were almost 5 million internally displaced people in the country affected by conflict and violence. Women and girls are the main victims of violence in the region, suffering the long-term effects of the different forms of violence, such as sexual harassment, abuse, human trafficking, and rape.
- *Ecuador* has been experiencing marked political instability since 2023, when, in a context of economic crisis and insecurity, the current president Noboa (a young politician with neoliberal and authoritarian tendencies) was elected and a new assembly was formed. The government is promoting the “Phoenix Plan” to fight organised crime. The plan is focused

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<sup>3</sup> The quilombola communities of Brazil are ethnic groups descended from enslaved Africans who managed to escape and form autonomous settlements, called quilombos, during the colonial period. These quilombos became refuges and centres of resistance against slavery, preserving their African cultures and traditions.

on military deployment, the construction of mega prisons, and the implementation of high-tech intelligence equipment for the security forces. Undoubtedly, this has raised concerns among human rights defenders, as it poses a threat to civil liberties and constitutional rights.

By the end of 2023, the human rights situation in Ecuador had deteriorated significantly, with a surge in violence and insecurity. It is now one of the three most violent countries in Latin America. Criminal gangs are fighting for territorial control, leading to extreme acts of violence such as decapitations, dismemberments, and attacks on public officials, including the assassinations of many authorities. Between January and June 2023, the number of reported extortion cases doubled to 4,600.

With regard to social issues, Ecuador faces challenges in employment, income security, and migration – violence and threats being major drivers of emigration. The rights of vulnerable groups, including women, children, and LGBTQI+ individuals, remain under threat. Femicide rates are alarmingly high, with 77 reported cases between January and September 2023 and 238 gender-based violence deaths. The government has failed to protect the rights of human rights defenders and journalists, who continue to face harassment, threats, and attacks.

- In *Peru*, the persistence of poverty, economic inequality, informality in the economy and the labour market, the development of illegal and informal economies such as drug trafficking, illegal mining and logging have led to an increase in irregular migration and generated an increasingly violent environment where human trafficking poses a constant threat. It is estimated that poverty has currently exceeded 28.5% in the country.

Since 2018, Peru has gone through a period of deep political instability, marked by a succession of five presidents with high levels of disapproval and, for the most part, accused of corruption. It is surprising that at this moment, the institution with the most credibility in the country is the armed forces, in which almost a quarter of the Peruvian population trusts.

- Currently, *Chile* is facing a severe crisis of trust and transparency, aggravated by recent corruption scandals that have exposed a network of illicit influences involving public officials, lawyers, etc. who sought to gain advantages in the judicial and tax systems. These practices have generated a strong distrust in public administration and have consequently weakened compliance with the law and the justice system. This has worsened the crisis of representation compelling citizens to demand significant changes in the structure and



transparency of the state. In recent years, Chile has seen a significant increase in migration flows, particularly from Venezuela, Bolivia, and Haiti, which has increased pressure on social service systems and intensified the debate on migration policies.

Despite being historically considered one of the most peaceful and safe countries in the region, Chile has experienced an increase in crime and infiltration by drug trafficking networks. The country continues to struggle with socioeconomic disparities. Chile has one of the highest development indexes in the region, but a significant gap remains between the richest and the poorest. It is at a crucial moment of political, social, and economic tensions, with the national debate centred on citizen demands for greater equity, security and transparency.

- In Central America, Guatemala stands out as one of the countries with the highest rates of violence and poverty, where economic disparities between urban and rural areas (the latter being poorer and less developed) are clearly evident, accentuating people's vulnerabilities to different forms of violence, including human trafficking. Even urban areas are not exempt from these risks due to the high percentage of informal employment. Within this context, indigenous peoples face the greatest challenges, as they lack recognition of their territorial rights and suffer discrimination. Their struggles for land and natural resources often result in conflicts and rights violations. Corruption and the weakness of the judicial system also cause serious human rights violations, making accountability difficult.
- Finally, Mexico, the second largest economy in Latin America, faces a complex social, political and economic scenario, with more than 46 million people living in poverty (mainly in the states of Chiapas, Guerrero, and Oaxaca), of which 44% are women. In the country, only 10% of the population holds 52% of the wealth. There has been an increasing persecution of social movements and human rights defenders. Violence, including femicides and transfemicides, has increased significantly, becoming linked to drug trafficking, human trafficking, and forced disappearances.

In recent years, throughout the region, human rights defenders and community leaders, especially those related to land, environmental and indigenous rights issues, have been threatened and killed for their social commitment.

## Migratory context and public policies in Latin America

**Argentina, Colombia, Peru, and Chile** are the four main destination countries for migrants in South America,<sup>4</sup> while in **Central America** a migratory route has been consolidated, especially used by certain Caribbean and African nationalities. In general, Latin America and the Caribbean receive almost 12 million migrants, of which at least 70% come from South America (ME Valenzuela, 2020).

According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM) data,<sup>5</sup> approximately 80% of migrants from South America are intraregional migrants, and women have contributed to this growth. This intraregional migration is attributed to the decline in immigration in Europe, the tightening of immigration policies abroad, the positive evolution of regional and national migration policies, as well as the generation of greater employment opportunities in the subregion.

The reason for migration in South America is predominantly work-related. Therefore, the economic-political behaviour of countries is one of the decisive indicators for migration. In other words, socio-economic and political compulsions determine the fluctuations in migration routes.

Criminal violence, political instability, poverty, and gender-based violence are also expulsion factors in countries such as Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Mexico (IOM, 2024). Migratory flows in this region have particular characteristics and have undergone significant changes in recent decades, increasing considerably within the same region and between neighbouring countries.

### Intraregional migration

The continued economic disparity between countries and subregions within Latin America has generated migration flows towards those places where there are greater job opportunities and better living conditions. Likewise, internal conflicts and natural phenomena such as earthquakes, hurricanes, floods, and droughts have forced people to move to other regions in search of safety and refuge, both in the short and long term. Moreover, the existence of social and family networks in the destination countries has also fostered this type of migration.

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<sup>4</sup> IOM, [Migration Trends in the Americas](#). Quarterly Bulletin October-December 2023.

<sup>5</sup> International Organization for Migration (IOM, Gender, migration and care tasks: Challenges in South America, 2023.

In the region, the participation of women in migration flows has increased significantly and traditional migration corridors have been established between certain countries, such as between the Andean countries or the countries of the Southern Cone.

Venezuelan citizens continue to be one of the largest migrant and refugee populations, regionally and globally. As of March 2023, more than 211,000 Venezuelans had obtained refugee status and more than one million were awaiting asylum recognition. By the end of that year, there were more than seven million Venezuelan refugees and displaced migrants worldwide, with the vast majority – more than six million – hosted in Latin America and the Caribbean.

**Colombia** is the country hosting the largest number of Venezuelans – almost three million – followed by **Peru** – more than 1.5 million – and **Ecuador** – around half a million. **Chile and Brazil** have also received significant numbers, both exceeding 400,000 Venezuelan citizens. The latter has granted asylum to Venezuelans and implemented policies to facilitate their stay and allow them access to documentation and basic socio-economic rights.

Migration in Chile is marked by several important challenges. The country has seen a significant increase in the arrival of migrants from the region. The current migration policy is considered very restrictive, with the legal text containing greater requirements for nationals of Haiti, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Suriname, and Venezuela. They must apply for a visa for both tourism and work, and for student purposes. This leads many people to enter Chile through unauthorised paths. They find it difficult to survive due to their irregular immigration status and this increases their vulnerability to human trafficking. The report from the Jesuit Migrant Service confirms that between 2018 and 2023, entries through unauthorised paths increased considerably, reaching 56,846 migrants in 2021 and more than 53,000 migrants in 2022. Many migrants have found it difficult to regularise their status as a result of these actions. This has generated tensions within the country in relation to social coexistence and migrants' access to basic rights. The Chilean government has carried out various border control actions and migration policies focused on security, including the use of military forces in the northern areas to combat human trafficking, migrant smuggling and organised crime. However, actions aimed at regularising the migrant population present in Chilean territory are still insufficient.

According to the 2023 data from the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, other countries in the region such as Nicaragua, Honduras, and Cuba have also become countries of origin for a significant number of asylum seekers. Meanwhile, Peru, Mexico, Brazil, and Costa Rica host many asylum seekers in the subregion.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>IOM, World Migration Report 2024.

Finally, it is worth highlighting that some of the largest internal displacements in Latin America and the Caribbean have been caused by climate disasters. According to IOM data (2024), Brazil has faced more than 700,000 displacements, and Colombia, just under 300,000. Both recorded the highest number of displacements due to flooding caused by heavy rains, followed by Cuba, where Hurricane Ian caused 90,000 displacements.

## Migration to North America

Transit migration from the subregion to the United States and Canada remains high and has diversified, turning Colombia and Central America into key zones, with migrants passing through and undertaking risky journeys north, often assisted by *coyotes*.<sup>7</sup>

One of the most travelled routes is the Darien Gap, a dense tropical forest path between **Colombia and Panama which** requires many days to cross. With no access to water, health services or food, it puts migrants at great risk.

In the first nine months of 2023, more than 390,000 migrants had crossed the Darien Gap from Colombia to Panama, most of them from Venezuela, Ecuador, and Haiti.

**Ecuador**, for its part, in addition to being a key destination country, especially for migrants from the subregion, has become a crucial entry point to South America for migrants of increasingly diverse nationalities. This is due to the implementation of more flexible migration policies compared to other countries in the region. The route to reach the United States passes through the Andean-Central American-Mexico migration corridor.

It is important to highlight that in recent years, the arrival of **extra-regional migrants to South America has increased significantly**, mainly from Africa and Asia, with the intention of reaching North America. Although the majority remains determined to reach these destinations, some migrants decide to remain in the South due to certain difficulties and high cost of the trip. These migrants face significant challenges to their integration and social cohesion, encountering precarious working and living conditions.

## Migration from Central America

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<sup>7</sup>Term used in Ecuador, Costa Rica, Honduras, Mexico and Peru to refer to migrant smugglers.

Central America continues to be a key region of origin and transit for migrants seeking to reach the United States or Canada from Panama, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala. This movement has reached pre-pandemic levels with an unexpected increase in the operations of migrant trafficking networks. By August 2022, **Panama and Mexico** had seen an increase in irregular migrants – 85% and 108% respectively.

# Migration policies and human rights

Migration policies, in their design and implementation, have a significant impact on the exercise of the rights of migrants, especially women and girls.

Immigration detention and deportation policies, such as the recent agreement between the governments of the United States and Panama to accelerate the deportation processes of migrants who enter Panama irregularly, preventing migrants from reaching the southern border of the United States, the difficulty in obtaining identity documents or regularising immigration status, and restrictions on access to basic health services, education, and housing – these are the main challenges faced by migrants. In particular, women and girls face significantly higher risks of sexual violence, both during their migration journeys and in destination countries, with particular vulnerability to human trafficking for sexual exploitation.

With regard to these scenarios, in the last two years some South American countries have experienced important changes in their migration policies with potentially significant implications for migrants:

1. In 2023, following the change of government, **Brazil** rejoined the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, revitalising the *country's "commitment to the protection and promotion of the rights of all migrants living in Brazil, as well as the more than four million Brazilians living abroad"* (IOM, 2024). However, since 2017, Brazil has implemented the Migration Law, a migration policy that respects human rights and is aligned with international standards and the principles of non-discrimination, equal treatment and protection against arbitrary expulsion. The country has facilitated the regularisation of migrants and guaranteed their access to essential services such as health, education, and employment.
2. In **Colombia**, in August 2023, at least 2.3 million Venezuelans (out of a total of 2,876,000) received their temporary protection permit. In an effort to guarantee the rights of migrants and facilitate their integration into the labour market, with the ultimate goal of avoiding labour exploitation or human trafficking for forced labour, the Colombian government issued the Temporary Protection Statute for Venezuelan Migrants in May 2021. This statute, known as Decree 216 of 2021, grants a validity of ten years of legal residence in the country, undoubtedly considered as a step forward in the prevention of human trafficking.
3. **Peru**, one of the main destinations for Venezuelan migrants, ranking second after Colombia, has given an inconsistent response to Venezuelan migration. Of the two million Venezuelans currently residing in the country, more than one million are concentrated in the capital city of Lima and Callao, making the capital the foreign city with the largest

Venezuelan population in the world. However, by the end of 2023, Peru had granted humanitarian residence permits to 79,600 Venezuelan asylum seekers and temporary residence permits to almost 225,000 Venezuelans who were in an irregular migratory situation.

From a policy of *open arms*, guaranteeing measures for the regularisation of migrants, the government has moved towards a militarisation of borders, with a security-based approach that prioritises immigration control and national security.

Across the region, as of March 2023, more than 4.2 million residency permits or other types of immigration categories had been issued to Venezuelan citizens.

**Chile**, a country that has experienced a significant increase in the number of migrants over the last 30 years, enacted new immigration reforms, making it difficult and restricting access and stay within the country. Authorities are also allowed to deport undocumented migrants entering Chile.

In the case of **Argentina**, the combination of austerity measures, deregulation and paralysis of public policies is harming Argentinians, and with it, the migrant population residing in the country. The current government has substantially raised the immigration fee for temporary and permanent residency procedures, both for people from MERCOSUR countries and associated states, as well as for those from other regions.

In Central America, **Guatemala** has established itself as a country with high levels of migration, both internal and international. High rates of violence, social conflicts, and natural disasters contribute to forced displacement within the country and to other countries, especially the United States. Mexico, a crucial transit country for Guatemalan migrants heading north, is a major concern for Guatemalan migrants and human rights organisations due to the high risks of trafficking, disappearance, exploitation, and systematic abuse. In order to manage migration flows and provide protection to international migrants, without access to basic services such as food and shelter, the country has continued to carry out border controls and adopt procedures for regularising immigration status. However, the implementation and coverage of these programmes are insufficient.

Due to its strategic proximity to the United States, **Mexico** is a transit and reception country for international migration from more than 122 countries, positioning itself as one of the five main recipients of migrants globally. Mexico's collaboration with the migration policies of the United States has contributed to its transformation into a destination country, but the resources

allocated are insufficient and migrants live in extreme conditions, with limited access to shelters that, when they exist, are mostly managed by non-governmental organisations.

Migrants arriving in Mexico are a very young population, between 18 and 29 years old, with a growing proportion of women comprising approximately 48% of the migrant population. Many of the migrant women resort to sex work to survive, which has led to an increase in unplanned pregnancies, especially among young people aged 16 to 19. Since 2018, migrant caravans originating mainly from countries such as Venezuela, Honduras, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Cuba, El Salvador, Colombia, and Ecuador have not ceased. Labour trafficking has increased and, with it, abuses and compliance with requirements to obtain immigration permits.



# Human trafficking

In Latin America and the Caribbean, the rise in irregular migration and organised crime has led to an intensification and capitalisation of the exploitation of people, especially migrants in transit or settled in destination countries. Networks dedicated to drug trafficking and other illicit activities have expanded their operations to human trafficking, taking advantage of their control over clandestine routes and their ability to operate in areas of high insecurity. **Human trafficking has become a significant source of income for these criminal groups, who find migrants to be the ideal population to exploit.**

State responses have been highly variable, focusing on border control and maintaining internal security, leaving many migrants without adequate protection and exposing them to the clutches of criminality.

Public policies and national regulatory frameworks to combat human trafficking, although comprehensive, face major challenges for their implementation, particularly in contexts where violence and corruption prevail. Impunity remains a major barrier, allowing these practices to continue without significant consequences for traffickers, while victims, especially women and girls, continue to suffer the worst forms of violence and exploitation.

The gender approach reveals specific patterns in human trafficking in the region:

- Women and girls are disproportionately the most affected, accounting for 70% of identified victims, with sexual exploitation being the main purpose. It is estimated that for every four female victims, one is a girl or adolescent.

This crime is aggravated in countries where economic and political crises have exacerbated gender inequality, limiting women's access to education and economic opportunities, and increasing their exposure to domestic and sexual violence. These factors, combined with deeply entrenched unequal gender roles, significantly increase the risk that women and girls will also fall victim to other forms of exploitation such as forced domestic labour, forced marriages and organ removal.

- On the other hand, men and boys are more likely to be victims of forced labour in sectors such as construction, agriculture, mining, fishing and private military services. They are more exposed to forced recruitment by criminal groups to commit crimes. Migrant workers are up to three times more vulnerable to being victims of forced labour or other types of exploitation.

- Similarly, the LGBTQI+ population is highly vulnerable to trafficking due to discrimination and social stigmatisation, lack of family acceptance, and the violence they face daily. LGBTQI+ migrants, who mostly do not have support networks during their migration process and in destination countries, are more likely to be exploited in labour and for sexual purposes.

In the region, **Colombia** is one of the countries most affected by human trafficking, especially women, girls, boys, men, adolescents, the LGBTQI+ population, including Venezuelan migrants, Afro-descendants, people with disabilities, and those living in areas controlled by illegal armed groups. Despite meeting the minimum standards for the elimination of this crime, the US State Department's 2024 Trafficking in Persons Report (TIP Report) states that the country still has deficiencies in the identification of victims, especially among migrants. Deficiencies were also pointed out in assistance and protection services for victims and in criminal investigations.

Official records published by the Ministry of the Interior show a country in which human trafficking affects women in 85% of cases, predominantly for sexual exploitation, making other purposes such as forced labour, illicit recruitment and servile marriage invisible. Likewise, as a result of the copious migratory flow from Venezuela, the crime has become internationalised. Since 2020, the number of foreign victims of trafficking in Colombia has fluctuated between 30% and 40%, and of these, at least 80% are victims of Venezuelan nationality.

In the country itself, the intersection between migration and human trafficking presents significant challenges for public policies. On the one hand, the demand for basic services has intensified, and on the other, a greater number of human trafficking networks offer their "services" to migrants, thus increasing the risks they face.

There is no doubt that the growth of these networks has had a greater impact on women, trans and non-binary people. They are the most affected in relation to the violence and exploitation experienced. From a territorial perspective, a new social and institutional reality is being generated in the territories with the greatest reception of migrant populations.

Similarly, **Peru** is seeing a change in the structure of human trafficking, evidencing the trend towards internationalisation of the crime. If in 2018, the Public Prosecutor's Office reported an insignificant number of foreign victims, in 2022, 271 foreign victims were identified. In 2023, the Public Prosecutor's Office reported that almost a fifth of the victims were of foreign origin, with 80% of Venezuelan nationality. The number of people entering the country through irregular routes has increased, evading the control and oversight of the Peruvian authorities.

The National Policy against Trafficking in Persons identifies gender-based violence against women as one of the main vulnerability factors for sexual exploitation and human trafficking. It has been shown that many victims of trafficking and other forms of exploitation had previously been victims of gender-based violence, in a context in which gender stereotypes and roles, power hierarchies and subordination between genders prevail, fostering social tolerance towards this type of violence, especially in the family or couple environment.

As a result, a struggle has arisen within Peru between criminal organisations to control sex work business in the city of Lima and in other regions of the country. The stigmatisation and violence exercised against women dedicated to sex work has led to gangs finding opportunities within this sector to exploit more women. Impunity and social intolerance are factors that perpetuate and aggravate this situation.

In **Brazil**, the dynamics of human trafficking can be described as mixed. Over the past five years, trafficking networks in the country have exploited both domestic and foreign victims, as well as Brazilian victims abroad. Women and children from Brazil and neighbouring countries such as Bolivia, Paraguay, and Venezuela are particularly vulnerable to trafficking for sexual exploitation within Brazil, especially in the states of Rio Grande do Sul and Santa Catarina. Brazilian women are also victims of trafficking for sexual and labour exploitation in Western Europe, South-East Asia, and other regions. In Brazil, there are increasingly more migrants from Bolivia, Haiti, Paraguay, Venezuela, China, and those living close to Brazil's borders being exploited both sexually and for labour. Exploitation also extends to the digital realm, with traffickers using online platforms to recruit their victims. Afro-Brazilian men and transgender women face greater risks as they are severely exploited under the pretext of providing them with protection or gender-affirming procedures.

Forced labour remains widespread in Brazil's rural and urban sectors, affecting men, women, and children in industries such as agriculture, mining, and domestic work. Trafficking networks use deceptive recruitment, debt-based coercion, and threats to keep their victims in exploitative conditions, with notable cases in sectors such as charcoal production, construction, and the textile industry.<sup>8</sup> Criminal networks are now forcing trafficking victims, both Brazilian and foreign, to participate in drug trafficking and other criminal activities. According to the *TIP Report 2024*, some police officers in Brazil consistently engage in abusive behaviour, further complicating efforts to identify and protect victims.

In July 2024, Brazil launched the new *National Plan to Combat Human Trafficking*, a significant step that seeks to improve coordination between government agencies and civil society

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<sup>8</sup> Information provided by our REDLAC member *ASBRAD*, in Brazil.

organisations. The plan reinforces prevention and victim assistance strategies, with guidelines that include awareness campaigns, capacity building for professionals, and the expansion of assistance and protection mechanisms.

The situation in **Argentina** reflects major challenges. In the first half of this year, the national government barely spent the budget allocated for assistance and protection of victims of human trafficking, leaving hundreds of women, girls, and boys at the mercy of criminal networks that exploit them sexually and, to a lesser extent, in their work.

The Executive Committee for the Fight Against Human Trafficking, a government entity intended to combat trafficking, was transferred from the Cabinet Office to the Ministry of National Security, with an operational cut of 94.5%. So far this year alone, the country has reported 594 victims (29 minors, 344 men, 246 women and 4 LGBTQI+ people). These include Argentinian, Bolivian, Paraguayan, Venezuelan, Chilean, and Colombian nationals, among others. The majority of them were for the purposes of forced labour (410) and 158 were trafficked for the purposes of sexual exploitation.

Migration policy in **Chile** has shown an ambivalence between international commitments to guarantee and respect human rights and the fight against forced labour.

In 2018, Chile became the first country in Latin America to join the Alliance 8.7, a global initiative to end forced labour, modern forms of slavery, human trafficking and child labour, linked to the achievement of Goal 8.7 of the United Nations 2030 Agenda. In 2022, Chile assumed the presidency of this alliance. However, the Ministerial Advisory Commission for the Eradication of Forced Labor (CAMTRAFOR) has shown little productivity and lack of transparency, ignoring the role of civil society within the Action Plan for the Eradication of Forced Labor (PANTRAFOR), an instrument that has not yet been presented by the state.

The Economic and Environmental Crimes Act also represents a step forward in holding companies accountable for human rights violations in their supply chains. Although it indirectly establishes due diligence mechanisms and penalises crimes related to human trafficking, it does not classify trafficking as an *economic crime*. The effectiveness of this law will depend on its implementation and monitoring to ensure compliance by companies.

Finally, another of the Chilean initiatives is the Action Plan against Human Trafficking (2023-2026). This plan, although improved after criticism from civil society organisations, is considered to be un-innovative and unambitious. Although it provides for improvements such as strengthening the *Intersectoral Protocol for Assistance to Victims*, it still faces implementation

problems and a lack of resources. Consequently, inter-institutional coordination remains a challenge, and underreporting of the crime makes it difficult to adequately respond to victims of human trafficking.

Along the same lines, **Ecuador** has responded to human trafficking by classifying this crime in its Comprehensive Organic Criminal Code.<sup>9</sup> It has also ratified the Action Plan against Human Trafficking (2019-2030), the Palermo Protocol and the joint work of several institutions such as the Ministry of the Interior, the Ombudsman's Office and the Attorney General's Office.

In February 2024, the National Assembly of Ecuador regulated the Organic Law. However, despite all efforts, between 2023 and July 2024 the System for the Registration of Cases of Human Trafficking and Smuggling of Migrants reported the identification of only 154 victims of trafficking in Ecuador, with 84% of them women and 16% men. In other words, significant challenges persist in the country, such as the invisibility of this crime, the naturalization of trafficking, victims' lack of knowledge about their situation of exploitation, and the confusion between trafficking and other crimes such as migrant smuggling. These factors, together with the limitations in access to justice and the expansion of large criminal groups behind human trafficking, underline the need to strengthen public policies and inter-institutional coordination.

In Central America, **Guatemala** has specific laws to combat human trafficking, such as the Law Against Human Trafficking and the Law for the Comprehensive Protection of Children and Adolescents. These laws are designed to prevent trafficking, protect victims, and impose sanctions or sentences on perpetrators. However, effective implementation of these laws has been a challenge due to a lack of resources and weaknesses in the institutions responsible for their enforcement.

International cooperation has been fundamental in strengthening Guatemala's response to human trafficking, from direct assistance to victims to training public officials in charge of the matter, providing information to citizens, providing equipment and strengthening the police and the judiciary.

Overall, although there are efforts and legal frameworks to address human trafficking, migration and human rights in Guatemala, the effectiveness of these policies is limited by structural challenges such as weak institutions, corruption, and lack of resources. Improvement in these areas requires coordinated and sustained action at both the national and international levels.

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<sup>9</sup> In article 91.

In **Mexico**, the trafficking landscape is much more complex, with a 30% increase in trafficking for sexual exploitation.<sup>10</sup> Latin American migrants in Mexico City and other cities on the southeastern and northern border are the most affected. The country, known internationally for being the territory of various criminal organisations, such as the Sinaloa Cartel, Los Zetas, the Jalisco Nueva Generación Cartel (CJNG), and the Santa Rosa de Lima Cartel, is also home to criminal groups such as the Tren de Aragua from Venezuela and the Mara Salvatrucha and M18 from El Salvador. In addition to controlling drug trafficking in southeastern Mexico, they also participate in human trafficking, extortion and organised crime. All of these criminal networks are fighting over territories, which has led to an increase in the recruitment of girls and adolescents between 13 and 14 years old.

In the first half of 2024 alone, more than 300 human trafficking investigations were opened in Mexico. Official figures do not reflect the magnitude of the problem because many cases are wrongly classified as domestic violence or other crimes. Another challenge is impunity, which prevails due to the presumption that public officials are involved in these criminal and trafficking networks. Despite the General Law to Prevent, Punish and Eradicate Human Trafficking, access to justice for victims remains limited, particularly in states such as Tlaxcala, Puebla, Veracruz, and Chiapas.

Unlike other countries in the region, the *modus operandi* of trafficking networks in Mexico has changed. Instead of seducing and promising work, victims are now kidnapped directly from the streets, workplaces, and even educational institutions. And, as is also the case in Peru, international trafficking has taken over some sex work spaces in Mexico, generating tensions between Mexican sex workers and migrants, due to the latter's involvement in criminal activities such as extortion.

## Regional response to human trafficking: Actions and Strategies of REDLAC organisations

In this multi-causal and multi-faceted scenario, REDLAC organisations play a crucial role in coordinating national and regional efforts to combat human trafficking and protect the rights of victims from a human rights and gender perspective.

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<sup>10</sup>According to data from the organisation Brigada Callejera de Apoyo a la Mujer, E.M.A.C.

In this section, we will examine the actions and strategies they have implemented, highlighting their collaborative approaches, innovative initiatives, and results achieved in protecting and assisting victims across the region.

In **Colombia**, civil society organisations, including **Corporación Espacios de Mujer, Fundación Renacer and SINTRASEDOM**, play a crucial role in the fight against human trafficking and in providing care to sexually exploited children and migrant women, especially in the context of the humanitarian crisis caused by the massive arrival of Venezuelan citizens. Through various initiatives and strategies, they have managed to make the problem visible, assist victims and promote legislative and social changes, driving and, in many cases, complementing the actions of the state. They have managed to handle the deficiencies of the state by offering a wide range of services, from prevention and awareness of this crime to comprehensive care for victims of trafficking. Their ability to influence public policies and raise public awareness about the situation of migrants and victims of trafficking has been key to improving institutional responses to these issues.

Their awareness-raising campaigns and training activities have been instrumental in informing the population about the risks of trafficking and strengthening community capacities to reduce their vulnerabilities. Their proximity to the communities has allowed them to more accurately identify possible cases of exploitation and offer humanitarian assistance, psychosocial support and support in the social reintegration of victims.

In 2024, civil society organisations have been facing significant challenges, particularly in terms of financial sustainability and institutional capacity. Despite their ability to adapt to emerging needs, a lack of resources and staff limits their ability to respond effectively in protracted crisis contexts. However, their work is essential to complement state action, reaching populations and territories that would otherwise be neglected.

**CHS Alternativo in Peru** has focused its work on addressing human trafficking through strategies such as political advocacy, prevention, prosecution and technical assistance. During 2024, it has contributed significantly to various international bodies. In collaboration with GAATW, it prepared the regional document on the clarification of the concepts of sex work and sexual exploitation. In 2023, it also filed a lawsuit against the Peruvian State before the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR).

In terms of prevention and knowledge management work, CHS Alternativo currently leads awareness campaigns and manages ethnographic research on the situation of forced labour of

the native Amazonian population in conditions of sexual exploitation, illegal logging, drug trafficking, and illegal mining. They also conduct research into other criminal economies.

In the area of capacity building for the prosecution and control of trafficking cases, CHS Alternativo focuses on training justice operators to overcome legal obstacles, such as incorrect classification of cases and lack of inter-institutional coordination. The organisation regularly conducts specialised courses for prosecutors and other state institutions in order to improve the judicial response to human trafficking and gender-based violence, and to expose the relationship between the two issues.

In **Brazil**, the **Associação Brasileira de Defesa da Mulher da Infância e da Juventude (ASBRAD)** plays a crucial role in national and international advocacy against human trafficking and respect for the human rights of migrants. As a member of the National Committee to Combat Human Trafficking, it has been instrumental in the launch of the *IV National Plan* while actively participating in the United Nations forums.

Currently, ASBRAD leads the largest campaign against human trafficking in Brazil, visible in the main airports of the country, and has also produced a *web series* on this issue. In 2024, they have been involved in the management of two shelters specialised in the protection of victims of trafficking, women at risk, migrants and refugees. ASBRAD is a partner of the Latam airline's *Aviation Solidarity Program* to facilitate the safe return of victims of human trafficking and smuggling, and collaborates with IOM in providing support to Brazilian victims abroad who want to return voluntarily and safely to the country.

In **Chile**, the **Libera Foundation** stands out for its work in three main areas: victim assistance, political advocacy and education. The organisation offers free legal assistance to victims of human trafficking and forced labour, representing both national and foreign victims exploited in Chilean territory. For example, in 2023, a relevant case taken on by the organisation was that of the recruitment of people in Chile and transferred to the United Kingdom for forced labour. These cases have required the Foundation to explore legal avenues and resort to strategic litigation.

In terms of impact, during 2023 and 2024, Libera has made improvements in the country's legislative and administrative framework, promoting the participation of networks such as *Observe La Trata – Chilean Chapter* and the *Business and Human Rights Platform*. An important milestone was achieved with the suspension of the weak Action Plan against Trafficking, followed by participation in bilateral meetings with public entities to strengthen their commitments in the fight against forced labour. In the educational field, Libera has



implemented new methodologies to reach both public and private sectors, organising film forums and discussion spaces to deepen the debate on forced labour and strategies to confront it.

In Central America, **ECPAT-Guatemala** has developed advocacy actions at the municipal and regional levels with the aim of comprehensively addressing sexual exploitation and trafficking of children and adolescents. Its work focuses on research, support in training and capacity building, detection and referral of victims, and providing technical support to government institutions. In addition, it coordinates with civil society organisations and the Regional Network of Special Prosecutors against Human Trafficking for the elimination of sexual exploitation and trafficking of children and adolescents for sexual purposes, guaranteeing respect for their fundamental rights, free from any form of violence.

Unlike the work with trafficking victims carried out by most REDLAC members, in **Ecuador**, the **Permanent Committee for the Defense of Human Rights (CDH)** has focused its efforts on **prevention**. In collaboration with UNHCR and the Politécnica Salesiana University, CDH launched a human rights training programme for social leaders in Guayaquil. Through this initiative, **Community Support Points** were established to offer legal assistance and training, particularly for people in situations of human mobility. As a result, the **Community Network of Human Rights Defenders** was formed, encompassing 25 communities in the city. This network, made up of 70 defenders, addresses issues such as human rights, women's rights, and the rights of refugees and migrants. It also develops community protection routes in areas like health, education, and prevention of gender-based violence.

In this context, throughout 2024, CDH has been working with leaders of this network to address the impact of organised crime in Guayaquil, linked to the lack of socioeconomic opportunities and the limited presence of the state. Research conducted under the "Tejiendo Esperanza" project<sup>11</sup> identified the factors that facilitate the recruitment of adolescent girls and boys into criminal gangs and developed **preventive strategies** to dismantle the organised crime business model. As part of these initiatives, CDH coordinates its community work with local educational institutions in vulnerable areas such as Monte Sinai and Isla Trinitaria, providing educational support to children and adolescents both within and outside the formal education system.

At the same time, CDH is implementing workshops for the mothers and caregivers of programme participants, aiming to strengthen family support networks and reduce domestic and gender-based violence. These workshops benefit ten families by providing tools to improve

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<sup>11</sup> In partnership with the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime and Fundacion de las Americas (FUDELA).

communication and emotional support, preventing risk factors related to forced recruitment and human trafficking.

In Mexico, the organisation **Brigada Callejera de Apoyo a la Mujer E.M.A.C.**, in its long history of anti-trafficking work and defending the rights of sex workers, has managed to train more than five thousand cisgender and transgender sex workers between Mexico City and Tapachula, Chiapas, on their rights and strategies for enforcing them. Thanks to these training sessions, investigation files have been opened on transfemicides, police extortion, discrimination, medical negligence, parental authority, and human trafficking.

However, the organisation has experienced setbacks in the guarantee of the fundamental rights of Mexican and migrant sex workers, **especially due to the collusion of organised crime with the police, military and immigration personnel**, making it difficult to file complaints and open investigations.

In 2024, Brigada Callejera has continued to provide support to sex workers during judicial processes, which usually take between one and two years. Likewise, in collaboration with the National Institute for Women, it has worked on the creation of a human rights booklet for sex workers, which highlights the responsibility of government institutions in caring for this population.

They continue their fight for the elimination of the *Health Control Collection* in several Mexican states, manifesting that the government prioritises economic benefit over the health of these women. Together with the Mexican Network of Sexual Work, which operates in 27 states, they have strengthened the defence of labour and health rights. They have organised meetings between civil society organisations and sex workers groups in order to develop action plans to combat violence and control organised crime in sex work sites.

Finally, through its weekly newspaper *Noticalle*, it continues to provide spaces for discussion on social problems that affect sex workers and other communities in situations of extreme poverty. This allows them to make these issues visible and address them in the public sphere.

## Conclusions

In conclusion, human trafficking in Latin America and the Caribbean remains a severe challenge, driven by massive migration flows over the past five years, caused mainly by political and economic crises in countries such as Venezuela, Ecuador, Colombia, Guatemala, and Haiti. These migration flows, in turn, have increased the vulnerability of millions of people to criminal networks. For their part, organised crime groups, including networks involved in drug trafficking, have expanded their activities to human trafficking, taking advantage of their control over clandestine routes, turning migrants in transit or in certain destination countries into a lucrative source of income for these networks.

As reflected throughout the report, the impact of human trafficking is disproportionate among women, girls and LGBTQI+ people, with sexual exploitation being the most common form of abuse within the region. However, the dynamic continues to shape the trafficking of men and boys for exploitation in forced labour, such as in construction, agriculture, and fishing. Colombia, in particular, stands out as one of the countries most affected by trafficking, with Venezuelan migrants, Afro-descendants and LGBTQI+ people among the most vulnerable. Although the country has met certain standards to combat the crime, deficiencies in victim identification and assistance services remain problematic.

In countries such as Peru, an increase in the number of foreign victims, especially Venezuelan migrants, has been observed. Sexual and gender-based violence is a central factor in the vulnerability of these women. In contrast, in Brazil, trafficking networks exploit both national and foreign victims. The LGBTQI+ migrants in particular face a higher risk of labour and sexual exploitation. These countries reflect how the trafficking phenomenon is multidimensional and varies in its dynamics depending on national contexts.

Countries such as Argentina, Ecuador, and Chile face specific challenges in their fight against trafficking. For example, in Argentina, the execution of the budget allocated to support victims is limited due to its recent political context, while Ecuador has made progress in classifying the crime in its legal framework since the beginning of 2024. Chile, for its part, has made international commitments that should strengthen its response, although it still has serious gaps in compliance with the duties of prevention, detection, and prosecution of trafficking and forced labour, coupled with institutional weakness and corruption. In short, these structural

challenges limit the effectiveness of victim protection policies and programmes and keep victims of trafficking in the respective countries vulnerable.

Finally, the interrelationship between organised crime and human trafficking in Latin America and Central America is deep and multifaceted, reflecting the sociopolitical contexts marked by inequality, violence, and political instability in several countries. The rapid expansion of these criminal organisations during 2024 has been made possible by institutional weakness, corruption, impunity and the lack of government resources exacerbating violence in the most vulnerable communities.

Since more than 80% of victims of trafficking for forced labour are in the private sector, it is also essential to establish adequate procedures that oblige companies to protect human rights and prevent forced labour in their supply chains.

REDLAC, unilaterally or in conjunction with the GAATW International Secretariat, has intervened directly in these dynamics, providing its contributions in various international forums such as the United Nations Human Rights Council and to the reports of the Special Rapporteur on Trafficking in Persons and the Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights of Migrants (Colombia, 2023), and the Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women and Girls (Peru, Mexico 2024).

The organisations of the GAATW-REDLAC network have played a key role in denouncing omissions and insufficient actions by several Latin American states before the IACHR, particularly during the public hearing of the 187th period of sessions. In 2023, they jointly prepared the Report of the Civil Society of Latin America and the Caribbean for the IACHR, with the focus on human trafficking and the due diligence obligations of states in the region. In it, the organisations pointed out deficiencies in the diligence of countries such as Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Chile, Mexico, and Peru. These deficiencies relate to prevention, investigation and punishment of human trafficking, aggravated by the post-pandemic migration crisis, which has increased the vulnerability of migrants to transnational trafficking networks. Since then, the organisations have demanded greater collaboration between states and an improvement in regulations, especially regarding forced labour and sexual exploitation.

## Recommendations

Considering that there are significant gaps in the protection of victims of trafficking and that civil society organisations face a situation of scarce resources, the presence of greater international cooperation with civil society and grassroots organisations could facilitate the exchange of good practices and strengthen capacities to address human trafficking. Despite the challenges, civil society and non-governmental organisations play a crucial role in the care and protection of victims. Likewise, the presence of international cooperation could put pressure on states to comply with the commitments assumed at the international level in this regard.

Political will and budget allocations are needed to address this crime in a comprehensive manner for the care, prevention and protection of victims of trafficking. It is crucial to implement awareness-raising programmes and campaigns that inform women, girls, their families and communities about the risks associated with human trafficking.

To strengthen preventive work, educational systems must actively promote gender equality and human rights, empowering women and girls with skills that allow them to make informed decisions and learn about their rights. Likewise, it is necessary to raise public awareness about the seriousness of human trafficking from a human rights perspective and not with sensationalist overtones that promote stigmatisation of victims. To consolidate protection and care mechanisms for victims of trafficking, states must implement training programmes for the police, judiciary, and health personnel.

It is essential for organisations to create safe spaces where women, especially migrant women, can share their experiences and strengthen their support networks. In addition, training in leadership and defence of human rights must be a priority, along with support for the creation of organisations led by women, which allow them to develop greater autonomy and representation.

It is also key that the academia, non-governmental organisations and other relevant actors carry out joint research to better understand the dynamics of trafficking and migratory flows, documenting the experiences of women to make their vulnerabilities, needs and challenges more visible. The findings and data collected in these studies should be used by states to design more effective interventions, always based on a gender and human rights approach that recognises the particularities of migrant women and victims of trafficking. To combat human

trafficking, REDLAC considers collaboration between authorities, civil society, sex workers and survivors to be crucial.

Finally, it is recommended that national regulatory frameworks be reformed to **broaden** the definition of human trafficking to the current contexts of the region. This expansion would have greater impacts on the protection of migrant labour rights, on protection mechanisms for victims, and on awareness-raising and training processes at all levels. In addition, efforts should also be made to criminalise forced labour or similar forms as an autonomous crime. International collaboration, prevention, protection and organisational actions are key to effectively addressing human trafficking.



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