



I SPENT  
MANY DAYS  
ON THE ROAD

BUT I MADE  
IT HERE

SOCIOECONOMIC  
INCLUSION OF  
MIGRANT AND  
TRAFFICKED WOMEN  
IN SOUTH AMERICA



Global Alliance Against  
Traffic in Women

The Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women (GAATW) is an international network of more than 80 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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## LIST OF ACRONYMS

**ASBRAD:** Associação Brasileira de Defesa Da Mulher, da Infância e Da Juventude (Brasil)

**CAREF:** Comisión Argentina para Refugiados y Migrantes (Argentina)

**CEM:** Corporación Espacios de Mujer (Colombia)

**CHS:** Capital Humano y Social Alternativo (Peru)

**COD:** Country of Destination

**COO:** Country of Origin

**CSO:** Civil society organisation

**ECLAC:** Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean

**FGD:** Focus Group Discussion

**FPAR:** Feminist Participatory Action Research

**GAATW:** Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women

**GAATW-IS:** International Secretariat of the Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women

**GCM:** Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration

**ILO:** International Labour Organisation

**IMRF:** International Migration Review Forum

**IOM:** International Organisation for Migration

**LAC:** Latin America and the Caribbean

**MERCOSUR:** Common Market of the South (acronym in Spanish)

**NGO:** Non-governmental organisation

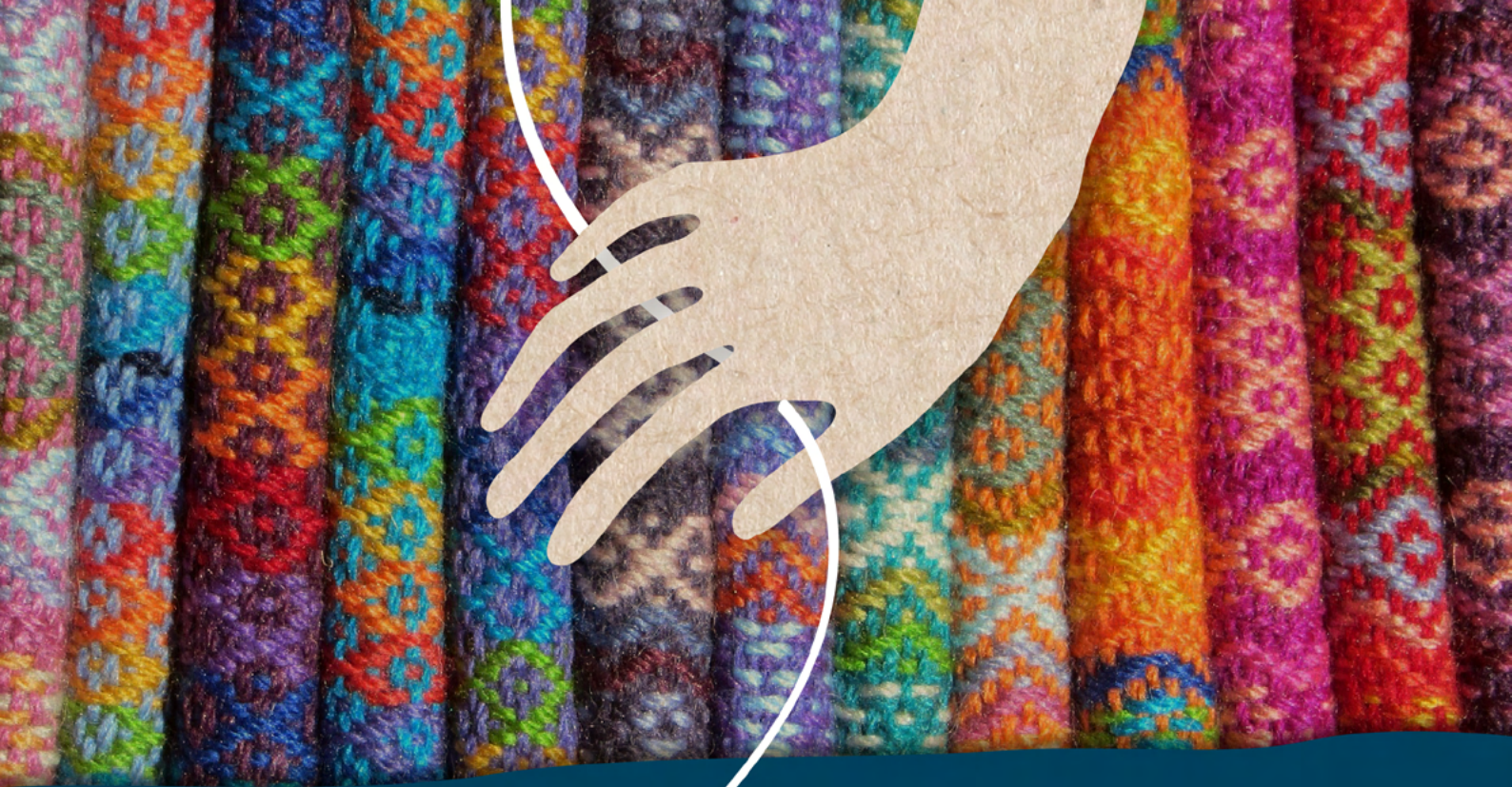
**RMW:** Returnee migrant woman

**SDG:** Sustainable Development Goals

**TiP:** Trafficking in persons

**VoT:** Victim of trafficking

**WMW:** Woman migrant worker



# IN TRO DUC TION



# INTRODUCTION

## Women's labour mobility in South America

A key aspect of migration in Latin America and the Caribbean is the route to North America, particularly from Mexico and the Northern Triangle of Central America (Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador) to the United States. With around 14.8 million migrants,<sup>1</sup> this is one of the largest migration corridors in the world and has long been in the spotlight of international media and policymakers. However, intraregional migration is also a major trend across Latin America, although smaller in number in comparison to northward mobility.<sup>2</sup> It is estimated that between 1970 and 2010, the share of intraregional migration has grown from 24% to 63% of all immigration.<sup>3</sup> In South America, migrants frequently move within the region and the majority choose the Southern Cone<sup>4</sup> as their destination: Argentina, Chile and Brazil are the countries that attract most migrants from within the sub-region, mainly from the Andean nations<sup>5</sup> and Paraguay, and some of these flows tend to be more and more feminised.

While mobility within South America has a long tradition, more recently, these migratory trends have grown at a fast pace and have significantly diversified.<sup>6</sup> A number of factors has shaped this increase: more restrictive immigration policies in traditional destination countries (such as the United States of America and Spain), increased access to communication technologies, lower transportation costs, and the implementation of regional integration mechanisms that made mobility easier.<sup>7</sup> A clear example of the latter is the MERCOSUR Residence Agreement, in force since 2009, which grants residence and work permits to citizens of member and associated States (Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay) for a period of two years with no requirements other than nationality.<sup>8</sup>

1. United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, *International Migrant Stock 2020*, 2020.
2. Paola Cymant, *No borders to equality. Global mapping of organizations working on gender and migration*. WIMN and FES, 2021.
3. Martínez y Orrego, 2016; OIT, 2016b, as cited in Ignacio Carrasco and José Ignacio Suárez, *Migración internacional e inclusión en América Latina. Análisis en los países de destino mediante encuestas de hogares*, Serie Políticas Sociales, CEPAL, Santiago, 2018.
4. The Southern Cone traditionally includes Argentina, Chile, Uruguay, and sometimes the southernmost states of Brazil. In its broadest sense, it may also include Paraguay.
5. Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and Venezuela.
6. Marcela Cerrutti, *5 salient facts about intra-regional migration in South America*, 13 March 2020. Available at: <https://www.migrationdataportal.org/blog/5-salient-facts-about-intra-regional-migration-south-america>. Retrieved 18 November 2020.
7. Marie McAuliffe and Ana Triandafyllidou (eds.), *World Migration Report 2022*, International Organization for Migration (IOM), Geneva, 2021, p. 108.
8. Citizens need to present a valid passport, a birth certificate and proof of holding no criminal record. MERCOSUR is a South American trade bloc established in 1991 by the Treaty of Asunción and the Protocol of Ouro Preto in 1994. Its full members are Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay, Paraguay and Venezuela (the latter has been suspended since 1 December 2016). For more information about the Residence Agreement, see: [https://www.ilo.org/dyn/migpractice/migmmain.showPractice?p\\_lang=en&p\\_practice\\_id=187](https://www.ilo.org/dyn/migpractice/migmmain.showPractice?p_lang=en&p_practice_id=187)

In recent years, migration flows have been highly impacted by the economic and humanitarian crisis in Venezuela. It is estimated that since 2015 around 6 million Venezuelans have fled the country,<sup>9</sup> and the vast majority have relocated within the sub-region, with Colombia and Peru as their main destinations. Ecuador, Chile, Brazil and Argentina have also received large numbers of Venezuelan refugees, migrants and asylum seekers.<sup>10</sup>

The displacement of Venezuelans has had a notable impact on the sub-region's migration policy frameworks, and governments have implemented changing and often contradictory emergency mechanisms in response to it.<sup>11</sup> Another displacement flow is the significant number of Haitians who have migrated to South America in the wake of the 2010 earthquake. The majority had initially settled in Chile and Brazil, and many are now continuing their journey to the Mexico-US border under extremely adverse conditions. A closer look at the experiences of Haitian migrants in South and Latin America – as well as of other migrants of indigenous or African descent – points to growing racial discrimination and xenophobia.<sup>12</sup>

Women account for more than half of all migrants in South America,<sup>13</sup> and they play a substantial role in the domestic and care sectors.<sup>14</sup> Although women have always migrated – both independently and following their husbands or families – over the last decades there has been a sustained increase in women's mobility in search of better socio-economic opportunities. This tendency towards the 'feminisation of migration', particularly pronounced in the sub-region, has drawn attention from both researchers and policymakers seeking to better understand the ways in which women migrate, the reasons for their migration, and their experiences on the move.

Poverty, lack of access to decent work, low wages, declining quality of life, different forms of violence and gender inequality are among the main reasons that push South American women to leave their countries of origin,<sup>15</sup> and many find employment in the service sector or as domestic and care workers in destination countries. Historically, paid domestic work has been an important source of income for women across Latin America and the Caribbean, particularly for poor, indigenous and black women. Another important dynamic of women's mobility in the region are the so-called corridors for care, resulting from the externalisation of reproductive work in host countries. This demand, which is linked to growing ageing populations and an increase in the labour force participation of middle-class women, among other factors, is largely met by low-paid migrant women from neighbouring countries. Two of the main corridors for care and domestic work include the long-standing

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9. These numbers were taken from <https://www.r4v.info/en/refugeeandmigrants>. Retrieved February 8, 2022.

10. McAuliffe and Triandafyllidou, 2021.

11. Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay documented Venezuelan migrants within their ordinary Mercosur procedures, and most Venezuelan migrants and refugees in these countries are legal residents. Colombia and Peru, with practically no immigration laws in place, came up with temporary permits. Since they received the largest numbers of Venezuelans, their asylum systems were overwhelmed. For more information, see: Raisa Ortíz Cetra and María Inés Pacecca, *Laberintos de papel. Desigualdad y regularización migratoria en América del Sur*, CELS / CAREF, 2020. Available at: [https://www.cels.org.ar/web/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/CELS\\_Migrantes\\_digital\\_Final-1.pdf](https://www.cels.org.ar/web/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/CELS_Migrantes_digital_Final-1.pdf)

12. Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), *Social Panorama of Latin America*, 2019 (LC/PUB.2019/22-P/Rev.1), Santiago, 2019a. Chapter 5.

13. International Labour Organisation (ILO), *Labour migration in Latin America and the Caribbean. Diagnosis, Strategy and ILO's work in the Region*, ILO Regional Office for Latin America and the Caribbean, Lima, 2017.

14. Cerrutti, 2020.

15. Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), *Women's autonomy in changing economic scenarios*, (LC/CRM.14/3), ECLAC, Santiago, 2019b. Chapter 5.



movement of Paraguayan and Peruvian women to Argentina, and, more recently, of Peruvian and Bolivian women to Chile.<sup>16</sup> Several studies have pointed out that this phenomenon is leading to broadening inequalities between countries of origin and destination; deepening segregation in labour markets – where gender stratification compounds with that of class, race, ethnicity, age, nationality, and migratory status – as well as the transfer of less-valued tasks from local to migrant women.<sup>17</sup>

Overall, migrant women in Latin and South America are overrepresented in highly feminised labour sectors and informal, precarious, and underpaid jobs. Occupations such as care and domestic work are considered extensions of tasks naturally attributed to women under the sexual division of labour and are socially and economically undervalued.<sup>18</sup> The very nature of these jobs makes them difficult to regulate and renders migrant women less visible as workers. Even in other sectors, such as services or garment manufacturing, insecurity, exploitation and deskilling are overwhelmingly common. Furthermore, migrant women face multiple forms of discrimination at all stages of the migration cycle, as well as violence and harassment in the world of work.<sup>19</sup>

It is evident that uncertainty and precarity are pervasive in migrant women's lives across the region, as the majority find themselves 'working to survive'<sup>20</sup> and experience many difficulties in securing decent work and accessing social protections. This, in turn, limits their capacity to work while caring for their dependents across borders. In addition, heightened experiences of racism and xenophobia compound with other markers of inequality, such as gender, age, and disabilities, restricting their access to civil, social, and political rights. Taken together, these conditions significantly hinder migrant women's opportunities for social and economic inclusion and the construction of more inclusive and equal societies in countries of origin and destination.

Despite these hurdles, migrant women are active agents in their migration processes. Not only do they remit a high proportion of their monthly earnings – which are used to cover rent, food, clothing, expenses related to healthcare and education, and others<sup>21</sup> – but they also self-organise to defend their rights and actively participate in community and civil society organisations.

In the past two years, the COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated that migrant women are essential workers whose contributions are key to ensuring the production and social reproduction work in our societies. However, at times of crises it is usually women's time,

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16. María Elena Valenzuela *et al*, *Desigualdad, crisis de los cuidados y migración del trabajo doméstico remunerado en América Latina*, CEPAL, Santiago, 2020; ECLAC, *Women's autonomy*, 2019. Both sources also reference the movement of Nicaraguan women to Costa Rica as a migratory corridor for care.
  17. ECLAC, 2019b; Fernando Filguera and Juliana Martínez Franzoni, 'Growth to limits of Female Labor Participation in Latin America's Unequal Care Regime', *Social Politics*, vol. 26, No. 2, pp. 245-275, 2019.
  18. UN Women, *Women migrant workers' contributions to development*, Policy Brief No. 2, 2017. Available at: <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Headquarters/Attachments/Sections/Library/Publications/2017/Policy-brief-Women-migrant-workers-contributions-to-development-en.pdf>
  19. GAATW, *What a way to make a living. Violence and harassment faced by migrant women in the world of work in Argentina, Brazil, Peru, Colombia, Guatemala and Mexico*, GAATW, Bangkok, 2019a.
  20. Magdalena Caccia *et al*, *Sostener la vida a través de las fronteras. Cuidados y trayectorias laborales de mujeres migrantes en Uruguay, Idas & Vueltas*, Montevideo, 2021; Andrea Querol y Luis Enrique Aguilar, *Inclusión social y económica de mujeres migrantes venezolanas en Perú. Transiciones migratorias y trayectorias laborales*, CHS Alternativo, Lima, 2021.
  21. Monami Maulik and Allison Petroziello, *Gender on the Move: Working on the migration-development nexus from a gender perspective*, Second edition, UN Women Training Centre, Santo Domingo, 2016.

autonomy and well-being that serve as 'an adjustment variable',<sup>22</sup> further exacerbating structural inequalities and compromising their opportunities for social and economic inclusion. In this adverse scenario, while the calls to 'leave no one behind' and lead 'a sustainable economic recovery with gender equality'<sup>23</sup> are commendable, these cannot be achieved without putting migrant women's experiences and expertise at the centre.

## Institutional and policy framework

Over the last decades, international migration has become a pressing issue in the global political agenda, and there have been major efforts to understand the links between gender, migration and development and provide better responses to the specific realities of women on the move. Significant advances have been made in terms of mainstreaming a gender-responsive perspective to migration policies and programmes, as illustrated by the adoption of the Global Compact for Safe, Regular and Orderly Migration (GCM) in 2018. Similarly, the 2030 Agenda recognises the positive contributions of migration to sustainable development and includes multiple references to gender equality and women's empowerment which are particularly relevant in the context of mobility.<sup>24</sup>

In Latin America and the Caribbean, several regional fora and intergovernmental mechanisms were established with a focus on key development issues, such as the Montevideo Consensus on Population and Development from 2013. Even though it is non-binding, the Consensus sets gender equality and the protection of the human rights of all migrants as two of its priority areas and underscores countries' commitments to advancing more equal and inclusive societies for all.<sup>25</sup>

The Regional Conference on Women – a subsidiary body of the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) – has brought attention to the structural axes of gender inequality and the situation of women's rights at the regional and sub-regional levels. In 2020, Member States approved the Santiago Commitment with the purpose of accelerating the region's efforts to fulfil the Regional Gender Agenda, in which they agree, among others, to

promote a systemic change in the approach to migration to reduce the vulnerabilities of women in the migration cycle, and the adoption of cooperation agreements among countries of origin, transit, destination and return for migrant women, refugees and asylum-seekers, paying particular attention to displacement phenomena surrounding global care chains and their structural causes (...).<sup>26</sup>

22. ECLAC, *The COVID-19 pandemic is exacerbating the care crisis in Latin America and the Caribbean*, April 2020, p. 4. Available at: [https://repositorio.cepal.org/bitstream/handle/11362/45352/4/S2000260\\_en.pdf](https://repositorio.cepal.org/bitstream/handle/11362/45352/4/S2000260_en.pdf)

23. ECLAC, *The COVID-19 pandemic is exacerbating the care crisis in Latin America and the Caribbean*, Special Report COVID-19, No. 9, April 2020, p. 2. Available at: [https://repositorio.cepal.org/bitstream/handle/11362/46634/S2000739\\_en.pdf?sequence=5&isAllowed=y](https://repositorio.cepal.org/bitstream/handle/11362/46634/S2000739_en.pdf?sequence=5&isAllowed=y)

24. For example, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 5, 8, 10, 16 and 17. Tam O'Neil, Anjali Fleury and Marta Foresti, *Women on the move. Migration, gender equality and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, Overseas Development Institute, London, 2016.

25. I Regional Conference on Population and Development in Latin America and the Caribbean, Montevideo consensus on population and development, ECLAC, August 2013. Available at: [https://repositorio.cepal.org/bitstream/handle/11362/21860/15/S20131039\\_en.pdf](https://repositorio.cepal.org/bitstream/handle/11362/21860/15/S20131039_en.pdf)

26. XIV Regional Conference on Women in Latin America and the Caribbean, *Santiago Commitment*, ECLAC, January 2020, p. 5. Available at: [https://conferenciawmujer.cepal.org/14/sites/crm14/files/20-00087\\_crm.14\\_santiago\\_commitment.pdf](https://conferenciawmujer.cepal.org/14/sites/crm14/files/20-00087_crm.14_santiago_commitment.pdf)

The past twenty years have also seen positive developments in the policy frameworks that regulate people's movements across borders. Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay, Peru and Colombia have all revised and adjusted their migrations laws. These regulations reflect a growing tendency towards a rights-based approach to human mobility, recognising it as a human right, explicitly referring to migrants' social rights and promoting regularisation as a state obligation. However, in most cases, regular status continues to be a condition, either on paper or in practice, for the full enjoyment of civil, social and political rights of migrants, as it does not guarantee effective access.

**TABLE 1**

**Latin America (five countries): specific rights of migrants identified in migration laws, by country<sup>27</sup>**

Country	Law		Year	Where	Human rights	Health	Education	Work	Due process/ justice	Social protection/ social security	Sexual and reproductive rights	Vote	Housing	Family reunification	Rights of migrant children and adolescents
Argentina	Decree 70/2017* Struck down by Presidential Decree 138/2021 in March 2021	Amendments to Acts No. 25.871 and No. 346	2017		✓				✓					✓ a	
	Decree No. 616	Implementing regulations for Migration Act No. 25.871 and its amendments	2010	Title I: Rights and obligations of foreign nationals	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓ b		✓	
	Act No. 25.871	Migration Act	2003	Title I: Rights and obligations of foreign nationals	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓				✓	
Brazil	Act No. 13.445	Migration Act	2017		✓		✓		✓					✓	✓
Colombia	Act No. 2136	Migration Act	2021	Article 4: Principles Article 84: Rights according to the Integral Migration Policy	✓	* (please see note below)	* (please see note below)	* (please see note below)	✓		✓			✓	✓
Peru	Legislative Decree No. 1350	Legislative Decree on Migration	2017	Article 9: Rights of foreign nationals	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓						✓
Uruguay	Act No. 18250	Migration Act	2008		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	

\* The rights to health, education and work of the migrant population in Colombia are not directly recognised in the new regulatory framework, but are granted by Colombia’s Constitution, which states that all foreigners within the national territory will enjoy the same fundamental rights as Colombians. For more information, please see the full text of Act No. 2136 that was passed on August 2021:

<https://dapre.presidencia.gov.co/normativa/normativa/LEY%202136%20DEL%204%20DE%20AGOSTO%20DE%202021.pdf>

27. Adapted from ECLAC, 2019a, pp. 217-218. The original table did not include any information on Colombia.

When it comes to migrant women's rights, there have been some positive – albeit limited – developments in the mainstreaming of a gender perspective in migration governance. While Argentina, Colombia, and Uruguay's migration laws contain provisions on migrant women, Brazil and Peru reference migrant women only in secondary legislation. In addition, all five countries have ratified ILO Convention 189 on Domestic Work and Argentina, Uruguay and more recently Peru have ratified ILO Convention 190 on Violence and Harassment in the world of work.

In April 2021, Latin American and Caribbean countries engaged in the first regional revision of the GCM, in which they reiterated their commitment to its implementation and reaffirmed that migration is essential to democracy and sustainable development.<sup>28</sup> However, one year later, as the world continues to grapple with the coronavirus pandemic and States held the first International Migration Review Forum (IMRF), evidence suggests that migration has become increasingly challenging, particularly for women.

Previous research by GAATW has shown that migrant women continue to face precarity, exploitation and abuse in the world of work, as well as exclusion, gender-based violence and stigma during migration and upon return. Our experience also evidences that migration can have positive, negative or mixed effects on women's empowerment and gender dynamics:<sup>29</sup> it can lead to increased power in decision-making within the family but also expose them to greater vulnerabilities. However, rather than being the cause or the solution to different social issues, women's migration reveals existing inequalities that can further be entrenched in the absence of proper social protection systems and gender-sensitive migration, labour and care policies.

Feminist scholars and activists have made invaluable contributions to the understanding of migration as a gendered phenomenon and have successfully directed the attention of policymakers and international agencies towards the cross-cutting issues that affect migrant women's daily lives. However, there are still significant gaps to be addressed, particularly when it comes to bridging the disconnect between policies and migrant women's experiences on the ground and ensuring the conditions for their full and equal participation in society.

As the debates in the fields of migration and development continue to focus primarily on migrants' positive contributions to families and communities in countries of origin and destination, our concern goes well beyond that. In Bastia and Piper's words, 'what about the women who undertake these journeys?'<sup>30</sup> What do they need in order to be recognised as full members of society? In what ways do existing policies and programmes impact their everyday lives and well-being? How do they understand inclusion? This Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR) with migrant and trafficked women is a step in this direction: it provides insight into their perceptions and lived experiences of socio-economic inclusion in Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay, Peru and Colombia.

28. Chris Horwood and Bram Frouws (eds.), *Mixed Migration Review 2021. Highlights. Interviews. Essays. Data*, Mixed Migration Centre (MMC), Geneva, 2021, p. 16.

29. GAATW, 2019a; GAATW, *Reclaiming Migrant Women's Narratives: A Feminist Participatory Action Research project on 'Safe and Fair' Migration in Asia*, GAATW, Bangkok, 2019b. See also: Monami Maulik and Allison Petroziello, *Gender on the Move: Working on the migration-development nexus from a gender perspective*, second edition, UN Women Training Centre, Santo Domingo, 2016.

30. Tanja Bastia and Nicola Piper, 'Women migrants in the global economy: a global overview (and regional perspectives)', *Gender & Development*, vol. 27, no. 1, 2019, p. 26.

## About this research

Focusing on the social and economic inclusion of migrant and trafficked women is not a simple task, as the concepts and ideas linked to inclusion are 'vast and complex'<sup>31</sup> and, hence, difficult to operationalise. It is recognised that access to regular migration is a fundamental mechanism for the inclusion of migrants, as documentation facilitates access to protections, basic social services, and the enjoyment of human rights. However, on its own, regular status is insufficient, as the structural barriers that limit migrant women's opportunities to live with dignity and equality go well beyond regularisation.

In line with ECLAC's definition, our understanding of social inclusion is holistic and refers to

the realisation of rights, social engagement, access to education, health and care, access to basic infrastructure services and the availability of material resources such as income and housing. It requires a process of improving economic, social, cultural and political conditions for people's full participation in society, with both objective and perceived dimensions.<sup>32</sup>

This means that, while some aspects of social inclusion can be objectively measured through household surveys and other population studies, an integral approach to the issue necessarily requires focusing on women's own perceptions and lived experiences. This notion also emphasises that social inclusion is a continuum, rather than a fixed category in which people are placed.

At the same time, social and economic inclusion are inextricably linked and cannot be conceived of separately. Access to decent work is an essential aspect of people's inclusion and is key to the full enjoyment of their rights. Decent work 'refers to the promotion of opportunities for women and men to obtain high-quality, productive work, in conditions of freedom, equity, security and human dignity', linking employment to the provision of social protection, as well as 'the full observance of rights at work.'<sup>33</sup>

Opportunities, barriers and more generally experiences of social and economic inclusion are clearly gendered. A feminist approach to these issues is particularly relevant in order to identify the multiple and interconnected forms of oppression that impact migrant and trafficked women's lives. A feminist lens also allows us to better understand the complex ways in which women make sense of their lived experiences, as well as their strategies of resistance in the face of adversity. Migrant and trafficked women are a diverse group that is often reduced to dichotomic and essentialist representations such as 'good' and 'bad' mothers, 'heroines' and 'saviours', 'ideal, deserving victims' or 'loose women' and 'prostitutes', and intersectionality can be a useful tool for deconstructing these problematic and inaccurate representations.

31. ECLAC, *Linkages between the social and production spheres. Gaps, pillars and challenges*, Santiago, 2017, p. 85.

32. ECLAC, 2008 and 2009; United Nations, 2016; Levitas and others, 2007, as cited in ECLAC, 2017, pp. 85-86.

33. ECLAC, 2017, p. 86.

GAATW's close collaborations with feminist non-governmental organisations (NGOs), grassroots and self-organised groups of migrant and trafficked women have shown that they are best positioned to advocate for the full enjoyment of their rights and effectively influence decision-making processes that impact their lives. Therefore, this study aimed to document and analyse migrant and trafficked women's experiences of social and economic inclusion in five countries: Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay, Peru and Colombia. It focused on the factors that shaped their decisions to migrate, the challenges faced in their migration journeys, their experiences of paid and unpaid labour in both origin and destination and their reflections and recommendations for change.

Ultimately, this research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of migrant and trafficked women's social and economic inclusion from a South-focused perspective. While the research participants comprised a diverse group of women with multiple, complex and often ambiguous stories and perceptions of migration, paid and unpaid labour, gender dynamics, and social inclusion, it is our hope that this process brings their knowledge and expertise to the forefront, and supports them in fully realising their rights at home, abroad and on the way.



# METHOD OLOGY





# METHODOLOGY

Since its inception, GAATW has been committed to producing knowledge in a democratic and grassroots manner that aims to shift unequal power structures and ultimately serve migrant and trafficked women in advocating for social change and standing up for their rights. To this end, the GAATW International Secretariat and its partners adopted a Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR) framework to inform this study.

Participatory Action Research is an approach centred around the meaningful participation of the 'researched' community at all stages of the research process. Their perceptions, knowledge and lived experiences are not just recognised as valuable; they are the very foundation of the research process. In addition to being community-based, another key aspect of PAR is the 'action' component, focused on producing knowledge together with those most impacted by an issue with the greater aim of effecting social change.<sup>34</sup> Building on the core principles of PAR, FPAR challenges the assumption of 'neutrality' in research, blurring the lines that separate the 'researchers' from those 'researched' and positing that knowledge is always situated.<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, FPAR questions the androcentrism inherent to more traditional research approaches<sup>36</sup> by centring women's experiences and contributions in an effort to decolonise knowledge production and challenge intersectional systems of oppression.

FPAR is not an established set of data collection methods, but a lens through which we look at and critically engage with the world around us. In this sense, there is no 'right way' of conducting FPAR, as each process is unique and must be tailored to the specific context. Hence, our partner organisations were best positioned to decide – in consultation with the groups of women involved – on the most appropriate and effective methods to ensure their meaningful participation at all stages of the research.

34. Focus on Labour Exploitation, *Experts by Experience: Conducting Feminist Participatory Action Research with Workers in High-Risk Sectors*, FLEX, London, 2021.

35. Donna Haraway, *Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective*, *Feminist Studies*, vol. 14, no. 3, 1988, pp. 575-599.

36. Colleen Reid, Allison Tom and Wendy Frisby, *Finding the 'action' in feminist participatory action research*, *Action research*, 4 (3), pp. 315-332, 2006.

## Research partners and project inception

For this study, the International Secretariat collaborated with Comisión Argentina para Refugiados y Migrantes (CAREF) in Argentina; Associação Brasileira de Defesa da Mulher, da Infância e da Juventude (ASBRAD) in Brazil; Asociación Civil Idas & Vueltas in Uruguay; Capital Humano y Social Alternativo (CHS) in Peru; and Corporación Espacios de Mujer (CEM) in Colombia. The five partners work closely with migrant and/or trafficked women in their core programmes and activities; they apply a human rights and gender-sensitive perspective to their work; and are well connected with key stakeholders engaging on similar issues at the local and national level, including self-organised groups, grassroots organisations and networks advocating for migrant and women's rights. In the Secretariat's experience, these are all necessary conditions to ensure that the research process is embedded in the FPAR principles of meaningful engagement, continuous reflection and participant-led action for change.

After a series of initial conversations with each organisation, GAATW-IS convened three preliminary online discussions in July and August 2020 to define the scope of the study, identify key themes to be explored and discuss the conceptual framework. Partners strategically adjusted the research questions to the context in which they operate and the priorities of their constituencies, resulting in multiple and diverse approaches to the broadly conceptualised theme of social and economic inclusion of migrant and trafficked women. These convenings were followed by two webinars on the FPAR approach and its implications for the design and methodology of the study, held in October 2020. Although time was definitely a constraint, the webinars were an opportunity for the group to agree on a shared understanding of the key aspects of FPAR, namely, 'participation', 'action' and 'a feminist lens'. It also allowed them to build on the experiences of those who were already familiar with this framework, identifying key challenges, lessons learnt and good practices. FPAR's guiding principles were actively discussed, and it was acknowledged that meaningful participation and action for change would not only look different in each country but would also require making compromises between what is ideal and what is achievable throughout the process.

### CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNED FROM PREVIOUS EXPERIENCES WITH FPAR

During the second session of our webinar 'Conversations about FPAR', three partners were asked to briefly share their previous experiences with using this framework. These were some of the reflections that ASBRAD, CHS, and Espacios de Mujer shared with the group.

Among the challenges identified when doing FPAR with groups of migrant women were:

- Limited availability of the women to participate in in-depth interviews and FGDs, as well as difficulty to sustain participation over a period of time.
- The potential negative impact or risk of retaliation that participating in such research might entail for migrant women in the informal economy or in high-risk sectors.

- In one case, the participants' husbands thought that their wives were being 'brainwashed' by feminist ideology and pressured them to abandon the research.
- Some women were also under pressure by the community to abandon the research out of fear that their participation would draw unnecessary attention to their precarious working conditions and result in the loss of their sole source of income.

Two major learnings for our Brazilian partner referred to participant-led actions for change:

- The research process needs to be conceptualised as one aspect in a broader set of actions involving the participants and the communities; this would help to minimise the possibility of extracting knowledge and information and would also ensure that the research is of use to the community.
- Risk assessments need to be carried out on an ongoing basis and in close collaboration with the research participants in order to ensure everyone's safety and to minimise the potential risks that might result from their involvement in the research.

Borrowing from the framework recently developed by FLEX to assess participation,<sup>37</sup> migrant and trafficked women's engagement in this study ranged from *consultation* and *involvement* to *partnership*. In Argentina, CAREF collaborated with four local migrant-led organisations to recruit four young migrant women activists from Bolivia, Colombia and Venezuela as peer researchers. A social worker, a sociologist, a communications graduate and a journalism student, they all participated in the design of the questionnaires, the data collection and analysis, as well as in some advocacy planning meetings. Similarly, the research process in Brazil was conducted in collaboration with two Venezuelan refugee women who were researchers and participants at the same time. They were also actively involved at every stage of the research, from deciding the questions and data collection methods to writing the report.

*I think our presence as researchers was very important in terms of building relationships with the participants. Even if there is already a trust-based relationship with the rest of the team, I feel it's easier to open up to someone from your own country. Exchanges of perspectives are welcomed among women who have faced the same issues and share the same vulnerability and the same fears. (Xiomara Fernández, Venezuelan refugee in Brazil and peer researcher)<sup>38</sup>*

It is also important when doing FPAR to include spaces for ongoing learning and reflection, not only to assess the extent to which the community had ownership of the process, but also to reflect on the power dynamics at play among the researchers and participants, as well as the strategies in place to counteract these. This is particularly relevant when engaging with vulnerable groups, such as undocumented and/or low wage women migrant workers and victims of trafficking. Our partners regularly consult the migrant and trafficked women they work with in order to integrate their feedback into their programmes, and this research was no exception. Either through a focus group discussion

37. Focus on Labour Exploitation, p. 11.

38. Graziella Rocha et al, *Construyendo un Mundo Plural. Experiencias y percepciones de mujeres migrantes venezolanas en Guarulhos, São Paulo*, ASBRAD, Guarulhos, 2021, p. 18. All the interview quotes included in this report, originally in Spanish, were drawn from partners' individual research reports and were translated into English by the lead report author Emilia Cebrián.

(FGD), a reflection session or by leaving some time after the interviews for the participants to share their thoughts and feelings, the research teams made sure there were safe spaces for honest conversations about women's experiences. For example, in Colombia, the research team had originally prepared semi-structured interview guides, but as the fieldwork progressed, they realised that more open-ended conversations were a better approach to facilitate in-depth connections with the participants in this case.

## Data collection methods

The data collection took place between September 2020 and March 2021 via semi-structured interviews and FGDs with 100 women migrant workers (WMWs) in Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay, and Peru, as well as with 17 returnee migrant women (RMW) and 8 victims of trafficking (VoT) in Colombia. Due to the rapidly changing context and the coronavirus containment measures imposed by national and local governments, around two-thirds of the interviews were conducted by phone or video call, while the rest were in person. Key informant interviews were also conducted with relevant government officials and other stakeholders. Other data collection methods included participant observation in migrant women's work sites in Argentina; and two participatory workshops on labour rights and gender-based violence in Uruguay, both co-organised by our country partner with the Ministry of Labour and a network of feminist lawyers,<sup>39</sup> respectively.

In Brazil, Uruguay and Colombia, the research teams reached out to migrant and trafficked women whom they had previously assisted and with whom they had well-established relationships of trust. Other participants were identified through the women's personal and professional networks using snowball sampling, and through an announcement shared on social media in the case of Colombia. Our partner in Peru combined a snowball sampling technique with a mapping of NGOs, service providers and shelters that assist the migrant population in vulnerable situations in Peru. In Argentina, the participants were identified and contacted through close collaboration with migrant-led networks and grassroots organisations focused on migrant women's rights.

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39. Red de Abogadas Feministas del Uruguay.

**TABLE 2****Research sites and participants' profiles**

	Research sites	Women interviewed	Country of origin	Age	Education	Years abroad
<b>Argentina</b>	Buenos Aires Metropolitan Area (AMBA in Spanish) – La Matanza, outskirts of La Plata, Tigre, Buenos Aires City	21 WMWs	Peru, Bolivia, Uruguay, Guinea	25 to 55 years old	Almost all WMWs with completed elementary education, and only a few with completed secondary education	5 to 20 years
<b>Brazil</b>	Guarulhos, São Paulo	35 WMWs	Venezuela	21 to 45 years old	10 WMWs with university degrees; 17 with elementary and secondary education only; 8 with incomplete elementary education	Several months to 5 years
<b>Uruguay</b>	Montevideo	11 WMWs	Venezuela, Dominican Republic, Cuba, Ecuador	25 to 51 years old	5 WMWs with university degrees; 4 with completed tertiary education; 1 with incomplete tertiary education; 1 with incomplete secondary education	7 months to 8 years
<b>Peru</b>	Lima and Arequipa	33 WMWs	Venezuela	22 to 54 years old	27 WMWs with completed or incomplete tertiary education; 6 WMWs with elementary and secondary education	Several months to 5 years
<b>Colombia</b>	Medellín and its metropolitan area (Bello, Envigado, Itagüí); department of Risaralda (Pereira, Santa Rosa de Cabal y Dosquebradas); Bogotá; department of Cauca (Popayán)	17 RMWs; 8 VoT	Colombia	21 to 63 years old	A mix of elementary and secondary education only as well as tertiary studies	3 months to 4 years for VoTs; 1 to 45 years for RMW

**About the participants**

As can be seen in the table above, almost all women were of working age. They were employed in a variety of sectors and occupations, such as services, domestic and care work, informal work (mainly street vendors) and garment manufacturing/textile cooperatives (self-employment). Some were unemployed at the time of fieldwork and had lost their jobs during the pandemic. Nine women in Peru were staying at temporary shelters when they were interviewed. Most women were married or in a relationship and had children from one or more partners.

Except for the Guinean migrant in Argentina, two Colombian women, and several Venezuelan women in Peru, the vast majority had migrated through regular channels and/or were with a regular migration status at the time of fieldwork (it should be noted that some experienced difficulties in accessing or renewing their documentation due to lockdowns and restrictions during the pandemic). A migrant woman from Guinea in Argentina and her partner from Senegal were only able to regularise their status after they had a child in the country, as the requirements for migrants outside the MERCOSUR Residence Agreement are too stringent. Long-term migrant women of Bolivian and Peruvian origin in Argentina

were able to eventually regularise their migratory status once the requirements for South American migrants were eased after the enactment of Argentina's new migration law in 2003 and the entry into force of the MERCOSUR Agreement. Six Venezuelan women (five in Brazil and one in Peru) were granted refugee status and another six in Brazil had filed their asylum claims and were awaiting decision at the time of the fieldwork.

In-person interviews were conducted in women's work sites in the case of Argentina, and at places of women's choice in Uruguay, mainly nearby cafes and women's homes in some cases. FGDs in Brazil were conducted in the NGO's office. All partners made efforts to ensure flexibility when scheduling in-person and virtual interviews, accommodating to women's requests as much as possible and complying with the government's health protocols to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

Online data collection presented its own set of benefits and challenges. On the one hand, virtual interviews and FGDs allowed the research teams to reach out to migrant and trafficked women in multiple locations, and facilitated access to participants with limited availability, such as those with long working hours or with young children under their care. On the other hand, in addition to the barriers presented by limited access to technology, it was much more difficult for the researchers to build rapport and have smooth conversations in online interviews. Interruptions were frequent and privacy was a concern for the researchers, as not all the participants had access to a private space in their homes.

## Ethical considerations

All research participants provided informed consent prior to the data collection, either orally or in writing. The partners explained the research process to the participants to make sure that their participation was informed, confidential and voluntary, and that expectations were clear to everyone involved.

Confidentiality of participants was preserved by using coded numbers in the case of Peru and Uruguay, and by referring to participants' initials or using fictitious names in the cases of Brazil, Argentina, and Colombia. A number of research participants from Colombia and one participant in Argentina requested that their real first names were included in the research report, which was accepted by the research teams after thoroughly assessing the potential risks.

Research participants in Brazil and Uruguay received a small compensation for their time, and almost all the participants received support with mobile data and access to internet connection for their engagement in online interviews and FGDs.<sup>40</sup>

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40. We are aware of the ongoing discussion and ethical concerns regarding compensation for research participants, as it might become an incentive for participation or a coercive element that prevents them from leaving the research at any point or declining to answer certain questions. We believe that research partners are best positioned to decide if and when compensation is feasible, but we do encourage research teams and readers to explore the reasons why providing some sort of compensation to the participants might be appropriate, especially when engaging with underpaid and overworked women in the informal economy. For more information on this topic, please see: Focus on Labour Exploitation, 2021; and Lisa Rende Taylor and Mark Latonero, *Updated Guide to Ethics and Human Rights in Anti-Trafficking: Ethical Standards for Working with Migrant Workers and Trafficked Persons in the Digital Age*, Issara Institute, Bangkok, 2018.

## Limitations

The partners encountered some challenges in the full application of the FPAR framework, particularly in relation to the limited timeframe available to discuss and incorporate the core values of FPAR at every stage of the research; the extent to which the communities had ownership of the process; the limitations of phone/video interviews; and how to move forward with participant-driven actions for change once the data collection and analysis were completed.

As more than half of the research participants (74 women) were Venezuelan migrants, refugees or asylum seekers in Uruguay, Brazil and Peru, we are aware that this might overshadow the specific realities of migrant and trafficked women from/in other countries in the region. However, we believe that this is in line with the current reality of mixed migration flows in South America, and it appeared as a priority for states and civil society in host countries in order to provide appropriate responses to the needs and concerns of Venezuelan women.

This is a small-scale, qualitative study and it does not claim to be representative of the experiences of all migrant women in the region. Furthermore, most of the women who participated in the study and, more broadly, the women who seek contact with our partner organisations, are typically those who have experienced some form of violence or need assistance with other issues. In this sense, the data is skewed towards the problems and negative experiences of migrant women and may not adequately reflect all the positive experiences of migration. Still, we believe that the data and analyses contained in this report are truthful reflections of the challenges that women who participated in the study face. And based on our and our partners' experience, they are common among a large number of women migrants and thus need to be taken into serious consideration.

Finally, we encouraged partners to prioritise the research questions and areas of focus that were more reflective of the socioeconomic realities in which they operate and the concerns of the women they work with. The diverse contexts, sectors and issues covered made it challenging to consolidate the findings and make common, overarching recommendations.



# KEY THEMATIC HIGHLIGHTS



# KEY THEMATIC HIGHLIGHTS

**'I spent many days on the road but I made it here'<sup>41</sup>:**

## The migration journey

Most of the women interviewed referred to the migration journey as a turning point in their lives and reported feelings of fear and uncertainty during their travel. While a small number managed to book direct flights to the country of destination, the majority travelled partly by plane and mostly by bus, with multiple and often unexpected stops along the way. The journey was expensive and the costs were covered with lifetime savings, money borrowed from family, friends or others. In many cases, the women faced unforeseen challenges and had to find extra funds to reach their destination. It took them from several months to two years to repay their loans. Many returnee migrant women from Colombia had borrowed money from loan sharks<sup>42</sup> to pay for their tickets and found themselves in an endless cycle of crippling debt.

*[My second debt] was in dollars (...) The interest rates were crazy and my debt doubled. I was trapped with it the whole time. (Colombian returnee migrant woman, 46 years old)<sup>43</sup>*

Nearly all women interviewed shared that their journey was fraught with challenges, particularly for those who travelled alone or with children. A Dominican woman and her cousin were left on their own, without any money in an unknown city in Brazil after having paid USD 400 to a guide that would help them reach Uruguay. Venezuelan and Cuban women, on the other hand, ran into serious difficulties to obtain the documentation needed to leave their countries, and at least two of them recalled incidents of mistreatment and having their paperwork retained by border authorities at the airport.

*We boarded the plane and the officer in charge thought that I had forged the permit because this was the first time she saw a permit like this, issued by a judge (...) and she kept saying 'no, I don't believe you, you may even have forged the permit'. She said all this in front of my daughters. (Venezuelan woman in Uruguay, 37 years old)<sup>44</sup>*

*(...) When I arrived at the airport, they took away my son's permit, the permit that his dad signed so that he could be with me because he was a minor. They took it away from me and said that I didn't need that. (Venezuelan woman in Uruguay, 47 years old)<sup>45</sup>*

41. Dominican migrant woman in Uruguay, 25 years old. Magdalena Caccia et al, *Sostener la vida a través de las fronteras. Cuidados y trayectorias laborales de mujeres migrantes en Uruguay*, Idas & Vueltas, Montevideo, 2021, p. 17.

42. Locally known as 'préstamos gota a gota' or 'prestadiario'.

43. Corporación Espacios de Mujer, *Vivencias en el retorno y la reintegración. Mujeres migrantes y víctimas de Trata retornadas a Colombia*, Medellín, 2021, p. 32.

44. Caccia et al, p. 21.

45. *Ibid.*

Many women experienced conditions of extreme vulnerability while travelling, such as having to sleep on the streets and go without any food for days on end, and were often exposed to multiple risks, including robbery and different forms of discrimination. Some Venezuelan women in Brazil were met with xenophobic attitudes at the border, where local people yelled at them *'Go back home, filthy Venezuelan. You want to steal our jobs, filthy communist!'*<sup>46</sup> This was the first migratory experience for almost all Venezuelan women in Brazil, and most of them intended to continue their journey to Uruguay or Argentina, where the language would not be a barrier and some already had family and friends.

*After sleeping for three days on the street and the fatigue of the 13-day bus ride across the border, my body couldn't take it anymore. I wanted to die. When we were called through the gates, I saw a large structure that looked like something out of a movie. The army was everywhere, running security checks. At first, I was scared. I knew I wasn't doing anything wrong, but still, I was afraid. Afraid of being separated from my husband, of being deported. But when I saw the people with the United Nations blue vests, my heart calmed down. I felt protected and, in fact, the people in the army treated us with great respect. We had medical attention and help to get our papers and regularise our stay in Brazil. (Venezuelan woman in Brazil, 40 years old)<sup>47</sup>*

Most of the women either travelled to their destination through regular channels or were able to regularise their status at some point afterwards. Some exceptions include a Colombian trafficked woman who had gone to Spain through Venezuela with fake documents provided by her traffickers, a returnee migrant woman from Colombia who entered Venezuela through an irregular path because she did not have a passport, several Venezuelan women in Peru, and migrant women and men from Guinea and Senegal in Argentina.

In Tumbes, Peru, a small number of Venezuelan women highlighted the humanitarian support received by NGOs working on the border between the two countries. Thanks to the emergency aid provided by these organisations, they were able to find accommodation for the night and buy tickets to continue to other parts of Peru.

For some women, family members who had migrated before them provided all sorts of support during their journey – from money to cover transportation costs and relevant information about the migration process to a place to stay or even a job upon arrival. These support networks among relatives, close friends and other migrants in destination were instrumental in women's perceptions and experiences of social and economic inclusion in all five countries.

In Uruguay, many women recognised that gender dynamics played a significant role during their journey, as they were exposed to risks, fears and difficulties that specifically affect women on the move. Some even decided not to bring their families with them until they could afford direct flights to the country of destination, as they refused to let their children and other family members go through similar traumatic experiences.

46. Rocha et al, p. 24.

47. *Ibid.*, p 25.

*We took a bus to Brazil, where we stayed in a shelter for three days. I didn't sleep, I looked for a church for two days and then we were taken to the police in case we wanted to stay there. I remember we left the countryside in Brazil on a Tuesday and arrived in Rivera [a Uruguayan city on the border with Brazil] on a Saturday, we hopped from bus to bus. This went on for many days and I said I won't bring my children in these conditions. (Dominican woman in Uruguay, 38 years old)<sup>48</sup>*

Overall, women's stories illustrate that the migration journey was a distressed period, full of uncertainty. It refers not only to the travel, but also marks the beginning of the migration experience and the ordeal that most of them went through to reach their destination. Many women had demonstrated courage and resilience to leave everything behind, successfully overcome the obstacles along the way, and start over in a new place.

## Migration drivers and family ties

The vast majority of the women migrated in search of better living conditions for themselves and their families. Declining quality of life, worsening poverty, absence of livelihood security, unemployment, limited or no access to basic goods and services, increasing violence, and aspirations for a better life are among the main reasons that prompted their migration. Venezuelan women came under pressure to migrate due to the impacts of the economic and humanitarian crisis, and many women in Brazil and Peru recognised that leaving Venezuela was their last recourse.

*We wanted to give them [the children] a better future (...) We wanted them to have more opportunities, like the ones we had growing up (...) When our eldest was born, we bought a house, we bought a car. With my earnings as a teacher and his earnings as a taxi driver we were able to achieve our goals (...) but there was not much we could do at this point. (Venezuelan woman in Peru, 42 years old)<sup>49</sup>*

*I was staying at my eldest sister's place (...) I couldn't provide for myself and I didn't have economic support from anyone else, I was also just starting in the world [of work]. (Trafficked woman from Colombia, 22 years old)<sup>50</sup>*

It is important to note that Peru and Brazil were not the preferred destination for several Venezuelan women, but rather a first stop on their way to Chile, Argentina, or Uruguay, where they expected to find better socioeconomic opportunities and fewer barriers to integration. Some decided to stay in Peru due to the comparatively lower cost of regularisation and the more accessible requirements to legally stay in the country.

*I didn't plan to stay in Brazil, I wanted to transit through Brazil and then get to Argentina or Uruguay. Because without the language issue, I would be able to get a better job. But the only option they gave us was to go to Guarulhos. In Pacaraima, the people told me that the part of Brazil with most job opportunities is São Paulo and that's why I stayed. (Venezuelan woman in Brazil, 39 years old)<sup>51</sup>*

48. Caccia et al, p. 20.

49. Querol and Aguilar, p. 17.

50. Corporación Espacios de Mujer, p. 30.

51. Rocha et al, p. 25.

*My main goal was to leave Venezuela to be honest. Peru was never the destination, Peru was a transit stop on the way to Chile, but because of the paperwork, I found it easier to regularise my documents here in Peru. (Venezuelan woman in Peru, 39 years old)<sup>52</sup>*

In almost all cases, the decision to migrate was made as part of a family strategy, in an effort to provide a better quality of life for their children, reunite with their partners or other relatives who had migrated before them, support those left behind in the country of origin, or a combination of all three. Family dynamics played an essential part in their migration experiences and their roles as mothers, wives, daughters and sisters simultaneously shaped and were reshaped by mobility.

Trafficked women from Colombia were pressured by their families to migrate and send home money to improve their lives, and many were rejected or stigmatised upon return for their 'failed' migration.

*My sister told me 'Angela, you should go, that woman wants to help you, she seems like a good person, young women there make a lot of money, you are young and beautiful, you should go look for new horizons' and I believed her. My sister influenced my decision (...) I'll leave and repay my debt; I'll buy a house in Colombia for my mom and my sisters and I'll pay for my studies to become a policewoman: that's what I wanted. (Colombian trafficked woman, 22 years old)<sup>53</sup>*

Unlike the stories of most migrant women currently living and working in Brazil, Peru and Uruguay – whose experiences of migration took place in the last five-ten years – the mobility of Bolivian and Peruvian women to Argentina has a long tradition. The movement of Bolivian families to Argentina dates back to the 1950s, while the origins of Peruvian migration can be traced to the 1990s.<sup>54</sup> In this context, almost all of the women in our research arrived in Argentina during their teenage years or as young adults, and started working at a very young age, sometimes after school hours or instead of going to class. Some were born in Argentina and spent a significant part of their lives in their parents' country of origin. Their experiences include periods of intense mobility – both internally and internationally – that were usually tied to their family's or husband's jobs.

*Luisa was born in a rural area of Oruro (Bolivia) in 1975. At ten years old she moved to Cochabamba with her family and started to work, joining her mother who sold spices on the street.<sup>55</sup>*

*Nora was born in Jujuy (Argentina) in 1976, during her parents' work in the 'zafra' (seasonal harvest of sugarcane). She is the third of eight children, three of which are Argentine and five are Bolivian. She went to elementary school in a rural area in Sucre (Bolivia). After school hours, she 'sold soda and popcorn on the streets every day'. She graduated from high school much later, as an adult.<sup>56</sup>*

52. Querol and Aguilar, p. 19.

53. Corporación Espacios de Mujer, p. 31.

54. Corina Courtis and María Inés Pacecca, *Género y trayectoria migratoria: mujeres migrantes y trabajo doméstico en el Área Metropolitana de Buenos Aires*, Papeles de población, CIEAP / UAEM, 2010.

55. María Inés Pacecca, *Cortar los nudos. Mujeres, migrantes y cooperativistas en el Área Metropolitana de Buenos Aires*, CAREF, Buenos Aires, 2021, p. 26.

56. *Ibid.*

**'There's no work and I'm desperate!'<sup>57</sup>:**

## **Informality, precarity and exploitation in the world of work**

The women's main concern was to find a job and they started looking immediately after arriving in the country of destination. The majority found employment in the informal economy, as domestic or care workers, waitresses, cleaners, or salesclerks, among others, with precarious working conditions and with limited or no access to social protections and labour rights. Wages were low, often insufficient to cover basic expenses such as rent, food and clothing, and experiences of abuse, harassment and exploitation were frequent. This forced women to change jobs regularly in search of better alternatives, and when they could not find any, they relied on self-employment – mostly selling food or drinks on the streets. The shift to self-employment often occurred when there were no other options, or due to the inability to find employment in line with their skills and qualifications. In some cases, migrant women saw their job opportunities limited by their irregular migratory status. For many, however, regular status did not make much of a difference in their integration into the labour market, as most of the jobs available to them were informal and did not require documentation or a work permit.

In Uruguay, many women recognised that gender inequalities impacted their access to work, as the opportunities available to migrant women were extremely limited, usually in the domestic, care or cleaning sectors, and it was harder for them to find a job in comparison to their husbands and male relatives. Some of them also recalled incidents of gendered division of tasks and unequal workloads, when their employers requested them to perform additional tasks in comparison to their male colleagues, such as cleaning bathrooms, and they were usually paid less. Not being familiar with the labour laws in the country of destination was identified as an added challenge, as employers found multiple ways to take advantage of women's urgency and vulnerability, such as not giving them written contracts or only formalising their employment for periods of less than three months at a time, to prevent them from being able to file formal complaints.

*And my husband said 'but he never treated me like that...' Oh, well, but he treated me like that because I'm a woman. And he said 'but he never asked me to clean the toilets', but he asked me. (Venezuelan woman in Uruguay, 37 years old)<sup>58</sup>*

*I think that the difference is more evident in the workplace than anywhere else. I think it is easier for them [men] to insert themselves [in the labour market], because the rest of the migration experience is complicated for both parties, the sadness, the pain of leaving what is yours, the roots, meeting new people (...) everything, but the work part is the most complicated. Men have more opportunities to be employed in any field, even as cleaning assistants I see men (...) I think that's where I see the biggest difference. (Venezuelan woman in Uruguay, 37 years old)<sup>59</sup>*

57. Rocha et al, p. 28.

58. Caccia et al, p. 30.

59. Ibid.

In Brazil, language was identified as the biggest barrier to employment, which significantly limited women's access to work opportunities, and meant that for most of them the only available jobs were in domestic work. Almost all women recalled at least one incident of mistreatment and verbal abuse by their employers and mentioned that they were requested to teach Spanish to their employer's children, even when that was not included in the agreed tasks or reflected appropriately in their pay.

*I noticed that there is an interest in hiring Venezuelan women to work in people's homes. People with higher income in Brazil are used to having a live-in mucama [maid]. The employers see Venezuelan women as an opportunity to avoid signing work permits. It looks like they're doing you a favour by hiring a migrant woman and, because of that, they don't have to comply with the labour law. The other advantage is that they want us to clean the whole house and then teach Spanish to their children. I left my last job because of this: I felt abused and I was tired of having to teach the kids. (Venezuelan woman in Brazil, 25 years old)<sup>60</sup>*

*In my case, I couldn't stand working in the domestic sector because they humiliated me with the food. They didn't let me eat, and I had to bring my own food from home. One day I didn't have anything to eat, so I ate a piece of cheese and that was enough for them to make a scene. They asked if we didn't have manners in my country. I never felt more humiliated. They think that because we're going through a hard time, they can treat us like dogs. I took my things and I never came back. And I don't want to work in homes ever again. I prefer to work as a salesclerk or as a street vendor. (Venezuelan woman in Brazil, 18 years old)<sup>61</sup>*

Venezuelan women in Brazil and Peru expressed frustration due to the inability to find decent work opportunities. Many had formal jobs in Venezuela, with access to social protections and in areas of their expertise, and the stark contrast between these experiences in the world of work before and during migration was shocking.

*Here in Arequipa I had a hard time finding a job because of this issue: 'we no longer accept Venezuelans, there was an issue with a Venezuelan and we don't want to hire anymore'. Even job offers stated 'only Peruvians' and things like that, so it limits your job opportunities a lot when you are Venezuelan. I did get some interviews, and it has also happened when looking for places to rent. (Venezuelan woman in Peru, 26 years old)<sup>62</sup>*

*She told me 'You know what? There's a mother that will report you because she says you bit her daughter' and you can imagine how horrible that felt. I remember I cried so much, I was filled with anguish, because I thought, oh my God, I'm the one arriving in a country where I'm a foreigner, if I'm accused of anything, it's going to be that person's word against mine. I wasn't aware of the laws. Then I understood that this was that woman's strategy to stop me from asking her to pay me more. (Venezuelan woman in Peru, 39 years old)<sup>63</sup>*

Many women, particularly from Venezuela and Cuba, found themselves employed in occupations that were below their skill levels. Lawyers, teachers, nurses, psychologists, or engineers, among others, mentioned that the administrative procedures to certify their degrees were expensive and not always accessible. Additionally, their priority was to find a job – any job – that would allow them to support themselves and their families and

60. Rocha et al, p. 30.

61. *Ibid.*

62. Querol and Aguilar, p. 37.

63. *Ibid.*, p. 39.

repay debts incurred during the migration journey. Some returnee migrant women from Colombia experienced similar difficulties, as they could not find work in line with the new skills and certifications acquired abroad.

*The quality of life in the country has improved, particularly in [marginalised] communities. However, there are limited alternatives to take full advantage of the skills and knowledge acquired by people who have lived abroad, and bureaucracy makes administrative procedures tedious without offering concrete results. (Colombian returnee migrant woman, 53 years old)<sup>64</sup>*

*I had issues because they wouldn't accept the La Haya stamp, the apostille, so I couldn't certify anything. I also tried to certify my studies as a nursing assistant without any luck. (Ecuadorian woman in Uruguay, 40 years old)<sup>65</sup>*

In addition to these challenges, many women were unable to find jobs after a certain age or saw their options extremely limited.

*I'd like to work because I still feel useful. (Colombian returnee migrant woman, 63 years old)<sup>66</sup>*

*The moment they asked about my age, they told me 'We will call you', but that was it. (Colombian trafficked woman, 44 years old)<sup>67</sup>*

In Argentina, the 21 women interviewed were employed in textile, cultural, and commercial cooperatives in what is known as the *social or popular economy* sector.<sup>68</sup> All the cooperatives traced their origins to experiences of precarity and exploitation, mostly in the garment sector, that were tied to being a migrant. The cooperatives are not just an economic project or a labour opportunity, but also an act of empowerment linked to one or more markers of inequality in the migration experience, such as women's racial, ethnic or gender identities.

For Peruvian and Bolivian women in Argentina, the world of work is inextricably linked to family, generational and gender relations.<sup>69</sup> In most cases, women began working in the context of the family at a very young age, with activities such as caring for a relative's children or selling products in the streets with their mothers. Later on, usually thanks to a family member's referral, women found jobs in the domestic, care or service sectors.

Some women, especially those of Bolivian origin, moved on to the garment industry when a member of their family – a parent, a husband or a cousin – offered them a job in a workshop, where they learned the necessary skills. Working conditions in these workshops are extremely poor, with long working hours, no access to social security, no separation between the home and the workplace, and piece-rate payment. Over time, many migrant garment workers invested in sewing machines and put together their own family workshops before moving on to the *social economy* sector.

64. Corporación Espacios de Mujer, p. 40.

65. Caccia et al, p. 31.

66. Corporación Espacios de Mujer, p. 38.

67. *Ibid.*

68. Social or popular economy (*economía social y solidaria* o *economía popular* in Spanish) is an umbrella term used in Argentina for a work sector that includes a diverse range of economic activities in which work is self-managed by the workers (usually called *trabajadores sin patrón* or 'workers without a boss'), in an effort to challenge the traditional employer-employee power dynamic and to provide a more democratic and horizontal alternative. Other relevant aspects of this sector include low wages and limited purchasing power and access to capital.

69. Pacecca, p. 26.

Previous experiences of exploitation, precarity and instability led groups of migrant women and men to set up textile cooperatives, for two main reasons: a) the home and the workplace must be separate, and b) a workday cannot exceed ten hours.

*In the garment factories, the working hours and the production goals are very demanding, and you have no choice but to comply. If you request any sort of leave, they tell you to go work somewhere else where the working hours suit you. (Internal migrant woman in Argentina, 43 years old)<sup>70</sup>*

Employment in the cooperatives offers more flexibility and allows women to reconcile their paid and unpaid work responsibilities, such as adjusting their working hours to their children's school schedule or staying at home when they are sick. Despite these benefits, wages are insufficient, manufacturing orders are highly dependent on intermediaries, and it is very difficult to compete with traditional workshops in terms of costs and productivity. Many women hold two or more jobs at the same time and mentioned that they plan to go back to work in the private sector as soon as possible. Others, especially the founders of the cooperatives, often find themselves overwhelmed with the extra tasks required to keep the operation running and feel that not everyone shares the same commitment and dedication to the social and economic project behind the cooperative.

Migration forced some women to become the family breadwinners, while also keeping their care responsibilities intact. This resulted in a double or even triple workload and impacted their access to better job opportunities. In some cases, the precarity and instability of women's jobs forced other family members to seek employment, even parents who were already retired.

*I don't work, my husband is usually the one who works. I sometimes work one or two months when I find someone I trust to look after my child, because I'm scared to leave him with anyone else. I adjust to the availability of the person who will look after him so I can work (Venezuelan woman in Peru, 26 years old).<sup>71</sup>*

## The social fabric of care

Women are responsible for the vast majority of unpaid care work and spend three times as much time as men on these tasks.<sup>72</sup> Care work is the invisible base of the economy and is essential to the functioning of our societies at all levels. However, the burden of unpaid care responsibilities is unevenly distributed among the State, the market, the community, and the household under the current social organisation of care, and falls mostly on women within the household, resulting in women's time-poverty and hindering their participation in the labour force. The sexual division of labour and related gender norms that assign women the role of caregivers and men the role of providers, state welfare regimes

70. *Ibid.*, p. 31.

71. Querol and Aguilar, p. 31.

72. ONU Mujeres, *El progreso de las mujeres en América Latina y El Caribe 2017. Transformar las economías para realizar los derechos*, Panamá, 2017.



in which care is understood as a concern to be resolved within the family, and stratified experiences in which higher and middle income households have a broader range of alternatives when it comes to resolving care responsibilities are all contributing factors to the unjust care regime.<sup>73</sup> At the international level, the global care chain concept coined by Hochschild<sup>74</sup> explains the phenomenon by which the demand for caregiving within households in high- and middle-income countries is outsourced and covered by migrant women.

Care provision is a fundamental dimension of the migration experience, and women feel responsible for the wellbeing of their immediate and extended families. Migrant women in destination countries who had children or other relatives under their care, such as nephews, nieces or parents, found it extremely difficult to reconcile their paid and unpaid work. Some women had to leave their jobs because of the long working hours and the need to be at home with their children, while others had to take their babies and younger children to work with them – this was the case of most street vendors or self-employed workers. Many women received support from their mothers, aunts or close friends, who took care of the children during working hours. The situation was even more challenging for women who were the first in their families to migrate, as they did not have family and/or community networks to rely on. Some Venezuelan women in Peru refused to leave their children under the care of someone they did not know.

*After seven months my mom arrived... (...) I'm not working now, but I hope to find a job and she will take care of the child. Someday, I would like to enrol her in a CAIF [public family care centre] or somewhere, but in the meantime my mom takes care of her and helps me in the house. (Cuban woman in Uruguay, 36 years old)<sup>75</sup>*

*I don't have much free time; I work a lot. It has been difficult for me to achieve a balance between family and work life because I work, I sleep very little, I have very little time left to care for my daughters and every now and then I get the chance to take a little walk once a week or every fortnight (...) I fall asleep because I work until very late, it's 2 in the morning when they [daughters] fall asleep, so there is not much free time. (Venezuelan woman in Peru, 42 years old)<sup>76</sup>*

While several women acknowledged that some care tasks were shared with their husbands or partners, the vast majority felt responsible for domestic and care work in the household. A Dominican woman in Uruguay admitted that, back home, women were taught to do everything, from cooking and cleaning to changing the kids' clothes, and her daughter frequently complained about the unfair division of tasks between her and her brother in the house.

*Self-employment was tough because the father of my children never took care of them. When we were still living together, he left at 8 in the morning and came back at 8 in the evening. (Bolivian woman in Argentina, 34 years old)<sup>77</sup>*

73. Corina Rodríguez, *Economía feminista y economía del cuidado. Aportes conceptuales para el estudio de la desigualdad*, Revista NUEVA SOCIEDAD N°256, marzo-abril 2015.

74. Arlie Russell Hochschild, 'Global Care Chains and Emotional Surplus Value', in W Hutton and A Giddens (eds.), *On The Edge: Living with Global Capitalism*, Jonathan Cape, London, 2000.

75. Caccia et al, p. 37.

76. Querol and Aguilar, p. 42.

77. Pacecca, p. 29.

*Back in the Dominican [Republic], the chores related to the children and the house have always been women's responsibility. Some men here [in Uruguay] scrub, cook if they have to... there, you won't see that. But now some – not all – are doing it here. Those who live in the same pensión<sup>78</sup> where I live - two, three [Dominican men] - I see that they clean, they do things around the house. But in general, they work and that's it. I mean, they were raised like this (...) Even I have to fix that about myself; at least I need to put my son to mop - my daughter fights with me a lot about that (...) the boys are raised to do nothing because all the household chores are left for the girls. My 15-year-old doesn't know how to do anything, he doesn't even wash his clothes. My daughter asks the boy to help in the house (...) but mostly she's the one who cleans and cooks. (Dominican woman in Uruguay, 38 years old)<sup>79</sup>*

Women who had left their children with other family members in the country of origin, usually their mothers, aunts or sisters, felt extreme pressure to send remittances to support those left behind. Periods of unemployment or financial strain limited their capacity to remit money, which sparked feelings of worry, guilt, and depression. Several women in Uruguay shared that they frequently sent remittances not only to their immediate family members, but also to close friends and distant relatives.

*I sent [the children's aunt] part of my salary, she was in charge of keeping the fridge full and keeping services up to date. I sent 700 dollars a week, but it depended... (Colombian trafficked woman, 34 years old)<sup>80</sup>*

*I don't have children, but I send [money] to my dad, my mom, my sister, my nephews, my goddaughter, my aunts (...) I send my family [money] to eat because with what they earn they don't get enough to eat, it's not that they don't produce, everything went to hell (...) I had a lot of stress, I said, how do I pay for everything? (Venezuelan woman in Uruguay, 46 years old)<sup>81</sup>*

In most cases, split families resulted from a lack of better alternatives, especially when women did not have the necessary means to bring everyone with them, were unable to secure basic living conditions in the country of destination, or were not eligible for family reunification. Additional difficulties, such as advanced or chronic illnesses, prevented elder parents from being able to reunite with their daughters in destination. Besides the emotional hardship of being away from loved ones, the desire to help others migrate appeared frequently and was closely linked to the expectation of providing a better life for everyone.

Overall, women's experiences illustrate that migration comes at a high cost for them, especially in the absence of public policies for the recognition and redistribution of care work and with limited availability of family or community networks. On the other hand, their stories also evidence that care provision is multi-dimensional, and that there are countless ways in which women provide care for others: by sending money, through regular phone or video calls, by providing emotional support in difficult times, or even by planning a visit.<sup>82</sup>

78. *Pensiones* are usually old, dilapidated houses where individuals and/or families rent a room and share common spaces.

79. Caccia *et al*, p. 34.

80. Corporación Espacios de Mujer, p. 36.

81. Caccia *et al*, p. 36.

82. Baldassar *et al*, 2007, as cited in Bastia and Piper, p. 26.

## Social inclusion in countries of destination

Access to public services and fulfilment of basic needs are two essential components of social inclusion in its more traditional sense. Migration laws in Argentina, Uruguay, Brazil, Peru, and Colombia state that migrants and citizens have equal social and civil rights. However, evidence suggests that other norms and regulations function in practice as a barrier to inclusion and limit migrants' access to certain rights. This is the case in the healthcare system in Peru, for instance, which requires migrants to present the *carnet de extranjería* (foreigner's card) in order to receive medical assistance, resulting in the exclusion of irregular migrants. In Argentina and Brazil, on the contrary, healthcare is universal and access to medical assistance needs to be ensured for everyone, regardless of migratory status. This does not mean, however, that migrant women are not subject to exclusionary practices or do not experience discrimination in hospitals or healthcare centres.<sup>83</sup>

Many women highlighted access to public services as a positive aspect of destination countries which, in most cases, did not present major obstacles. They mainly referred to immigration services, healthcare, and education. Most of the Venezuelan women in Peru did not experience difficulties in accessing the healthcare system or receiving medical assistance, except for one woman whose brother had to be operated urgently and was asked to present an ID card, which he did not have. Other women mentioned that, on some occasions, they could not afford the minimum fee required to access the healthcare system, or that staff were too rigid with the paperwork requirements, even in emergencies. In Brazil, women were grateful for the support received upon arrival at the border, where they were provided medical assistance, accommodation, support with documentation and transportation to other cities to reunite with their families, all as part of *Operation Welcome*.<sup>84</sup> Almost all of them identified language as the main barrier when accessing public services, as none of the basic information is provided in Spanish and it was difficult to understand their rights and obligations in the country. With translation and interpretation support from our research partner and other NGOs, the women were able to enrol their children in school and request medical appointments. A common complaint was the lack of immigration services in Guarulhos and the need to travel to the capital city for administrative procedures linked to migratory regularisation or work permits.

In Uruguay, women valued positively that migrants have the same rights as citizens and emphasised the essential support received by certain government programmes. However, many mentioned that there are still significant gaps to be addressed when it comes to accessing and enjoying these rights in practice. Women complained that documentation procedures are complex and requirements are hard to meet; that they cannot access certain social security benefits due to lack of information or administrative delays; and that labour laws violations are extremely common.

83. Raisa Ortiz Cetra and María Inés Pacecca, *Laberintos de papel. Desigualdad y regularización migratoria en América del Sur*, CELS / CAREF, 2020.

84. *Operation Welcome*, or *Operação Acolhida* in Portuguese, is a voluntary relocation programme launched by the Brazilian Federal Government in 2018 in response to the arrival of Venezuelan migrants to Brazil through the border city of Pacaraima. For more information about *Operation Welcome*, see: <https://www.unhcr.org/news/press/2021/4/607e8ebe4/relocations-brazil-offer-dignity-hope-thousands-venezuelans.html>

*The people from the Alzheimer association helped me so much to get all the paperwork (...) I also received support from Comuna Mujer [a programme that provides psychosocial and legal assistance to women victims of gender-based violence], and even from Soluciones Habitacionales [a programme that provides support with rent for women victims of gender-based violence]. (Ecuadorian woman in Uruguay, 40 years old)<sup>85</sup>*

In Argentina, those with long-term permanent residency were able to access certain social programmes and emergency support schemes<sup>86</sup> that served to complement the limited income resulting from their work in the cooperatives or in other sectors, and in some cases, played a key role in the continuation of these labour collectives in the social economy.

*(...) in certain circumstances, their unpaid labour (as caregivers) or unregistered jobs (as employees) made them visible as beneficiaries of direct transfer programmes that contributed, indirectly, to the sustainability of these cooperative, training, empowerment and exchange spaces that have marked a before and after in the lives of so many women.<sup>87</sup>*

Another fundamental aspect of migrant women's experiences of social inclusion is related to support networks in the country of destination. These mostly informal networks are usually formed by migrants from the same country and serve diverse purposes. In many cases, those who have migrated before, including family members, close friends, and acquaintances, help more recent arrivals to navigate administrative procedures, find a place to stay, access job opportunities and even lend money to those in need. Other networks are formed around shared religious beliefs, like groups of Catholic Cubans in Uruguay or Evangelical Venezuelans in Brazil, in which women and their families find a sense of belonging and community. Cultural practices linked to music and dancing, such as women's groups of *comparsa*<sup>88</sup> and *candombe*<sup>89</sup> are also important activities in which they find joy and build relationships with others. These connections have eased their feelings of isolation and have made the hardships linked to migration more bearable.

*I know someone from Idas y Vueltas [the research partner] who told me 'since you like percussion, I'm planning to join a comparsa that goes out near my home, you can come home, familiarise yourself and start moving' (...) When I went, they introduced me to everyone in the comparsa and I started taking pictures (...) I ran into one of the dancers near my place and she asked if I wanted to get to know La Melaza.<sup>90</sup> The next Sunday she introduced me to the group and now I play the drums. (Venezuelan woman in Uruguay, 46 years old)<sup>91</sup>*

*When we moved, we met some Catholic Cubans in Uruguay by chance. And it was the best thing that happened to me. What I enjoy the most about Uruguay is my church, my fellow Cubans, but also Uruguayans, Brazilians, Venezuelans. You [the research partner] have helped us a lot, but these people have given us so much warmth, a WhatsApp group of Cubans, and my children also have their youth group. (Cuban woman in Uruguay, 48 years old)<sup>92</sup>*

85. Caccia et al, p. 42.

86. Such as Asignación Universal por Hijo (AUH), Salario Social Complementario or Ingreso Familiar de Emergencia (IFE).

87. Pacceca, p. 33.

88. In Uruguay, *comparsa* refers to a group of *candombe* dancers and drummers. In other parts of Latin America, *comparsas* are an ensemble of singers, dancers and musicians who wear costumes and masks and perform traditional music at dance parades and during carnival times.

89. A style of music and dance that originated in Uruguay among the Afro-descendant community. *Candombe* is also common in Argentina, Paraguay and Brazil.

90. La Melaza is a *comparsa* group formed by women which is characteristic of the *candombe* cultural scene in Montevideo.

91. Caccia et al, p. 42.

92. *Ibid.*, p. 43.

*As soon as I reached Guarulhos with my husband and my daughter, we had to live in my sister-in-law's house, who took me to a protestant church. I didn't have anything and the pastor helped me find a home and supported me by paying three months of rent. The people in the community are curious about my story, they are interested in learning more about my culture and learning Spanish. Despite all the problems, I feel very good and happy here in Guarulhos. (Venezuelan woman in Brazil, 35 years old)<sup>93</sup>*

Many migrant women were also grateful for the support received by local NGOs and self-organised groups of migrants, which consisted of food coupons or baskets, clothes, access to healthcare, free language lessons and referral to shelters or other institutions. In many cases, the NGOs acted as a first point of contact for the women and their families to meet other migrants and start taking part in social or cultural activities.

In Argentina, the cooperatives are not just a source of employment, but also a social and economic project involving much more than work. Support networks either existed before or are usually built around the cooperatives, which in some cases also function as cultural and education spaces where women learn about sexual and reproductive health and rights and challenge patriarchal norms. *La Tiendita Migrante*, an online cooperative that sells 'anti-racist sanitary kits', was formed by two Mexican migrants and activists in Buenos Aires together with a group of migrant men from Senegal and a woman from Guinea. They met at the Spanish language classes organised by *Bloque de Trabajadores Migrantes* (BTM), a self-organised group of migrant activists from Argentina, and the idea behind this cooperative was to provide an alternative source of income for African migrants during the pandemic, when street vending was no longer an option. Similarly, *La Minga* is a cultural cooperative formed by Afro-Uruguayan migrant women that combines income generating activities with anti-racism activism, particularly against Afro-descendant people in Argentina.

*The idea behind these mingas<sup>94</sup> is the empowerment of the Afro-descendant community; and to show that many of the things associated with Afro culture (candombe, music, dances, food) are indeed work, but are usually not recognised as such mainly because they are done by Afro descendants. (Uruguayan woman in Argentina, 55 years old)<sup>95</sup>*

*(...) La Tiendita [Migrante] has been a viable solution in a very critical situation. It has allowed self-employment away from the streets, it has strengthened the organisation and has enabled other learnings, such as travelling around and getting to know the city better. (Mexican woman in Argentina, 32 years old)<sup>96</sup>*

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93. Rocha *et al*, p. 25.

94. *Mingas* are cultural fairs or gatherings where local producers, entrepreneurs, and artisans sell food and crafts, and which often include musical and artistic performances.

95. Pacecca, p. 21.

96. *Ibid.*, p. 23.

## Mental health and psychological well-being

Women experienced feelings of guilt, frustration, and depression when they could not fulfil their expectations as main providers and carers. Gendered expectations, such as having to sacrifice their well-being and personal development for the sake of their children, parents or other close relatives, weighed heavily on them, even when these were not explicit. Women felt responsible for their family's wellbeing in origin and destination, and this burden often brought out guilt and anxiety, especially when they were unable to secure good living conditions in the host country and send remittances to their dependents back home.

*You feel small, like the tiniest thing in the universe; and alone. But well, I was able to do it and overcome this. You feel really depressed, the issue of depression is strong, it's not easy. But thankfully you can count on people to help lift your spirits and keep moving forward. (Venezuelan woman in Uruguay, 39 years old)<sup>97</sup>*

Perceptions around women's migration in origin countries tend to be ambivalent and contradictory, as those left behind value migrant women's essential role in the family's well-being while also blaming them for leaving their children behind and exposing them to such a painful experience.<sup>98</sup>

*It is not well-seen for a mother to abandon her six-year-old daughter, because it's the mom who provides care, who weaves life. From my family's side, they didn't agree with my decision. My in-laws told me to take advantage of this opportunity and encouraged me, so I made the decision to leave. (Colombian returnee migrant woman, 37 years old)<sup>99</sup>*

In some cases, parents, especially mothers, were concerned about their daughters and grandchildren's safety in the country of destination, and worried about not being able to 'be there' for them. It is clear that migrant women make sacrifices in order to provide for their families, which often come at a high cost for their personal development and psychosocial well-being. When asked about their feelings about the migratory process, many women were conflicted, although they usually referred to their immediate and extended family members as the reasons to keep pushing forward in these challenging scenarios.

Some Venezuelan women in Peru shared that they found it difficult to think about the near future without feeling anxious or stressed. These sentiments were associated with the uncertainty of their lives in Peru, and the sensation of being stuck in constant survival mode, as well as the worsening situation in Venezuela. Some women had hoped to return after one or two years, if Venezuela's economic and humanitarian crisis showed signs of improvement, but this was not the case. The pandemic significantly worsened these feelings, as women and their families saw their lives become even more precarious.

97. Caccia *et al*, p. 42.

98. Maulik and Petroziello, 2016, p. 67.

99. Corporación Espacios de Mujer, p. 36.

## The impact of COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the difficulties, barriers, and abuse experienced by people on the move, and served as a pretext for the emergence and consolidation of anti-immigration measures in South America and around the world, with increased securitisation of borders and tightening of entry restrictions. In some cases, migration services were overwhelmed and understaffed, which resulted in increased difficulty for migrants to access or renew necessary documentation to remain in regular status. In other cases, governments' responses included discriminatory practices towards migrants and blamed them for the spread of the virus.

In this context, the gendered dimensions of the health and economic crises triggered by the pandemic have been extensively documented. Women experienced heightened job insecurity, as lockdowns and containment measures had a particularly negative impact in highly feminised labour sectors, such as services, domestic and care work, education, and tourism. As most migrant women work in the informal economy and have no access to social protections or labour rights, it was difficult for them to stop working during lockdowns while having no access to an alternative source of income. Many of their jobs were not recognised as essential, forcing them to either stay at home without pay or go to work despite imposed restrictions. At the same time, the closure of schools meant that children had to stay at home, which not only increased women's burden of unpaid care work, but also significantly limited their ability to continue working while also caring for their families. Experiences of gender-based violence also increased, due to many women being stuck at home with their abusers, and the limited capacity of support services during lockdowns.

*My husband and I live well, we have been together for four years. We have problems like any couple, but we had never crossed the line of physical aggression. We had been married for two years when we decided to come to Brazil together (...) But a lot has changed with the pandemic. We are unemployed and I see him very nervous, he doesn't know what to do. There are times when I want to return to Venezuela – between dying of hunger here and there I prefer there, because at least we are close to our families. He disagrees, and thinks we've already suffered a lot to get here and no matter how bad the situation in Brazil is, it's still better than in Venezuela. One day we attacked each other. He hit me and I hit him back. It was just this time, but it was something that had never happened before and I'm afraid it might happen again. (Venezuelan woman in Brazil, 33 years old)<sup>100</sup>*

Many of the women lost their jobs during the pandemic and were unable to secure a stable income. In Peru, a number of women had to stay at temporary shelters because they could not afford to pay rent, while in Brazil most women received support with food baskets and other essential goods that they could no longer afford. In Uruguay, many women were unable to leave their precarious jobs out of fear they would not find a better alternative. In Argentina, the work in all the cooperatives was either significantly reduced or completely halted during the pandemic, which negatively impacted migrant women's earnings.

100. Rocha et al, pp. 31-32.

*Everyone in my family [husband, brother-in-law and sister] worked in sales. With the pandemic, everything was closed and people were fired. It was the first time everyone in our house was unemployed. It's very disheartening to go through a situation like this, and even more so in a country other than your own, where you don't have many people that can help you find other jobs. (Venezuelan woman in Brazil, 37 years old)<sup>101</sup>*

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101. *Ibid.*, p. 28.





REFLECTIONS  
AND  
ACTIONS  
FOR  
CHANGE



# REFLECTIONS AND ACTIONS FOR CHANGE

An important outcome of this FPAR were the learnings and reflections that led our research partners to revise and adjust their programmes or to conceptualise new lines of work that had not been considered a priority. In some cases, it also helped to reach new groups of women that they had not collaborated with in the past, and whose voices and stories are often left behind. Whenever possible, partners referred research participants to available support services and provided information about their rights and obligations in the countries of destination or upon return. In getting together and finding a platform to speak up about their dreams, hopes, struggles and experiences, many women found a sense of power and community.

*For me it was a very powerful experience. During the team meetings, either for the preparation of the questionnaire or the selection and invitation of the women who would collaborate in the research, I forgot about my migrant status. I was just one more person in the research team. My opinions were more technical, regarding the best way to work on certain topics with women considering the difficulties with the pandemic. However, when the role changed and I answered the questionnaire and participated in the Focus Group as a migrant woman, I accessed the memories of my own migration and adaptation process in Brazil. I got emotional several times. I had the opportunity to share details of my story that even my own coworkers did not know. (Maholi Leonet, Venezuelan refugee in Brazil and peer researcher)<sup>102</sup>*

In Argentina, CAREF's close engagement with the six cooperatives led the organisation to launch a new programmatic line focused on the *social or popular economy* sector, in an effort to gain further insights into the specific realities of migrant women self-employed in cooperatives and bring their concerns to the forefront of their advocacy. In 2022, CAREF will hold a series of discussions with relevant government bodies to address the shortcomings of existing migratory regulations and advocate for the recognition of self-employment and cooperative work as a valid source of employment for regularisation. The research team recognised that the FPAR framework was instrumental in this process, as it allowed them to improve their work with migrant activists and migrant-led grassroots collectives.


In Uruguay, Idas & Vueltas implemented two participatory workshops focused on questions and issues raised by the women during in-depth interviews: the workshop on labour rights facilitated direct connections between migrant women and government officials from the Ministry of Labour, who had organised a similar initiative in the past without much attendance. The second, in collaboration with a network of feminist lawyers, was focused on gender-based violence where attendees shared their experiences in a safe space and received information on existing resources available to them.

<sup>102</sup>. Rocha et al, p. 18.

Besides engaging in policy advocacy in support of migrants' rights at the local and national level, particularly against anti-immigration policies and practices of the current administration, ASBRAD in Brazil started providing free psychosocial support to migrant children and adolescents in response to a shared concern by the research participants who had children under their care. In addition, in collaboration with the Undersecretary for Racial Equality in Guarulhos and two private entities, ASBRAD currently offers free Portuguese lessons for migrants of all nationalities with the aim of supporting their social and economic inclusion and fostering cultural exchanges with the host community.

In Colombia, Espacios de Mujer gained valuable insights into migrant and trafficked women's perceptions and experiences of return and reintegration that fed into their feminist training programme Escuela Atenea, which now includes a module dedicated to migration. Similarly, the research team developed a methodology for the reintegration of returnee Colombian citizens with a focus on victims of trafficking. After the launch of all country research reports in a public webinar, our partner was contacted by a human rights organisation focused on racial justice in Colombia to identify possible opportunities for collaboration and joint advocacy actions.

In Peru, CHS Alternativo began implementing new activities to address migrants' concerns, particularly with regards to their social and economic inclusion in the country. Additionally, CHS is working to strengthen their alliances and networks with migrants in order to establish trust-based relationships and support collective action. To this end, the organisation is coordinating with NGOs and CSOs focused on migrants' rights to exchange experiences and identify opportunities for collaboration.



CONCLUSIONS  
AND  
RECOMMENDATIONS



## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This report highlights that migration can be a positive experience, as it allowed women to support themselves and their families across borders, and build community and networks of solidarity among friends, relatives and other migrants in destination countries. In some cases, migration enabled women to realise their dreams of continuing their studies, building a house for their parents, or setting up their own businesses. At the same time, it is also fraught with multiple challenges caused by states' inefficient and insufficient policy and institutional frameworks at the intersections of migration, labour, and gender; bureaucratic and complicated administrative procedures; social attitudes of gender-based discrimination, racism and xenophobia; weak labour protections in certain sectors where migrant women are overrepresented; the exclusion of migrants from social protections; and the continuous invisibility and undervaluation of women's paid and unpaid work.

Our research shows that there is still a long way to go in order to achieve comprehensive socioeconomic inclusion for migrant and trafficked women and ensure their full and equal participation in all aspects of society. This will not be possible as long as women continue to experience poor working conditions while also being the primary care providers within their families; as long as their essential contributions to the functioning and development of communities and societies remain unrecognised; and as long as they have to sacrifice their personal development, wellbeing and autonomy in order to ensure basic living conditions for themselves and their loved ones.

Based on our conversations with the 125 women in Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay, Peru, and Colombia, who shared their stories and insights with us, and our partners' extensive experience in support of migrant and trafficked women's rights, we highlight the following recommendations:

States need to uphold democratic values and the rule of law, combat corruption, end gender-based discrimination and violence, and create decent work opportunities for all in an effort to target the root causes that push people, particularly women, to migrate in the first place. Migration should be an informed and voluntary decision and not the only viable option to earn a living.

Promote social acceptance of migrants to combat xenophobia and negative social attitudes towards them by fostering cultural exchanges between the host community and migrants. Many migrant women have been subject to discriminatory and xenophobic attitudes in destination countries, triggering feelings of fear and isolation. Cultural exchanges foster social cohesion and facilitate experience-sharing and relationship building among locals and migrants.

Monitor the effective implementation of ILO Conventions 189 and 190. While the ratification of these Conventions is a step in the right direction, there are still significant gaps to be addressed between legislation on paper and in practice. Domestic work continues to be highly informal, precarious and poorly regulated, and labour laws violations as well as abuse and harassment are pervasive among domestic, care and informal workers.

Develop and implement comprehensive care systems based on the principle of co-responsibility between the State, the market, the community and the household, as well as among men and women, along with policies that promote the recognition of women's unpaid work.

In countries with existing care systems, or where these are currently being developed, it is important to assess migrant women's effective access to policies, resources and services available in order to identify and address barriers and exclusionary practices (mainly related to language, gender-based discrimination, racism and xenophobia, limited vacancies, and lack of information, among others). While Uruguay's National Care System (SNIC) is a major advancement in this regard, government officials interviewed by Idas & Vueltas recognised certain practical limitations that directly affect migrant women's access to the SNIC. An example is that public family care centres (CAIFs) require that an adult is present to accompany the children's adaptation process, which is not possible for women who work long hours or have no paid leave and is even more challenging for migrant women who might not have family or community support networks to rely on.

Develop and implement a set of educational policies and programmes to challenge the invisibility and undervaluation of women's paid and unpaid labour, with a focus on overcoming sexist stereotypes and breaking down patriarchal social and cultural norms. Some of the challenges faced by the migrant women who participated in this study are also common among working women in general, which is why we emphasise the need for comprehensive policies and programmes targeting the sexual division of labour and harmful gendered norms.

Ensure that the recognition of educational, training and/or skills certificates is affordable and accessible to all migrants. Many women were either unable to gather the necessary documentation to certify their studies, particularly in the case of Venezuelan and Cuban women, or could not afford the costs of certification.

Ensure low-cost international money transfers between countries of origin and destination. Nearly all of the women who participated in this study regularly send remittances to their families and relatives in COOs, even when their income is low while the cost of the transfers is very high.

Ensure that emergency or extraordinary mechanisms for regularisation, such as the ones currently in place for Venezuelan nationals across several Latin and South American countries, are not the only available options for migrants to regularise their status and facilitate the transition towards more permanent and ordinary procedures.

Ensure that migrants can access public services on par with nationals, with emphasis on migrant women's access to gender-based violence support services, sexual and reproductive healthcare, and mental healthcare and psychosocial assistance.

Promote formalisation and skills certification in highly informal and insecure labour sectors, such as domestic and care work.

Provide gender-sensitive and anti-racism trainings to public and private institutions that assist and frequently interact with migrants, such as migration and border officers, justice system officials, and healthcare providers, among others. Several migrant and trafficked women shared experiences of discrimination and violence at some point in their migration journey and when accessing public or private services. In some cases, women avoided requesting information or support out of fear of being mistreated or discriminated.

Improve the dissemination of information on migrants' rights and obligations in both countries of origin and destination, with a focus on available services, reporting mechanisms and labour rights. Some women recognised that many of the rights violations they experienced were related to not being aware of the labour laws. However, most of the time it was women's urgency and the limited options available to them that made them tolerate abuses and harassment out of fear of losing their sole source of income.

Create a return network and aid or credit funds targeted towards women and strengthen migrant communities in CODs to promote their integration.

Promote regular migration channels and accessible entry and stay requirements for extra-regional migrants.

Produce systematic and disaggregated data on migration flows and migrant populations to inform evidence-based policies.

The country research reports published as part of this Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR) project coordinated by the Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women include:

***Cortar los nudos. Mujeres, migrantes y cooperativistas en el Área Metropolitana de Buenos Aires, by CAREF (Argentina).***

[www.caref.org.ar](http://www.caref.org.ar)

***Construyendo un Mundo Plural. Experiencias y percepciones de mujeres migrantes venezolanas en Guarulhos, São Paulo, by ASBRAD (Brazil).***

[www.asbrad.org.br](http://www.asbrad.org.br)

***Vivencias en el retorno y la reintegración. Mujeres migrantes y víctimas de Trata retornadas a Colombia, by Corporación Espacios de Mujer (Colombia).***

[www.espaciosdemujer.org](http://www.espaciosdemujer.org)

***Inclusión social y económica de mujeres migrantes venezolanas en Perú. Transiciones migratorias y trayectorias laborales, by CHS Alternativo (Perú).***

[www.chsalternativo.org](http://www.chsalternativo.org)

***Sostener la vida a través de las fronteras. Cuidados y trayectorias laborales de mujeres migrantes en Uruguay, by Idas & Vueltas (Uruguay).***

[www.idasyvueltas.org.uy](http://www.idasyvueltas.org.uy)





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