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Negotiating the Colombian border: Venezuelan migrant women's survival in Cúcuta

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List of Acronyms

DIAN	Dirección de Impuestos y Aduanas Nacionales [National Tax and Customs Office]
ELN	Ejército Nacional de Liberación [The National Liberation Army]
EPL	Ejército Popular de Liberación [The Popular Liberation Army]
FARC-EP	Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia-Ejército del Pueblo [Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia- People's Army]
GAO	Organized Crime Groups
ILO	International Labour Organization
IMF	The International Monetary Fund
ISS	International Institute of Social Studies
IOM	International Organization for Migration
OLP	Operación para la Liberación del Pueblo [Operations for the Liberation of the People]
PEP	Permiso Especial de Residencia [Especial Residence Permit]
TMF	La Tarjeta de Movilidad Fronteriza [Border Mobility Card]
UNHCR	The UN Refugee Agency
UN	United Nations

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Abstract

This study is about how Venezuelan migrant women negotiate their survival in a border city in Colombia. Cúcuta was selected because the city has been socially and economically very important since at least the 1970s, for migration which was formerly mainly from Colombia to Venezuela. The Simon Bolivar bridge located in its metropolitan area is the most used crossing point along the border. In this study, the border is understood as a set of practices by different actors. Survival in this context is understood not only in economic terms, for the migrant women now crossing from Venezuela, but includes how these migrant women cope with different actors, including police, migration officers, and criminals extorting them. One finding was that Venezuelan women migrants' vulnerability was reinforced in the case of those engaged in selling sex in the city, because of the conditions and the stigmatisation towards this activity. One way the women migrants reduce the risks of their status and their work is through female resistance networks involving relations of mutual support and protection.

Relevance to Development Studies

This research touches upon a relevant issue for development studies: How migrant women affected by poverty and marginalization negotiate their survival in various contexts and urban spaces. Such a study aims to construct a new narrative and to highlight problems that have remained invisible. The study shines a light on the strategies of women to navigate and operate within the informal economy despite being neglected by the current policy discourse. It is hoped that this very current research could be useful to policymakers and development practitioners to understand Venezuelan women's experiences. With it, it is also expected that local and national authorities will become interested in helping to enlarge these migrant women's capabilities to negotiate their daily survival and to move into longer-term perspectives.

Keywords

Venezuelan, migrant, women, Colombia, Cúcuta, bordering, survival, negotiating, informality

Chapter 1: The Opening Act

1.1. Nature of the problem and importance of this research

The political, economic and social crisis currently gripping Venezuela has pushed more than four million people to leave the country since 2015. Venezuelans have migrated to different Latin American countries, but more than 1.4 million people have fled to Colombia to start a new life (Collins 2019a, UNHCR 2019, Migración Colombia 2019).

The majority of people crossing the Colombian-Venezuelan border arrive in Cúcuta. This commercial border city is important for the thousands of Venezuelans looking to satisfy their basic needs or for those searching for a new home (Revista Semana 2018). More than half of the Venezuelans living in the city are women, and this research aims to understand how they are negotiating their survival.

In Chapter 1, the scene is set, explaining the context of the Venezuela / Colombia border. In Chapter 2, how the border and, more specifically, the Simon Bolivar bridge used to be perceived before 2015, and how its role in the migrant crisis changed after its closure by the Venezuelan government will be laid out. This is relevant to the beginning of Venezuelan women's journeys when they cross to Colombia, as well as throughout their stay in the city. They are constantly reminded by government officials that due to their migratory status that they could be sent back to Venezuela at any time. The variety of informal activities that Venezuelan women perform to earn a daily income, as well as their working and living conditions are documented in Chapter 3. Finally, in Chapter 4, the focus is on how, while being out in Cúcuta's streets, women have to interact with criminals who extort them, the Colombian police, and abusive men. I will look closely at women's coping mechanisms to deal with them.

Overall, the importance of this research lies in the fact that Venezuela's social and economic crisis is not expected to end anytime soon. Nor is the flow of people fleeing the country to neighboring nations. Whatever happens internally in Venezuela has a social, political, and economic impact on the Latin American region. For instance, the Venezuelan migratory crisis has added another burden to the complex Colombian reality. The country is currently enjoying a somewhat fragile peace, brokered by the peace agreement—negotiated between the government of Juan Manuel Santos in 2012 and the hemisphere's biggest guerrilla movement, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC in Spanish). This Peace Agreement is currently being hindered by a slow implementation and a rise of violence. For a border area like Norte de Santander, where the state presence has always been weak, it means that the central government has to face the challenges of building a sustainable peace but also to deal with the arrival of Venezuelans. For the Venezuelans, it means that while they have to struggle to meet their basic needs, they also are exposed to the violation of their human rights (Asmann 2018, ICRC 2019).

I believe that this research will contribute to constructing a new narrative and highlight the experiences of marginalized women who operate in the informal economy and may not have clear migratory status. The outcome of this research could be used by policymakers and

development practitioners to understand their reality and to help to create inclusive and realistic policies that alleviate the suffering of these women as a consequence of migrating.

1.2 Background to the Proposed Study

1.2.1 The Venezuelan Crisis

The Venezuelan crisis has very complex and intertwined roots that are social, economic, political and criminal, and can be traced back to the time when Hugo Chavez was president of Venezuela. Venezuela, once known as one of the world's richest oil-economies, has collapsed socially and economically due to a series of economic and political policies. The country is perhaps in the most precarious positions of any other in the region (Kott 2012: 82).

Under the regime of Nicolás Maduro, the food and medicine shortages combined with chronic criminality and corruption has brought Venezuela to collapse (John 2018: 5). Overall, between 2013 and 2017, the Venezuelan economy shrunk by 50%. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) estimates that hyperinflation reached 1,300,000% and it is expected to grow to 10,000,000 by the end of 2019. The economic emergency has impacted the living conditions of Venezuelans, who are struggling to satisfy their basic needs. Nearly 90 percent of the country's population now lives below the poverty line. (Universidad del Rosario and Fundación Konrad Adenauer 2018:6, Prichard 2019).

Tensions between the socialist government and the opposition have always existed (Buxton 2005:328) but escalated after Maduro's re-election in 2018, which many considered illegitimate. In January 2019, opposition leader Juan Guaidó proclaimed himself president of Venezuela, called for the military (the key pillar for supporting Maduro) and people to turn against Maduro and force him out of office. Although Guaidó's move to declare himself the interim president was supported by 53 countries, in practical terms he has little power (Ribando 2019). Government repression and social tensions have worsened as Maduro and his cronies have retaliated political opponents and protests (BBC 2019).

Violence and insecurity have also increased in Venezuela in recent years. The country has the highest rates of homicides in Latin America and the Caribbean – 81.4 per 100,000 inhabitants, according to the Venezuelan Observatory of Violence. Of Venezuela's 335 municipalities, 296 are suffering from an epidemic of violence (OVV 2018). New forms of organized crime have emerged. Criminal groups, known as *megabandas* (mega-gangs) kidnap, extort, and traffic drugs; pro-government armed groups known as *colectivos* (collectives) have become criminalized in the territories they control. Finally, prison-based networks called *pranes* (prison slang for 'lead prisoners') have increased their power and control over drug markets, contraband and weapons inside and outside the jails (InSight Crime 2017a:8).

1.2.2 Venezuelan migration to Colombia

Venezuela's internal struggles and problems has prompted more than four million Venezuelans to leave their country since 2015. That figure is expected to reach more than five million in 2019 (UNHCR 2019, Watson 2018).¹ Of all the Caribbean and Latin American countries, more than 1.4 million Venezuelans choose Colombia as their number one destination for starting a new life (Migración Colombia 2019, John 2018: 2).

Historically the 2,219 km of the border between Colombia and Venezuela (the equivalent of the distance between Greece and Spain) sees a continuous flow of people, goods, and money (InSight Crime 2016),² but the migration patterns have varied across the time. It used to be Colombians that would flee to Venezuela. The first peak of Colombians migrating to Venezuela occurred in the late 1960s and 1970s due to the oil boom, which attracted skilled and professional workers as well as unskilled labourers (Pellegrino 1989 in Cerrutti 2009:10). Later, in the 1990s and 2000, with the rise of right-wing paramilitarism, the Colombian conflict went through one of its bloodiest phases, pushing thousands of Colombians over to Venezuela (Carvajal 2017, InSight Crime 2017b:27).

On the other hand, Venezuelan migration to Colombia can be traced back for more than a decade. The first wave occurred in 2004 and was comprised mainly of Venezuelan oil industry professionals. A second phase occurred in 2010 when Venezuelan executives and investors wanted to protect their assets from economic instability and socialist policies. Finally, in 2014, a third wave brought mainly middle-class people, professionals, and students who wanted to continue their professional careers in the neighboring country (Carvajal 2017). It must be clarified that a significant number of these migrants did not successfully settle in Colombia due to the absence of an appropriate migratory policy: "Venezuelan people faced many obstacles to start a business or continue with their studies. The procedures and regulations are mainly established for nationals, and many people with money decided to go to other countries."³

The fourth and most recent wave of Venezuelan migrants started in 2015 when the Venezuelan government decided to close their side of the border. This investigation argues that this year should be considered the breaking point because it was when the most vulnerable Venezuelan people starting to leave Venezuela, and it is when the border dynamic changed dramatically. These two claims will be further explained in Chapter 2.

¹ Information included in the Final Essay for Gender and Sexuality Lenses Class

² Information included in the Final Essay for the Case Study Class

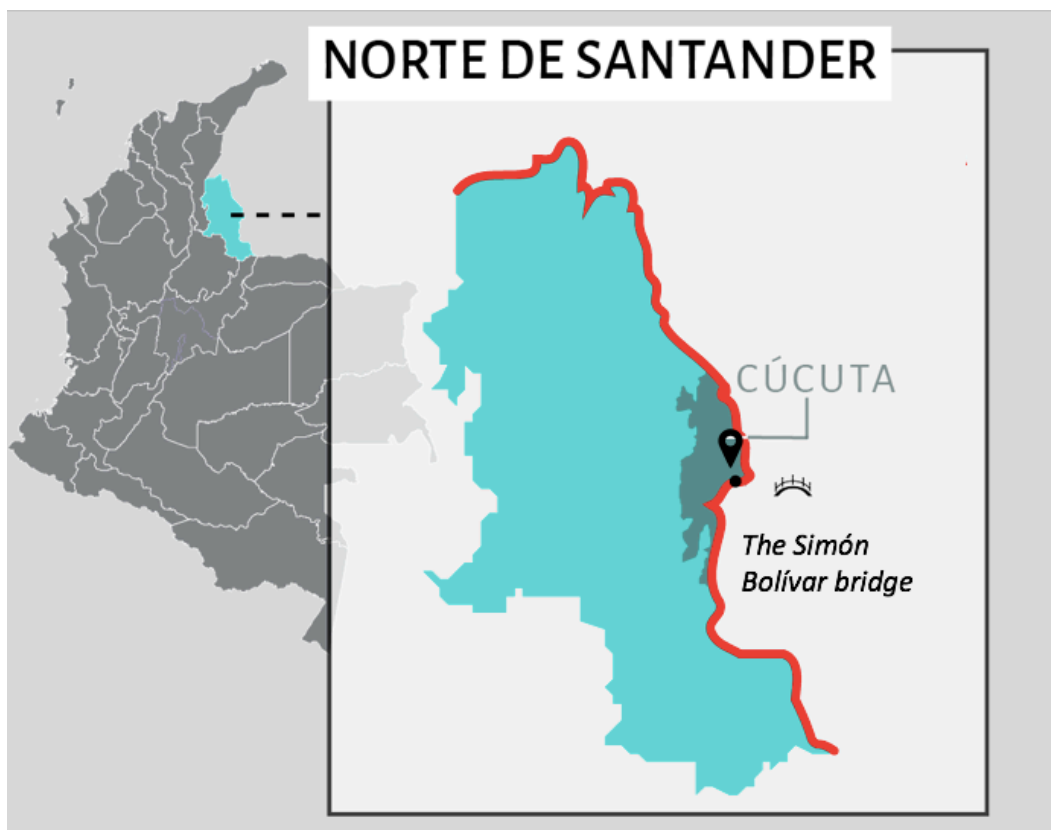
³ Interview with the Border Secretariat Juan Carlos Caicedo (15 July 2019)

1.2.3 Cúcuta: the border city where the two realities meet

With a population of 650,000 inhabitants, Cúcuta receives between 35,000 and 50,000 Venezuelan people per day⁴, and it has become the new home for more than 111,000 Venezuelans (Migración Colombia 2019).⁵ Due to the number of Venezuelans here, its important geographic location and relevance in socio-economic terms, Cúcuta was chosen as a representative case for the border dynamics and the migration phenomenon (Gerring 2007:89).

To cross by land from Venezuela to Colombia there are 7 different crossing points. In Cúcuta and its metropolitan area, there are three of them, the Francisco de Paula Santander Bridge, the International Bridge Las Tienditas, and the Simon Bolivar Bridge. The latter – located in La Parada in Villa del Rosario municipality – is the most frequently used crossing.⁶

Map 1 'Cúcuta'



Source: Proyecto Migración Venezuela with author's modifications⁷

⁴ This number can go up until 70,000 according to Migration Colombia

⁵ Interview with the Border Secretariat Juan Carlos Caicedo (15 July 2019)

⁶ Interview with Regional Director of Migration Colombia (16 July 2019), Interview with the Border Secretariat Juan Carlos Caicedo (15 July 2019)

On top of being the most significant transit point and the administrative capital of the department of Norte de Santander, Cúcuta is part of one of the regions most affected by the armed conflict. It is where members of the guerrillas and criminal groups, both national and international, come to meet, make personal investments and negotiate drug trafficking deals. The National Liberation Army (ELN); the Popular Liberation army (EPL); dissidents of 33th FARC Front; and two former paramilitary groups now known as Organized Crime Groups (GAO): Urabeños and Rastrojos all have a presence in Cúcuta. Recently smaller criminal structures have also formed, such as La Línea and La Frontera, both of which run human trafficking and human smuggling networks. The city is one of the most important places for money laundering and according to the Regional Prosecutor's Office, the metropolitan area of Cúcuta, together with Ocaña (another Colombian municipality in the area), are the most corrupt municipalities in the department (InSight Crime 2019b).

Socio-economic affairs in Cúcuta are closely tied to Venezuela. In the 2000s, when Chávez was president and their currency was stronger, Venezuelans used to come “to purchase expensive goods such as electronics or high-quality clothing items. Some of these were produced in Colombia, and others were imported”. Likewise, Colombians used to go to Venezuela to travel and to look for economic opportunities. This is no longer the case due to the Venezuelan economy, but Cúcuta became the pantry of essential goods for Venezuelans (Collins 2019, Yurdakul 2019).

1.3 Theoretical Framework and key concepts

1.3.1 Border/Bordering Migrants

Traditionally, borders are understood as the legal lines separating jurisdictions, or as broad zones of transition between different societies and centers of power. The term border, boundaries, and frontiers are present in all languages and mostly are understood as the “limits of social groups” (Bartlett and Mackay 1989 in Anderson and O’Dowd 1999: 594).

This research moves beyond defining borders merely as ‘lines on a map’ that delimit a territory (Newman 2003:14). Relying on the term ‘bordering’, the Colombian and Venezuelan border is seen as a mode of interaction “between border crossers and border agents (not just border police, but also local police, employers, local citizens, social workers, etc.” (Fontanari, 2017, Weber, 2013 in Fabini 2019: 176, Fernandez and Fabini:2018).

Borders are crossed, and from the moment that they are established, there are people interested in moving beyond the barrier (Newman 2003:14). As it will be explained in Chapter 2, before 2015, Colombians and Venezuelans used the Simon Bolivar Bridge regularly while there was not any type of governmental control. After that year, with the aggravation of the Venezuelan crisis and the closure of the border, this dynamic changed and the ‘migrant category’ became relevant to differentiate ‘us’ from ‘them’ (Anzaldúa 1989:9). There is not a legal definition of ‘migrant’, but the United Nations and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) agree that an international migrant is someone who changes his or her country of residence, temporarily or permanently (United Nations 2019, IOM 2019).

Migrants are the people who left Venezuela, that only have Venezuelan nationality, and are currently residing in Colombia. This definition matches the recent classification of the Venezuelan population made by the Colombian government. According to this, there are four categories: Colombian returnees (Colombian people who lived in Venezuela and returned after 2015), the mixed families (families with Venezuelan and Colombian members), the foster families (Colombian families receiving Venezuelan migrants) and the migrants. Within the migrants, there is a differentiation between *migrantes pendulares* (border crossers), individuals who cross the border daily and go back to Venezuela, and the *caminantes*, which are those who walk across Colombia to find a way out to other countries.

With regard to the migrant's reasons and motivations for migrating, there are exhaustive debates about the structural factors and the migrants' agency. There are two main approaches - the functionalist or the neoclassical model, which argues that migration is the outcome of "individual decision-making processes," where the individual could expect more significant economic benefits in the country of destination (John 2018:3). On the other hand, the structural approach argues that international migration is caused "by socio-spatial inequalities that constrain the life chances of individuals and members of specific social classes in particular places" (Koser and Salt, 1997 in John 2018:3, Wright 1995:772). This investigation takes a structural position, and it claims that the Venezuelan economic, political and social situation, pushed more than four million Venezuelans to move and look for better living conditions (Gould 2015:145, John 2018:3).

1.3.2 Negotiating Daily Survival: Women Migrants' Coping Strategies

There is copious academic research on negotiation, both in terms of published studies and conceptual perspectives. The traditional concept of negotiation refers to when two or more parties need to reach a joint decision or an agreement while there are shared and opposed interests (Shonk 2019). In this research paper, negotiation will be understood as a process involving numerous actors, where Venezuelan women's agency operates through a combination of individual and collective strategies within a matrix of relationships and institutional practices (Bakan and Stasiulis 2003:2). This concept will be used descriptively to show how Venezuelan women act in a volatile context based on unequal power relations and where their actions might be limited by the fact that they are not Colombian citizens.

Venezuelan women use different strategies to negotiate their survival and to cope with a hazardous environment. In this research paper, survival refers to the way Venezuelan women manage to get monetary resources and the types of strategies they implement to maximize their income and minimize their expenditure (Wallace 2002:275). Most of them have managed to get a daily income through the informal sector, specifically as street vendors and sex-sellers. On the other hand, the coping mechanisms will be understood as the range of innovative and complex resources employed by migrant women in a context where legal and institutional forms of support are unavailable (Datta et al 2007:405-406, Palmary et al 2014: 123, Wallace 2005:273). Women selling sex are vulnerable to exploitation, harassment, and violence by clients and law enforcement officials (Popoola 2013: 140). Their experiences will be used to show how women cope with a risky environment through solidarity and collective action (McIlwaine 2005:41, Palmary et al 2014:128).

1.4 Research Questions

Research question:

- How do Venezuelan migrant women negotiate their daily survival in the border city of Cúcuta?

Sub questions:

- How has Cúcuta, as a 'bordered' city, crossed and shaped by the women migrants' trajectories?
- How are women surviving economically in the informal economy of this bordered city? How does this differ from Venezuelan men's survival strategies?
- What coping strategies do women selling sex employ, to protect themselves in this sector?

1.5 Methodology and Ethical Challenges⁸

1.5.1 Methodology and Methods

This research was done using a feminist stand-point epistemology, which aimed to use “oppressed women’s lives as grounds to criticize the dominant knowledge claims” (Harding 1991:121). My aim was to get close to the reality of Venezuelan women and to offer an authentic representation of their lives, as they themselves experience them (Brooks 2007: 56). The research methods followed an ethnographic approach which means that I approached Venezuelan women and I interacted with them in their everyday context while participating when possible in their daily activities. By doing this, I got close to them and listened to what they have to say (Hammersley & Atkinson 2007:2). The data collection was done using participant observation, semi-structured interviews, informal conversations and field notes.

During the two weeks that I was in Cúcuta I identified key locations where women did different activities to survive. This included parks, shelters, community kitchens, and streets where the most prominent commercial activity takes place. I spent time getting to know the physical and social layout of the location for my fieldwork (Bernard 2011:269) while using different categories for observing. I identified the economic activity in which they were involved, how they moved in the spaces and how they related to each other. As De Certeau argues, space and place are not merely inert or neutral features of the environment; instead, they must be activated by the practices of users and passers-by (De Certeau 1989:99). In the same way that the border ‘comes alive’ by people crossing it, this research was made possible by visiting the spaces mentioned above and interacting with women. To show how the ordinary can become extraordinary, the narrative of this research paper is shaped by my walking journey in the city and my encounters with women (Morris 2004:677).

⁸ The Information included in this section it was part of the Final Essay for Ethnography Class

My main strategy was to gain women's trust by adapting to their environment. "I [got] close to people and I made them feel comfortable enough with my presence, so that I [could] observe and record information about their lives" (Bernard 2011:256). In the cases of informal vendors, I started the conversation by buying whatever they were selling (candies, water, coffee) and asking them about their day. After that I slowly introduced myself and expressed my interest in knowing about their lives. By initially being a customer and staying with them while they were selling in the street, I was allowed not only to talk with them but to be part of their routine (Hammersley & Atkinson 2007:2). In the case of the community kitchen⁹ and shelters I changed my strategy and volunteered for a couple of hours. While I helped cutting vegetables and preparing salad, I was able to interview three Venezuelan women as they were cooking. In the second kitchen, I played with the children and help the working staff as I interviewed one Venezuelan mother.

My research population focus is the Venezuelan migrant women in Cúcuta. Being aware of the different temporalities of migration and because of the continuous flow of people in the city, I chose my interviewees while hanging out with more frequency in the Santander Park, in a community kitchen, and on 7th avenue. The selection of my respondents relied on women's acceptance to talk to me. (Hammersley & Atkinson 2007:4). I was pleasantly surprised by how naturally my conversations flowed with most of them. I was able to interview and informally talk with 17 women; each of them was asked to choose or were assigned a pseudonym. The stories of 13 women, were chosen as the most representative and are shared in the following chapters. My sample is non-representative, and the validity of my qualitative research comes from the triangulation of information, from the process of thinking critically about the data and from my reflections on the research process.¹⁰

The Venezuelan women that I interviewed have lived in Cúcuta for more than three months, are aged between 25 and 40 years old, and all except one are mothers. Some of them are single mothers (60%), which translates into more economic pressure to provide for their families. Out of the 17, 6 were married, but 3 of them have their husbands in Venezuela. See table 1,0 below.

¹⁰ Roy Huijsmans. 'Designing Ethnographic Research, Identifying Challenges, Anticipating Dilemmas'. Power Point Slides. Session 8. June 2019

Table 1 'Information of Venezuelan Women interviewed'

#	Family status				Source of income			Way of crossing the border
	Name (chosen by themselves)	Marital status	Partner location	Children	Venezuela	Colombia	Place where they work	Bridge or Illegal trail
1	Zulma	Married	Colombia	Yes		Sells water/ begs	Street	Bridge
2	Yuliany	Single		Yes	Receptionist	Volunteers	Shelter	Bridge
3	Carla	Single		Yes	Worker in an ink factory	Volunteers/sells food	Shelter/Street	Bridge
4	Wilmer*	Married	Colombia	Yes	Driver	Sells sodas	Street	Bridge
5	Lady	Single		No	Student	Makes Jewlery	Street	Bridge
6	Jennifer***	Single		Yes	Smuggler	Sells sex	Street	Bridge
7	Mariela	Married	Venezuela	Yes	Sales woman	Waitress/ Sells chicken	Restaurant	Bridge
8	Rosemary	Single		Yes		Sells electronic devices	Street	Bridge
9	Sandra	Single		Yes		Sells candies	Street	Bridge
10	Maria	Married	Venezuela	Yes		Works in a textile factory	Factory	Illegal trail
11	Nancy	Single		Yes	Garbage recycler	Beggs	Street	Illegal trail
12	Karina**	Married	Colombia	Yes				Illegal trail
13	Helen	Married	Colombia	Yes	Health technician	Sells sex	Street	Illegal trail
14	Joselin	Married	Venezuela	Yes	Pharmacology technician	Sells sex	Street	Illegal trail
15	Macarena	Single		Yes	Pharmacology technician	Sells sex and food	Street	Illegal trail
16	Margarita	Single		Yes	Sales woman	Sells sex and food	Street	Illegal trail
17	Jesica	Single		Yes	Ice cream seller	Sells sex	Street	Illegal trail
18	Luna	Married	Colombia	Yes	Student	Sells candies/Beggs	Street	Illegal trail

Source: made by the author

NOTES

*Wilmer is a man

** She is a Colombian

***She was on her way to Bogotá, she is a *caminante*

Regarding their livelihoods, 16 of them work in the street, showing that there is no correlation between a high level of education and better economic opportunities in Cúcuta (Chapter 3). Finally, most of them (9) arrived in Colombia by using *la trocha* (illegal crossing points), showing how, despite the existence of a formal bridge, the irregular crossings are equally important (Chapter 2).

I must mention that the unpublished Cúcuta report done by InSight Crime was used as a base to understand Cúcuta's context before my arrival and some of its content is included in this research. I also had the opportunity to obtain valuable information from interviewing another 16 people.¹¹ Among them, there were government and non-government officials, college professors, two psychologists, and a taxi driver. The government officials were predominantly men (8), and the non-governmental officials and the psychologist were women (8). Apart from helping me to learn more about the border and migration, these interviews helped me access the women that were the focus of my fieldwork. One particularly helpful organization was the Miriam Castrillón Foundation, which acted as a gatekeeper to help me speak with the women selling sex. To get initial access to these interviews I was allowed to use InSight Crime's name. To be linked to an institution was strategic and helped open some doors that otherwise would have taken longer to open. By having access to officials working on the migration crisis, I was able to share key findings and observations with them, which are being used as inputs for specific reports.

Lastly, I kept a notebook with fieldnotes, and every night I wrote down my observations and reflections. This helped me select particular moments of my experiences and use them for the descriptive parts of the text, and also contributed to my analysis and to identifying examples. On top of that, as part of my observation, I took pictures of some spaces (Emerson 2011:46, Markham 2013:441).

1.5.2 Positionality¹²

The reflexivity aspect that ethnography contains allowed me to recognize that my past experiences and personal biases have influenced my research (Cerwonka 2007:26). Before starting my Masters in Development Studies at the International Institute of Social Studies (ISS), I worked as a researcher for InSight Crime (<https://www.insightcrime.org>), which is a think tank focused on security and organized crime issues in Latin America. While doing extensive fieldwork across Colombia and Venezuela I got to know both realities closely. I became aware that in our reports and discussions, we always talked about 'inhabitants,' 'people' and 'communities. We generalize on the consequences, effects, and participation of men and women in relation to the armed conflict and organized crime.

¹² The Information included in this section it was part of the Final Essay for Ethnography Class

In my professional experience in a field mainly consider for ‘men’ the importance of gender analysis was underestimated. I decided to give priority to Venezuelan women and give them “the opportunity to discover themselves for themselves, to interpret themselves as they think fit, and to live their lives according to their own lights” (Meyers 2002:15).¹³

Likewise, as a feminist, I would like to challenge the image of Venezuelan women as weak and powerless. I recognize that most of the Venezuelan women in Cúcuta are living harsh realities, but I believe it is necessary to give them the opportunity to share their resourcefulness (Agustin 2005: 232). As Harding highlights:

“Never had women been given a voice of authority in stating their own condition or anyone else’s or in asserting how such conditions should be changed. Never was what counts as general social knowledge generated by asking questions from the perspectives of women’s lives” (1991:106)

As well, by self-reflecting on what values, attitudes, and agenda I bring to the research process, I also acknowledge my positionality (Harding 1993 in Nagy 2014: 12). I, as a young middle-class and educated Colombian woman, situate myself in a position of privilege regarding my interviewees, who are in a vulnerable condition. What we shared is that we identified as women, we speak the same language and there is not a difference in our physical appearance (Briones 2017: 22).

I have never been forced to leave my country and to be far away from my loved ones. I have been a migrant, but a legal one, in countries where I have had educational and professional opportunities. Since I have had the chance to develop my professional career, I have not had the necessity to work in the street. Moreover, I am not a mother, and despite the fact that I was born in a country in conflict I have never been a victim of violence. By knowing this, and while being in the field, I was personally and emotionally challenged by women's realities. I could not avoid feeling both helpless and heartbroken by their experiences.

1.5.3 Ethical Challenges¹⁴

Given the complex Colombian context – the presence of armed groups and a society characterized by sexist attitudes – women in Cúcuta are exposed to suffering violence and mistreatment. I had to be careful to not re-victimize them while I interviewed them. To face this challenge, before starting the conversation I clarified that they could stop talking at any moment and that they did not have to answer any question that made them feel uncomfortable. From my side, as a researcher, I avoided any question that could be painful and intrusive.¹⁵

Nevertheless, while I was talking with some women, and without asking directly, women selling sex shared experiences of abuse with me. During these interviews, I was accompanied by Daniela, a psychologist, who provided us with her professional support. During these

¹³ Information included in the Final Essay for Ethnography Class

¹⁴ This section included was part of the Final Essay for the Ethnography Class

¹⁵ Information included in the Final Essay for Ethnography Class

interviews, it also became clear to me that some of them did not have clear the boundaries between what could be considered as rape and violence, and consensual sex. We talked about their rights and discussed what they considered important, but I felt impotent because in practice, they do not want to report the cases for fear of being deported, and they do not want to face stigmatization by the Colombian authorities.¹⁶

Some of my interviewees told me that they felt ashamed of their line of work and that they did not know if they should call themselves 'prostitutes'. Ethically, what mattered to me the most was how they identified themselves and how they understood this activity.

Finally, and before going into the field, I felt that these women were not going to receive any direct benefits from contributing to my research. I felt that the least that I could do in return for their time, was to buy whatever they were selling, often food or sodas while we talked. In the case of women selling sex, I invited them to meet with us in a *panaderia* (bakery) where we could share some food and talk. With other interviewees that I met in the street who were begging or waiting for services, I offered them to come to eat and drink something with me as we talked.¹⁷

¹⁶ Interview with World Food Program official Johana Saenz (24 July 2019)

¹⁷ Information included in the Final Essay for Ethnography Class

Chapter 2: The Colombia-Venezuela border

Before 2015, the shared border between Venezuela and Colombia was not perceived as a division but rather a connection that linked Colombians and Venezuelans culturally, socially, and economically. But that changed in 2015 when the Venezuelan government closed the Simon Bolivar bridge – the border’s most important crossing point. After the closure thousands of Colombians who used to live in Venezuela were forced to return to Colombia. With them, the most vulnerable and needy Venezuelan people also migrated. The Colombian authorities implemented new border mechanisms to regulate the flow of people. The bridge or illegal crossing points are the spaces that Venezuelan migrant women experience before getting to Cúcuta. My research on the Simon Bolivar bridge shone some light on how Venezuelan women negotiate their entry into Colombia and highlighted the co-existence of two borders: ‘the legal’ and the ‘illegal’.

2.1 Before 2015 there was no border: a Colombian perspective

The Colombia/Venezuela border is unique, contradictory, and should be understood as “dynamic, mobile and performative” (Fernandez and Fabini 2018). I argue that the border is more than the hard-geographic division of both. For the Colombian government, the border area includes the seven official crossing points along the Norte de Santander Department and the municipalities next to them.¹⁸ One of these seven crossing points, the Simon Bolivar bridge, connects Cúcuta and its metropolitan area with the Venezuelan states of Táchira and Zulia. The border is not only the bridge, there are also the illegal crossing points right underneath it that connect the same towns.

Moving beyond the spatial boundaries, the border is also defined by the people who cross it and live in it, the illegal armed actors who profit from it and the Colombian authorities who control it. At the same time, the border is the social and cultural relations that formed historically (Newman 2003:14). In that sense, it is worth considering the concept of border performativity coined by Nancy Wonders (2006), which proposes the following to define the border:

“The border is socially constructed via the performance of various state actors in an elaborate dance with ordinary people who seek freedom of movement and identification. The choreography of this dance is shaped by state policies and laws, but it is increasingly shaped by larger global forces as well” (Wonders 2006: 64–65 in Fabini 2019:177).

The Colombian-Venezuelan border is far from simple, it is problematic and multifaceted (Anderson and Dowd 1999 in Pum Khan Pau 2018:4). Observations that the most significant transformation of the border occurred in 2015 when the Simon Bolivar bridge went from being ‘open’ to be ‘closed,’ suggest the transition from a ‘flexible border’ to a more rigid one. (Welchman 1996, Newman & Paasi 1998, Newman 2000, Kolossov & O’Loughlin 1998,

¹⁸ Interview with Regional Director of Colombian Migration (16 July 2019)

Van Houtum 2000 in Newman 2003:13). That event changed the material and symbolic use of the border, as well as the border actors' actions' (Anderson et al 1999:594, Wonders 2006: 66 in Fabini 2019:178).

To understand how the border changed we need to understand how it worked before the 2015 shift. This will be done using the observations of two college professors: Manuel and German. Both of them have lived most of their lives in Cúcuta. While drinking a coffee in the Simon Bolivar University campus, Manuel told me:

“The first thing that you should know is that all *Cúcuteños*¹⁹ had family on the other side of the border, four out of five Colombians had relatives in Venezuela. Norte de Santander, Zulia and Táchira were ‘one’. For Christmas or Holy Week, or for a relative’s birthday, we used to cross the bridge. Even without having a particular reason to go to Venezuela, we used to spend our weekends there and also do our grocery shopping there.

I know that most of the University staff including me, and the vast majority of *Cucuteños*, have double citizenship. It was very common that Colombians registered here would live or worked in Venezuela, and the other way around. For example, my cousin was born in Colombia, she studied her professional career here, but she gave birth to her son in Venezuela. The most important events in her life happened in two different places”.²⁰

Manuel's reflections show how the free movement of people forged very strong social and cultural bonds that transcended the border. Before 2015, there were no Colombian authorities (migration or police) on the bridge, and nobody needed documents to cross to the other side. According to Manuel, Colombians and Venezuelans never felt that they were crossing a border, the bridge felt that it connected, rather than divided them (Yaar-Waisel 2018:1). Manuel continued:

“My family and I have always eaten Venezuelan products because they used to be cheaper. [Venezuelan state subsidies made everything cheaper for Colombians]. I dare say that more than half of the products that Colombians used to buy were contraband. Not only buying contraband products but bringing them in to Colombia to sell was seen as a typical way to earn a living²¹. Frequently I saw the police ‘who were the ones who were supposed to catch the smugglers,’ putting gasoline in their vehicles from *las pimpinas*”.²² Manuel laughed, he looked at me and told me: “It sounds ironic I know, but that is how it used to work.”²³

¹⁹ People from Cúcuta

²⁰ Interview with Professor Manuel (23 July 2019)

²¹ There are two kinds of smuggling: small-scale and large-scale. Small-scale smuggling is carried out by low-level operators using a technique local police refer to as “smurfing” – carrying small amounts of goods over the border but making around 20 trips a day often via formal border crossings”. The majority of the smuggling in Cúcuta its done this way. (Bargeant 2014

²² *Pimpinas*: Container for contraband gasoline which is sold in the streets or houses

²³ Interview with Professor Manuel (23 July 2019)

The open border not only shaped social relations and what *cucuteños* used to eat, but also blurred the difference between the informal and illegal money-making ways. Historically the Colombian side of the border has been considered as ‘black spot’ because the government has been incapable of guaranteeing people’s basic needs and services. As a consequence, guerrilla paramilitary groups have filled that power vacuum while profiting through activities such as money laundering, drug trafficking, extortion, and illegal mining (Villa & Pimenta 2019:6). What is remarkable is that not only have these illegal armed groups benefited economically, but border inhabitants have used smuggling as a way of earning a livelihood. (In-Sight Crime 2017a: 22). German, another college professor, shared Manuel’s perception and added a crucial insight: “borderlines have never been relevant except when security matters appeared”:

“As border inhabitants, we shared identity and cultural elements. We revive how our relationships with Venezuelans used to be when Pastor Lopez died on the 7th of April 2019. Lopez was a very famous Venezuelan singer, and he died in a Hospital in Cúcuta, where he used to live. On the day of his funeral, hundreds of Venezuelans and Colombians who grew up with his music gathered on Cúcuta’s streets to sing and cry while commemorating his life. What I’m trying to say is that there were no differences between people from Cúcuta and Venezuela. The border only became visible when ‘security issues’ arose”.²⁴

German demonstrates how borders are constituted by social structures and identity factors. Any change in the function, forms, or meaning implies a modification to people’s daily lives (Popescu 2012 in Yaar-Waisel 2018:2). Likewise, he emphasizes how the state presence on the border has been limited, and when it has become visible, it has been mainly through military interventions: “The state presence for the Norte de Santander department has been through *balas, hambre y sangre* [bullets, hunger, and blood]”, a UN official confirmed it to me.²⁵

2.2 The border closure in 2015: Colombians and Venezuelans flee the crackdown

After Nicolás Maduro closed the border in 2015, violent and exceptional measures were implemented. This political decision changed the way the border was perceived, but it also marked the beginning of the fourth wave of migration from Venezuela and the return of Colombians who used to live in Venezuela.

In August 2015 there was a confrontation between Venezuela’s military and Colombian smugglers on the Venezuela side of the border. As a result, and based on the Venezuelan media version, three soldiers were injured, and one smuggler died (BBC Mundo 2015b). Follow by the incident, Maduro announced the closure of the Simon Bolivar bridge for 72 hours –which communicates Cúcuta with San Antonio and San Cristobal in Venezuela. A few days later, the closure was extended, and an ‘emergency state’ declared in several municipalities of Táchira state (Ciurliza 2015).

²⁴ Interview with Professor German, Red de Movilidad Colombo-Venezolana (17 July 2019)

²⁵ Interview with UN official (24 July 2019), Interview with Ombudsman officials (19 July 2019)

“I made the decision to close the border after the incident (...) We have reached the limit of aggressions by armed groups, of speculators and smugglers (...). Every day, 40,000 people cross to the Venezuelan side of the border, and this has created an unbalanced situation in the border area, which I believe is affecting the happiness and the life of Venezuelan people. This decision is a measure to restore order, peace, tranquillity, and justice in the border” (Télam 2015, Newman 2015), Maduro stated after the closure.

This is not the first time the Venezuelan government has blamed Colombian paramilitaries for causing violence and for smuggling subsidized goods. Nor is it the first time that the border was shut down for this reason (Human Rights Watch 2016, Newman 2015). But this time, Maduro’s allegations allowed him to securitize and to exceed the security forces’ capacities (InSight Crime 2017b:45). Based on Swartz & Karakatsanis, “securitization is the process by which political elites frame an issue as involving fundamental issues of security and survival against an existential threat” (2013:98). By blaming Colombian paramilitaries for Venezuelan insecurity and ignoring other possible internal factors, Maduro closed the bridge and implemented extraordinary measures, that otherwise would not have been accepted by the Venezuelans (Waever 2011:469).

After the bridge was closed, Maduro deployed security forces in Táchira –a nest of paramilitary groups, brothels, criminals and smugglers according to him – as a part of the Operations for the Liberation of the People (Operación para la Liberación del Pueblo – OLP). These operations aimed to take neighbourhoods back from delinquents but became notorious for searches carried out without warrants as well as extrajudicial killings, and forced evictions (Human Rights Watch 2016, InSight Crime 2017b:45).

“We are going to knock down all the houses there, just so you know. Not a single house will remain”, Maduro announced (Newman 2015), while the National Venezuelan Guard forcibly evicted and deported nearly 2,000 Colombians. Another 22,000 Colombo-Venezuelans, came back ‘voluntarily’ to Colombia, due to violence, threats, and extorsions received by Venezuelan security forces (Carvajal 2017, Human Rights Watch 2016)²⁶ In this context, the forced return of Colombians, and the arrival of the poorest and the sickest Venezuelans began a new wave of migration.²⁷

After closure in August 2015, the bridge was opened briefly in July and December 2016. In March 2019, the Venezuelan government allowed sick people and students to cross to Colombia (RCN Radio 2019). This measure was known as the ‘humanitarian corridor’ and after it was announced the flow of people crossing to Colombia increased in more than 234%, and the use of las trochas (illegal trails) too. (GIFMM 2019, Migración Colombia 2019).

²⁶ Interview with the Border Secretariat Juan Carlos Caicedo (15 July 2019)

²⁷ Interview with the Human Rights Advisor of Personeria, Oscar Dimas (15 July 2019); Interview with the Border Secretariat Juan Carlos Caicedo (15 July 2019); Interview with Regional Director of Migration Colombia (16 July 2019)

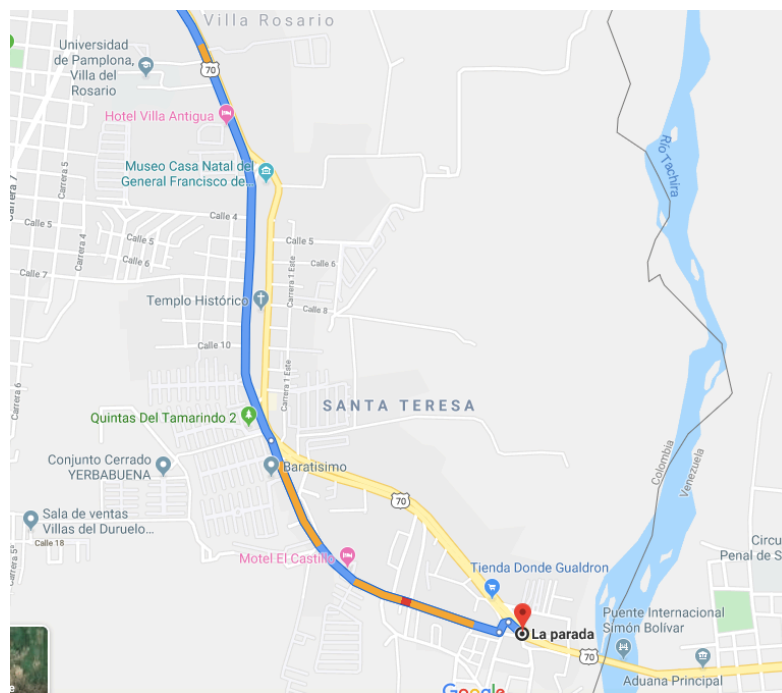
2.3 The aftermath 2015: The Simon Bolivar Bridge and ‘Los Pendulares’

The following section deals with my experience on the bridge on in July 2019, during field-work. It shows how the bridge dynamic works as well as what it means for a Venezuelan woman to cross it.

2.3.1 La Parada

It is 10 in the morning, and the sun is shining. I arrive via taxi at La Parada— where the International Simon Bolivar Bridge is located. La Parada is part of the Villa del Rosario municipality, part of the Cúcuta metropolitan area, approximately 10 km away from the city center (20 minutes by car). See the map below.

Map 2 ‘La Parada’



Source: Google maps

In La Parada, the traffic is so heavy that the taxi stops completely, and several men approach the car and start looking through my window: “Those are the *maleteros* (suitcase chargers). They are expecting to see full bags, which they can carry for²⁸COP 3,000 (USD\$1) to the other side of the border”, Andres (pseudonym), the taxi driver, explained to me.

²⁸ COP=Colombian pesos

I get out of the car, and as I walk towards the bridge a man approaches me and says: “I can stamp your passport without queues.” I didn’t ask how much he would charge. Still, later, I realized that a couple of meters before arriving at the bridge entrance, there is a Colombian migration office (see map 3), where Venezuelans with a passport make their crossing official. I keep walking, and I see another man standing and shouting *se compra cabello* (I buy hair) while he holds several pieces of hair in his hand. For some Venezuelan women, selling their hair is a way to get some money. They are paid between COP 20,000- 60,000 (USD\$6- \$18), but many women have been scammed after their hair is cut.²⁹

I am about to cross the fence that marks the entrance to the bridge, when a man standing next to talking by phone sees me. He interrupts his call and offers me transportation to any Colombian city. He is holding a piece of paper with a variety of destinations and prices written on it. It has been reported that tourism agencies and taxi cooperatives “are the newest fronts being used to hide migrant-smuggling rings at the border.” One could pay from USD\$12 to \$500 to travel across Colombia, depending on the length of the journey (Bonilla 2019).

After just ten minutes in La Parada I saw the diversity of goods and services—from bus tickets to getting a tattoo - offered by Colombians and Venezuelans to get by. Before this place was a popular commercial area, but now *cucuteños* prefer not to come because it is perceived as insecure, dirty, and chaotic.³⁰

2.3.2 The Bridge

After crossing the fence, I walk across the bridge. As I look up, I see three big signs. The one in the middle says, ‘International Simon Bolivar Bridge,’ the other to the left says, ‘Colombian Migration’, and the one to the right says ‘Services,’ featuring the UNHCR symbol, the Red Cross flag, and the Norwegian Refugee Council logo. These international organizations are part of the 45 non-governmental organizations working in Cúcuta to attend those affected by the migration crisis.³¹

I know that I am about to leave Colombian territory when I see the enormous signboard “Come back soon - Colombia waits for you”. What divides Colombia and Venezuela is a line of fences and a white tent. Inside the tent, there are two rows of police and immigration officers, and in between them, Venezuelans file through. This bridge or ‘humanitarian corridor’ –as it is known since the beginning of 2019– it is used daily by 35,000 and 50,000 *migrantes pendulares* (daily crossers). Those are the Venezuelans who come for one day or a couple of days to meet their basic needs: “to buy food and access to health and education services”.³²

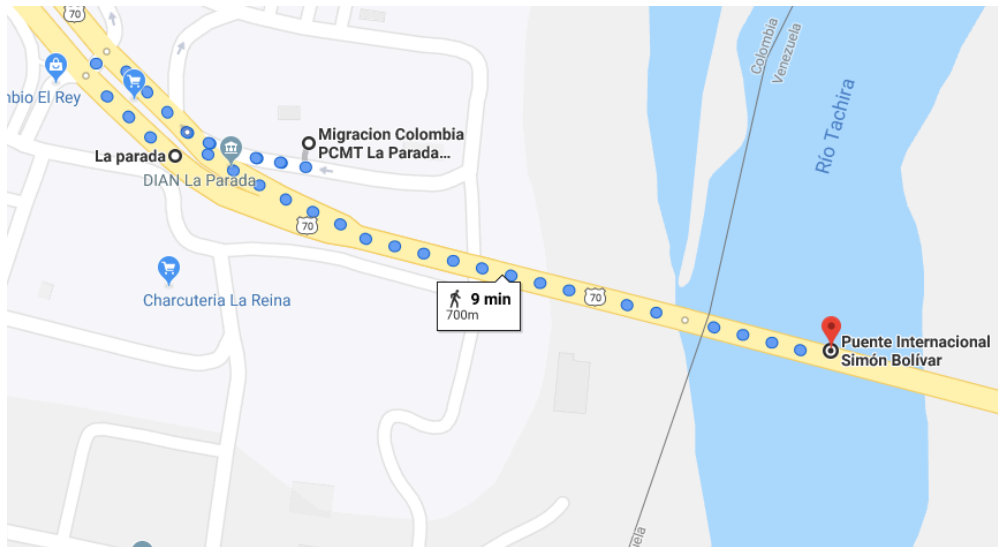
²⁹ Interview with a psychologist (22 July 2019)

³⁰ Interview with government official (15 July 2019)

³¹ Interview with the Border Secretariat Juan Carlos Caicedo (15 July 2019)

³² Interview with the Border Secretariat Juan Carlos Caicedo (15 July 2019)

Map 3 'Walking distance from la Parada to the Bridge'



Source: Google maps

Figure 1 'The International Simon Bolivar Bridge'



Source: Fieldwork 2019

I move past the fence, and with the permission of the migration officer, I stand and observe the whole scene. Most of the people crossing are carrying suitcases. *Los pendulares* are carrying empty bags that in the afternoon will be full of food and hygiene products to take back to Venezuela. Those who cross with their bags packed are part of the 5,000 Venezuelans who cross the bridge every month and do not return; from that number, 2,000 Venezuelans stay in Cúcuta.³³

³³ Interview with OCHA Officer Adelaida Acosta (22 July 2019)

Figure 2 'People crossing the border'



Source: César García-Proyecto Migración Venezuela

To cross the bridge, Venezuelans need new documents recently introduced by the Colombian government. As Anderson argues, the increasing flow of people has generated a growing need for border-crossing mechanisms and institutions of governance (Anderson et al 1999: 602). The most common document is *La Tarjeta de Movilidad Fronteriza* (Border Mobility Card-TMF), designed for the daily crossers to stay in the border area for no longer than seven days. Venezuelans who wish to live in Colombia have to apply to one of the six *Permisos Especial de Residencia* (Especial Residence Permit-PEP) depending on the purpose of their stay. The latest permit was announced in July 2019, and it is for Venezuelans who were denied refugee status but still want to work in Colombia (Morales 2019). In practical terms, some Venezuelans do not know the purpose of the documentation required by the Colombian government or do not even have a Venezuelan ID.³⁴ Most of my interviewees did not have a permit to stay in Colombia, and they did not understand how to get it.

The mechanisms implemented by the Colombian government control who enters and remains in the country, but they have also constructed a binary of a 'privileged Colombian' and a 'marginalized Venezuelan'. Venezuelans are 'outsiders' and they cannot access essential services or government programs due to their nationality. It does not mean that all Colombians living in the border area better off, but in some cases their living conditions are better. (Wonders & Jones 2014:520).

³⁴ Interview with OCHA Officer Adelaida Acosta (22 July 2019)

2.3.3 A Venezuelan woman negotiating her crossing on the bridge

It only takes me five minutes to witness how the migration officers enforce the border mechanisms. The migration supervisor is holding a woman's documents, which he briefly checks and then turns to say to me: "Look, Miss, this happens every day -- people with false documents." Then he turns to the young Venezuelan woman and says: "You know that this document is false. You cannot cross with it." She replies: "I have crossed several times with this document, please let me pass."

Figure 3 'The Venezuelan side of the International Simon Bolivar Bridge'



Source: Fieldwork 2019

He stares at the woman's ID, looks at her again, and asks: "What are you going to do in Colombia?". She replies: "I have to buy some stuff, but I will be back in the afternoon". She did not have any luggage and she seemed to be in a hurry. The migration officer turns to me: "Since this is a humanitarian situation, we have to look carefully at a person and see if they look like a 'good person'. Based on that, one should decide if the person should pass".³⁵

The Colombian migration authorities were taken by surprise by this unanticipated flow of people: "We were not prepared to deal with a crisis of this magnitude, and we do not have the resources to respond to expectations." To deal with the migration crisis, the Colombian government established the documents mentioned above, and also implemented the control of the border area in three departments - including Norte de Santander – through the Migratory Special Group (Grupo Especial Migratorio)– composed of police, Colombian migration, Colombian Family Welfare Institute, and the National Tax and Customs Office (DIAN

³⁵ Interview with a migration officer (16 July 2019)

in Spanish). The group aims to verify migrant's documentation and to fight contraband and prostitution (Proyecto Migración Venezuela 2018, World Bank 2018).

The human and monetary resources to detain everyone crossing the bridge without the right documents are not there. Neither is it possible to deport all the undocumented migrants in a city like a Cúcuta, that is why the formal governance mechanisms are complemented with informal practices (Weber & Bowling 2008 in Fabini 2019:181). As I witnessed on the bridge, migration officers are deciding who should pass based on subjective judgements and this becomes problematic when the unbalance power-relation between a government official and an undocumented migrant translates into abuses. A UN officer told me that Venezuelan women have reported cases where migration officers retain women's documentation and demand sexual favors.

The woman realizes that the migration officer is taking too long and before he could say another word, she says: "Look, sir, I just had an abortion and I am bleeding. I am feeling really bad and I need medical attention - if you want you can verify." The migration officer replies: "Ok *Señorita*, go on". This woman used her femininity and the man's embarrassment over her 'bleeding' to negotiate her crossing to the other side (Johnston Robledo et al. 2007 in Peranovic et al 2017:113).

I see two women who are stopped, one for having her birth certificate and the other one for having her Venezuelan ID. Both of them were asked their reason for coming to Colombia and were allowed to pass. Women have multiple motivations for negotiating their crossing with border officials. For example, Antonia, crosses the bridge every day, "only to get two food plates from the community kitchen to feed her sick child and her unemployed husband".³⁶

2.3.4 *La Trocha*

This time, I am walking from Venezuela over to Colombia. A couple of meters away from the immigration checkpoint, I lean over the bridge, and I look down. Under the bridge, I see three young men carrying a pair of tires on their shoulders. Many people like them get paid for moving merchandise considered contraband from one side to the other. For instance, tires are not essential goods, and if passed on the bridge, they get confiscated by the DIAN.³⁷

I realized that the infamous *trochas* (illegal trails) that everyone talks about are just under the bridge. I have always imagined that the *trochas* were hidden and unreachable, but they are visible to everyone, including me. The border goes beyond the bridge on which I am standing, and in fact, there is a 'parallel' border, another illegal world where thousands of people are exposed daily.

³⁶ Informal conversation with Antonia (18 July 2019)

³⁷ Interview with Regional Director of Migration Colombia (16 July 2019)

If women do not cross the bridge, they get to Colombia using these alternative routes - more than half of the women I interviewed used the illegal crossing points. The border was officially opened again in July 2019. Before that, the closure of the international bridges did not stop people from crossing to Colombia but just increased the risks for them. The routes are controlled by criminal groups that charge between COP 10,000-20,000 (USD\$3-\$6) to let people cross the border (Risquez and Salomon 2019). Criminal groups can make up to COP 70,000,000 (USD 20,000) per day while deciding who and what passes.³⁸ Luna, one of my interviewees who sells candy in the street and was accompanied by her husband when I met her told me how is to cross the illegal trails.

“We came from Maracaibo, and paid COP 20,000 (USD\$7) to ‘bad people’ to cross to Colombia. While we were waiting to cross, a family arrived with a small child. One of the men wanted to keep the minor, but the dad refused and begged them to take him and not his son”. Do you know what happened, miss? Luna asked me. “Another man took the boy away on a motorcycle while the rest of the family was pushed behind some bushes; minutes later, we heard the gunshots; they were killed.” There was a pause in our conversation, and she kept talking, “Before letting you pass, the men have to take their t-shirts off to make sure they are not carrying a gun or a camera. While we were walking over to Colombia, we saw many armed men. They usually charge money according to what you are carrying with you, but we did not have anything with us”.³⁹

I heard many other testimonies about the illegal crossing points. For instance, Mariela crossed to Colombia with her three children and her mother but the person who let them pass did not charge her money and told her, “Do not worry, we do not mess with old people.”⁴⁰ It was a matter of luck because my interviewees agree that both women and men have to pay. On top of that, they have been cases in which they are offered money for leaving their children with the criminal groups: “A woman who was crossing with her three children was told: “I’ll pay you for the boy and with that money, you can feed the other two.”⁴¹ Apart from being separated from their offspring, women have been victims of sexual abuse. This will be further developed in Chapter 4. What is remarkable about *la trocha* and the bridge, is that after crossing, women often find themselves back on them, because they’re either deported and want to return, or they leave to visit their family left on the other side.

³⁸ Interview with non-governmental officer (16 July 2019)

³⁹ Interview with Luna and Carlos (21 July 2019)

⁴⁰ Interview with Mariela (22 July 2019)

⁴¹ Interview with a psychologist (22 July 2019)

Chapter 3: Venezuelan migrant women ‘getting by’ in Cúcuta

The border city of Cúcuta has a weak economy and few formal employment opportunities. Venezuelan women who arrive there find that the best way to make money is via the informal sector. While walking on the 6th and 7th commercial streets, I met Rosemary, a Venezuelan street vendor. Her experience will be the starting point to show the working and living conditions of Venezuelan migrant women in Cúcuta, the primary income earners in their households. Finally, I will explore the differences, if any, of activities by men and women.

3.1 Cúcuta: as a pantry of medicines and food for Venezuelans

Cúcuta’s economy has historically been attached to Venezuela’s internal affairs. This city - a commercial hub - depended so much on its neighbouring country that during the 1970s – when the oil boom happened in Venezuela – the city stopped developing its textile and footwear industry and became the commercial center for supplying prosperous Venezuelans.⁴² In practice, this meant that Venezuelans used to come to the city to buy expensive goods and high-quality items (Collins 2019, Yurdakul 2019), while most Colombians earned their livelihoods by smuggling.⁴³ Colombians used to take advantage of the price control and the black currency market of the neighboring country to bring in petrol and all sorts of household and agricultural goods, as well as motorbike parts, and meat (InSight Crime 2016).

Cúcuta’s formal economy (mainly based on coal mining, construction, and the cultivation of rice, cocoa, and cassava) is fragile. The business sector has struggled to develop due to excessive taxes and the negative incentives generated by smuggling (InSight Crime 2019b). Against this background, it’s not surprising that border inhabitants have always relied significantly on informal services and trade as a source of income, and as an alternative to the high rate of unemployment (DANE 2019, Friman 2004:101).

The so-called informal economy (“also called ‘underground’, ‘hidden’, ‘shadow’, ‘irregular’”) will be understood as all economic activities that are – in law or in practice – not covered, or insufficiently covered, by formal arrangements” (ILO 2002a in ILO 2007: 113). Some of these activities may resemble the formal sector but do not accomplish the local regulations because “some are forms of tax evasion or money-laundering; some are crimes that require a victim; others fit definitions of alternative or solidarity economies (mutual-aid, community projects, voluntary work, self-help)” (Agustin 2007a:42). Cúcuta is an example of how the informal sector in practice is flexible and could include activities such as smuggling – which, according to the law, are a crime. In this sense, a criminal economy will be distinguished by the production and distribution of illicit goods and services, including arms trafficking, drug trafficking, money laundering and extortion (Friman 2004: 101).

⁴² Interview with Human Rights Advisor of Personeria Oscar Dimas (15 July 2019)

⁴³ Smuggling will be understood as small-scale: “Small-scale smuggling is carried out by low-level operators using a technique local police refer to as “smurfing” – carrying small amounts of goods over the border but making around 20 trips a day often via formal border crossings” (Bargeant 2014 in InSight Crime 2016:51)

Venezuelans, as well as Colombians are currently joining both the criminal and informal economies in Cúcuta (Risquez and Salomon 2019). Poverty and need cut across nationalities, but Venezuelans are in a more vulnerable position due to their condition as migrants – their living and working conditions are precarious. Apart from the emotional distress caused by being pushed to leave their homes, Venezuelans are surviving on very basic levels. Survival is understood as “how people living in marginal situations manage to juggle [monetary] resources in innovative and complex ways to get by” (Wallace 2002:273) (See Chapter 1). For instance, the women that I interviewed earn, on average, around COP 15,000 (USD\$4) per day, and with that money, they negotiate a place to sleep and food. They pay COP 5,000 (USD\$1,5) for a spot on the floor to sleep in an overcrowded room, where they also have to shower and cook, and with the other COP 5,000 they buy or cook one meal a day.

3.2 Cúcuta’s bustling city centre

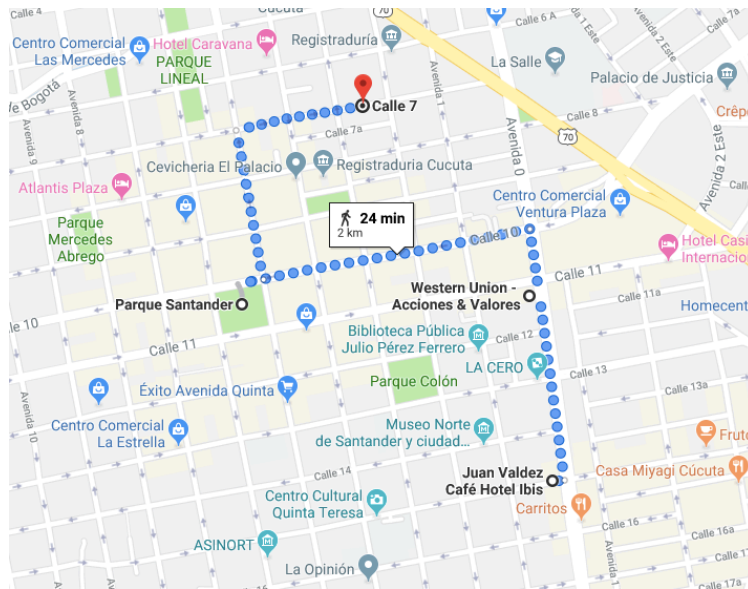
It is 10 am in the morning, and I am heading to the place where some Venezuelans work and where most of the *pendulares* do their groceries: 6th and 7th streets. My hotel is 15 streets away from the city center – it may sound close but those few blocks make a big difference. It is not common to see any Venezuelans around this area, everything is quiet, and the open shops remain mostly empty. I was told by one of my interviewees that due to the type of commercial activity – primarily clothes and expensive brands – Venezuelans do not spend time around here.⁴⁴ The deeper I get into the city center, more people I see walking on the streets and the music in the stores gets louder.

While walking, I see a line of people outside of the ‘Western Union’ exchange house. I look inside and is completely full of people. What I was told is that *los pendulares* use this business to receive money sent from other countries, and then a *cambista* (person who exchange the money informally) deposits it in a Venezuelan account with a more beneficial exchange rate (Saez 2018).

I keep moving, and I know that I have reached the heart of the city because I come to city hall right in front of the famous Santander Park. This park has become ‘a shelter’ for the dozens of Venezuelans selling food or passing the time of day there (La Opinión 2018).

⁴⁴ Interview with Human Rights Advisor of Personeria Oscar Dimas (15 July 2019)

Map 4 'Walking down Cúcuta city'



Source: Google maps

I continue walking a couple of streets further and I arrive on 7th avenue. I am walking on the sidewalk, but there are people standing and selling both on the sidewalk and in the road. These streets are overcrowded by vendors and buyers selling everything from clothes, food, appliances, medicines and games for children to rat poison. While on the street, I remember what I heard the other day on a Cúcuta radio station. A woman implored the police to increase its presence in the streets and reestablished order: “There is no longer public space, the street vendors are occupying it as if its their house, like they own the streets.” Owners or not, both Colombians and Venezuelans come here daily to earn their livelihoods.

Figure 4 'A city center street'



Source: Fieldwork 2019

All the big supermarkets have their doors wide open, and security guards are watching out for tons of flour bread and toilet paper that are outside of the shops. The pharmacies are even worse - they have their doors closed to limit the number of people inside, who have their prescriptions in hand, demanding medicines. Outside of the pharmacies, people sell contraband medicines at half the price. The most common medicines are painkillers and diabetes treatments, birth control pills, and antibiotics, a Venezuelan vendor explained to me.

Something else catches my attention. There is a row of parked taxis waiting for Venezuelans who have finished their shopping, to take them back to La Parada. Venezuelan people are easy to identify, most of them have suitcases or empty sacks, as well as backpacks with the Venezuelan flag. Kilometers away from the Simon Bolivar bridge, I realized how spaces become connected by the daily behaviour of thousands of Venezuelans. The border stretches from the bridge to the city center, and it is shaped by individual actions (Fabini 2019:177) (see Chapter 2).

On a street corner, I see a sign attached to a light pole that says, 'I watch your bags'. Next to it, a woman is sitting surrounded by more than 20 full bags. To her right, another woman is selling two bottles of mayonnaise and three bottles of tomato sauce. Those are the subsidized Venezuelan products that used to be smuggled into the country by Colombians, and now they are brought and sold by Venezuelans. Both of them give an idea of women's resourcefulness to earn money.

Figure 5 'Venezuelans with their sacks of food ready to departure'



Source: Fieldwork 2019

Time has passed fast, and this walk in sunny Cúcuta made me thirsty. I approach a woman selling water, after buying a bottle I ask her about her day, and we had a long conversation. Hilda told me that she has been a Colombian street vendor for more than 14 years, and with this job she was able to raise her two children and to put one of them through university. Hilda has two *puestos* (fixed spots in the street) for selling drinks and inflatable swimming pools. The daily arrival of Venezuelans has been good for her business: “Now things are better because Venezuelan people come, exchange some dollars, buy and leave,” she told me while she was unpacking some boxes.⁴⁵

Most Colombians working on the streets have used the same street space for years. Meanwhile, Venezuelans have to sell their products walking around and have no fixed spot. Venezuelans are newcomers in a market dominated by Colombian street vendors and getting a fixed spot in the street is difficult, since there is not much space left.⁴⁶ Next to the small refrigerator where Hilda keeps the drinks she sells, Rosemary is sitting selling electronic devices. Hilda introduces to me Rosemary and asks me to keep an eye on her water business while she is pumping air into the swimming pools for display. While I help Hilda, Rosemary shares her story with me.

3.3 Rosemary

From the 111,000 Venezuelans reportedly in Cúcuta in July 2019, 53% are women.⁴⁷ Rosemary arrived in the city 7 months ago. She lives with her extended family and her children in a small rented house. She works in the street selling electronic devices such as headphones and speakers, and this is a part of her story:

“My mom was the person who came first to Cúcuta. As a single mother, she has always played the ‘mom and dad role’, she has provided everything for my siblings and me. Two years ago, when she realized that the situation in Venezuelan was not getting any better, she decided to come to Colombia. She came alone without knowing what she was going to do here or even where to stay. In the first two months, she slept in Cúcuta’s streets until a Christian organization gave her shelter. That was a tough period, but afterwards, she managed to buy two thermoses for selling coffee in the road, and with that, she managed to survive for a few months. When she was more stable, my sister joined her, then my nephews and my brother. I was the last one to arrive, I waited as much as I could, and I came with my three children. [Many of the women that I talked about have sold coffee in the street. According to them it is profitable - each thermo leaves a profit of COP 5,000 (USD\$1,5), and often they have at least three]

I arrived without a job, and while helping my sister to sell drinks in the street, I met Ricardo, a Colombian man who needed someone to help him to sell his electronic products in his street stall. Now I work for him every day from 8 a.m. in the morning until the late afternoon.

⁴⁵ Informal conversation with Hilda (24 July 2019)

⁴⁶ Informal conversation with Hilda (24 July 2019)

⁴⁷ Interview with the Border Secretariat Juan Carlos Caicedo (15 July 2019)

Now, my siblings and I are the ones working, and our mom takes care of our children. The fact that the three of us can work (all as street vendors), makes everything easier because all of us can contribute with some money to pay the rent and eat”.⁴⁸

Of all the women that I talked to who work as street vendors, Rosemary was the one with the best working conditions.⁴⁹ She earns a stable amount of money per day COP 25,000 (USD\$8) independently of how much or what she sells, and she’s given lunch. Besides that, Rosemary is accompanied by her family which has been important for economic and emotional support. (Hagan 1998:55). The importance of women’s networks for coping with their reality will be further developed in Chapter 4.

Zulma, for example, sells waters in Santander Park. She buys a package of 20 water bags every day for COP 3,000 (USD \$0,86) and ice to keep them cold for COP 1,600 (USD\$0,46). She sells each bag in COP 500 (USD\$0,14), which means that she gets COP 5,400 (USD\$1,5) per day in profit: “With this amount, I feed my two children and my husband who arrived three weeks ago. This is not enough to feed my family, so on bad days, I also beg for money”, she explained to me while we walk across the Santander park selling water.⁵⁰

Mariela works 8 hours a day as a waitress in a restaurant, without a contract. She earns COP 15,000 (USD\$4) per day but if she eats, she only earns \$10,000 (USD\$2,8). Her case highlights how working in a registered business does not guarantee better working conditions. Also, it shows how illegal or unregistered employment is common in Cúcuta (ILO 2007:39). Companies prefer to have three irregular migrants working than having to pay a full salary to a Colombian, who would also have to be registered in social protection schemes.⁵¹

Due to the women’s lack of documentation and the hard-economic situation in Cúcuta, Rosemary’s, Zulma’s and Mariela’s stories show how informal work, and more explicitly selling food and goods in the street is the best alternative to unemployment (Porters and Castell 1989 in Loutfi 2001:89). The informal sector is providing only a primary and precarious, source of income to Venezuelan migrant women, while their living standards are below the minimum. Women expressed that they do not eat well, and they walk long distances to arrive at the city centre, all of them live in the peripheral neighbourhoods.

⁴⁸ Informal conversation with Rosemary (24 July 2019)

⁴⁹ Women selling sex could earn more than the COP 25,000 that Rosemary makes, but actually, that depends on the number of clients and what they offer to pay.

⁵⁰ Interview with Zulma (16 July 2019)

⁵¹ Interview with the Border Secretariat Juan Carlos Caicedo (15 July 2019)

3.3.1 Women resourcefulness: others survival strategies

Aside from the harsh conditions in which they are working and living, what these stories have in common is women's resourcefulness. Most of the women who want to provide for their families implement different survival strategies, such as minimizing expenditure by not taking public transport or maximizing income while doing more than one activity at the same time (Datta et al 2007:406). Sandra, who I met in a shelter while she was waiting for a medical check for her daughter, sells candy in the street. She walks at least an hour every day to the city centre with her six-month-old baby in her arms and her five- and seven-year-old children. She is a single mother and per day earns around COP 4,000 (USD\$1,15), - with that amount she feeds her children with barley, and sometimes she mixes it with milk for the baby.⁵² Similarly, Mariela takes her children to a community kitchen to eat, where she only pays contribution of COP 1,000 (USD\$0,3) per person.

Another strategy used is to volunteer to get at least a meal a day. While visiting and volunteering in a community food kitchen which receives 4,000 women, children, and disabled people a day, I met Yuliany. While we were cutting vegetables and preparing the salad, we had a conversation. Yuliany arrived in La Parada a year ago with two of her three children. Back in Venezuela, she was a receptionist, and now she comes every day to the community kitchen and receives a contribution of \$30,000 (USD\$8,6) per week. She and her children are allowed to eat breakfast and lunch and take home a bucket of food. Yuliany is trying to get a job in a house as a domestic worker because she wants a more stable income to be able to send money to her son back in Venezuela. She is an example of how women meet the urgent needs of her family by offering services to other vulnerable Venezuelans (Loutfi 2001: 91).

3.4 Venezuelan women challenging the gendered division of labor?

From the conversations I had with women, I found that women are the main bread-winners in most of the Venezuelan households, even when men are living there. Women are the ones in charge of providing for their children in Colombia but also for those left behind in Venezuela (Cerrutti 2009:3). Also, women do the work traditionally attributed to 'women' (such as domestic work, beauty services, etc.), but they also are part of the criminal economies mainly considered for 'men.'

Gender is understood as the process of creating distinguishable social statuses for the assignment of rights and responsibilities. As part of a stratification system, gender defines social differences between what is to be a 'woman' and a 'man' as well as their expected behavior (Lorber 1995: 32). As a structure, "gender divides work in the home and in economic production, legitimates those in authority, and organizes sexuality and emotional life". In that sense, the gender division of labour is the allocation of tasks to a particular gender

⁵² Informal conversation with Sandra (24 July 2019)

according to their innate skills, this division is not biological but socially constructed. (Connell 1987, 91-142 in Lorber 1995:34).

As women and men become unemployed back in Venezuela, the decision-making on who goes out to work or who migrates to Colombia has heavily relied on the idea that women could secure a job more quickly than men (Cerrutti 2009:24). This has contributed to a change in the traditional roles, from being the men the breadwinners to women becoming the income earners (Fonchingong 2005:250).

In Zulma's household, it was decided that she migrate first and she is the one earning the income. Her husband arrived after three months later but refuses to work:

“Every day at midday, he comes and picks up what I have earned during the morning, brings me lunch, and he goes back to cook and take care of the children. My husband feels embarrassed about working in the street - he said it is better for a woman to sell on the streets than a man. He thinks that he has the right to feel embarrassed, but I do not think about that, even if I do not make enough money selling water, I ask for food or money from strangers. He is very lazy, - I am thinking of getting a divorce”, she laughed, and we kept walking in the Santander park.⁵³

While women take on most of the economic burden as the main breadwinners, the daily routines of the families have changed. Women work, and men and their children have to adapt to their absence by doing some of the household chores and childcare (Cerrutti 2009:33)

In the case of single mothers (some 60% of my interviewees), they have to balance their role as homemakers, mothers, and earners (Cerrutti 2009:33). For example, Jessica, who works selling sex in the Mercedes Sabrego Park, wakes up every day at 5 a.m. to prepare food for her teenage children. She accompanies her daughter to high school and takes her 16-year-old boy to the center with her. While she is working, her boy sells water in the park.

“I arrived without my children and I worked for a while until I managed to buy a little bed and find a place to sleep, then I went back to Venezuela and brought them to Cúcuta.” As she pulls her daughter's student ID card out of her wallet, she says to me, “I managed to register my daughter in high school. I am glad that she can continue her studies”. When I asked about her son, she told me: “My son is not studying for one reason: money. I cannot afford to keep them both at school. Last week my daughter had English homework, and the materials cost me COP 12,000 (USD\$3,6) It was almost everything that I had earned in one day. If my two children were studying, we wouldn't have enough money to eat.”⁵⁴

⁵³ Interview with Zulma (16 July 2019)

⁵⁴ Interview with Jessica (19 July 2019)

Although Venezuelan women are doing jobs considered gender appropriate, at the same time they are challenging the assumption that men are the only actors involved in criminal activities. (Norland et al 1981:422). Table 2.0 shows the main activities done by Venezuelan women and men in Cúcuta. This table is a result of my participant observation and information obtained in the interviews

Table 2 ‘Venezuelan men and women income-generating activities’⁵⁵

	Informal activity	Women	Men	Transwomen
1	Sells hair	X		
2	Takes care of other’s bags	X		
3	Provides beauty services on the street or in a beauty salon	X		
4	Tutoring	X		
5	Domestic work	X		
6	Survival Sex/ Prostitution	X		X
7	Cleans windows		X	
8	Sings in the traffic lights		X	
9	Begs	X	X	
10	Works in a restaurant	X	X	
11	Sells food and goods (including smuggled products)	X	X	
12	Volunteers	X	X	
13	Maleteros (suitcase chargers)	X	X	
14	Smuggles*	X	X	
14	Sells drugs (microtrafficking)*	X	X	
16	Extorts*	X	X	

Source: made by the author

NOTE: The activities marked with an ** are not considered part of the informal sector but from the criminal sector, which was explained above. Smuggling is against Colombian law even if it has been normalized in the border area.

According to the traditional gender division of labour, Venezuelan women are doing activities associated with their “allegedly innate female abilities and characteristics” such as domestic work, beauty services, selling sex, tutoring, and selling food on the street. However, they are also doing criminal activities such as micro trafficking, smuggling, and extorting which are considered activities more suited to men due to their ‘aggressive, strong and leading nature’ (Loutfi, 2001:139) (Yablonsky 1974:67 in Norland et al 1981:422). Overall, at least in the urban area of Cúcuta, men and women are doing the same income-earning activities in the informal and criminal sectors.

⁵⁵ I had an informal conversation with a transwoman, and she reported that some of them are involved in selling sex. Probably they are involved in other types of jobs but that was not part of my findings. The transwoman category is included to respect self-identification, even though the Colombian society recognized them as men.

Chapter 4: Women selling sex and their collective mechanisms

In the previous chapter, we saw how women used informal jobs, especially the sale of food and goods in the streets, to earn a daily income. This section will show how women also sell sex as a survival strategy. This choice is not the easiest, and carries a significant risk; in fact, while being in the Mercedes Abrego Park, women are exposed to harassment and abuse by the police as well as extortion by criminals and mistreatment by clients. To negotiate their safety in this hazard environment women have created collective mechanisms. Joselin, Leidy, and Margarita's experiences honor the stories of all the resilient women I met.

I am aware that the women that I talked with are not part of a homogenous group, and there is a variety of experiences among them. By dedicating a chapter to women selling sex, it's not my intention to define them as 'bad' as opposed to women who sell food and goods in the street as 'good'. Both street vendors and women selling sex are trying to earn money, and abuse and "labor-related problems are rife among them." (Agustin 2004 in Agustin 2005: 223)

4.1 Parque Mercedes Abrego: "Where only bad things can be found"

It is Friday afternoon, and I have been in Cúcuta for more than a week. I am heading to the Park Mercedes Abrego. I take a taxi that is parked at the entrance of the hotel, and by coincidence, this driver has already taken me to other places. While sitting in the back seat, I tell the driver the name of the cafeteria where I am going to do the interviews. He gives me a strange look through the rear-view mirror, like wondering what I could possibly do there, but he keeps on driving.

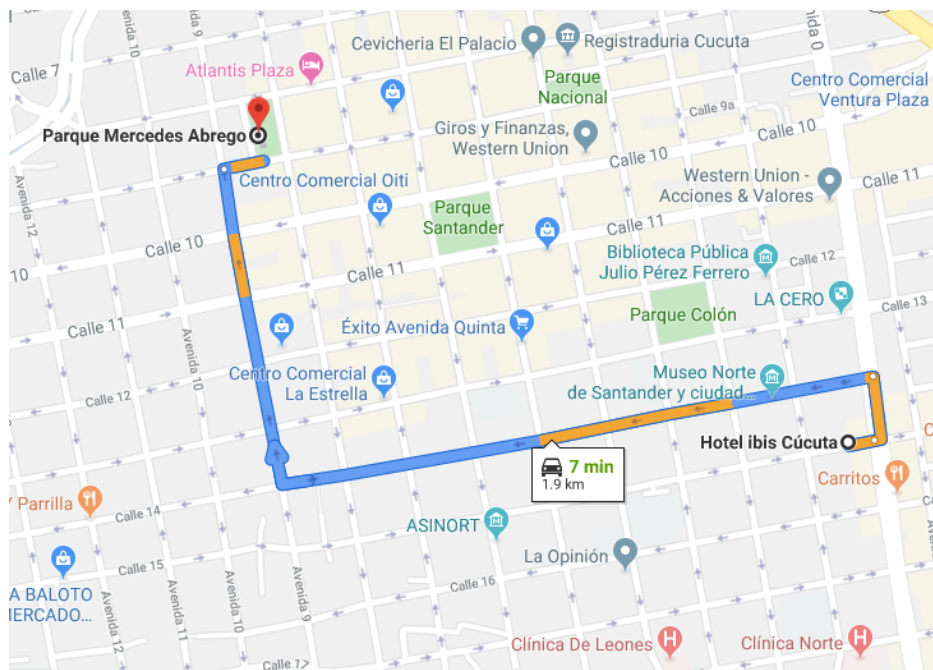
After five minutes, we arrive at the park, and while we look around for the exact place, he asks me: "Are you sure it is here where you have the meeting?" I nod, and replies: "I want to make sure because this place is not very safe. If you look around, only bad things can be found here: crime and prostitution."⁵⁶

His words reflect that for Colombian society, sex work is still considered an undesirable activity that should be avoided, even though in 2010, the Constitutional Court recognized it as a 'legal' and a 'decent' job (Parces & Páris 2016:23). Women engaging in sexual transactions are judged, discriminated against and considered "vectors of disease who should be tested and controlled" (Kempadoo 2004:169, Sentence T-36 de 2015 in Parces & Páris 2016:26).⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Informal conversation taxi driver (19 July 2019)

⁵⁷ Information included for the Gender and Sexuality Lenses unpublished assignment 'Representation of Venezuelan Women in Cúcuta: a critical analysis through a gender and sexuality lens', July 2019.

Map 5 'Driving journey to Mercedes Abrego Park'



Source: Google maps

Indeed, this is not an appealing park, and it does not seem like an ideal place to hang around. I recall that in the Santander Park among the Venezuelan crowd and street vendors, people were chatting, drinking coffee and children were playing around with the pigeons. In contrast, this cement park is surrounded by hotels that rent rooms for women and their clients (from USD\$1,5 to USD\$3), there is one cafeteria, and a couple of noisy bars. There are a few street vendors, but mostly, what I see are groups of women talking while sitting down or standing, and some men passing by. The majority (95%) of the women and girls selling sex in this park are Venezuelan, but before it used to be mainly Colombians.⁵⁸ There is a small police station in the park, and I note how ‘the bad things’ of this city go on under the nose of state institutions.

At the cafeteria, I met with Daniela, my gatekeeper. She previously contacted three women and asked them to meet with us here and another three women joined spontaneously without prior notice. I was advised not to interview women in the park because it was not safe: “On previous occasions when we have talked to women, we have noticed how men listen to our conversations. They do not want anyone interfering with their business. It is their territory, and it is better to go with someone that knows the area,” said Miriam, the founder of an NGO who has been working with the women on a project.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Interview with Miriam Castrillón (16 July 2019)

⁵⁹ Interview with Miriam Castrillón (16 July 2019)

Figure 6 'Parque Mercedes Sabrego'



Source: Fieldwork

4.2 Joselin: Am I a prostitute? Selling sex as a coping strategy

The following story shows how some Venezuelan women hesitate to identify themselves as prostitutes and see selling sex as a coping strategy to survive in a city with limited opportunities.

Helen, our first interviewee, told her friend Joselin that she was going to meet with someone in the cafeteria. Out of curiosity, Joselin approached us, and we invited her to sit with us. She was shy at first, but after a few minutes and while sharing some food, she became more open. Joselin arrived a year ago in Cúcuta with her nine-year-old son, without any plan or money. She is from Cojedes, Venezuela, and she used to work in a pharmacy.

“To be honest, I never thought that I was going to leave Venezuela or live in Colombia. I chose Cúcuta because it is the nearest city to Venezuela, and part of my family is still back there, including my husband, who is taking care of our three-floor house.

When I arrived, I didn't know that I was going to sell sex. My husband doesn't know what I do to send money back home, but under these circumstances, you do what is necessary to keep your family well.

Every day I sell coffee, and I do *raticos* (sell sex). I charge COP 25,000 (USD\$8) for sexual intercourse, but some men offer less, sometimes I earn that per day but sometimes I earn more. The only thing that I want is to get a real job. I think that all Venezuelan women working in this park, including me, would do something completely different if we were given the chance.

The other day a woman who works in an NGO came and told us that as ‘prostitutes’ we have rights”. She looked at Helen (her friend) and asked her: “That is what they told us that we have to call ourselves: prostitutes, right?” and they both laughed.⁶⁰

Based on Agustín’s arguments, many female migrants and non-migrants like Joselin, “who sell sex do not consider themselves workers but rather people temporarily engaging in a stigmatized occupation that is nothing to build an identity on” (Agustín, 2005 in Agustín 2007:529). Joselin does not see herself as a prostitute, and her story is pertinent to showing the theoretical differences between sex work, prostitution, and survival sex.

On the one hand, sex workers are considered “adults who receive money or goods in exchange for not only consensual sexual services but also erotic performances, either regularly or occasionally” (Open Society Foundation 2019). Within the sex work umbrella, prostitution “is making oneself available for sexual activities with someone in exchange for remuneration”. Like any other type of job, sex work/ prostitution could have an employment status (directly employed by someone else or self-employed), and a contract (a formal arrangement or even an informal one) (Jennings 2010: 233).⁶¹ On the other hand, survival sex is different from the previous ‘categories’:

“Survival sex refers to the sale or exchange of sex to obtain the basics of life: food to eat, rent for the week, or medicine for a sick child. Individuals selling sex usually work on the streets, and probably have little ability to set the terms of the contracts they engage in”. (Jennings 2010: 234).

It is very difficult to determine who fits these categories. I do not intend to put Venezuelan women in these ‘boxes,’ and much less to reduce their identities to what they do as a temporary or permanent activity.⁶² The decision of not calling Venezuelan women prostitutes or sex workers was based on what women expressed to me, and the fact that most of my interviewees were selling sex out of necessity under challenging conditions. I did not come across women who explicitly identified themselves as sex workers, but this does not mean that there aren’t any in Cúcuta.

There are two polarized debates around how beneficial sex work can be and how autonomous the decision to do it is. The oppression paradigm argues that sex work is exploitative and violent for individuals who practice it, and even claims that individuals could end up involved in this activity because they were abused as children or trafficked into it. In other words, it considers sex work as something that can be done to a person, and not something that can be chosen (Weitzer 2009:214). In contrast, the empowerment paradigm focuses “on how sexual commerce qualifies as work, involves human agency, and maybe potentially empowering for workers” (Carmen & Moody 1985, Chapkis 1997, Delacoste & Alexander 1987, Strossen 1995 in Weitzer 2009:214).

⁶⁰ Interview with Joselin (24 July 2019)

⁶¹ Information included for the Gender and Sexuality Lenses unpublished assignment ‘Representation of Venezuelan Women in Cúcuta: a critical analysis through a gender and sexuality lens’, July 2019.

⁶² Comment based on the discussion with Karin Astrid Siegman (7 May 2019)

This ambivalence about women's decision to sell sex is well illustrated by Joselin's story. She was not forced by anyone, but she felt that she was being pushed by her circumstances. She claimed that she thought that she 'had no choice', or a better option (Widdows 2013:162). She shows how selling sex can involve both a free and restrained choice (Smith 2017:347). Other interviewees told me that before arriving in Cúcuta, they knew that selling sex was the best economic option, despite the fact that back in Venezuela they had a different occupation.

To respect their diversity of experiences and to open up spaces for contradictions, I suggest looking at Venezuelan women selling sex from a polymorphous perspective. This means we should avoid generalizing, and instead recognize that there are power relations embedded in their experiences. Their gender, class, and even the physical space in which this activity is done also have to be considered (Weitzer 2009: 215). I proposed we move beyond these opposite debates and recognize that while for some Venezuelan women selling sex can be exploitative, for other women it may not, and their perception may change depending on their personal circumstances. (Smith 2017: 346)

4.3 Leidy: Warning each other, coping with police while selling sex

“When one has children, one has to do whatever it takes to bring food home. As a mother of two children, I have a huge responsibility ‘on my back,’ and I’ll do anything for my children. People say that this is the easiest job, but it is the most difficult. To be continuously humiliated and mistreat is tough, and on top of that we have the police saying all the time: ‘We will take you to the migration authorities, and they will take you back to where you belong, back to your country.’”⁶³

Most of the women selling sex that I talked to are undocumented migrants; deportation is a constant threat. Leidy came to Cúcuta with the promise of working in a bar, but when she arrived, she was forced to sell sex to pay back the cost of her crossing to Colombia. Recently, when Leidy was standing in the park waiting for clients, she was detained by the police and taken back to Venezuela. Her story shows how women have to deal not only with stigmatization but with the risk of being sexually abused.

“I arrived at 4:00 a.m. via the bridge. Back in Venezuela, I paid COP 150,000 (USD\$45) to cross the bridge with legal documents and to get a job in a bar in Colombia. On the first day at the bar, I was told by the owner that apart from selling alcohol and receiving a commission per client, I also had to sell sex. The people with whom I have the arrangement tricked me, I

⁶³ Interview with Macarena (19 July 2019)

did not get any documentation, and the job that I was promised was not what I expected. I stayed until I paid the money that I owed, and I then I left.

After that, I started working in Celeste's bar doing *raticos*. Sometimes I am at the bar, and occasionally I come to the park, but I prefer not to. Now there are many women, and the 'business' is going bad. In fact, there are days that women do not earn any money. But the main reason for avoiding coming here is that police and migration officers are constantly patrolling the park, and I do not feel safe.

One week ago, a cop came and asked me for documentation and because I do not have the special permit, yet they put me on a truck with a group of women. They left us there for hours, and when it was late at night, they took us to Ureña (Venezuelan city in Táchira State) through the Francisco de Paula Santander bridge. The policemen gave our documentation to the Venezuelan guards and left. We waited and begged the guards to let us go, and they released us at 2:00 a.m. It was late, and all of us wanted to go back to Colombia. The first thing that one of the guards told us was: "If you do not want to be raped and beaten, do not use *la trocha* to go back." Another three women and I managed to get to San Antonio (Venezuelan city in Táchira state - close to Cúcuta), and from there, a friend gave us a ride back to Colombia. We arrived in Cúcuta at around 5 a.m. in the morning.

I was lucky, but I know cases of women that were sexually abused when they were taken to Venezuela. This is how it works: The police force them to pass to the other side, and when they want to return to Colombia, they have to pay with their bodies to cross *la trocha*. They do not have any choice. Most of the women working in the park have been raped. The police officers know about this practice and still keep taking women there. I am tired of working here. I'm waiting for my Special Work Permit to be ready (PEP) and I will look for other employment options".⁶⁴

Women selling sex on the street face constant harassment by the police. Without any doubt, Venezuelan street vendors also are exposed to deportation, but women selling sex are twice as vulnerable because they are both Venezuelan and sex-sellers. The abuse of power and the violent practices of Colombian police towards women selling sex are not new and can vary "from arbitrary withholdings, destruction of documents, verbal and physical violence, extortion and expulsion from public places" (Parces & Páris 2016:52).

The internal bordering process becomes visible through the interaction of the police and migrant women (see Chapter 2). Women are chosen by the police, and when they are stopped for an ID check, they are subjected to an exclusion mechanism (Weber and Bowling, 2008 in Fabini 2019: 176-181). Often, those controls have ended in sexual assaults: "The police and migration officers take women to *las trochas*. They leave them there and they say to the other men: 'These are whores you can do whatever you want with.' It seems that there is an arrangement for taking women at those late hours at night, so they can easily be abused."⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Personal interview with Leidy (19 July 2019)

⁶⁵ Personal interview with a psychologist (22 July 2019)

Due to Venezuelan migrant women's general distrust of the police, they prefer to avoid any contact with them, even when there is something to report. For example, in the case of one woman, her client tried to rape her and even stabbed her. When her psychologist suggested she should go to the police, she refused and argued: "I do not want to go to the police station because I am sure that they are going to tell me: '*eso le pasa por andar de puta*' (which translates as: 'that is what you get for being a whore')."⁶⁶ In fact, one of my interviewees went to report a client that did not pay her, and while trying to make a formal complaint at the police station located in the park, the officer told her: "No one is forcing you to fuck men, what happened to you is your own fault."⁶⁷ The relationship between Venezuelan women who sell sex and the police are based on stigma, abuse and the violation of women's human rights.

To deal with police abuse, Venezuelan migrant women have created coping mechanisms to deal with a risky environment. Leidy told me, "If I see that a policeman is asking for documentation, I warn others if necessary, I run around the park telling the others."⁶⁸ This strategy is also used by street vendors. Zulma, who sells water (see Chapter 3), told me that she always walks and never stands still: "I was detained by the police last weekend, but nothing happened to me. As street vendors what we do is to check constantly who is in the park and who is missing."⁶⁹ In general, women selling sex and street vendors look out for their friends and relatives while working. It is worth highlighting the role of networks to take care of each other, this idea will be developed in the next story (Palmary et al 2014:129).

4.4 Margarita: Female resistance networks to cope with extortion

Margarita's story exposes the presence of criminal groups controlling the park's territory through extortion, and the daily reality of women dealing with unruly and violent clients.

Margarita arrived in Cúcuta two years ago. She has two children, a boy aged seven and a three-year-old girl. Her daughter lives with her, but her son is still in Venezuela. She came to Colombia with her sister, both of them with the intention of selling sex.

"Every morning, I get up at 6:00 am and take my daughter to a community day-care; after that, I come to the park to work. While I wait for my clients, I walk around and help my sister to sell sodas. The economic situation is difficult here. For example, today I have only earned COP 20,000 (USD\$6) [it was 4 pm when I talked to her], and on top of that, there are people forcing us to pay a COP 10,000 (USD\$3) fee per week for working in the park. According to them that quota is for occupying the space and for them to keep us safe.

⁶⁶ Interview with a psychologist (22 July 2019)

⁶⁷ Interview with Macarena (19 July 2019)

⁶⁸ Interview with Leidy (19 July 2019)

⁶⁹ Interview with Zulma (16 July 2019)

Recently a group of Colombian men came to tell us that we had to pay *vacuna* (the extortion). This time it was different, we organized ourselves, and we decided that we were not going to pay anything to anyone. They threatened us and told us that if we do not pay, we would suffer the consequences. But we resisted.”⁷⁰

It becomes evident that extortion by illegal armed groups exacerbated the women’s already poor economic conditions. People from Cúcuta, especially cattle ranchers, businessmen, and even smugglers, are used to being extorted by guerrillas and other groups, but for Venezuelan women this is an unusual complication (InSight Crime 2019b).

Women developed a collective strategy to resist extortion and support each other. Through these networks they have not only cope with criminals, but they also assist each other with matters related to food, shelter, job information and emotional support (Boyd, M., 1989:638 in Hagan 1998:5). In Margarita’s case, she relies on women who work at the park, and she and her sister also help each other out.

In addition to dealing with criminal threats, women also suffer exploitation and mistreatment by clients.

“A few days ago, a client proposed I clean his house and have sex with him. I was cleaning and cooking all day. When I finished, he wanted to have sex without a condom. He told me that if I refused, he would not pay me for my work. I did not accept it, and he kicked me out of his house. I came back to the park. I felt so bad, so humiliated. Men take advantage of our situation. Sometimes, men come and tell me: ‘Hey, how are you doing? I know that you probably have not eaten anything – I’ll give you COP 10,000 (USD\$3)- with that, you eat lunch and pay your room’. They are taking advantage of the situation, and sometimes I do not have any other choice.”⁷¹

Physical, verbal, and economic violence by clients is commonly experienced by women who sell sex. Often clients feel able to demand and even force women to do things they do not want to do because they are paying. Many men get offended and respond violently when women refuse to have sex without a condom (Parces & Páris 2016:46), as in Margarita case. On top of that, one of the main obstacles for people selling sex in Colombia is that they are not protected by the system or incentivized to report crimes against them: “If they do not pay attention to a Colombian woman, much less to a Venezuelan one. There are many obstacles for (any) women in Colombia to denounce gender-based violence. The first one is that we have normalized this type of behavior. And the second one for Venezuelan women is that they do not denounce for fear of being deported. Even if they dare to do so, how do we register their cases?” a UN officer told me.

To avoid violence from clients, Venezuelan women share information about well-behaved clients and report strange behavior. For instance, Joselin and Helen have identified that the youngest male clients tend to be more aggressive, and they try to avoid them. Also,

⁷⁰ Personal interview with Margarita (19 July 2019)

⁷¹ Personal interview with Margarita (19 July 2019)

they share clients to help each other out economically but also to support each other if one of them does not feel like having sex (Palmary et al 2014:130)

It was also clear that women use some basic rules to protect each other. They go to the same motels where they are known and where others can find them. They have created alarm mechanisms to let each other know that they are well while with a client. They constantly text each other and someone makes sure that they always come back to the park. Similarly, they have agreed on not seeing any client while he is in a vehicle and do not attend more than one man at a time. Finally, they welcome the health services provided by religious organizations or any NGOs.

Chapter 5: Synthesis and Concluding Thoughts

The Colombian-Venezuelan border comes alive via the daily crossing of thousands of Venezuelans, the control of the Colombian authorities, and even the actions of illegal armed actors. The border includes the Simon Bolivar bridge, the illegal crossing points, and extends all the way until the heart of Cúcuta city center (Fabini 2019:177, Newman 2003:14).

In 2015 the closure of the Simon Bolivar bridge and the expulsion of the Colombian population living in Venezuela prompted the fourth wave of migration of Venezuelans. The people in most need arrived in Colombia looking to satisfy their basic needs and to access health services. The border changed from being flexible to be an obstacle to the strong socio-economic relationship established before among border inhabitants.

For the Colombian government, it provoked the creation of formal mechanisms of control, which in practice exclude undocumented Venezuelan migrants (Welchman 1996; Newman & Paasi 1998; Newman 2000; 2002a; Kolossov & O'Loughlin 1998; Van Houtum 2000 in Newman 2003). These new controls increased the use of *las trochas*. Although they existed before, while the bridge was closed, the illegal crossing points became necessary for those without legal documents wanting to cross to Colombia. Whether through the bridge or *las trochas*, women negotiate their crossing with different actors. On the bridge, government officials based on a subjective rationale, determine who passes and who does not. Meanwhile, under the bridge, the illegal armed groups charge money for letting people and merchandise pass to the other side. Neither of the above spaces is safe from power abuses and violence.

From the 111,000 Venezuelan people living in Cúcuta, more than half are women. Women's reasons to stay in this city are diverse. My interviewees expressed that some of them decided to stay here due to the proximity to Venezuela which allows them to go back and forth, which is very important especially for those with children on the other side. Others arrived in Cúcuta because a family member migrated first and decided to stay; but generally, what seems to be the most common reason is that they do not have enough money to go further away. All of my interviewees, except one, arrived without a concrete job offer, but some of them had been told by an acquaintance that a job was available.

In Cúcuta poverty and vulnerability cut across nationalities, but Venezuelan women are in a weaker position due to their condition as migrants, and their living and working conditions are more precarious. Most of the women that I interviewed were single mothers and have a bigger challenge because they have to balance their role as mothers and breadwinners.

Once women are in Cúcuta, they negotiate their survival in different spaces. On the streets of the city center, women sell food and goods. What they earn is barely enough to eat and rent a place to sleep. To deal with scarcity, they implement strategies to increase their daily income such as doing more than one activity at a time. A second space is the Mercedes Abrego park where some of them sell sex. They are exposed to stigmatization, deportation, and clients' violence. Those women have created collective coping mechanisms to resist a

harsh environment. Therefore, their negotiation capacity is seen in how they earn a daily income but also in the ways they use networks to protect each other.

Venezuelan women do what it takes to feed their families, to adapt to the realities of Cúcuta, and to overcome the obstacles imposed by not having Colombian citizenship.

5.1 Possible Future Research: citizenship as missing ingredient?

While before 2015, nationality was virtually irrelevant, since the border closed and the Venezuelan crisis worsened, it has become essential for many Venezuelans to have Colombian citizenship. This research made evident that women's nationality became an obstacle to access health and pension services, to get a formal job, to denounce abuses and crimes, and to register their children at school.

The importance that future research focuses on the limits imposed by citizenship and how to overcome them are illustrated through the following situations. First, in the Norte de Santander Department, there are around 32,441 children that should be enrolled at school, and the majority are reported to be in Cúcuta. Due to their parent's legal status, about 35% of them are unable to attend school. Even if they can register, the lack of public monetary resources prevents them from having the same conditions as the Colombians children, for instance, in terms of food.⁷² The second case is the incapacity of the Venezuelan population to denounce any crime and to be covered by the Colombian law. For instance, the Armed Conflict Victims Law (1448) was designed for the Colombian people. The legal system does not include any Venezuelan victims of armed group actions. Similarly, Venezuelans' violent deaths are rendered invisible in the Norte de Santander Department. These are justified by their involvement in illegal activities, and no further investigations are conducted.⁷³ Finally, there are more than 24,000 children in the country without a nationality even though they were born in Colombia. What will happen with those children and their non-Colombian parents? (Bracho 2019) These examples demonstrate the importance of linking migrants' daily realities and coping mechanisms to their legal status and citizenship.

⁷² Interview with OCHA Officer, Adelaida Acosta (22 July 2019)

⁷³ Interview with Ombudsman officials (19 July 2019)

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