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A Forgotten Crisis: The Challenges Of Implementing A Gender-Based Humanitarian Intervention in the Darien

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NICOLE LARA

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Members of the Examining Committee:

Supervisor:

Nanneke Winters

Second Reader:

Daphina Misiedjan

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Inquiries:

International Institute of Social Studies
P.O. Box 29776
2502 LT The Hague
The Netherlands

t: +31 70 426 0460
e: info@iss.nl
w: www.iiss.nl
fb: <http://www.facebook.com/iss.nl>
twitter: [@issnl](https://twitter.com/issnl)

Location:

Kortenaerkade 12
2518 AX The Hague
The Netherlands

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List of Acronyms

IASC	Inter-Agency Standing Committee
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
IOM	International Organization for Migration
MRSs	Migrant Reception Stations
NGOs	Non-Governmental Organizations
SENAFRONT	National Border Service
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

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Abstract

This research paper offers an analysis of the evolution and current status of the humanitarian response for transit migrants in the Darien province as of 2023, focusing on the complications in the consistent implementation of a gender approach. Through a qualitative interviewing methodology used in interviews with nine humanitarian actors, this research reveals the challenges to humanitarian interventions brought by the lack of proper coordination between agencies, the transit status of this migrant population, and the absence of state presence. Moreover, it identifies that such challenges further hinder the ability to integrate a comprehensive gender approach in the humanitarian response due to the lack of an inter-organizational agreement on what such an approach entails and how it should be implemented for this particular transit migrant population. Finally, it offers a reflection on what further actions could be taken by humanitarian organizations in the field to respond to the challenges that the rapid increase in this migratory flow may represent for the humanitarian field in the near future.

Relevance to Development Studies

The current migratory flow that crosses the Darien Gap is a result of economic and social instability in migrants' countries of origin. While it is the responsibility of state actors to ensure that the human rights of their population are protected, this is often not the case. As a result, humanitarian organizations have taken the role of providing care and aid for this transit migrant population, in the absence of formal institutions doing so. The importance of their interventions cannot be understated, as they aim at protecting a population that is particularly vulnerable due to the irregular and transit nature of their migration status. Moreover, a gender approach is particularly relevant for the field of Development Studies, as it aims to address further vulnerabilities that may be caused by the gendered nature of migration (Mora and Piper, 2021). Overall, this research study complements the current lack of literature focused on the humanitarian response that is offered to this particular population, which is necessary in order to address any existent gaps.

Keywords

Humanitarian action, transit migrants, gender approach, Darien, Panama.

Chapter 1 Introduction

While migrants are not inherently vulnerable, they can be vulnerable to human rights violations. Migrants in an irregular situation tend to be disproportionately vulnerable to discrimination, exploitation and marginalization, often living and working in the shadows, afraid to complain, and denied their human rights and fundamental freedoms (OHCHR, n.d.).

Migration is not a new phenomenon. It has always been present throughout history as a result of ever-changing needs and demands. Therefore, migration routes are in constant change, and in the last decade, one specific migration route has become more popular: the Darien Gap. This route that connects Colombia with Panama has gained prominence in recent years due to the increasing and concerning number of people who cross it every day, the extreme circumstances that can be found throughout the route, and the difficulties in providing thorough humanitarian support for the migrant population that crosses it. Currently, thousands of migrants cross this jungle area every day as part of their longer journey towards North America, many without knowing the true extent of the dangers that this route represents.

The harsh conditions of the journey through the Darien Gap, combined with the in-transit nature of the migrant population that crosses it, increases their already existent vulnerability as irregular migrants. This also results in different risks arising for different populations such as women, children, the elderly, and the disabled, among others (OHCHR, 2023). The gendered nature of migration, in general, (Mora and Piper, 2021) and the diversity of this particular migrant population makes the implementation of a gender approach relevant in any humanitarian intervention on their behalf (Inter-Agency Standing Committee, 2017). However, humanitarian actors are faced with complex challenges that render their work difficult.

The nature of the Darien gap as an international border zone further complicates things both from an international relations perspective as well as due to the lack of institutional presence on both sides of the border resulting from to the difficulties in reaching this jungle area. In the absence of the state, humanitarian actors such as large non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and smaller foundations have become present in the area, offering care at multiple different points of the migration route. Following the

humanitarian principles of humanity, neutrality, and impartiality, these organizations have taken it upon themselves to ensure that this invisibilized population's human rights are granted by providing them with the basic support they need to continue their journey (OCHA, 2012). Although literature on the nature of exactly what this humanitarian intervention entails is limited, migrants have reported that the assistance that they are given is not sufficient to meet their needs (Rupprecht, 2022).

Humanitarian intervention in this area is not only complex due to the gendered violence that marks the route, but also due to the transit nature of this migrant population. Most of the people who cross the Darien jungle aim to reach North America as quickly as possible. For this reason their stay in Panama after crossing the gap tends to be quite short, not more than a couple of days unless they have to stay longer to undergo medical treatment or in the case that they have run out of money to continue their journey (Alto Comisionado de las Naciones Unidas para los Refugiados, 2023: p. 5). This reality makes it hard for humanitarian actors to provide the most comprehensive aid possible for every person that crosses. It also makes it difficult to obtain information on how effective the aid was or to follow up with the population to ensure their well-being. These and other implications of this population's transit status will be further explored in the following chapters.

When researching this migration route it became clear to me that there is a lack of comprehensive literature on the topic. This is especially true when it comes to the Panamanian side of the Darien, as there seems to be more research available on the situation on the Colombian side of the jungle (Angulo et al. 2019). This is an important gap because, while it is important to understand how this migratory route begins, I believe it is increasingly relevant to have a more profound understanding of the reality that this migrant population faces when exiting the jungle due to the complex challenges that they face during the journey. Therefore, the response and follow-up to the effects of the journey are a crucial piece of information to understand this population's overall journey.

In addition to this, the challenges that humanitarian actors encounter when providing aid for this migrant population, other than those already mentioned, are unclear in the available literature on this topic. Furthermore, the available information on the humanitarian response that this population receives is limited to the role of organizations focused on physical and psychological healthcare (Alto Comisionado de las Naciones Unidas para los Refugiados, 2023: p. 5). For this reason I believe it is important to enhance

the limited existent literature by providing a more thorough documentation and analysis of the evolution and current situation of humanitarian action in the Darien from the unique perspective of the humanitarian actors themselves. Complementing this analysis with the lens of a gender approach will, therefore, provide a more comprehensive understanding of how humanitarian actors can improve their response to more efficiently target the differentiated needs of all migrants that transit this route.

This research paper will, in turn, be divided into six chapters, starting with a brief introduction of the history of the migrant flow in the Darien, followed by information on what crossing the Darien Gap entails as of 2023. The second chapter consists of the theoretical framework that will be used to analyze the current humanitarian response based on the standards followed by humanitarian organizations in terms of gender, connected to the implications of this population's transit status. Next, the third chapter will describe the methodology used for the purpose of this research, including an exploration of its limitations and the ethical considerations connected to my positionality in regards to this investigation.

The fourth chapter will then offer a more broad understanding of what the current state of the humanitarian response in the Darien is, based on the perspective and experiences of nine members of humanitarian organizations that were interviewed. This is complemented by the evolution in this humanitarian response that was brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, followed by the current role of the state in this response. Chapter 5 will then provide an analysis of the current challenges that humanitarian actors are facing, which include the difficulties with inter-agency collaboration, the complications brought about by this population's transit status, and the important role of language and information for the provision of a comprehensive humanitarian response. Finally, the sixth chapter will present the conclusions stemming from this research, providing an analysis of how the difficulties that humanitarian actors face affect their ability to implement a gender approach in their interventions.

1.1. A Brief History Of Migration Through The Darien Gap

According to the International Organization for Migration (2022, p. 24) between the years 2005 and 2022 the amount of people that migrated through Latin America more than doubled, surpassing the 15 million mark. For the sake of this research paper the focus will be on migration trends starting in 2016 until the present day because this is the time during

which the flow of migrants crossing the Darien began the rapid increase that is still observed until this day (Human Rights Watch, 2023).

While in previous years Panama was seeing the flow of less than 10,000 people, the year 2016 marked an unprecedented increase, with upwards of 30,000 people crossing the Darien Gap. According to a report by Migración Panamá (2019), the main nationality of this migrant population was Haitian, with more than 16,000 people arriving from this country. Considering the fact that this number represents more than half of the total number of migrants that transited the Darien during that year, it is important to consider what factors could have led to such an increase.

In 2010 an earthquake devastated Haiti, leaving widespread destruction behind. This exacerbated the already existent political crisis that threatened the population's human rights and their ability to build a future for the next generations. These challenging conditions, therefore, forced a large amount of the population to become displaced, with many choosing to migrate elsewhere in the search for better opportunities. According to Human Rights Watch (2023), however, Haitians are one of the nationalities that have the most restrictions for mobility within the Latin American continent. Therefore, informal migratory routes as the Darien often serve as the only means through which this population can gain access to foreign countries.

The following year, 2017, Panama witnessed a sharp decline in the amount of people transiting through the country, with less than 7,000 people crossing throughout the year. This trend continued in 2018, when the migrant flow barely surpassed 9,000. However, in 2019 the number sky rocketed once more, reaching upwards of 22,000 people. Once more, the most prominent nationality were Haitians, with more than 10,000 of them crossing the Colombia-Panama border (Migración Panamá, 2019). This could, again, be attributed to the economic and social instability that has persisted in this country.

In the year 2020 the migrant flow decreased once more, this time to 6,465 people transiting throughout the whole year (Migración Panamá, 2020). This decrease in migratory flow can be attributed to the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the International Organization for Migration (2020), the Panamanian government closed the country's borders on March 12th of said year, and remained closed for the next five months in an attempt to protect the population. During this time the flow of migrants completely halted, which was an unprecedented situation considering the much larger flows that had become usual in the previous years. However, this was only the calm before the storm.

According to Migración Panamá (2021), in all of 2021 the number of migrants crossing the Darien Gap reached a whopping 133,726, with the most numerous flow arriving between the months of July and October. During this year, the trend of Haitian migrants dominating the flow continued, as they represented more than half of the total number of migrants who made the crossing. They were then followed by Cubans, Chileans, and Brazilians, all of which surpassed 5,000 migrants.

A similar trend in exponentially large numbers of migrants crossing the Darien continued in 2022, however this year saw almost double the amount than in the previous year, reaching a total of 248,284 people. Migración Panamá (2022) reported that during this year Venezuelans represented the largest population that transited this route, at more than 150,000 people. Once again, looking at the situation of Venezuela provides insight into the possible causes of this concerning increase.

Since 2014 Venezuela has been going through a social and economic crisis that represents one of the largest humanitarian crises in the world due to the extent of it. This already harrowing reality was then exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which caused unemployment rates to heavily increase not only in Venezuela, but in all of Latin America. While Venezuelans had been migrating to other countries for years, the sudden increase in their arrival at the Darien Gap could be attributed to migration laws in other countries. According to Human Rights Watch (2023), countries north of Panama, such as Costa Rica and Mexico imposed more strict regulations for Venezuelan nationals, requiring a visa in order to enter such countries. This is added to similar regulations that were already in place in other countries, including Panama itself. Therefore, the option for irregular transit that the Darien Gap offers to this migrant population can be considered one of the only options for Venezuelans to flee the increasingly complicated situation that their country is facing.

Finally, the amount of people that have transited the Darien in 2023 has surpassed any expectations. Migración Panamá (2023) has reported that as of September, 2023, the massive amount of 408,972 people have crossed the Darien Gap. Once again, this population is led by Venezuelans, with this nationality representing more than half of the total number of migrants. The second most prominent population that has crossed this year are Ecuadorians, with their numbers reaching close to 50,000.

The current situation in Ecuador differs slightly from the instability that Haiti and Venezuela have been facing. The South-American country has witnessed a considerable

increase in violence stemming from widespread organized crime in recent years. Human Rights Watch (2023) explains that this growing insecurity has aggravated the already increasing economic instability that the country is facing. Such uncertainty and fear have, therefore, pushed the citizens of Ecuador to migrate elsewhere in search of better opportunities. In addition to this, countries such as Mexico have also added visa requirements for Ecuadorians since 2021. Ever since then, the number of Ecuadorian migrants that transit through the Darien Gap has seen a rapid increase, putting them at the second place right behind Venezuela for a second year in a row.

1.2. Crossing the Darien Gap: a Challenging Reality

The Darien is a large jungle area that is found in the North of Colombia and extends to a large portion of the South of Panama. This is the only spot in which the Pan-American highway is interrupted due to the difficult terrain and conditions that this tropical jungle represents (Wolfe 2022). Known as the ‘Darien Gap’, this has become one of the most transited migration routes in the world in recent years for those seeking to reach North America. The unique conditions of this route make it incredibly dangerous, as migrants are exposed to natural risks such as extreme weather, disease, and even animal attacks. In addition to this, there are also increasing human-related risks due to the presence of armed groups in the area and those who, along the way, take advantage of the vulnerable situation of the migrants.

In order to comprehend the depth of this problem it is important to understand what migration through this route entails. The following information represents the situation as of March of 2023, but it must be stated that some specifics of the route, such as costs, reception, and the role of state institutions are in constant change. Migrants coming from diverse countries, such as Haiti, Venezuela, Cuba, and Ecuador, among others, start this difficult passage in Colombia. They pay hundreds of dollars to be transported as close to the border with Panama as possible. Once there they start the journey through the jungle on foot, having to go up and down hills of difficult terrain and crossing rivers that threaten to drown even the strongest person. In addition to this, the difficult weather poses an extra threat, as the area sees heavy rain between the months of May and December, which further complicates the journey and increases the likelihood of life-threatening situations such as flash floods (Human Rights Watch, 2023).

The amount of time it takes to reach the Panamanian side depends on the route taken and the amount of people that are traveling together. According to the most recent reports, 90% of migrants start their journey in Acandí, Colombia, then arrive at the indigenous community of Bajo Chiquito in Panama and then are transported to Lajas Blancas (UNICEF, 2023). It is estimated that the journey takes anywhere between 5-10 days, while longer journeys of up to 15 days in the jungle are more common for families that are traveling with young kids, the elderly, or disabled individuals (Alto Comisionado de las Naciones Unidas para los Refugiados, 2023: p. 4).

Image 1: Most common migratory routes



Source: Human Rights Watch, 2023

Once they arrive at any of the many indigenous communities that call the Darien jungle their home, they can obtain further guidance to reach the humanitarian organizations that provide aid for this population. Before reaching them, however, the National Border Service (SENAFRONT) takes over and identifies migrants, often through the use of biometrics, to keep a formal account of who has arrived in Panama to continue their transit towards North America. Once this process is done migrants pay for a spot in small canoes that take them to one of two Migrant Reception Stations (MRSs) located up the river where NGOs such as Doctors Without Borders provide them with immediate medical care (Alto Comisionado de las Naciones Unidas para los Refugiados, 2023: p. 5).

The goal of this migrant population is to continue their transit towards the North, so they stay an average of 24 hours in these reception centers before continuing with their journey. After this, they have to pay another \$40 for transportation that will get them close to the border with Costa Rica. Those who do not have the resources to continue their travels have to stay in such temporary and under-resourced sites. This can increase their already vulnerable status because the urge to continue their journey can lead them to dangerous situations in an attempt to obtain the necessary funds to keep going.

Even though the level of danger of this migration route is high, the amount of people that decide to cross it has been steadily increasing. Between January of 2022 and January of 2023 it is estimated that 272,918 people crossed the border between Colombia and Panama (Alto Comisionado de las Naciones Unidas para los Refugiados, 2023: p. 9). This number is worrisome because it is almost twice the amount of people that crossed the border the previous year. Given the dangerous conditions, it is surprising that the number of reported deaths was 'only' 36 for the year 2022. However, accounts of those who made the journey evidence the fact that deaths are largely underreported due to many bodies getting lost in the dense jungle and the inability of migrants to offer help to others at their own expense (International Organization for Migration, 2023). Many migrants report witnessing traumatic sights such as abandoned children, decomposing bodies, people drowning in rivers, and even sexual assaults (Wolfe, 2022). These highly traumatic experiences, in addition to the physical toll that the journey in itself can take on them, result in migrants arriving in Panama having unique medical and psychological needs that seem to have become the main focus of humanitarian organizations with presence in the area.

While the journey through the Darien jungle is extremely difficult for anyone that crosses it, there are certain challenges that are unique to women. In recent years the number of reported cases of sexual violence against women and young girls have seen a concerning increase. Doctors Without Borders reported to have treated 396 women who had been victims of sexual violence throughout their journey between April 2021 and March of 2022. (Médecins Sans Frontières, 2022). This can have severe detrimental effects on the mental health of these women, making the journey much more difficult as they have to add this extra toll to the already difficult task of ensuring the safety of the children that usually accompany them as they cross. This can also put the women's health at risk if they are not able to arrive at a MRS in time to obtain medical help to treat infections or to receive medication to prevent an unwanted pregnancy.

1.3. Justification and Relevance of Research

This migration route is considered by many to be largely invisibilized (Alto Comisionado de las Naciones Unidas para los Refugiados, 2023: p. 1). After living in Panama for more than a decade it was evident to me that there was a lack of transparency from the government regarding what the situation of this migration route was like. Only in recent years has this topic gained notoriety, however this has mostly been due to its sensationalization by the media.

The invisibilization of the specific conditions that transit migrants face throughout this route and of the challenges encountered by humanitarian actors to offer an appropriate response to this population's needs is also evidenced by the lack of literature that goes beyond a description of the current migratory situation. Reports by the main humanitarian organizations that are involved in this migration route, such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the International Organization for Migration (IOM), and UNICEF focus largely on quantitative data regarding the number, nationality, age, and gender of the migrants that cross it, as well as their motivations to migrate and the dangers that they face throughout the route. However, there is yet to be a more comprehensive report on what humanitarian action in this area entails, how it has evolved over time, and what shortcomings it has encountered..

The more I investigated this migration route and the humanitarian intervention that accompanies it, the more apparent it was to me that gender is a crucial lens through which it should be analyzed and addressed because of the gender-based vulnerabilities that this migratory experience can create. In the context of transit migration, gender is one of the factors that differentiates the experiences and vulnerabilities of each person throughout the route due mainly to gender roles and relations (Inter-Agency Standing Committee, 2006; 2017). Due to this, the effects of such experiences will also differ, resulting in different needs, especially when it comes to health (Llácer et al. 2007). A gender approach is thus particularly necessary when analyzing the humanitarian intervention for the migrant population arriving in the Darien, especially because the bulk of the humanitarian response focuses on healthcare.

The second half of 2022 also saw the largest population of migrating children, with 82% of them crossing during this period. This correlates with the largest number of women crossing, which suggests that women tend to carry the additional responsibility of ensuring the safe crossing of their children. In addition to this, it was reported that in the

same year more than 15 babies were born throughout the journey (Alto Comisionado de las Naciones Unidas para los Refugiados, 2023: p. 13). This increases the vulnerability of the mothers due to the expected lack of medical care during such a delicate process, as well as having to continue the journey in a presumably weaker state and with the additional responsibility of a newborn. When also considering the above-mentioned increase in instances of sexual assault and gender-based violence, a gendered response becomes more relevant.

Due to the picture that these numbers paint I believe that a gender approach could offer a beneficial lens through which to look at this situation. According to the Inter-Agency Standing Committee, this approach is beneficial for humanitarian action:

The integration of gender into humanitarian programming helps to ensure that the particular needs, capacities and priorities of women, girls, men and boys — related to pre-existing gender roles and inequalities, along with the specific impacts of the crisis — are recognized and addressed (Inter-Agency Standing Committee, 2017, p. 24).

Understanding this can allow humanitarian actors to differentiate the aid that they provide considering the specific needs of each gendered person, which is something that was not evident within the literature that is available on this topic. This could also create an opportunity for empowerment based on an understanding of the specific roles and vulnerabilities of each person, as well as the relationships that gender creates between them.

Considering how fast the number of people that decide to cross the Darien Gap each year is increasing, I believe that it is crucial to analyze how humanitarian actors are approaching this situation. Understanding what challenges humanitarian action has faced in the past and how these challenges were addressed can offer valuable insight on how to approach the issues that are arising with the increasing influx of migrants. I consider a gender approach to be a useful tool in this particular case due to the implications that the route may have for different people based on their gender, age, or sexual orientation. This approach can offer helpful information regarding the particular needs of each gendered person, which can then be used for the implementation of new programs, policies, and even legislation (Regional Conference on Migration 2017).

1.4. Research Objectives

Consequently, the aim of this research is to analyze how the approach of humanitarian actors responding to the migration crisis in the Darien Gap has changed in response to the challenges they have faced over time and what this has meant for their implementation of a gender approach. Such challenges include factors like the COVID-19 pandemic, which affected migration as a whole, the exponential increase in the number of transit migrants that cross the Darien each year, and the presence of the state, which could represent either a challenge or a tool for humanitarian actors. This is based on the understanding that humanitarian organizations, including those I reference in my research, acknowledge the importance of a gender approach in the humanitarian field. However, it is unclear how this works in practice.

Through my analysis I want to find any persistent gaps in their humanitarian interventions in order to provide suggestions for the future of the humanitarian field on how they can provide a more appropriate response that fits the unique needs of this migrant population and takes into account all factors that can increase the vulnerability of migrants in transit. This research also has the goal of contributing to the literature on migration through the Darien Gap from the point of view of humanitarian actors, which seems to be lacking as of the time of writing this. In order to complete the above-mentioned purposes, this study will be addressing the following questions:

1.4.1. Research Questions

How do humanitarian organizations implement a gender approach in their aid for transit migrants arriving in the Darien province, and what are the challenges they find in doing so?

Sub Questions

- In what ways has humanitarian action in the Darien Gap evolved over time in response to increased migration? How do humanitarian actors perceive and address gendered needs?
- How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected the ability of humanitarian actors to provide aid for transit migrants in the Darien?
- How do humanitarian actors address the in-transit nature of the migrant population that passes through Panama in the aid they provide?

- To what extent is the Panamanian state involved in protecting the human rights of this migrant population, including the rights of women and children?

Chapter 2 Conceptual Framework

This chapter looks at the framework through which I will analyze the response from humanitarian actors in the Darien. It begins with the discussions surrounding the efficiency and ethics of the humanitarian field, followed by the theory of what a gender approach is supposed to entail when it comes to humanitarian intervention, and ending with a discussion of what these concepts entail for transit migrants in a displacement context.

2.1. The Humanitarian Field

Humanitarian organizations are guided by a set of principles and standards that are meant to ensure an honest intervention that benefits all people in need, without distinction, and which are based on moral and ethical values. The humanitarian principles consist of humanity, impartiality, neutrality, and independence (Barnett, 2014). They ensure that the work of humanitarian organizations remains ethical and follows the main goal of saving lives. “These principles, if followed and respected, create ‘humanitarian space’ that provides a sanctuary for aid workers and victims” (Barnett and Weiss, 2008, p. 4). However, a strict adherence to these principles can at times hinder the organizations’ ability to create real change to help populations in need.

For example, the principle of independence ensures that the humanitarian sector remains separate from the political sector, therefore not being able to interfere in what, in many cases, is at the root of a crisis. To Gupta et al. (2023) this results in a “short-termism” in humanitarian aid that focuses on immediate action that saves lives rather than looking at long-term interventions that can promote social transformation, thus deviating from the ideal aid-development nexus that the field promotes.

A strict adherence to humanitarian principles is a double-edged sword. To many, upholding these principles rigorously is crucial for states to see humanitarian organizations as valid, which in turn allows them to access populations in need around the world (Network on Humanitarian Action, 2018). Access can be considered to be the first step towards providing a population in need with protections, therefore adherence to the principles is critical for humanitarian organizations to reach those who need their help the most. For this reason it is the opinion of experts such as Dr. Kristalina Georgieva that:

Humanitarian principles should be adhered to more than ever in contemporary international humanitarian affairs because their relevance is directly proportional to the extent of the complication of a disaster and/or conflict, and since contemporary crises are increasingly complicated, it is all the more vital to implement humanitarian principles (Alameldeen, 2021, p. 124).

However, it is evident that remaining apolitical is often not an option because the situations that the humanitarian world responds to do not happen in a ‘political vacuum’ (Labbé and Daudin, 2015). Therefore the humanitarian field has also been criticized for turning a blind eye to cultural norms that violate human rights, especially those of women, for the sake of remaining neutral and impartial (Gupta et al. 2023).

Humanitarian organizations’ focus on short-term aid has also been criticized for inherently creating a culture of what Vijfeijken (2019) refers to as “‘savior’ complexes and ‘macho’ or ‘cowboy’ behaviors” within humanitarian organizations. Such complexes can blur the lines between what should be the motivation behind humanitarian action and what in reality incentivizes members of such organizations.

Aid agencies seem to be driven by both values *and* interests, especially evident where some appeared to be ‘pornographers of death’, caring more about constructing heroic images of themselves for donors than about the plight of victims (Barnett and Weiss, 2008, p. 6).

While the effects of the ‘macho’ behaviors are largely discussed in the context of organizational culture, this also creates a relevant concern when it comes to the disproportionate power relations that exist between humanitarian actors and the beneficiaries of humanitarian aid. Through their authority humanitarian organizations determine who receives aid and who doesn’t, which can unintentionally further victimize an already vulnerable population (Barnett and Weiss, 2008, p. 42). These effects are crucial to take into account when analyzing the effectiveness of humanitarian action, as they can further exacerbate already existing vulnerabilities created by factors such as gender.

2.2. Gender in Humanitarian Interventions

The concept of gender within the humanitarian field has been in constant change since its institutionalization by publications such as the UNHCR’s 1991 Guidelines on the

Protection of Refugee Women (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2014). Previous to this there had already been several critiques of the lack of recognition of women in definitions such as the one for ‘refugees’, which was originally based on the paradigm of a male refugee, and how this resulted in the invisibilization of women within the international agenda (Camus-Jacques, 1989; Greatbatch, 1989). In response to such critiques special guidelines were created to distinguish women from what was considered to be the ‘normal refugee’, which inherently ‘othered’ women and victimized them further (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2014). Within refugee studies the specific needs of women have been increasingly recognized, as was the case for those considered ‘normal’ migrants.

However problematic, the importance for such a distinction was evident, as migration patterns began to show an increase in the amount of women involved in this phenomenon in recent decades, which raised concerns for their differentiated vulnerabilities (Martinez-Pizarro, 2008, cited in Fries, 2019).

Women and girls are also disproportionately affected by crisis and exposed to gendered risks and vulnerabilities. Gender-based violence in some crisis settings affects more than 70% of women. It is a human rights, protection and health issue, which is exacerbated in times of conflict, disaster and displacement (Churruca-Muguruza, 2018, p. 9).

To Martinez-Pizarro (2008, cited in Fries, 2019) this formal recognition of women was a crucial step in the right direction because previous to this the lack of institutional recognition for the role of migrant women resulted in their invisibilization within legal and other international frameworks.

However, to many others like Hillhorst, Porter, and Gordon (2018, p. S5) further work was necessary in order to move the concept of gender “away from viewing men and women as binary and separate categories, and instead as relational”. Such a perspective would give way to a more refined gender approach that analyzes every individual’s socially situated identity in order to determine their vulnerabilities in a more accurate manner, without generalizing. Unfortunately this is easier said than done, as “the humanitarian community still has a tendency to say ‘gender’, when in practice it means women and girls. Moreover, the spotlight is narrow, essentially focusing on the status of women and girls as vulnerable people or victims without agency” (Hillhorst, Porter, and Gordon, 2018, pp. S5-S6).

In 2018 the United Nations Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) for Humanitarian Coordination called for “the need to understand the specific needs, capacities and priorities of women, girls, boys and men, and integrate this understanding throughout the programme cycle” in an attempt to expand the view of a gender approach within the humanitarian field. The IASC’s *The Gender Handbook for Humanitarian Action* (2017) is now one of the most widely accepted publications in the field that exemplifies what a gender approach should entail. This publication emphasizes that “Women and girls are neither exclusively nor solely the passive victims of crisis. Men and boys should not be seen solely as perpetrators of violence” (p. 22), which emphasizes the idea that a focus on gender entails much more than just women. It also suggests that women, girls, men, and boys all have different capacities and experiences, and taking these into account is crucial for the “meaningful participation” of all beneficiaries of humanitarian aid (p. 24).

One strategy promoted by the IASC is gender mainstreaming. This approach involves different actors who use a top-down method to analyze the different implications for men and women in humanitarian crises and therefore to create guidelines and policies to tackle such disparities (Gupta et al. 2023). However, recent analyses such as the one conducted by Gupta et al. (2023) have shown that this method has only been successful in its implementation by humanitarian organizations but not in its results, showing that this method lacks the ability to create the difference that it intended. Further, this top-down approach has also been considered problematic within the field, as it can be emasculating for men who may feel their role as ‘protectors’ and ‘providers’ is threatened by humanitarian actors, especially in the context of refugee camps (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2014). However, creating a universal framework on what a gender approach entails for humanitarian action would also be problematic based on the ever-changing phenomenon of transit migration. This is particularly relevant in the context of transit migrants such as the ones who cross the Darien Gap, as their transit status can further complicate humanitarian organizations’ ability to understand and target their differentiated vulnerabilities and capabilities based on gender.

2.3. Transit Migration

One particularity about the population of migrants that reaches the Darien province is their transit status, as Panama is not their destination country and very few know about the possibility or have an interest in applying for asylum in this country (Leonarda RET).

Unfortunately, while research on transit migration has increased in the past years (Basok et al., 2015; Prasad et al., 2023) there are only few studies offering an understanding of the particular experience of migrants who transit the Darien (Winters, 2019). Most of the existing data on this population comes from interviews conducted once transit migrants have arrived at their destination, which fails to reveal the impact of not knowing how or when their migration journey will end, on top of the already discussed complications of this journey (Frank-Vitale, 2020, p. 70). This lack of a critical approach to transit migration results in a lack of understanding of its implications, which exacerbate the vulnerabilities of this population.

Migrating is already a challenging and often traumatic experience, however the extra challenges that transit migrants face cannot be understated. “Migrants in transit are exposed to a broad spectrum of extreme health threats, including rape, assault, kidnapping, robbery, police abuse, torture, amongst others” (Llanes and Ghys, 2021, p. 187). In addition to this they are also exposed to several health risks brought upon by the often poor and dangerous conditions of the migration routes. Unfortunately, transit migrants may not seek or access healthcare due to the fear of being detained, which would represent a large set back in their journey (Médecins Sans Frontières, 2019).

While some may choose not to access services such as those provided by humanitarian organizations, there are many others who do not have any knowledge about this possibility. In fact, many lack an understanding of their rights as migrants, which makes it more difficult for any action to be taken from their part when such rights are violated (Llanes and Ghys, 2021, p. 187). In addition to this, Ghys and Inzunza-Acedo (2023) report that most migrants do not fully grasp the extent of the risks represented by the journey or the specifics of what it entails, even if they have heard stories and obtained information prior to embarking in it.

One factor that can explain the absence of significant literature on transit migration is the lack of a universally agreed-upon definition for this concept (Castagnone, 2011). In an attempt to remediate this Casillas (2008, p. 174) refers to a “espacio de tránsito” [*space of transit*] in order to encompass to the full experience of transit migrants before reaching their country of destination. Viewing transit as a theoretical space can offer a better understanding of what it entails, as this concept separates itself from the preconceived ideas that migration is linear, and it captures the idea of constantly being on the move and subject to changes (Frank-Vitale, 2020, p. 74). However, it is clear that there is a dire need

for further research that brings light to the experiences of transit migrants as they are on the move, to fully understand the implications for actors such as humanitarian organizations.

Chapter 3 Methodology

For the purpose of this research I used a qualitative approach with the goal of obtaining a more in-depth understanding of such a unique and largely invisibilized situation. However, it is important to state that the purpose of this research is not to generalize the results, considering that the particularities of the case make the conclusions only relevant to itself. This research was further complemented by desk-based research to provide a broader analysis of the situation.

The method used for this research was qualitative interviews. More specifically, semi-structured interviews were used particularly because of the possibility that this method opens for new topics and conversations that may arise in the moment of the interview, even going beyond the pre-planned interview questions, as many times it is in these more comfortable spaces where the most valuable insights can be encountered. This research method allows the researcher to obtain in-depth reflections on open-ended questions by providing important details and context that can paint a more comprehensive picture of the research problem (Hennink et al. 2020).

As a result of this research aiming at understanding the role of humanitarian actors in the Darien, I conducted nine interviews with individuals that currently work in the humanitarian sector in Panama, including some that have worked for years with the migrant population that crosses the Darien Gap. The goal was to understand what humanitarian action consists of in this area, what the priorities of these organizations are, what are the difficulties that they have encountered over the years, and how they have addressed them. These interviews focused on finding out if or to what extent a gender approach is used by these organizations to analyze how to offer the most appropriate aid considering the vulnerabilities that may be attached to gender in this context.

These nine interviews were conducted from August 2nd to September 26th 2023 with members of the main international humanitarian organizations that offer aid in this area, including RET, IOM, HIAS, Save the Children, and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). The organizations were chosen based on their involvement with the migrant population in the Darien province, while some interviewees were chosen specifically due to their years of experience and expertise on this situation.

In order to obtain access to the interviewees I had the help of my father who has worked in the humanitarian sector in Panama for over a decade. He made the initial contact

with members of the organization he works for and others, and through these initial contacts I was referred to members of other organizations to complete my investigation. Four interviews were conducted in person at the organizations' offices in Panama, while six interviews were conducted through online platforms. All interviewees provided either their written or verbal consent to be part of this research. As part of the informed consent participants were asked if they wished to be identified by their name and if they wished to be tied to the organization they worked for, considering any conflicts of interest that may arise from doing so. As a result, all interviewees will be identified by their first name except for one, who will be given an alias. All interviewees but one will be identified in connection to the organization they currently work for.

3.1. Positionality and Ethical Considerations

My positionality when it comes to this research is important to understand because it not only motivated me to conduct this investigation, but it also influenced my ability to do so and will likely influence my conclusions. I must begin by mentioning that I myself am a migrant. I arrived in Panama at the age of twelve through formal means. For this reason my experience with migration has been completely different than that of the transit migrants that arrive in this country through informal means. This has therefore shaped my understanding of migration and its implications. However, the reality of informal migration is completely different when it does not have legitimacy in the eyes of the state, which is an experience I will never be able to fully understand from my privileged position.

My personal experience with migration sparked an interest in understanding how a global phenomenon can result in increasingly diverse experiences based on various factors relating to the means through which it happens. I was especially interested in migration through the Darien Gap because in the decade that I lived in Panama I was never aware of the extent and complexity of the situation. It has only been in recent years that this migration route became visibilized by the media. However, this has largely been done in a sensationalist manner, and not with the purpose of bringing awareness to the general public of the reality of what is currently happening in the jungle.

In addition to this, my positionality is also influenced by my indirect contact with the humanitarian field. As previously mentioned, my father has been part of this field for a large part of my life, which has allowed me to gain insight on its inner-workings, the politics

behind humanitarian organizations, and the scope of its work. This may cause me to have a positive bias towards humanitarian actors, which could guide my interview questions and analysis in a certain direction, however I will attempt to mitigate. It is also important for me to acknowledge my father's role in helping me obtain access to humanitarian actors to interview, as if I had attempted to reach them on my own it is unlikely that I would have gotten the access that I was fortunate enough to obtain.

When it comes to ethics, the main aspect that I wanted to remain conscientious of was in relation to the re-telling of traumatic experiences. As previously mentioned, the reality of what migrants have to face as they transit the Darien Gap is incredibly crude, which is one of the reasons I decided to refrain from including migrants in my research, so as to avoid their re-victimization (Clark and Walker, 2011). However, the focus on migrants' experiences could result in a failure to acknowledge that humanitarian actors who work with population have also had to witness such realities on a different level. As a result, in order to avoid re-victimizing my interviewees, I refrained from including questions regarding specific stories of migrants or about the challenging experiences they face throughout the migratory route. I ensured that my questions were directed towards the humanitarian response as a whole as a way to avoid such possible ethical concerns.

3.2. Methodological Limitations

The limited timeframe available for this research and the difficult accessibility to the Darien region led me to focus on the perspectives of the humanitarian actors only. For these reasons the voices of transit migrants themselves and state actors are not included in this research, which limits the full understanding of their experiences. This decision was made in part due to the difficulty in contacting this population because of their transit nature as well as the previously mentioned ethical concerns.

The decision to not conduct fieldwork in the Darien also means that the information I have obtained is all second-hand and only offers a particular perspective on what is happening in this region, which can be subject to biases. This choice was made due to time constraints, as well as the difficult access to the region and the possible safety risks that could arise from my presence without having any formal ties to the humanitarian organizations in the field. Nonetheless, this limits the scope of my analysis to secondary sources only especially in terms of what the reality in the MRSs is.

Furthermore, the decision to only interview members of international NGOs can represent a challenge for the validity of the information obtained from them, as it may have been influenced by organizational politics, classified information only meant for internal communications, and the informal means through which I obtained such interviews. Such factors may have prevented interviewees from sharing specific information either due to confidentiality concerns related to their position within the organization or other personal reasons. In addition to this, the personal connection between some of my interviewees and my father could have influenced the amount or depth of information that was provided to me.

In addition to these challenges it is also important to specify that my investigation only refers to a basic understanding of a gender approach, which focuses on women, girls, men, and boys. This research does not take into account gender diversity, or other intersectional identities that may result in different experiences of migration and humanitarian aid. Furthermore, the sample size is limited to nine participants because some scheduled interviews fell through due to time constraints, however the information obtained from these interviews is complemented by a substantial literature review that allows a comprehensive exploration of the research problem.

Chapter 4 The Current State of the Humanitarian Response in the Darien

This chapter relates the current status of the humanitarian interventions that transit migrants can access once they arrive at the migration centers in the Darien province based on the experience of humanitarian actors who are present in the field as of August of 2023. It also offers a reflection of how the COVID-19 pandemic represented an important moment in time in the evolution of the humanitarian response in the Darien, in addition to other challenges. Finally, it explores the presence (or lack thereof) of state institutions and their role in the humanitarian response provided to this migrant population.

Chapter 5

4.1. Humanitarian aid in the Darien province

Darien as a province in the country is a forgotten province, it is the least developed province in the country with limitations for accessibility, the quality of the education system, potable water, electricity, etc. Basic services. (Leonarda, 2023).

In order to understand where the humanitarian response in the Darien stands as of 2023, first some information is necessary to contextualize its evolution. People started using the Darien as a migration route around the year 2008, however the migrant flow at the time wasn't significant and therefore any humanitarian interventions were directed towards the indigenous populations where transit migrants arrived after exiting the jungle. Rocío, who at the time worked at the Defensoría del Pueblo (*Ombudsman's Office*), mentions that this was a constant situation until the end of 2015, when the number of people migrating through this route increased drastically.

By this time Rocío was working at IOM Panama, who started to have a more important presence in the Darien by the end of 2016, when their aid was necessary due to the concerning increase in migrants arriving at indigenous communities. "Shelter houses for indigenous people had a capacity for 150 people, and they were receiving about 400 people, meaning that the capacities were surpassed". To her, this is the point at which IOM Panama took the role of visibilizing the situation because the Panamanian government did not want to make this reality known to the population at large. "At this point there were no resources for the humanitarian community to work there, there was only one donor who

wanted to give funds to sponsor an operation for an irregular transit towards the United States”, says Rocío. This was one of the main challenges that humanitarian organizations faced at the time, as they had to comply with the humanitarian principles that guide their work while at the same time being tied to the wishes of the donors and higher ups.

What we were told at that time was that in order for us to see a real emergency situation that would allow us to organize the global funds we would have to be talking about a large amount of deaths or situations of risk, which was not the case of the Darién (Rocío, 2023).

Therefore IOM began the humanitarian response in this region first by working with the government to set up temporary camps, and later on by starting coordination efforts with other international NGOs including the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), UNICEF, UNHCR, and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA).

Rocío mentions that since 2019 this increase in coordination, in addition to more donor funds targeting this population becoming available, resulted in a more comprehensive humanitarian response in the Darien. As of now the main humanitarian organizations that have a presence in the field are RET, HIAS, MSF, the ICRC, IOM, UNFPA, and the UNHCR, which are located in the two MRSs in Lajas Blancas and San Vicente. To Paula, the goal of these organizations are: “Aid, health, and protection, the basics”. Currently, RET focuses mainly on childhood and gender, HIAS on offering legal and social protection, MSF and the ICRC are focused on health and gender, while IOM deals with migration in Panama as a whole, but has a specific group aimed at the emergency response in the Darien that, according to Kim, was set up in 2022. However, while the increase in humanitarian actors offering assistance for this population is promising, it can also complicate their ability to provide a comprehensive and consistent response in both MRSs. During Rocío’s, Susanna’s, and Paula’s latest visit to the MRS in San Vicente in August of 2023, they mentioned having witnessed a more organized response than in Lajas Blancas, which complied more thoroughly with the guidelines on how to provide a gender-based response for this population. “Women on one side, men on the other, families in another area, safe spaces for children”. Rocío also mentioned how there seems to be a better understanding of what this approach entails overall, with actions such as keeping bathroom areas well lit, having clear protocols for the response for victims of sexual violence, and

having differentiated areas for everyone to feel safe. However, each organization has more specific actions and protocols in terms of how to provide a response based on a gender approach.

Leonarda mentions that RET is in a constant process of updating and enhancing the protocols for their response based on what they witness in the field every day. For instance, They initially created their 'Espacio Seguro Para Mujeres' (*Safe Space for Women*), as a place where women could talk safely about their experiences and groom themselves after their journey through the jungle, in order to feel a sense of normalcy again after the strenuous experience. However, after implementing this protocol they began to realize that men were also interested in such a space and being able to partake in acts as simple as shaving. Therefore, Leonarda mentions that these spaces were renamed as 'Espacio Cuidado de Mi' (*Space Taking Care of Myself*) in order to also welcome men and anyone who could benefit from such services. In addition to this, RET also provides hygiene kits differentiated by gender, menstrual kits, and social and legal orientation especially for women who have been victims of sexual and gender-based violence, which all go along with the organization's goals of: "Socio-emotional liberation, giving migrants their dignity back in different ways, returning them their agency and self-esteem after the doubts and guilt they faced during their journey, especially in the case of families", says Leonarda.

While it is clear that the humanitarian response in the Darien province has greatly improved in the past five years, the current state of it is threatened by the aggressive increase in the number of transit migrants that arrive each day. As explained by Rocío, in July of 2023 Panama announced that they had already reached the same amount of migrants that had crossed in all of 2022. More than 250,000 people traveled through the jungle in less than a year. When comparing this to the reported 250 people who transited throughout all of 2008, the concerning dimension of the current situation is evident. The humanitarian organizations in the field are therefore focused on ensuring they have the funds and personnel that are necessary to continue providing this response. However, to some humanitarian actors there should be a shift in focus, which is exemplified by Leonarda: "The response we are providing in Panama is a palliative, because the situation originates in the countries that these people are leaving". Nevertheless, she admits that when weighing both options, the immediate response that they are currently providing is the priority.

4.2. COVID-19: Before and After

In 2020 the whole world was affected by an unprecedented pandemic that forever changed life as we knew it. This was no different for the humanitarian response in the Darien, as COVID-19 represented a turning point especially in terms of coordination. In response to the growing concerns of the spread of the pandemic the Panamanian government made the decision to close its borders from March to October of 2020. According to Rocío and Kim, this resulted in 2500 transit migrants becoming stuck for this, at the time undetermined, period of time in the MRSs. Susanna mentions that this caused an “invisibilization of the migrant” due to the fact that there was no recognition of this problem by the state. This situation, therefore, represented a new challenge for the humanitarian field.

By Leonarda’s account, most of the humanitarian organizations that were in the field had to stop their interventions initially due to the safety of their staff’s health. She also mentioned the urgency felt within RET to create a new plan to return their staff to the Darien in a manner that was safe for everyone. While this return represented a larger financial strain and safety risk for the organizations, it turned out to also have an overall positive effect. To Rocío, Susanna, and Kim, this was viewed as an opportunity. For this period of time, the once transit migrant population became static, therefore giving time for humanitarian organizations to sit together and plan a more thorough and coordinated plan of action. “This created the opportunity to better organize at an interagency level to enhance the response”, said Kim.

IOM was one of the few organizations that remained in the field from the very beginning of the pandemic. According to Mariel this gave them the chance to begin coordination with other humanitarian organizations in order to “provide a response that is appropriate and effective for this population”. In addition to this, they took this time to gather as much information as possible about this transit migrant population, which was later published in the form of Displacement Tracking Matrix reports that included data on the context of the current migration trends, the conditions that this population faced throughout the Darien Gap route, and the immediate needs of this population upon arriving at the MRSs. This information was incredibly valuable, as it was later used to create more comprehensive plans and programs based on the needs that were identified, and differentiated based on gender, countries of origin, destination countries, etc., as stated by Kim.

The pandemic was especially important for gender-based interventions to be enhanced. To Byron, an expert on human rights and migration, this was an extremely crucial step in the right direction, as he mentioned that:

The (gender) approach should be focused on safeguarding the integrity and life of all people. That must be a priority from the moment they arrive there, from the initial registration this approach should be there.

In the case of IOM they focused their efforts on coordinating with state agencies to promote their involvement in the humanitarian response. One of the ways they did so, says Kim, was by creating awareness for state agents of the risks faced by this population based on gender and by promoting projects “focused on gender to reinforce the capacities at the local level of the Panamanian government to mitigate the risks associated with gender-based violence”.

As a result of all the above-mentioned actions, the reality of what was happening in the Darien Gap became more visibilized, which was crucial for humanitarian organizations to obtain more funds targeting this transit migrant population. Rocío mentioned that “COVID was determinant because previously there was a will but there were no resources”. After the pandemic organizations such as Save the Children began receiving an increasing amount of funds specifically directed towards the response in the Darien. Nonetheless, to others, such as Susanna, this issue is still largely invisibilized. “In Panama we live in parallel worlds”, she stated, mentioning that people in Panama City do not have an awareness of what is truly happening in the border with Colombia.

4.3. State Presence

While humanitarian organizations are the main sources of aid for transit migrants in the Darien, the Panamanian state should also play an important role in the humanitarian response, as such cooperation can enhance the interventions provided for populations in vulnerable situations (Harvey, 2009; Hilhorst et al. 2021). However, according to Leonarda, the government does not have the capacity to provide the attention and support that this migrant population needs. Therefore, to Tomás, the government is the least involved, while, paradoxically, also the most responsible actor when it comes to the care of this migrant population.

Humanitarian organizations should be auxiliaries of the state, the lead should be taken by the National Migration Service and in terms of security by SENAFRONT, but they are the ones with the least involvement in these interventions (Tomas, 2023).

During their last visit to the MRS at Lajas Blancas in August of 2023, Susanna, Rocío, and Paula from Save the Children mentioned only witnessing the presence of SENAFRONT and Migración Panamá (*the Panamanian Migration Office*), as well as only one official from the Defensoría del Pueblo (*Ombudsman's Office*). However, the role of this latter official is to ensure and protect the human rights of all Panamanian nationals in the Darien province, which is already an extensive territory that, as previously mentioned, is difficult to access. Adding the responsibility of ensuring the well-being of the transit migrants arriving in the province, therefore, is an almost impossible task. “There is no presence of the Panamanian state, because the same official from the Ombudsman’s Office that is responsible for attending to everything else in the Darien is also responsible for the migrants”, mentioned Susanna. Rocío added that there was no presence of the state entity tasked with protecting children, adolescents, and families, the SENNIAF, which is a concerning observation, as these are some of the most vulnerable populations within transit migrants (UNICEF, 2017).

One state actor whose presence has been concerningly absent throughout the history of migration through the Darien Gap is the Ministerio de la Mujer (*Ministry of Women*). According to Leonarda, this state entity had a brief presence in the Darien around 2017-2018 when the coordination efforts with the state began. At the time it was known as the Instituto de la Mujer (*Institution for Women*), a name that was recently changed to become a formal ministry in 2023. According to Kim, IOM is currently collaborating with this state institution to open an office in Metetí, a town near both Lajas Blancas and San Vicente. It is their goal to provide assistance for female migrants based on their differentiated needs, as have been identified by the humanitarian organizations that have had a presence in the field for years.

The presence of the Ministerio de la Mujer has been long awaited, especially because there seems to be a lack of understanding of the benefits and importance of a gender approach by the state institutions that are present in the Darien. Byron exemplified this when talking about the long lines that transit migrants have to endure upon their arrival in Panama as

they wait to register with the migration officials. He mentioned that every person has to wait in the same line, regardless of gender, age, or health state; everyone spends long hours waiting under the sun and extreme heat, which is alarming considering the extremely physically-taxing journey that they have just gone through in the past week. However, the focus of the ministry on women only could also represent a challenge for the implementation of a comprehensive gender approach. Tomás worries that this focus could result in the vulneration of men based on biases that state actors may have against them and their needs.

There seems to be an understanding among the humanitarian actors interviewed that the presence of the state in the Darien province has mainly had the goal of ensuring that transit migrants continue their journey towards the next country, Costa Rica, and that they do not stay in Panama. Byron simplifies the current role of the state as: registration, orientation, transportation, and nutrition. By registration he refers to the presence of Migración Panamá stationed outside of the jungle, where transit migrants exiting the Darien Gap must first register with the authorities before being able to continue their journey up the river towards the MRSs where they can begin receiving humanitarian aid. According to Leonarda, here migrants are subjected to a biometric screening that is aimed at identifying individuals with ties to drug trafficking and organized crime, among others, who may be sought by Interpol, as Panama has a clear policy of not allowing the transit of those who have been linked to such criminal activities.

The Panamanian government also facilitates transportation for this migrant population. Paula mentioned that the government provides buses that can take transit migrants from the MRSs all the way to the northern border with Costa Rica. However, they do not subsidize such transportation, which comes at a cost of around \$40 for adults, as of 2023. In connection to this, Mariel from IOM explained that the migration policies that target this population are centered around the assumption that they have the intention of continuing their route North, and therefore do not plan to stay in Panama. Consequently, even from a legal stand point it seems to be clear that the state is pushing for Panama to remain a transit country, and not a destination.

This hesitation from state actors to get involved and to visibilize what is happening in the Darien could be attributed to many different factors. To Susanna, one of the reasons for this could be the increase in xenophobic sentiments expressed throughout the country in recent years. She explained that this hesitation to inform the population about the

current reality of migration is evidenced through the current election period that the country is going through, during which no candidate has spoken about this topic. Susanna stated that this shows that migration through the Darien is “not part of the political agenda”, which is a sentiment that was also shared by Tomás.

The presence of the state in the Darien, however, seems to be increasing as of the past three years, aided by the expanding inter-agency coordination brought upon by the COVID-19 pandemic. On one hand, this is a positive change because it can increase the overall capacities of the humanitarian response in this region. Furthermore, it could also give this reality more visibilization once it is formally acknowledged by the state. On the other hand, however, it could also represent a challenge for the international NGOS that are currently offering aid to this population, as it is the Panamanian government that allows such organizations to have a presence in the country. Not only that, this increasing presence could create new challenges for the transit migrant population and their ability to freely transit through Panama.

Chapter 5 Challenges for the Humanitarian Response in the Darien

This chapter seeks to analyze the main challenges that the humanitarian response in the Darien is currently facing. It is based on the experiences of the humanitarian actors that have been interviewed, who offer their insights based on what they have witnessed during the years they have been present in the field and involved with this humanitarian response. The main challenges that have been identified include coordination between organizations and state agencies, the transit status of this migrant population, and the role that language and information play for the ability of this population to access services that allow them to continue their journey.

5.1. Coordination

Among all the humanitarian actors that were interviewed for the purpose of this research there was one answer in common when asked about the main challenges to the humanitarian response in the Darien: coordination. As previously mentioned, inter-agency coordination has existed in this region almost from the beginning of the history of this migratory route. However, in the past this has not been comprehensive or fully effective for many reasons.

To Susanna, some of the main challenges for inter-agency coordination are organizational egos and the difference in operational capabilities. Different organizations have different goals for their response, as some focus on health, such as the ICRC, and others in legal protection, such as HIAS. And while all of these organizations are guided by the humanitarian principles, as previously stated, they all have a different approach to this, which can result in important differences that may affect the way they work with other organizations and institutions.

The case of IOM is an example of this, as Kim emphasized the importance of this humanitarian organization's work in connection with the Panamanian government, including actions such as "creating awareness of the topic of gender in their collaborations", but also working at the national level to inform and improve migration policies. To some, this may go against the humanitarian principle of independence and could, therefore, affect some organizations' likelihood to collaborate with IOM.

Coordination among humanitarian organizations, however, could be argued to be easier due to them sharing the main goal of providing life-saving aid for this transit migrant population. However, the Panamanian government's goals may be different, which could affect coordination efforts with state agencies. Rocío explained: "A crisis that is not recognized by the country, difficulties in obtaining funds from national cooperation, which is aggravated when the country does not acknowledge the emergency situation". Nevertheless, in recent years there has been a positive trend when it comes to inter-agency cooperation including state entities. One of the most important ways in which this has happened has been through the Grupo de Movilidad Humana (*Group for Human Mobility*).

From the years 2018-2019 a working group was created within the United Nations in order to articulate efforts, and instead of calling itself Grupo Refugio de Migración (*Group for Migration Refuge*) it starts being called Grupo de Movilidad Humana, which is coordinated by IOM and the UNHCR. The idea is that this group coordinates their efforts with the government in order to not duplicate their efforts. (Rocío, 2023).

Rocío also mentioned that at the moment this group functions as Grupo de Movilidad Humana Plus Plus, as it now also includes some civil society actors and around seven other agencies that are part of the United Nations. In addition to this, Kim stated that at the institutional level there is now a roundtable called the Mesa Darienita Sobre Migración (*Darienite Roundtable About Migration*), which holds regular meetings with the main organizations that lead the humanitarian response in this province to coordinate efforts and avoid their duplication.

According to Susanna, Save the Children is planning to take a step further in terms of coordination by expanding these efforts to the humanitarian organizations that offer aid to this population in the rest of the transit countries north of Panama. To this organization, cross-border coordination is necessary to address the transit nature of this migrant population. Susanna stated:

What we are trying to do is to make it understood that this migration route is a process, and that the interventions provided should be focused on the immediate needs that they [transit migrants] have in the moment, but thinking that it will be complemented throughout the rest of the route.

However, considering the already complex experience of enhancing cooperation within the Darien, taking such coordination across borders could prove to be even more demanding. To Mariel, inter-agency coordination has been a “process of growth and learning”. Humanitarian actors have felt the need to rapidly adjust their interventions in response to the fast-paced increase in migration flows in the past three years. This phenomenon made it clear that inter-agency cooperation is necessary to provide a more comprehensive humanitarian response. However, sometimes an increase in the amount of actors involved could lead to more gaps being created when communication among them is not thorough. This is a concern that Byron has, especially when it comes to the attention provided to victims of sexual or gender-based violence. “Many are victims and nobody knows it because no one talks to them or approaches them to find out if anything has happened to them”. Such concerns show that there is still much work to do in terms of coordination in order to ensure its efficiency and impact, because as Susana stated, at the moment “criminal organizations [in the Darien] are better structured than the humanitarian action or even the state”.

Nevertheless, the current focus on increasing cooperation is a promising situation. According to Mariel, “the first coordinated meeting that included all actors that seek to provide a response only took place less than a month ago”. Meaning that it was only as of July of 2023 that such a meeting included all humanitarian organizations that work in the field as well as state actors such as Cancillería (*Chancellor’s Office*), the Ministerio de la Salud (*Ministry of Health*), and the Ministerio de Seguridad Pública (*Ministry of Public Safety*), among others who had been notably absent in the past.

5.2. Transit Status

The challenge that we face as a humanitarian community is how we can provide assistance when this is not necessarily what these people are looking for. They want to continue their journey, they want to reach their destination as fast as possible (Paula, 2023).

One of the main challenges that humanitarian organizations face in the Darien is the transit status of the migrant population that arrives in this province. As previously mentioned, Panama largely remains a transit country, as most of the migrants that cross the Darien Gap have the goal of reaching North America. For this reason they only stay in Panama for

short periods of time, some for a couple of days, while others even only for a couple of hours.

The urgency that this migrant population has to continue their journey hinders humanitarian organizations' ability to provide them with more comprehensive interventions. This is especially alarming when it comes to the response for psychological health needs because, in theory, such interventions take time. When talking about the risks that this population faces throughout the route, Tomás mentioned: "Sexual abuse, theft, murder, kidnappings, witnessing death, all of that triggers a series of responses and situations that fall within the areas of protection and mental health". He explains that the psychosocial aid that organizations such as the ICRC can provide in response to such cases is therefore limited because the MRSs do not have the most "optimal conditions for clinical care, neither do we have the time to do so, therefore we have to do it in a group setting or through individual interventions that last very few minutes". While not ideal, such actors must therefore adapt their previous knowledge and protocols to the immediate needs of this population.

There is a concern that the intense desire that transit migrants have to continue their journey can prevent them from realizing the dimension of what they have gone through, and therefore the importance of accessing adequate support for it. When talking about the perception of these people upon arriving at the MRSs, Susanna said:

The mud, the dirt, the trauma can be washed off, once I get there I will see what I can do with all the consequences that this will create for the rest of my life. For children, as well, the level of stress [they go through] is toxic, and so is what will be generated by this 14-day-long exposure, for the rest of their lives.

Therefore, Kim states that humanitarian actors focus on providing this population with the necessary information so that they can "make informed decisions about the choices they will make regarding continuing the journey or not, but it is definitely a challenge due to the conditions in the Darien".

Due to the limited amount of time that humanitarian actors have with transit migrants, they have had to adapt and learn how to quickly identify their immediate needs. "We work as we go", stated Tomás. He mentions how the more time the actors have had

on the field, the better they become at pinpointing who needs psychosocial support and how to provide it in a timely manner. For this reason, Kim stated:

I think that is why it is essential to have personnel in the field, in order to provide an adequate response to the humanitarian and protection needs they [migrants] have and for the referral of cases.

Kim adds that humanitarian actors are therefore in a time crunch to identify needs, address them, and begin the referral process before this population continues their journey.

‘Transit migrants’ needs are urgent, which makes it hard for humanitarian organizations to evaluate the effectiveness and impact of their response, said Kim. In connection to this, Leonarda mentioned that this complicates their ability to obtain data that can help them create formal protocols or frameworks for their response. Therefore, most of the ways in which the humanitarian response is delivered in the field comes from the experience of the personnel that works directly with the transit migrant population. This differs from the usual top-down approach that humanitarian organizations use, where protocols are created by higher-ups by making assumptions of what would work best in the field. The success that these organizations have had in providing aid to this population, without using the standard methods, therefore shows that there is room for the humanitarian world to adapt and change the ways in which they create their protocols.

In addition to the previously stated challenges resulting from the transit status of this population, the ability of humanitarian actors to follow up with particularly complex cases is also hindered. As these migrants continue their journey at a fast pace, Mariel said that many times it is impossible to provide this important follow-up. According to Tomás, “A follow-up is complicated, you can only offer a very basic intervention and you know you will likely never see that person again”. This is of particular concern when dealing with cases of sexual or gender-based violence. For such cases, organizations like the ICRC have created ways to provide some level of follow-up.

When there are very sensitive cases we communicate with the actors in charge of the MRS in Chiriquí [border with Costa Rica] in order to provide some follow up before this population leaves Panama (Tomás, 2023).

Leonarda expressed a similar account, mentioning that sometimes there is coordination with members of the same organizations who are stationed in the transit countries that follow. In this way they can ensure that particularly complex cases are given the necessary interventions without delaying this population's journey towards North America.

Organizations such as HIAS, with a focus on providing legal protections to this population, also use a similar method to ensure the safety of the migrants as they continue their route, said Juan.

5.3. Language and the Role of Information

Migrating is a [human] right, but it is a right that the person can access through information (Leonarda, 2023).

A growing concern of many of the humanitarian actors that were interviewed is the apparent lack of information with which this population arrives in the Darien. Tomás recounted:

One of the main obstacles is the lack of information, because once they reach the Colombia-Panama border they likely arrive blank on information-related matters. Then when they arrive in the Darien, around 90% to 95% of people tell me 'You know, I had no idea that this was going to be this way'.

This lack of information continues once transit migrants arrive on the Panamanian side of the Darien, with Tomás mentioning that "besides the 'I did not know' there is also the 'where am I?', 'where do I go?', 'how do I do this?'". Susanna explained this deficiency in information as follows:

You go to your line for the bus or if you need to do anything else you have to ask around... there is no directory that says 'here we can take care of your health, here we can take care of cases of sexual violence, here we can take care of your child', meaning there is no directory that specifies the humanitarian services [that are offered at the MRSs].

To Susanna, this represents a big challenge for humanitarian organizations because they have to find alternative ways to provide such information in a way that is relevant for this population. Based on her experiences, she stated that the information that these migrants

trust the most comes from other migrants who have successfully made the journey in the past. It is, therefore, mainly through word of mouth that they obtain such information. There also seems to be a lack of trust in humanitarian actors, meaning that handing out fliers or setting up signs are unlikely to make a difference. This is consistent with the findings of Arias et al. (2023), who explain that there is a trend of mistrust of humanitarian actors that is especially exacerbated in situations of transit migration. Therefore, this offers an explanation for the persistent gap in information that is still witnessed within this transit migrant population regardless of humanitarian efforts, and that is yet to be fully addressed.

Byron expressed his concern for this lack of information due to what it can mean for one of the most vulnerable groups within this migrant population, which are women who have gone through sexual violence or assault during their journey through the jungle, stating that:

Especially for all the women who are victims of sexual abuse and other types of violence in the Darien, who face, in addition to being victims of such abuses, obstacles to access these [humanitarian] services.

As mentioned by Leonarda, many times cases of sexual violence go underreported due to taboos or for the fear that doing so will result in a longer process that will prevent them from continuing their journey promptly. However, in such cases these decisions are made by victims based on the information that they have of the availability of such services. When the transit migrant population do not even have this information, it adds another layer of vulnerability to their already vulnerable status.

Another aspect of this transit migrant population that makes access to information challenging is the diversity of nationalities and, therefore, languages that are spoken by them. While most migrants come from Venezuela, there are also a large amount of extra-continental nationalities crossing the Darien Gap, including migrants from Afghanistan, India, South Africa, Iran, China, and recently even from Ukraine, according to Susanna. This can complicate these migrants' ability to access information and to communicate with humanitarian actors. As stated by Vammen (2021), information can save migrants' lives, which exemplifies how crucial it is for this challenge to be addressed. Paula stated that language is not a problem for basic aid and the attention of immediate needs such as hygiene, but that it can represent a barrier when it comes to more serious complications such as mental health issues.

As a result, different organizations have diverse ways in which they approach this challenge based on the different services they are focused on. For instance, Mariel stated that IOM provides signs with information in several languages or with images that can be universally understood. Their personnel also has downloaded audios in their smartphones with information in different languages, which is a technique that Leonarda reports is also used by RET.

In addition to this, Leonarda mentioned that often times the children facilitate communication among adults. This is especially true for particular cases of families that have to stay in the MRSs for extended periods of time for either health or legal reasons. She mentioned that children are often restless and want to find ways to help. RET saw this as an opportunity to expand their interventions targeting childhood and use this as a learning opportunity for children, while also giving them agency during a time in which the needs of children tend to be left behind. The creative ways in which these humanitarian organizations have targeted this challenge with language shows their ability to adapt and to find ways to respond to the particular needs of this population, filling in the gaps that exist in humanitarian manuals or guidelines that don't or can't be applied to this unique migrant population.

Chapter 6 Conclusions

As members of the humanitarian community we must better understand the needs of this population from the perspective of the migrants and not so much from our own perspective (Paula, 2023).

This research had the aim of obtaining a more thorough understanding of the humanitarian intervention in the Darien province, how it has evolved over time, and how this has affected the implementation of a gender approach. While recognizing the limitations of the qualitative approach that was used and the possible implications of only including the voices of humanitarian actors, it is important to state that this study is not representative of the humanitarian field as a whole, but it provides a snapshot of its dynamics in the Darien province specifically. This research paper, therefore, provides insights that can be valuable for the humanitarian field and to broaden the existent literature on this particular topic.

The Darien Gap is a treacherous route that implies innumerable risks for those that are forced to make the decision to cross it. The already abundant challenges of migration are then further exacerbated by this population's status as transit migrants. This negatively affects humanitarian organizations' ability to fully implement a gender approach in their interventions because the population is on the move. They have the urge to continue their journey towards North America, so humanitarian actors are not able to provide them with a comprehensive response, or to offer a follow-up to understand how effective their interventions are. This also limits their ability to comply with existent guidelines for the implementation of a gender approach, thus revealing a gap that can result in further vulnerabilization of this migrant population.

Moreover, based on the interviews that were conducted, it is evident that there is no common understanding among all the humanitarian actors in the field of what a gender approach should entail for the response offered to this population. For some organizations there is a clear comprehension that a gender approach focuses on the different vulnerabilities and capacities of women, girls, men, and boys, and this is shown in their interventions that take all identities into account. Such is the case of RET, who has had a presence in the field since the beginning of the boom of this migratory route, and who has particular guidelines and protocols for the attention of every gendered person, nationality, destination, and situation. For other organizations, however, it seems like a gender

approach stays in the theory behind their aid provisioning but is not reflected in their interventions. This could be due to the lack of an agreed-upon framework within the humanitarian field on what a gender approach should look like for transit migrants, revealing a concerning gap that must be addressed in order to provide this vulnerable population with a comprehensive response to their specific and differentiated needs.

Contrary to my assumptions before conducting this research, it seems that the COVID-19 pandemic represented an overall positive moment in time for the humanitarian response in the Darien. While the closing of the borders hindered the migrant population's ability to continue their route, this was seen as an opportunity by the humanitarian field to increase their efforts at the much needed inter-agency cooperation. Such a surprising outcome shows the ability that the humanitarian actors in the Darien have to adapt to new challenges and find ways in which they can enhance their interventions, while prioritizing the needs of the transit migrant population.

While the waiting period of the pandemic offered a chance for humanitarian actors to strengthen their response, this was not the case of the Panamanian government. It is clear that the lack of institutional presence in the Darien province is a concern. While it is the state's responsibility to care for migrants transiting the country (Harvey, 2009; Tomás, 2023), this is not possible due to the lack of resources, staff, and coordination that keeps government agencies outside of the Darien. This further complicates the full extent of the humanitarian intervention offered in the province because without the state recognizing and addressing the issue, it remains largely invisibilized. It is also concerning that the only presence of the state is focused on ensuring that transit migrants continue their journey as fast as possible so that they do not stay in Panama (Kim, 2023).

It is comprehensible that the state finds it difficult to access the Darien province and that human resources are limited, however, this does not excuse their lack of presence with the purpose of helping transit migrants in their journey, especially considering the fact that this is a problematic that has existed for more than a decade and that continues to grow exponentially every year. However, the possible risks of an increase in state presence should also be taken into account, considering the fact that this is an irregular migratory route. More state presence could, therefore, create further vulnerations for the safety of the transit migrants as well as for their ability to reach their destination country.

Additionally, humanitarian actors are currently facing a more dire situation due to the exponential increase in the number of migrants that transit the Darien every day. As of

October, 2023, more than 450,000 people had crossed the Darien Gap (Cárdenas, 2023). This suggests that, for the first time in history, the migrant flow will surpass half a million people within a year. As stated by the humanitarian actors that were interviewed for the purpose of this research, the MRSs have already faced issues due to their limited capacities, therefore it is evident that if this flow continues increasing as fast as it is, it will reach a certain point where a humanitarian intervention will no longer be possible.

This reveals the need for a shift in the focus of humanitarian organizations from immediate aid to the sources of this increase in migration, as suggested by Leonarda. However, doing so could create a conflict with the principles that guide humanitarian action, as getting involved with the sources of migratory flows could be considered to be violating the principles of independence and neutrality. This leaves the humanitarian field at an impasse, understanding what is necessary for the improvement of this problem, while at the same time being limited to providing interventions that only serve as a band aid for a problem of a much larger magnitude.

Ultimately, the current state of the humanitarian interventions in the Darien is limited to immediate, life-saving aid, and short-term care for psychological and legal needs. This is understandable because the transit nature of this migrant population does not allow for a more comprehensive response than that. It is clear that the overall humanitarian response has seen a vast improvement since 2008, especially in terms of inter-agency coordination, an increase in funds targeting this population, and the increase in involvement by the state. However, the current challenges hinder the ability to fully implement a gender approach in the response, which may be exacerbated in the following months as the migratory flow continues to increase. It is evident that more research on this topic is necessary in order to find better and more comprehensive solutions for the current and future problems that humanitarian actors face. It is yet to be determined how the humanitarian field will address this ever-changing situation, but it is important for the focus to remain on how to address the needs of the transit migrant population over anything else.

Appendices

Appendix 1: List of participants of research and humanitarian organizations

Name	Organization / Area of Expertise	Role in Humanitarian Response
Susanna	Save the Children	Childhood, health, education
Rocío	Save the Children	Childhood, health, education
Paula	Save the Children	Childhood, health, education
Byron	Dr. of law and specialist in migration	Legal counsel and protection
Leonarda	RET	Psychosocial support, childhood, gender, hygiene needs
Kim	IOM	Migration capacities, international protection, coordination with state
Mariel	IOM	Migration capacities, international protection, coordination with state
Juan*	HIAS	Psychosocial support, gender, hygiene needs, legal advisory
Tomás	ICRC	Psychological support, especially for gender-based violence

Appendix 2: Interview guide

Preguntas iniciales

1. ¿Cual es su nombre?
2. ¿A qué organización pertenece?
3. ¿Cual es el rol de esta organización en la respuesta humanitaria en el Darién?

Preguntas particulares

1. ¿Cual es el enfoque de esta organización en la temática de la migración?
2. ¿Qué proyectos llevan a cabo para ayudar a la población que se encuentra en el Darién?
3. Según su experiencia, ¿qué desafíos y obstáculos enfrentan estos migrantes al llegar al Darién?
4. ¿Qué ayuda humanitaria encuentra esta población?
5. ¿Como ha afectado la pandemia a las operaciones de ayuda humanitaria?
6. ¿Como se coordina su organización con otras y con agencias gubernamentales?
7. ¿Qué desafíos enfrentan al trabajar con otras organizaciones y agencias?
8. ¿Qué impacto ha tenido el trabajo de su organización en esta población?
9. ¿Qué indicadores considera más importantes para evaluar el éxito de la respuesta humanitaria?
10. ¿Existe un enfoque de género en sus proyectos hacia esta problemática, y si es así, qué conlleva?
11. ¿Qué medidas urgentes cree se deben tomar para mejorar la respuesta humanitaria?
12. ¿Qué apoyo adicional necesitaría su organización?
13. ¿Algo más que quisiera agregar para complementar?

Appendix 3: Informed consent form

Consentimiento Informado

Investigación sobre la problemática de la migración en el Darién desde la perspectiva de organizaciones de ayuda humanitaria con un enfoque de género

Investigador Principal: Nicole Lara

Institución: Erasmus University, International Institute of Social Studies

Este documento tiene el objetivo de informarle sobre el propósito de este estudio, los procedimientos involucrados en la entrevista, y sus derechos como participante. Lea atentamente la siguiente información y no dude en hacer cualquier pregunta que pueda tener.

1. **Propósito del Estudio:** Obtener información relevante sobre la problemática de la migración en el Darién, desde la perspectiva de las organizaciones de ayuda humanitaria que trabajan en la zona. Esta información contribuirá a mi tesis académica y puede ser útil para informar y mejorar los esfuerzos humanitarios en la región.
2. **Confidencialidad:** Sus respuestas serán tratadas de manera confidencial y se utilizarán únicamente con fines académicos. Los datos obtenidos se mantendrán anónimos si así lo desea, y la información identificable no será compartida con terceros.
3. **Voluntariedad:** Su participación en esta entrevista es completamente voluntaria. Tiene el derecho de negarse a participar o retirarse de la entrevista en cualquier momento sin consecuencias negativas.
4. **Derechos del Participante:** Al participar en la entrevista, tiene derecho a hacer preguntas, solicitar aclaraciones y compartir su experiencia de manera abierta y honesta. También tiene derecho a solicitar una copia de la tesis final cuando esté disponible.
5. **Contacto:** Si tiene alguna pregunta o inquietud sobre la investigación, puede comunicarse conmigo en cualquier momento a través del correo 641620nl@eur.nl.

Al firmar a continuación, confirmo que he leído y comprendido la información proporcionada en este documento de consentimiento informado. Estoy de acuerdo en participar voluntariamente en la entrevista de investigación y entiendo que puedo retirarme en cualquier momento sin consecuencias.

Deseo mantenerme anónimo/a:

Firma del Participante:

Fecha:

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