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A Threat Analysis: Challenges to Human Security for Venezuelan Migrants Post-Migration to Trinidad and Tobago

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The country of Venezuela which is a close neighbor of Trinidad and Tobago continues to confront a major crisis that has unleashed multiple forms of sociopolitical violence against its citizens and has created a plethora of problems and threats including poverty, insecurity, and human rights violations. This ongoing socioeconomic crisis began around 2013 and has become progressively worse. Hyperinflation, escalating starvation, disease, crime and mortality rates are commonplace resulting in massive migration from the country. About seven million persons have left Venezuela over the last ten years seeking better lives and safety. About one hundred thousand of these migrants are in Trinidad and Tobago. Outward migration caused by this situation has been linked to numerous new challenges to Venezuelan migrants in Trinidad and Tobago. This paper sought to understand the experiences of these migrants. A cross-sectional qualitative project was conducted to discuss the threat environment for these migrants analysing resettlement threat factors for health, security and general well-being through semi-structured interviews (forty). The analysis focused on understanding the experiences of Venezuelan migrants during the period 2014-2024 and was conducted during the period March 1-April 30, 2024. The research revealed threats related to health, safety, education, employment and general well-being of Venezuelan migrants that have informed migration policies, and human rights efforts for Trinidad and Tobago.

Keywords: migrants, physical threats, economic threats, risk factors, government policy

Introduction

Trinidad and Tobago is an archipelagic republic in the southern Caribbean between the Caribbean Sea and the North Atlantic Ocean, northeast of Venezuela[1]. The closest point between Venezuela and Trinidad is merely eight miles away. Due to a lack of proper border management in Trinidad and Tobago, Venezuelan migrants have been able to slip through and enter illegally into Trinidad through several beaches especially in the south-west areas like Icacos, Palo Seco, Los Iros and Morne Diablo. It is estimated that since 2014, over 100,000 Venezuelans have migrated to Trinidad and Tobago[2].

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[1] Trinidad and Tobago | People, Culture, Language, Map, Population ... https://www.britannica.com/place/Trinidad-and-Tobago.
[2] Interview with Senior Immigration Officer Gewan Harricoo on September 1, 2024. Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago.

These migrants have been fleeing a crisis which has unleashed multiple forms of sociopolitical violence against them and has created a context of unmet needs, general insecurity and human rights violations. The Venezuelan healthcare system is the most underprepared in the region to deal with mental health conditions and chronic and infectious diseases. Lack of spending on health care, shortages in medicines, supplies and treatments, the exodus of health workers, the COVID-19, rising violence and control by armed groups of vast territories have contributed to declines in health indicators of the general population outward migration, and increased perception of risk (Correa-Salazar, Page, & Martínez-Donate, 2023). In this paper the threat environment of the migrants when they arrived and settled in Trinidad and Tobago will be highlighted. The results from the forty interviews will be disclosed and some recommendations would be provided to ease the plight of these migrants in Trinidad and Tobago.

Methodology

Instruments Used

This study was implemented over a two-month period March and April 2024. Four post-graduate students and one author were involved in the fieldwork which consisted of executing interviews with open-ended questions. Each person conducted eight interviews each in the following areas in Trinidad—Port of Spain, Arima, San Fernando, Mayaro and Siparia. Religious leaders, teachers and two leaders of two NGOs in Port of Spain and San Fernando assisted in the project by identifying and encouraging the migrants to participate in the interview process. Each interview took about one hour and a half hours. The main instrument used was the interview with open-ended questions.

The semi-structured interview guide was built upon extensive formative research and validated with religious leaders, teachers and even immigration officers. It included an initial section on demographics and explored threats and experiences of violence during the crossing of the border and their post-migration experience. All research activities were done in both Spanish and English by one author and his post-graduate students. The interviews were audio recorded and were then transcribed manually.

Participants: Due to the assistance we received from the religious leaders and teachers among others, a purposive sampling method was used. Inclusion criteria were: (1) persons over eighteen years old; (2) they were living in Venezuela for at least five years before they came to Trinidad and Tobago; (3) they were living in Trinidad and Tobago for at least five years; and (4) they came illegally using sea transport.

Confidentiality

To ensure confidentiality of all data collected, all interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim by research assistants in the post-graduate Spanish class at the University of the Southern Caribbean.

Transcripts were jointly coded by one author and his post-graduate students. Discrepancies were solved through group revision and consensus in three weekly meetings. Coherence and saturation of themes were assessed continuously. Interviews were analysed in both Spanish and English by the author/principal investigator (PI), Dr. Raghunath Mahabir.

Ethics

Ethical approval was granted by the University of the Southern Caribbean, located in Maracas, Trinidad. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved the use of oral consent for all the participants and the non-inclusion of their names to protect anonymity.

Oral consent was documented for all participants in audio before interviews and there were no written informed consent since participants were skeptical about signing documents, disclosing personal information, and placing trust in institutions, including academia. It was also assessed to be safer by local partners and peer leaders due to migratory status. The IRB approved these conditions before the start of the research. Our ethical approach to the research is based on participatory care ethics which promotes socially responsible actions through the re-defining of subjects as active participants instead of vulnerable subjects and based on our University's motto, "Beyond Excellence".

Acknowledging that this research involved vulnerable adults, we held several discussions and extensive consultations with the religious leaders, NGOs and teachers in selected study sites. This work was conducted to identify potential concerns and ethical protections prior to the initiation of our research and to support trust through collaboration with organizations and individuals based on an understanding of the research aims and mechanisms of accountability. Engaging emancipated adolescents was a critically important part of our research in order to ensure a truly inclusive perspective of Venezuelan migrants. All participants were informed of their right to leave or terminate the interview at any time.

To ensure protection of all our participants, research staff involved in data collection activities underwent a two-month training with the IRB at the University that covered study aims and objectives, ethical procedures for research with adults, referral pathways for participants in need of assistance, use of audio-equipment, and qualitative research methods. All participants provided informed assent or consent in Spanish. One author and his four research staff (all four have post-graduate qualifications in the field of National Security and Counseling Psychology) monitored participants for signs of anxiety, distress or disquiet during interviews and reminded participants that they could refuse to participate at any time. Research staff were under close supervision by the author who consulted with researchers after each interview, either face to face or through WhatsApp video. Participants were prompted to prioritize personal safety and safety of others when doing interviews or discussing the study. Data were stored on a secure server at the author's home.

Results

Purposive sampling was used in this project and forty (40) adult migrants were interviewed. Their ages ranged from 24 to 65. Of these migrants, 24 were female and 16 were male. Many of them had children living with them in Trinidad as well as some of them still in Venezuela. Thirty-five of these migrants acknowledged that where they live presently in Trinidad was not the first place they stayed when they first came and that they all would have moved from one location to another in Trinidad to live at least four times.

Of the 40 persons interviewed, two came in 2014, three came in 2015, five of them came to Trinidad in 2016, eight came in 2017, seven came in 2018 and 15 of them came in 2019. Several reasons were given for leaving Venezuela including unemployment, poor health facilities, high cost of living and general insecurity and violence in their areas including gang violence. The main areas from where they came from Venezuela were Tucupita, Maturin, Curiapo, and Carupano. Several reasons were also given for coming to Trinidad and Tobago as opposed to going to the other neighboring countries like Brazil, Colombia and Guyana. These included the fact that some of them already had family in Trinidad; it was easier to travel to Trinidad since many boats were involved in this lucrative boat transport business and was reasonably cheap; they believed it was easier to get jobs in Trinidad and there were better health facilities in Trinidad. Two of the women even

stated that they came to Trinidad since it was rumored that Trini men had a strong liking for Spanish speaking women, especially those from Venezuela and Colombia.

In discussing the first set of problems they experienced when they arrived in Trinidad, 25 of the migrants indicated that when they landed especially in Icacos and Los Iros[3], they had to hide in the bushes for periods ranging from three days to two weeks for fear of them being detained by immigration officials. While they were fed by persons who were responsible for transporting them to Trinidad, most of them claimed that the food was not enough and that several days they would go hungry. Hiding in the bushes also meant that they were victims to mosquitoes; especially in the night, the nights were cold for those without blankets or other coverings and the hygiene facilities were non-existent with no running or fresh water and having to excrete in the bushes.

Five major themes emerged from the qualitative data regarding the threat environment faced by the Venezuelan migrants in Trinidad. These were: stigmatization of Venezuelan men as bandits/gang members and criminals; stigmatization of Venezuelan women as prostitutes/husband snatchers; lack of protection and help from wage boards regarding how much wages they were to be paid; inability to secure health benefits as quick as possible; and lack of educational opportunities for both children and adults.

Theme 1. Stigmatization of Venezuelan Men as Bandits/Gang Members and Criminals

Based on the interviews conducted, 10 of the 16 men stated that they felt intimidated by prospective employers who questioned if they were gang members of if they had any kind of criminal records. While three of them confessed to having been arrested in Venezuela on minor charges, all 10 of them indicated that they came looking for a better life since they wanted to see their family lives improved and so they were doing everything possible to live crime free lives. The six other male migrants were all working but stated that they were never questioned as to their backgrounds or if they had criminal records. When asked by the interviewer if any of them had indeed committed crimes in Venezuela, all six of them claimed to have clean records. However they indicated that though they felt as if they were being monitored by their employers, they did not feel intimidated since their “bosses” were kind to them, treated them well and ensured they worked every day. One of the respondents noted that it was true that many Venezuelan men who came to Trinidad were already involved in crimes in Venezuela and they came to Trinidad looking for avenues to practice what they know. Another migrant indicated that he came to Trinidad in 2015 and has recognized that the crime in Trinidad has gotten to a point that people are afraid to leave their houses. He also agreed that gang violence in Trinidad has gotten unbearable and the drug and human trafficking have only increased since the illegal migration of criminal elements from Venezuela. He stated that “crime is on the increase in Trinidad and the criminals from Venezuela have found their way into it”.

Reality: Venezuelan criminal gangs are participating in serious crime in Trinidad and Tobago, both in competition and collaboration with local gangs, said a UN report publicised on September 2, 2024 titled *Caribbean Gangs: Drugs, Firearms, and Gangs Networks in Jamaica, Saint Lucia, Guyana and Trinidad and Tobago*. The report listed the types of crimes engaged in by Venezuelan criminals as extortion, human trafficking and the smuggling of illegal drugs and guns. It said that Trinidad and Tobago had a “thriving” drug

[3] Los Iros and Icacos beaches are in the southwestern part of Trinidad where many Venezuelan migrants enter the country illegally. Moruga is more on the southeast part of the island. These three areas are considered rural areas and are well known for other forms of illegality including drug and arms trafficking.

trade, serving as "a major transit point for cocaine and cannabis". This country (Trinidad) was well-regarded by organised crime networks owing to its location just 11 kilometres from Venezuela and its position outside the hurricane belt, which allows for year-around trafficking; the report said: "What is more, strong cultural ties in southern Trinidad with Venezuela have ensured that the coastal region, including Icacos, Cedros, and Moruga, are sites of extensive trafficking of drugs, guns and migrants"[4].

Threat Impact: As a result of this stigmatization, many Venezuelan male migrants in Trinidad have found it difficult to obtain high paying jobs and as such have had to work in agricultural fields, poultry farms and on construction sites where they are paid minimum wages. Of the 16 men interviewed, two were qualified teachers in Venezuela while another one had a degree in Pharmacology but the only employment they were able to secure in Trinidad was farm and construction work. This of course also resulted in frustration of these holders of degrees since they were finding it difficult to get work permits to work in Trinidad.

Theme 2. Stigmatization of Venezuelan Women as Prostitutes/Husband Snatchers

Of the 24 women interviewed, 12 of them claimed to have been sexually harassed within the first three months after arriving in Trinidad. They did not make any reports to the police because they were illegal in the country and were afraid that they might be sent back to Venezuela. Of these 12, four of them were allegedly harassed by their employers (bar owners) to perform sexual acts for money. Another two of them claimed that when they initially came to Trinidad they worked as maids/house servants but were later fired from their jobs after being accused of being too friendly with the men of the house.

Reality: Spanish women from neighboring islands have been cited as particularly vulnerable to illegal trafficking and exploitation in a report on prostitution in the islands. "In Trinidad and Tobago, women and girls from the Dominican Republic, Guyana, Venezuela, and Colombia are subjected to sex trafficking in brothels and clubs, often lured by offers of legitimate employment, with young women from Venezuela especially vulnerable"[5].

For Venezuelan women arriving presently, in a different context of forced migration, they may confront a sexualized stereotype to varying degrees.

Venezuelan women for example are offered work to take care of children but may be taken to a prostitution house and even trafficked if they cannot escape. Many Venezuelan women are also victims of other sexual crimes but the majority of these incidents go unreported since they also believe that the criminal justice system in Trinidad and Tobago is very weak and their chances for justice are very slim.

Historically, women unable to gain legal status or employment are more vulnerable to exploitation which is an important aspect of the lived experience for displaced people, specifically women. The risk of women and girls being trafficked and exploited is higher in conditions where safe and legal pathways of entry are not maintained in the host country, where legal rights are not granted so reporting to authorities is diminished, and places where the right to work is not granted (Teff, 2019). Presently, in Trinidad and Tobago the Counter Trafficking Unit, the Living Water Community and the Government aim to protect and support Venezuelan women to mitigate such exploitation.

Furthermore, while these stereotypes and stigma exist, and disturbing cases are reported, not every migrant experiences discrimination or exploitation to the same extent[6].

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[4] Trinidad Newsday, September 4, 2024.

[5] U.S. Department of State, 2019.

[6] The Counter Trafficking Unit has so far gotten one person in 2024 charged with human trafficking and successfully prosecuted.

Threat Impact: Many Venezuelan women have been sexually molested in Trinidad and Tobago in one way or the other. From the interviews conducted, at least seven women acknowledged that they felt they had no choice but to work as sex workers since they had families to feed, they had to send back money to Venezuela and had to take care of themselves. Many of them also faced the risk of arrest and detention by the police as well as abuse and violence by their employers.

On another note, there has been the establishment of the group 'Venezuelan Female Entrepreneurs' (pseudonym) in 2020 as a method used by Venezuelan women to counter the 'triple jeopardy' (nationality, gender, and condition as survival migrants) that they faced. Aspiring to one day provide business and language classes to other Venezuelan women, this network currently serves to gather similar experiences of government abuse whilst challenging xenophobia. The group's founder, a balloon decorator, says, "I want them [Trinidadians] to know what Venezuelan women are really like […] Not as prostitutes or here to do harm", slating media depictions of Venezuelan women as the source of male infidelity and family disintegration (Herbert, 2021).

Meanwhile, members express an immense obligation to other Venezuelan women, attempting to rebrand their overall image by highlighting their talented and hardworking ethics. As one interviewee says, "We are not here to do evil; we come to do good. We want to be an example for the whole of Latin America". Remaining in contact via WhatsApp and Facebook and meeting once a week in a member's house, participation provides an opportunity to gain mutual support and advice from one another. Despite operating in the same highly competitive industries, the most experienced entrepreneurs share business hacks, such as how to set up online payment systems and manage social media platforms, whilst other members watch tutorials together and share contacts of potential clients.

In the face of shared hardship, these women have merged to counter-dominant systems of representation, offering a bottom-up counter-narrative to homogenous depictions of Venezuelans whilst overcoming cultural fixities that deem entrepreneurship as masculine. In turn, by endeavoring to appear as mothers, wives, sisters and friends, they actively challenge boundaries of belonging and perceptions of Venezuelans as 'eternal newcomers'. And despite its relatively recent formation, they are frequently featured in Trinidadian newspapers.

With entrepreneurship able to generate income and knowledge transfer for immigrants whilst potentially providing host country economic growth, these findings stress the need to overcome a general propensity towards underscoring the victimhood of Venezuelan women at the expense of their heterogeneity. Instead, support for Venezuelan migrant entrepreneurs in Trinidad and Tobago should be ensured to ease socioeconomic adaptation and progress. The need for recipient states such as Trinidad and Tobago to guarantee the rights of Venezuelan arrivals and provide vital residence and work permits remains (Alsina, 2022).

Theme 3. Lack of Protection and Help from Wage Boards Regarding How Much Wages They Were to Be Paid

Of the 40 interviews conducted, it was learnt that 22 of these migrants were working for no more than two hundred Trinidad and Tobago Dollars i.e. TT 200.00 per day. The minimum wage in Trinidad and Tobago is TT 20.50 per hour and while it seemed they were getting a little bit more than the minimum wage, the reality is that they sometimes worked more than eight hours, sometimes up to 10 to 12 hours depending on where they worked. Two of the women who worked in bars for example worked from 10 am to 10 pm (12 hours) but were still paid TT 200.00 per day. When asked by the interviewer if they ever requested an increase in wages, they responded by saying that they were afraid to do so in case they lost their jobs.

Another eight of them, six women and two men were fortunate to be working for between TT 300.00 and TT 400.00 a day. They indicated they knew they were overworked but were glad that they could have earned sufficient money to help their families both in Trinidad and in Venezuela. All six of these women were working in restaurants in San Fernando and Chaguanas while the two men worked in a furniture factory in Chaguanas and the other in a supermarket in Arima.

The remaining 10 interviewees chose not to say how much they worked for but two of them acknowledged that they have been doing work in a particular church in Port of Spain and that they have been receiving assistance from several parishioners.

Reality: Venezuelan migrants in Trinidad and Tobago often face challenging working conditions and lower wages compared to local workers. Many Venezuelans work in low-skilled, labor-intensive jobs that are typically less desirable to locals (Hosein, 2020). The main areas of employment for migrants in Trinidad and Tobago, identified by stakeholders, include the following: (1) warehousing; (2) construction—inclusive of welding, masonry, and plumbing; (3) domestic cleaning; (4) retail; (5) tourism; (6) hospitality; (7) agriculture and agro-processing; (8) food and beverage; (9) textiles; (10) manufacturing; (11) security service; (12) supermarkets; (13) automotive repairs; and (14) music industry. It must also be noted that migrants are generally absorbed in 'manual labour' and 'less attractive' jobs because of the reduced costs for engagement and the reluctance amongst local workers to perform these jobs.

The wages for Venezuelan workers can vary significantly. Some reports indicate that Venezuelan nationals are often paid less than the local minimum wage, with some earning less than $100 TTD per day. In contrast, local laborers might earn around $300 TTD per day (Santoo, 2019). There have been efforts to improve labor conditions and reduce instances of underpayment among Venezuelan migrants (IOM, 2023), but challenges remain.

There are legal protections for migrant workers in Trinidad and Tobago, although enforcement can sometimes be inconsistent. These include:

1. Equal Treatment: Migrant workers are entitled to the same labor rights as local workers under the Industrial Relations Act. This includes fair wages, safe working conditions, and the right to join trade unions.

2. Minimum Wage: The national minimum wage applies to all workers, including migrants. However, as mentioned earlier, enforcement can be a challenge, and some employers may not comply.

3. Work Permits: Migrants need valid work permits to be employed legally. The Ministry of National Security oversees the issuance of these permits.

4. Anti-Discrimination: The Equal Opportunity Act prohibits discrimination based on nationality, ensuring that migrant workers should not be treated unfairly compared to local workers.

5. Legal Aid: There are organizations and legal aid services available to assist migrant workers with labor disputes and other legal issues (Baldeosingh, 2019).

Migrant workers in Trinidad and Tobago have several avenues to report labor violations:

Ministry of Labour: Workers can file complaints directly with the Ministry of Labour and Small Enterprise Development. They can visit the ministry's offices or use their online services.

Trade Unions: Migrant workers can join trade unions, which can provide support and advocacy in cases of labor violations.

Legal Aid and Advisory Authority: This organization offers legal assistance to those who cannot afford it, including migrant workers facing labor disputes.

Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs): Several NGOs, such as the Living Water Community and the International Organization for Migration (IOM), provide support and can help migrant workers navigate the process of reporting violations.

Equal Opportunity Commission: For cases involving discrimination, workers can file complaints with the Equal Opportunity Commission.

Hotlines and Helplines: Some organizations and government bodies provide hotlines for reporting labor violations and seeking advice.

It is important for workers to document any violations they experience, such as keeping records of hours worked and wages received, to support their claims. When asked if any of them knew about these avenues for assistance and redress, it was discovered that only three migrants knew about these options.

Threat Impact: Despite these protections, many migrant workers, including Venezuelans, still face exploitation and underpayment. Efforts are ongoing to improve the situation and ensure better enforcement of existing laws. Due to poor implementation of several laws and regulations relating to migrants and their working conditions and wages, many Venezuelan migrants have no other option or opportunity and thus they have to work for what wages they get. Upward mobility then is extremely difficult for them.

Theme 4. Inability to Secure Health Benefits as Quick as Possible

In the interviews with the 40 migrants, 28 of them indicated that they have sought medical care in the health institutions in Trinidad including the General Hospitals and the local Health Centers. At least 50% of the experiences were satisfactory while the other 50% identified extremely long waiting periods, inability to get beds if they had to stay over and even lack of medication. Three of them also indicated that they have been to the General Hospitals (in Port of Spain and San Fernando) on multiple occasions and have benefitted from getting assistance for their ailments.

Reality: Venezuelan migrants in Trinidad and Tobago face several significant health challenges:

1. Limited Access to Healthcare: Many migrants struggle to access comprehensive healthcare services, particularly secondary and tertiary care, due to legal and financial barriers.

2. Language Barriers: Communication issues can hinder effective medical treatment and understanding of health information.

3. Mental Health Issues: The stress of migration, uncertainty about their status, and separation from family can lead to anxiety, depression, and other mental health problems.

4. Chronic Diseases: Migrants often have limited access to regular medical check-ups and medications, exacerbating chronic conditions like diabetes and hypertension.

5. Infectious Diseases: Overcrowded living conditions and limited access to sanitation can increase the risk of infectious diseases.

6. Maternal and Child Health: Pregnant women and children are particularly vulnerable, facing challenges in accessing prenatal and pediatric care.

Efforts by local and international organizations aim to address these issues, but significant gaps remain.

Notwithstanding these gaps, Venezuelan migrants in Trinidad and Tobago have access to some health benefits. These include:

1. Emergency and Primary Care: Registered Venezuelan migrants can access publicly available emergency medical and primary care services.

2. Limited Access to Advanced Care: Access to secondary and tertiary healthcare services remains limited for many migrants (Lyons & Bhagwandeen, 2023).

3. Humanitarian Aid: Organizations like the EU have provided significant aid, including emergency healthcare, to support vulnerable Venezuelan migrants[7].

4. Medical Missions: Initiatives like the USNS Comfort mission have provided medical care to thousands of Venezuelan migrants in Trinidad, offering surgeries and other treatments[8].

Threat Impact: Despite these efforts, many migrants still face barriers to optimal healthcare due to public health policies and the strain on the local healthcare system (Modeste-James & Huggins, 2022).

Theme 5. Lack of Educational Opportunities for both Children and Adults

Of the 40 persons interviewed, 12 of them had children (18 children in all) between 5-17 but they were not attending any educational institutes or schools. Of these 18 children, 10 were engaged in helping their parents in their work while the other eight stayed at home. Seven of the parents indicated that they wanted their children to get an education but could not afford to pay any fees. The other five parents indicated that though their children were not at school, they taught them at night and were especially interested in having their children learn English. All in all, these 18 children were not receiving a formal education.

Among the 40 interviewees, five persons indicated that they intended to pursue tertiary education within the next year or two since it was not affordable for them right now in Trinidad. Moreover the language barrier was posing a major problem to them since in all the colleges and universities in Trinidad and Tobago, the major language used is English.

Reality: Since 2015, Trinidad and Tobago experienced an influx of over 40,000 migrants from Venezuela. Having signed the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, young migrant children are entitled to education in Trinidad and Tobago.

Of the 16,523 registered Venezuelans, at least 4,400 are children who are supposed to be in school. The students instead are in a parallel education system awaiting approval from the National Security Ministry to allow them access to public schools. In the interim, 1,400 migrant students have enrolled in Equal Place, a parallel education system developed in 2019.

Equal Place uses online platforms NotesMaster and Daware to teach the children, preparing them to enter the school system. It is promoted through the Education Working Group (EWG), inclusive of UNICEF, UNHCR, Living Water Community (LWC), TTV Solidarity Network, Catholic Education Board of Management (CEBM), Archdiocesan Ministry for Migrants and Refugees (Office of the Archbishop), Pan-American Development Foundation (PADF) and the Ministry of Education.

For the past two years, none of the migrant children have been able to access formal education in both private and public schools. Chairman of the Association of Denominational Boards of Education Sharon Mangroo said in 2019, the government approached the organisation to help prepare migrant students to enter the school system.

“About two years, almost three years ago, the Prime Minister asked the Archbishop to take responsibility for educating migrant children. The Archbishop met with the then minister of education, and then minister of

[7] https://civil-protection-humanitarian-aid.ec.europa.eu/news-stories/stories/trinidad-and-tobago-providing-aid-vulnerable-venezuelan-refugees-and-migrants_en.

[8] https://dialogo-americas.com/articles/venezuelan-immigrants-receive-medical-care-in-trinidad-during-comfort-visit/.

national security and they worked out a procedure for doing that. The bottom line is that the Ministry of National Security must give approval". When contacted for an update, National Security Minister Fitzgerald Hinds said: "This matter is not in front of me as Minister of National Security in any official way".

Mangroo said that the Catholic School Board has prepared at least 100 Venezuelan children for entry into primary school and are awaiting approval. "The provision is that no local child must be negatively affected. No local child must be denied a place from the school. So what we do is that we identified primary schools, because we're not touching secondary school, that's too controversial, in which there are school spaces".

"So we identified those and then we did the rest of the things that are necessary. We made sure that they were children whose parents held registration cards and they had sufficient English so that they would not disrupt the school". She added that teachers were also trained to teach English as a second language so that both students and teachers will be prepared.

Mangroo said that it was even more difficult to have migrants enter secondary schools because of the demand among local children for places. She emphasised that none of the migrants are "in school" as that is illegal but are accessing some form of formal schooling.

"Every local child would like to gain entry into one of the secondary schools. So no, we didn't consider having the children there at all, not in the day school. We have made the premises available for after-school activities for those children".

She said prior to the closure of schools, there were at least three schools that were made available to assist migrant children with after-school, secondary schooling. UNHCR, in a statement to Sunday Newsday, reiterated that education is a fundamental human right, "regardless of who someone is or where they come from".

"Being able to go to school gives children a chance to do more than just learn numeracy and literacy skills, but also key social and life skills. In addition to efforts supported by UNHCR, many organisations and entities have tried to provide means of informal educational engagement to children. However, these temporary interventions cannot replace being able to formally attend a school and engage in the holistic learning that the school environment allows".

In January, UNICEF Child Friendly Space coordinator Matthew Batson said that the primary school-aged migrant children followed the same subjects as those enrolled in accordance with the Ministry of Education guidelines, which include mathematics, English, language arts, science, social studies and physical education[9].

Threat Impact: The lack of access to education for Venezuelan migrant children has significant and far-reaching impacts:

1. This can lead to long-term emotional and psychological issues.

2. Increased Risk of Exploitation: Children who are not in school are more vulnerable to child labor and sexual exploitation[10]. For instance, in Colombia, many Venezuelan children have been found working instead of attending school[11].

3. Future Economic Challenges: Without education, these children face reduced opportunities in the workforce as adults[12]. This perpetuates the cycle of poverty and limits their abilities.

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[9] An Equal Place to learn: 4,400 migrant children want to go to school. Trinidad Newsday, Jensen La Vende, Saturday 2 October, 2021.

[10] https://lac.savethechildren.net/news/one-four-venezuelan-migrant-children-peru-not-school-study.

[11] https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/venezuela-crisis-childrens-education/.

[12] https://lac.savethechildren.net/news/one-four-venezuelan-migrant-children-peru-not-school-study.

4. Emotional and Psychological Effects: Being excluded from the educational system can damage children's self-esteem and create feelings of insecurity.

5. Social Integration Issues: Not attending school can hinder the social integration of migrant children, making it harder for them to adapt to their new environments and build a sense of community[13].

Conclusions

In Trinidad and Tobago, many Venezuelan migrants face numerous threats to their lives and well-being. The spiraling cost of living, fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic, and high unemployment rates, have made it difficult for many Venezuelan migrants to rebuild their lives and integrate into society. Despite progress achieved through various regularization and documentation initiatives, increased humanitarian needs underline the urgent need for enhanced protection, access to services, and job opportunities. The stigmatization of men as criminals and the women as prostitutes continues unabated.

Many migrants cannot afford three meals a day and lack access to safe and dignified housing. Many are resorting to "survival sex", begging or indebtedness, just to be able to eat or to avoid living on the streets. Extremely low salaries also make it difficult to support themselves and their families. Even though schools are now back in session, many Venezuelan migrant and refugee children face multiple barriers to accessing education, mainly due to the lack of enrollment slots or space. Based on a press released from the Ministry of Education, "Migrant children of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela will be admitted into schools in Trinidad and Tobago effective September 2024. This is in compliance with the Immigration (Amendment) (No. 2) Regulations 2024 and applies to Venezuelan nationals under the age of eighteen (18), whose parents registered with the Ministry of National Security (MNS) in 2019 and continue to register annually under the Migrant Registration Framework (MRF)". Even so, only 23 children have so far been admitted to primary school this semester with no children accepted in the secondary schools or universities in Trinidad. Many migrants have also resorted to crime such as robbery and kidnappings and extortion which make it even more difficult for the Trinidad population to trust Venezuelan migrants[14].

Recommendations

There are several ways that Trinidad and Tobago can improve its response to the influx of Venezuelans fleeing their country and the dire circumstances they would confront upon their return. One would be to institute a special regularization process, which would allow the undocumented migrants currently in the country to apply for residency and work permits. The government should pass legislation on refugees and asylum that reflects its international obligations under the Geneva Convention on the Status of Refugees and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. These include commitments to provide access to public education to all children, regardless of their legal status, and access to legal work by refugees. Trinidad and Tobago should also reduce its use of immigration detention and use alternatives to detention (Teff, 2019).

According to Refugees International, supporting Venezuelan migrants in Trinidad and Tobago involves several key recommendations:

1. Regularization and Legal Status: Implement temporary special regularization measures to allow

[13] https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/7/4/venezuelan-migrant-children-struggle-to-access-education.
[14] Trinidad Express Newspapers, https://trinidadexpress.com/news/local/migrant.

undocumented Venezuelans to apply for short-term residence and work permits. This would help them integrate into society and reduce the risk of exploitation.

2. Legislation and Policy: Introduce or amend legislation to provide better protection for refugees and asylum seekers. This includes implementing the National Policy to Address Refugee and Asylum Matters more effectively.

3. Humanitarian Aid: Continue and expand humanitarian aid programs, such as those funded by the EU and managed by UNHCR, which provide cash assistance, food, and healthcare to vulnerable Venezuelans.

4. Access to Services: Ensure that Venezuelan migrants have access to essential services like healthcare, education, and legal assistance. This can be facilitated through partnerships with international organizations and local NGOs.

5. Community Integration: Promote social cohesion and reduce xenophobia by fostering community integration programs and awareness campaigns (Teff, 2019).

6. The mindset of citizens of Trinidad and Tobago has to change in relation to the stigmatization of Venezuelan. Several studies have shown that while some men are members of criminal gangs, the majority of them are relatively honest men seeking betterment for themselves and families and they work hard to accomplish this. Likewise while some Venezuelan femal emigrants have been engaged in prostitution, either by force or willingly, the majority of them came to Trinidad looking for work and have been busy working in supermarkets, stores, agricultural fields and many other places with a view towards improving the lives of themselves and their families.

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