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Breaking the cycle

Human Inside: UNHCR helps refugee women survive sexual violence



It is a crying shame that women fleeing violence face violence again: Colombian victim. UNHCR/B. Heger.

Mayerly Jiménez* was a young Colombian refugee in Ecuador and the mother of a little child when she died in a hospital in the country's capital Quito at the age of 20 – burned by her partner when she was about to abandon him after many years of bullying and abuse. These had also been the causes why Jimenez had left Colombia in the first place: Her mother had obliged her at the young age of 14 to have a relationship with a man who was ten years older.

Jiménez was one of thousands of Colombian girls and women in the region who were and are unable to leave their boyfriends or husbands. Uprooted, integration difficulties, lack of documentation and prejudices about refugees combine to push them into abusive relationships. Conflict not only makes domestic violence more likely, it often aggravates it. In such a context, the UNHCR in Ecuador and Venezuela works systematically to protect these women as well as to prevent sexual or gender-based violence (SGBV) in the first place.

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According to the National Statistics Institute, in Ecuador six out of ten women suffer violence. For refugee women the risk of mistreatment is even higher since many of them are invisible. They often live in situations of social exclusion and extreme vulnerability – easy targets for exploitation and abuse. In the countries of asylum, a high number of women are exposed to survival sex, beatings or threats by partners, employers and even civil servants.

For many female refugees and asylum-seekers from Colombia, this is a bitter déjà-vu: The Colombian Ombudsman's Office estimates that approximately 17 per cent of displacement is caused by SGBV.

In response to these compelling situations, UNHCR works closely with state and local institutions as well as NGOs to mitigate the effects of violence against women at risk and their families. An example is providing shelter to female survivors of violence together with the Women's Federation of Sucumbíos, a town in Eastern Ecuador, across the border from Colombia's Putumayo Department. UNHCR also offers free counseling at legal clinics of universities in the border town of Tulcán, in Esmeraldas (Pacific Coast) and Ibarra (in the North). In addition, programs intended to make livelihoods more sustainable for vulnerable women, e.g. through microcredit schemes, are paramount in the search for individual solutions.

In Venezuela, UNHCR and its partners hear similar stories to those told by Jiménez from adolescents and young refugee women who face physical, psychological or sexual mistreatment – either at home or in their communities. "My partner beat me and stabbed me in the leg," reports Cecilia Castro Ibarra,* a refugee in San Fernando de Apure, a small town in the heart of Venezuela. "He threatened me and my family. This is the reason why I fled from Colombia. I left him to protect my family." And with a deep sigh she adds: "You never really get to know someone."

Addressing sexual and gender-based violence means that UNHCR and partner organizations offer various services to respond to the needs of victims and providing support to them is often a painful journey from overcoming trauma and settling in a new country. Survivors in Venezuela can participate in vocational training to gain or strengthen skills such as computer literacy, sewing or cooking to become self-sufficient, which in itself can be a powerful preventive measure against violence. Apart from addressing emotional and psychological trauma, specialized sexual and reproductive health support is provided to treat medical conditions of the reproductive system that are the consequences of such violence. These conditions can also include HIV infections and other sexually transmitted diseases.

But UNHCR's approach goes further to tackle the root causes of this serious problem. UNHCR involves both women and men as well as communities to help identify SGBV issues and reflect about their causes. This important step is taken together in a well-coordinated response with national institutions to enable SGBV survivors to break the cycle of violence and start anew.

Sonia Aguilar and Oana-Calina Resteman

*Name changed for confidentiality reasons

Report Review: More efforts needed to fight trafficking in persons

The global "Trafficking in Persons Report 2014" by the US State Department sees progress in fighting this scourge in Colombia. The Report suggests areas for improvement in protection and reintegration support for victims of forced or sex labor, particularly IDPs.

www.state.gov/documents/organization/226845.pdf

Where the streets have no dead end

How Panama benefits from giving permanent residence to refugees

“It is a milestone,” says UNHCR’s Senior Regional Protection Officer Eva Camps. “The advantages are huge,” confirms Nancy Ospita Silva, a Colombian refugee near Panama City. Both speak of Law 74 which gave way to permanent residence for hundreds of refugees in Panama.

Up until recently, they had to request renewal of their papers each year. Their temporary documents barred Colombians from full participation in the economic life of this thriving Central American nation. The conditions at banks were previously less favourable, temporary residents could not register their small companies in the tax system and they could not aspire to become Panamanian citizens.



Bright outlook: Backed by her residence card Colombian refugee Valeria Araujo Valera studies to start her own business in Panama in five years’ time. UNHCR/R. Schönbauer.

But Panama has removed obstacles to integration. Its administration recognized that “temporary” and “sustainable” did not match. Three years of refugee status are enough to request permanent residence. Nancy Ospita who sells beauty articles such as pedicure rasp files and wants to expand

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her business under the label “Nancy Distribuidora,” has been one of the first to get the new residence card. “Now I belong to my social environment,” she says with delight. As a permanent resident she can open an account with a deposit of 50 US\$ while previously she needed US\$750. That allows her to diversify the line of accessories she offers and to plan the opening of a small spa one day. “Panama is a country that offers persons so many things,” says Ospita.

Valeria Alaujo Valera, an 18-year old student of logistics, has her mind set on the future in the land of the world-famous Canal. With a residence card, the young lady has high targets: “In two years’ time I will finish my studies and in five years, I should have enough experience to set up my own logistics company – something like FedEx.” In the meantime, she works with her mother as a fashion designer.

But some streets still have dead ends for refugees. Valeria’s mother, Delsy Valera, was the only family member who did not get permanent residence because her file was lost. Without this card a company requiring her services as fashion designer refused to hire her.

Soledad Gutierrez*, a Colombian refugee who lives with her husband and three children in Panama City, had a similar experience earlier this year. While she had already permanent residence, she did not receive a work permit. In the Labour Ministry, “she said”, nobody had information about the Law 74”.

“I am now quite confident that in the meantime all parts of the administration have been briefed about this breakthrough legislation,” said UNHCR’s Camps several months later. And, after a moment’s pause, she adds: “Panama can only benefit if refugees have a permanent perspective.”

Roland Schönbauer

*Name changed for protection reasons

Note the quote

“Ending conflict is much more than silencing weapons.”

President Juan Manuel Santos at the Forum on Culture of Peace and Transitional Justice, Bogotá, 23 July 2014

Join hands and leave footprints for peace

How UNHCR helps indigenous peoples defend their cultures in Colombia



Look and see the beauty of our community! Youth rediscovering their identity. UNHCR/D. Díaz.

“We gathered our story as indigenous people in songs and dances, and in this way it will not be forgotten,” says Alfredo Solano* in Unión Peneya (Southern Colombia). Alfredo is an Embera Katío leader involved in a community documentation session which UNHCR is undertaking with children, adolescents and adults.

So far, more than 100 participants from indigenous, afro-descendant and *campesino* (peasant farmers) communities in the regions of Catatumbo, Unión Peneya, Buenaventura and Chocó explored their memories and realized the importance of their distinct cultures. Split into various groups they discussed, revisited and rescued their distinct cultures. By documenting them through these oral stories, they leave proof of their existence and their commitment to defend their individual and collective rights.

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Through the creation of oral stories and photographic documentation UNHCR helps communities not only to systematize facts about the recent past, but also to unearth creative abilities. Leaders of all ages, ethnicities and origins are given the opportunity to show that despite the persistence of armed conflict within and around their territories, they are willing to join hands to portray their unique ethnic identity and to make “footprints” in efforts to foster a culture of peace.

Rescuing memories and strengthening the voices of communities have made them proud as individuals, communities and leaders. “I want people from all over the world to see my pictures so they can realize how beautiful our land and our people are”, says Andrés, a young boy from Unión Peneya, who took photos of his classmates.

And word reached the EU Commission’s Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection Department in Brussels, which opted to support UNHCR’s approach.

Diana Díaz

*Not his real name

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