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In the Name of Gender-Based Violence: US Border Externalization in the South American Migration and Border Regime

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Abstract

In 2018, there was a sharp increase in displacement from Venezuela in a context of profound political and economic instability. International organizations disseminated images of people moving in extremely precarious conditions, particularly highlighting women, pregnant and carrying children, as the emblematic figures. This situation was soon labeled a "migration and humanitarian crisis", legitimizing an unprecedented humanitarian intervention primarily funded by US government. This essay analyzes the migration and border control practices that evoke gender-based violence as a category of intervention on migration movements from Venezuela between 2018 and 2023. It draws on my ethnographic, multi-sited, and mobile fieldwork carried out between 2021 and 2023 in 24 localities and border areas of the so-called South American Western Corridor. The essay argues that gender-based violence functioned as a category of political intervention that facilitated the externalization of borders in South America through a humanitarian architecture primarily funded by the U.S. government. Within this framework, the externalization of borders operated surreptitiously, outsourced to international organizations and NGOs, and concealed under the narrative of protecting women. I contend that the gender-based violence category was not fixed but rather operated in different ways according to the security interests of the US government. Specifically, when migrant itineraries were oriented toward countries in the South American Andes, gender-based violence was invoked to facilitate and accelerate the movement of 'women and children'. Conversely, when the United States became a desired destination for thousands of Venezuelan migrants, the gender-based violence was reframed to support deterrence strategies.

Keywords: Gender-Based Violence, externalization, border, migration, South America

In the Name of Gender-Based Violence: US Border Externalization in the South American Migration and Border Regime

"More than any other humanitarian emergency I have encountered, the Venezuela crisis is truly a women's crisis," stated Alexandra Moncada, National Director for Ecuador at the NGO CARE International. With this assertion, the displacement of millions of people from Venezuela began to be framed through a gendered lens. In 2018, there was a sharp increase in displacement from Venezuela in a context of profound political and economic instability. The media, international organizations, and NGOs have disseminated images of people moving in extremely precarious conditions, particularly highlighting women—pregnant and carrying children—as the emblematic figures of what was soon labeled a "migration and humanitarian crisis." The recurrent portrayal of "women and children" travelling thousands of kilometers on foot and carrying small backpacks moved the international community and led to the deployment of an unprecedented humanitarian intervention in South America.

This essay analyses the migration and border control practices that evoke gender-based violence as a category of intervention in migration movements from Venezuela between 2018 and 2023. It draws on my ethnographic, multi-sited, and mobile fieldwork carried out between 2021 and 2023 in various localities and border areas of the so-called South American Western Corridor. The essay argues that gender-based violence functioned as a category of political intervention that facilitated the externalization of borders in South America through a humanitarian architecture primarily funded by the U.S. government.

South America had not been considered a major epicenter of mass displacement for over a century. Rather, Venezuela was traditionally characterized as a destination for migrants. However, political instability, hyperinflation, state violence, persecution of Colombian migrants, growing insecurity,

and shortages of medicine and food triggered large-scale departures from the country (Ávila, 2017; Palma-Gutiérrez, 2021, p. 202). The scenario was shaped not only by internal dynamics but also by geopolitical conflicts: interventions by South American and European countries and, fundamentally, the United States in opposition to the government of Nicolás Maduro were decisive in triggering this situation. Within this context, migration from Venezuela was increasingly framed as a "migration crisis," a designation that legitimized multiple forms of political and humanitarian interventions (Domenech, 2025). The organizations involved in producing this narrative have estimated that 7.9 million Venezuelans have left the country since the onset of the crisis (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2023).

The framing of Venezuelan mobility as a "migration crisis" by multiple national and international agencies catalyzed the construction of a humanitarian architecture known as the Regional Interagency Coordination Platform for Refugees and Migrants of Venezuela (R4V Platform), led by UNHCR and IOM. The Platform was tasked with mobilizing international funding and coordinating humanitarian interventions across Latin America, bringing together and standardizing the actions of other international agencies, NGOs, and civil society organizations. Although its activities extended across most Latin American and Caribbean countries, the South American Andean region became a key site of intervention. Brazil was another key player in the humanitarian intervention deployed by the R4V Platform. Given its geographical size, it developed its own strategy, "Operation Shelter" (Moulin Aguiar & Magalhães, 2020). This intervention was characterized by three dimensions: the creation of a new spatiality of control, the production of gender as a form of humanitarian governance, and the extension of the U.S. border through this humanitarian architecture.

Regarding the first dimension, the South American Andes region—including Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, Chile, and Argentina—was crossed by millions of migrants carrying only a few belongings on their backs. The R4V Platform also deployed a series of services to facilitate migrants' transit, including shelters, "information and guidance points," food and travel kits, and money for food. The movement of millions of people through illegalized pathways led to a crisis in border control and a loss of relative control over migratory movements. In this sense, the intervention of the R4V Platform was more than a response to humanitarian suffering. On the contrary, it constituted a novel control strategy aimed at restoring national and regional (b)order by channelling and regulating what was framed as unruly movement.

Secondly, gender was central to the humanitarian intervention and the deployment of the corridor, not only because it mobilized international compassion through images of women and children in transit, but also because it was embedded in the very structure of the R4V platform and shaped everyday humanitarian practices on the ground. The Platform included a specific yet cross-cutting "Protection Sector," which included a sub-sector responsible for addressing gender-based violence (GBV). Rather than occupying a marginal position, this sub-sector formed part of a multiplicity of actions focused on preventing the risks of GBV and responding to "survivors." These guidelines were incorporated by a wide range of organizations, from traditional religious NGOs to those identifying as "feminist." Specifically, the narrative surrounding GBV structured the daily actions delivery of humanitarian assistance through so-called "prioritization criteria" that privileged children, pregnant women, and LGBTIQ+ people. The alleviation of suffering thus became closely tied to the visibility and legibility of feminized bodies, while cis-heterosexual masculine bodies were racialized through the discourse of danger.

Thirdly, the migratory landscape reshaped by this new humanitarian architecture also gave rise to a revealing image: the United States flag became part of the emerging aesthetic of migration in South America. Suddenly, the flag appeared everywhere, moving to the rhythm of migration. Humanitarian materiality was imprinted on it in many forms. The backpacks distributed in aid kits, food assistance cards, banners displayed outside NGOs, and the vests worn by humanitarian workers frequently bore a small American flag alongside the phrase "With the financial support of" and the name of the relevant U.S. government agency such as PRM or USAID. This aesthetic was the tip of the iceberg of a complex humanitarian network orchestrated to govern migration in South America and safeguard U.S. security.

This essay argues that gender-based violence (GBV) functioned as a category of political intervention that facilitated the externalization of borders in South America through a humanitarian architecture primarily funded by the U.S. government. Within this framework, border externalization operated in a concealed manner: it was outsourced to international organizations and NGOs and veiled under the narrative of protecting women. I contend that GBV did not operate through a single logic, but through two distinct and complementary ones, depending on the security interests of the U.S. government. On the one hand, when migrant itineraries were oriented toward countries in the South American Andes, GBV was invoked to facilitate and accelerate the movement of "women and children." The humanitarian architecture thus institutionalized mobility in subtle ways": it channelled movement, set its rhythm, and contributed to anchoring errant populations within South American countries. Like a play on words, the corridor worked by r(o)outing the indomitable migration. On the other hand, when the United States became the desired destination for thousands of migrants travelling from South America and crossing the Darién region, GBV was reframed to support deterrence strategies. In this case, rather than

enabling mobility, the narrative of violence was mobilized to produce fear and encourage migrants to desist from transit. Thus, while one logic operated through the managed circulation of feminized migrants within South America and the other through the discouragement of northbound mobility, both ultimately converged in legitimizing, extending, and consolidating migration control through the reification of women as governable, dependent subjects.

The essay is organized into four sections. The first outlines the theoretical framework that underpins the essay's argument and provides a brief overview of the methodology and ethnographic fieldwork. The second section examines the externalization of the U.S. border within the South American migration and border regime. It focuses on the humanitarian architecture deployed in response to mass displacement, arguing that such architecture is part of a broader containment strategy aimed at keeping migration within the South American region. Within this framework, the section also introduces the relationship between this humanitarian architecture and gender-based violence (GBV) as a category of intervention. The third section analyses how GBV constitutes the cornerstone of the South American Western Corridor through the production of migrant women and children as intervention targets. In this sense, the prioritization practices that take place in the humanitarian field constitute a form of governing mobility through mobility (Tazzioli, 2018), influencing the rhythm of migration and accelerating the transit of "women and children." The last section focuses on the uses of GBV when migrant itineraries are headed towards the United States. The narrative used to facilitate the movement of women and children is drastically suspended and reinterpreted to dissuade their onward migration.

1. Theoretical and methodological notes: gender, border externalization, and migration corridors

This essay aims to understand the gendering of the South American migration and border regime. In this context, I have identified a process that intertwines gender governance (Halley et al., 2018) and migration governance (Mezzadra, 2005; Domenech, 2013), giving rise to a new mode of control over populations on the move. This emerging form of governance entails the metabolization and instrumentalization of the "gender perspective"—and related categories such as "gender equality" and "women's issues"—in migration and border control. This process took place through the formation of an international network of actors, consultative spaces, conferences, and international commitments, mainly promoted by international organizations such as UNHCR, IOM, and UNIFEM. Far from dismantling patriarchal structures, it is based on traditional regulations and representations of gender and sexuality that are linked to racist practices of mobility control (Trabalón, 2021, 2024). Within this framework, I argue that the representations underpinning the gendering of control are based on a binary, heteronormative, and gynocentric discourse, where gender equals woman, and woman equals a violated subject and object of protection. In summary, both in my larger research and in this essay, gender operates in a double sense: as an analytical lens and as an object of critical inquiry.

In approaching the concept of gender, I begin by acknowledging, following Oyěwùmí (2017), that the social construction of sexual dimorphism as perceived in the human body is rooted in eminently Western conceptions of what has come to be codified as "biology." In other words, the "body" has not been visible or universally available for categorization. Thus, the universal presupposition and application of categories such as patriarchy, "woman," and "gender" is ethnocentric and manifests the hegemony of Western epistemologies over other cultural classifications. It is crucial, then, to take this critique seriously and recognize that the analysis of the gendering process operates when working with Western and Westernized populations. Once gender has been de-essentialized, it

should be understood as a set of critical questions rather than a series of labels or pre-established answers (Butler, Fassin, and Scott, 2007; Scott, 2018). In this way, gender constitutes a category of feminist analysis that has allowed us to understand Western and Westernized societies by questioning the social production of sexed bodies, the normalization of the sex-gender-desire nexus, and the destabilization of the masculinity-femininity binary.

Specifically, this essay draws inspiration from—and seeks to contribute to—the body of scholarship that analyses the intersection of narratives surrounding the "gender perspective," humanitarianism, and migration and border control. Malkki's pioneering work (1995, 1996) demonstrates how international institutions represent refugee women and children as feminized and infantilized subjects, producing helplessness as an intrinsic trait to enable humanitarian control policies. Ticktin (2008, 2011a, 2011b) exposes the use of sexual violence as both a narrative of borderization and a category of humanitarian intervention. Her work has contributed significantly to early reflections on—and documentation of—the relationship between two care regimes: the fight against violence against women and humanitarianism—whose connection was not immediately intuitive but is now recognized as deeply intertwined. Clavijo and Sabogal (2013) analyse how UNHCR constructs the figure of the "refugee woman" through a logic of vulnerability and guardianship, articulated with security discourses in migration governance. Olivius (2015, 2016) shows that gender interventions reproduce hierarchies between the West and the non-West, positioning refugee women as "strategic humanitarian partners" through the instrumentalization of unpaid feminized labour. Hess (2013, 2019) argues that the European border regime is underpinned by articulations of gender and sexuality for governance purposes. Von Czechowski (2018, 2024) analyses a refugee camp in Tanzania to demonstrate how "SGBV" policies are structurally ineffective in addressing violence yet effective in regulating everyday life. Hammami

(2023) studies the GBV apparatus in Gaza, highlighting its civilizational dimensions and the manipulation of rape narratives in war to construct sexual violence as a constitutive element of refuge. Finally, Holzberg et al. (2022) argues that sexuality also functions as a technology of borderization, key to regulating mobility.

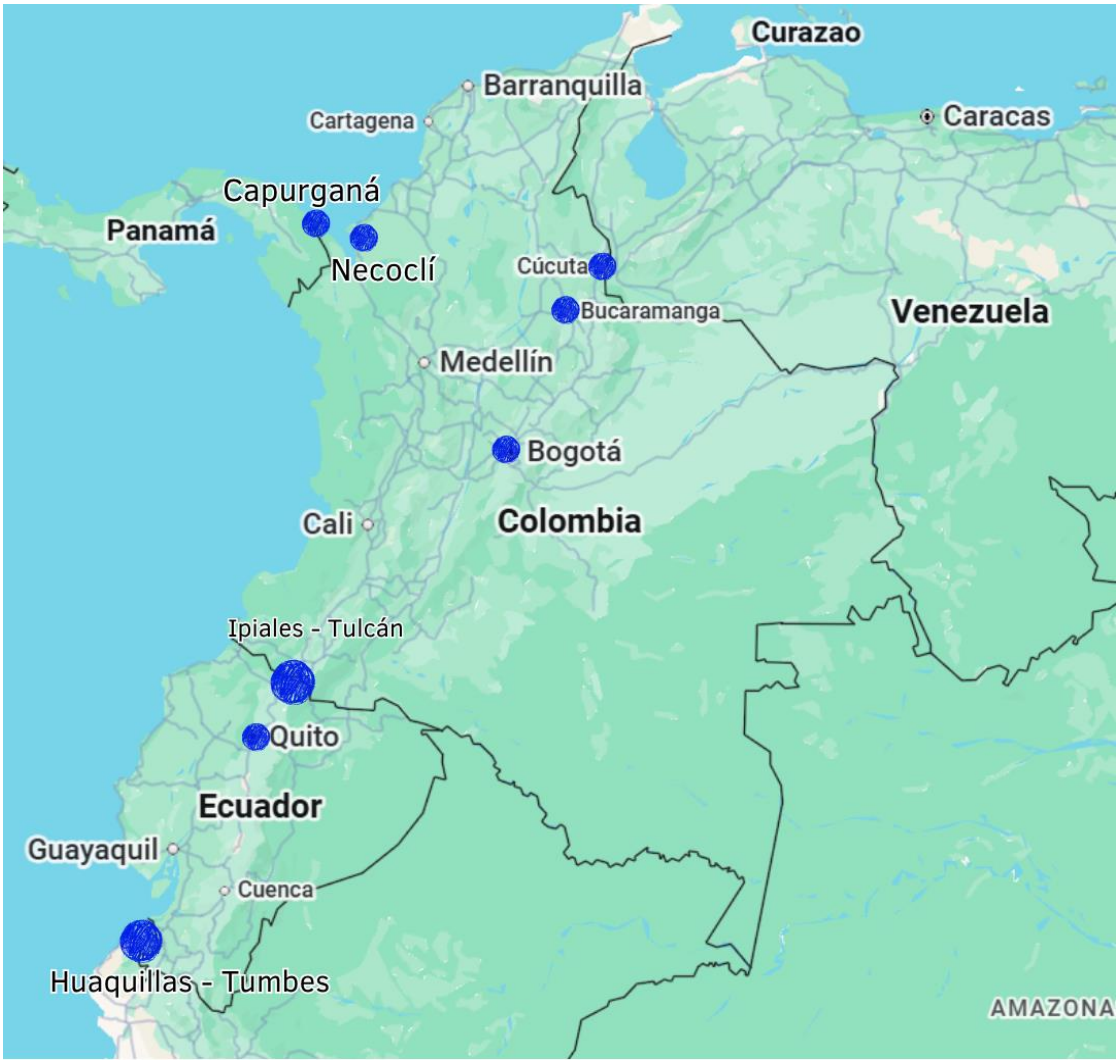
In the field of critical migration and border studies, border externalization has been defined as the "territorial and administrative expansion of a given state's migration and border policy to third countries" (Casas-Cortes et al., 2015). This body of scholarship has made important contributions by rethinking borders beyond their conventional representation and considering the diversity of practices and actors involved in the production of state sovereignty. However, this definition of externalization focuses on the direct involvement of border authorities in foreign borders and territories, as well as the transfer of border control to the national surveillance apparatuses of third countries. I consider this definition to be productive in a variety of ways, but insufficient to capture the range of practices that occur when border externalization takes place through the production of humanitarian borders (Walters, 2010). Instead, I support Cuttita's proposal (2022), which argues that externalization is carried out not only through states but also through other actors, such as NGOs and international organizations, via funding or other incentives aimed at preventing or limiting unwanted immigration into their territories. In this sense, this approach contemplates practices that go beyond classic border control practices, such as the militarization of border areas, to account for the central role of humanitarianism. Accordingly, the guidelines and conditions imposed by donor states on NGOs operating in so-called "countries of origin and transit" should be understood as key elements of border externalization practices.

Finally, the concept of corridors is understood through the contributions of Kasparek (2016) and Walters (2021). Kasparek defines a migration corridor as a narrow, highly organized mechanism

that channels and facilitates the movement of people. This occurs as a result of the destabilization of border orders, insofar as the control institutions involved in the migration and border regime lack sufficient capacity to stop the extraordinary movement of people across their borders. In this way, "informal routes" become institutionalized corridors for reestablishing some form of control over movement. Walters (2021), on the other hand, refers to "routes" as a mode of governance. He argues that discourse surrounding routes constitutes a way in which borders, territories, and migrations are transformed in the midst of ongoing struggles over the right to move and the right to stay. In this sense, corridors are understood as a spatial process that accounts for various modes of regulation aimed at channelling or directing movements, and "itineraries" as the paths and passageways of migrants whose mobility exceeds institutional attempts at control. From this perspective, "transit migration" is not treated in this project as a distinct type of migratory mobility, nor as a descriptive term for moments of migration. On the contrary, I understand the configuration of the "transit migration device" (Hess, 2010) as an institutional category of production, intervention, and regulation of irregular movements. This does not imply ignoring the relevance of migrants' transits but rather rejecting the notion of "transit migration" as a classification category.

The analytical proposal is grounded in empirical material produced during my ethnographic fieldwork, which was multi-sited and mobile along the South American Western Corridor between September 2021 and November 2023. This work aimed to examine ethnographically the South American migration and border regime from a feminist perspective. To this end, I conducted interviews with humanitarian workers, primarily those specializing in gender issues and affiliated with organizations focused on this area. Additionally, I carried out participant observation in "humanitarian aid" spaces for migrants in transit and conducted interviews with feminized

migrants. Part of the fieldwork was carried out in collaboration with members of the research team to which I belong; for this reason, I use the plural in some ethnographic excerpts. This work took place in several border areas and high-transit sites: San Salvador de Jujuy and La Quiaca (Argentina); Villazón, La Paz, Desaguadero, and Pisiga (Bolivia); Colchane, Iquique, and Arica (Chile); Tacna, Desaguadero, and Tumbes (Peru); Huaquillas, Quito, and Tulcán (Ecuador); Pasto, Ipiales, Bogotá, Bucaramanga, Pamplona, Cúcuta, Maicao, Necoclí, and Capurganá (Colombia). The following maps are intended as illustrative and orientational tools, highlighting key points along the corridor. Arrows indicating northbound or southbound movements have been intentionally omitted, based on the understanding that mobility within migration corridors is not linear or unidirectional, but instead involves multidirectional trajectories unfolding over different temporal frames (Álvarez Velasco, Pedone, & Miranda, 2021).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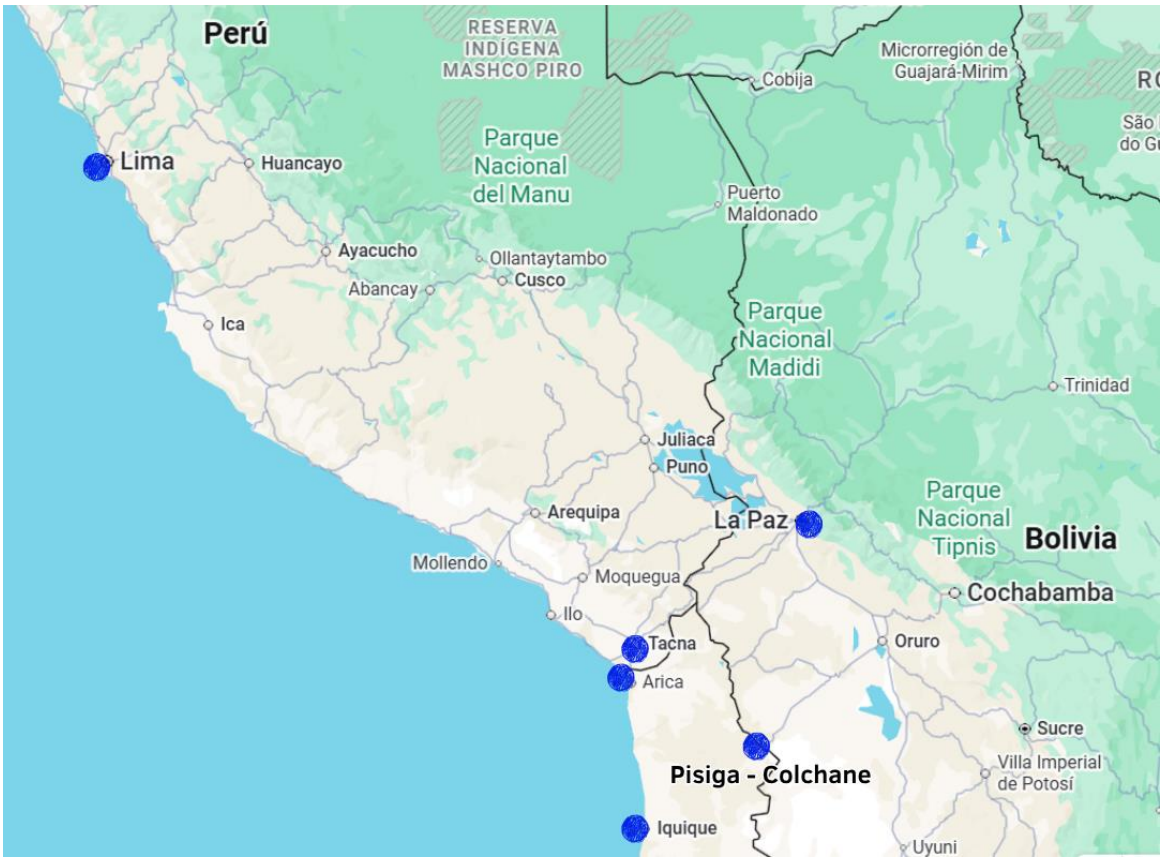

2. Stretching the borders to South America: Gender-based violence on the humanitarian border

The externalization of U.S. borders within the South American migration and border regime, triggered by the tumultuous Venezuelan migration, took place with the creation of the R4V Platform (Domenech, 2023; Domenech & Biondini, 2023; Biondini et al., 2023). Officially launched on April 12, 2018, as a United Nations initiative (R4V Platform, 2025), the platform emerged when departures from Venezuela were rapidly escalating. By the end of that year, neighbouring Colombia had registered the entry of 1,359,815 Venezuelans (Migración Colombia, 2024). At the same time, the Trump administration intensified economic sanctions[2] and redoubled

[2] In August 2017, US President Donald Trump signed an order (Executive Order 13808) prohibiting the Venezuelan government and its state oil company, PDVSA, from accessing financing in US markets. This meant that they could no longer borrow or sell bonds in that country. However, some exceptions were made so that these measures would not affect the Venezuelan people or US

efforts to intervene in Venezuela. In this context, the United Nations entrusted UNHCR and IOM with the leadership of the Platform. The representative of this coordination was Guatemalan Eduardo Stein, who lacked experience in the field of migration and asylum but had close ties to U.S. political institutions and experience in international negotiations with various actors (Domenech, in press). The objective of this platform was to "coordinate the regional response to the situation of refugees and migrants from Venezuela" and provide "basic rights and services, protection, as well as self-reliance and socio-economic integration" (R4V Platform, 2025). In other words, it was the space that monopolized, dominated, and standardized the "humanitarian response" in the region.

At first glance, the R4V Platform appears to reflect international concern about the extreme human rights violations suffered by the people living in Venezuela. It can also be interpreted as part of the geopolitical disputes between the U.S. and Venezuela and the efforts to delegitimize and overthrow the government of Nicolás Maduro. Without denying the existence of multiple reasons that led to the formation of this humanitarian architecture, the Platform was also a strategy to respond to U.S. border security concerns. Domenech (in press) has analysed the prelude to the formation of this platform, highlighting the U.S. government's long-standing concerns about the "dangers" posed by massive migration movements in South America. Since the 1970s, the U.S. has been reluctant to build a route connecting Colombia and Panama through the Darién Gap, partly to prevent the spread of foot-and-mouth disease and the possible displacement of Colombian migrants toward the country. Another key event dates back to 2008, when the Ecuadorian

interests as much. Then, in March 2018, Trump signed another order (E.O. 13827) prohibiting transactions with cryptocurrencies created by the Venezuelan government, such as the "Petro". In May of that same year, a third order (E.O. 13835) was signed, blocking any transactions related to the purchase of Venezuelan debt or the use of Venezuelan assets as collateral for loans. In addition, since then, the US government office responsible for enforcing these sanctions (the OFAC) has issued special permits to prevent CITGO—a US oil company owned by PDVSA—from being sold to creditors claiming debts.

government eliminated visa requirements (Infobae, 2008) for all citizens of the world who wished to enter the country. Ecuador became the "gateway" for "illegal migration" to the United States, especially for nationalities classified as undesirable (Gualdoni, 2010). These events turned the Ecuadorian president's decision into a border security problem for the United States, whose officials exerted intense pressure on the Ecuadorian government until visas were reestablished for a group of nationalities (Domenech & Díaz, 2020; Álvarez Velasco, 2020).

Since 2017, as Domenech (2025) shows, experts with ties to the White House have acknowledged that U.S. officials on the National Security Council were deeply concerned about the effects of political and economic instability in Venezuela. In this context, the experts emphasized the need to consider actions in response to the possible scenario of a "refugee crisis" in the region. While military intervention was explored, the focus was placed on "preventive measures" that could be implemented. One expert's proposal closely mirrored what would later evolve into the R4V Platform. The difference between that proposal and the R4V Platform was that the "interagency plan" was to be led by the United States. Although the R4V Platform was established by the United Nations, the central role of U.S. government agencies, such as the PRM and USAID, closely aligned with the recommendations put forward by these experts.

The day after the launch of the R4V Platform, on April 13, 2018, the United States government announced the allocation of $16 million in humanitarian aid to Latin America and the Caribbean for those fleeing the crisis in Venezuela. The funding was presented as complementary to that provided in 2017, bringing the total amount to $21,396,386. Although dozens of agencies were donors to the R4V, it has functioned primarily as the executor of funds from the U.S. By the end of 2018, the U.S. had donated $96,594,006. According to data from OCHA's Financial Tracking Service, in 2019, U.S. funds represented 73.6% (approximately $301 million out of $409 million)

of the total funds available to the RMRP for implementation (OCHA, 2019). In the following years, the proportion increased: in 2020 it was 67.9% (approximately $453 million out of $666 million) (OCHA, 2020); in 2021 it was 79.7% (approximately $473 million out of $593 million); in 2022 it was 82% (approximately $518 million out of $632 million) (OCHA, 2022); in 2023 it was 81.8% (approximately $501 million out of $612 million) (OCHA, 2023) ; and in 2024 it was 90.2% (approximately $461 million out of $512 million) (OCHA, 2024). The externalization of U.S. borders in South America was operationalised through conditions introduced via donor financing (Couttita, 2022), that is, through U.S. government agencies. Specifically, two key dimensions shaped and conditioned humanitarian practice on the ground: the prioritization of "gender-based violence" in funding allocations and the (un)availability of resources to support the displacement of migrants depending on whether they were heading north or south on the continent. These two elements form the basis of the argument developed in this paper.

Regarding the first dimension, in the town of Ipiales, Colombia, a humanitarian worker who is an expert in GBV assistance shared that they were implementing a pilot program of transnational humanitarian transportation for women at risk or survivors of GBV—I will return to this program in Section 3. This caught my attention, and I asked her where the initiative had come from. She responded, "Well... PRM, which is our donor. It has an impact on many agencies, and let's say that the pillars today in most agencies are working with GBV." She went on to explain that GBV was "one of the donor's strong pillars," designed to aid women who "are at risk or are survivors," and that "they are sending resources precisely for that purpose." The prominence of GBV and the involvement of NGOs in this type of assistance did not surprise me, as it was part of the pattern I had identified in my previous fieldwork in northern Argentina, Chile, and Bolivia. In fact, in the city of Tulcán, Ecuador, a feminist NGO worker had told me about institutional concern that "all

organizations are rushing to apply for GBV prevention projects." However, what did surprise me was the central role of PRM in financing these initiatives. What, then, was the relationship between PRM and the financing of GBV projects?

In 2012, U.S. President Obama issued an Executive Order (13623) urging government departments and agencies to implement the United States Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Gender-Based Violence Globally. The primary objective of this order was to make gender equality, the welfare of women and girls, and the fight against gender-based violence a priority of U.S. foreign policy. As part of this initiative the following year PRM, in collaboration with USAID's Bureau for Democracy, Conflict, and Humanitarian Assistance, launched the *Safe from the Start: Preventing and Responding to Gender-Based Violence (GBV) from the Onset of Emergencies* program. This initiative aimed to expand GBV interventions, integrate GBV risk mitigation into all humanitarian sectors, and increase accountability at the global level. Between 2013 and 2021, $167 million was invested. Considering that initiative a success, and with the goal of generating "systemic change in the architecture of the humanitarian response focused on women and girls" (U.S. Department of State, 2015), *Safe from the Start* was renewed in fiscal year 2022 with an investment of $25 million. In contrast to the approach later taken during Trump's second presidency, PRM and USAID published annual calls for general funding, that prioritized victims of violence, as well as specific calls focused on GBV.

Funding opportunities for NGOs, both general and those focused on GBV, referenced the "General NGO Guidelines" for project development. The information in the guide was updated annually. Given the time frame of my research, I will use the 2021 [3] fiscal year as a reference (U.S.

[3] Among the changes introduced compared to the 2020 guidelines were special considerations related to the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the requirement for an in-depth gender analysis and the mainstreaming of protection within project descriptions. The identification of vulnerable populations and their feminization were key elements of the guidelines. After addressing administrative

Department of State, Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration [PRM], 2021). The centrality of gender as a key determinant of vulnerability and GBV as a target for humanitarian intervention was evident throughout the document. The first point addressing this dimension was the "Gender Analysis," which consisted of identifying "factors that promote or undermine gender equality in the context of the program." The guidelines recommended that the analysis focus on specific subpopulations of women and girls at risk, addressing the "intersection of multiple vulnerabilities": female heads of household, LGBTIQ+ migrants, married girls, and others. A recurring suggestion throughout the document was the inclusion of activities "focused on survivors [of GBV]," even in general calls for proposals. In this context, the guidelines urged the deployment of lifesaving GBV interventions, prevention measures, empowerment initiatives, and training, among others. Finally, the relevance of GBV was reflected in the budget structure, as proposals addressing GBV were required to calculate the total cost of these activities as a separate line item in the proposal.

Regarding the second dimension—the (un)availability of resources to support the displacement of migrants—I would like to outline how the corridor functions in relation to movements to the south or to the north, in order to frame the subsequent discussion of the instrumentalization of GBV in mobility governance in the South American migration and border regime. The creation of a humanitarian border—mediated by humanitarian intervention—through the South American Western Corridor consisted of the deployment of a multiplicity of assistance strategies aimed at facilitating southward migration and rooting populations in South American countries. From the

issues, projects were required to conduct a Gap Analysis, that is, to identify target populations not served by other organizations. At times, this requirement created a contradiction with later stages of the project design, particularly the determination of the Target Population and Vulnerable and Underserved Persons of Concern. Rather than emerging inductively from an analysis of underserved populations, the guide itself predetermined who counted as vulnerable: women, children, adolescents, LGBTQI+ people, older adults, sick people, people with disabilities, and members of minority communities. Furthermore, a later paragraph explicitly stated that "competitive" proposals should describe how women would be included and how their specific needs would be addressed in the design and implementation of the program.

Colombian-Venezuelan border to the Chilean and Argentine border areas, a series of humanitarian points linked the most important locations for migratory transit between countries. The R4V Platform deployed "Safe Spaces" and "Care and Orientation Points" that centralized the delivery of humanitarian aid. At the same time, guidance activities in these locations consisted of directing people to the next points along the route. A wide range of services was provided in these spaces, including the distribution of kits—carried in backpacks that would come to define the aesthetics of migration in South America—containing food and travel items, prepaid or debit cards for the purchase of food, and legal, psychological, and medical assistance. Two services were the most demanded: shelters and so-called "humanitarian transportation." In accordance with the principles and guidelines established by donors, as we will see in the following sections, priority in the delivery of humanitarian aid was given to "women and children," especially if there was a "risk of GBV" or if they were "survivors."

In a conversation with a former regional director of an international NGO specializing in "gender perspective," she noted that "security issues" were a significant concern for the NGO's donor, USAID. When I asked her to clarify, she explained: "We had to respond to Venezuelan migration while it is in Latin America, because they know that their next destination is the U.S." She elaborated that two logics intersected in efforts to expand funding for those traveling in and through Colombia. First, alleviating emotional and physical exhaustion meant that people would arrive in other countries in better condition, reducing the burden on the response. This logic was linked to the idea that migrants needed a place where they could settle with dignity and stop moving around the region. Second, this humanitarian impetus was underpinned by the idea that "if you can't settle anywhere, you go to the rich country in the north." This idea, which resurfaced

during the meeting with donors, was also linked to fears about migrant caravans: “Caravans are the United States’ main argument; other countries must respond so that they don’t arrive.”

The fears expressed by experts at the beginning of this section and by the donors with whom the NGO official met became a reality. In 2020, migration to the United States from South America grew exponentially amid the region’s political and economic instability. The so-called “Darién Gap” was no obstacle for the thousands of people seeking a better future, and the town of Necoclí became a migratory hub connecting South America with the rest of the continent. In this town, NGO workers explained to me how they experienced the constraints imposed by the donors funding humanitarian aid in the region. They explained that the sources of the funds “greatly limit what can be done,” especially if they came from the United States. In such cases, the funds were intended to help the population regularize their status in the region. The flip side of this was that there were no funds to provide shelter or transportation to those in the Darién area. Along the same lines, another NGO representative in the town of Apartadó (near Necoclí) explained that the availability of resources to alleviate northbound migration was conditional in that region. He noted that there was “pressure from the countries they are arriving in to make the route less easy.” He argued that “facilitating the route encourages transit,” because if people were migrating despite extremely hostile conditions they faced in the Darién, any relief would mean an increase in the number of people crossing to the north.

The accounts of humanitarian workers at various levels of the organizational hierarchy revealed the surreptitious uses of the R4V Platform. While acknowledging the relief experienced by the thousands of migrants who received assistance, I argue that the U.S. border was externalized to South America through the financing of this novel humanitarian architecture. The explanation provided by humanitarian workers in Necoclí revealed the underlying logic behind the generosity

of humanitarian aid in the rest of the region. If, as the NGO representative in Apartadó stated, "facilitating the route is encouraging transit," then the multiple shelters, service and orientation points, safe spaces, the distribution of kits and money, and humanitarian transportation were not simply a matter of generosity or humanitarian concern. On the contrary, they formed part of practices aimed at containing migratory movements within South America to prevent the arrival of racialized migration at the U.S. border. As introduced earlier, gender-based violence played a crucial role in the guidelines of agencies such as PRM and USAID. In the following two sections, I show how the externalization of borders materialized through programs that, via GBV-focused interventions, facilitated movements southward and discouraged movements northward.

3. R(o)outing migration through intervention on gender-based violence in the South American Western Corridor

The South American Western Corridor was a form of repair work (Sciortino, 2004) in response to the destabilization of borders caused by the indomitable Venezuelan migration. A multiplicity of actors coordinated their efforts to regain border control in a region that had not faced a similar situation in a century. The humanitarian border, materialized in the form of a corridor, was the expert solution, orchestrated by security and "migrant and refugee crisis" management professionals such as the IOM and UNHCR. This novel strategy took the form of an externalization of the U.S. border, which operated through the government of mobility through mobility (Tazzioli, 2017). In other words, these control practices aimed not at blocking movement but rather at influencing its rhythms and directions to prevent people from reaching certain borders. However, this control strategy did not operate universally on the migrant population in general—as the humanitarian architecture focused, with some exceptions, on Venezuelan nationals—nor on the Venezuelan population in particular. Throughout this chapter, I show that gender-based violence

(particularly associated with women) was the cornerstone of the configuration of the South American Western Corridor. This control strategy is based on the narrative of GBV to justify exceptional measures, such as the transfer of migrants in an irregular situation. In this sense, the humanitarian government of mobility through mobility focuses on and prioritizes "women and children" as a strategy to accelerate the pace of migration in a population socially represented as "weak" and, therefore, "slow."

The prioritization of "women and children"— categorized as women survivors of GBV, at risk of GBV, pregnant women, single-parent families, or girls—was significant during the fieldwork. From Colombia's northern border to the northern border of Chile or Argentina, humanitarian workers made it clear that their most relevant services were directed toward that population. "Single men" were unlikely to receive anything more than a "kit" and legal or psychological assistance. Shelters, food cards, and humanitarian transportation were primarily allocated to women and children; men were included, though not always, if they were traveling "with their families." PRM guidelines presented in the previous section transcended formality and conditioned humanitarian practice throughout the region. To show how the corridor operates through interventions targeting feminized migrants, especially via the category of gender-based violence, I focus on three key points along the corridor. The first is the northern border area of Colombia along the route extending from Cúcuta, the crossing point with the highest number of entries from Venezuela, especially between 2018 and 2019. The second is the border crossing at Ipiales (Colombia), a mandatory passageway to the rest of the Andean corridor. And finally, the northern border of Chile, specifically the town of Iquique, which gained prominence as a destination and transit point for Venezuelan migrants beginning in late 2020.

"The protection route" in northern Colombia

In 2022, about ten kilometers from the Simón Bolívar International Bridge (Colombian-Venezuelan border), there was the main assistance point for "los caminantes" (the walkers), a term used to describe Venezuelan migrants traveling in precarious conditions. On a large plot of land beside the road, white tents and the famous UNHCR shelters (RHU) were visible from afar. In July of that year, I was able to visit the facilities and see the humanitarian services provided there: the distribution of food and hygiene kits, psychosocial support, legal assistance, lunch, shelter for one or two days, and humanitarian transportation. The latter service caught my attention. Humanitarian transportation was a "sector," a specific service of the R4V Platform, similar to shelter, protection, or health. According to the IOM Regional Director, this type of program was specific to South America, "a particular response that has been developed in our region."[4] Humanitarian transportation was officially defined as "border-to-border transportation" whose "primary objective" was "protection, including the mitigation of risks of trafficking and smuggling of persons and GBV, particularly women, girls, and persons of diverse gender identities and sexual orientations." The program's other objectives were to facilitate the "integration" processes of these populations—that is, transporting people southward and rooting them in their new communities through integration. In short, routing and rooting.

In an elegant office located in a mall in Cúcuta, a regional representative of the IOM explained to me that there were agreements between different members of the R4V Platform and Border Management to transport people. Border Management had told them that they could not do so on a large scale, "so we prioritize the most vulnerable profiles and those who need protection."

[4] "Humanitarian Transport as a Response & Its Impact on Mitigating Human Trafficking Risks," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zfh84EwJCgQ

Emphasizing the complexity of transporting irregular migrants, the IOM official stated that "an exception is made to the law, justifying it on the basis of needs and risks." In this regard, field workers from this organization explained to me that they had observed that it was not simply a matter of assisting those who were on the move, but rather of addressing "the specific protection needs we have identified, such as gender-based violence." In this way, the identification of "protection needs" such as GBV becomes part of a broader assemblage that, as Clavijo (2025) argues, ties together need, protection, and control, legitimizing intervention upon mobile populations while depoliticizing the conditions that produce their vulnerability.

Humanitarian transportation focused on the "protection" and "risk mitigation" of trafficking and GBV. However, at that particular humanitarian aid point, close to the border, GBV became more central, as the transportation program had been designed and implemented by a Colombian feminist organization. Since 2018, the Fundación Mujer y Futuro (Women and Future Foundation) has been responsible for transporting women and children in precarious conditions from the northern region to the rest of the country. One of the most common destinations was Ipiales, on the border with Ecuador. The representative of the organization explained to me that the impulse for creating this program had been the "total lack of knowledge" among women regarding the route, the distances, and the "protection risks" involved in transit. Although transporting these women to their destinations was an effective form of "protection," it did not solve the problem of lack of knowledge. For this reason, the organization introduced a training session into the transportation program to teach women about "violence against women, risk mitigation, rights, how to plan their journey, if they had one, and what route to take."

I had the opportunity to participate in that program. In July 2022, early in the morning, I went to the humanitarian aid point and took the bus with the rest of the migrants. The journey was

organized according to a logic of encapsulation (Lindquist, 2018; Xiang, 2013), with the aim of "mitigating protection risks." The organization had instructed the bus drivers that we were not allowed to get off the bus (although we did anyway). Once we arrived at the location where the training session was to take place, we were also told that we were not allowed to know or share our location with other people. The day was structured around games that, in a somewhat childish manner, sought to teach definitions of gender-based violence, the use of a graph called a "violence meter," human trafficking, basic geographical concepts, and the immigration regularization mechanisms available in Colombia. The main activity of the program consisted of separating men and women to provide each group with specific information. Women were instructed to recognize "protection risks" (including sexual violence, kidnapping, human trafficking, and road accidents, among others) and the "mechanisms" to avoid these risks (not hitchhiking, not accepting food or drinks from strangers, and not separating from children). A set of practices grounded in what Clavijo (2026) calls the "didactics of control" were articulated to deploy more affable modes of governance over mobile populations.

The representation of women as those who do not know is an operation that allows their innocence to be claimed. As Ticktin (2017) has shown, not knowing has built the moral category of innocence— that is, a conceptual apparatus that allows for the classification and hierarchization of deserving populations because they are perceived as beyond political corruption. In this apolitical realm, humanitarianism is also found. This mode of governance is based on innocence as a political category that orders its practices. Even when it is not its own and exceeds it, this moral category remains central to the delimitation of deserving populations through the intersection of suffering and innocence. At the same time, humanitarianism reinforces its apolitical place by imbuing itself with the purity of the subjects it assists. The relationships established in the humanitarian field

through the notion of innocence institute two mutually constitutive subjects: the innocent, pathetic, and docile, and the one who cares for the innocent—the saviour (Ticktin, 2017). In this regard, the representative of the Foundation explained to me that "the gender approach gives us the expertise to identify this or that [the risks of protection]." The knowledge economy involved in this category justifies the exercise of power and guardianship over subalternized populations. Their position as gender experts places them above the ignorant women travelers who cannot identify the potential harm to which they expose themselves when they migrate. In this context, the claim of innocence is not simply a paternalistic view resulting from participation in the humanitarian field. On the contrary, it is a necessary condition for entry and assistance. Without an innocent and suffering subject to save, there can be no humanitarianism.

"*Transnational management of GBV cases": from Colombia to Peru*

In the city of Ipiales, in southern Colombia, a GBV and mental health specialist from the NGO HIAS welcomed me to her office in July 2022. While describing the various projects carried out by the organization, she mentioned one that particularly caught my attention: "cross-border case management." "Case management" referred to the neoliberal and depoliticizing instrument used within the cooperation framework, which consisted of addressing GBV on the basis of individual cases and referring them to humanitarian assistance and the state apparatus. However, there was a dissonance between the temporary nature of migratory transits and the lengthy bureaucratization of GBV responses. In this context, HIAS was developing a protocol for "people in transit who identified themselves as at risk of GBV." The coordination was carried out between the different HIAS offices in Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru. The corresponding offices circulated information about the case and the specific needs of the person and coordinated transportation. In the case of Colombia, transportation was provided to the border at Rumichaca, where the person

was left. On the other side, in the city of Tulcán, someone was waiting for the assisted person, who would then be admitted to shelters and have their next destination arranged.

As with the Mujer y Futuro Organization, this program was accompanied by "informative talks" developed with a "specific methodology": "It's all about raising awareness of GBV. They are usually given tips on how to deal with economic, psychological, and sexual violence, and some protective measures are provided: safe routes, minimizing risks, and places to go if there is chaos of that kind." I asked her again what "safe routes" meant, and she explained that it involved discouraging them from walking, especially along the roadside, walking at night, "mulear" (jumping into trucks), and instead encouraging them to look for humanitarian points to continue on their way.

I would like to return to the subject of this program: "people in transit who identified themselves as being at risk of GBV." The notion of "risk of GBV" was extremely significant for understanding how this category operated in the field. During the interview, I asked the HIAS worker again what the organization understood by this concept. Her response highlighted the potential of this category to intervene with feminized migrants. She stated that there were "elements that increase the risk," such as being a sex worker, having a history of violent relationships, having a partner who uses psychoactive substances or alcohol, being a woman traveling alone, being a pregnant woman traveling, or being a single mother. The notion of "risk" allowed the category of GBV to be expanded beyond specific cases of women who had experienced some form of violence. Potentially, most women could qualify under these criteria. However, this does not mean that this program has had a wide reach, unlike the Mujer y Futuro program or others carried out in different parts of the corridor. Beyond its scope, this type of program captures the logic of action in the

Western Corridor, which was based on the expansion of a narrative that represents feminized migrants as dangerous due to their displacement.

Disputing vulnerability in northern Chile: victims of gender-based violence or sick children first?

Since 2020, with borders closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Chile has become a destination for thousands of migrants, especially Venezuelans who had already migrated to Peru. The sudden presence of migrants in extremely precarious situations in public spaces sparked a xenophobic outbreak in the northern city of Iquique. In response, the Chilean government set up a camp for migrants, called the Dispositivo Transitorio "Lobito," to relocate people living on the streets. The camp was located in a desert area between an arid dune and the cliff above a small beach, practically disconnected from the city. This space concentrated the delivery of humanitarian aid, coordinated with most of the city's NGOs.

During the month of November 2023, I visited the Lobito camp on a daily basis. The "priority criteria" for entering the camp were relatively flexible, as long as space was available. Otherwise, men without families were turned away. However, these criteria did apply when it came to the distribution of other types of humanitarian aid. The Lobito camp operated as a distribution centre for migrants to other parts of the country (according to their wishes) through humanitarian transportation. There was also rental assistance for those who settled in the city of Iquique, as well as the distribution of food cards. Regarding this assistance, the prioritization criteria operated as they did throughout the corridor: women and children first, while men without families were excluded.

My arrival coincided with that of a group of migrants who had been transferred from the Pisiga (Bolivia)-Colchane (Chile) border. Among the approximately 60 people who arrived, I met Carlos,

a man in his 40s and the father of a large family. I also met Denycsa, the head of a family, who was traveling with her partner. Like most of the people in the camp, they were extremely anxious to leave and reach their final destinations. Humanitarian aid was their only way out. In my first long conversation with Carlos, he shared his desperation to leave the arid climate. His daughters, who were traveling with him, had given birth less than a month earlier, and the babies had respiratory problems. During that conversation, Carlos recounted his family's life as if he were listing his "vulnerability criteria": his son had been sexually abused, he had a physical disability, his grandchildren were sick, and they had fled persecution by Colombian guerrillas. The PRM's guidelines seemed to capillarize into Carlos's speech, shaping it to fit the performance of vulnerability required to receive assistance.

Denycsa also told me about her experience of suffering. A few years ago, in Chile, she had escaped a violent relationship and taken refuge in a shelter for women survivors. Some time later, she went in search of her sons, who had been left behind in Venezuela and Colombia. One of them, a teenager, was also experiencing an extremely violent relationship. While in the camp, her son told me, an argument broke out between Denycsa and her partner. It had been a heated fight: he had insulted her and her children and taken some of her belongings. In the days following the fight, her ex-partner had harassed her with messages on her cell phone. "My mom was explaining her situation, because she's also speaking out because she can't go on like this and she's not going to be okay here (...) Mom wants to leave because she doesn't feel safe. We don't sleep safely either, we can't eat in peace," her son explained to me.

The day after that conversation, there was a commotion in the camp when Denycsa and her family were transferred to a hotel in downtown Iquique, where they were waiting for plane tickets to fly to the south of the country. Carlos was overcome with indignation. He explained that he had been

waiting for two weeks for his family to be taken out of the camp and moved to a hotel for the sake of his grandchildren's health. "I've been crying for two weeks," he said, "but it seemed that no one cared." According to him, the humanitarian workers had said they were going to remove them, but nothing had happened. Worse still, they had been told that day that the humanitarian workers would be away the following week, so they would have to wait at least ten more days. He did not understand how what he considered a couple's fight was a valid reason for them to be transferred. Carlos repeated incessantly that his children "are worthless" and that "the priority is not the children, the priority is the adults." He wondered if they would take them out "when the children are almost dying."

Through these three cases, I have sought to show that humanitarian interventions addressing gender-based violence are the cornerstone of a migration control strategy implemented in the form of a corridor. These actions have improved migration conditions for many women. The fact that innovative humanitarian transportation programs have managed to overcome accusations of transferring people in irregular migratory situations in the name of gender-based violence is a significant development that highlights the capacity of nation-states to dismantle their own criminalizing categories. At the same time, the international circulation of concern about gender-based violence has made it possible to highlight the existence of patriarchal structures and to rethink the social production of femininity and masculinity. However, it is necessary to reflect on the unintended effects of using feminist principles and ideals for control purposes (Halley et al., 2018). The title of this essay, "In the Name of Gender-Based Violence," is inspired by the work of Farris (2017) who, like Ticktin (2008, 2011a, 2011b) and Abu Lughod (2015), has critically analysed salvationist discourses about Third World women to show the unintended effects of policies based on feminist good intentions. In this context, I argue that gender-based violence has

contributed to justifying practices of border externalization based on racist practices of nationality production.

Evoking gender-based violence, "risks," and "dangers" when discussing migrant women contributes to consolidating racialized representations of womanhood. In this sense, the interventions in the first two cases, based on the representation of women as ignorant, reproduce the structural conditions of submission while simultaneously hierarchizing "whitewashed" women who administer the funds of the "rich countries of the North." As Espinosa Miñoso (2021) has shown, gender governance constitutes a modern project and, as such, is racist, rooted in the notion of development as a linear and evolutionary process. This framework constructs the fiction of the past of white Western femininity as marked by male oppression— represented as docile and weak—in contrast to a present marked by "liberation," "empowerment," and "gender equality." As a corollary, racialized and subalternized femininities, which were not previously intelligible as gendered subjects (Lugones, 2008), are integrated by assigning their practices to the remote past of white Western femininity—that is, as women oppressed and subjugated by archaic men from their own group (Mohanty, 2008).

4. "Desist from transit": GBV as a deterrent to transit migration

On June 8, 2022, we arrived at the bus terminal in Medellín. There, we went to the information stand to ask about the companies traveling to the Gulf of Urabá. Next to the stand, a poster caught my attention: "Network: #Free Wifi IOM." With explanations in French and Creole, it invited us to join the free network of the International Organization for Migration after sharing "brief information about your current life and the people you are traveling with." In the rush to get tickets, we continued on to the sales stands. After checking prices and timetables and getting the tickets,

there was a long wait. As the hours went by, we realized that we were not the only ones waiting to head for the Gulf of Urabá. Migrants ready to set off on the journey through the Darién Gap, carrying backpacks of international aid and insulating mats, filled the waiting rooms.

After walking around the terminal making observations, somewhere between boredom and tiredness, we sat down to wait on the floor, as many others were doing given the shortage of seats. Out of both curiosity and necessity, I remembered the Wi-Fi network offered by IOM and started the connection process. I say process because it was neither simple nor immediate. After a few glitches and providing an email address, I was able to access the survey, which, among numerous questions, asked for the number of people classified by sex and age, the relationship between them, whether there were pregnant or lactating women, the reasons for displacement, and the "main risks and difficulties" encountered on the journey. These included categories such as sexual violence, family violence, physical violence, and violence or exploitation of children and adolescents, among other issues.

At the end of the survey, there was one more step before accessing the Wi-Fi: watching an animated video. A female voiceover narrated the video, which featured a dark-skinned woman against a jungle background and images of threatening men. The voice said, "We all have the right to a life without violence, a life in peace, wherever we are. So, if they intimidate you, hit you, ridicule you, bite you, threaten to hurt you, push you, belittle your abilities or stop you from leaving the trip [te impede abandonar el viaje], call and ask for help at these helplines... Because on your journey through Colombia, you are not alone, and you have the right to receive assistance and protection." Once the video finished, the network connected and gave other video options to watch—one on economic violence and another on sexual violence. Both followed the same scheme

and aesthetic as the first, representing the practices associated with these forms of violence in a jungle setting.

During the pandemic, there was a significant increase in migrants—mainly Haitians, but also people of other nationalities—who, in order to reach the United States, crossed the jungle region of the Darién Gap. Meanwhile, in recent years, in a context of continuous political and economic instability in South America and new announcements in U.S. border policy, there has been historic growth in South American migrants—especially Venezuelans, but also Ecuadorians and Colombians—heading north overland through the Darién.

We headed toward Necoclí. This town had become the border area with the highest concentration of migrants. Although it was not close to the border line, it was the place where migrants waited, prepared, and planned their entry into the jungle. Arrival at the border line was mediated by access to maritime transport to the town of Capurganá.

The arrival of the mass migration of Venezuelans (another relevant nationality was Ecuadorian; however, the overrepresentation of Venezuelans attracted the most attention) had transformed the landscape in the town due to the presence of groups and families in situations of economic precariousness who, unable to pay for tickets immediately, had to wait for days in Necoclí. On the other hand, Haitians, Chinese, Indians, Uzbeks, and people from the hundreds of nationalities that congregated in Necoclí often had the resources to stay in local hotels and pay for their tickets to Capurganá immediately.

In the beach area, especially near where the boats set sail, a series of makeshift tents and shops could be seen. This was where the daily life of groups and families unfolded as they continued saving money to be able to continue their journey. Clothes hanging out to dry, cooking fires,

children playing, and young people chatting made up the migration scene in Necoclí. As part of the "response strategy," humanitarian aid organizations had concentrated their intervention in that locality and in the beach area in particular. Next to the departure point for the boats, there was a Red Cross tent, and throughout the day, especially when the boats were leaving, humanitarian workers could be seen chatting with people, handing out water purification tablets. or simply observing the situation.

4.a. "Are you sure?": The reconfiguration of humanitarian assistance to GBV

The jungle area encompassed by the Darién region became a space of singular attention for the actors involved in the migration and border regime. That "tapón," which had kept South America relatively disconnected from Central and North America, was beginning to crack. This region had a social complexity that converged in the construction of a complex web of representations. On the Colombian side, the area was controlled by a cartel and paramilitary group known as the Gulf Clan. Toward the "interior" of the jungle, there was also the presence of Indigenous groups recognized as having "ancestral territory." These dimensions converged in the spectacularization of the region and in the instrumentalization of these facts for the purposes of migratory control. One of the interviewees, a regional representative of IOM, described it as "absolutely wild." He considered that there were a series of "risks" that transcended its geographical uniqueness, such as the violence derived from the Colombian armed conflict, the territorial control by "indigenous" people and their community councils, and drug trafficking.

In this context, GBV, especially sexual violence, has occupied an extremely significant place, both in social representations and in the experiences of those who undertake journeys from South America to the United States. "El Darién is another epicenter of sexual violence: the highest figure

since 2021 was recorded"; "Migration crisis: 16 women are raped per day in the Darién jungle"; "Crimes against migrants in the Darién Gap, including sexual violence, are not investigated or punished"—these are some of the news headlines published by the press that reflect the prominent place that sexual violence has acquired in the media. Similarly, it has become an object of intervention for international organizations, as can be seen in the "pedagogical" videos described by the IOM official regarding free Wi-Fi networks. A similar level of importance was given by HIAS and UNICEF in their reports on the Urabá region. The former stated that "information and guidance should focus especially on gender-based violence and women's rights and improve the ability of survivors to seek help," while the latter identified as key "risks and needs" in Turbo, Necoclí, Acandí, and Apartadó the "high rates of sexual and gender-based violence, including sexual exploitation."

Gender-based and sexual violence are constituent elements in the feminization process of illegalized migrant populations and are transversal in the expansion of humanitarian intervention in the region. However, I identify a specific element in this context that reveals the logic of control involved in the production of the corridor and the deterrence of mobility. Returning to the video about GBV involved in the Wi-Fi connection, the phrase "[if] they prevent you from leaving the trip, call and ask for help on these helplines" is particularly noteworthy. Even though this type of problem usually appears in reports on human trafficking, throughout interviews and documentary review linked to movements to the south there is no mention of, or intervention regarding, the desire or impossibility of "abandoning the trip." On the contrary, when it came to movements in a southerly direction—as shown in the previous section—the "response" to GBV was articulated with the aim of facilitating and favouring the transit of feminized migrants.

The idea of "abandoning the journey" takes on a distinctive place in the humanitarian narrative about journeys north. This can be seen in the results of a survey carried out in Necoclí by the Interagency Group on Mixed Migratory Flows (GIFMM) in Colombia. They concluded that "there is a strong reluctance to give up transit, even if humanitarian transportation were offered to return to Venezuela, if conditions improved in this country, or if they were offered an employment opportunity in Colombia." Even though the concern about deterring mobility is not exclusive to feminized migrants, it is particularly linked to them through the production of gendered representations of mobility. In this sense, a psychologist belonging to an international NGO that provided assistance in Necoclí mentioned this point when asked about the gender issues identified in her experience in the locality:

Generally, when you do the tours, you see many families, couples and children, and groups of men. Sometimes you see that the woman is migrating because her partner wants to migrate. The man has decided that he is going to migrate and the woman sees that she has four children, she is going to be left alone and decides to migrate too. When this happens, in a very subtle way, I try to talk to the person, not to persuade them, but so that they know that they can come to this center.

In line with her remarks, a report launched in March 2023 by GIFMM Colombia entitled "*Protection Risks on the Urabá-Darién Route*" mentioned, as part of the "gaps identified" in terms of "GBV prevention, mitigation, and response," the lack of "temporary accommodation for GBV survivors with high levels of vulnerability and risk, including women who find themselves on the beach, who give up on continuing along the route or who decide to request international protection." In this sense, as part of the production of migrant "femininity," representations are generated that subtly link the strength of female migration to male oppression. In this way, traditional representations are sedimented that place men in the position of mobile subjects and

women as those tied to the mobility processes of their partners. Considered "naturally" sedentary, the mobility of feminized migrants is constructed as problematic and, as such, becomes an object of humanitarian intervention. From this perspective, I understand that the production of narratives that justify control in the name of feminized migrants reproduces patriarchal and racist logics, albeit in differentiated ways according to the process of externalization existing in the region.

4.b. Prioritization as Deterrence: The Humanitarian Response to GBV in Necoclí

On June 13th, in Necoclí, we met up with Charlotte, Raúl, and Enrique, migrants with whom we had established a bond in the previous days. Raúl and Enrique were traveling together, while Charlotte was traveling with her boyfriend's family. They were all in "beach condition," that is, sleeping in tents in the area where the boats set sail. When we found them, they were sitting on the curb, chatting. When I greeted them, I noticed that Charlotte's eyes were puffy, but when I asked her if she was okay, she avoided answering. We continued chatting about other matters. When it was time to leave, Raúl came over and told us that, after a fight with her boyfriend, the family had thrown her out of the tent, forbidding her to return to the tent area and leaving her completely on the street. Faced with this, we decided to consult the two organizations that we knew had physical premises and that we knew of at the time. At the Migrant Support and Guidance Point—funded by UNHCR and managed by the Apartadó Social Ministry—we were told that they only provided legal advice. For their part, the Red Cross explained that they did not have any kind of program that would allow them to help in this case. In the end, we were unable to find any kind of assistance. That night, Charlotte made up with her boyfriend and was able to return to the tent.

As I made my way along the corridor, passing the many humanitarian aid sites, I identified a stark contrast in the way GBV and sexual violence were addressed when it came to journeys north versus

journeys south. This raised the question of why, despite the intention to standardize the "humanitarian response" in the region, GBV assistance was not articulated in the same way in the Gulf of Urabá as in the rest of Colombia and South America. In this sense, while there were multiple shelters and humanitarian transportation programs that prioritized, or were mainly aimed at, "protection profiles," including women victims of GBV, in the town of Necoclí the "response" was limited to psychosocial care, mental health support, and the activation of the institutional protection route. This dynamic was experienced by humanitarian workers from an international NGO in terms of "frustration":

The fact that a person arrives here, for example, a woman, and tells you a heart-rending story about something that happened to her on the beaches and you start to think, what can you do in this case? (...) Then you think, "well, as an organization, at the moment I don't have the resources to help this person". So you communicate and ask (...) "I need resources for something else, is it possible?" First question, if we are going to give them a monetary transfer, "is this a person with a vocation for permanence or is this a person in transit?" Oh, no, the most likely thing is that this person, when they leave your office tomorrow, the day after tomorrow, will continue their transit despite what they have just experienced. Then, we don't have time to respond with a monetary transfer. You start to come up against all these obstacles, all that is what we call obstacles. In the end, that person leaves, you didn't do anything, yes, and of course they are still a victim and that happens with all the needs, with all the specific needs for protection. A family arrives, maybe a father with a woman and two, three, four, five children, "we have nowhere to sleep or we have nothing to eat" and you can't answer them, right? Because you know that nobody, no institution, neither the State, nor cooperation, nor any local organization, has an active service in the shelter, nor food. This is the situation that one has to face on a daily basis.

It is significant that, in the case of the ideal subjects of humanitarianism—the "good victims" embodied in the "protection profiles"—the intervention deployed has been so limited. Far from offering a technical critique or proposing the correct unification of the "humanitarian response" as a desirable outcome, I understand that the differentiated ways in which the logics of prioritization and response to GBV operate are part of the mechanisms used to dissuade mobility toward the north, while simultaneously allowing us to understand the channelling of populations moving toward the south. Within this framework, the response to GBV in the South American Western Corridor, under the guise of quasi-feminist "politicization," conceals its use as "part of broader nationalist and imperial projects." The process of borderization in South America is thus vectorized through the language of sexual and gender-based violence (Ticktin, 2008).

4.b.a. A place of passage: erasing GBV from prioritization criteria

The austerity and limitations of the humanitarian response was a controversial issue for state officials and international cooperation agencies. Of particular concern was the presence of women and children in "beach situations." The aforementioned report on "Protection Risks" by GIFMM Colombia stated that one of the problems in the region was the absence of "temporary accommodation for GBV survivors." However, this category—overwhelmingly present in other contexts—gradually disappeared as the "place of passage" [lugar de paso– temporary place] project was explained to me.

There was controversy surrounding the idea of a "shelter," and questions in the interviews about the possibility of its installation gave rise to a climate of secrecy, confidentiality, and unease. Let us remember that along the Western Corridor there were multiple "shelter" strategies, ranging from tourist hotels leased to migrants to the classic image of camps composed of RHUs. From the outset,

the name of the space revealed the existence of disputes, negotiations, and agreements about what that potential space should and should not be. In an interview, the municipal official in charge of the "Disaster Management" sector explained that, in response to the people in a "beach situation," they were considering the possibility of creating a "place of passage," In response, I asked if it was a shelter. "I wouldn't call it a shelter, because that would have other connotations for them, it would be like a place of passage where they can ... the priority will be given to mothers with children, or those who need priority assistance," he replied.

From international cooperation officials, I obtained similar responses when I asked whether they were considering the possibility of setting up a "refuge": "From experience, I say we don't call them a refuge. Let's call it a place of passage, not even a shelter." In another conversation, aware of the controversy surrounding the name, I mentioned that I had been told about the possibility of opening a space that was not a shelter but a ... The interviewee finished my question: "A temporary space for protection. Yes, that's right."

In an informal conversation, a female international cooperation official based in Necoclí explained to me that, if accommodation were to be provided, "super-strict and super-clear rules had to be put in place." Based on previous experiences, she considered that the conditions and parameters had to be "very clear": "you have to be very selective." In this sense, she pointed out that managing a place of passage required one to "think with one's head and not with one's heart"; otherwise, one would become sensitive to the situation of the many people who would come. In view of these restrictions, the official argued that it was necessary to institutionalize and implement a place of passage that was intended "exclusively for mothers with children under five or ten years of age." If these guidelines were not followed, it would become a "alcahuetería" place because "everyone will want to be there," which would exceed the capacity of the space. She reiterated that, under

those circumstances, the real priority was breastfeeding mothers, pregnant women, and children living on the street. Even so, she clarified that this did not mean that adults could not go hungry or be cold, but rather that they had a better chance of survival than children and vulnerable populations.

Were the prioritization practices based on "vulnerability criteria" or "protection profiles" simply about managing limited resources? Was it about being efficient? I consider that the stories surrounding the shelter show that the deployment of humanitarian aid and the prioritization criteria are ways of containing mobility. Efforts to restrict entry to a potential shelter are linked to a reflective exercise by officials regarding the attraction of populations through the establishment of assistance points. The contrast between Necoclí—the gateway to the north—and the rest of the corridor heading south shows that the establishment of each assistance point and each prioritization criterion has a desired effect on mobility practices. As the PAO official said, "facilitating the route is to encourage transit." In this sense, narrowing the prioritization criteria—leaving only the most innocent of the innocent—constitutes a strategy to dissuade mobility.

The senior official of an international organization located in the Gulf of Urabá explained that the issue of shelters was complex for him because one day there would be two hundred people, "but tomorrow there won't be two hundred, there will be six hundred," so there will never be enough shelters to cover the entire population. Along these lines, he explained that the responsibility of international organizations and cooperation agencies was to guarantee the well-being of people "in especially vulnerable situations," which did not include men (in the next chapter I analyse the relationship between masculinity and humanitarianism). The civil servant's concern regarding the installation of a shelter was that, the more "functional or friendly" the migratory point became, the greater the concentration of people would be. For that reason, he had told the priest of the church

who was promoting the possible installation of the shelter, “don’t set it up.” Given this confidence, he recognized that he could be considered “a beast,” a bad person. However, faced with the many stories, experiences, and realities they knew, the concern that crossed their minds as an organization was to find the best way to “optimize resources” and ensure that migratory transit would “continue to be friendly” without favouring or stimulating it. He reiterated that the organization was not meant to stimulate migration, because “it is already sufficiently stimulated.” For that reason, there would never be a universal shelter, but rather shelters should be “of a transitory, temporary nature and with strict protocols for entry, permanence and exit.”

The prioritization practices deployed in the name of the most vulnerable act as a supposed instrument for regulating migratory movement. Even though it is difficult to reliably demonstrate that “humanitarian aid” attracts a greater or lesser number of people, the narrative itself is significant in terms of the conviction and concern expressed by officials. In this sense, the belief that assistance points attract populations leads to concrete interventions in the field that seek to discourage movements toward the north. In this way, the installation of a “shelter” reveals the conflicts and negotiations that have taken place around the desire to control the migratory movement and the effects sought through the deployment of humanitarian aid. It is therefore relevant to observe how “prioritization” functions as an elastic and flexible principle that transforms across different contexts of mobility, expanding or constraining the scope of humanitarian assistance.

The logic of prioritization, based on the rhetoric of the nobility of good intentions and the alleviation of suffering, conceals its complementary opposite: letting people suffer. Ultimately, these organizations determine which subjects’ pain is tolerable and inconsequential. Prioritization practices, through moral narratives, structure the control practices deployed in that region with the

aim of containing migratory movement. The lability of the contours of innocence becomes visible in the selective alleviation of the suffering of single women or victims of violence, who are (de)hierarchized as subjects deserving of help. Suddenly, international cooperation, so committed to the "gender perspective," redefines its principles and removes from the equation those who are not so innocent or suffering.

5. Conclusions

The aim of this essay was to analyse the migration and border control practices that evoke gender-based violence as a category of intervention in migration movements from Venezuela between 2018 and 2023. To achieve this, I drew on ethnographic scenes produced along the Western Corridor of South America, in border areas such as Tulcán, Iquique, Norte de Santander, and Necoclí. I also enriched the analysis through document review, which allowed me to trace the international connections involved in the deployment of policies and control practices that evoke gender-based violence. Through this, I have argued that gender-based violence functioned as a category of political intervention that facilitated the externalization of borders in South America through a humanitarian architecture primarily funded by the U.S. government.

The externalization of the U.S. border in South America operated through financial mechanisms that sustained the deployment of this humanitarian architecture across the region. Programs financed by the U.S. were focused on feminized bodies, reflecting the gendering of U.S. foreign policy, which has positioned interventions against gender-based violence as a pillar of its global intervention. In this context, border externalization in South America materialized through the formation of a humanitarian border that took the form of a corridor. Within this configuration,

“women and children” became the symbolic and operational cornerstone of the deployment of this novel form of mobility control.

Within this framework, the essay explores how entrenched representations of femininity are rearticulated and recoded through “gender-sensitive” discourse. Thus, gender-based violence constitutes a new narrative that is, paradoxically, grounded in patriarchal representations of the mobility of feminised migrants. Throughout South America, a narrative portrays women’s mobility as inherently risky, both to themselves and to others, thereby legitimising practices of control and surveillance. However, these discourses are not homogeneous; they are evoked in different ways depending on the control logic operating in each ethnographic site.

Discourses of risk and protection, and interventions carried out in the name of gender-based violence, operate in two distinct ways. On the one hand, the humanitarian architecture of the corridor subtly institutionalized movement: it channelled it, set its rhythm, and contributed to rooting errant populations in South American countries. It is precisely the narrative of risk that justifies the deployment of humanitarian infrastructure to facilitate the movement of these vulnerable profiles. On the other hand, when it comes to movements towards the north, a politics of emotions is deployed which, veiled in the idea of “informing,” operates by generating fear. In this context, the figure of “desist from transit,” or giving up the journey, emerges in relation to the mobility of feminized migrants. This framing contributes to the representation of women’s journeys to the north as manifestations of male oppression. Regardless of the context and strategy, feminized migrants are constantly represented as objects of violence. It is precisely this type of narrative, cloaked in good intentions and framed through a relatively feminist discourse, that reifies women as governable, dependent subjects, and ultimately restricts their freedom of movement.

Epilogue

This research began in 2021, at a time when humanitarianism was one of the main forms of mobility control shaping the South American migration and border regime. Simultaneously, the "gender perspective" had an extraordinary presence across the many agencies involved in migration and border control. The R4V Platform promoted actions on the ground, training spaces, seminars, and guidelines that placed gender at the center of "good practices" in migration governance. In 2021, gender issues held a privileged place at the South American Conference on Migration. In 2022, Chile mainstreamed gender within the National Migration Service. Driven by the unprecedented presence of this narrative, I began to reconstruct the history connecting migration governance with gender. Contradictions were present from the outset, when my pursuit of critical research collided with a political position that had deeply shaped me. How could I criticize the "gender perspective" and the political translation of feminist ideals if they were so precious to me?

The literature of great feminists, far from obstructing the search for critique guided me along the way. It was clear that I was not the first to pursue these inquiries in the field of migration, as discussed in the introduction to this paper. Decolonial, anti-racist, and autonomous feminists gave me the courage to interrogate the "gender perspective" and analyse its entanglement with surreptitious forms of mobility control that reproduce patterns of colonial domination. However, the hegemony I set out to critically analyze—produced by the expansion of humanitarianism and the institutionalization of gender within state institutions—seems to be crumbling. The expansion of new far-right movements and their arrival in multiple states across the Americas and around the world has largely eroded the power structures I have been studying in recent years. The

contradictions that emerged at the outset of my research now haunt me more than ever. Is this the worst possible moment to write this critique?

I wish these final reflections offered a definitive answer, but that is not the case. To paraphrase Joan Scott, I have only doubts to offer. Still, in this sea of uncertainty, horrified by the destructive power of the infamous new right, I would like to attempt a possible response. Contrary to my initial impulse to consider this the worst moment for such criticism, I ask myself: isn't this precisely the moment when we most need to hold on to it? I think, for instance, of the celebratory discourse that has circulated in recent months regarding USAID following its dismantling. Faced with an extremely violent and punitive immigration policy promoted by the Trump administration, progressive sectors now seem to embrace an institution that, in the name of protection and development, has long deployed U.S. imperial power in the "Global South."

By hiding or softening criticism, does the right not gain even more ground? Are we not ending up defending those institutions that, for years, we have shown to reproduce, concealed or explicitly, colonial and racist forms of power in our territories? If we know that international cooperation constitutes part of the externalization of borders by imperial states, will we now defend it because a more destructive model has appeared before us? Perhaps critical knowledge can serve as the compass that guides us and preserves the revolutionary and transformative power of feminisms. Perhaps then, when the infamous right collapses as an effect of its own contradictions and of collective struggles, we will not direct our energy toward defending or rebuilding those forms of power that have subjugated us. On the contrary, we may be able to mobilise our political imagination to build new worlds that reject racial, patriarchal, and nationalist domination from the ground up.

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