

Summary

Affective Cartographies

Migrant, displaced, and refugee
girls and adolescent girls in
Latin America and the Caribbean

“migrating is like being born again”



Summary. Emotional cartographies.

Migrant, displaced, and refugee girls and adolescents in Latin America and the Caribbean.

“Migrating is like being reborn”

Lead Author of the Regional Report

Jeannette Tineo Durán, Researcher

General concept, regional coordination and supervision by HIAS

Emma Puig de la Bellacasa, Senior Advisor Gender and GBV for Latin America and the Caribbean

UNICEF Regional Coordination and Supervision

Shelly Abdool, Regional Gender Advisor

Debla López, Gender and Migration Specialist

HIAS Coordination and research in the countries

Aruba Cinthia Quant and Vania Arendsz

Colombia Luisa Morales, Camilo Ramirez, and the Mental Health and Psychosocial Support Team in Barranquilla

Costa Rica Ingrid Maldonado and Gabriela Núñez

Ecuador Joseph Mejía, Ana Giraldo, Maricela Parra, Lorena Jácome, Child Protection, GBV and MHPSS teams from the HIAS Offices in Esmeraldas, Santo Domingo, Quito, Guayaquil, Machala, and Cuenca.

Guyana Karen Jardine and Brenda Lawrence

Mexico Berenice González Valencia, Cielo Vázquez, Diana Hurtado, Karla Flores Melgar, Luisa Rivera Sánchez, Uriel López Valadez, and Blanca Lomeli

Panama Alexandra Carrizo, Wendy Mow, Roberto Mera, Yazcari Murillo, Oriana Durán, Elisa Rivera, Francisca Avecilla, and Montserrat Miranda

Peru Alyssa Barzola, Andrea Ladrón de Guevara, Elizabeth Centeno, Elizabeth Montes, Enmanuel Linares, Gabriela Zumarán, Magaly Alejos, Laura Izquierdo, Rosa Recalde, Miluska Mas, and Brunela Carballido

Venezuela Dorennys Angulo, Delisbeth Villalobos, Angelica Sarmiento, Besty Mora, Estefania Reyes, Morelba Jiménez, and Teams in Caracas, San Cristóbal, and Maracaibo

Editing: Mónica Quintero

Coordination: Lucy Garrido CCVW

Summary: Cecilia Lucas Huget

Design and layout: gliphos

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Alberto Tejada St., Building 102, City of Knowledge Panama, Republic of Panama

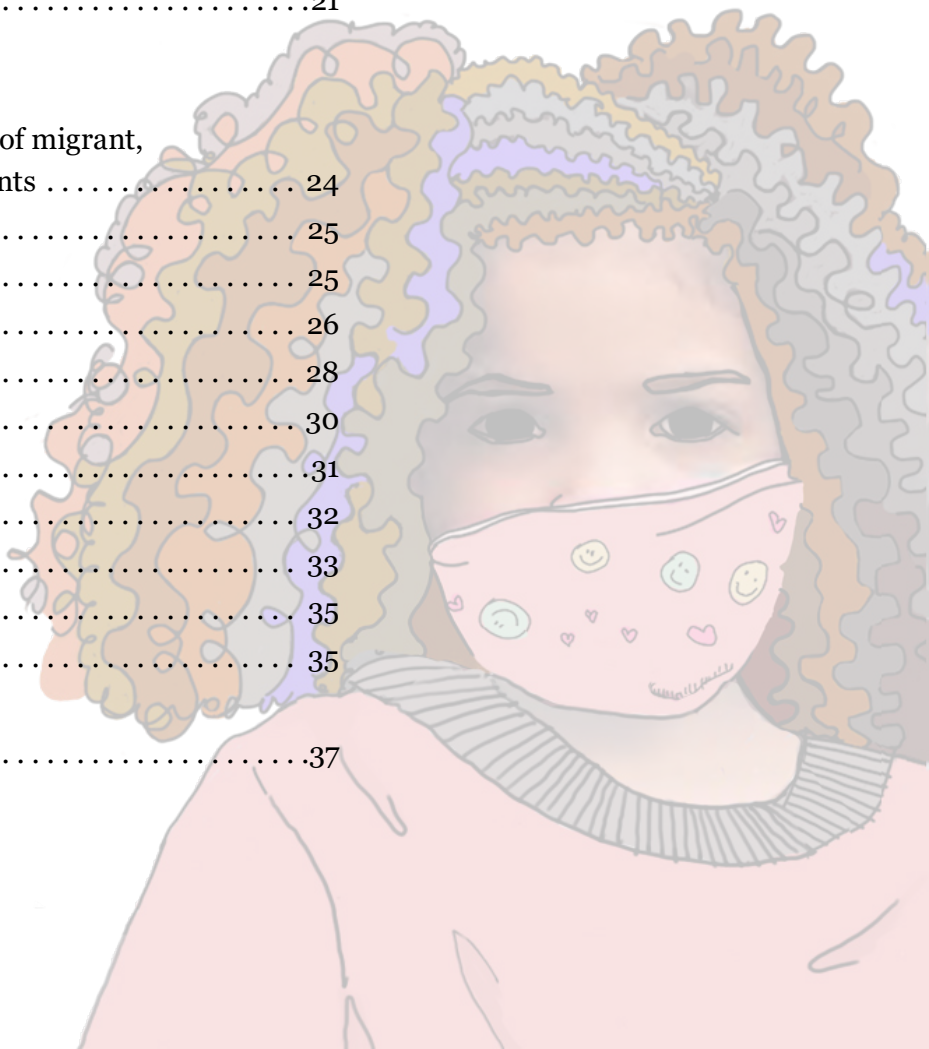
PO Box: 0843-03045

Tel.: +507 301 7400

www.unicef.org/lac

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1. Introduction

“I need to feel like my stuff matters”

This document presents the main results of the study **“Emotional Cartographies. Migrant, displaced, and refugee girls and adolescents in Latin America and the Caribbean”**.¹ The study was conducted between November 2020 and June 2021 by the international NGO HIAS and by the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF).

The objective of this work is to create awareness of the realities and opinions of migrant, displaced, and refugee girls and adolescents so that they are considered. In a concise and easily accessible way, it seeks to amplify their voices so that they are heard by those who decide on public policies (particularly migration policies), by social movements, and by organizations providing services to migrant populations in the region.

In their own words, **“no one cares about what we feel”** or **“there is nothing to be done because no one does anything.”** It is essential, therefore, to let them know (and feel) that their words, their stories, and their lives matter; that they have been heard; and that many institutions and people are taking action with and for them. This is the only way we can begin to reverse and repair the systematic exclusion these girls and adolescents suffer.

Context

Being a girl or adolescent is not easy. During this stage of life, they face multiple demands to access the adult world. Further, being a migrant girl or adolescent is even more complex; not only do they experience sociocultural and economic difficulties in this journey, but they are also subjected to uprooting when forced to leave their country against their will.

¹ The full study can be found at <<https://www.unicef.org/lac/en/node/11241>>.

According to UNICEF estimates, there are 6.3 million migrant children and adolescents in Latin America and the Caribbean. Nearly 100,000 unaccompanied children and adolescents were detained between 2015 and 2016 on the Mexican border. Around 30,000 were returned to the countries of the Northern Triangle of Central America (Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador).

Moreover, there is the humanitarian crisis in Venezuela, which considerably increased human mobility in the region. Of 5.4 million people who have migrated from that country, 25% are girls and boys (UNHCR), with girls suffering the most exposure to violence, discrimination, xenophobia, and labor and sexual exploitation (HIAS 2019).

This situation poses important challenges related to the response and coordination capacity of States to ensure that girls and adolescents are at the center of the migration policies of the countries.

Joint action

Both HIAS and UNICEF share the concern that migrant girls and adolescents, refugees, or victims of forced displacement play an insufficient role in the discussions held by governments in regional governance platforms that address and design migration policies.

There is an urgent need to give visibility to the multiple violence experienced by girls and adolescents on migratory routes, both at the origin and during displacement, as well as in the places of arrival and return. It is important to emphasize that the violation of rights and the lack of individual and collective protection are greater when girls or adolescents experience the following:

- ▶ *They are migrants or forcibly displaced **unaccompanied persons***
- ▶ ***They are pregnant or adolescent mothers***
- ▶ *They have experienced some form of **sexual abuse or violence***
- ▶ *They have been exposed to situations **of child, early, and forced marriage and union***

The study and its objectives

This diagnosis is a joint effort between HIAS and UNICEF to identify the main needs and challenges faced by girls and adolescents who are migrants or victims of forced displacement. The study established the following specific objectives:

- 1) Document the main concerns and needs of girls and adolescents in a situation of migration, while considering their age, gender, race/ethnicity, sexuality, nationality, and immigration status, among others.
- 2) Collect and analyze testimonies and experiences of these girls and adolescents, highlighting the violation of their rights and agency.
- 3) Identify the most common types of gender-based violence (GBV) and the protective and risk factors involved.
- 4) Point out the various forms of self-perception and resilient imagination that these girls and adolescents have.
- 5) Identify the impact of migration and forced displacement on the emotional health of girls and adolescents.
- 6) Prepare recommendations based on the demands of girls and adolescents to prompt a programmatic response, as well as actions in favor of gender equality, international protection, and migration.
- 7) Obtain inputs and evidence of the problems suffered by girls and adolescents, their worldviews, their interests, and their proposals, and disseminate them so that they are considered when designing and executing public policies from different intersectoral approaches.

The methodology and sampling

The result is a powerful qualitative and participatory study. The research included **393 migrant, displaced, and refugee girls and adolescents** in nine countries of the region (**Aruba, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Guyana, Mexico, Panama, Peru, and Venezuela**). In addition, the countries of origin of the participating girls and adolescents included **Colombia, Guatemala, El Salvador, Mexico, Nicaragua, and Venezuela**. The latter had the highest representation in the sample.

The research team consisted of highly-skilled professionals in the field of social sciences with training in psychology, law, and anthropology. The study included

72 group interviews —9 in each country studied— and 35 individual interviews.

In addition, the methodology included **participant observation** (eight cases currently followed by the HIAS team were analyzed), and **interviews with key actors**, with a focus on public policies. We also interviewed ten decision makers in the field of migration, support for refugees and humanitarian aid, and specialists in gender and childhood. Finally, there was **a group workshop** with HIAS **technical staff carrying out direct care and document review** (70 documents were analyzed by digital ethnography).

The starting point for the study was the available theoretical and practical knowledge, which allowed girls and adolescents to be identified as political actors, that is, as people capable of producing knowledge based on their actions and feelings. At the theoretical framework level, the research resorted to and discussed the following approaches: intersectional; gender-generational; intercultural; cross-border; and rights approach.

Brief description of the group of girls and adolescents participating in the study

- ▶ **The time of the forced migration or displacement:** this fluctuates between girls and adolescents who have been forced migrants or displaced persons for less than one year and those who have been so for eight or more. The largest group in the sample are those who have been migrants or displaced between one and two years.
- ▶ **Administrative situation:** 55% of the participants are in a regular situation or in the process of receiving refugee status, 32% said they did not have documents proving their migratory status or refugee status, and the rest stated that they did not know or ignored what their legal situation was.
- ▶ **Education:** the majority of girls and adolescents attend school (66%) or are in the process of regularizing their educational situation, while 34% do not currently attend any school. It is noteworthy that none of the respondents who are in a shelter receive formal education.
- ▶ **Housing:** the majority of girls and adolescents live in a house or a rented room with close relatives. In most cases, the high number of people

with whom they live stands out (between four and seven people). All the interviewees in Mexico are in shelters.

- ▶ **Ages:** two age groups were considered, consisting of girls between the ages of 7 and 9 and adolescents between the ages of 10 and 17. The group of adolescents was subdivided into three age groups: 10–11, 12–14, and 15–17.
- ▶ **Other variables considered in defining the participants:** degree of exposure to previous or continuous experiences of GBV; whether or not they were accompanied during the migratory or displacement process; types of migration (voluntary or forced; internal, international, pendular, or cross-border; irregular, regular, and labor; returnees, etc.); and different ethnic-racial origins, nationality, gender identity, sexual-affective orientation, among others.



2. Forced migrant and displaced childhood and adolescence

“The trip was a surprise, they never said anything to me, I didn’t know how I was leaving or where we were going. My dad just told me to pick up a few things and put them in a bag. I had to leave my grandmother, my dog, I still miss them a lot, I don’t know what happened to my dog and at that time my grandmother died. I cried a lot for both of them.”

(Testimony of a girl/adolescent in an individual interview)²

The testimonies of girls and adolescents give an account of the injustices and violence experienced, both in the places of origin and during the crossing of borders and in the places of destination. To organize the main needs and concerns of migrant, displaced, and refugee girls and adolescents, the research team divided its approach into the following four key areas:

- ▶ **Individual**
- ▶ **Interpersonal**
- ▶ **Institutional**
- ▶ **Cross-border**

2.1 Individual level

- ▶ **Impact:** the migrant, displaced, and refugee girls and adolescents participating in the study suffer various psychosocial impacts —of varying degrees and intensity— related to structural violence and the migrant grieving process that have consequences on the development of their self-esteem.

2 For this summary, brief fragments were selected from the testimonies in the study “**Emotional Cartographies. Migrant, Displaced, and Refugee Girls and Adolescents in Latin America and the Caribbean**”.



“I have kept to myself the fear that I have felt traveling, leaving the house, without knowing where I was going.”

(Testimony of a girl/adolescent in a group interview)

- ▶ **Grieving:** nostalgia, fear, restlessness, loneliness, confusion, helplessness, frustration, and learned helplessness are the most significant characteristics of migratory grief present in the girls and adolescents participating in the study.

“I dream of standing up and seeing them all sitting down drinking coffee.” *(Testimony of a girl/adolescent in a group interview)*

- ▶ **Alone and in silence:** they do not talk about their psychophysical ailments. They do not have a trusted person who listens to them or with whom they feel safe to report or react when they suffer situations of abuse or harassment, inside or outside their home.

“I was alone all the time, I didn’t talk to anyone, I didn’t want to talk to anyone because I always thought they were going to make fun of me. I isolated myself.” *(Testimony of a girl/adolescent in a group interview)*

- ▶ **My body, my territory?** Girls and adolescents lack knowledge of their own bodies and their sexuality. Girls between the ages of 7 and 9 consider them “adult” topics and prefer not to comment on them. They are embarrassed

MIGRATORY GRIEF

- ▶ The notion of migratory grief is used in the psychosocial field to identify the process of uprooting, suffering, and disconnection experienced by migrants regardless of the type of migration they undertake.
- ▶ Wounds are opened by the absence or loss of places, people, animals, objects, or things.
- ▶ Migratory grief has common characteristics with any loss; however, its repetitive nature is specific to the migratory experience.
- ▶ It is an open process that affects one’s relationship with the environment, fragmenting memory into a “here” where they arrive and a “there” that they miss.

STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE

- ▶ Structural violence relies on explicit and implicit mechanisms or principles that privilege one social group over another based on traits such as age, gender, class, ethnicity-race, and nationality, among others.
- ▶ This violence is organized and sustained by discourses and practices of an individual, interrelated, and institutional nature, which prevent subordinate and/or oppressed people from satisfying their basic needs.
- ▶ Structural violence takes various forms: it can be direct and visible or indirect and invisible.



or afraid to ask or give their opinion on the issue. Further, adolescents state that they only find answers to their doubts or concerns regarding sexuality and reproduction on social networks and with their best friends. Many of them become aware that they are treated as sexual objects because of the harassment they experience inside and outside their homes. Most of the messages they receive — which are authoritative and violent— warn them not to get pregnant or have sex.

“We need more talks or information at school about how to take care of our body, about not being afraid. There are girls who want to talk about something that happened to them, and they don’t do it because people won’t believe them, so the person who hurt them then hurts others even more.” (Testimony of a girl/adolescent in a group interview)

- ▶ **Body image:** most of the girls/adolescents expressed insecurities regarding their body image related to stereotypes of beauty linked to fat phobia. In particular, the indigenous and Afro-descendant girls and adolescents consulted have a greater feeling of rejection associated to their body image and the ideals of white-mestizo beauty that prevail in their environments.

“I need to go for a walk or a stroll and not be called a fat cow.” (Testimony of a girl/adolescent in a group interview)

- ▶ **Use of time:** the rhythm of their lives is marked by many responsibilities and little space for play and leisure. Work, care, and school take up most of the

time of the interviewees. Most of the adolescents that participated in the study emphasized that they perform a wide variety of care activities.

***“My time is not my own.”** (Testimony of a girl/adolescent in a group interview)*

- **Childhood and adolescence:** many of the adolescents interviewed started migrating when they were children. During the journey, they went from being girls to being considered women or adult adolescents. As they get older, they experience higher demands as caregivers and their needs are not heard, even in contexts of constant harassment. As a result, their perception of freedom is very limited.

The most pleasant thing about being a girl is receiving attention, support, and signs of affection every day. However, migrant adolescents complain that as they get older, they stop receiving attention and the physical signs of affection, and their needs are ignored.

***“I am neither old enough to make decisions, nor young enough to be looked after.”** (13-Year-old adolescent. Individual interview, January 13, 2021)*

THEIR PERCEPTIONS OF BEING A GIRL AND AN ADOLESCENT

1. ***“They tell me I have to do the house chores because I am the girl. My brothers don’t have to, and they’re older than I am.”***
2. ***“The differences with boys bothers me. They can do sports and go out on the street. I can’t.”***
3. ***“You have to avoid people putting their hands on you (...) Be responsible with your body.”***
4. ***“I don’t like that we have to stop playing with dolls.”***
5. ***“The most unpleasant part is all the changes, like menstruation, zits, and lots of emotions at the same time.”***

- **The imposition of forced migration and displacement:** migration and/or forced displacement for girls and adolescents, except for unaccompanied girls, is an experience that takes them by surprise and over which they have little decision-making power.

“Migrating is like losing everything [...] it’s like being reborn.” (Testimony, 11-year-old girl/adolescent)

MEANINGS OF BEING A MIGRANT, DISPLACED, AND A REFUGEE

WHAT YOU LIKE MOST/ ADVANTAGES

- Meeting different people.
- That people are interested in my culture.
- Learning new stories about a place.
- Reuniting with my family.
- Food and music.
- Traveling and seeing new places.

WHAT YOU DISLIKE/ DISADVANTAGES

- Not having the same opportunities as nationals.
- Feeling strange all the time.
- The limitations placed by academic institutions to study if you are a foreigner (there are no scholarships, leveling, etc.).
- The legal situation, not having documents. When you are of legal age, the terms to access education change. There is deportation, etc.
- Getting separated from family (grandmothers, cousins, etc.), friends, and pets.
- Not having my own room.
- Not having any friends.
- Being bullied on the street and at school.
- The difficulty of adapting to another culture that is not your own.
- The complexity of adapting to a school system with other standards other than those of the country of origin.
- Abandoning everything you had at home (food, language, friends, objects, etc.).
- The constant rejection for being from another country.
- The get-togethers and meetings that friends have at home and not being able to be there with them.



- **Their fears, their terrors:** they live with the terror of being sexually assaulted by strangers, neighbors, or relatives, both in the country of origin and when crossing the border or in places of temporary or permanent residence. Girls are very familiar with serious or extreme situations of violence. Some, due to their economic precariousness, fear sexual exploitation (from their perspective, the exchange of sex for survival is experienced as a concrete fear). Many of the unaccompanied adolescent girls living in shelters have a great fear of being deported.

It is important to emphasize that some adolescents who are pregnant or have children fear that the State will take their children away because they are in the country illegally. For this reason, many times they do not go to health centers and are exposed to unsafe childbirth.

Due to bureaucratic barriers in education systems, they fear that they will not be able to complete their studies, especially after they turn 18. They also fear being kidnapped, attacked, or getting lost during the journey. Finally, they experience the fear of not being able to create lasting friendships in the country of arrival, something crucial for personal fulfillment.

“Migrating was a bit hard for me because I was 6 months pregnant. I worked for a few days on a farm where I gave birth with a midwife. It was not in a hospital. That is why my son is not registered. I thought they weren’t going to believe me, they were going to say, ‘Oh, this one is here irregularly and now she gave birth!’ Well, until I made the decision, because if I hadn’t, they would take the child away from me.” (Testimony, 15-year-old adolescent)

- **Expectations, dreams, and achievements:** despite the harshness of the migratory experience or forced displacement, girls and adolescents overcome the challenges and continue their routes, and they perceive the migratory project as the possibility of improving the living conditions of their families in the country of origin. At the same time, they do not lack the astuteness and determination to survive.

In their stories, girls and adolescents who migrate or are forcibly displaced and are alone or pregnant talk about fleeing from situations of hunger, exclusion, violence, or sexual abuse in their countries of origin. They are

stories of courage and bravery, of settling in the midst of uprooting. Despite the adverse context of migratory grief and the violence to which they are exposed, these girls and adolescents seek alternatives to preserve their dreams and expectations.

“I want to do many things. Model, dance, and be a doctor. I want to change the world, so that there is no violence.” (Girl/adolescent testimony)

2.2 Interpersonal level

TYPE OF VIOLENCE AT THE INTERPERSONAL LEVEL

IN THE FAMILY

- ▶ Unequal distribution of domestic chores.
- ▶ Inability to go out and explore the environment.
- ▶ Surveillance and punishment system for behaviors not aligning with their gender.
- ▶ Lack of communication, reproaches, fights, and emotional misunderstanding.
- ▶ Ban on playing games; playing sports based on gender.
- ▶ Lack of access to financial resources for self-management.
- ▶ Constant prohibition of emotional-erotic relationships.
- ▶ Abandonment, helplessness, constant denial, and emotional neglect.
- ▶ Beatings, confinement, and other forms of physical abuse as a method to regulate the “disobedient” or “rebellious” behavior of girls and adolescents.

CONTROL OF ACTIVITY ON SOCIAL NETWORKS AND NON-FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

- ▶ In relationships with their peers:
- ▶ Group pressure to carry out activities.
- ▶ Hurtful comments about their body.
- ▶ Creation of group relationships that exclude based on nationality, race, or for aesthetic reasons, etc.

TYPE OF VIOLENCE AT THE INTERPERSONAL LEVEL

- ▶ Closed and stigmatizing codes.
- ▶ Rumors and acts of rejection based on sexual orientation or gender identity.
- ▶ Establishment of strict gender norms determining what they can and cannot do in the sphere of recreation, family, emotional relationships, etc.

IN COUPLES (EMOTIONAL/SEXUAL RELATIONSHIPS)

- ▶ Search for emotional support in adult male figures.
- ▶ Surveillance of social networks and cyberbullying.
- ▶ Constant dismissive observation of aesthetics (clothing, hair, weight, etc.).
- ▶ Decision about the places they can or cannot go to.
- ▶ Determining what friends-families they can or cannot relate to.
- ▶ Emotional blackmail associated with economic exchange and protection.
- ▶ Derogatory comments about physical appearance.
- ▶ Emotional control through jealousy.
- ▶ Control over when, how, and where to have sex.
- ▶ Emotional deception, disloyalty regarding love-related agreements.

IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD

- ▶ Rumors about private life.
- ▶ Constant monitoring of activities they do and reporting to adults in the family.
- ▶ Constant control of personal aesthetics.
- ▶ Harassment and constant verbal attacks.
- ▶ Establishing spaces that can or cannot be used.
- ▶ Acts of racism, xenophobia, and sexism in public spaces (shops, markets, streets, parks, etc.).
- ▶ Demeaning comments about sexuality and the body on social networks.

- ▶ **Violent communication:** girls and adolescents report that they have family, friendship, love, and neighborhood relationships that constantly pressure them to remain attached to traditional gender values. In this sense, they are marked by experiences of systematic violent communication in the countries of origin, during transit and upon arrival and return.

Many of the interviewees stated that in their daily settings —home, school, neighborhood, and social networks— sexist, nationalist, racist, xenophobic, and adult-centered discourses abound. These discourses materialize in expressions or acts of contempt toward their origins and identities. For example, girls of Venezuelan or Colombian origin report that they receive demeaning comments and are classified as prostitutes, homewreckers, drug dealers, assassins, butchers, etc.

“A teacher told me that Venezuelans come here to steal their jobs, food, and husbands.” (Girl/adolescent testimony in a group interview)

- **Domestic violence:** several of the girls and adolescents who were consulted are exposed to or are witnesses to the violence suffered by their mothers at the hands of their fathers and stepfathers. They are usually the ones who support them, with considerable emotional wear and tear from witnessing the constant physical and emotional abuse. In these contexts, they are also often exposed to sexual abuse or assault.

“Parents should be educated more. Give them talks so they don’t hit or fight so much.” (Girl/adolescent testimony in a group interview)

- **Sexual-emotional ties:** from the love or sexual-emotional point of view, girls and adolescents feel uncertainty, distrust, and fear. Many find it normal that love and abuse of power go together. Most of the testimonies—even from girls between the ages of 7 and 9—denote pessimism because love is a space of coercion, against which they have to develop self-defense mechanisms.

In the narratives explored, male figures are not reliable. The only exception to this perception are adolescents and young people who live outside the capitals—“those from the interior”—whom they consider more respectful. Many girls and adolescents also reported difficulties in maintaining romantic relationships, since their families tend to interfere with or prohibit such ties; therefore, they tend to keep them “hidden” or “without permission”.

Another difference in terms of love is that the vast majority prefer to have relationships with men older than them. The forced and early relationships or unions of unaccompanied adolescents with older youth or adults are due to the need for emotional and economic support.

“Love depends on the situation. It can be pleasant, but many times it is unpleasant because you have to stop doing what you like to do to please your boyfriend or husband.”

“Less violence at home, so we don’t have to leave home with older people.”

“I feel that when I have a boyfriend or something like that, I want to learn self-defense.”

“The most difficult thing is that sometimes you have children, the man abandons you and you have to raise your child by yourself.”

(Adolescent mother, 14 years old)

- ▶ **Among friends:** girls and adolescents develop bonds of friendship during migration. Best friends replace the persons lost in the country of origin, mainly grandmothers. For many, these new ties become the only ones that satisfy their needs for affection, communication, and fun.

In these bonds there is remarkable mutual care between peers. There are also tensions in these bonds of friendship related to gender patterns and linked to beauty, sexuality, and care policies.

“I have friends at school, that’s what I like the most.”

(Testimony of a girl/adolescent in a group interview)

- ▶ **Women who inspire:** support for mothers and grandmothers is very noticeable in the stories analyzed. The aspiration to study in the future

is directly linked to the influence of their mothers and with the present, specifically with the material conditions of exclusion and the denial of rights due to their condition as migrants or displaced persons.

Most identify the adult women in their environment as their main allies in their support network. In this sense, they indicated, in order of importance: their mother, best friends, neighbors, and teachers.

The role of mothers, grandmothers, and aunts stand out; they are a source of inspiration and recognition for these girls and adolescents and they are central figures in their self-identification process.

“My mother and grandmother are hardworking women who are always fighting for our future.”

(Testimony of a girl/adolescent in a group interview, February 23, 2021)

2.3 Institutional level

- ***“I don’t know what my rights are”***: most of the girls and adolescents participating in the study have practically no access to information about their rights. They have no detailed knowledge of the laws, policies, programs, and services to which they can turn in the event of a violation of their rights. Many interviewees do not have information on the steps to follow to access the health, education, and justice systems. However, in one way or another, they all know that there are principles of equality, dignity, and non-discrimination that should protect them.

Poor access to public services is evident in most accounts. The constant response was “I don’t know” or “they are not available in the area of residence”. In the words of an expert consulted in Mexico, “there is no adequate investment to detect blind spots in the path followed by girls and adolescents on their migratory routes.”

They mistrust public institutions and emphasize that the most useful thing is self-defense. Of all participants, 36% responded that they do not feel safe if they resort to a protection mechanism when their rights are violated and indicated feeling afraid “because we do not know what can happen afterward.”

“I wouldn’t do anything because sometimes you can get into trouble with the neighbors or with other people if you report it, so it’s better not to do it.”

(Testimony of a girl/adolescent in a group interview)

- **What they claim:** the rights that the participants consider most important to defend are education, recreation, the right to express their opinions and feelings, family reunification, and the use of information technologies. The fact that they mention the right to go out and to be able to have friends as part of their basic rights is meaningful. Several of them pointed out that being able to continue their migratory route was a basic human right for them and their families.

2.4 Cross-border level

- **Daughters of the road:**³ girls and adolescents begin migration processes or prolonged forced displacement. These are trips that last months and even years. This condition of being permanently “in transit” structures their identities. They can leave a place, come back, cross borders, leave again.

They are pilgrimages that are carried out by land, water, and air. Those with the most violent stories are those who travel by foot along very dangerous paths or roads where they come across soldiers and outlaw groups. They generally use boats or small vessels, pack animals, trucks, buses, trains, etc. The use of these vehicles leads them to experience insecurity, distrust, fear, and loneliness.

Some of the participants stated that the worst part of the journey is not knowing what is happening or what is going to happen, and they must trust people they do not know. Obviously, this position is considerably tougher for those traveling alone. Many feel guilty because of the adversities along the way, believing that they originated from something they did wrong or because they acted improperly.

3 In the regional report, Tineo Durán refers to the novel “Daughter of the Road” (*free translation of “Hija del camino”*) by Afro-Spanish writer Lucia Mmobio (2019) to refer to the complexities of living on the road in-between places.

The research revealed dramatic situations. For example, the experiences of girls and adolescents in shelters in the border area of Mexico, who stated that they felt imprisoned. They live in situations of confinement, which intensified in the context of the pandemic. There is evidence that shelters are not safe spaces for girls and adolescents; on the contrary, they reinforce violent gender patterns, especially in relation to care work.

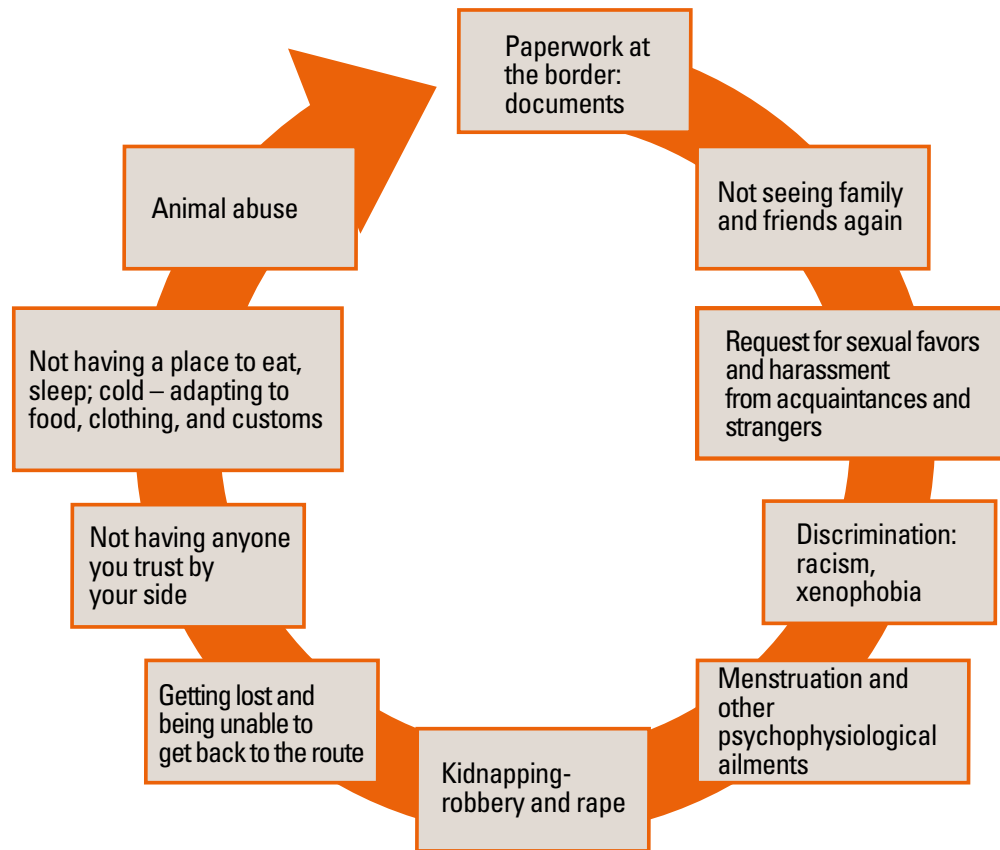
“We need accommodation but not a lockdown or jail”

It is also important to point out that along the way *“there are always people willing to help”*. One element that several stressed is that despite how adverse or exhausting it can be to cross borders, there is always the possibility of going *“toward a better future”*. Most of the testimonials agree with the following:

“If I had to do the journey again, I would do it, because now we are doing better than before. Now, although there are problems here too, I don’t feel that my brother, my mother, or my father will just vanish any given day.” (Testimony of a girl/adolescent in a group interview)



CROSS-BORDER VIOLENCE



3. Emergencies, demands, and recommendations for the protection of migrant, displaced, and refugee girls and adolescents

RECEPTION SYSTEM

Set of governmental, non-governmental, and civil society actions that guarantee the exercise of migrant applicants for international protection.

This section includes a series of recommendations for compliance with international protection standards on gender, childhood, adolescence, and migration. It is organized into the 10 main areas of needs and demands identified by migrant, displaced, and refugee girls and adolescents for the full exercise of their rights.

Urgently transforming reception systems is essential to facilitate the integration of the population requesting refuge. To this end, it is important to improve the management and coordination capacity in order to find solutions in the areas of health, education, housing, work, food, legal and psychological assistance, as well as translation and interpretation services, language teaching, leisure, and recreation, among others.

In addition to the proper functioning of reception systems, it is also necessary to implement special programs addressing the multiple and diverse realities of migrant, displaced, and refugee girls and adolescents.

3.1 Housing

The main characteristic in terms of housing that girls and adolescents participating in the study highlighted was overcrowding. They usually live with many people in the same house (between five and eight people), and it is common for four people from the family to live together in a rented room.

Main problems

- ▶ Lack of privacy and intimacy.
- ▶ Deterioration of mental health and constant stress due to overcrowding.
- ▶ Exposure to sexual harassment practices by relatives.
- ▶ Coexistence with noise, dirt, and precarious housing (inadequate energy systems, gas, and water, among others).
- ▶ Absence of proper spaces for educational activities, rest, or play.
- ▶ Constant changes that alter the space-time relationship and limit settling in a place.

“There was a backyard in my house and we played there a lot but we can’t anymore because an uncle came to cook food for sale, and he took over the backyard completely. We no longer have a place to play, so now we can only play on our mobile phone.”
(Testimony of a girl/adolescent in a group interview)

- ▶ **Proposals:** housing policies and programs aimed at the migrant population. Facilitate the inclusion of the migrant population in the housing programs of the country of arrival. Support for access to housing, low-cost rentals, government control of the quality of the offer, and defense in cases of abuse.

3.2 Nutrition

Hunger or lack of food are causes for migration. Many girls and adolescents expressed that they suffer from hunger. They also indicated that in their

homes there is not enough money for adequate food for their psychophysical development. The interviewees did not know how food programs work or how they are activated.

For many girls and adolescents, it is about finding food and “*not starving*”, as one adolescent put it. Lack of food puts them at risk—in their own words— of “*doing whatever it takes to get bread*”.

“There are many children where I live who sometimes don’t have food and sometimes, we help them. Sometimes we don’t have food and the neighbors help us.” (Testimony, 8-year-old girl)

Proposals:

- ▶ Ensure that food support programs are more effective and respectful of people’s dignity (not welfare or charity).
- ▶ Guarantee permanent access to food distribution for the migrant population.
- ▶ Create specific programs for the migrant population that are coordinated with the educational systems so that they address nutrition and food issues that allow the incorporation of food traditions from the country of origin and host countries.
- ▶ Promote spaces for the exchange of food and culinary traditions between migrants and the communities of the host country.

3.3 Health

Where exclusion, stigmatization, and discrimination are most manifested is in the field of public health, according to the testimonies of girls and adolescents. The general perception of the interviewees is that if you are not sick you should not attend a health center. On top of this, they encounter barriers as a result of not having a healthcare card.

There are also elements that highlight the lack of information on sexual and reproductive rights that allow adolescents, especially pregnant women, to



undergo regular check-ups. Nor are there any mental health services on migration routes.

This group also experiences ailments related to the physical and emotional exhaustion they are exposed to in the migration process, especially for those who do not receive any type of psychosocial support, including those who suffered sexual assault in the country of origin or during the migratory journey.

“My mother wanted to take me to the hospital to be checked because my head hurts a lot, but every time we go, they tell us that they can’t treat me. She has fought a lot and only once did a nurse help us to reach the doctor. But they always say unpleasant things like that we, Venezuelans, have taken up all the space and that we are taking health care away from them. That is very upsetting, because you go there in pain or because you have a major problem, and you leave feeling more pain because of everything you have to hear.”

«I should go to planning. I need to get a shot, but I don’t like going to the gynecologist. Besides, the papers and the questions he asks are uncomfortable for me because I already told him that I don’t like my body and stuff. The truth is, I have only gone once and I haven’t returned, not even after my pregnancy. I do not know how I am doing inside.”

“It would be good to have psychologists to talk to because there are things that make us very angry. I live around a lot of violence, sometimes I don’t even know why I feel like this. I have no one to talk to or who to ask for help with all the aggressiveness I feel.”

(Testimonies of girls/adolescents given in group interviews)

Proposals:

- ▶ Facilitate access procedures to the healthcare system (access to healthcare cards) and information on how it works and access to services.
- ▶ Create and update protocols in accordance with the specific demands of migrant girls and adolescents. Specifically, generate advice and care protocols in situations of violence and abuse in shelters or during migration routes.
- ▶ Raise awareness among healthcare staff on multiculturalism and ethnic-racial diversity.
- ▶ Provide sexual and reproductive health resources that are adaptable to the demands and needs of migrant girls and adolescents.
- ▶ Create mechanisms for reporting bad practices related to stigmatization and discrimination.
- ▶ Provide translation services for girls and adolescents who do not speak the language of the country.

3.4 Education

School is one of the few places where migrant girls and adolescents can establish bonds of friendship among peers, generate support networks, and strengthen the feeling of belonging to the country of arrival. In fact, it is one of the few institutions with which they create bonds. However, the rights of migrants are still not part of the educational curriculum, despite the constant increase in the migrant population in educational centers.

It is worth pointing out that these girls and adolescents have many expectations and aspirations for personal development linked to the possibility of studying. The main difficulty in accessing education lies in the requirement of documents that certify the administrative status in the country of arrival.

There is yet another barrier: the bureaucratic obstacles to recognize previous studies, which is more serious for those who do not speak the language of the country of arrival. In general, the adolescents expressed uncertainty about what will happen to them once they turn 18. After that age, the documentation requirements in the education system are even greater. The girls and adolescents in a shelter setting, the unaccompanied, and pregnant women expressed the greatest difficulties in accessing education.

Another obstacle within education is violence and discrimination. For many migrant, displaced, and refugee girls, without systems in place to ensure their protection, schools can be cruel. It is the setting for constant harassment by students and teachers, where various forms of physical, verbal, and even sexual harassment coexist. The bathroom and playground are the places where bullying occurs most frequently.

There are no efficient measures to prevent and mitigate the impact of these phenomena on girls and adolescents in place. Repair is non-existent. The acts of violence go unpunished and the school, according to the testimonies analyzed, does not contribute to the transformation of the imaginaries that sustain these violent dynamics.

Proposals:

- ▶ Do not restrict access to the educational system to a regular immigration or refugee status.
- ▶ Coordinate educational policies, migration policies, and the rights of young people in the countries of departure and arrival.
- ▶ Facilitate validation or homologation procedures for studies.
- ▶ Raise awareness and train teaching staff on human rights and migration
- ▶ Have clear reporting protocols, comprehensive protection, and justice in situations of violence.
- ▶ Bring the school system closer to the family and community structure of migrant girls and adolescents.
- ▶ Provide information on sexual and reproductive rights in the context of migration and displacement.
- ▶ Increase the number of migrant and refugee professionals in the education system to provide more qualified and warm attention to girls and adolescents.
- ▶ Promote the participation, voice, and decision-making of migrant girls and adolescents in the mechanisms provided by the school.
- ▶ Facilitate translation and access to learning when it comes to countries where a language other than the mother tongue of migrant girls and adolescents is spoken.

“With the pandemic, everything in school is harder because everything is online, and sometimes we don’t have enough money to connect.”

“I’m not attending school because when my mother went to ask for a space, they said they could not give me one because she had to have my Venezuelan transcripts, my grades.”

“I have friends at school, that’s what I like the most.”

“I want to validate my high school diploma, but it is not easy. They ask us for papers.”

“What I don’t like is that they often call us ‘venecas’.”

“In my school there is no talk of migration although there are many Venezuelans like me.”

(Girl/adolescent testimonies given in group interviews)

3.5 Work

All the girls and adolescents participating in the study perform care tasks in their homes. In addition, many of them work outside the home: street sales (jewelry or food businesses); child care; house cleaning; animal care; give class (nursery); beauty salon. Pregnant adolescents or single mothers are the ones who most strongly demand access to the labor market.

Those who work for pay usually use the money to supplement family income and for expenses associated with personal hygiene and studies, among others. Some of them also send remittances to their grandmothers.

Needs and challenges:

- ▶ Lack of knowledge regarding rights and child labor.
- ▶ Exposure to situations of labor exploitation (harassment and xenophobic attacks).

- ▶ Few economic compensatory measures at home: many of them do not manage money to meet minimum needs.
- ▶ Disqualification and various forms of mistreatment in work environments, including home-based.

“For me it is difficult to think about school because now my priority is my son, what I need is a job and that is what I am trying to do as a priority.”

(Testimony of a girl/adolescent in a group interview)

3.6 Justice

The participants express a total distrust of the justice system (“they never believe us”) when filing complaints concerning acts of violence experienced at school, at home, and on the street. They believe that judges are not going to do anything because they are not empathetic to their stories.

Besides the police, the girls and adolescents consulted do not know of any other entities to turn to in case of violence or abuse. Although they know what their fundamental rights are, they do not know of any mechanism to resort to in the country of origin or in the country of arrival in the event of a violation of their rights. In general, they do not know if there are State or civil society organizations where they can go to report an act of violence.

Girls and adolescents do not report acts of domestic violence for fear that they or their families will be deported. Except for the legal support they receive from some local and international organizations, they are unprotected throughout the migration process.

They do not know that it is possible to file a complaint, precisely because of the constant corruption to which they and their families are exposed to during migration. They think that the rights of women are those of adult women, such as their mothers, grandmothers, and aunts. However, they do not consider that they also have rights.

In many contexts, legal frameworks prevent girls and adolescents (because of their guardianship status) from making use of legal resources to defend their rights.

When the aggressions occur in a relationship, the family, or in shelters, access to justice is even more difficult. Public officials are often not familiar with issues related to gender, children, and migration.

“What I didn’t like about my trip was that the guard stopped us on the road, and they asked us a lot of questions. They were saying that Venezuelan women were not ladies. In my case, I had to travel without my guardian and the truth is that I had very unpleasant moments. The man from the boat was hitting on me, and in a place where we had to stay, he tried to abuse me, not in a sexual way, but he did very unpleasant things to me. I haven’t received guidance on where to report it.” (Testimony of an adolescent)

3.7 Leisure and recreation

The girls and adolescents consulted do not have a space for leisure and to enjoy their free time in their community, educational, or family environments. Apart from parks or sports fields, which were mostly identified as unsuitable for them, social networks and television seem to be the most used means of entertainment.

In their daily routines, they did not mention activities that promote social, cognitive, emotional, and psychomotor skills; on the contrary, work and care, in addition to school, take up most of their time.

Girls and adolescents are unaware of the resources available from local governments in terms of mental health and physical education in sports centers, and in artistic and cultural spaces. There are no proposals from public institutions to foster friendship, dialogue, and communication among them and other people in the community. They state that they do not have safe spaces to carry out outdoor activities that promote community building. The few existing spaces for leisure—courts and parks—are mostly used by adult men.

Families must bear the cost of leisure activities (trips, walks, cinema, etc.). There are no bonuses or discount policies that facilitate access to leisure. In fact,

because they are foreigners, they sometimes have to pay more to enter certain parks or tourist attractions in the countries of arrival.

“We need more courts to practice sports and do exercises that are good for our health.”

“I want to play more [...] I want them to let us play.”

“I would like to have handicraft workshops. The other day I went to one that they organized, and it had painting. I really enjoyed it.”

“I like to play with my dog. It’s what I enjoy the most.”

“I prefer not to go out, it scares me. I like to listen to music, watch TV, or look at Facebook.”

(Girl/adolescent testimonies given in group interviews)



3.8 Media and social networks

The girls and adolescents participating in the study spend a large part of their time connected to social networks. The most used are Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, and YouTube. They use social media for four purposes:

1. Maintaining bonds with family and friendship networks in the country of origin.
2. As a means of entertainment and fun.
3. Studying and doing homework.
4. As an alternative source of information to the family, the community, and educational institutions.

Needs and challenges:

- Limited access to information technologies and resources associated with cyberspace and academic development and training.
- Little information about their rights as girls and adolescents in terms of digital protection.

- ▶ Constant exposure to various forms of sexting without consent.
- ▶ Social networks are used as a control tool by their partners or former partners.
- ▶ They depend on their partners, relatives, or acquaintances to access virtual information services and this entails risks for their sexual safety.
- ▶ Exposure to blackmail and extortion for them and their families.
- ▶ Use of networks as the only space for socialization and entertainment.
- ▶ Overexposure of private life, intimacy, and other issues related to data protection.

“My mom won’t let me use social networks. She says that is not for me because I am very young, but I would like to have social networks to talk with my friends. Everyone does.”

“They always post nasty things and say unpleasant things about your body. They’ll tell you if you’re ugly or pretty, they also curse a lot, out there, for everything.”

“I don’t have a cell phone, they are expensive. My mother lends me hers to talk to my grandmother and my cousins.”

“I like to use it to amuse myself. I like to watch videos of stupid things so I don’t have to think about anything and just laugh. I like memes.”

“Free WIFI.”

“We need mobile phones.”

(Girl/adolescent testimonies given in group interviews)

3.9 The street

Street harassment was constantly mentioned in the stories analyzed. It is a form of gender violence that reduces the use of public space for women of all ages. It is a typical disciplinary practice of sexist violence to limit freedom of movement.

The ethnic-racial condition is another variable that determines greater violence on the street. Testimonies point out remarks about skin color, type of hair, buttocks, or mouth. There are also references to sexual orientation and gender identity.

The stories told by the girls and adolescents reveal that many have internalized dress codes associated with the ideology of “good” or “bad” women. In this sense, there are prevailing beliefs including the idea that they—“the ones who dress inappropriately”—cause harassment.

Needs and challenges:

- ▶ Absence of citizen security policies focused on preventing street harassment.
- ▶ Constant remarks that affect self-esteem and self-image, which generates self-hate. Street vendors are the most exposed to these situations.
- ▶ Risk of isolation and increased fear of using public spaces.
- ▶ They live with the fear of being raped or touched inappropriately on the street.



“I want to be able to go out on my own, without fear.” (Testimony of a girl/adolescent in a group interview)

3.10 Social participation

The participants do not have experience coming together and collaborating to defend their rights. In general, they do not know of any space for collective organization initiatives, beyond informal spaces created at school or friendship networks for leisure purposes; nor do they participate directly in community groups or networks that encourage social action.

Needs and challenges:

- ▶ Girls and adolescents are unaware of the networks and groups working in their immediate environment which they could join.
- ▶ They have no motivation to defend their rights. Structural dependence on the adult world is considerable.
- ▶ They do not have role models of their generation that stimulate their interest in getting involved in social transformation.
- ▶ Their talents and leadership are not used participating in school, health, and media activities, among others.
- ▶ Images of migrant children promoted by agencies and donors associate them with poverty and do not stimulate their imagination and power.
- ▶ Models of femininity continue to focus on areas of caring and nurturing. These imaginaries are widely disseminated by the media, religions, schools, etc.

“I want a group to get together and talk about what is happening to us.” (Testimony of a girl/adolescent in a group interview)

4. The future their imagine

“I want to be my own boss.”

“I see myself as a dancer, dancing a lot, traveling, and making friends everywhere. I see myself gathering the whole family together in one place.”

“I see myself fighting homophobia so that everyone can be happy.”

“I want to be a lawyer to defend people. More than anything I want to defend women and fight for their rights. I want to know about laws to defend myself and other people so that we can live free of abuse.”

“I want to be a writer, I want to express what I feel, and transform my thoughts into letters.”

“I would like to work and live by myself.”

“I want to be a lawyer to defend the rights of migrants from Venezuela.”

“I see myself becoming famous on TikTok.”

“I want to be a psychologist to help all abused women. I want to help them lose their fear. I would also like to be a pastry chef to make life sweeter. I don’t know. I’m undecided.”

(Girl/adolescent testimonies in group interviews)



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HEADQUARTERS
1300 Spring Street, Suite 500
Silver Spring, MD 20910
301-844-7300
<https://www.hias.org>
info@hias.org

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Oficina Regional para
América Latina y el Caribe
Calle Alberto Tejada, Edif. 102
Ciudad del Saber
Panamá, República de Panamá
Apartado postal: 0843-03045
Teléfono: +507 301-7400
www.unicef.org/lac