Gendering the Border Effect:

Sexual and Gender-Based Violence in the Midst of Insecurity and a Refugee Crisis

Julia Zulver and Annette Idler

The borderlands between Colombia and Venezuela are experiencing a double crisis: (i) Colombia's armed conflict is reconfiguring, leading to new expressions of insecurity, and (ii) the region is experiencing the influx of millions of refugees, migrants, and *retornados* fleeing Venezuela's humanitarian crisis. People on both sides of the borderline must navigate the complex security environment produced by the impact of these two phenomena. It is in these zones that we see the "border effect" playing out.

Julia Zulver, 2019, Villa del Rosario, Colombia.

Border Effect:

The border effect is characterised by "the confluence of weak state governance, a low-risk/high-reward opportunity environment, and a propensity for impunity, which arises from the transnationality of borderlands in vulnerable regions and their distance to state centres." It can take shape in four mechanisms:
- border as facilitator   • border as magnet
- border as deterrent   • border as disguise.

Idler, Annette. Borderland Battles: Violence, Crime, and Governance at the Edges of Colombia's War. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019

This policy brief overlays a gender lens on the border effect in order to understand the ways that gendered power dynamics play out in the Colombian-Venezuelan borderlands, specifically as they relate to risks of sexual and gender based violence faced by migrants, refugees, and receptor communities.

Key Findings
Gendered Border Effect:

Latin America and the Caribbean is the most violent region in the world for women (Amnesty International*). Similarly, the Colombian-Vene-zuelan borderlands — and the groups who operate in them — are governed by logics of machismo. This results in women facing high risks of SGBV, among other inequalities, often in a context of normalisation of this violence and without access to justice or redress.

These gendered dynamics are obscured under the disguise of general 'danger' in borderlands. Specific and gendered insecurities remain hidden, leaving women and girls exposed to heightened violence without sufficient action being taken to alleviate their suffering or hold perpetrators accountable. In such a context of impunity: "perpetrators take advantage of the fact that [women] are almost invisible."

Our findings show that the border effect exacerbates existing gendered power dynamics in the following ways:

- It facilitates sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV).
- It makes women vulnerable to prostitution and sexual exploitation.
- It hinders access to support systems.

The double crisis of insecurity and humanitarian emergency in the Colombian-Venezuelan border-lands makes the border effect particularly discernible:

- It increases the insecurities and vulnerabilities of those exposed to it.
- It intensifies the gendered nature of the border effect.

*Amnesty International. "Amnesty International Report 2017/2018: The State of the World's Human Rights." London, 2018. https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/pol10/6700/2018/en/

Methodology

The findings are based on qualitative fieldwork in four border zones: (1) Cúcuta (metropolitan and Villa del Rosario), (2) Catatumbo (Tibú and Sardinata), (3) Arauca (capital), and (4) La Guajira (Riohacha, Maicao, and Paraguachón) between February and May 2019 (see figure 1).
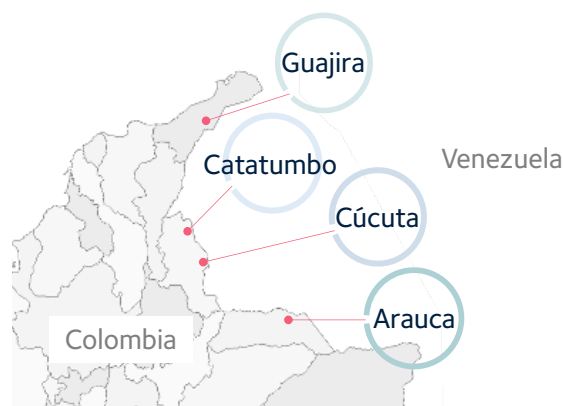

Figure 1 Map of field sites along the Colombia-Venezuela border.

We conducted 149 semi-structured interviews (figure 2), complemented by participant obser-vation at official and unofficial border crossings, public parks, red light zones, shelters, and community meetings.
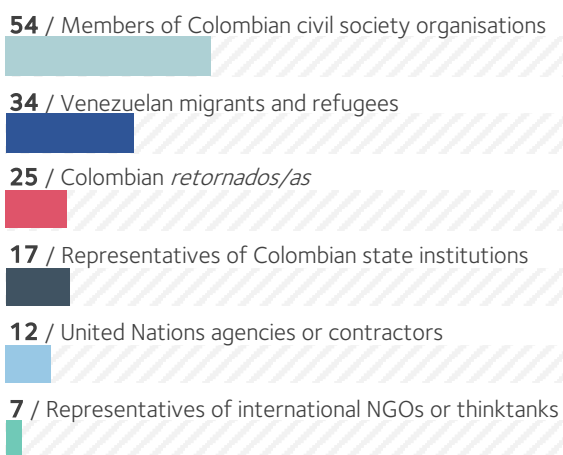
54 / Members of Colombian civil society organisations

34 / Venezuelan migrants and refugees

25 / Colombian *retornados/as*

17 / Representatives of Colombian state institutions

12 / United Nations agencies or contractors

7 / Representatives of international NGOs or thinktanks

Figure 2 Distribution of semi-structured interviews.

Diagnosis of Vulnerabilities

1
Facilitator

The border facilitates the concealment of victimisation, promotes illegal economies, and obscures social control by violent non-state groups, allowing for illicit cross-border authority. We see:

Gendered violence in *trochas*
- Armed groups control informal cross-border passages where people are forced to pay them extortion.
- Women are exposed to sexual violence when they cannot pay or when the armed groups want to take advantage of their vulnerabilities.
- Risks are exacerbated through border closures.
- Venezuelan women are brought to Colombia to forcibly work as domestic staff or at armed groups' camps.

Feminicide
- Feminicide is used as a tool of social control and social cleansing by armed groups, particularly in places where they regulate sex work/prostitution.
- Feminicide is on the rise amongst prostitutes, facilitated by high levels of impunity.

2
Deterrent

The border reduces predictability, increases exposure to selective violence, fuels distrust between violent non-state groups, and intensifies interpersonal distrust. We see:

Xenophobia and prostitution
- Venezuelan women and girls turn to prostitution, including in armed group camps, to mitigate economic hardship.
- Venezuelan women are stigmatised as prostitutes, even if they are not engaging in.

3
Magnet

The border attracts multiple violent non-state groups due to the high opportunity-low risk environments. We see:

Gendered insecurity and ongoing territorial contestation and control
- Women are brought into armed groups' camps as cooks, cleaners, and prostitutes, where they are exposed to SGBV and risk feminicide in a context where perpetrators enjoy impunity.
- Armed groups quickly change rules on whether prostitution is permitted and different groups have different rules, exposing women to violence (including feminicide) if rules are breached.

4
Disguise

The border alienates the communities who live there from the state, given their distance from power centres. We see:

Lack of access to justice
- Venezuelan women and girls often don't register their claims with the authorities, due to lack of knowledge about Colombian laws, stigmatisation or fear of retribution violence from armed groups.
- When violence takes place in *trochas*, women are unable to register claims using Colombia's anti-violence against women law (Ley 1257 de 2008) because the acts didn't take place on Colombian soil.
- Access to justice in the case of SGBV is often elusive, as state authorities don't always register claims, activate legal routes, or follow-up on cases when women denounce violence.

Lack of nuanced data and data collection mechanisms
- There is hardly any data on sexual and gender-based violence available.
- This absence of adequate data has resulted in a lack of an appropriate response, i.e. through specific services for survivors of sexual and gender-based violence.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- Assessments of the double crisis in borderlands must urgently adopt a gender lens to make visible and address the vulnerabilities women, girls, and the LGBTI community face as a result of the gendered power dynamics that dominate in these territories, and which are exacerbated by ongoing insecurity and the humanitarian crisis. This lens will reveal their specific policy and protection needs.
- Colombia's state institutions and international humanitarian organisations need to systematically develop and integrate their ability to register, document, and collect gender-sensitive data on sexual and gender-based violence. They further need to ensure that services are equipped to take gender-sensitive approaches when dealing with survivors of SGBV.
- Decisions to close the border and to reduce humanitarian aid will have disproportionate impacts on women, girls and the LGBTI population including their exposure to SGBV, both in public spaces like *trochas*, but also in neighbourhoods and households. Adopting a rights-based perspective to decisions like these is vital in territories where we know that women, girls, and the LGBTI community are exposed to specific dynamics of insecurity due to their gender. Such a stance requires active recognition, promotion, and protection of all women's rights to enjoy a life free from violence, as enshrined in CEDAW's Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women (1993).
- The international community can also play a role in mitigating the gendered double crisis in the borderlands by supporting the grassroots women's organisations that often perform the lion's share of SGBV prevention and response work, through the designation of funds and resources to support their work, and the provision of technical assistance.

This brief summarises the following article:
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Further references:
-Idler, Annette. Borderland Battles: Violence, Crime, and Governance at the Edges of Colombia's War. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019.
-Zulver, Julia. "High Risk Feminism in Colombia: Women's Mobilisation in Violent Contexts [DPhil Thesis]." University of Oxford, 2018. https://ora.ox.ac.uk/objects/uuid:3fc50c53-d6f5-49c9-a3ba-ca68570a78a3

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Hosted at the University of Oxford's Changing Character of War Centre, CONPEACE focuses on changing security landscapes in marginalised spaces, especially in border regions during transitions from war to peace. Founded and directed by Dr Annette Idler, CONPEACE's interdisciplinary research bridges the gap between marginalised communities and political power centres, using bottom-up methodology based on intensive fieldwork, conceptual frameworks on non-state order and regular cross-stakeholder fora.