

# A PLEA TO PROTECT CHILDREN FROM COMMERCIAL SEXUAL EXPLOITATION IN LATIN AMERICA DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

## CONTEXT AND CURRENT SITUATION

Latin America is at the most critical moment of the COVID-19 pandemic and epicenter worldwide. The Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) reports that as of July 6, there are more than 2.5 million people infected and more than 115 thousand deaths. Brazil is the country with the highest death count, followed by Mexico, Peru and Chile.

The pandemic showed the fragility of healthcare systems, which do not have sufficient and universal infrastructure, endowment, and technological and human resources to prevent and attend to the increasing number of patients.

Since March, measures such as mandatory confinement, preventive self-isolation, curfews, the closure of borders and commerce, and the suspension of air, land and river mobility to prevent the spread of the virus were issued. These measures negatively impacted national economies, ECLAC<sup>1</sup> calculates a drop of 5.3% in the GDP and an increase in the unemployment rate by 3.4%; the increase in the poverty rate by at least 4.4%, which would mean 28.7 million additional people to the existing one, and extreme poverty rate would increase by 2.6%, which means 15.9 million additional people.

Biosecurity measures to contain and prevent the spread of the coronavirus are difficult to comply with for more than 60% of the population, mainly because they are in the informal economy sector, who, in addition to presenting unsatisfied basic needs, do not have the resources to obtain personal care supplies, or possibilities to maintain social distance.

Several Latin American countries have recently seen an increase in gender-based violence. In Colombia, between March 20 and April 4, 2020, according to the Office of the Presidential Advisor on Equality for Women, there was a 51% increase in cases of domestic violence, 12 women were murdered in a period of 16 days. In Mexico, the Gender Equality and COVID-19 Observatory indicate that during the month of confinement 911 calls made by women who reported violence by their husbands or partners increased by 57%. Between March 19 and April 26, 17 girls were murdered and raped according to a report by the Femicide Observatory. In Bolivia, as of April 15, 4 femicides and 1,200 cases of violence against women were reported in the quarantine period, as well as 33 cases of rape of minors. In Uruguay, between April and May, calls to the National Orientation and Support Service for Women in Situation of Domestic Violence of the Ministry of Social Development increased by 80%. In Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, a 50% increase in reports of domestic violence was reported; Argentina shows an increase of 30% in the daily call average to the 144 line due to gender violence (March 20-31). In Peru, from March 16 to May 5, have been identified more than 2,600 cases of domestic, family or gender-based violence attended by the Aurora program, 12 femicides and 226 rapes have been registered, 132 of them girls. In the case of Chile, calls to

---

<sup>1</sup> CEPAL.12/mayo-/2020. *El Desafío Social en Tiempos del COVID-19. Informe especial N°3 (ECLAC.12 May-/2020. The Social Challenge in Times of COVID-19. Special report No. 3)*

the 1455 line increased by more than 70% and 12 femicides have been registered in the months of confinement, in addition to 22 attempts of femicides in the months of April and May alone. Furthermore, women are particularly vulnerable to the precariousness of working conditions, with higher informality rates and more exposed to becoming unemployed.

One of the first measures of the governments was the suspension of school classes, to then start virtual education, keeping children and teenagers in isolation. This situation, on the one hand, potentiated the risks of online sexual exploitation and, on the other, excluded the most disadvantaged communities, exacerbating the possibilities of mistreatment and violence within their homes and community, without the possibility that teachers, health personnel, social workers and civil society organizations provide them with the necessary assistance and protection in a timely manner.

Investigations and criminal prosecutions for cases of commercial sexual exploitation of children and minors have also been limited, having the proceedings suspended or delayed, since government measures that restrict the mobility of people demanded more police officers to control it.

National governments and bodies for the protection of children and teenagers have not designed specific strategies or allocated budget resources to prevent trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation of children.

Confinement places children and teenagers in special vulnerable situations to these forms of violence, given the way in which exploiters exercise control, blame and power over their victims, who distrust the authorities and do not seek or do not have the accessible mechanisms for children and teenagers to request support.

Increasing internet access during the pandemic has maximized the risks of online crime. Like the activities that were transferred to digital platforms for continuity, criminals have also migrated to this field. Different websites have been exposed to discuss how to take advantage of the pandemic and the anonymity of social networks to access, download, produce and share materials of sexual abuse of children and teenagers, both in open networks, peer networks and the dark web, They are also used to groom and subject children and teenagers to dynamics of trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation. In Mexico, the Financial Intelligence Unit reported a 107% increase in pornography that uses children and teenagers during the last months of confinement. For Europe, Europol has reported an increase in the number of attempts to access illegal websites blocked with content of material of sexual abuse of children.

The precarious conditions of the migrant population, as well as xenophobia, harassment, the presence of inducing agents and sexual violence, constitute factors for migrant children and teenagers to be victims of trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation by criminals and gangs, same that have been aggravated during the pandemic.

A population of special concern are children and teenagers belonging to ethnic minorities, who face structural segregation based on a history of discrimination and violence.

The impact of COVID-19 on the increase in the rates of inequality, poverty, hunger and the need to search to cover basic needs are, therefore, accelerators of the vulnerability children, teenagers and their families to be subjected to dynamics of sale, trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

It is a priority to include and mainstream gender and rights perspectives to eliminate gaps in social and economic inequality of these especially vulnerable groups. The countries of the region, in coordination with cooperating agencies and the United Nations, must design humanitarian assistance strategies, incorporating the voice of children, teenagers and young people in them.

Cash transfer programs and other supports are necessary, as well as initiatives for the return of women to economic activity and efforts to ensure their access to sexual and reproductive health services.

It is crucial to reinforce the immediate response to children and teenagers victims of trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation, to expand coverage in programs and services adapted to the needs and particularities of the population from a focus on the victim and trauma, differential and intersectional.

Reactivation strategies must be developed and, especially in economic contexts of risk for crimes, such as that associated with travel and tourism, mining, among others, with intersectoral actions between the government, the private sector and civil society, for the construction of safe and protective environments. Companies must respect the human rights of children and implement due diligence strategies to mitigate their impacts, as well as adopt codes of conduct to prevent and respond promptly and appropriately to the presence of crimes that affect children and teenagers.

Promote the participation of children and teenagers in the reconfiguration of their new reality and their environments of coexistence and development; as well as in the strategies that are taken for the safe return to classes, either in the classroom or online, guaranteeing access for all.

A work plan between internet provider companies, governments and civil society should be promoted, so that illegal content is not allowed on virtual platforms, as well as the use of timely reporting and reporting channels in situations of risk or violation of rights of children and teenagers.

In terms of crime protection and prosecution in the region, it is important to promote agreements and coordination scenarios for countries that seek to harmonize their regulatory frameworks to deal with these crimes, including virtual patrol, and that allow for identification, rescue, assistance to the victims and the judicialization of the networks and exploiters. In particular, regional initiatives such as the Regional Action Group for the Americas (with its Spanish acronym *GARA*) must consolidate prevention, care and judicialization strategies that allow a comprehensive response to the commercial sexual exploitation of children and teenagers in the context of travel and tourism.

It is essential that the States have differentiated information systems, both for the health impact of the pandemic on children and teenagers, as well as for the crimes of trafficking and commercial and non-commercial sexual exploitation, which make the children and teenagers who are victims visible with statistics that respond to the analysis of their life cycle, sex, ethnicity, provenance, among others, to recognize their psychosocial conditions and allow an adequate characterization of crimes.

It is an imperative to transform social imageries that hide, tolerate, and promote trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation as possible ways of survival, especially in situations as complex as current

ones, recognizing them categorically as crimes and as forms of violation of the human rights of children and teenagers and their own dignity.

July 14, 2020

## **ECPAT NETWORK IN LATIN AMERICA**

---

ECPAT Nicaragua - Casa Alianza Nicaragua  
ECPAT Argentina - CASACIDN  
ECPAT Peru - CHS Alternativo  
ECPAT Chile Corporación ONG Raíces  
ECPAT Guatemala  
ECPAT México - EDIAC  
ECPAT Bolivia - Fundación Munasim Kullakita  
ECPAT Costa Rica - Fundación Paniamor  
ECPAT Ecuador - Fundación QuitoRaymi  
ECPAT Colombia - Fundación Renacer  
ECPAT Paraguay - Grupo Luna Nueva  
ECPAT Uruguay - Gurises Unidos  
ECPAT Dominican Republic - MAIS  
ECPAT Chile - PAICABI  
ECPAT Brazil  
ECPAT Nicaragua - TESIS