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# OVERALL SITUATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS IN THE STATE OF ZULIA OCTOBER 2021 SUMMARY

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## OCTOBER 2021 SUMMARY

Commission for Human Rights of the state of Zulia (Codhez)

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# GENERAL OVERVIEW

The *October 2021 Summary* on the overall situation of human rights in Zulia documents the current condition of the right to education and women's rights. To this end, a review of both media and civil society reports, in addition to the principal regulations on both matters was carried out.

The right to education represents one of the fundamental rights that is essential for the personal, social, and human growth of children, adolescents, and young people, which today is in extreme danger due to the neglect of the State in the face of multiple and justified claims of different sectors that make up the Venezuelan educational framework.

Education represents one of the most debated issues in recent months, since the application of distance learning modality (little explored and very little known in the pedagogical experience of the country) has left more mistakes, gaps, and doubts than good academic results. It is necessary to mention that since March 2020, the national government decreed the suspension of face-to-face activities at all educational levels of the country, and its replacement with two plans: *Each Family a School* and *a University at Home*, which implied the execution of academic activities through the use of new technologies. These technologies are not available to the vast majority of students, teachers, and professors. In addition, its execution requires having electricity and internet access on a continuous and regular basis.

On the other hand, this Summary presents a general perspective on the reality experienced by women and girls in Zulia. Their rights have been undermined in all aspects of their lives since the connotation of patriarchy still prevails in Zulia society.

However, thousands of women tirelessly fight to conquer and defend their roles despite the severe limitations that the State itself imposes on their actions due to omission and normative, administrative or judicial inoperability. The battle to earn the recognition and vindication of their rights is long, especially amid the suffering, humiliation, and excessive ridicule they're subjected to. Thus, the State fails to comply with international mandates, such as the one provided for in Article 3 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, whose text stipulates that "*States Parties shall take in all fields, in particular in the political, social, economic and cultural fields, all appropriate measures, including legislation, to ensure the full development and advancement of women , for the purpose of guaranteeing them the exercise and enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms on a basis of equality with men*"<sup>1</sup>.

To this end, the State must guarantee a life free of all types of violence, understanding that violence against women exceeds the physical aspect, as regulated in Article 15 of the Organic Law on the Right of Women to A Life Free from Violence<sup>2</sup>, the following are considered forms of gender violence against women: psychological violence; bullying or harassment; threat; physical violence; domestic violence; sexual violence; violent carnal access; forced prostitution; sexual slavery; sexual harassment; workplace violence; patrimonial and economic violence; obstetric violence; forced sterilization; media violence; institutional violence; symbolic violence; women, girls, and adolescents trafficking; femicide; and, assisted or induced suicide.

A critical convergence point between the two topics discussed in this Summary refers to the importance and need to guarantee the right to education of Zulian girls and adolescents, because leaving girls and adolescents outside the educational system puts them at a disadvantage and increases their vulnerability since they don't have the cognitive or attitudinal tools to defend their women condition or the rights that it involves.

The most essential data on the status of Covid-19 and the vaccination process in the region are mentioned. Once again, Zulia accumulates a high number of infected people in the face of the usual panorama of hospital deficiencies and inaccessibility to medicines.

## 1. EDUCATIONAL SITUATION IN ZULIA

Education is a human right and a fundamental social duty. According to the Venezuelan Constitution, education is democratic, free, and compulsory, and the State must assume the “...*indeclinable function of maximum interest in all its levels and modalities...*”. In this sense, it is considered a public service whose primary provider must be the Venezuelan State, which must provide it free of charge until university undergraduate degrees. This means that it has an obligation to create and sustain institutions that allow the access, permanence, and completion of the educational process in a comprehensive, high-quality, permanent manner, and under equal conditions and opportunities<sup>3</sup>.

Education is the human being's form of liberation. A State that does not promote and invest in the education of its citizens uses ignorance as a weapon of submission, especially in contingency situations such as that experienced because of Covid-19 in the country, whose fundamental guarantee must aim to establish means to access education for all without distinction or obstacles and to support the necessary conditions for this.

On this topic, the Venezuelan State must adopt the “... *appropriate measures to guarantee access to the right to education from a comprehensive point of view. In this sense, even if education centers remain closed during the pandemic, this should not lead to an increase in educational inequalities due to gender, poverty, disability, ethnicity, religion, geographical location, among others. On the other hand, the decisions to reopen educational centers must guarantee that potential risks to the health of the people in this area are overcome, guaranteeing safe educational opportunities for children and adolescents, also extending to their families*

<sup>4</sup>. As it will be seen subsequently, this is very far from the Zulian reality.

### Attrition of teachers, professors and students

Student dropouts continue to rise. Many young people have put aside their studies due to the need to work to support their homes, an issue that worsened with the application of distance education to which not everyone has access. This situation represents a huge emotional burden and uncertainty for a large part of Zulia's youth, as they feel trapped between wanting to advance and not being able to do so.

Most young people in the region who dropped out of school are engaged in activities such as motorcycle taxis, deliveries, food or clothing sales, street trading, among others. According to the president of the Union of Teachers of the state of Zulia (Suma), there were no precise figures on student desertion at the beginning of this year because this could only be verified upon return to classrooms<sup>5</sup>.

However, data published in May by *Todos por la educación* Alliance, as a result of a survey applied in several states of the country, including the Zulia region, demonstrated that the percentage of school dropouts before and during quarantine was up to 50%. Regarding the absence of teachers, this same survey points to a dropout of up to 17.50% since the beginning of the pandemic, so this figure must be included in the high rate of teacher absence that had been experienced in previous years<sup>6</sup>.

The impressive index managed by the Union of Teachers of Venezuela stands out, whose president estimates that in the country approximately 80% of students are not prepared for a higher level, since they were not able to pass all the contents taught under distance education modality in the 2020-2021 school period, ratifying the lack of preparation for this type of educational modality, which could have been led by the Department of Educational Technology that was eliminated by the Ministry of People's Power for Education years ago<sup>7</sup>.

In March of this year, the Union of Teachers of the state announced that they would not return to classrooms without a previous salary adjustment, regardless of the application of the

vaccination plan for this educational sector, since, according to the president of the Union of Teachers of Zulia state, “*the vaccination plan must be accompanied by a decent salary. That is one of the essential aspects. The requirement is a fixed salary adjustment because even if you get vaccinated, you cannot eat without a salary adjustment. The Union of teachers will not go back to classrooms. Vaccines are not food. We demand improvements to be able to live with dignity*”.

Thus, the fundamental problem is that teachers have no decent salary to cover their needs. Due to this reality, many educators must find other occupations and have even been forced to emigrate<sup>8</sup>. This is a matter of great concern because spaces are left empty that can hardly be filled by well-prepared people to assume these responsibilities.

In this vein, since July, the return to face-to-face education in the country has been announced as of October. However, the union organizations of Zulia state that this represents madness. Thus, the Federation of Teachers of the Lagunillas municipality demands that for this to be viable, in addition to the active vaccination process for the education sector, the conditioning of the schools is necessary. Most of them are dirty, in the dark, do not have basic services, and have been victims of the underworld. Also, salaries need to be adjusted<sup>9</sup>. Even though the announced salary increase of July was considered important, it is still insufficient given the high rates of hyperinflation of the country<sup>10</sup>.

According to the organization *Todos por la Educación*, in May, a teacher earned an income of less than USD 0.13 per day as a salary. Along with this, the national government has stipulated a series of subsidies called education-related bonuses, such as the Simón Rodríguez Bonus (Bs. 16,700,000.00, that is, USD 5.9, at that time)<sup>11</sup>. In this regard, the aforementioned organization states that: “... *the administration of this authoritarian system for the allocation of selective subsidies is presented as a control instrument that does not propose to free the educational community from the situation of extreme poverty that it suffers, but to binder, on the other hand, the articulation and the direction of demands of the educational union towards the State, as a consequence of the growing need and the fear of losing bonuses or their job*”<sup>12</sup>.

This dramatic reality is exacerbated in rural areas of the state, for example in the Guajira municipality, where teachers dedicate themselves to informal trade to survive since the salary they receive is not even enough to buy the ingredients for a full lunch. For this reason, many sell coffee, *empanadas*, prepaid mobile recharges, among others. In their best day, they must settle for butter, a pack of cornmeal and a quarter of a kilo of cheese<sup>13</sup>, which is clearly a sad and outrageous situation, in the case of people who dedicated their lives to study and work, to shape new generations, and which are today abandoned due to State irresponsibility.

Proof of this is evidenced in the aforementioned survey carried out in several states, including Zulia, and presented in May by *Todos por la educación* Alliance: 77.27% of interviewed teachers report failures in the provision of some basic service; 50% of cases do not have access to basic services and they report schools and high schools without electricity, water and much less access to the internet<sup>14</sup>.

Notwithstanding the foregoing, the national government insists on the announcement of the gradual reincorporation to face-to-face education. The response to this call has been a refusal on the part of teachers, who suffer in their own flesh unfair salaries, the lack of maintenance of educational facilities, the dismantling and looting of academic institutions, the almost null provision of basic services in these areas, student attrition and human capital flight.

It is noted that true educators are irreplaceable. Non-professionals and inexperienced people cannot be granted the task of educating human beings as citizens aware of their rights. The so-called piracy in classrooms should be avoided, since the shaper of generations, the teacher, must be an integral person in knowledge, attitude, vocation and ethics.

### **Distance education amidst the pandemic**

Difficulties to access to education represent a problem that affects all municipalities in the state. However, to a large extent, rural municipalities have suffered a more dramatic and direct impact, such is the case of the Guajira municipality. Since last year, when the implementation of this modality of education with the use of new technologies began, warnings were immediate. In this area of the state, the absence of necessary tools for student prosecution was reported, even though in the course of the year successive announcements were being made about a possible return to face-to-face education, which were not materialized due to the constant outbreaks of positive cases of Covid-19 in the country.

Without electricity, internet, or electronic devices it is impossible to make this possible. In addition, students don't have money to buy study guides either. It is estimated that in this municipality there are 178 schools with an enrollment of 20,000 students and by the beginning of this year an average of 80% of these institutions were closed<sup>15</sup>. Undoubtedly, courses taught under these conditions represented quite a challenge. That is why many describe it as an incomplete education, which forced many children to leave schools because they did not have the basic means for its implementation<sup>16</sup>.

This is a reality that is experienced at the national level, whose general diagnosis points to a clear setback and weakening of the educational system. The Plan *Each House a School* executed by the national government leaves much to be desired, since distance education cannot be based solely on the delivery of activities that are often completed by parents. Furthermore, the vast majority of teachers do not have the electronic means to optimize this learning process.

This leads to the affirmation that the Venezuelan State has failed to comply with its constitutional obligation to guarantee the educational process of the people. Even, according to data managed by the organization *Todos por la Educación*, it is reported that 90.97% of teachers perceive this distance education system implemented by the national government as negative<sup>17</sup>. Another worrying aspect is the degree of education of teachers. Spokesmen for the Observatory of Education organization affirm that the teacher's profile is no longer important but that "*it seems that the most important thing is to have a profile that fits PSUV*"<sup>18</sup>.

Faced with this scenario, the right to education is intermittent, since, in addition to the shortcomings to carry out this distance education in the midst of an unprecedented economic crisis and the pandemic context, academic training and interaction that is usually received in schools is left in the hands of parents and / or guardians. Unfortunately, many times these parents and / or guardians do not have the necessary knowledge to undertake this serious responsibility and, in this sense, far from being a solution, this represents a violation to the rights of children and adolescents of the region.

As mentioned in June the return to face-to-face education for the 2021-2022 school year in October has been announced, which, according to statements of the Minister of Education, would be conditional in compliance with the vaccination plan<sup>19</sup>. However, as mentioned, in addition to mass vaccination, without knowing official figures regarding this sector until now, teachers are demanding pay rise and rehabilitation of school infrastructure as the first steps towards returning to face-to-face education.

It is necessary to note that teachers are aware of the need to resume face-to-face education because, according to statements by the president of the Venezuelan Federation of Teachers, '*We have receded a lot these last two years regarding education. Going through a third year under these conditions would be very, very harmful for students under public education. We must make an effort, both the government and we, the teachers who are willing to do so, as long as they guarantee the conditions that we are demanding*'<sup>20</sup>.

On the other hand, it is highlighted that this emergency in education precedes the decree of social and collective quarantine. The point is that after said decree and before the abandonment of

educational institutions by the government, the situation worsened. These previous problems range from insufficient wages and the lack of maintenance of the educational infrastructure to the serious levels of malnutrition among students due to the discontinuity of school feeding programs.

This panorama worsened when they tried to use new technologies to implement distance education, further widening the inequality gap in access to education. Likewise, educational quality decreased to the point where children and young people did not reach the necessary skills for their promotion<sup>21</sup>.

Another consequence that should be highlighted, stated by the national secretary general of the Union of teachers of Venezuela, is that primary education was left in the hands of parents and / or guardians, who do not have an electronic device - given its high cost - to carry out this type of education; Also, serious psychological problems have been caused to children, since confinement damages a normal childhood and reveals many difficulties in learning.

In addition, a large number of teachers left the educational system, a situation that is so serious that even education authorities are requesting education zones throughout the country to recruit high school graduates to be incorporated as teachers. This constitutes another concern, since these are young people who do not have the necessary tools or the pedagogical or didactic capacities to undertake and assume this responsibility<sup>22</sup>.

### School infrastructure

The official announcements of a possible return to face-to-face education in October have generated anxiety, concern and great uncertainty given the reality of the infrastructure and services of educational institutions in the region. In this regard, as a result of the survey applied by Todos por la Educación, 68.18% of the interviewed teachers consider that the educational institution where they work requires attention regarding its infrastructure, among other needs, such as the constant theft of desks, light bulbs and bathroom fittings, essential elements to activate face-to-face education<sup>23</sup>.

In this sense, the president of the Venezuelan Federation of Teachers estimated that at the national level, before the pandemic, 70% of educational establishments faced structural problems: lack of drinking water, damaged bathrooms, deteriorated spaces, lack of supplies, closed dining rooms, and after two years of closure of these facilities, the situation worsened as a result of vandalism. For this reason, it is estimated that, for this year, at least 90% of school facilities require reconditioning<sup>24</sup> due to leaks in ceilings and / or walls that require immediate repair to avoid further damage and lack of lighting and ventilation<sup>25</sup>.

Specifically, in the case of Zulia, since the beginning of this year, constant thefts suffered by educational institutions have been denounced, leaving the schools evicted and with incalculable losses due to the neglect of the competent bodies. Schools abound without desks, sanitary rooms, totally looted and in ruins, without school canteens<sup>26</sup>.

An example of the above are the persistent electricity and internet failures that prevent the development of academic activities of students from 90 communities in the Guajira municipality, who sometimes must pay up to COP 2,000.00 for one hour of Wi-Fi connection to research to complete their homework because telephone lines are nonexistent in these areas<sup>27</sup>. In addition, a good part of the schools in this municipality were vandalized to smuggle their wiring and metals<sup>28</sup>.

However, the call of competent authorities to resume face-to-face classes continues, applying the same plan of quarantine flexibility scheme following the 7 + 7 mechanism, in addition to a vaccination session planned for children and adolescents starting in October<sup>29</sup>. This issue is highly debated by health specialists. Faced with this, the opinion of teachers remains in the sense that the conditions for returning to classrooms are not in place.

To this end, the president of the Union of Teachers of Zulia assured that 85% of schools are not suitable to restart face-to-face education, since there are no toilets, no desks, no drinking water,

or electricity. Even emblematic institutions of the state such as the Liceo Coquivacoa were robbed the last year, in addition to not having basic services, and 80% of Liceo Baralt's facilities are disabled. This situation is aggravated in the absence of biosafety plans<sup>30</sup>.

### **Higher education crisis**

This year 2021 can be considered one of the worst in terms of the loss of the university academics in the country. The unprecedented professor and student attrition, limited salaries, the violation of academic autonomy, the dismantling of higher education facilities, the abandonment and excessive neglect of universities by the current national government, have no antecedents in our history.

The first days of the year can be considered tragic for the main university in the region, since in the early morning of January 7, 30 armed men entered the Postgraduate facilities of the Faculty of Humanities and Education of the University of Zulia and subdued security staff. One of them was thrown from the second floor of the building and was seriously injured. In addition, serious material damage and theft of equipment and wiring were caused<sup>31</sup>.

This situation confirms the extreme abandonment of university facilities of which the national government is responsible. Another example is the case of the Rafael María Baralt National Experimental University<sup>32</sup>. These are irreversible or hard-to-recover damages that have a direct impact on all university activities.

This anguishing panorama has prevailed since 2020, increased by the suspension of face-to-face classes and the insufficient budget to guarantee security, which resulted in empty university facilities and the increase in thefts and robberies that point to acts of organized crime and not only of ordinary crime<sup>33</sup>.

An example of this is the case of the Faculty of Engineering of the University of Zulia, one of the spaces hardest hit by the underworld and laziness, where there are many broken ceilings, a shortage of desks, damaged doors and garbage accumulated in corridors and classrooms. It also does not have electricity because its electrical panels and power lines were stolen.

The university problem increases with the budgetary suffocation: for this year, 2021, only the amount corresponding to January was delivered, and the deposit was incomplete. There is no budget to activate operations, no transportation for personnel, no toner, no paper, and even resources to purchase a light bulb<sup>34</sup>.

As mentioned, the university crisis worsened with the implementation of a remote system for which no one was prepared. This lack of preparation depends on many factors since not only is it focused on the lack of capacities and competencies between teachers and students for the management of digital and technological tools of education, but on the inexistence of a platform that allows interaction, lack and obsolescence of electronic devices, the deficiency in the provision of services such as electricity and low internet connectivity, necessary for the continuity of the educational process under this modality.

In spite of this, another negative element joins this problem. It has to do with the nonexistent salary conditions and social security for university professors and staff, who do not have primary medical care, hospitalization, or surgeries, or maternity. The national government ignores these demand, and therefore unions and students of the University of Zulia warn that the national executive “threatens to close the public system of university education”<sup>35</sup>.

On the contrary, the national government continues to impose arbitrary decisions that undermine academic autonomy. Such is the case of the migration of the already insufficient salary payments to a centralized platform managed by the national government, which represents a blatant and flagrant violation of the administrative autonomy of the universities.

This is a continuation of a systematic and conscious attack by the government against university autonomy. In addition, registration in the Patria system is necessary to collect special bonuses, social security pensions, gasoline subsidies, and the Simón Rodríguez bonus, among others. Therefore, those who are not registered will not receive what corresponds to them by right, leaving social security institutes and, teachers' associations whose contributions came from teacher salaries, adrift<sup>36</sup>.

International organizations, such as the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, have expressed concern about this. These State actions undermine university autonomy and generate a frightening effect on university professors and officials with critical positions towards the government. Thus, the Commission recalls that “...universities are a fundamental pillar for democracy, whose essential element is criticism and plurality. In this sense, we urge the Venezuelan State to adopt measures aimed at guaranteeing academic autonomy, including the allocation of the adequate budget for the operations of university institutions and guaranteeing that the payroll payments of the personnel of public universities are made through an independent and impartial system that protects academic freedom and expression”<sup>37</sup>.

Concerns about the university crisis are not limited to the above but extend to the few opportunities that the country can offer to young graduates. For this reason, young people affirm that there are no opportunities to grow in the country since the State does not provide guarantees to access to employment, quality education, political participation, coupled with an absolute non-observance of the promotion and protection of human rights<sup>38</sup>.

Meanwhile, and in opposite to this reality, according to data provided by Nicolás Maduro, in the 2020-2021 academic period, 370,000 new high school graduates graduated who, according to him, have guaranteed spots in universities. He also reported that he authorized resources for the creation of 48 Community Public Works Brigades for the university sector in order to carry out maintenance work<sup>39</sup>.

## 2. SITUATION OF WOMEN RIGHTS IN ZULIA

Traditionally, women and girls have been diminished in their being and existence. The configuration of equal rights has been a struggle whose result is still difficult to understand and apply for some. Gender equality implies a recognized human right, with solid bases for its promotion and protection, “...essential to achieve peaceful societies, with full human potential and capable of sustainable development...”<sup>40</sup>, but it undoubtedly represents one of the most controversial rights Worldwide. Under this premise, gender-based violence has been the weapon of those who oppose, out of ignorance or conviction, to recognize women as equal human beings, subject to rights and protagonists of their own existence.

In the report titled Vilified Bodies, Codhez, Mulier and Proyecto Mujeres, state that “Gender violence is a threat against the dignity and psychological, moral and physical integrity of women. It represents the highest manifestation of gender inequality and remains the leading cause of violent deaths for women. Although structural gender violence, to a greater or lesser extent, has a global scope, in Venezuela, it converges with the complex humanitarian emergency (EHC) and the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, drawing an especially critical panorama for women and girls”<sup>41</sup>.

Zulia women are victims of a regressive and selfish culture that refuses to accept their free will of decision and action, in addition to a State that turns the other way and does not assume its constitutional obligation to guarantee the exercise of rights and prerogatives that have always been owed to Venezuelan women. Instead, it contributes to their deterioration by not providing minimum living conditions and not granting them security or justice.

It was just over 40 years ago when the world began to pay attention to the constant injustices suffered by women. In 1979 the UN General Assembly approved the Convention on the elimination

of all forms of discrimination against women, which entered into force on September 3, 1981, whose article 1 provides that the expression discrimination against women denotes “*all distinction, exclusion or restriction based on sex whose object or result is to impair or nullify the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women, regardless of their marital status, based on the equality of men and women, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural and civil spheres or any other sphere*”<sup>42</sup>.

In Venezuela, the Organic Law on the Right of Women to a Life Free from Violence rules, whose last amendment was materialized in 2014. This law's primary object of regulation is to “*...guarantee and promote the right of women to a life free from violence, creating conditions to prevent, provide attention, punish and eradicate violence against women in any of its manifestations and spheres, promoting changes in sociocultural patterns that sustain gender inequality and power relations over women, to favor the creation of a just, democratic, participatory, joint and protagonist society*”<sup>43</sup>.

### **The life of the Zulian woman: a perennial suffering**

One of the aspects that is part of the focal point of the discussion centered on women's rights revolves around the violence of which millions of women and girls in the country are victims, particularly in Zulia. According to the law above, violence against women comprises “*...any sexist act that has or may result in death, damage or physical, sexual, psychological, emotional, labor, economic or patrimonial suffering; coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, as well as the threat of executing such acts, whether they occur in the public or private sphere*”<sup>44</sup>.

In general, according to the Utopix monitor, 256 femicides were registered in the country in 2020, with an average of one woman dead every 34 hours. The existence of the quarantine contributed to the victims having to remain under the same roof as their aggressors, and likewise, the limitations to mobilize due to the shortage of gasoline, public transport, and cash contributed to this<sup>45</sup>.

In this regard, according to data from the Venezuelan Observatory of Violence, In Zulia, almost one femicide per month was recorded during 2020, adding a total of 11 deceased women and 15 attempted homicides due to gender violence. Among the perpetrators, men stand out due to the context of domination over the woman, the father or stepfather, sons-in-law, and male neighbors of the victim. Also, at least two rapes and sexual abuse were reported each month, of which 50% of the victims were girls under 14 years old<sup>46</sup>.

By the beginning of 2021, the number of victims continues to rise. According to the Digital Observatory of Femicides of the Center for Justice and Peace (Cepaz), during January 18 femicides were registered throughout the country is, a woman was killed every 38 hours. Most of these events occurred in the victim's home<sup>47</sup>.

In Zulia, during the first two months of the year, 20 women and 23 girls and adolescents were victims of physical and psychological violence, with a predominance of physical abuse –fist-blows– in women, and sexual assault on girls and adolescents. The scenarios for this grotesque behavior are varied: men who take advantage of the vulnerability of women with children in need of food, who use intimidation to rape and assault them; kidnapping of women where there is physical and psychological abuse; and women savagely beaten by ex-partners. This last assumption, according to the Venezuelan Observatory of Violence in Zulia, is motivated by “*...a macho culture in which women are considered property and the rupture of the relationship is not accepted; the refusal to return to the abuser causes this type of aggression that, on occasions, ends with the death of the ladies*”<sup>48</sup>.

For the first semester of this year, as part of the domestic violence experienced in the region, 43 attacks against women based on gender violence were reported in Zulia. In this regard, according to the Venezuelan Observatory of Violence in Zulia, “*The cases of physical, psychological and sexual abuse of boys, girls, adolescents and women that are known seem to be just the tip of the iceberg of a problem of which we have indications that it is more generalized than we suspect. Likely, this increase in cases of violence against children,*

*minors, and women is associated, among other factors, with confinement that has forced an unusual cohabitation, becoming a risk factor, in which potential aggressors expand the possibilities of attacking under these new conditions of coexistence at home'*<sup>49</sup>.

In this context, for the first quarter of 2021, Utopix reported 58 cases of femicides throughout Venezuela. The case of the induced suicide of an 11-year-old girl in the state of Zulia is highlighted due to being raped by her father<sup>50</sup>, foreseen and punished as a crime in article 59 of the Organic Law on the Right to Women to a Life Free of Violence<sup>51</sup>.

On a different note, during May, campaigns to report sexual abuse began through social networks. Several women raised their voices to publicize the abuses to which they had been subjected. This aroused the interest to investigate these facts by the Public Ministry. According to experts in the field, these public complaints indicate that the State's protection system and its justice system failed them, since '*The victim sees social networks as a place where her aggressor can receive the social rejection that she is waiting for'*<sup>52</sup>. It's a matter of putting under the spotlight acts of harassment and abuse that are not normally evident in the country due to the macho and androgenic culture. However, this represents an awakening in people's consciences to begin the path of understanding towards the value of women as human beings, as equal persons and holders of free exercise rights.

In effect, the State system has failed Venezuelan women, and particularly Zulian women. According to the Report on the treatment that the Judicial Branch in Venezuela and specifically the Supreme Tribunal of Justice, have given to cases of violence against women, presented by Access to Justice, several and repetitive are the behaviors of the actors of the Venezuelan justice contrary to the interests of women and a gender perspective. These are decisions that point to the intervention of the judge where prejudices, roles or stereotypes are perceived against women as protected subjects; court decisions that do not take into account the principle of intersectionality of the victim, that is, contextual elements that concurrently victimize women such as poverty, belonging to an indigenous ethnic group, having a disability, power relations, among others; and decisions in which serious violations of women's rights are committed in such a way that they distort the judicial process and that it does not serve the purposes that the law requires, such as re-victimization, judicial delay, omission of fundamental elements of the process, among others<sup>53</sup>.

Another form of violence against women is reflected in human trafficking. By 2020, 517 Venezuelan women in the hands of human trafficking networks were rescued, including 124 girls and adolescents. This crime threatens the life and dignity of the person and that translates into sexual exploitation, forced labor, domestic servitude, child begging or organ removals<sup>54</sup>. In this regard, Mulier organization warns "*that girls and adolescents drop out of school to take care of household chores or to go out to work and this implies a greater risk for them to be captured by human-trafficking networks or gender-based violence*". It was even highlighted that girls and adolescents who continued their studies were also virtually exposed to abusive situations by staying online longer and running the risk of being caught by traffickers. Another alarming element pointed out is that "*one in four Venezuelan girls leaves the country alone or without the accompaniment of their parents or their representatives, and this makes them more vulnerable to this crime'*<sup>55</sup>.

Another problem, but just as worrisome since it threatens the physical and emotional stability of women, as well as their quality of life, has to do with the suffering of millions of women due to the ineffectiveness and deficiency of the state in the provision of basic services –Drinking water, electricity, domestic gas, among others– and protection in cases of gender-based violence in the context of the pandemic.

This warning is highlighted by Mulier in their Report on the Results of the Program of Psychological Care for Women in Situations of Gender Violence, stating that amidst "...health emergencies, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the risk of violence intensifies. Stress, social disruption, lack of

*protection, loss of income, and reduced access to services affect women differently. In many countries where citizens are encouraged or required to stay at home, the risk of intimate partner violence is likely to increase*<sup>56</sup>.

It is women who come to terms with these circumstances and apply adaptation strategies to achieve calmness for their family amid the daily chaos that living in Zulia implies.

For example, these are women of any age, usually with children, who must go on foot to get water, go to places where they provide it, sell it or improvised water outlets because it does not reach their homes, and then return with heavy bottles of water dragging a wheelbarrow, baby stroller, wheelchairs. They live on the edge of ravines where the city's sewage pools<sup>57</sup>.

Other women have to use wood for cooking because the domestic gas service is nonexistent or because the purchase of a gas cylinder is inaccessible, with the risk of suffering respiratory diseases, burns, irritations, suffocation from the impact of wood smoke. Some of these women are even pregnant or breastfeeding and must undergo this ordeal to feed their children<sup>58</sup>.

The other common ailment is living in the dark due to a lack of electricity. Women are victims of extensive electricity rationing and blackouts with temperatures that can reach 40 degrees. They always try to alleviate the climate for their children and keep them away from mosquitoes, all of which generate anxiety, panic, sadness, and discouragement to move on with their day-to-day<sup>59</sup>, and that is how their lives go by, amid worries and despair.

These behaviors in the midst of the complex humanitarian emergency experienced in the country, make it possible to confirm that, in the domestic sphere, most women “...continue to be rooted in gender roles oriented to these patterns of care provision and protection of the family and, therefore, outreach, of the most vulnerable members of your community. In this sense, they lose autonomy because they feel called to take care of others to give meaning and importance to their lives”<sup>60</sup>, and unconsciously they immolate their present and future life. The foregoing is a scenario that contradicts inter-American provisions, such as the one provided for in Article 5 of the Inter-American Convention to Prevent, Punish and Eradicate Violence against Women Convention of Belém do Pará, which states that “Every woman exercise freely and fully exercise their civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights and will have the full protection of those rights enshrined in regional and international instruments on human rights. The States Parties recognize that violence against women prevents and nullifies the exercise of these rights”<sup>61</sup>.

By way of information, the Maracaibo Mayor's Office activated a hot line to receive complaints of cases of gender-based violence (0800-Violeta or 0800-8465382)<sup>62</sup>.

### 3. GENERAL SITUATION OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN ZULIA

One of the first news that emerged in September was related to the presence of the Mu variant in the region, initially detected in Colombia, classified by the WHO as a variant of interest, that is, the one whose transmission is community-based with suspicions of being of greater transmission. However, the predominant variant in the country is the so-called gamma, initially detected in Brazil<sup>63</sup>.

By September 10, according to official information, there were more than 344,000 positive cases at the national level since the start of the pandemic. At the same time, it was reported that 693,600 vaccines had been received from Sinovac laboratories, as part of the acquisition made through Covax, constituting the first batch of 12,068,000 doses of vaccines that Venezuela would receive through this mechanism<sup>64</sup>.

In Zulia, the administration of the second dose of the Sputnik V vaccine was reported. The state governor affirmed that this implementation would achieve the goal of 50,000 immunized people per day in the state. Likewise, he reported on the initiation of house-to-house immunization for people in bed and pregnant women with fourteen weeks of gestation, although he offered no further details<sup>65</sup>.

By mid-September, the presence of at least five variants of Covid-19 was confirmed: alpha, delta, gamma, lambda and mu at the national level, and the death of seven health workers due to complications derived from Covid-19 was reported, among them a Zulian doctor. According to the records of Doctors United for Venezuela, to this date, 747 members of the health personnel have died throughout the country since the beginning of the pandemic<sup>66</sup>. Meanwhile, the national government has only reported the death of 194 health workers to PAHO since March 2020<sup>67</sup>.

For its part, the Medical Federation of Venezuela expressed the danger that the lifting of sanitary measures implies in the face of Nicolás Maduro's proposal to make said measures more flexible during November and December<sup>68</sup>. On the other hand, the National Academy of Medicine pointed out that only 14.88% of Venezuelans have received the two doses of the vaccine against Covid-19, which represents approximately 4,260,000 people, compared to the data announced by Nicolás Maduro who assured that by September 23, 40% of the population would have been vaccinated, without specifying if it corresponded to a dose or two of the vaccine<sup>69</sup>.

September closed with a total of 233,800,338 infected people and 4,784,177 deaths, worldwide<sup>70</sup>. In Venezuela, according to figures published by the national government, 368,968 positive cases were recorded since the beginning of the quarantine and 4,469 people died from Covid-19. For this same date, Zulia registered 28,987 positive cases<sup>71</sup>.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

The rising vulnerability of school-age children and youth people is one of the greatest concerns regarding education. The reasons are diverse: these children and young people are often the primary source of income for their families and are dedicated to finding a livelihood to feed themselves. This results in school attrition, and a child who leaves school is a child whose fragility increases in every way.

The complicated situation of the education system in Zulia urgently requires recreating teaching-learning based on values and ethics: it is about enhancing the right to education as the basis of any organized and civic society. To achieve this objective, it is necessary to go through the exaltation of teachers and professors who, amid this complex humanitarian emergency and repeated violations of human rights, maintain their vocation intact but eager for freedom and social justice both for themselves and for their students.

The state response has been to promote a systematic and continuous program of destruction of education at all levels, to replace it with indoctrination and alienation plans that do not benefit the millions of Zulian children, adolescents and young people, limiting hopes for growth and promoting the training of people who are not proactive and unaware of their capacities and rights.

This systematic and continuous program is demonstrated by the abandonment of the educational infrastructure by competent bodies, the malfunction of public services, the lack of public transport, the shortage of gasoline, the food crisis, low wages, the violation of university autonomy, with no response or governmental alternatives. That is why we demand the Venezuelan State to design and apply effective and timely public policies to rescue the Venezuelan educational system, with particular attention to the most unprotected areas.

On the other hand, the Venezuelan State must pay strict attention to guaranteeing and protecting the rights of Zulian women. It is necessary to implement measures that allow the prevention of events of gender-based violence, and to end once and for all the diminished vision that is attributed to women. Otherwise, the State would keep on having this outstanding debt that increases each time the integrity of the woman is compromised.

The appropriate attention to cases related to any of the forms of gender violence requires the correct training of the competent personnel, which implies their sensitization to deal with this type of violence, and thus avoid the re-victimization of women by a State that does not fulfill its constitutional responsibilities.

In this sense, the Venezuelan State must assume its obligation in the adoption of administrative, legislative, judicial measures and changes of any other nature that allow guaranteeing the human rights of women and girls victims of violence, as well as creating the ideal set-up to achieve goal 5 of the Sustainable Development Goals, such as achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls, in equal circumstances, without conditions or denials of any kind.

## NOTES

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