

# MIGRANT STORIES: SHELTERED LIVES

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Thousands of people have crossed the border between Venezuela and Brazil, and upon arriving on the Brazilian ground they often become just “the Venezuelan”, as if their existence could be reduced to a single belonging, determined by nationality. However, they are women, men, trans, children, youth, adults, the elderly, displaced human beings with diverse life experiences, converged by the condition of becoming a migrant, a refugee, which does not dilute the other constitutive aspects of their identity. In the project Migrant Stories we photograph

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and get in touch with their life stories. Along the following lines and photos we will share with you part of this experience.

According to the United Nations, more than 5.2 million people have already left Venezuela, especially since 2018, most of them to Latin American and Caribbean countries, mainly Colombia, Peru, Ecuador, Chile and Brazil, in the total of 4.3 million and millions of Venezuelan migrants and refugees on the continent, a situation of displacement unprecedented in the region (UNHCR and IMO, 2020). The migratory flow of Venezuelans to Brazil has intensified since 2017, with Roraima, a state bordering Venezuela, the main gateway to the country, mainly through the city of Pacaraima. Once in Brazil, most continue to the state capital, Boa Vista, covering the 215 kilometers between both cities in many cases on foot or hitchhiking, a journey that journalists Costa and Brandão (2018) experienced and called “the route of hunger”.

It is estimated that around 264,617 Venezuelan migrants and refugees are currently living in Brazil.<sup>7</sup> There are different factors in the decision of each one to leave Venezuela, and although affected in a different ways and intensity by them, throughout the project Migrant Stories we have recurrently come across with testimonies from migrants and refugees whose motivations stem from the worsening of the economic and political crisis in Venezuela, in a context of hyperinflation, violence, food and medicine shortages. Starting in 2018, Migrant Stories is an ongoing project linked to International Relations Department and the Sérgio Vieira de Mello Chair at the Federal University of Roraima (UFRR) in Boa Vista, Brazil.

“It is as if they have forced us to leave, it was not our desire to come here. We simply had no other option. The situation was so critical that we could no longer live there” says Ruth about her decision to leave Venezuela. She lives with her son and husband at the shelter Rondon 1, currently inhabited by 757 people, one of the twelve shelters for migrants and refugees in Boa Vista, which together host an average of 6000 migrants and refugees (ACNUR, 2020). The shelters are the result of the Brazilian Government’s *Operação Acolhida* (Operation Welcome) launched in march 2018. This Operation encompasses the Brazilian government at federal, state and municipal levels as well as the support of UN agencies and civil society organizations. It is coordinated by the Humanitarian Logistics Task Force, formed by the Armed Forces, which is responsible for providing shelters with security, food, medical assistance, and also for their infrastructure and maintenance. UNHCR, the UN Agency for Refugees, in its turn, holds a refugee protection mandate and, following a cooperation agreement with the Ministry of Citizenship, is responsible for the shelters’ management through partner organizations.

Ruth and her family are sheltered lives, and by that we refer to individuals in a situation of vulnerability when they are inserted in a migratory flow motivated by the context of a humanitarian crisis and who are living in shelters for migrants and refugees as an emergency measure in a place other than their country of origin. Like many, Ruth left Venezuela driven by a mixture of despair and hope, she left behind a socioeconomic context that became unsustainable, and an affective circle that gave her life meaning and security: loved ones, family

<sup>7</sup> Data available at the Regional Inter-Agency Coordination Platform for Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela (Response For Venezuelans), an initiative co-led by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM). The last update of this number was on December 31<sup>st</sup>, 2019. Available at: <<https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/platform/location/7509>>. Access on: July 13th 2020.

gatherings, her home, her job; she left a part of herself in her pursuit to not only to rebuild herself, but to have a future. And this expectation about what lies ahead gives her strength to deal with a precarious present, full of absences.

As Malkki (1996) argues, there are standardized practices - carried out, for instance, by the media, academia, governments, humanitarian and international organizations - that often visually represent the refugee in a dehistoricizing manner, as a suffering and powerless victim. These practices, she stresses, turn the refugee into an “anonymous corporeality”, an universal victim in a way that their singularity and condition as historical actors are replaced by the one of a speechless body. There is also an ambivalence on the visual representation of migrants and refugees, as a victim in need of protection, in one hand, and as a threat to the host society, on the other (Chouliaraki and Stolic, 2017). The visual framing as a threat dehumanizes the refugees and consequently influence public debate and reinforces politics of fear performed by governments (Bleiker et al., 2013).

The securitization of migration, considering migrants and refugees as threats, can be observed in the State of Roraima’s attempt in 2018 to close its borders with Venezuela under the argument that the Venezuelan migration flow to Brazil had overload the public health and educational system, led to increase in criminality and could bring the collapse of the State’s public system if the arrival of Venezuelans continues. Although this governmental endeavour was overruled by the Brazilian Supreme Court, it has persisted the local authorities instrumentalization of the migration phenomenon as the scape goat to disguise problems within the public administration, including structural challenges long existing before the migration flow (Sarmiento and Rodrigues, 2018; Milesi, Coury and Rovey, 2018). Such xenophobic rhetoric has also been incorporated by part of the civil society in Roraima leading to tensions between migrants, refugees and the host society, resulting in different forms of violence against Venezuelans, ranging from verbal aggression to modern slavery and human traffic.

In Mota’s (2019) study of media representation of Venezuelan migrants in Brazil, with focus on a local newspaper from Boa Vista and on a national one, her findings indicate that both media reproduce stereotyped and stigmatized narratives of migrants and refugees, and therefore, as she puts it, contribute to strengthen the mentioned above tension in Roraima. Several of the subjects we have interviewed along the project Migrant Stories have suffered xenophobia. Ruth, while pregnant, has been called bitch” and “slut” on the streets of Boa Vista, while Mirla has been told in different occasions “go back to your country, you’re not from here!” up to the point to feel ashamed to speak Spanish in public places. Marco, Ali, Abigail and her family have also suffered some sort of aggression due to their nationality as Venezuelans.

The project Migrant Stories conveys a Post/Decolonial loci of enunciation which “attempts to bring visibility to narratives, experiences and perspectives of subalternity, in a process of power rearticulation in which the muted Other in hegemonic discourses assumes the transgressor behavior of speaking” (Carrijo, 2016:41). Instead of anonymous and speechless bodies, each migrant and refugee is considered far beyond mere statistics of entering the country and requesting asylum. They are subjectivities, with a name, Caterine, Francisco, Josbelys, Yraída, etc, whose lives are intertwined by the migratory experience, but each with their own singularity. In the project their life stories gain visibility through photographic and textual narratives that transcend stereotyped imagery. They call into question the hegemonic representation practices and the hierarchical construction of Self and Otherness that positions migrant and refugees in the inferior realm and normalizes the violence against a dehumanized

other. By telling their own narratives, migrants and refugees employ their agency as an act of resistance in demand for the recognition of their legitimacy to engage in a horizontal conversation with the local community, which enables an intercultural dialogue as a fundamental step towards the peaceful coexistence between migrants and refugees and the host society.

The project is carried out by a team of professors and undergraduate students from different areas of knowledge. Its execution involves four steps and, among them, the photographic record and interviews with Venezuelan migrants and refugees in Brazil. So far, the project has focused on those in Boa Vista, in the state of Roraima. Here we will present the experiences specifically regarding the migrants and refugees living in shelters, but in the project we have also been working with people in other livelihood circumstances. We employ a multimethodological approach based on the theoretical and methodological procedures of life story (Atkinson, 1998; Marré, 1991). In short, the life story method aims at “from the synthetic totality that is the specific discourse of an individual - to reconstruct a human experience lived in a group and with a universal tendency”<sup>8</sup> (Marre, 1991: 89).

In the project's first step, we hold meetings with its members in order to discuss topics related to the project, such as contemporary migratory processes, notions of photography, interview techniques and so on. During this preparatory stage, the questions for the interviews are collectively prepared, and further, role play interviews are acted out among the project team. The second step encompasses the field work in which the migrant's and refugee's photographs are taken and their oral narratives are recorded through semi-structured interviews conducted in person in the shelters. The third step involves the selection and edition of the photos as well as the analysis of the narratives of the social subjects of the research and further construction of the texts about their life's stories and, then, the translation into English. Each story is written in two versions, a short one for the project's Instagram and a longer one for its webpage. In the fourth step, the photos and texts produced are published in Portuguese and English on the project's website ([www.estoriasmigrantes.org](http://www.estoriasmigrantes.org)) and Instagram (@estoriasmigrantes).

The photo essay and stories presented below result from the field work taken place throughout the second semester of 2018 at the shelters Nova Canaã and Rondon 1 in Boa Vista, capital of the State of Roraima, Brazil. During this period, we photographed and got in touch with some life stories, listened to their trajectories, opinions, dreams, got to know their daily lives, learned about and with each of the subjects we engaged in conversations with.

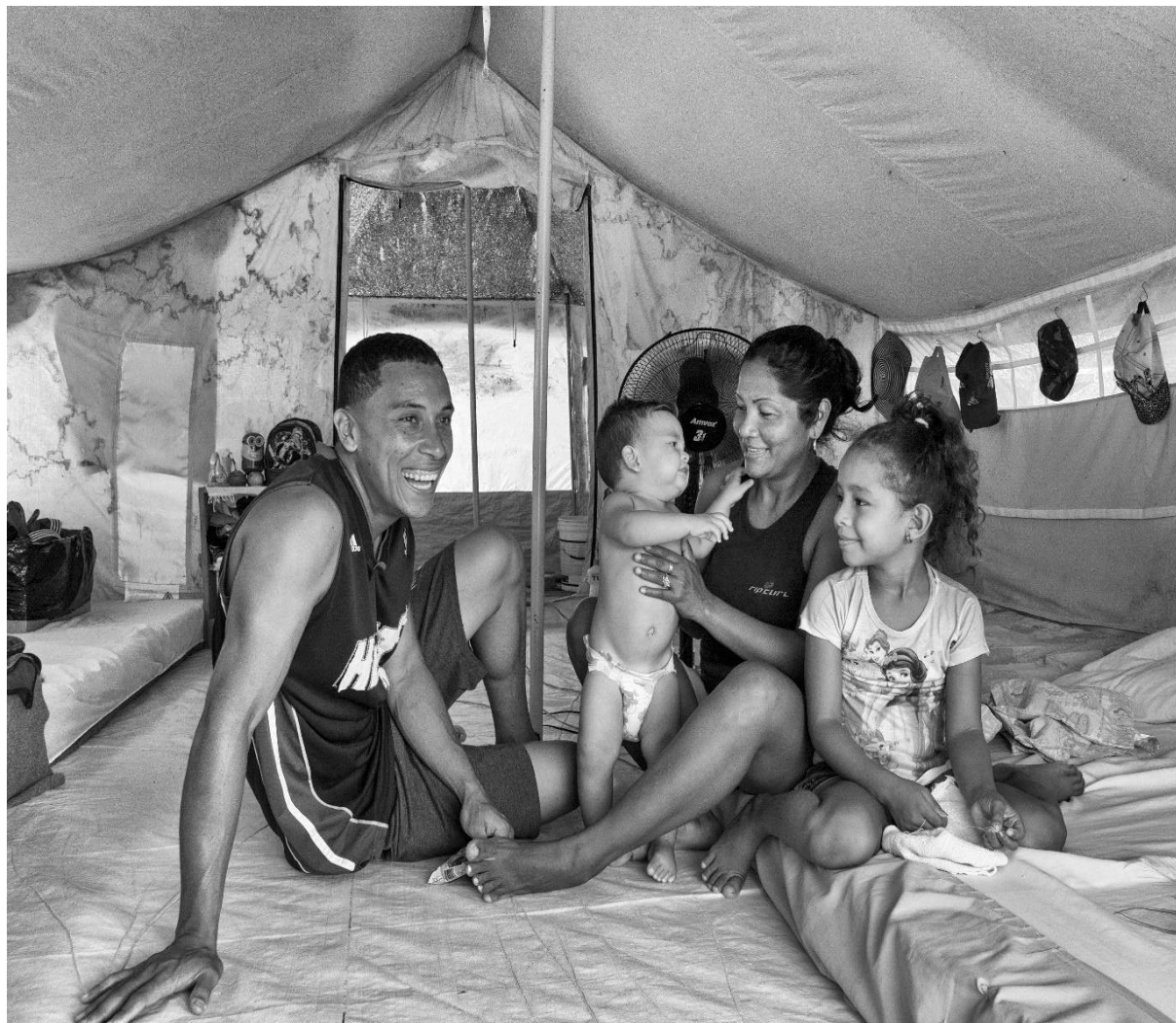
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<sup>8</sup> Our translation, original in Portuguese, “a partir da totalidade sintética que é o discurso específico de um indivíduo – reconstruir uma experiência humana vivida em grupo e de tendência universal”



*“I think this is the best place where I could start over with my family.”*

**Ali**



**Ali and his family**

Ali Del Valle Carrillo Peinado, 30, used to live in the city of Maturín, Venezuela. He was in the last semester of the undergraduate course in physical education and worked as a musician. With the earnings from his music he was able to maintain his family, as well as afford the college fees. However, with the worsening economic crisis in his country, it became no longer possible to live from his art and he ended up having to abandon his studies and to look for new sources of income. With no prospect of employment, having three young children and a mother to look after, he had no doubt: it was necessary to leave Venezuela. He recalls that even after selling the little he had, he could barely get the ticket to arrive in Santa Elena (Venezuelan city at the border with Brazil). Despite having suffered a lot of xenophobia in Brazil for being Venezuelan, Ali shows optimism and nurtures expectations of better days.



Ali's daughter



*“We chose Brazil because it is the closest country, but the language is a challenge that still keeps us apart from Brazilians.”*

### **Mirla**



**Mirla while pregnant**

Mirla Isabel, 26, has been in Brazil for a year. In Venezuela her money was no longer enough to cover her basic expenses and she was concerned for the health of her 5-year-old son, as there were no medicines available to buy. She mentions the difficulty of raising a child in a shelter, but she daily tries to transform that little space of a tent made of canvas into a home. When she arrived in Boa Vista, she initially lived for seven months on the street and describes it as a very harsh period. For her, language is an obstacle to integration. She has heard several times people telling her “go back to your country, you're not from here!” Therefore, she sometimes she feels ashamed to speak Spanish in public places. However, this kind of hostility does not discourage her, since, as she explains, she knows that in Brazil there are also many people who are kind and willing to help.



**Mirla's son**



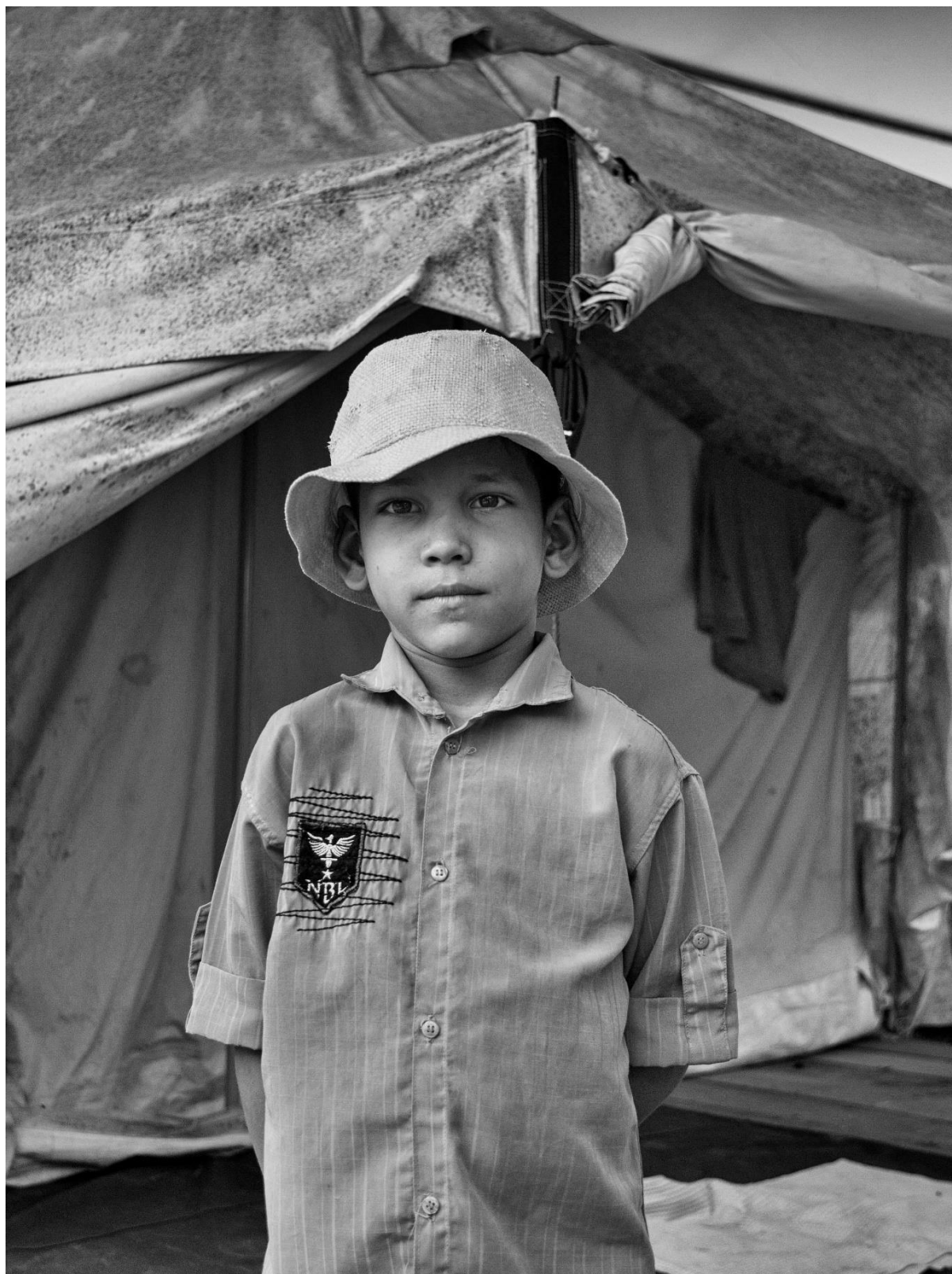
*“My biggest dream is to live in a quiet place where my children can grow up safely.”*

### Francisco



### Francisco

Francisco, 32, used to live in Venezuela with his four children. He had a fish stall in a market and a small farm where he used to produce fruits to sell. His life was good and the business profitable. However, with the economic crisis in his country, life became increasingly difficult. It got to a point in which he had to make the decision to sell the little he had and emigrate to Brazil in search for better life for his family. The trip to Boa Vista was not easy. The family walked for seven days over 100 km between Pacaraima and the capital of Roraima. Francisco says they received a lot of support from indigenous communities along the way. He was also surprised by a truck driver who, touched by his family's situation, offered them a ride to their final destination. Francisco dreams about being able to see and cultivate his land again and to continue the business he had to leave behind.



Francisco's son



*“What I like about here is that at least we have what to eat, when you work you for a day, you can already buy something to eat with what you earned”*

## Josbelys



**Josbelys and her two daughters**

In our conversation, Josbelys, carrying her 7-days-old daughter in her arms, remembers what her life was like in Venezuela before the crisis and how her family used to gather on the weekends to have fun and go to the beach together. At the age of 19, after graduating from high school on Margarita Island, she devoted most of her time to the care of her 4-year-old daughter. She arrived in Brazil after a long and tiring bus trip that lasted three days and while being pregnant with her second daughter. She came in search of better life conditions and to give birth in a hospital that had at least the basic supplies, something she couldn't expect any more in Venezuela. Josbelys believes her stay in Brazil is temporary as her country still has a chance of being rebuilt. “The same way it has collapsed, it can rise up” she says.



*“As a Christian family, we seek to have fun in another way, which is not going out to drink or dance. We like to go to the church, spend time with family and take care of our children’s education.”*

### Yraída



**Yraída with her daughter**

Yraída, 32, has been living in the shelter Nova Canaã with her two children and husband since May 2018. In Venezuela, she was an undergraduate student of systems engineering and remembers that her life was completely different, since her partner and her were both working and studying. She says that her routine at the shelter consists of waking up at 6am and prepare breakfast for the children. Take them to school. Then return to tide her tent inside the shelter. She tries to make it as clean and organized as possible. As she does not know when her family’s interiorization will take place, in the meanwhile, she tries to turn that small space into a home to her family.

*“There are people who come to Brazil because of extreme circumstances they can’t control.”*

### Ambar



**Ambar with her family**

Ambar Gonzales, 38, has an undergraduate degree in computer engineering and worked in this field at the city hall in her home town, living an economically stable life, she says. The main reason why she came from Venezuela to Brazil with her youngest son and husband, leaving behind their two older children, was the health condition of the boy, who is a cancer patient. Ambar tells us about the country’s shortage of needed medicine for her son’s chemotherapy, and about the internet campaigns she ran to gather the money to import those. But the costs to get the medicine became too high. Currently, with the support of civil society organizations, the family was sent to Brasilia so their son could get his healthcare treatment.

*"I am in Brazil so that my children can have a future."*

**Caterine**



**Caterine and her son**



Caterine, 25, left behind a comfort life and a good part of her family and friends who stayed in Barcelona (Venezuela), when she came to Brazil together with her husband and two children in March 2018. The journey to Boa Vista, the capital of the Brazilian state of Roraima, was not easy. The money that the family had managed to save ended in Pacaraima, some 200 km from Boa Vista. Luckily they were able to complete the final part of the trip hitchhiking. Caterine says she never wanted to leave Venezuela, but the situation in her country has forced her to look for better opportunities, especially for her children. Her biggest dream is to continue to be a beautician and to open her own beauty salon in Brazil. She hopes that Venezuela will soon recover from the crisis as she longs to return to her home country, where she grew up, have built a life and where she wants her children to grow up.

*“I felt bad because even having a job I could not help my family. I would need five more wages for me and my family to eat well.”*

### Marco



**Marco**

When he left Venezuela in 2018 due to the crisis, Marco, 20, was a undergraduate student of tourism and worked as a driver. He came to Brazil looking for a life stability because he believed that he would have more job opportunities here. He wanted to ensure a better quality of life for his family and mainly for his sister who is sick and needs medicines that in Venezuela were no longer available. Marco says that at the beginning of his adaptation in Brazil the linguistic barrier was the most difficult aspect to overcome as well as the xenophobia he has suffered from Brazilians simply for being Venezuelan. Despite of missing his friends and family, who remain in his country, in his return plans to Venezuela, for now, he foresees only short visits.

*“It is as if we were forced to leave, it wasn’t our desire to come here. We simply didn’t have other choice. The situation was so critical that we couldn’t live there anymore.”*

## Ruth



**Ruth and her son**

Ruth, 31, arrived in Boa Vista in February 2018 with her son Tomás. She used to be a student of business administration, but when she got pregnant with Tomás she left the university and opened her own business. According to Ruth, her family had a good life in Venezuela until the crisis came and changed everything. They had to sell a motorcycle, one house, as well as the furniture and equipment from the second house, in which they lived. Ruth is pregnant with her second child. A boy or a girl, she doesn’t know. “We don’t do ultrasound to Venezuelans” she was told rudely in a hospital in Boa Vista. Ruth shares with us that even to pregnant women people do not spare xenophobic comments and insults like “bitch” and “slut”, as she has been called on the streets of Boa Vista in some occasions. She still hopes that she will be able to return to Venezuela and rebuild her former life.



*“If people realize you are a Venezuelan, they immediately change their behaviour.”*

**Abigail**



**Abigail and her family**

Abigail, 28, comes from Puerto La Cruz, Venezuela. She used to work as a receptionist and housekeepers at hotels in her city. The decision to come to Brazil was made when, she stresses, her comfortable life was replaced by a reality of scarcity of food and medicine. Abigail has been in Brazil since august 2018. She was initially living in a house with her husband and children but they were evicted since they ran out of money and no longer could afford the rent. Then, Abigail and her family lived on the streets for a month, before finding a vacancy in the shelter, a period they were often a target of xenophobia. She would like her family to move to Santa Catarina as she has heard that the weather is more pleasant there and the people are more friendly and would treat them better. She expects this is true. Her greatest wish is to get a job that would allow her to raise enough money to be able to return to Venezuela as soon as the crisis is over.

*“Music is a discipline and a wonderful art.”*

## Jusmery



**Jusmery**

Jusmery Vallenilla, 44, is from Puerto Ordaz, Venezuela. She has a degree in early childhood education, and used to work at a public school as a music teacher. Jusmery has been in Brazil for nine months, together with her two children and grandchildren. She explains that she had never considered leaving her country and that she only did so due to the drastic decline in her family's life quality. As a teacher, Jusmery would love to be able to teach music in the shelter and highlights the need of more entertainment activities there, especially for the children. For the future, she thinks about interiorization and believes that this opportunity will bring her family the possibility to recreate, in Brazil, the good times they have lived in Venezuela.



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