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# 2020 Laureate of UNHCR's Nansen Refugee Award

## BIOGRAPHY

# Mayerlín Vergara Pérez

Mayerlín Vergara Pérez  
– known as Maye is  
the 2020 Laureate  
of UNHCR's Nansen  
Refugee Award.



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The Laureate of the Nansen Refugee Award is a human rights activist, campaigner and the Regional Coordinator for the Renacer Foundation a non-governmental organization in Colombia that has been working for decades to eradicate sexual exploitation of children and adolescents, many of whom are refugees.



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For over 20 years, Maye has made it her life's mission to rescue girls and boys, helping them free themselves from the yoke of sexual violence and the enduring pain it causes.

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Maye joined the Foundation right after becoming a teacher. Since then she has been pounding the pavement of remote communities and areas known for sex work, day and night, in search of children and teens involved in sexual exploitation. Her work is not only emotionally harrowing but also risky, pitting her against the dangerous criminal organizations that run the networks of human trafficking and child sexual exploitation rings.

Shy and self-effacing, Maye downplays her work insisting the real heroes are the children themselves. Still, her efforts have changed the lives of hundreds of young people who would have otherwise endured years of suffering. Despite all the challenges and personal sacrifices

**“She’s their north star,”  
said Tashana Ntuli, an  
Associate Protection  
officer for UNHCR, the  
UN Refugee agency,  
in Riohacha. “Maye  
defends those children  
and their rights, tooth  
and nail.”**

that this emotionally draining work has demanded of her, Maye’s goal has remained unwavering: to seek out and provide life-saving assistance to children who are being abused in unspeakable ways.

In 2018, Maye packed up her life in Cartagena and moved to Riohacha, the capital of the northeastern department of La Guajira on Colombia’s border with Venezuela. Her move came in the wake of a reconnaissance mission to La Guajira, during which Maye and other members of the Renacer Foundation team, identified hundreds of children who were being sexually exploited.

The area has seen a spike in child sexual exploitation among refugees and migrants fleeing the ongoing political, human rights and socio-economic crisis in neighbouring Venezuela, and at least half of the

children the team identified were refugees and migrants from this country. Some of them had made the journey to Colombia with their families; others alone; and still others, who had been trafficked by networks that operate sexual exploitation rings.

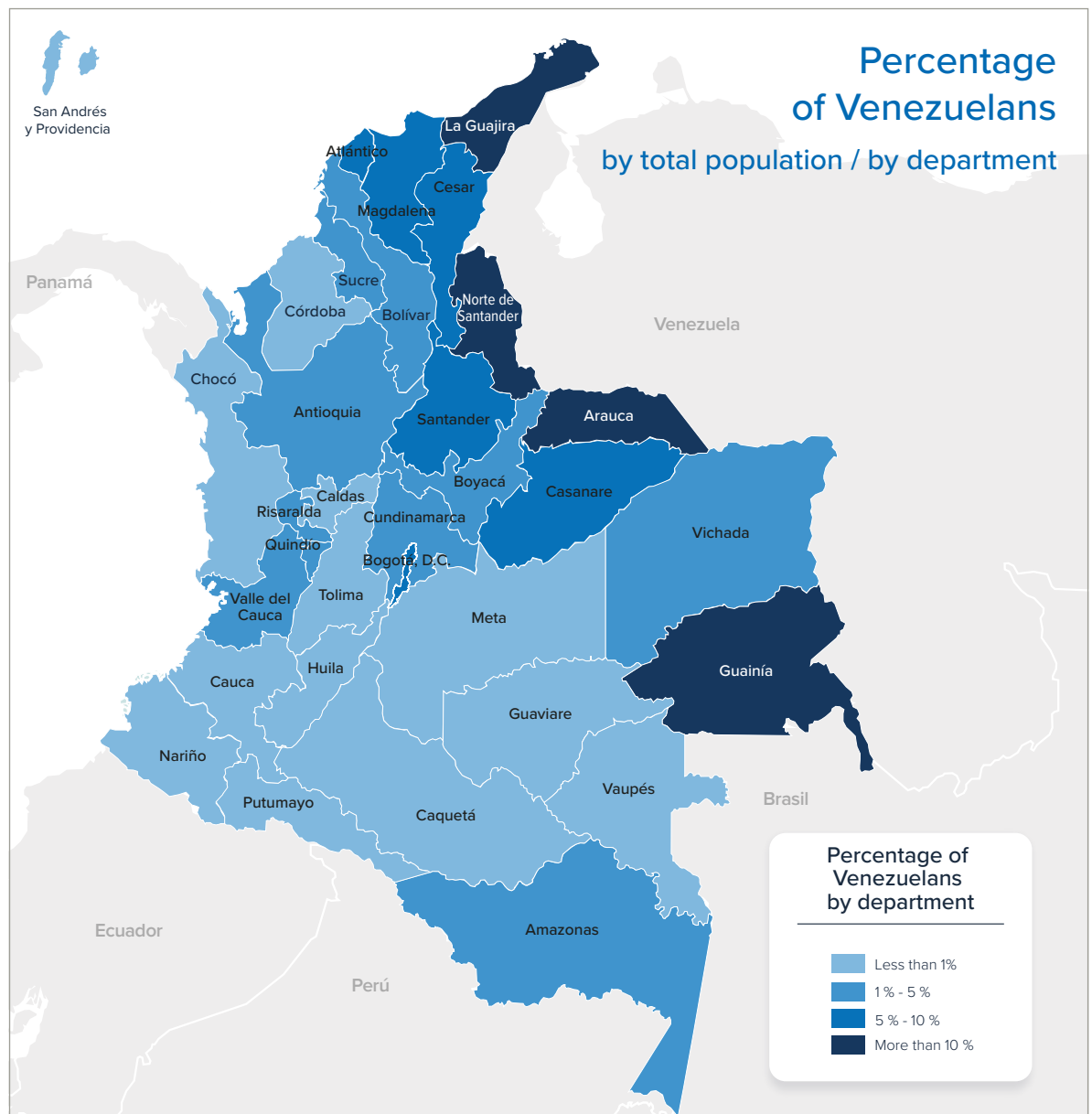
Having seen first-hand the heartbreaking reality on the ground in Riohacha, the team knew they had to act. Maye volunteered to take on the enormous task of setting up a rehabilitation home in Riohacha. The home is now a safe haven for dozen of child and teen survivors of sexual violence and exploitation, some as young as age 7.

A rigorous daily schedule packed with talk therapy, group sessions and educational activities provides the children order and structure while at the same time giving them the space, tools and time they need to process their trauma. A team of more than a dozen professionals,



including teachers, a psychologist, a social worker, a nutritionist and a lawyer, are on hand to guide these girls and boys through the recovery process, which generally takes about a year and a half. Once they are able, the children resume their studies, and over the years many have gone on to lead fruitful careers. Over the course of its first year, this new home provided a safe, therapeutic space to 75 children and teens.

In addition to being the bedrock of the home – and seeing to it the children are provided with the psychological support, legal guidance and vocational training they so desperately need - Maye has become an outspoken advocate in the fight against childhood sexual exploitation. She regularly speaks out publicly against the abuses she has witnessed, calling on civil society, Colombian authorities, as well as players in the tourism sector to protect children and adolescents.





DEPARTMENT	POPULATION*		DEPARTMENT	POPULATION*		DEPARTMENT	POPULATION*	
Amazonas	79.020	1,2%	Cesar	1.295.387	4,3%	Norte de Santander	1.620.318	12,4%
Antioquia	6.677.930	2,3%	Chocó	544.764	0,1%	Putumayo	359.127	1,0%
Arauca	294.206	15,5%	Córdoba	1.828.947	0,7%	Quindío	555.401	1,6%
Atlántico	2.722.128	6,0%	Cundinamarca	3.242.999	2,9%	Risaralda	961.055	2,1%
Bogotá, D.C.	7.743.955	4,5%	Guainía	50.636	12,7%	San Andrés y Providencia	63.692	0,5%
Bolívar	2.180.976	3,8%	Guaviare	86.657	0,4%	Santander	2.280.908	4,7%
Boyacá	1.242.731	1,3%	Huila	1.122.622	0,4%	Sucre	949.252	2,4%
Caldas	1.018.453	0,7%	La Guajira	965.718	16,1%	Tolima	1.339.998	0,7%
Caquetá	410.521	0,1%	Magdalena	1.427.026	6,3%	Valle del Cauca	4.532.152	2,0%
Casanare	435.195	5,0%	Meta	1.063.454	0,7%	Vaupés	44.712	0,2%
Cauca	1.491.937	0,5%	Nariño	1.627.589	0,8%	Vichada	112.958	3,3%

\* Total population projection by department 2020.

Source: Prepared by the Inter-Agency Mixed Migration Flows Group in Colombia (GIFMM Colombia) with official information from Colombia Migration as of May 30, 2020.

Through her relentless activism and advocacy, Maye helped usher into law two landmark pieces of legislation back in 2009. Law 1329 established a mandatory minimum sentence of at least 14 years in prison for those convicted of aiding and abetting the sexual exploitation of children and adolescents. The same year, another bill, Law 1336 targetted the owners of establishments that allow the sexual exploitation of children on their premises.

## About Renacer Foundation

The Renacer Foundation is a Colombian nonprofit founded in Bogotá in 1988 by psychologist Luz Stella Cárdenas. Over more than three decades, the organization has provided comprehensive assistance to more than 22,000 child and adolescent survivors of commercial sexual exploitation, as well as survivors of other types of sexual violence. The organization is dedicated to promoting, guaranteeing and restoring the rights of this children and teens.

Fundación Renacer's home in La Guajira was set up in April, 2019, following a two-month-long reconnaissance mission to the border region with Venezuela. La Guajira, a north-eastern border region of Colombia, has seen a spike in child sexual exploitation among refugees and migrants fleeing the ongoing political, human rights and socio-economic crisis in neighbouring Venezuela. Over the course of its first year, this new home provided a safe, therapeutic space to 75 children and teens – 91% of them girls, and, 49% refugees and migrants.

## An increasing problem in the region

According to the 2018 UNODC Global Report on Trafficking in Persons, the Americas are home to the world's largest number of child victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation.

In 2016, 80% of the detected victims of trafficking in South America were female. Even though women comprised the majority of the accounted victims (51%), there was also significant percentage of accounted child victims (37%). In regards to Central America and the Caribbean these two regions account for the world's largest share of detected victims of trafficking in



persons for sexual exploitation worldwide. In those regions, children, mostly girls, representing 41% of the total detected victims. (That is well above the global average of about 29%)<sup>1</sup>.

Since 2015, the deteriorating situation in Venezuela has forced millions of people to flee. Some 5 million Venezuelans have left their country in recent years, fleeing food and medicine shortages, galloping inflation and widespread insecurity. An estimated 1.7 million of them have sought shelter in neighbouring Colombia.

Colombia's La Guajira, where this year's laureate is based, hosts approximately 155,725 Venezuelan refugees and migrants, making it the department with the highest concentration of Venezuelan refugees and migrants in the country. Officially, Venezuelans represent 16% of the total population of La Guajira, although the real proportion could in fact be higher due to the proximity and permeability of the border with Venezuela. While there is only one official border crossing along the 249 km-long border between the department of La Guajira and Venezuela, there are an estimated 180 informal crossings.

The influx of Venezuelan refugees and migrants has put La Guajira – the fourth-poorest of Colombia's 32 departments, under additional strain.

Desperate to find safety and a better life, Venezuelans often resort to any means possible to flee the country. This makes them vulnerable to the sorts of human trafficking networks, criminal gangs and guerrilla groups that are often active along borders.

The number of transnational trafficking victims identified in Colombia in just the first four months of 2020 was 20% higher than the total number of transnational trafficking victims identified in the country in all of 2019. The majority of victims identified were young women, 63% of whom were between the ages of 10 and 30 years old. (source: Venezuela Migration and UNODC with data from the Ministry of the Interior<sup>2</sup>).

Overall, both trafficking and sexual exploitation of Venezuelans has increased considerably in recent years. Between 2015 and to 2019, the number of victims of human trafficking identified in Colombia increased by 23%.

Furthermore, the fact that most Venezuelan refugees and migrants are in Colombia irregularly makes them more vulnerable to sexual exploitation and trafficking, while at the same time making it more difficult to identifying and assist them. Despite efforts by the Colombian government, which implemented several regularization options, an estimated 57% of Venezuelans in Colombia today remain in an irregular situation.

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has increased the vulnerability of Venezuelan refugees and migrants to crimes of sexual exploitation. The tight border restrictions aimed

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1 Source: [https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/glotip/2018/GLOTiP\\_2018\\_BOOK\\_web\\_small.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/glotip/2018/GLOTiP_2018_BOOK_web_small.pdf)

2 Source: (Spanish only): <https://migravenezuela.com/web/articulo/trata-de-personas-en-contextos-de-la-migracion-venezolana-en-colombia/1905>



at containing the spread of the virus have made crossing at official checkpoints almost impossible, forcing many desperate people to resort to precisely the kinds of irregular means of crossing that increase their risk of sex trafficking and exploitation. Additionally, the economic impact of the pandemic has left many refugees and migrants unemployed and homeless, pushing many into poverty - which is one of the main drivers of sexual exploitation.

Disruptions to education services or separation from caregivers who fall sick as a result of the pandemic may leave children unattended and increasingly vulnerable, or it may prompt caregivers to entrust them to traffickers pretending to provide them with education or work.

## UNHCR's role

Across the region, UNHCR works closely with local and national government institutions to strengthen the assistance provided to Venezuelan refugees and migrants and to promote their local integration and contribution to host communities. UNHCR is providing lifesaving assistance in border areas to new arrivals, supporting access to basic goods and services, promoting peaceful coexistence with host communities, as well as access to fundamental rights, such as documentation, education and employment.

In close coordination with UN agencies and national and regional authorities UNHCR works to develop strategies and train officials on prevention, early identification and response of child abuse and exploitation cases.

UNHCR is committed to ensuring that children, adolescents and youth are protected from harm and that their rights are upheld through the provision of quality services and programmes to meet their specific protection and developmental needs. UNHCR also works to ensure that victims of trafficking do not become stateless and promotes asylum for those who face persecution or have a well-founded fear of persecution as a result of being trafficked.

**[www.unhcr.org/nansen](http://www.unhcr.org/nansen)**