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Responding to Gender-Based Violence in Multiple Crises

Insights from the Darién Gap Case Study

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Abstract

In humanitarian settings, Gender-Based Violence (GBV) is a cause of human rights violations, notably affecting women in vulnerable situations. Migration crises, particularly those leading to the displacement of individuals, further aggravate the vulnerability of women. Recent years have seen a feminization of migration, marked by the higher influx of women migrating, highlighting the need for greater focus on studying GBV. This research aims to explore GBV within humanitarian crises, focusing on protecting women's rights. The analysis centers on the migration and humanitarian crises happening in the Darién Gap as a case study. It employs a qualitative method via semi-structured interviews with humanitarian experts to analyze the GBV response implemented in the region. The study adopts a Complex Adaptive System (CAS) with a Human Rights-Based Approach (HRBA) as its theoretical framework. Findings indicate that context influences the humanitarian response during crises. Therefore, it is essential to tailor GBV services to the context and ensure that women are at the forefront of decision-making processes to fulfill their rights. Effective coordination among stakeholders is crucial to achieve this goal. Its absence can hinder the effectiveness of the response and weaken the prioritization of women's rights, especially in transit migration scenarios.

Keywords: Gender-Based Violence, Humanitarian Crisis, Migration Crisis, Darién Gap, Humanitarian Response, Complex Adaptive System, Human Rights-Based Approach.

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List of Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Definition
AoR	Areas of Responsibility
CEDAW	Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women
CAS	Complex Adaptive System
CT	Complexity Theory
DEVAW	Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women
GBV	Gender-Based Violence
HIAS	Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society
HRBA	Human Rights-Based Approach
IASC	Inter-Agency Standing Committee
ICG	International Crisis Group
IOM	International Organization for Migration
IUCN	International Union for Conservation of Nature
MRSs	Migrant Reception Stations
PAHO	Pan American Health Organization
PFA	Psychosocial First Aid
R4V	Regional Inter-Agency Coordination Platform for Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SGBV	Sexual and Gender-Based Violence
SRHR	Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights
SV	Sexual Violence
UN	United Nations
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNFPA	United Nations Population Funds
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund

Chapter 1: Introduction

Gender-Based Violence (GBV) represents a global development and humanitarian issue that leads to health and human rights violations (Raftery *et al.*, 2022). In humanitarian settings, GBV is one of the major causes of these violations, often perpetuated by socio-cultural norms that undermine women's rights (Raftery *et al.*, 2022; Vu *et al.*, 2014). Women living in conflict areas and experiencing migration due to forced displacement are particularly vulnerable to Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV) (Pérez-Vázquez & Bonilla-Campos, 2023). In times of complex humanitarian emergencies, women face increased risk due to heightened violence and irregularity, leading to a higher incidence of SGBV (Gebreyesus *et al.*, 2019; Pérez-Vázquez & Bonilla-Campos, 2023; Vu *et al.*, 2014). As migration becomes a focal point of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) within the 2030 Agenda, it has emerged as a significant social determinant impacting the Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) of migrant and refugee women (Calderón-Jaramillo *et al.*, 2020; UN, 2020). Especially within migration flows, the lack of sexual and reproductive care hinders the full realization of human rights for women (Calderón-Jaramillo *et al.*, 2020). During transit migration, where migrants are in a country only temporarily, cases of violence are common. This leaves women vulnerable to sexual harassment, rape, and often forced to engage in survival sex in return for protection from smugglers (Robbers & Morgan, 2017).

In humanitarian settings, GBV response and coordination are crucial to an effective humanitarian intervention (Raftery *et al.*, 2022). When humanitarian crises arise, various stakeholders, such as United Nations (UN) agencies, national governments, and international and local organizations, implement a humanitarian coordination system to optimize the use of resources and the human capacity for more effective humanitarian recovery efforts (ibid.). The emphasis on evidence-based GBV responses and prevention within humanitarian emergencies has significantly increased (Pérez-Vázquez & Bonilla-Campos, 2023; Raftery *et al.*, 2022). This highlights the ongoing relevance of the GBV topic, requiring further study and exploration (ibid.). Of particular importance is the interest in GBV coordination, a subject rarely explored due to the lack of evaluation mechanisms for humanitarian coordination (Pérez-Vázquez & Bonilla-Campos, 2023; Raftery *et al.*, 2022; Robbers & Morgan, 2017).

1.1 Aim and Research Questions

The relevance of the contemporary issue provides a valid basis for the research. This study aims to explore the topic of gender-based violence within the complexity of a humanitarian crisis while ensuring the protection of women's rights. The study's objective is to provide a comprehensive understanding of an issue that occurs globally, thereby emphasizing its international significance (Creswell, 2013; Stake, 1995). Building upon the insights of this research, findings can be transferred and adapted to similar contexts (ibid.). Therefore, the research will develop around the following research question:

How is Gender-Based Violence (GBV) addressed within the humanitarian response framework during crisis situations, with a focus on safeguarding women's rights?

Past research suggests that humanitarian responses involve multiple components, such as stakeholders, resources, and flow of information and knowledge, all of which impact the effectiveness of such responses (Greene *et al.*, 2017; Raftery *et al.*, 2022). For this reason, it is necessary to foster a deeper comprehension of the main research question. Accordingly, the following sub-questions aim to respectively explore (a) the influence of geographical, socio-cultural, and political factors within a humanitarian response, (b) the challenges and obstacles faced by humanitarian actors during a response implementation, and (c) the role of humanitarian actors in prioritizing the protection of women's human rights while addressing GBV response, as outlined below.

(a) How do geographical, socio-cultural, and political dynamics in crisis regions affect the effectiveness of humanitarian response efforts targeting women's rights?

(b) How do humanitarian actors address the challenges to Gender-Based Violence (GBV) affecting women in crisis situations, and what obstacles hinder an effective response to GBV within the humanitarian response?

(c) How do humanitarian actors prioritize the protection of women's rights within their response strategies to address Gender-Based Violence (GBV) in crisis settings?

These four questions will be explored using the Darién Gap as a case study. In recent years, this region between Colombia and Panama has been designated as one of the most dangerous and complex territories due to its inaccessibility and the migration crisis of individuals crossing this irregular inland route (Porras Cantons, 2023; Yates & Pappier, 2023). This migration, which saw more than 520.000 people crossing only in 2023, has led to a humanitarian crisis, particularly concerning incidents of gender-based violence (Doctors Without Borders, 2023; Servicio Nacional de Migración, 2023). These cases significantly impede the fulfillment of human rights, especially for women (Doctors Without Borders, 2023; International Crisis Group, 2023; Porras Cantons, 2023; UNHCR, 2024; Yates & Pappier, 2023). In this regard, the area's inaccessibility poses significant challenges before, during, and after the crossing. Given the presence of a humanitarian crisis and the significance of human rights and GBV cases in the region, this case study provides a suitable context to investigate the main and sub-research questions outlined above.

1.2 Outline of the Study

The research questions serve as guidelines for understanding the topic of GBV in humanitarian response while safeguarding human rights. As briefly mentioned, the GBV humanitarian response implemented in the Panamanian province of Darién, amidst the Darién Gap migration and humanitarian crises, will serve as a case study for analysis. Accordingly, Chapter 2 presents the background context on the Darién Gap, outlining its territorial and cultural features and the geographical, socio-cultural, and political dynamics that rendered the territory one of the most complex areas to implement a humanitarian response. In Chapter 3, a literature review is conducted, introducing key concepts, and exploring the interconnectivity between GBV, the impact of an influx of women migrating, leading to a feminization of migration, and the role of collaboration in humanitarian response settings. The review's purpose is to identify research gaps in existing literature. Chapter 4 introduces the rationale for creating a theoretical framework combining Complex Adaptive System (CAS) theory and a Human Rights-Based Approach (HRBA). Chapter 5 covers the methodology used for the study, including an extensive explanation of the steps for data collection and analysis, ethical considerations, and limitations. Chapter 6 discloses the results, analyzed through the lens of the theoretical framework, while Chapter 7 provides a deeper comprehension of these findings. This

chapter answers the main and sub-research questions, outlining a discussion of practical implications, limitations, and suggestions for future research. Finally, Chapter 8 concludes with the main takeaways and contributions of the study.

Chapter 2: Background Context

The background context provides an understanding of the geographical and cultural landscapes of the Darién Gap, highlighting the territory's socio-political development, which serves as a base for comprehending the research at hand. The chapter presents the territory, its constraints and diverse populations, and the factors that transformed it into one of the area's most dangerous transit routes during the growing migration crisis. Following, the attention is put on the rise of sexual and gender-based violence cases happening in this migration path, introducing the existing humanitarian response implemented in the region, and setting the base for the research exploration and analysis.

2.1 The Physical and Cultural Geography of the Darién Gap

Extending from the eastern side of Panama's Darién Province to the western border of Colombia's Chocó Department lies the region of the Darién Gap, also known as *El Tapón de Darién* (Girot, 2001; Suman, 2006). As the name suggests, this region represents a gap of lawless jungle of around 150 km between South and North America (Alì, 2018) (see Figure 1). De facto, the region lacks roads and infrastructures, leading to isolated informal settlements and limited accessibility (Claudino-Sales, 2019; Girot, 2001). Throughout the centuries, numerous attempts have failed to close the gap (Suman, 2006). In 1925, a project to build a network of roads connecting the southwest point of Argentina to Alaska was initiated (Miller, 2014; Suman, 2006). Only in 1963, the Pan-American Highway was officially opened (Girot, 2001; Miller, 2014; Suman, 2006). With a 30,000 km coverage, the only breaking point corresponds to the 150 km of the Darién Gap (Alì, 2018; Girot, 2001; Suman, 2006).

Figure 1: The Darién Gap (Stott, 2023)

2.1.1 Physical Features

There are numerous reasons for the lack of infrastructure and the failed achievement of constructing a highway to connect the two Americas. Firstly, the Darién Gap includes the Darién National Park in Southeastern Panama, at the border with Colombia (Girot, 2001; UNESCO, n.d.) (see Figure 2). With an extension of 579,000 hectares (ha), corresponding to 5790 km^2 (UNESCO, n.d.), it represents the bridge and entry point between South and North America (Claudino-Sales, 2019). In 1981, the Park was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and in 1983 a Biosphere Reserve (Girot, 2001; Suman 2006). Likewise, during the 1994 International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) General Assembly, the Darién Gap became a global conservation area, prioritizing its preservation against highway construction (Girot, 2001).
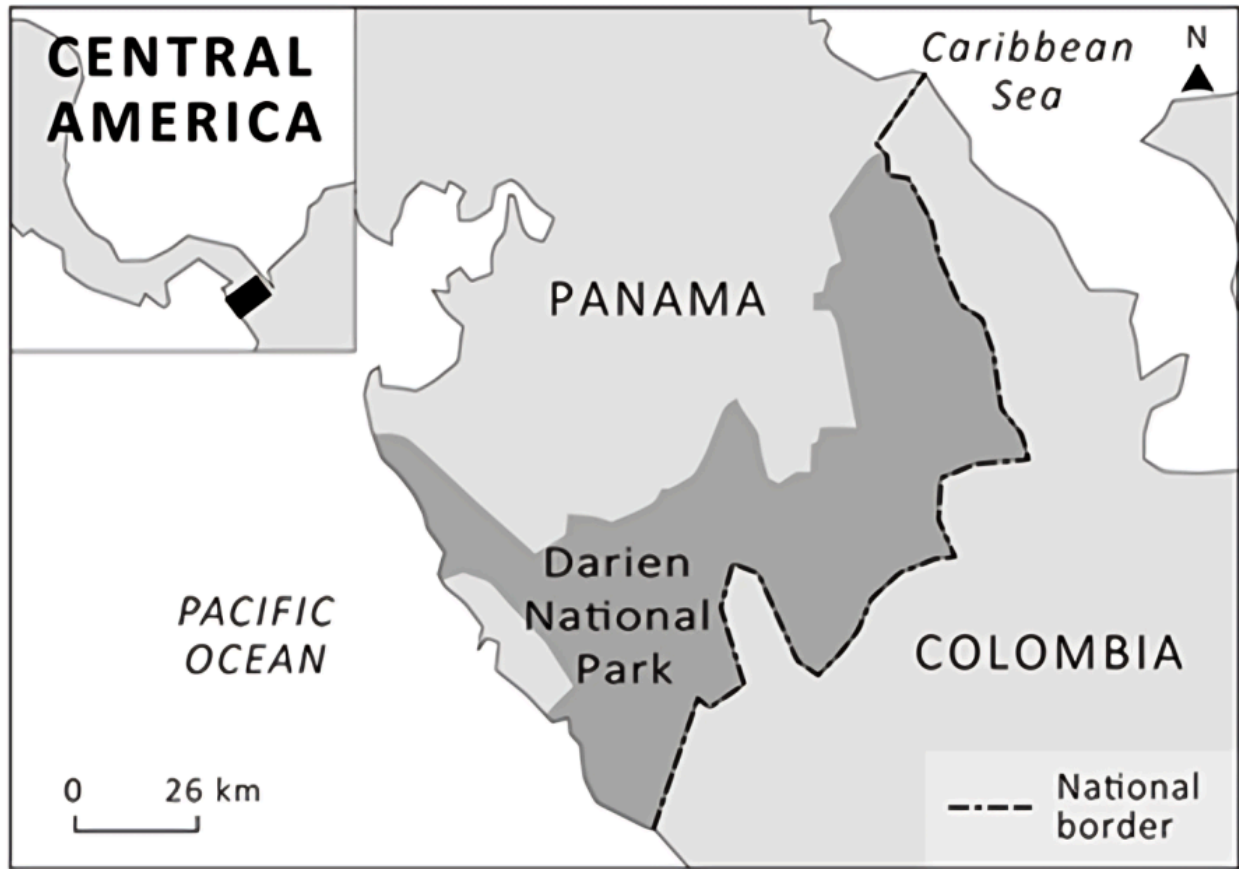
Figure 2: Darién National Park, Panama (Claudino-Sales, 2019: 68)

Secondly, the Darién National Park includes a variety of habitats and landscapes, being one of the most biologically diverse territories in the Americas (Claudino-Sales, 2019; Girot, 2001; Suman, 2006). Besides rivers and different streams of water, the park has beaches, rocky terrains, palm forests, mangrove swamps, and an extensive rainforest ecosystem (Claudino-Sales, 2019; Girot, 2001; UNESCO, n.d.). Accordingly, the climate is tropical, hot, and humid, characterized by two main seasons: dry and rainy (Claudino-Sales, 2019). During the rainy season from May to November, there are rain showers, and thunderstorms, making the territory impervious and subject to flooding (ibid.). Given its uniqueness of flora and fauna, there are unfavorable conditions in building the continuation of the Pan-American Highway or other infrastructures (Miller, 2014).

2.1.2 Cultural Features

The tropical jungle is home to three indigenous communities, the Emberá, Woonaan, and the Guna people who have inhabited the region for generations, sustaining their livelihoods in this arduous environment (Girot, 2001; Suman, 2006). Historically, these communities have been, and keep being, the most isolated populations in Panama and Colombia, leading to territorial and land recognition conflicts lasting centuries (Girot, 2001; Runk, 2012; Suman, 2006). The Guna Revolution of 1925 is a key event highlighting indigenous independence in Panama, one of the first countries in Central and Latin America to create indigenous *comarcas* (ibid.). A comarca is a reserved semi-autonomous administrative territory (Runk, 2012; Suman, 2006). The Gunayala Comarca, of which Guna people form part, was recognized in 1938, while the Emberá and Wounaan Comarca were finalized in 1983 (Runk, 2012) (see Figure 3). Moreover, the 1991 Colombian Constitution recognized territorial claims for the Emberá and Woonaan populations on the Pacific coast and the lower Atrato Valley (Girot, 2001).
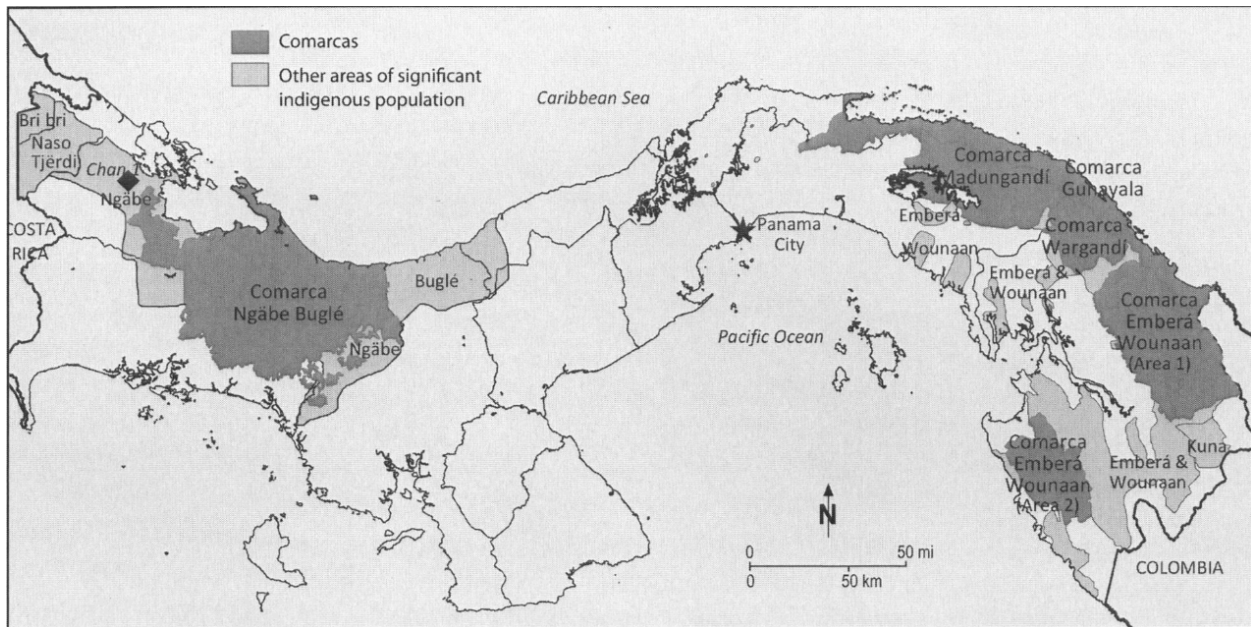

Figure 3: Indigenous Comarcas of Panama (Runk, 2012: 27)

Through the quiet revolution (Herlihy; 1989; Herlihy, 1995; Runk, 2012), these communities have obtained the right for indigenous self-governance and full territorial control (Martínez Mauri, 2011, as cited in Runk, 2012). Nevertheless, these rights are not respected

despite the legal recognition of land titles (Girot, 2001; Runk, 2012). Constant conflicts arise due to a series of external factors such as extractive cycles of mining and timber ventures at the Colombian border and illegal logging in the Panamanian Darién province, aggravating the challenges of defending indigenous rights and territorial sovereignty (ibid.). In essence, the future of the Darién Gap is in the hands of a multitude of actors and interests (Girot, 2001).

2.2 The Migration Crisis and the Humanitarian Response to GBV

The following sections will delve deep into the introduced migration issues in the Darién Gap, and the increasing incidence of GBV along the migration path. They will conclude with a detailed description of the humanitarian response implemented in Panama for migrant survivors.

2.2.1 Mapping Migration Routes and Navigating Dangers

Given its impenetrable forests and geographical characteristics, the Darién Gap is considered one of the most challenging landscapes globally, holding a complex geographical, historical, and socio-political context (Claudino-Sales, 2019; Mixed Migration Centre, 2023; Runk, 2012). Although the past success of the Pan-American Highway has fostered economic growth and regional cooperation, the Darién Gap remains a natural barrier, strengthening its isolation (Girot, 2001). This region uncovers a dangerous side, being one of the most perilous and lawless land-based migration routes in the world (Porras Cantons, 2023; Yates & Pappier, 2023). The emergence of a migration crisis has increased in recent years, seeing individuals and families crossing the Darién Gap as a gateway to hope in North America and finding better working opportunities (International Crisis Group, 2023; Porras Cantons, 2023).

According to the latest data in 2023, 520,085 people crossed the Darién Gap, peaking in August with 81,946 people crossing (Servicio Nacional de Migración, 2023). The majority of migrants (81%) come from Latin America (particularly Venezuela and Ecuador), followed by 9% from Antilles (notably Haiti) and 8% from Asia (including China and India), (International Crisis Group, 2023; Servicio Nacional de Migración, 2023). According to statistics, 52% are male, and 26% female with an increasing number of unaccompanied children (22%) and families (Servicio Nacional de Migración, 2023). Of these, 78% are adults and 22% are minors (ibid.). In a report from Mixed Migration Group (2023), adapted from the Regional Inter-Agency Coordination

Platform for Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela (R4V) (2023), it is possible to see the primary migration routes (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: Migration Routes in South and North America (Mixed Migration Centre, 2023: 16)

The latest data only represent the culmination of a crisis that has been increasing over the years. The first major migration started in the late 1990s when Colombians escaped from internal conflicts (Yates & Pappier, 2023). Only starting in 2010, by seeing the increasing crossing, the Panamanian government began recording entries (Servicio Nacional de Migración, n.d.; Yates & Pappier, 2023). Between 2010 and 2014, there were approximately 2,400 crossings per year, a large difference from the data nowadays (ibid.). The primary root cause of migration comes from the consequences of increased insecurity in the socio-political context in numerous Latin American countries. Examples come from Venezuela, Ecuador, and Haiti where insecurity is shown in forms of repression, economic collapse, and political insecurity (International Crisis Group, 2023; Yates & Pappier, 2023). Accordingly, the January - December 2023 infographic from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) shows that 61% of migrants left their home country due to attacks, threats, and general insecurity; 72% lacked employment or low income; and 34% lacked services (UNHCR, 2024).

However, the reality of crossing the Darién Gap is not immune to external influences. The hopeful journey for migrants is transformed into a myriad of dangers, given the absence of established migration pathways, increasing the risks for those undertaking the crossing. 97% of migrants report that the Darién Gap is the most dangerous part of their migration route (Mixed Migration Centre, 2023), a journey lasting on average between 2 and 15 days (UNHCR, 2024). Apart from the risks coming from the treacherous terrain, migrants face unpredictable weather conditions, and the threat of violence from criminal organizations and armed groups that take advantage of the absence of government oversight (International Crisis Group, 2023; Porras Cantons, 2023; Yates & Pappier, 2023). In particular, *Clan del Golfo* (the Gulf Clan), a Colombian armed group, represents a constant threat of being exposed to human trafficking and other crimes (ibid.). Although data changes monthly, only in December 2023, 38% were victims of fraud, scam, or robbery, while 14% received threats (UNHCR, 2024).

2.2.2 The Rising Tide of Gender-Based Violence

The Darién Gap presents alarming vulnerabilities concerning the violation of human rights and different forms of violent abuse (Porras Cantons, 2023). Particularly, cases of gender-based violence have increased among migrant women and girls crossing, reporting sexual assaults, exploitation, and trafficking (International Crisis Group, 2023; Porras Cantons, 2023;

UNHCR, 2024; Yates & Pappier, 2023). Numerous international organizations are working with people being victimized throughout the journey. Only in 2023, *Médecins Sans Frontières* (Doctors Without Borders) assisted 397 survivors of sexual violence, including children and men (Doctors Without Borders, 2023). Moreover, 4 in 10 migrants experienced abuse during their journey, and 11% traveled with survivors of violence (sexual, psychological, or physical), (UNHCR, 2024). Although cases of GBV are underreported, the topic is gaining increasing importance (Doctors Without Borders, 2023; Robbers & Morgan, 2017). While women, who account for 95% of those giving testimony, increasingly share the experiences faced throughout the journey in the Darién Gap, it is notable that men have also reported being victims of GBV (Doctors Without Borders, 2023). Migrants are kidnapped, beaten, and raped by armed groups that steal their money, telling the migrants that it is the fee to pay to cross the Darién Gap (ibid.). If people try to defend themselves or defend someone else, they face the risk of suffering sexual abuse themselves or in some cases being killed (ibid.). However, many GBV incidents go unreported by victims given the fear of stigma and damage to their reputation (ibid.).

2.2.3 The Humanitarian Response System for Coordinating Crises

The migration crisis affecting Central America has been mitigated by the humanitarian efforts implemented by the Government of Panama alongside numerous international organizations (Raftery *et al*., 2022). The migrants are received by Panama's *Servicio Nacional de Migración* (National Migration Service) for first registration and medical assistance (Yates & Pappier, 2023). Following, the migrants get sent to one of the Migrant Reception Stations (MRSs) in Lajas Blancas or San Vicente, where, other than the government, international organizations maintain a permanent presence (ibid.). Besides Doctors Without Borders, assistance is provided by the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), UNHCR, the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS), and the Panamanian Red Cross (ibid.). The services offered cover first aid, psychosocial support, and general guidance for the journey onward. Only 2% of migrants report wanting to stay in Panama, as the final destination is towards the North, mainly the USA, Canada, and Mexico (International Crisis Group, 2023; Porras Cantons, 2023; UNHCR, 2024).

During humanitarian crises, a coordination system for United Nations agencies and other humanitarian organizations establishes clusters under which each actor has a prioritized

responsibility (OCHA, n.d.; Raftery *et al*., 2022). The UN Cluster system was adopted in 2005 as a mechanism to improve the effectiveness of the response, ensuring that affected people's needs are met and avoiding service duplication (OCHA, n.d.). Among the eleven clusters, 'protection' ensures actions and rights-based responses mitigating risks (UNHCR, 2023b.). In particular, this cluster assigns specific Areas of Responsibility (AoR) to the United Nations Population Funds (UNFPA) concerning GBV (ibid.). AoR stands as a globally standardized mechanism designed to facilitate a multi-sectoral approach to preventing and addressing gender-based violence within humanitarian contexts (Inter-Agency Standing Committee, 2015).

Within humanitarian and human rights organizations, there is an increasing need to address this migration crisis, especially advocating for the vulnerability of women and girls (International Crisis Group, 2023). These efforts do not come without their challenges. Despite the established provision of psychosocial support and safe spaces offered to GBV victims, there are still limitations to an effective humanitarian response. Among the major ones is the lack of personnel for the number of people arriving at the reception stations (Yates & Pappier, 2023), followed by a lack of prevention services, a lack of time assessment for transit migrants, and a need for better coordination among the stakeholders in the field (International Crisis Group, 2023; Porras Cantons, 2023). Given the rising influx of women migrants crossing the border and the increasing incidence of GBV cases, this chapter highlights and contributes to the gap in the importance of exploring the humanitarian response in a crisis region, while safeguarding women's human rights.

Chapter 3: Literature Review

The following chapter outlines the key concepts and terminology used in the study. The second part includes an extensive literature review on the role of women, migration, gender-based violence, and humanitarian response in past literature. It explores how these concepts have become interconnected issues, identifying gaps within research on humanitarian settings.

3.1 Key Concepts and Terminology

The field of study focused on humanitarian response encompasses numerous terminologies, and given the complexity of the research, it is crucial to highlight how the

different concepts may vary (Eklund & Tellier, 2012). Therefore, it is important to explicitly state the definitions adopted in the research, specifically for the notions of 'Gender-Based Violence' and 'Migrant'.

3.1.1 Unraveling Gender-Based Violence

Araujo *et al*. (2019: 2) discuss gender-based violence, by introducing Sexual Violence (SV) that includes exploitation, abuse, and "any sexual behavior or attempt to obtain a sexual act, without the voluntary consent of the victim". Given that SV is considered a key aspect of GBV, the term Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV), has emerged and it is widely used in refugee and migrant discourse (Pérez-Vázquez & Bonilla-Campos, 2023; Simon-Butler & McSherry, 2019). When defining GBV, the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women (DEVAW) issued by the UN General Assembly in 1993 affirms that violence against women constitutes a violation of human rights (OHCHR, 1993). The term violence against women entails

> any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion, or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life (OHCHR, 1993: 2).

Following, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) defines GBV as "an umbrella term for any harmful act that is perpetrated against a person's will and that is based on socially ascribed (i.e. gender) differences between males and females" (2015: 5; Raftery *et al.,* 2022). Furthermore, the UNHCR (2003: 10) adopts the GBV definition of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) as "violence that is directed against a person based on gender or sex. It includes acts that inflict physical, mental, or sexual harm or suffering, or threats of such acts, coercing, and other deprivations of liberty" (CEDAW, 1992: 2; Simon-Butler & McSherry, 2019).

All definitions of SV, GBV, and SGBV include common characteristics such as violence and discrimination based on gender and sex, which inflict physical, mental, or sexual harm, and

deprive the victim's liberty and freedom. Therefore, for research purposes, GBV, SV, and SGBV will be used interchangeably, unless otherwise stated.

3.1.2 Defining Migrant

The term *migrant* is an overarching concept that has been the subject of an ongoing debate, as it typically refers to any individual who relocates to a country other than their usual residence for an extended period (Scheel & Tazzioli, 2022; UNHCR, 2019). However, this neutral conception of the term has raised concerns regarding its encompassing nature, overlooking the various facets involved in human mobility (Anderson, 2017; Scheel & Tazzioli, 2022). Scholars have proposed that the term migrant includes a series of perspectives, offering an understanding of a "myriad of ways to be a 'migrant'" (Mezzadra, 2011: 13; Scheel & Tazzioli, 2022). Migration and mobility are viewed as socially constructed phenomena occurring within the historical dynamics and social and power structures embedded within society, influencing different patterns of movements (Amelina & Lutz, 2019).

For the purposes of this research, the term migrant adopts the definition suggested by Scheel and Tazzioli (2022: 3), describing a migrant as "a person who, in order to move to or stay in a desired place, has to struggle against bordering practices and processes of boundary-making that are implicated by the national order of things". By emphasizing border struggles, this definition allows us to understand that migrants face challenges that are shaped by, socio-economic factors and other pertinent countries' border characteristics (Mezzadra, 2011; Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013; Scheel, 2019). This definition provides a lens through which to understand border struggles in the context of migration. It suggests that migration emerges as a contingent, relational, and multifaceted phenomenon (Scheel & Tazzioli, 2022).

3.2 The Feminization of Migration and Its Risks

Given the rising number of migrants globally, data suggests a feminization of migration (Amelina & Lutz, 2019). 51% of refugees and other people in need of international protection are classified as female, including women and girls across various age groups (UNHCR, 2023a). According to data drawn from the latest report by UNHCR (2023a), the global number of forcibly displaced people reached 108.4 million people, due to persecution, conflict, violence, and violation of human rights. Of these 35.3 million are classified as refugees, 62.5 million are

internally displaced people, 5.4 million are asylum-seekers, and 5.2 million are other people in need of international protection (ibid.). The latter is defined as individuals who have been forcibly displaced across international borders, yet not categorized as asylum-seekers, or refugees, but still considered to need international protection (ibid.).

Women in crisis and disaster phenomena have been more vulnerable to risks and external threats (Gebreyesus *et al.*, 2019; Pérez-Vázquez & Bonilla-Campos, 2023; Raftery *et al*., 2022; Vu *et al.*, 2014;). Within humanitarian crises in particular, studies have shown that women are subject to violence, and abuse, preventing them from fulfilling their rights (ibid.). Gender-based violence represents a global concern regarding health, human rights, and protection (Raftery et *al.*, 2022). In humanitarian settings, GBV is manifested in different forms reinforced by socio-cultural norms that weaken women's rights (Raftery *et al.*, 2022; Vu *et al*., 2014). Numerous women living in conflict and being forced to be displaced experience sexual and gender-based violence, during transit and within destination countries (Pérez-Vázquez & Bonilla-Campos, 2023). Violence includes sexual harassment, rape, and survival sex in return for protection, transport, or documents, from smugglers or other migrants (Robbers & Morgan, 2017). Accordingly, it has been found that in complex humanitarian crises, one in five displaced women experience sexual violence (Vu *et al.*, 2014). Moreover, during complex humanitarian situations, cases of sexual violence tend to increase (ibid.). Studies have found that the conditions of irregularity and risk during the migration process make women more vulnerable to SGBV (Gebreyesus *et al*., 2019; Pérez-Vázquez & Bonilla-Campos, 2023).

The SDGs of the 2030 Agenda put migration as a crucial focal point, making it a significant factor influencing sexual and reproductive health and the rights of migrants and refugee women (Calderón-Jaramillo *et al*., 2020; UN, 2020). Migration flows also pose a problem in health service availability and accessibility, especially lacking definitive sexual and reproductive care and justice for women (Calderón-Jaramillo *et al*., 2020). Accordingly, the growing significance of respecting human rights within humanitarian crisis settings underscores the need for cooperation in all situations, regardless of their origins (Lie, 2020).

3.3 Addressing Gaps in GBV Actions within Crisis Humanitarian Response

In humanitarian settings, GBV coordination represents an essential component of the humanitarian response (Raftery *et al.*, 2022). The term humanitarian response refers to national

or international action that is undertaken in response to a crisis (Eklund & Tellier, 2012: 593). In the literature, it is interchangeably used as 'humanitarian action', 'emergency response', 'disaster relief,' and 'crisis management' (Eklund & Tellier, 2012: 593). In times of crisis, UN agencies, national governments, and international and local organizations establish a humanitarian coordination system to optimally use resources and knowledge capacity (Raftery *et al.*, 2022). However, GBV remains an area to be studied and explored. Previous studies highlight the importance of focusing on evidence-based GBV responses, risk mitigation, and prevention within the realm of humanitarian emergencies (Pérez-Vázquez & Bonilla-Campos, 2023; Raftery *et al.*, 2022). Moreover, emphasis should be placed on GBV coordination which remains rarely explored (ibid.). The lack of evaluation mechanisms for coordination systems represents a notable gap in research (Robbers & Morgan, 2017).

One major challenge is the limited availability of disaggregated data on SGBV prevalence due to underreporting or insufficient documentation (Robbers & Morgan, 2017; UNHCR, 2003). While the collection of sex-disaggregated data is recognized to be important, in crisis situations it still presents a challenge, requiring major efforts (Eklund & Tellier, 2012). The importance of collecting and analyzing sex-disaggregated data is essential for informing preparedness plans, crisis responses, and both early and long-term recovery interventions (ibid.). There is a need for humanitarian actors to collect, review, understand, and report sex-disaggregated data to mobilize resources and build capacity in humanitarian settings (ibid.). This process is particularly crucial given that although sexual abuse is more prevalent against women, incidents have been found to occur also against men (Calderón-Jaramillo *et al.*, 2020; Gupta *et al.*, 2023).

There is a demand for further research to comprehensively grasp the complexity of these scenarios and their connection to the vulnerabilities of migrants regarding SGBV (Calderón-Jaramillo *et al.*, 2020). The importance of SGBV in migrant and refugee contexts has encouraged further investigation into adopting an integrated framework to understand SGBV within these populations, tackling their specific needs, and designing tailored support systems (Pérez-Vázquez & Bonilla-Campos, 2023). However, there is a gap in understanding the SGBV intervention responses within transit migration, as highlighted in previous studies (Asgary *et al.*, 2013; Robbers & Morgan, 2017).

Furthermore, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (2018: 7) calls for the "active participation and leadership of women and girls in humanitarian action" (Gupta *et al.*, 2023). Recent analyses indicate that the objectives outlined in the aforementioned statement have not been met (ibid.), suggesting a relevant gap in the current literature. Despite, in recent years, remarkable commitments have been undertaken to promote gender equality and empower women in humanitarian efforts, substantial disparities persist between these commitments and the actions required to positively make an impact on the lives of women and girls in humanitarian settings (Lafrenière *et al.*, 2019).

3.4 Assessing Contextual Disparities in GBV Response

In emergency contexts, significant disparities are identified in the delivery of services and the ability of survivors to access them (Raftery *et al.*, 2022). GBV is given low priority, with only 1% of humanitarian funding being directed to GBV interventions in the last five years (Murphy & Bourassa, 2021; Raftery *et al.*, 2022), entailing the need for further research on how to allocate financial resources more effectively in GBV interventions within the humanitarian sector (Raftery *et al.*, 2022).

These disparities in service delivery and accessibility are due to structural contextual factors in the location where the humanitarian response is implemented (Civaner *et al.*, 2017; Darcy & Hofmann, 2003; Greene *et al.*, 2017; Krishna & Daniel, 2021). The suitability of a response is affected by criteria related to the origins of the crisis and its prevailing context (Darcy & Hofmann, 2003). Distinctive characteristics of political, socio-economic, and cultural factors of a context are found to shape every humanitarian and operational response (Andersen & Behmer, 2018). The statement is supported by Kasapoğlu and Ecevit (2004), who suggest that knowledge of socio-cultural factors is necessary when developing initiatives aimed at enhancing disaster preparedness. Specifically, socio-cultural factors are defined as social patterns and practices across cultures, that help examine particular local livelihoods and governance structures (Benoist, 2018: 340).

Humanitarian responses are geographically specific, and it is suggested that humanitarian actors use methods to adapt to contextual changes (Abdelmagid *et al.*, 2019). Recent studies reveal the importance of considering socio-cultural factors in assessing humanitarian effectiveness (Krishna & Daniel, 2021). However, delivering effective responses

appropriate to context and culture poses a significant challenge for humanitarian actors (Greene *et al*., 2017). Recognizing local culture as a critical dimension of humanitarian operations can introduce a new perspective to these efforts (Krishna & Daniel, 2021). Inaccurate assessment methods and the lack of awareness of the socio-cultural, geographical, and political context can hinder effective humanitarian implementation (Greene *et al*., 2017). Within humanitarian assistance, this relates to the suitability of various factors within the broader crisis context, such as the response's objectives, intervention selection, response scale or geographical coverage, targeted beneficiaries, and the cultural acceptability of interventions (Abdelmagid *et al*., 2019).

Understanding the context criteria enables a risk analysis and assessment which in turn influences the decision-making of the humanitarian interventions and determines the impact of the response (Abdelmagid *et al*., 2019). Accordingly, Churruca-Muguruza (2018) highlights the importance for humanitarian actors to utilize a framework for context and risk analysis, along with a Human Rights-Based Approach (HRBA). This process facilitates the identification of threats, vulnerabilities, and their underlying causes, including violations of international human rights (ibid.). This approach will ease the establishment of an appropriate response, effectively assess risks, and ensure that interventions are responsive to the needs and rights of affected populations (ibid.).

Chapter 4: Theoretical Framework

The following chapter introduces the theoretical grounding to understand the processes that influence human rights fulfillment within humanitarian response amidst crisis situations. Principally, it will serve as a foundation for expanding the analysis of the interplay between the GBV humanitarian response and the Darién Gap migration crisis. Using the Complex Adaptive System (CAS) theory, the research examines the GBV humanitarian response while applying the Human Rights-Based Approach (HRBA), creating a theoretical framework to shed light on associated challenges.

4.1 Complex Adaptive Systems (CAS) Theory

Complex Adaptive Systems (CAS) derive from Complexity Theory (CT), a form for examining characteristics and behaviors of dynamics non-linear systems (Schneider & Somers, 2006; Turner & Baker, 2019). Under complexity theory, complex systems are open, operating

without central control and fixed structure, yet maintain their distinctiveness while dynamically interacting with their surroundings (Berg *et al*., 2018; Schiffling *et al*., 2022). Additionally, Davis *et al*. (2015: 334) define complex systems as "connected networks of semi-independent agents, generating system-wide patterns that can learn and adapt over time". Agents within CAS are interdependent and heterogeneous entities and have the potential to generate non-linear outcomes within the system (Crawford & Kreiser, 2015; Turner & Baker, 2019). Furthermore, in a system of many components, agents can interact, adjust, or learn by constructing models to anticipate future outcomes (deMattos *et al*., 2012).

In essence, CAS refers to open dynamical systems whose structural configuration can be organized through the exchange of information, and other resources, facilitated by agents, within their environment (Turner & Baker, 2019). This exchange transforms resources to support action (ibid.). Moreover, Choi *et al*. (2001) propose a model that encompasses agents, environment, and adaptation into three sub-systems, namely internal mechanism, environment, and co-evolution. This model is used in the research to accentuate that CAS theory is instrumental in examining and comprehending systems composed of agents' collective interactions that lead to emergent events (Carmichael & Hadžikadić, 2019; Schiffling *et al*., 2022). CAS is inherently complex and adapting, exhibiting diversity and the ability to evolve based on experiential learning (Begun *et al*., 2003; Schiffling *et al.*, 2022). The evolution is influenced not only by the agents' interactions but also by the interplay between the environment and the agents (ibid.). In the context of this research, the environment and the agents are represented respectively by the crisis-affected region and humanitarian actors, as explained in the following section.

4.1.1 CAS as a Theoretical Framework in Humanitarian Settings

The CAS theoretical framework has been used to analyze phenomena across many disciplines (Carmichael & Hadžikadić, 2019). Recent studies explored the growing interest in adopting complexity theory and CAS as a new method to explain and theorize events within the realm of social sciences, as well as for the development and implementation of policies (Byrne & Callaghan, 2022; Turner & Baker, 2019). Aligned with this study's purpose, Seybolt (2009) and Schiffling *et al*. (2022), explore the context of humanitarianism under the lens of CAS. On the one hand, Seybolt (2009) describes the humanitarian assistance community - encompassing UN agencies, national governments, and international and local organizations - as a complex

adaptive system. On the other hand, Schiffling *et al*. (2022) use humanitarian logistics - the planning and organization of goods, materials, and information flow to fulfill beneficiary's needs (Schiffling *et al*., 2022) - as a complex adaptive system. Both the humanitarian community and logistics form part of the key components of a humanitarian response during a crisis, enabling flexibility in its implementation (Schiffling *et al*., 2022; Seybolt, 2009). In this case, the humanitarian response represents a Complex Adaptive System and flexibility allows the system to adapt to its changing environment, which increases effectiveness (Schiffling *et al*., 2022). By applying the model of Choi *et al*. (2001) and building on the research from Schiffling *et al*. (2022) the theoretical framework focuses on the three sub-systems of CAS: internal mechanism, environment, and co-evolution.

Internal mechanisms concern agents contributing to humanitarian relief, encompassing the flow of information and resources, as well as shared values and assumptions among the different agents (Schiffling *et al*., 2022). As a segment of humanitarian response, agents under CAS are represented by international organizations and humanitarian actors, collaborating and united for a common goal: provide humanitarian assistance (Schiffling *et al*., 2022). In particular, in the complexity frame of reference, a crisis describes the situation in which the current conditions of a system are unsustainable and must be settled through radical change (Byrne & Callaghan, 2022). Complexity thinking thus is essential to guide toward positive outcomes within a crisis (ibid.). Moreover, CAS permits the understanding of coordination as a method to enhance performance by adjusting and suiting the system to its environment (Seybolt, 2009). The external environment surrounding CAS includes the contextual factors influencing humanitarian response implementation, such as socio-cultural, geographical, and political dynamics that drive change within CAS (Choi *et al*., 2001; Schiffling *et al*., 2022). Given the dynamic nature of these factors, agents are hypersensitive to change and thus use existing knowledge to adapt to the change in the CAS environment (ibid.). Co-evolution is defined as "the tendency of several sub-systems within one main system, to move together towards new forms of existence or new states of development" (Luoma, 2006: 106). The co-evolution and change adaptation process involves feedback between the system and its environment (Choi *et al*., 2001; Schiffling *et al*., 2022; Turner & Baker, 2019).

The understanding of the dynamics of the environment, agents, and co-evolution factors will serve as a base for the theoretical perspective for analyzing the GBV humanitarian response

in the Darién Gap, rendering it a Complex Adaptive System worthy of study. The theory will facilitate interpreting outcomes and exploring suggestions for humanitarian response management and strategies for improved adaptation to a Human Rights-Based Approach.

4.2 Human Rights-Based Approach (HRBA)

The Human Rights-Based Approach has been considered a fundamental conceptual tool in humanitarian and development interventions since its origins in the late 1990s (Noh, 2021). The human rights framework offers insights towards empowerment for individuals, at the local and international level (Maschi *et al.*, 2022). Human rights are at the core of the approach, where the duty-bearers are accountable for the respect, protection, and fulfillment of the rights of all individuals, known as rights-holders (Hamm, 2001; Noh, 2021; UNSDG, 2003). In the migration context, States and international organizations are duty-bound to respect, protect, and fulfill migrants' human rights (OHCHR, n.d.). This entails, among other responsibilities, the protection from abuse and violent acts from smugglers ensuring access to essential health and social services (ibid.). On the one hand, rights-holders have the entitlement to be empowered to know and claim their rights in decision-making (Hamm, 2001; UNSDG, 2003). On the other hand, duty-bearers are expected to fulfill these obligations through strategies, and interventions (ibid.). The approach is built upon the underlying principles of universality, equality and non-discrimination, participation, and accountability (Hamm, 2001; Noh, 2021; UNSDG, 2003).

The primary principle is universality, meaning applying human rights to all, understanding which rights are at stake in a crisis, and using them to define the intended interventions (Hamm, 2001; UNSDG, 2003). The second principle of equality and non-discrimination entails that all human beings are entitled to the same rights and protection (ibid.). Thus, it requires duty-bearers to identify the unequal accessibility of resources and services and address the gap with specific policies and measures. The third principle in the HRBA states that rights-holders are included in the participation and access to decision-making (ibid.). Through empowerment, rights-holders can actively identify and address structural barriers that impede them from fulfilling their rights. The fourth principle of accountability has a dual responsibility. Rights-holders can claim and fulfill their rights by transparent and effective accountability mechanisms, which are put in place by duty-bearers, making them accountable (ibid.).

4.3 Integrating CAS Theory and Human Rights-Based Approach

The Complex Adaptive System and the Human Rights-Based Approach complement each other, providing a framework for analyzing how human rights are upheld within a humanitarian response during a crisis (see Figure 5). Both can be used as analytical frameworks for addressing the complexity of crises while upholding human rights in humanitarian action.

On the one hand, within the context of humanitarian crises, the Complex Adaptive System theory helps understand the dynamics and interconnected factors that come with it, as explained by Choi *et al.* (2001) and Schiffling *et al.* (2022). Within this system, factors such as internal mechanisms, the environment, and co-evolution dynamics play a crucial role in influencing the realization of human rights in crisis contexts. The CAS theory permits an extensive comprehension of the interaction of the environment and internal mechanism and its adaptation process to changes, understanding the behavior of the affected population and the response itself. Moreover, CAS acknowledges the emergence of unpredictable outcomes from the interactions of agents within the system, which is common in crisis situations.

On the other hand, the solutions to the emergence of humanitarian action need to respect the HRBA that puts at the center human rights and its principles of universality, equality and non-discrimination, participation, and accountability. HRBA informs the design and implementation of interventions within a CAS framework by ensuring that they are responsive to the needs and rights of affected populations. By applying this approach, HRBA promotes the empowerment and participation of rights holders in decision-making, enabling them to claim their entitlements and hold duty-bearers accountable. The emergence solutions need to be flexible and adaptable in strategies to effectively address the emergence and fulfill the affected population's rights.

Complex Adaptive System

Internal Mechanism

- Agents
- Shared values
- The flow of resources and information

Co-Evolution

- Non-linear change

Environment

- Geographical, socio-cultural, and political factors

System Emergence Solutions

Claiming rights

Rights-Holders

- Universality
- Equality and non-discrimination
- Participation
- Accountability

Duty-Bearers

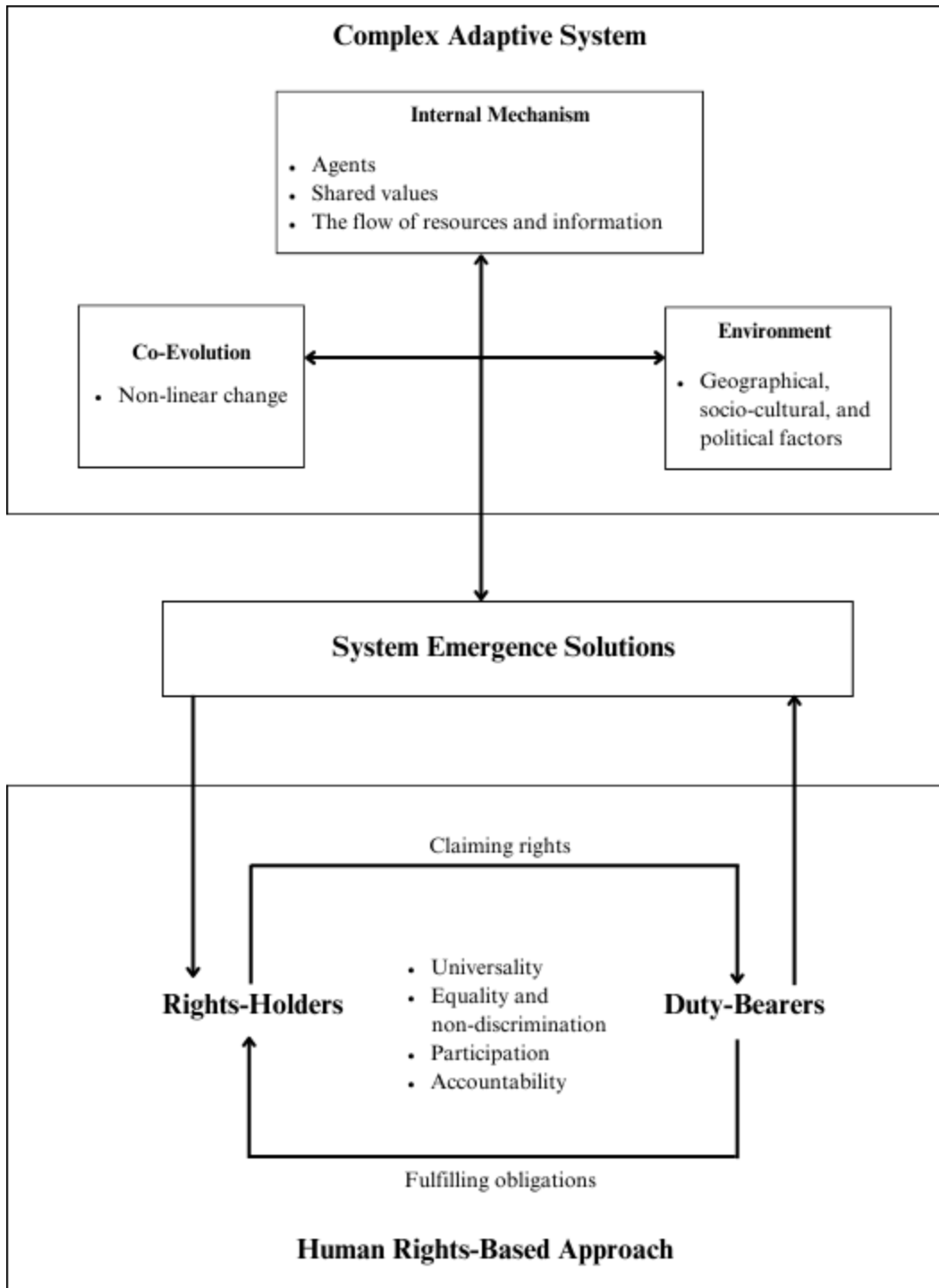Fulfilling obligations

Human Rights-Based Approach

Figure 5: Combining CAS and HRBA Models (figure modified from Choi *et al*. (2001), and UNSDG (2003), created by the researcher)

Chapter 5: Methodology

The following chapter presents the research design and methods utilized in the study to collect and analyze data inherent to the discussed topic. Following, are reflections on the methodological limitations, ethical considerations, and researcher's positionality.

5.1 Research Design

The analysis was built on case study research that requires the researcher to investigate a real-life case, bounded by time and place through in-depth data collection (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2009). This research methodology used an inductive approach, relying on the researcher as the primary interpreter of the collected data and systematically gathering insights for empirical knowledge (Creswell, 2013). The ground for the thesis was a single instrumental case study, where I, the researcher, addressed a particular concern or issue, and used the bounded case to exemplify the issue (Creswell, 2013; Stake, 1995). Moreover, this study aimed to offer a comprehensive perspective and generate principles, or theoretical understandings that can be transferable to similar contexts (ibid.). However, it is important to acknowledge that the findings of a case study are limited (Creswell, 2013; Stake, 1995). These conclusions are grounded in the particular circumstances of the study and are not intended to be universally applicable (Creswell, 2013; Stake, 1995). Despite these limitations, the case study of the Darién Gap contributes valuable insights to the understanding of human rights and the GBV humanitarian response in challenging contexts.

5.2 Data Collection

The data collection process started with the identification of a research question, allowing a narrow focus on the themes to study and determining the methodological strategy to apply (Hammett *et al*., 2014; Silverman, 2017). The interest of the research focused on understanding the geographical, socio-cultural, and political factors and the challenges encountered by migrant women before, during, and after the crossing of the Darién Gap, as well as examining the GBV humanitarian response implemented in the area. To understand the case, I contacted humanitarian actors and experts involved in the emergency. However, this process resulted in limited access to and participation of migrant women for interviews regarding the research topic, as discussed in one of the limitations outlined in the next section.

5.2.1 Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured open-ended question interviews were used as the primary data tools. This type of method permitted me to uncover multiple layers of insights with follow-up questions (Hammett *et al.*, 2014). Accordingly, an interview guide with a set of predefined questions in both English and Spanish was used. Space was left for the interviewer and interviewees to engage in conversations that enable emerging topics and perspectives (ibid.) (see Appendix I). The interviews took place from December until February, setting up online environments, through Zoom and Google Meet, to facilitate both the researcher's and interviewees' schedules, each session lasting a minimum of 45 to 60 minutes.

5.2.2 Sampling

A total of fourteen experts were contacted by email (see Appendix II), coming from the principal international organizations operating in the Darién Province: IOM, UNFPA, UNHCR, HIAS, the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), and Doctors Without Borders. Only five respondents agreed to participate and four followed through with the interview. Reasons for non-participation included a lack of response from the participants after multiple email attempts, unavailability of participation, and an opinion from one participant that they were not the best fit for the research. Two interviewees worked for UNFPA, the UN Agency for Sexual and Reproductive Rights and Health, operating both at the regional and local levels. Another participant was affiliated with IOM, whose mandate is dedicated to the well-being of migrants. Additionally, one interviewee represented HIAS, primarily focused on responding to refugees' needs.

The sampling method and selection of candidates relied on my personal network working within the field of interest. Therefore, an initial purposive sampling was utilized, given that the sample would offer the most informative knowledge regarding the research issue (Creswell, 2013). In addition, snowball sampling was used by requesting participants to recommend other experts who could potentially participate (Bryman, 2012; Creswell, 2013). Despite the limited number of interviews conducted and given the limited bounds of the research design, a form of saturation was reached, entailing that no new significant information was emerging (Creswell, 2013). After four interviews, participants were constantly highlighting the same challenges and issues. However, it is important to note that deeper levels of analysis could have emerged if more

participants had been involved in the research (Hammett *et al.*, 2014). The lack of response excluded data that could have been useful to the research, thus limiting the understanding of the findings.

5.3 Data Analysis

As part of the qualitative design, the data were reviewed through a thematic analysis, which entails the findings of common themes within a database (Creswell, 2013; Tracy, 2013). The first step involved the transcription of the interviews, made by the transcribing function of Word, and my supervision. Three interviews were conducted and transcribed in English, while the fourth was conducted in Spanish. In this case, after the initial transcription, the interview was translated into English with a Word translation tool and facilitated and double-checked by the researcher's language proficiency. Accordingly, a few sentences have been grammatically changed for fluency purposes.

After getting familiarized with the transcription process, the primary cycle involved creating open codes and pointing out the main attributes of the highlighted quotes (Tracy, 2013). The codes derived from the first-cycle coding are then compiled into a codebook, providing an overview of the codes, and facilitating the second-cycle coding (ibid.). In the second cycle, open codes were clustered together into categories, according to similar attributes (ibid.). Finally, the categories were further clustered to develop themes, which served as the basis for the elaboration of the results (ibid.). The analysis identified 6 themes: Introduction of Organizations; GBV and Migration Statistics; Geographical, Political, and Socio-cultural Challenges; Humanitarian Response Coordination; Humanitarian Response Strategies; and Good Practices for the Future. Among these, five themes were used as a base to systematically present the findings. However, due to the inclusion of private and personal information from the participants, the *Introduction of Organization*s theme was omitted from the findings.

5.4 Methodological Limitations

The research methodology presented threefold limitations, essential to highlight to better understand the study and encourage further research. Firstly, the research sample was limited. The decision to interview humanitarian actors and experts online was determined by my limited access to the field. Consequently, there was a lack of direct engagement with migrant women,

who, in this case, are the victims, thereby shifting the attention from, and limiting the understanding of women's direct experiences. Secondly, despite three follow-up attempts, most of the experts contacted were unresponsive. Although a level of saturation was achieved, the lack of response prevented me from pursuing an interview with them, thus excluding their perspectives and insights and limiting the comprehensiveness of the study. Thirdly, the case study at hand aimed at understanding the broader role of human rights in the humanitarian response to emergency and complex cases. The case study of the Darién Gap provides valuable contributions to the understanding of humanitarian settings. It is acknowledged that this area is difficult to explore and access, and it is important to note that the small sample size limits the generalizability of the findings. Considering the growing interest in the area, an alternative methodology (e.g. survey, ethnographic research, document analysis) can be applied to evaluate the satisfaction level of the health services provided. These processes can collect disaggregated data for more effective implementation and analysis. They include interviewing and observing the beneficiaries of the implemented strategies.

5.5 Ethical Considerations

Given the involvement of external actors working in international organizations under strictly regulated processes, ethical considerations were essential to take into account while collecting data and engaging with the participants (Creswell, 2013). First, all the participants were assigned pseudonyms to ensure anonymity (Bryman, 2012). To guarantee confidentiality, no personal information, including name or surname, was included at any level of the research. Although a consent form was prepared, participants preferred to give oral consent during the interview. As a disclaimer, all the experts contacted were informed about the purpose of the research, including the aim of the study, and participation in academic research as part of a study program (Bryman, 2012; Creswell, 2013). Furthermore, participants were assured that personal or sensitive information would not be disclosed. The same information was repeated and agreed upon during the interview online, highlighting the participant's right to withdraw from the study at any point, and their right not to respond to any question that might compromise personal or organizational reputation. Questions were asked following the preparation of extensive research based on publicly available data on the region and organizations' humanitarian involvement

(Bryman, 2012). The interview began only after obtaining recorded consent from the participants.

5.5.1 Positionality and Reflexivity

During the interview process, my positionality and reflexivity played a role in the validity and reliability of the data collected (Bryman, 2012; Thambinathan & Kinsella, 2021). Specifically, I was mindful of the dynamics and risks associated with conducting online interviews, especially given my position as a student reaching out to experts. I recognized potential mistrust in sharing sensitive information, thus I prioritized data confidentiality to ensure the integrity of the research process. Additionally, my positionality as a woman working for women's rights enables me to understand the relevance of advocating for these rights. Even though I had no close relationship with women in the context of my research, my past experiences in Panama exposed me to the struggles faced by women regarding sexual and reproductive rights. Witnessing these challenges firsthand strengthened my interest in conducting this research and understanding the role of collaboration in supporting women's rights.

Chapter 6: Analysis and Interpretation of Findings

The following chapter will discuss the findings of the thematic analysis resulting from the semi-structured interviews with humanitarian and GBV experts in the province of Darién. The results focus on factors that favor and hinder women's rights, specifically addressing GBV, within the humanitarian response during the migratory crisis in the Darién Gap. The data highlight the multifaced approach to women's rights, emphasizing challenges, and assistance systems from international coordination, and fostering a comprehensive and rights-based response. These findings will be examined through the lens of Complex Adaptive System (CAS) Theory and a Human Rights-Based Approach (HRBA), as introduced in Chapter 4.

6.1 Setting the Context

"Challenge. Hope. Coordination" (Interviewee 1)

"Urgently needed. Insufficient. Life-saving" (Interviewee 3)

"It is a challenge. It is a necessity. It is urgent" (Interviewee 4)

These quotes represent the answers to the participants' descriptions of the GBV humanitarian response in the Darién Province. They illustrate how the GBV humanitarian response to the migration crisis in the Darién Gap is addressed, highlighting the severity of the situation. In recent years, the context of the Darién Gap has emerged as one of the most alarming humanitarian cases, especially concerning the provision of adequate services to meet human rights for individuals crossing the jungle (Porras Cantons, 2023). Within the study, interviewees were asked a series of questions concerning the main challenges female migrants encounter in the context of the Darién Gap. Women crossing this region have been found more vulnerable, with the journey itself being described as an emotional challenge. Particularly, while introducing the topic of GBV, a participant highlighted that: *"In the Darién Gap exists a lot of violent situations, most of them are sexual situations that happen to a lot of women who pass in the jungle"* (Interviewee 1).

The increasing influx of migrants has required a humanitarian response, yet challenges persist due to external factors, hindering the implementation of effective measures to safeguard human rights (International Crisis Group, 2023; Porras Cantons, 2023; Yates & Pappier, 2023). Analyzing the GBV humanitarian intervention under a CAS lens will allow for a better understanding of the factors worsening the humanitarian action, especially concerning human rights for women. As described in the theoretical framework, in a Complex Adaptive System environment, internal mechanisms, and co-evolution are essential to study the case (Choi *et al*., 2001; Schiffling *et al*., 2022). Furthermore, the results within internal mechanisms and co-evolution factors will be analyzed based on the principles of HRBA.

6.2 The Environment of a Complex Adaptive System

The GBV humanitarian response in the Darién Gap can be considered a Complex Adaptive System given that there are no fixed structures, and it interacts with the environment in which it takes place (Byrne & Callaghan, 2022; Schiffling *et al*., 2022). The environment itself externally affects the strategies and operations that occur in the geographical location of the humanitarian response. According to Choi *et al*. (2001) and Schiffling *et al*. (2022), one focus of the CAS is the external environment, which encompasses geographical, socio-cultural, and political aspects. From the geographical perspective, the interviewees highlighted the crossing itself as a danger, considering it a "*very complicated*" and "*harsh*" area (Interviewee 2;

Interviewee 3), where it was mentioned that the environment and climate worsened the route conditions. Moreover, the risks of crossing the jungle are deepened by the presence of threats that are out of the migrants' control such as animals, illnesses brought by mosquito bites, and robbery from criminal and organized clans, causing migrants to lose all their resources (Interviewee 4). The following quote exposes the importance of understanding the diverse dimensions of the Darién Gap, as asked during the interview process:

They call it a National Park because that is the name, but it is known as the Darién jungle. So, you are facing an issue from what the Darién is as such, as you find rivers and a lot of vegetation. So, in itself, it is already complicated to say that it is a route (Interviewee 4).

From a socio-cultural point of view, the Darién Gap is part of an indigenous territory, where regulations are subject to different cosmovision and territory regulations (Runk, 2012; Suman, 2006). This characteristic was brought up during interviews describing the context as "*a protected national area where there are a lot of indigenous communities. They have the control over the territory*" (Interviewee 2). As described in Chapter 2, different communities form part of the Darién Province, namely the Guna, Emberá, and Wounaan (Runk, 2012). This factor creates a *"cultural issue from the worldview and idiosyncrasy of the communities. [...] So, understanding them from the perspective, from the culture of each of them, also requires an understanding of the livelihoods",* as Interviewee 4 explained. Supporting the studies of Choi *et al.* (2001), and Schiffling *et al*. (2022), the socio-cultural context thus has to be understood to implement an adequate humanitarian response "*because sometimes they [the indigenous people] do not have the same vision that the organizations have"* (Interviewee 1). This is relevant to highlight since, during the interview process, it was mentioned that one implication of these differences in vision is that GBV cases can also occur within indigenous communities: "*They [female migrants] can be exposed in the host communities and the different shelters because that can happen again, another violence situation"* (Interviewee 1).

Finally, from a political point of view, the Panamanian political situation was described as challenging (Interviewee 3). Migration restrictions from the government resulted in a significant challenge to work in the Darién province (Interviewee 3). In this subject area, GBV

was brought to the attention, accentuating that the Government is *"seeing this only as the fact of having migrants crossing the country or staying in the country, but they are not considering their needs when they arrive in the country"* (Interviewee 3). As such, the government and the politics in Panama are setting the base for a difficult context within the crisis migration affecting the Darién Province, as stressed by the following quote:

> *The government put a set of restrictions for migrants to cross Panama and they are implementing certain measures to avoid migrants from staying. [...][W]e have elections in Panama this year in May. So, it means that all the politicians are working for their campaigns more than to respond to this crisis. [...][T]hey are implementing several measures to avoid migrants from entering Panama, so that is also challenging working with institutions* (Interviewee 3).

The first part of the analysis reveals that the geographical, socio-cultural, and political dynamics shaping the environment of a Complex Adaptive System influence the humanitarian response implementation. This understanding is crucial for the internal mechanisms of a CAS, particularly its agents, as elaborated in the next section.

6.3 The Internal Mechanisms of a Complex Adaptive System

Internal mechanisms encompass agents, along with their shared values, and resource and information flows within a humanitarian action (Choi *et al*., 2001; Schiffling *et al*., 2022). In the context of a humanitarian response, the primary actors responsible for implementing humanitarian strategies are humanitarian organizations and their personnel (Schiffling *et al*., 2022; Seybolt, 2009). The GBV humanitarian response in the Darién Gap is implemented by governmental institutions as well as international and local organizations. Particularly, it was mentioned that the Ministry of Health of Panama has a regular presence, alongside main stakeholders such as IOM, UNHCR UNICEF, UNFPA, HIAS, Red Cross, and Doctors Without Borders (Interviewee 1; Interviewee 2). While applying an HRBA, the same agents are referred to as duty-bearers (Hamm, 2001; Noh, 2021; OHCHR, n.d.; UNSDG, 2003), who are responsible and have the task of ensuring the fulfillment of rights-holders' rights. Accordingly, during the interview, it was noted that the shared responsibility to uphold women's rights and well-being is

a fundamental principle for humanitarian actors: *"We want them to share what kind of strategies we can provide to them"*, said the participant during Interview 1. This statement emphasizes the principles of participation, equality, and non-discrimination within an HRBA (Hamm, 2001; Noh, 2021; UNSDG, 2003).

The shared values and the flow of resources and information are projected in the humanitarian coordination among all the different agents. As supported by Seybolt (2009) a Complex Adaptive System allows for an examination of the coordination factor to enhance performance and adjust the system to its environment. In the case of the GBV humanitarian response in the Darién Gap, a coordination system is put in place. From the interviews there was a general consensus that there is a good coordination system, although participants call for improvement within interagency coordination, meaning that: *"We really need to coordinate very well with our agency so that our mandates are respected"* (Interviewee 2). The same participant, talking about their organization, expanded on the question about coordination among the different actors in the Darién province:

> *We never work by ourselves, we believe that it is a better way to work with our partners and, in that way, we work with national authorities that are present, local governments and we also work with the other humanitarian actors that are present* (Interviewee 2).

In such a complex environment, accountability from the HRB approach is assessed using satisfaction tools, with a primary focus on women's opinions and perspectives, enabling them to actively participate in improving the fulfillment of their rights. During Interview 1, it was mentioned that an accountability population mechanism is put in place to evaluate the participation rate of women in the activity and their satisfaction with it. Interviewee 1 suggested that: *"This helps to know if the different interventions that we implement are good for them, and what kind of topics are really good for them"*. The participant in Interview 3 also agreed that evaluation is measured with the number of services or percentage of survivors who receive a good quality service. Once again, principles of participation, equality, and non-discrimination remain the focal points.

It was shared that the importance of understanding women's needs is crucial due to the risk of exposing them to traumatic events they lived. *"Some of them have maybe been*

traumatized. [...][W]e do not want to expose them, we need to help them" argued Interviewee 1. Yet, it is relevant to mention that: *"Achieving that multisectoral coordination would be the challenge",* as explained by Interviewee 4. Results revealed significant obstacles that are important to highlight as they disrupt the smooth flow of information and resources necessary to enhance performance in humanitarian response (Seybolt, 2009). It resulted that, in the GBV humanitarian response to the Darién Gap, shared values are not always in line among all the actors, which should be the basis for a good coordination system and understanding of CAS and HRBA (Choi *et al.*, 2001; Schiffling *et al.*, 2022; Seybolt, 2009). Accordingly, the principles of HRBA are not always met, especially from governmental institutions: *"Sometimes they [female migrants] prefer to talk with organizations, [rather] than the institutional functionaries. They feel awful when [they] talk with institutional functionaries who are men and sometimes, they have 'prejudicios' [prejudices]"* (Interviewee 1). Here, it is possible to observe a discrepancy in the accountability of duty-bearers to fulfill their obligations in satisfying women's rights.

Additional challenges related to information and resources flow have emerged. Beginning with women's documentation during transit migration: *"The situation happens when [...] women go to maybe the different organizations without a referral. And maybe we can duplicate the services because we do not know that"* explained Interviewee 1. Moreover, there is insufficient data on GBV assaults, given that: *"They [women] do not report and that it is going to continue to be a challenge, because how do you control, let's say what is happening when they are not coming by"*, as highlighted by Interviewee 4. Consistent with this factor is the fear of reporting and the stigma around GBV (Doctors Without Borders, 2023), as also the following interviewee accentuated when asked the reason for the lack of GBV cases report:

> *There are several factors why they are not going to say that they suffered it. There is, for example, the fear of what the aggressor can do, just the fear of what we [humanitarian actors] say in this case, what those who are traveling with you may think. [...][P]erhaps there is also a denial or even, let's say, a lack of recognition that it was sexual violence* (Interviewee 4).

Thus, these results go against the principle of non-discrimination, impeding a full understanding of how to help rights-holders claim their rights. Moreover, a shortage of personnel in the field

can obstruct efficient coordination. "*It is very, very challenging and there are not many providers*", and "*when you need to find someone new, is difficult*" explained two participants (Interviewee 1; Interviewee 2). Especially counting the number crossing the Darién Gap, personnel is found to be insufficient to implement effective services for GBV survivors: "*If you think you only have three persons dedicated to gender-based violence for one organization, [...] the number is so less than people who pass. So, I think this is the other challenge because it is very hard to cover*" (Interviewee 1).

In line with the results, these factors reduce the effective utilization of resources and information (Choi *et al*., 2001; Schiffling *et al*., 2022; Seybolt, 2009). Furthermore, these challenges hinder duty-bearers from fulfilling their responsibilities towards rights-holders.

6.4 The Co-Evolution of a Complex Adaptive System

The aforementioned challenges accentuate the role of co-evolution, wherein humanitarian responses adapt in accordance with the environment (Choi *et al*., 2001; Luoma, 2006; Schiffling *et al*., 2022). The process of co-evolution thus requires the subsystems (agents and environment) within one main Complex Adaptive System (GBV humanitarian response) to move towards new states of development (Luoma, 2006). By integrating an adaptation process and feedback scheme to the changing environment, the CAS can become more efficient (Choi *et al*., 2001; Schiffling *et al*., 2022; Turner & Baker, 2019). Results from the interviews presented strategies of co-evolution adopted by the actors following an understanding of the changing environment of the Darién Gap and its GBV implications, yet with a remaining gap from an HRBA perspective.

Humanitarian actors have adapted strategies and interventions to the GBV response in the Darién Gap. The challenges of the territory structured the understanding of the agents on how to apply detailed humanitarian implementations within the realm of GBV in transit migration. When asking a question about this topic, an answer reflected the relevance of the case: "*So, in GBV in particular, what we did is to decide what kind of intervention we could really have in the Darién, knowing that people's aim crossing the Gap is not to stay in Panama*" (Interviewee 3). This area brings an additional layer to migration management. Migrants crossing have an objective: "*Their aim is not to stay in Panama, but to continue their path to the North, to the United States*" (Interviewee 1). Thus, the majority of migrants remain in the Panamanian territory only temporarily. The phenomenon of transit migration poses a challenge for actors

managing the GBV response and fostering trust building, considering that they "*have less than 24 hours to generate this trust. [...][S]o, understanding that challenge, it is a very short period*" (Interviewee 4). When asked to expand on this challenge, Interviewee 3 focused on how agents need to intensify their resources:

> *You need to do the most you can do in very few hours knowing that they may need maybe some days or even weeks to get all the services they need and all the assistance they may require for their needs* (Interviewee 3).

To adapt to this environment, agents set up a strategy, related to the social and psychological well-being of women victims of GBV. Successful responsive initiatives include safe spaces, psychological support, health care, and case management services, comprehensive sexual education and empowerment workshops, and first aid. The primary strategic humanitarian action is focused on creating a secure environment for women and girls, called *Espacio Seguro,* translated as 'Safe Space'. The Safe Space helps *"to guide women to a place where they can feel confident in, let's say, talk to other women"* (Interviewee 1) and explore relevant topics for their well-being such as self-esteem and self-care (Interviewee 1). After a first introduction of the service, where it was mentioned that hygiene kits are also given to women, a more detailed description was presented:

> *[...][W]e needed to have something that is called 'The women and girls' safe spaces', which is a place whose main objective is to empower women. Empower them with information, with psychosocial support, and give them some kind of skills that they can develop, and they may help them to recover after having endured GBV* (Interviewee 3).

Through the assistance of a Safe Space, serving as "*an entry point both to capture some kind of case of gender violence*" (Interviewee 1), humanitarian practitioners have a closer relationship with women and can better identify those in need of additional support, and direct them to specific assistance mechanisms, such as psychological support or case management services: "*We know that anyone who passed Darién Gap is in a vulnerable situation. But sometimes you*

can identify some cases that have more vulnerabilities than others. So, this is very important, from a response in this specific context" (Interviewee 1).

Case management has been a recurring and successful strategy in providing help to GBV survivors. Within the context of the Darién province, international humanitarian actors have been implementing these services as well. During Interview 3, the participant extensively explained the ground and processes of case management, which is guided by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee guidelines and discussed among different actors working with GBV. These guidelines suggest a structured method of assessment, planning, coordinating, and evaluating options to meet an individual's health needs and develop a plan of care:

I [humanitarian actor] will be like your [GBV victim] focal point for your case. I will help you also to have access to the different services that you may need. Then, I assess the needs of the survivor and design an action plan with the survivors. I Implement the plan and do of course the follow-up of that plan. Then, I close the case (Interviewee 3).

However, in the context of a humanitarian response to crises, such as the case study at hand, the case management process is done in fewer steps, because it has to be a rapid response (Interviewee 3). In the case of the GBV humanitarian response within the transit migration crisis, Interviewee 3 noted that: *"Instead of having this close phase, what we have is a step where we give them all the information they need to continue seeking help during the road or to avoid suffering GBV again"*. Moreover, the same participant continued explaining that the process is composed of: *"Best practices and the right way to do case management to really allow the survivors to get to a recovery process"* (Interviewee 3). When asked for examples, Interviewee 1 highlighted that to ensure the ongoing well-being of women in another country, a process of referral mechanisms has been developed: *"They [the office in Colombia] make a referral to us together with the two offices in Costa Rica and Honduras. We try to support that woman who is in a vulnerable situation"* (Interviewee 1). Once again, the agents are adapting the solution to the environment, as understood from a Complex Adaptive System point of view, and adapting the principles from an HRB approach (Choi *et al.*, 2001; Schiffling *et al.*, 2022; Seybolt, 2009).

6.5 Unmet Needs and Future Humanitarian Practices

The increasing importance of respecting human rights within humanitarian crisis settings, entails the necessity to cooperate in any situation, no matter its origins (Lie, 2020). The case of the GBV humanitarian response in the Darién Gap presents demanding efforts to meet all the needs of GBV survivors. When asked about how to transform a humanitarian response into a sustainable development practice, the following quote emerged:

> *We [humanitarian actors] know that humanitarian response is just the first step to pave the way to have development in that country, to pass to a recovery phase. Unfortunately, the context we have today with the numbers of migrants just increasing and with all the restrictions that the government has today for migrants, I see it very difficult to work in Darién* (Interviewee 3).

In line with this quote, participants were asked about potential best good practices to implement to help mitigate and dim occurrences of GBV happening in the transit of Darién. To start, Interviewee 3 suggested: "*A need to increase the number of services available, modeling for clinical management, human rights, but also psychosocial support*". Particularly, the necessity for the availability of SGBV services arises due to the lack of capacity to respond to these cases:

> *I think increasing the services, and the number of services that are available in the region for GBV survivors. Mostly because there are some massive cases of rape in the Gap and there is not enough capacity to respond to that* (Interviewee 3).

Moreover, enhancing coordination among actors was emphasized. "*Continue with this group of coordination with the different organizations. I think this is one of the best practices that we have, we need to still implement that*" (Interviewee 1). Participant in Interview 2 echoed this statement suggesting that: "*We can duplicate whatever we see that it works*". Participant in Interview 1 continued with the explanation of a successful practice to avoid duplication: "*Implement that route of attention for gender-based violence survivors and go to a different organization with the survivor to avoid that kind of duplication*". Among some strategies proposed there are communication campaigns, as suggested by Interviewee 1: "*Implement our*

graphical campaigns about where you are, where you need to go, what are the different situations that you can face in the next point, in different languages". Moreover, Interviewee 1 highlighted the importance of training personnel in gender-sensitive issues: *"They need to be training in that kind of PFA, Psychosocial First Aid, in what is a survivor from a violent situation"*. In this regard, it was agreed upon to work with host indigenous communities to understand their different perspectives and visions (Interviewee 1; Interviewee 2; Interviewee 3; Interviewee 4). Finally, Interviewee 3 expressed optimism for a potential information management system: *"I think it would be interesting, [...] to say that we can implement an information management system."*

However, duty-bearing obligations remain still to be studied, especially in this lawless environment where prevention is lacking: "*There is no easy way to prevent GBV from happening in the area",* argued Interviewee 3. When asked about long-term plans for GBV prevention, participants in the study agreed that it is among one of the biggest challenges, given that they do not have control over what happens inside the jungle:

> *The fact that you have armed groups in the Gap, it makes it more difficult to work on prevention. How do you really do something that may prevent women from suffering GBV, when you know that the whole Gap is controlled by armed groups from both sides of the border? That is very difficult* (Interviewee 3).

These results present a paradox. In a lawless territory, such as the Darién Gap, where no government has jurisdiction, holding duty-bearers accountable becomes challenging. For this reason, it was mentioned that it should be necessary to strengthen the national capacity to respond to the emergency (Interviewee 3). In this way, accountability from the duty-bearers can be reinforced: "*Making them, the government or the national institutions, take ownership of the humanitarian response"* (Interviewee 3). Based on these results, the research can draw upon conclusions and make recommendations for humanitarian response strategies toward human rights fulfillment in crisis situations.

Chapter 7: Discussion

The current chapter will present a discussion of the research's findings. As a reference, the investigation has been centered around the following research question: '*How is Gender-Based violence (GBV) addressed within the humanitarian response framework during crisis situations, with a focus on safeguarding women's rights*?'. To reach a conclusion to the main research question, sub-questions have been employed to delve into the understanding of the various factors that influence an effective GBV humanitarian response. Specifically, the research utilizes the GBV humanitarian response during the migration crisis of Darién Gap as a case study to investigate the issue.

The first section of the chapter will focus on discussing the findings in relation to the sub-questions. Initially, it will address the impact of the geographical, socio-cultural, and political dynamics on a humanitarian crisis. Additionally, it will examine the challenges, obstacles, and strategies humanitarian actors face in addressing GBV while ensuring the protection of women's rights. Furthermore, the chapter outlines the practical implications of the findings, the research limitations, and suggestions for further study.

7.1 The Context

The first sub-question of the research focuses on the context of a crisis region where a humanitarian response is being implemented. It particularly explores the geographical, socio-cultural, and political dynamics that shape the context and influence the effectiveness of humanitarian response efforts targeting women's rights. The analysis showed significant findings regarding these dynamics. Firstly, from a geographical perspective, the case study of the Darién Gap, highlighted that protecting nature can come at the expense of human safety. The Darién Gap is a heritage-protected jungle (Girot, 2001), and findings revealed that there is still a lack of effective assistance to address the GBV cases and protect people's rights in the area. Despite stakeholders being aware of the dangers and complexities of the Darién Gap, they still lack the necessary preventive measures to mitigate gender-based violence during the crossings. This is primarily due to the various factors that render the territory inaccessible, such as arduous terrain and criminal activity (Claudino-Sales, 2019; Girot, 2001; Porras Cantons, 2023; UNESCO, n.d.; Yates & Pappier, 2023). This finding is consistent with research by Darcy and Hofmann (2003), which accentuates how the complexity of geographical characteristics can hinder the

effectiveness of humanitarian responses. Moreover, the authors argue that a geographically sensitive humanitarian response is essential to meet the needs of the crisis-affected population (ibid.). This aligns with the affirmation by Green *et al.* (2017) and Krishna and Daniel (2021), suggesting that geographical aspects are crucial considerations when applying a humanitarian intervention.

Secondly, from a socio-cultural perspective, the case study at hand showed an awareness from humanitarian actors of the different cosmovisions held by indigenous communities in the area. Findings revealed that incidences of sexual violence can happen in the host communities as well. Therefore, it was suggested that increased collaboration with indigenous could facilitate capacity building for both the community and the migrants. This finding is in line with the existing literature, which suggests that culture is recognized as a key dimension in implementing humanitarian assistance (Greene *et al.*, 2017; Krishna & Daniel, 2021). Moreover, it corresponds to the notion that being aware of socio-cultural factors is crucial in the development of initiatives aimed at enhancing disaster preparedness, humanitarian response, and recovery, as suggested in the research by Andersen and Behmer (2018) and Kasapoğlu and Ecevit (2004).

Thirdly, from a political perspective, the major factor highlighted in the case study's findings was a concern over the political situation in Panama and the upcoming election. Interviewees agreed that the instability and the unwelcoming attitude towards migrants in the country worsen the development of an effective humanitarian response, especially when government officials lack training to assist migrants who were victims of GBV. It was suggested that governmental institutions should take more responsibility and be held more accountable in dealing with both the migration and the humanitarian crises in the area. This finding is consistent with Civaner *et al.* (2017), Green *et al.* (2017), and Krishna and Daniel (2021) who argue that politics is an important consideration and can significantly impact humanitarian response efforts. Moreover, this finding is in line with Darcy and Hofmann (2003), who emphasize the importance of political risk analysis, arguing that the role of national governments in assessing and responding to a humanitarian crisis is significant.

Overall, this sub-question provided interesting and valuable insights highlighting the significant role of context in the implementation of a humanitarian response, while understanding the need of the affected people to safeguard their rights. This follows what past research has accentuated. According to Darcy and Hofmann (2003), Greene *et al.* (2017), and

Krishna and Daniel (2021), the context is shaped by various variables related to the nature of the crisis and the area in which it occurs. Its understanding is crucial for the effectiveness of a humanitarian response, given that humanitarian needs are, to some extent, specific to the context (Darcy & Hofmann, 2003).

7.2 Challenges and Obstacles

The second sub-question invokes a discussion on challenges and obstacles faced by humanitarian actors during humanitarian crises that can hinder GBV's effective response affecting women. Findings from the case study of the Darién Gap accentuate that although interviews did not disclose data on the percentages of women assisted, they indicated that certain services are exclusively reserved for women, concluding that women are at higher risk. Interviewees agreed on the heightened vulnerability of women during a crisis, emphasizing the priority of implementing more gender-based violence services within the humanitarian efforts. Challenges found in the humanitarian implementation in the Darién Gap include a need for better coordination, given the high number of duplicated services and duplicated women's portfolios. Moreover, the transit migration context necessitates humanitarian actors to adapt services to short-stay situations. Furthermore, additional challenges arise due to the persistent lack of GBV data due to stigma, and a shortage of personnel to assist all those in need. This calls for more suitable GBV prevention strategies, the provision of adequate services, and improved coordination.

These findings are consistent with the fact that each humanitarian response is unique, and challenges arise based on the context (Darcy & Hofmann, 2003). However, this case study identifies some challenges that are present in that past literature. Firstly, the findings are in line with research showing that women are indeed more vulnerable in crisis situations (Gebreyesus *et al*., 2019; Robbers & Morgan, 2017). Particularly, findings align with the notion that women in displacement and migration contexts are more at risk of sexual and gender-based violence, as suggested by Calderón-Jaramillo *et al*. (2020), Pérez-Vázquez and Bonilla-Campos (2023) and Vu *et al*. (2014). This calls for better attention to women's needs, contributing to the recognition of the feminization of migration, which shows the growing significance of women in migration flows (Amelina & Lutz, 2019). Furthermore, the study finds that there is still a lack of GBV disaggregated data collection, emphasizing that GBV remains a persistent issue. This is

consistent with the argument by Eklund and Tellier (2012), who claim the importance of collecting disaggregated GBV data for a better humanitarian response.

7.3 Response Strategies

The third and final sub-question emphasized women's rights within the context of GBV, highlighting the obligations of humanitarian actors to prioritize women's rights within their response strategies. Findings revealed that there is a clear priority to understand and implement humanitarian strategies that contribute to women's well-being. By doing so, women are placed at the center of decision-making processes, empowering them to assert and claim their rights for their specific needs, which is in line with a Human Rights-Based Approach (HRBA). Accordingly, GBV humanitarian response strategies in the Darién Gap include case management services adapted to a transit migration context, safe spaces for women and girls, hygiene kits, referral mechanisms, psychological support, and comprehensive sexual education workshops. Although there was a consensus that strategies can be improved, the findings show that the current approaches are tailored and implemented to meet the needs of the women affected.

The findings of the sub-questions revealed that there is a consensus to focus on women's rights. In accordance with previous literature, findings suggest that in humanitarian response, humanitarian stakeholders should use a human rights-based approach to meet the rights and needs of the affected population (Churruca-Muguruza, 2018; Lafrenière *et al*., 2019). However, findings revealed that this approach is not always followed by governmental institutions. By prioritizing women's rights within the context of GBV, humanitarian actors can better address the specific needs and challenges faced by women in crisis situations. This approach, consistent with the notions of Gupta *et al*. (2023) and the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (2018) argue that there is a need to include women in the decision-making process within the humanitarian response actions, empowering them to claim their rights and mitigate sexual exploitation. Overall, this concludes that adopting an HRBA in GBV humanitarian response can help ensure that interventions are effective, inclusive, and tailored to women's rights.

7.4 Practical Implications

This study uncovers practical implications that can be applied in policy-making, international regulations, interagency collaboration, and global coordination within humanitarian

settings. Firstly, while this study specifically focuses on women's rights, it calls for a higher importance of including gender mainstreaming in policy-making. Gender-based violence affects not only women and girls but also men and boys, as supported by past literature and background information. The findings suggest that the majority of violent situations involve women, implying that the remaining cases can involve men and boys. This implication is a crucial aspect in ensuring that all survivors have their rights and needs respected and addressed effectively and equitably. Considering the needs, and priorities of both women and men in the design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of humanitarian programs and policies can enhance humanitarian response based on the population.

Secondly, another implication from the case study emphasizes the need for equal access to SGBV services for all populations affected by humanitarian crises. This study focuses on the migrant population; however, it is important to recognize that there are different forms of migration. The findings suggest that while the majority prefer to leave Panama, those who remain, entering through this illegal path, will need to apply for refugee or asylum permits. It is important to ensure that all individuals, including refugees and asylum seekers, have access to these services. All three populations are entitled to basic human rights that must be upheld based on international regulations within humanitarian and crisis settings.

Thirdly, this research has a practical implication for interagency and global collaboration and coordination, as the findings provide evidence for optimizing humanitarian responses during crises. By working together, international and local organizations, government and each stakeholder involved can leverage their respective expertise, resources, and information to provide a more comprehensive and effective response to humanitarian crises. The inclusion of a GBV perspective in humanitarian assistance, suggests that collaboration and coordination can improve and facilitate the collection of SGBV data, enabling more targeted and effective response efforts.

7.5 Limitations and Future Research

The study faces limitations that can be used for identifying areas for future research. In addition to the methodological limitations already outlined in Chapter 5, there is still a gap in understanding the influence of governmental politics on humanitarian responses and how the political context within these settings impacts such responses. While previous literature has

examined political dynamics alongside socio-cultural and geographical factors (Choi *et al.*, 2001; Schiffling *et al.*, 2022), the findings of this study showed that the government tends to lack accountability during humanitarian crises. Therefore, future research should study the specific role of governments in crises and explore their strategies and practices concerning gender and human rights practices within humanitarian settings. It could provide valuable insights into understanding how governmental politics shape humanitarian assistance while contributing to the development of more effective and accountable policies.

A second limitation lies in the lack of understanding of the risks faced by all victims of SGBV and their specific needs, including women of different ages and men. The current study did not focus on these aspects of risks and needs, nor did it include all the aforementioned populations. This is particularly relevant given that studies by Calderón-Jaramillo *et al.* (2020) and Gupta *et al.* (2023) have suggested that men are also victims of GBV. Therefore, this gap presents an opportunity to conduct new research on specific risk analysis and needs assessment for every individual who suffered GBV in humanitarian settings. By addressing this gap, future research contributes to the creation of disaggregated GBV data based on different ages and gender (Eklund & Tellier, 2012).

A third limitation of the study is the absence of budget allocation analysis for humanitarian assistance, particularly for GBV response. It was mentioned that, in the last five years, only 1% of humanitarian funding has been allocated to GBV interventions (Murphy & Bourassa, 2021; Raftery *et al.*, 2022). Therefore, this is an area that warrants analysis given that, in humanitarian settings, UN agencies and other international organizations operate with funded projects. Conducting such analysis would present interesting insights into the impact of the interventions, aid in refining future humanitarian practices, and inform budget allocation decisions based on the GBV services needed.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

Gender-Based Violence (GBV) is a radical cause of human rights violations, representing both development and humanitarian issues. Increasing cases of sexual violence have escalated in humanitarian settings, particularly in the migration context. Accordingly, this study contributes in several ways. Firstly, this research specifically focuses on how GBV affects women's rights in crisis situations, using the migration and humanitarian crises of the Darién Gap as a case study.

The study shows that there is an increasing number of GBV victims among migrants, particularly during transit and upon reaching their destination countries. Notably, this study contributes to filling the gap in understanding sexual and gender-based violence prevention and response intervention within transit migration, as highlighted in previous studies (Asgary *et al*., 2013; Robbers & Morgan, 2017). Moreover, it contributes to filling the gap in addressing the need to enhance the availability of data on GBV prevalence, particularly regarding the vulnerability of migrants (Calderón-Jaramillo *et al*., 2020; Robbers & Morgan, 2017).

Secondly, this study highlights the uniqueness of each humanitarian response, suggesting that while major strategies have been implemented and adapted to specific settings, collaboration, communication, and shared values among all stakeholders involved are essential. Pooling resources, knowledge, and experience is necessary to assist victims in fulfilling their rights. This conclusion contributes to addressing the gap in the study on GBV coordination and coordination mechanisms, which have remained largely unexplored (Robbers & Morgan, 2017). Additionally, it contributes to filling the gap in the study of GBV responses, and prevention in the context of humanitarian crises, as highlighted in studies by Pérez-Vázquez and Bonilla-Campos (2023) and Raftery *et al*. (2022).

Thirdly, this study accentuates the importance of placing women at the forefront of decision-making processes regarding their rights' fulfillment. Understanding their experiences, needs, and priorities is crucial for enhancing a GBV humanitarian response. By analyzing the involvement of women in decision-making, empowering them to assert their rights and make impactful decisions in humanitarian settings, this research contributes to filling the gap in existing literature, aligning with the recommendations of Gupta *et al*. (2023) and Lafrenière *et al*. (2019), who emphasize the importance of women's participation and empowerment within humanitarian responses.

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Appendix I: Interview Guides

English Version

Interview Guide English	
Settings	Online Zoom/Google Meet
Type of Interview	Semi-structured open questions
Interview Introduction *(3 minutes)*	Good morning and thank you for being here with me today in this interview. My name is Demetra and today we will have an interview based on your expertise for about 45-60 minutes. Before we start, I will go through some technicalities about the project and related confidentiality.
Description of the Research *(5 minutes)*	This interview is part of a research study for the Faculty of Social Sciences at Lund University, in Sweden, as part of my master's program in International Development and Management. This research will help me collect insightful data to explore the challenges that migrant survivors from gender-based violence face while transiting the Darién Gap, between Panama and Colombia.

	More specifically, I am interested in understanding the gaps that are still present in the humanitarian response in the Darién Gap and how these gaps are preventing migrant survivors from accessing GBV services.
Confidentiality *(2 minutes)*	As this is a research study for my master's, I kindly ask you if it is possible to record this interview, as it will help me during the data analysis process. This is a confidential meeting, meaning that your personal details will be concealed with a pseudonym unless you allow me to share your name and role for research purposes. Moreover, you have the right to refrain from answering any questions that may compromise confidential organizational data, and you also have the right to withdraw from the study at any point during the process. The interview data only will be shared with my thesis supervisor and the resulting thesis will be published on the University Portal, when the project is completed. Do you have any questions? If you agree to these conditions, we will proceed with the interview, starting the recording now.

Orienting Questions	1) How are you?
(5 minutes)	2) Can you please state your name, organization, and your role within the organization?
	3) Please tell me more about the organization.
Interview Questions	**Theme 1: Gender-Based Violence (GBV)**
(15-20 minutes)	1) What are the main challenges in the context of GBV in the Darién Gap?
	2) What are the cultural and contextual dynamics that influence GBV in the region?
	3) How accessible are the GBV services for people affected by sexual abuse?
	4) What are the quotas for women and men using the GBV services?
	5) How often do people report gender-based violence assaults?
	6) I read that there is missing data on reporting sexual abuse and violence in the Darién Gap, what are the processes that make sure that GBV is prevented?
	7) What barriers do migrant survivors face in accessing GBV services in the Darién Gap, and how do you work to overcome these barriers?
	8) Can you share examples of successful strategies or programs that have improved the accessibility of services for migrant survivors?

	Theme 2: Humanitarian Response
	1) What is the humanitarian response strategy in place for GBV survivors in the Darién Gap?
	2) What are the main challenges in the humanitarian response strategy for GBV survivors in the Darién Gap?
	3) How is the coordination among different actors assuring the protection of GBV survivors in the Darién Gap?
	4) How are the humanitarian responses assuring the accessibility of GBV services to migrant survivors in the Darién Gap?
	5) What are the factors preventing a successful implementation of a humanitarian response for GBV in the Darién Gap?
	6) In your opinion, what are some areas or aspects that require immediate actions or attention in the context of GBV in the Darién Gap?
	7) What mechanisms are in place to monitor and evaluate the impact of GBV response interventions in the Darién Gap?
	a. How do you measure the effectiveness of programs, and what indicators are considered most relevant?
	Theme 3: Coordination System
	1) What is the coordination system among the different actors in the field to ensure that

	GBV services are accessible? 2) What are capacity-building programs in place to prevent GBV? 3) What do you have to say about the humanitarian-development-peace nexus? 4) What kind of actions are necessary to find sustainable solutions for preventing GBV in the context of the Darién Gap? 5) What role does collaboration play in the effectiveness of humanitarian responses for GBV in this region? 6) Can you share an experience where the response has been successful?

Wrap-up Questions
 	
(10 minutes)
	1) Based on your experiences, what recommendations would you provide for improving the humanitarian response to GBV in the Darién Gap?
	
	2) Looking forward, what do you believe are the key priorities for enhancing GBV response efforts in this region?
	
	3) How would you describe in three words the humanitarian response to gender-based violence in Darién Gap?
	
	4) Do you have any further feedback related to the GBV humanitarian response in the Darién Gap?
	    a. Could you maybe help me find some other potential respondents for this interview?
	    b. If there is a GBV coordinator group?

	c. More documents?
Conclusion of the Interview *(5 minutes)*	This was the end of the interview. Thank you once again for the time spent with me, sharing insightful information for my research study. It was a very valuable time!

Spanish Version

Guía de Entrevistas Español	
Configuración	En línea Zoom/Google Meet
Tipo de Entrevista	Preguntas abiertas semiestructuradas
Introducción de la Entrevista *(3 minutos)*	Buenos días y gracias por estar hoy aquí conmigo en esta entrevista. Me llamo Demetra y hoy realizaremos una entrevista basada en su experiencia durante unos 45-60 minutos. Antes de empezar, repasaré algunas informaciones sobre el proyecto y su confidencialidad
Descripción del Proyecto *(5 minutos)*	Esta entrevista forma parte de un estudio de investigación para la Facultad de Ciencias Sociales de la Universidad de Lund, en Suecia, como parte de mi programa de maestría en Desarrollo y Gestión Internacional.

	Esta investigación me ayudará a recopilar datos esclarecedores para explorar los retos a los que se enfrentan las migrantes supervivientes de la violencia de género en su tránsito por la brecha del Darién, entre Panamá y Colombia. Más concretamente, me interesa comprender las lagunas que aún existen en la respuesta humanitaria en la brecha del Darién y cómo estas lagunas impiden que las supervivientes migrantes accedan a los servicios de violencia de género.
Confidencialidad *(2 minutos)*	Como se trata de un estudio de investigación para mi maestría, le pregunto si es posible grabar esta entrevista, ya que me ayudará durante el proceso de análisis de datos. Se trata de una reunión confidencial, lo que significa que sus datos personales se ocultarán con un seudónimo, a menos que me permita compartir su nombre y función con fines de investigación. Además, tiene derecho a abstenerse de responder a cualquier pregunta que pueda comprometer los datos confidenciales de la organización, y también tiene derecho a

	retirarse del estudio en cualquier momento del proceso. Los datos de la entrevista sólo se compartirán con mi director de tesis y la tesis resultante se publicará en el Portal de la Universidad, una vez finalizado el proyecto. ¿Tiene alguna pregunta? Si está de acuerdo con estas condiciones, procederemos con la entrevista, comenzando ahora la grabación.
Preguntas de Orientación *(5 minutos)*	1) ¿Cómo está? 2) ¿Podría indicarme su nombre, la organización a la que pertenece y su función dentro de la misma? 3) Por favor, cuénteme más sobre la organización.
Preguntas de la Entrevista *(15-20 minutos)*	**Tema 1: Violencia Basada de Género (VBG)** 1) ¿Cuáles son los principales desafíos en el contexto de la VBG en la Brecha del Darién? 2) ¿Cuáles son las dinámicas culturales y contextuales que influyen en la VBG en la región? 3) ¿Cuán accesibles son los servicios de VBG para las personas afectadas por abuso sexual? 4) ¿Cuáles son las cuotas de mujeres y hombres que utilizan los servicios de VBG? 5) ¿Con qué frecuencia se denuncian las agresiones por violencia de género?

	6) He leído que faltan datos sobre denuncias de abuso y violencia sexual en la Brecha del Darién, ¿cuáles son los procesos que aseguran la prevención de la violencia de género?
	7) ¿Qué barreras enfrentan los sobrevivientes migrantes para acceder a los servicios de VBG en la Brecha del Darién, y cómo trabajan para superar estas barreras?
	8) ¿Puede compartir ejemplos de estrategias o programas exitosos que hayan mejorado la accesibilidad de los servicios para los sobrevivientes migrantes?
	Tema 2: Respuesta Humanitaria
	1) ¿Cuál es la estrategia de respuesta humanitaria para sobrevivientes de VBG en la Brecha del Darién?
	2) ¿Cuáles son los principales retos en la estrategia de respuesta humanitaria para sobrevivientes de VBG en la Brecha del Darién?
	3) ¿Cómo está la coordinación entre los diferentes actores para asegurar la protección de las sobrevivientes de VBG en la Brecha del Darién?
	4) ¿Cómo están asegurando las respuestas humanitarias la accesibilidad de los servicios de VBG a las sobrevivientes migrantes en la Brecha del Darién?
	5) ¿Cuáles son los factores que impiden una

	implementación exitosa de una respuesta humanitaria para la VBG en la Brecha del Darién?
	6) En su opinión, ¿cuáles son algunas áreas o aspectos que requieren acciones o atención inmediata en el contexto de la VBG en la Brecha del Darién?
	7) ¿Qué mecanismos existen para monitorear y evaluar el impacto de las intervenciones de respuesta a la VBG en la Brecha del Darién?
	a. ¿Cómo se mide la eficacia de los programas y qué indicadores se consideran más relevantes?
	Tema 3: Sistema de Coordinación
	1) ¿Cuál es el sistema de coordinación entre los diferentes actores sobre el terreno para garantizar que los servicios de VBG sean accesibles?
	2) ¿Qué programas de capacitación existen para prevenir la VBG?
	3) ¿Qué opinión le merece el nexo humanitario-desarrollo-paz?
	4) ¿Qué tipo de acciones son necesarias para encontrar soluciones sostenibles para prevenir la VBG en el contexto de la Brecha del Darién?
	5) ¿Qué papel juega la colaboración en la eficacia de las respuestas humanitarias para la VG en esta región?

	6) ¿Puede compartir alguna experiencia en la que la respuesta haya sido exitosa?
Preguntas Finales *(10 minutos)*	1) Basándose en sus experiencias, ¿qué recomendaciones daría para mejorar la respuesta humanitaria a la VBG en la brecha del Darién? 2) De cara al futuro, ¿cuáles cree que son las prioridades clave para mejorar los esfuerzos de respuesta a la VBG en esta región? 3) ¿Cómo describiría en tres palabras la respuesta humanitaria a la violencia de género en la Brecha del Darién? 4) ¿Tiene algún comentario adicional relacionado con la respuesta humanitaria a la violencia de género en la Brecha del Darién? a. ¿Podría ayudarme a encontrar otros posibles entrevistados para esta entrevista? b. ¿Si hay un grupo de coordinadores de VBG? c. ¿Más documentos?
Conclusión de la Entrevista *(5 minutos)*	Este fue el final de la entrevista. Gracias una vez más por el tiempo que me ha dedicado, compartiendo información útil para mi estudio de investigación. Ha sido un tiempo muy precioso.

Appendix II: E-mail Template

Dear [],

My name is Demetra Pollinari, and I am a student in the Master in International Development and Management (LUMID) at Lund University, Sweden. Currently, I am the resource mobilization and communication intern at the UNFPA Regional Office for Latin America and the Caribbean.

As part of my master's program, I am conducting academic research on the topic of the humanitarian response in the Darién Gap, with an interest in GBV services for migrant survivors.

I am looking for experts to interview within this field. I believe that your expertise and your organization will provide me with some insightful data, as well as firsthand experience and perspective on this delicate topic.

The interview will take place online, through Google Meet or Zoom, and will last approximately 45-60 minutes. The information shared will be treated with confidentiality and with the only purpose of the academic research being done.

I am aiming to conduct interviews throughout the months of January and February. Please, confirm your interest and participation by answering the email and providing a preliminary availability.

I will then share more detailed information about the study proposal and consent.

Kind regards,

Demetra Pollinari