Measures granted by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights to protect the health of Venezuelan women and girls

Summary of the decision in Case PM 150/19

On March 19, 2019, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) granted urgent protective measures for Venezuelan women and girls who go to Maternidad Concepción Palacios, one of the public hospitals affected by the current humanitarian crisis in Venezuela.

After reviewing information submitted by the coalition of four Venezuelan human rights organizations Red Equivalencias en Acción and the international organization Women’s Link Worldwide, the IACHR decided to grant the protective measures requested, noting that women who go to the Maternidad Concepción Palacios maternity ward or emergency room for urgent reproductive and sexual health needs, as well as newborn babies in the maternity ward, are at risk of suffering irreparable damage, including severe harm to their health or death.

It therefore ordered Venezuela to take the following measures:

- Provide the supplies, medications, equipment, and staff necessary to ensure the health of pregnant women and newborns
- Ensure provision of appropriate supplies, medications, and healthcare services in the emergency room
- Ensure that a gender perspective is applied in the performance of maternal healthcare services and other services provided to patients
- Create appropriate nutrition and monitoring programs for women before, during, and after childbirth, as well as for newborns
- Ensure proper hygiene and sufficient medical personnel to provide healthcare for women
- Improve hospital infrastructure
- Ensure consistent water and electricity supply

The Commission expressed its alarm at the high number of deaths at the hospital. In 2018, 15 women and 265 newborn babies died, and in January 2019 alone, 15 newborns died. The IACHR found that some of these deaths were hastened by the lack of access to timely and appropriate medical treatment, shortages of medical supplies and specialized personnel, and dire hygiene conditions at the hospital.

In addition to these serious risk factors for women, the IACHR observed that thousands of pregnant women have been forced to flee Venezuela due to the humanitarian crisis.
The Commission pointed out that the situation of risk and the shortage of healthcare services has a differential impact on women because of their need for greater protection and specialized sexual and reproductive healthcare services. Appropriate and timely maternal healthcare services are vital to protecting women’s rights to physical, mental, and moral integrity.

The decision goes on to note that while these precautionary measures may allow for emergency actions in light of the seriousness of the situation, the State should also make structural changes to public policies.

It is now up to the State to collaborate with the petitioner organizations and hospital staff to implement the measures, ensuring that they may participate in the implementation freely and without retaliation.