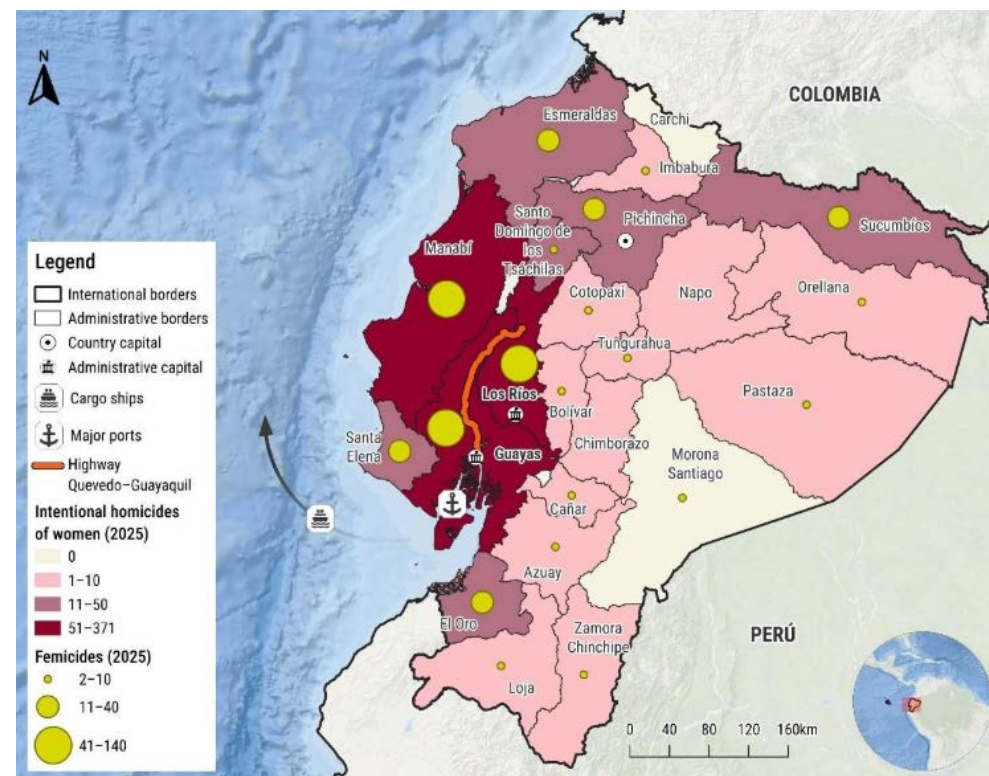


KEY FINDINGS

- Organised crime groups (OCGs) weaponise gender norms to consolidate territorial control in Guayas and Los Ríos, both strategic trafficking corridors with high homicide rates. To enforce social control and punish non-compliance, they use sexual violence, coerced early unions, and mobility restrictions, using women and girls to send violent messages and retaliate against rivals (KII 20/02/2026 a; KII 18/02/2026; KII 06/02/2026).
- At least 256 of 411 femicides nationwide in 2025 were linked to criminal systems. In Guayas and Los Ríos, OCG-perpetrated femicides represented 66.4% and 75%, respectively, of provincial totals. Firearm use in femicides rose to 78%, from 9% in 2020, reflecting convergence between gender-based and armed violence (ALDEA unpublished).
- Women aged 20–34 account for almost 50% of female homicides in Guayas and over 47% in Los Ríos (MDI 19/07/2024). Female community leaders and transgender women also face differential risks of lethal violence, extortion, and displacement as their public visibility, economic activities, and gender identities challenge OCG-imposed territorial control and social norms (KII 04/03/2026; KII 12/02/2026).
- OCGs use school environments for recruitment, extortion, and intimidation. They expose boys to forced affiliation and directly abduct girls from schools for sexual exploitation (Insecurity Insight 31/12/2025). Inside schools, poor infrastructure, such as doorless bathrooms, further exposes girls to sexual harassment (KII 02/03/2026 b).
- Violence-driven displacement increased by 357% in 2025, with women representing 54% of displaced people (3iS unpublished). Displacement is often intra-urban, keeping women near OCG-controlled areas (KII 26/02/2026). Ecuador lacks a legal framework for violence-driven internal displacement, leaving affected households – disproportionately women-headed – without formal protection (UNHCR/DP 31/07/2025).
- Violence reshapes family structures, concentrating burdens on women (MundoSur 2025). Children orphaned by femicide present severe distress, while grandmothers assume caregiving with minimal support (ALDEA 09/12/2024). Women spend up to USD 8 daily to monitor children’s safety against recruitment while sustaining households under extortion, mobility restrictions, and deteriorating mental health (KII 20/02/2026 b).

Map 1. Reported intentional homicides of women and femicides by province (2025) and key landmark locations in Guayas and Los Ríos



Notes:

This map displays two distinct indicators from different datasets. Province shading represents intentional homicides of women recorded by Ecuador’s Ministry of the Interior, and circles represent femicides registered by ALDEA.

The Quevedo–Guayaquil highway is a known high-risk route with frequent traffic accidents and security incidents, including armed attacks, robberies targeting transporters, and kidnappings (KII 18/02/2026; La Hora 11/12/2023).

Sources: ACAPS using data from OCHA (accessed 12/03/2026); Google Maps (accessed 12/03/2026); KII (18/02/2026); MDI (19/07/2024); ALDEA (29/01/2026); Insight Crime (30/10/2019)

ABOUT THIS REPORT

Aim

This report analyses how escalating organised crime-related violence – including rising homicide and femicide rates, intensifying territorial disputes between OCGs, and increased militarised responses – in Guayas and Los Ríos increased protection risks for women and girls, particularly femicide, sexual violence, exploitation, trafficking, early unions, recruitment, and displacement, in 2025. It examines how OCG-related violence intersects with gender-based violence (GBV) – including femicide (distinct from the broader homicide of women) and sexual exploitation – while driving displacement and restricting access to essential services and livelihoods, increasing women’s and girls’ exposure to protection risks.

It provides GBV coordinators and donors with evidence on protection risks and service gaps to inform programming in both provinces. This information helps them mitigate risks, allocate resources, target specific areas, and identify affected people, service constraints, and reporting limitations.

The report does not provide a comprehensive overview of gender inequalities in Ecuador, but it recognises that pre-existing structural gender inequalities – economic dependency, weak institutional protection, limited access to justice – intersect with and aggravate violence in OCG-affected areas by increasing women’s vulnerability to exploitation, coercion, and GBV underreporting.

Methodology

The analysis covers January–December 2025 and combines a review of secondary data sources and datasets – including intentional homicide, femicide, displacement, sexual violence and trafficking, and disappearance data – with qualitative primary information. The desk review draws on 70 sources, including humanitarian reports, UN publications, government documents, national statistical datasets (such as data from the Ministry of the Interior and Prosecutor’s Office), and media reporting.

To address information gaps – particularly on GBV underreporting, organised crime dynamics, and barriers to service access – the analysis incorporates 16 key informant interviews (KIIs) conducted between February–March 2026 with 22 experts (13 women, nine men) from NGOs, conflict specialists, and community-based

organisations; some interviews included multiple participants. Seven KIIs covered both provinces, eight focused on Guayas, and only one focused on Los Ríos – reflecting the limited presence of NGOs and other organisations operating in this province, as well as weaker institutional presence and reporting systems. These contribute to gaps in data and the visibility of protection risks (KII 11/02/2026). Secondary sources help mitigate this gap, but it highlights the need for increased institutional and humanitarian presence and data collection in the province. The KIIs provide insights into protection risks, access constraints, and the differentiated impacts of violence on women and girls.

Guayas and Los Ríos were selected given the intensity and characteristics of organised crime-related violence in each province. Across Ecuador, Guayas records the highest number of homicides, while Los Ríos has the highest homicide rate per capita. In absolute terms, Guayas also reports the highest number of intentional homicides of women in the country, followed by Manabí and Los Ríos. When considering the homicide rate of women per 100,000 inhabitants, Los Ríos ranks highest, followed by Guayas (MDI 19/07/2024).

Both provinces are geographically contiguous and form part of a strategic drug trafficking corridor linking inland routes to maritime export points, intensifying OCG control through competition over transport routes, port access, and logistical infrastructure. Los Ríos faces limited institutional capacity and humanitarian presence owing to historical marginalisation, reflected in the limited presence of NGOs, weaker service coverage, and reduced state and policing capacity. Its agro-industrial economy, particularly banana production, concentrates power among large landowners, some linked to OCGs, reinforcing parallel power structures and weak state presence and enabling dynamics such as land control, labour exploitation, and extortion (KII 20/02/2026 b). Violence has also escalated rapidly, including sharp increases in homicide rates and the expansion of OCG activity, further constraining the ability of institutions to respond and contributing to its relative invisibility despite acute risks (MDI 19/07/2024).

ACAPS triangulated data on the intentional homicide of women from Ecuador’s Ministry of the Interior with femicide records from Asociación Latinoamericana para el Desarrollo Alternativo (Fundación ALDEA) to better capture the broader scale of violence against women (ALDEA unpublished; MDI 19/07/2024). These terms are not interchangeable but complementary: official homicide statistics capture overall

lethal violence, while Fundación ALDEA provides gender-based classification, helping to identify femicide cases that may be underreported in official data. Comparing these datasets revealed that many gender-based killings are not officially classified as femicide owing to legal gaps or misclassification. In practice, cases are often recorded as homicide as gender biases and limited understanding of femicide lead authorities to overlook the gender-based motives underpinning the crime, as KIIs highlighted. Certain forms of gender-based killings, such as transfemicides, are also not explicitly typified within existing legal frameworks and are typically recorded as homicide, with sex registered according to official identification documents even when it does not align with gender identity, further contributing to misclassification and invisibility (KII 18/02/2026).

Femicide figures from ALDEA vary between its website infographics and an unpublished database. Where discrepancies occurred, the unpublished database was prioritised given its more detailed and disaggregated information. Because ALDEA regularly updates these figures, citations include the exact access date. By integrating both sources, this report helps mitigate underreporting in official statistics.

Limitations

- Stigma and fear of retaliation limit quantitative data on protection risks, particularly early unions, the recruitment and use of girls and adolescents, and sexual violence and trafficking, leading to underreporting. Available figures reflect recorded incidents rather than actual prevalence.
- The most recent National Survey on Family Relations and Gender-Based Violence against Women, still the primary national reference point, was conducted in 2019, limiting updated nationwide data on GBV patterns (INEC 15/01/2026). While some datasets provide sex-disaggregated data on specific forms of violence, these do not offer a comprehensive overview of GBV.
- Humanitarian monitoring has historically focused on refugee and migrant populations in the context of the regional Venezuelan migration crisis and international humanitarian priorities; comprehensive data on displacement linked to violence affecting the Ecuadorian population only emerged in 2024, limiting long-term trends analysis (3IS 02/04/2025). Information on broader protection risks – particularly OCG-related violence and displacement-linked GBV – remains fragmented and less systematically documented.

Information gaps

- Data on non-lethal GBV remains largely undocumented, with significant information gaps regarding coercive control, sexual exploitation, threats, extortion, and OCG-related violence.
- The monitoring of violence against trans women is limited to transfemicide tracking by ALDEA, which classifies these cases separately from its broader femicide dataset; other forms of violence remain undocumented.
- Most datasets lack ethnic disaggregation, obscuring specific risks for Afro-Ecuadorian and Indigenous women, particularly in coastal provinces such as Guayas, where Afro-Ecuadorian populations are significant.
- Quantitative evidence on the intersection of livelihood losses and displacement remains limited.
- Gaps are particularly pronounced in Los Ríos, where weaker institutional presence and fewer NGOs constrain systematic monitoring (KII 11/02/2026).

Terminology

- **Femicide** refers to the killing of women and girls because of their gender. Not all homicides of women and girls are femicide, but the report analyses both femicide and the intentional homicide of women to capture the broader scale of lethal violence (GBV AOR 10/2022). In Ecuador, under the country's criminal code, any person who, as a result of power relations expressed through any form of violence, kills a woman because of her sex or gender should face a prison sentence of 22–26 years (MJDHC 2014).
- **Intentional homicides** are unlawful killings committed with intent. These statistics capture all such killings, regardless of gender motive, and typically include cases arising from interpersonal conflicts, disputes over land or resources, gang violence, and armed group attacks (MDI 27/12/2022).
- **Early unions** refer to relationships involving children who cannot provide informed consent. Early unions are used throughout this report instead of early marriage because many such early unions are not formally registered or legally recognised (UNFPA 08/2021).

Given legal gaps, gender biases, and classification system limitations, not all gender-related killings are officially recorded as femicide. The report analyses both femicide data and intentional homicides of women recorded by Ecuador's Ministry of the Interior in parallel to better capture the scale and patterns of gender-based killings. KIIs and findings from a review of secondary sources support this interpretation.

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CONTEXT AND CRISIS OVERVIEW

General violence in Ecuador

Ecuador faces a severe protection crisis, with OCG expansion and fragmentation driving high homicide rates, recruitment, sexual exploitation and trafficking. The combined impacts of organised crime expansion, weak institutions, and socioeconomic inequalities aggravate protection risks, especially in Guayas and Los Ríos. OCGs strategically use violence against women and girls to assert territorial control and intimidate communities, manifesting in practices such as sexual violence, early unions, forced relationships, and threats against relatives (ACLEED 03/06/2025; ICG 12/11/2025).

Since 2023, organised crime-related violence has sharply increased, making Ecuador one of the most violent countries in South America (ACLEED 03/06/2025; ICG 12/11/2025). Between 2023–2025, homicide trends proved volatile. 2023 saw 8,248 cases (46.2 per 100,000 inhabitants), dropping to 7,063 (39.3) in 2024 before sharply rising to 9,216 (50.9) in 2025 – a 30.5% increase in cases and 29.5% increase in the rate. These trends are particularly pronounced in provinces such as Guayas and Los Ríos (MDI 19/07/2024).

Ecuador's position between major cocaine-producing countries, combined with its export ports and dollarised economy, makes it an attractive hub for trafficking and money laundering (ACLEED 03/06/2025; ICG 12/11/2025). Institutional weakening from an inconsistent state approach to organised crime through changes in government, combined with longstanding structural gaps and shifts in trafficking routes, facilitates OCG consolidation and territorial expansion (ACLEED 03/06/2025; InSight Crime 12/2024).

The prison system has become a central hub where OCGs coordinate trafficking, recruitment, and alliances. Within prisons, leaders maintain control and use established communication networks to direct operations, allowing violence to spread to urban and rural areas (InSight Crime 12/2024; ICG 12/11/2025). These dynamics translate to territorial control over communities, where OCGs impose coercive governance systems that heighten protection risks, including GBV, and embed exploitation within everyday life through sexual violence and trafficking, extortion, and forced recruitment into OCGs (KII 26/02/2026).

In 2024, shortly after OCGs seized TC Televisión facilities, Ecuador declared a domestic armed conflict that enabled military deployment (R4V 18/12/2025; ICG 12/11/2025; Primicias 09/01/2024). Despite these measures, violence continued to intensify. In the first half of 2025, Ecuador recorded the highest homicide levels in its recent history (R4V 18/12/2025). Between January–November, OCG-related incidents killed more than 3,600 people – a 42% increase compared with the same period in 2024 (ACLEDD 11/12/2025).

Violence in Guayas and Los Ríos

Table 1. Baseline data: population statistics and demographic indicators

Projected total population (2026): Guayas: 4,835,479 | Los Ríos: 988,852 | National: 18,243,816
Migrant population: Guayas: 100,234 | Los Ríos: 8,606 | National: 419,608

Indicator	Guayas	Los Ríos	National
% of women within the migrant population	50	50	51
% of women residing in urban areas	86	55	64
% of women residing in rural areas	14	45	36
% of women who identify as Afro-Ecuadorian	5	2	5
% of women who identify as Indigenous	1	1	8
% of households experiencing multidimensional poverty	36	45	37

Note: the first indicator is calculated as a percentage of the total migrant population. Indicators 2–5 are calculated as a share of the total female population. The final indicator is calculated as a percentage of total households.

Sources: ACAPS using data from INEC (accessed 03/03/2026); INEC (accessed 17/02/2026); INEC (accessed 13/02/2026)

Guayas and Los Ríos, both in Ecuador’s coastal region, have become epicentres of violence, with high homicide and femicide rates. Guayas hosts the country’s largest port in Guayaquil, while Los Ríos, an inland province, has an economy centred on banana, cacao, rice, and maize production (La Hora 06/10/2025). Their strategic position along trafficking routes and export corridors – including cocaine export routes linking inland production zones to coastal ports – makes them critical territories for OCGs (KII 19/02/2026 a; InSight Crime 12/2024).

In 2025, Guayas recorded the highest number of homicides in the country (4,106 cases or a 26.5% increase from 2024), while Los Ríos registered 1,276. Los Ríos had the highest homicide rate (130.4 per 100,000 inhabitants), followed by Guayas (85.8) (MDI 19/07/2024).

Violence against women and girls in Guayas and Los Ríos

Based on KIIs and available homicide and femicide statistics, violence against women has increased and shifted, with a growing proportion linked to OCG dynamics rather than occurring primarily within intimate partner settings (ALDEA unpublished; KII 18/02/2026; MDI 19/07/2024; KII 06/02/2026; ALDEA 09/12/2024). This reflects the increasing instrumentalisation of violence against women – via sexual violence, mobility restrictions, or early unions – to enforce territorial control and compliance, retaliate against rival groups, and sustain criminal economies. According to Ecuador’s Ministry of the Interior, in 2025, the national female homicide rate reached 4.3 per 100,000 inhabitants – a 48.2% increase from 2024. Guayas recorded the highest absolute number of cases, with 371 women killed (a 61.3% increase from 2024), yielding a rate of 7.7 per 100,000 inhabitants. Los Ríos registered 93 cases (a 63.2% increase) but recorded the highest rate in the country at 9.5 per 100,000 inhabitants (MDI 19/07/2024).

Table 2. Ten provinces with the highest reported rates of women's homicide per 100,000 inhabitants in 2025

National baseline: 778 intentional homicides of women | **National homicide rate:** 4.3 (+48.2% vs. 2024)

Province	Homicide rate	Homicides	Variation in homicides (vs. 2024)
Los Ríos	9.5	93	+63.2% ▲
Guayas	7.7	371	+61.3% ▲
El Oro	6.6	50	+100.0% ▲
Santa Elena	6.6	27	+58.8% ▲
Sucumbíos	5.9	12	+9.1% ▲
Manabí	5.5	94	+80.8% ▲
Orellana	4.6	9	-18.2%
Esmeraldas	4.5	27	+28.6% ▲
Cañar	3.4	8	0.0%
Santo Domingo	2.6	14	+180.0% ▲

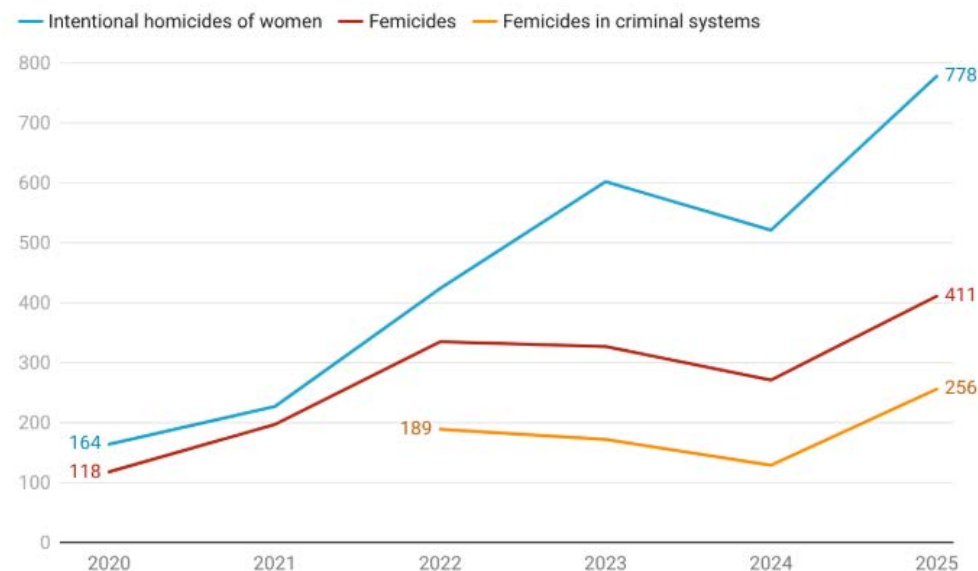
Sources: ACAPS using data from MDI (19/07/2024)

In 2025, there were 411 femicides nationwide, representing a 51.7% increase from 2024. ALDEA reports that at least 256 were directly linked to criminal systems, with women's bodies instrumentalised to send messages, assert control over communities, and retaliate against rivals. These links were identified through ALDEA's case monitoring and presence in communities, allowing them to track perpetrators and understand OCG dynamics (KII 18/02/2026). Their tactics include targeting women associated with rival groups, using sexual violence as punishment or intimidation, and exploiting women in trafficking networks or early unions to consolidate territorial control (MDI 19/07/2024; ALDEA unpublished).

The crisis has also triggered internal displacement driven by OCG violence, including extortion, recruitment, and sexual exploitation. In both provinces, displacement is often intra-urban (KII 26/02/2026). Guayas acts as both origin and destination, while Los Ríos is mainly characterised by outflows (UNHCR/DP 31/07/2025). In 2025, women represented 54% of displaced people nationwide, many in households with children (3iS unpublished). Women-headed households face heightened risks given combined caregiving and income responsibilities, increasing difficulties in securing livelihoods and exposure to protection risks (KII 11/02/2026).

In displacement contexts, precarious housing conditions, income loss, and limited service access compound these challenges. This can increase exposure to GBV, including sexual exploitation, survival sex, and coercion. Caregiving responsibilities and economic pressures may also restrict women's mobility and access to assistance (KII 26/02/2026; KII 19/02/2026 b). Data on the proportion of women-headed households is not available.

Figure 1. Intentional homicides of women and femicides in Ecuador (2020–2025)



Created with Datawrapper

Sources: ACAPS using data from MDI (19/07/2024); ALDEA (unpublished)



Women play key roles in community leadership and social support networks, particularly in Guayas, where they lead grassroots organisations and neighbourhood initiatives (KII 11/02/2026). These roles increase exposure to protection risks by making them more visible to OCGs and placing them in tension with territorial control. By organising community activities, facilitating access to assistance, or engaging with external parties, women leaders may be perceived as challenging OCG authority. Women in leadership roles, particularly in rural and community settings, face high GBV levels linked to public participation, making them more likely to face threats, intimidation, and, in some cases, displacement (efeminista 26/11/2024; KII 26/02/2026; KII 11/02/2026).

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Pre-existing gender norms and inequalities

In Guayas and Los Ríos, OCGs operate within pre-existing gender norms characterised by unequal power relations, leveraging these norms through early unions, sexual exploitation, and control over female relatives. Women are expected to assume caregiving and domestic roles, particularly in contexts of male absence resulting from violence or incarceration. This increases their vulnerability to OCG-related violence and exploitation by creating economic dependence, restricting mobility, and making them reliant on male intermediaries. Social norms position men as protectors, reinforcing male authority and expectations that women obey their partners (ONU Mujeres Ecuador 11/11/2022).

These norms normalise physical control over women, exposing them to specific risks, such as sexual violence and femicide. Key informants highlight that women's and girls' bodies are implicitly treated as commodities that can be appropriated and instrumentalised within broader systems of violence and economic gain (KII 18/02/2026; KII 11/02/2026).

OCGs' weaponisation of gender norms

OCGs weaponise and amplify gender inequalities to sustain operations, such as extortion, trafficking, and recruitment, enacting GBV by using women's bodies as tools for intimidation, punishment, and control within social regulation and economic exploitation. They use violence against women both to control them directly and to send messages between rival groups and communities, including acts of retaliation, warnings, and demonstrations of authority over territories and illegal economies, especially against rival men (KII 06/02/2026; KII 18/02/2026).

- **Women and girls as property and trophies:** OCGs objectify women's bodies as trophies or currency to assert dominance (KII 20/02/2026 a). They enact violence against women to send retaliatory messages and enforce compliance, often involving extreme cruelty such as mutilating hands, tongues, or eyes to symbolise that women should not work, speak out, or report crimes (KII 06/02/2026; KII 18/02/2026; Amnesty International 05/03/2024).
- **Women's roles under coercion and economic pressure:** OCGs exploit gender norms that portray women as less suspicious and assign them subordinate roles, facilitating their coercive recruitment and use within criminal operations (ICG 12/11/2025; KII 06/02/2026). Women and girls are often forced into roles such as extortion collection and surveillance and into domestic tasks (Primicias 08/02/2026). Gender norms that normalise women's subordination and caregiving responsibilities enable these dynamics, increasing their economic dependence on OCGs and heightening their exposure to violence (UNICEF 07/04/2025).
- **Weaponisation of violent masculinity for recruitment:** gender norms underpin recruitment processes that directly contribute to the subordination and heightened exposure of girls to GBV (UNICEF 07/04/2025; KII 11/02/2026). OCGs exploit traditional masculine ideals of dominance to recruit boys, offering money, status, firearms, and access to women through sexual exploitation and coerced relationships (ALDEA 09/12/2024; KII 24/02/2026 a). This drives boys into violent roles, such as hitmen and extortionists, with girls positioned as part of the 'rewards' linked to these forms of masculine performance, legitimising and normalising the sexual exploitation and abuse of girls (KII 11/02/2026).
- **Normalisation of violence in intimate and family relationships:** pre-existing patterns of intimate partner and family violence are reinforced and amplified in contexts with OCG presence. Perpetrators of domestic violence are often the same individuals who participate in OCGs (KII 18/02/2026; KII 06/02/2026). This

overlap normalises violence against women and girls across both private and public spheres, blurring the boundaries between domestic and crime violence. As a result, controlling behaviours and violence within relationships are tolerated and intensified, contributing to a continuum of violence that extends from the household to organised crime dynamics – perpetuating intimate partner abuse, coercive relationships, and the instrumentalisation of women in criminal networks (KII 18/02/2026; KII 06/02/2026; ALDEA 09/12/2024; OCCRP 30/11/2022).

By embedding GBV into territorial control, OCGs not only assert dominance but also generate severe humanitarian consequences, driving protection risks, displacement, and livelihood losses among women and girls in Guayas and Los Ríos. In displacement settings, women and girls face even increased exposure to exploitation, violence, and barriers to accessing services.

Illegal economies, strategic corridors, and OCG territorial control

Illegal economies and territorial control by OCGs not only drive violence in general but also shape the production and instrumentalisation of violence against women and girls within criminal systems. In Guayas and Los Ríos, women and girls are not only exposed to insecurity but are specifically targeted within criminal economies – including for trafficking, sexual exploitation, and retaliation – where violence, exploitation, and coercion are used to reinforce control over populations and territory (KII 26/02/2026).

Ecuador functions as a key trafficking hub linking cocaine production in neighbouring countries, such as Colombia, to international maritime routes (ACLEd 11/12/2025). Guayas and Los Ríos are central thanks to their position along strategic corridors, with around 80% of violent events in Ecuador occurring in coastal provinces (ACLEd 03/06/2025). These dynamics intensify OCG territorial control and competition, in turn shaping GBV patterns as violence, exploitation, and coercion are used to control populations and sustain criminal economies.

Los Ríos functions as a strategic inland corridor connecting the northern border – where cocaine enters from Colombia – to coastal export hubs (LR 04/12/2025). Rural routes and highways connecting to the ports of Guayaquil and Manta make it logistically crucial. OCGs contest these routes, directly affecting communities through extortion and recruitment (KII 19/02/2026 a). OCGs use rural areas, including farms in cantons such as Pueblo Viejo, to store cocaine before transport to the coast (KII 20/02/2026 b; Primicias 10/02/2026).

Guayas represents the final stage of this chain as a major centre of drug exportation. The port of Guayaquil, handling 3,000–4,000 containers daily, is the main gateway for cocaine shipments hidden in agricultural exports destined for Europe and the US, with nearby cantons providing logistical support; Durán operates as a storage hub, while Posorja and smaller ports are contested maritime routes (KII 19/02/2026 a; ACAPS 29/10/2025; ICG 12/11/2025). Violence is driven by competition between OCGs, primarily Los Lobos and Los Choneros, intensified after the extradition of the Los Choneros leader in 2025, which created a power vacuum (ACLEd 11/12/2025). Arrests and killings further fragment these structures into smaller factions, and transnational criminal networks supply financing and weapons, compounding this volatility (Primicias 23/02/2026; ICG 12/11/2025; ACAPS 29/10/2025). This competition reinforces territorial control and shapes patterns of violence against women and girls (KII 18/02/2026).

Beyond drug trafficking, OCGs have diversified into the extortion, kidnapping, and trafficking of women and girls for sexual exploitation. They generally target communities through extortion, coercion, and forced involvement in criminal activities as part of their economic model, and then target women and girls for sexual exploitation and trafficking, which function both as revenue-generating activities and as mechanisms of control (ACLEd 03/06/2025; KII 26/02/2026). They strategically use violence against women and girls to both punish noncompliance and send messages to rival groups (KII 18/02/2026; KII 11/02/2026). These dynamics contribute to a broader climate of fear and impunity, where violence becomes normalised and underreported (KII 26/02/2026).

Territorial control along these corridors restricts women's freedom of movement and access to livelihoods, services, and support networks. In areas under their control, OCGs often regulate movement through informal curfews, checkpoints, and restrictions on crossing neighbourhood boundaries, enforced through intimidation and threats. These dynamics increase risks of harassment, coercion, and violence for women and girls, particularly when travelling through contested zones (KII 12/02/2026). The presence of competing groups further intensifies insecurity, creating environments where violence is used strategically to assert dominance and instil fear (KII 18/02/2026).

Weak institutional presence along strategic corridors – particularly limited policing, judicial capacity, and specialised GBV protection services – aggravates these risks. Limited access to reporting mechanisms for GBV, shelter, and legal protection, combined with fear of retaliation, discourages survivors from seeking support or justice. This allows OCGs to maintain control and keeps violence against women and girls largely underreported and insufficiently addressed (KII 12/02/2026; ICG 12/11/2025).

IMPACTS OF INCREASED OCG ACTIVITY AND TERRITORIAL CONTROL

GBV types experienced by women and girls in OCG-controlled areas

In Guayas and Los Ríos, women and girls face multiple forms of OCG-perpetrated GBV, including femicide, rape, sexual assault, sexual exploitation, and early unions. Economic forms of GBV – including the denial of access to resources and services, as well as the targeted extortion of women-led businesses – are further detailed in the Reduced Livelihoods and Reduced Access to Services sections.

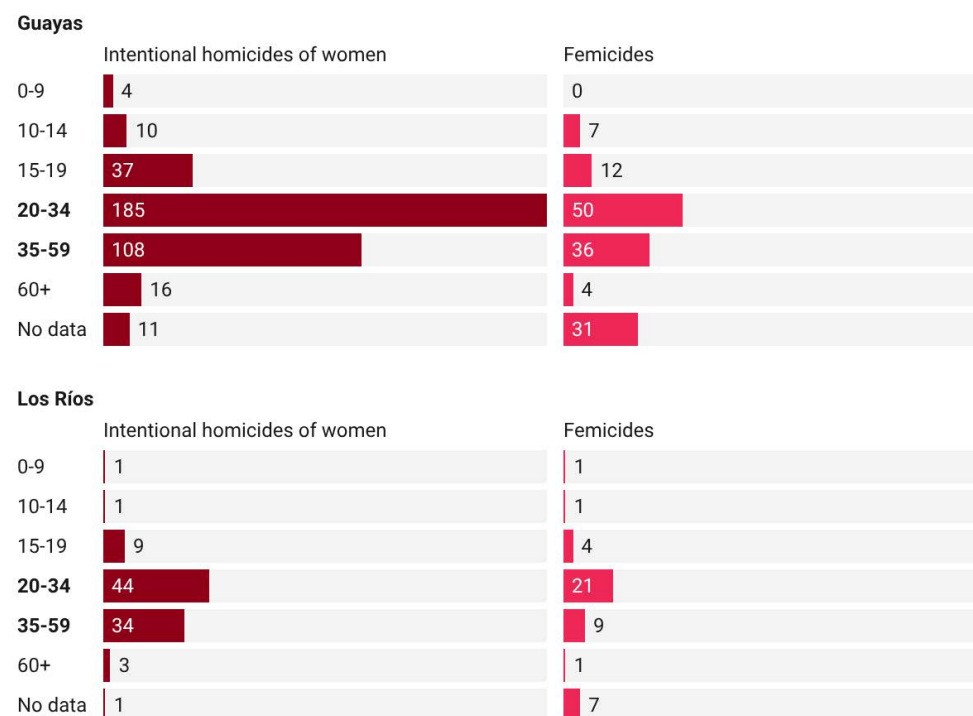
Femicide and intentional homicides of women and girls

Tracking femicide in Ecuador requires analysing data on both femicide and the intentional homicide of women. In OCG-controlled contexts, gender-based homicides are often misclassified as standard homicides owing to legal and institutional classification gaps, obscuring their scale.

In Guayas and Los Ríos, OCGs use femicide and intentional homicide of women to assert territorial control through retaliation, intimidation, and punishment (KII 26/02/2026; KII 20/02/2026 a). They kill women as retaliation against rival groups or male relatives or to punish those who leave exploitative and coerced early unions (likely to OCG members), refuse sexual exploitation, or do not cooperate with criminal activities (KII 26/02/2026; KII 19/02/2026 b; KII 18/02/2026). These killings are rooted in gender norms that frame women's autonomy as transgressive, reinforcing violence to reassert male dominance (KII 18/02/2026). This sees femicide as no longer limited to intimate partner violence (IPV) but embedded in OCG strategies, where they instrumentalise women's lives and bodies within territorial dispute and criminal governance.

OCG dynamics have also increased the brutality and public nature of these crimes in provinces such as Guayas and Los Ríos, shifting them from private spaces to territorial disputes often involving multiple perpetrators (MundoSur 2025). The use of firearms in femicides rose from 9% in 2020 to 78% in 2025, reflecting convergence with broader armed violence (ALDEA 29/01/2026; KII 18/02/2026). In some cases, they mutilate women's bodies postmortem to send a message and reinforce control and intimidation (KII 06/02/2026; KII 18/02/2026).

Figure 2. Femicides and intentional homicides of women by age group in Guayas and Los Ríos (2025)



Sources: ACAPS using data from MDI (19/07/2024); ALDEA (unpublished)

In 2025, Guayas recorded 371 female homicides and 140 femicides, the highest figures nationwide, while Los Ríos recorded 93 female homicides and 44 femicides, ranking third nationally (MDI 19/07/2024; ALDEA unpublished). Of these, OCGs perpetrated 93 femicides in Guayas and 33 in Los Ríos, representing 66.4% and 75% of the total reported femicides, respectively (ALDEA unpublished).

Women aged 20–34 are the most affected in Guayas (49.9%) and Los Ríos (47.3%) in terms of female homicides (MDI 19/07/2024). Similarly, high femicide rates affect the same demographic in Guayas (50 cases or 35.7%) and Los Ríos (21 cases or 47.7%) (ALDEA unpublished). A likely explanation is that women in these age groups are more likely to participate in economic activities, sustain households, or be in relationships that intersect with OCG networks, increasing their visibility and vulnerability to extortion, coercion, and retaliation (KII 18/02/2026).

Women with previous IPV exposure may face increased risks when perpetrators join OCGs, as affiliation increases coercive capacity, access to weapons, and impunity. Evidence from KIIs and documented cases suggests a notable overlap between domestic violence perpetrators and OCG membership (KII 06/02/2026; KII 18/02/2026; *El Comercio* 15/09/2025). In some cases, aggressors forcibly remove survivors from shelters for women, extending control beyond private spaces (KII 12/02/2026; *MundoSur* 2025).

In Ecuador, transfemicides increased from 14 cases in 2024 to 18 in 2025 (ALDEA 29/01/2026 and 28/01/2025). Trans women sexually exploited or running small businesses (such as beauty salons) face lethal violence when resisting extortion or collaboration. Traditional gender norms legitimise violence against trans women and restrict their access to justice, healthcare, and protection services. Underreporting remains significant given gaps in legal classification, data systems, and broader LGBTQ+ protection mechanisms (KII 04/03/2026; KII 18/02/2026).

Systemic impunity and institutional barriers – such as limited policing, court access, and reporting mechanisms – restrict survivors' access to justice, forcing families to rely entirely on community networks, particularly women-led initiatives, local NGOs, and informal support systems (KII 19/02/2026 b). The reporting system often requires survivors to file complaints in the same jurisdiction where the violence occurred, significantly hindering women and girls displaced by insecurity who may be unable to return to where the incident took place (KII 02/03/2026 b).

Sexual violence and rape

Women and girls face heightened risks of sexual violence in OCG-controlled areas. In 2025, Ecuador recorded 9,431 cases of sexual violence against children and adolescents. Guayas accounted for 1,548 or 16.4%, a 3% increase from 2024, and Los Ríos 258 or 2.7%, a 4% increase. Guayas ranked second nationwide, with the highest numbers in Guayaquil (967), Milagro (98), and Durán (85), while in Los Ríos, cases were concentrated in Quevedo (68), San Jacinto de Buena Fe (42), and Babahoyo (41). Reporting and institutional capacity likely influence observed differences, with higher reporting in urban centres such as Guayaquil. Risk patterns also differ between urban and rural zones, where exposure along plantation routes and limited mobility can increase vulnerability (FGE accessed 20/02/2026).

OCGs systematically use sexual violence as a tool of territorial control and intimidation. In some communities, armed incursions into homes targeting women-headed households may involve sexual violence and theft (KII 19/02/2026 b). One documented case describes how OCG recruited an adolescent girl through deception and then subjected her to sexual exploitation and drug trafficking, resulting in pregnancy and severe physical and psychological trauma before she was able to escape to a specialised shelter (UNICEF 07/04/2025). OCGs also use sexual violence as punishment and coercion in contexts where individuals resist control or refuse to comply with demands (KII 19/02/2026 b; KII 18/02/2026).

In rural areas of Los Ríos, risks are concentrated along routes connecting communities to plantations, schools, and markets, restricting women's mobility and increasing exposure to assault. These routes function as high-risk areas where sexual violence, harassment, and, in some cases, homicide occur. The bodies of homicide victims are abandoned along paths, illustrating both insecurity and the targeted nature of threats (KII 02/03/2026 b).

Trans men may face specific risks of sexual violence given the hypersexualisation of their bodies, perceived as exotic, while trans women face violence as they are perceived as transgressing and betraying patriarchal gender norms by rejecting the male privileges they were assigned at birth when they adopt feminised identities. These dynamics are linked to so-called corrective rape, which constitutes a broader risk across Ecuador, where OCGs use sexual violence as punishment or coercion based on gender identity. Access to protection services for LGBTQ+ survivors remains limited, with barriers including stigma, fear of retaliation, and gaps in institutional response (KII 04/03/2026).

Sexual exploitation and trafficking of women and girls

Girls' **sexual exploitation** is reported as a persistent practice in coastal provinces such as Guayas and Los Ríos, where OCGs often target those in the same communities where they operate. Through early unions with members and sexual exploitation, girls become subordinate within criminal structures, with OCGs treating them as trophies or symbols of status within group hierarchies. This notion reflects gender norms that objectify women's bodies as markers of status, control, and reward. Afro-Ecuadorian women and girls in Guayas face heightened risks of sexual exploitation given intersecting racial and gender discrimination (KII 11/02/2026).

Economic marginalisation also contributes to sexual exploitation. Youth unemployment and labour informality create conditions in which organised crime becomes one of the few accessible income sources (UNICEF 07/04/2025; IOM 19/12/2025). In provinces such as Los Ríos, dependence on the banana sector, precarious labour conditions, and limited livelihood diversification increase risks of child labour, recruitment, and coercion into exploitative activities for women, girls, and adolescents (KII 20/02/2026 b). Recruitment often occurs through economic pressure, deception, or social coercion, with families sometimes forced or threatened to enter girls in exploitative arrangements, particularly in contexts of extreme hardship (KII 11/02/2026). Fear drives compliance and underreporting, while denunciation may trigger threats and forced displacement. Displaced families face heightened risks of further violence, including GBV, during relocation and in arrival areas (KII 26/02/2026; KII 11/02/2026). Migrants, rural households, and displaced families are among the most affected groups.

In terms of the **trafficking of women and girls**, Ecuador recorded 176 cases in 2025 – 69.9% involving women and 30.1% men – based on officially recognised cases identified by authorities. Guayas accounted for 22% of the cases involving women and girls and Los Ríos 4.1%. In Guayas, this primarily affects Venezuelan migrants and refugees; 50% of the incidents involving Venezuelan women in 2025 were concentrated in the province, suggesting specific vulnerabilities related to irregular status, limited social networks, and exposure to exploitation (MDI accessed 20/02/2026).

Women and girls are primarily trafficked for purposes of sexual exploitation, including forced prostitution and exploitative arrangements (R4V 18/12/2025; ICG 12/11/2025). In Guayas and Los Ríos, OCGs and associated networks reel girls in for sexual exploitation and control through coercion, deception, or manipulation, including false promises of support, which create emotional or economic dependency (KII 02/03/2026 b; KII 26/02/2026; KII 20/02/2026 b).

In Los Ríos, an interprovincial trafficking corridor enables rural areas to function as recruitment zones, while Guayaquil and other urban centres in Guayas serve as destinations for sexual exploitation (KII 20/02/2026 b).

Early unions

In some communities, OCGs force adolescent girls into early unions with members, while in others, these unions may not involve overt force but are otherwise rooted in manipulation – including deliberate strategies to build trust and emotional dependency – or economic coercion. These are shaped by significant power imbalances, social pressure, and limited capacity for girls to refuse (KII 24/02/2026 b; KII 20/02/2026 b; UNFPA 04/08/2022). These dynamics are rooted in gender norms that normalise relationships between adolescent girls and older men, reinforce male control over female partners, and frame girls' sexuality as a resource that can be exchanged (KII 20/02/2026 b; KII 11/02/2026).

OCGs deliberately target girls facing poverty, limited school attendance, or restricted access to institutional protection. In these contexts, OCGs use coercion, manipulation, and false promises – sometimes linked to romantic relationships, employment opportunities, or protection from other groups – to draw girls into exploitative arrangements and abuse (KII 20/02/2026 b; KII 02/03/2026 b; UNICEF 07/04/2025). In some cases, families may face pressure that limits their ability to prevent these situations, particularly in contexts of economic hardship (KII 11/02/2026; UNFPA 11/10/2023). Girls involved in these situations may also face stigma within their communities, primarily from their association with OCG members, and increased dependency, further limiting their ability to leave (KII 20/02/2026 b; PI 30/09/2025).

These unions function as mechanisms through which OCGs recruit, control, and exploit girls, who face mobility restrictions, coercion to support criminal activities, and multiple forms of GBV, including sexual violence (KII 20/02/2026 b). Besides carrying out roles such as domestic labour or assisting with logistical tasks, their position within OCG structures may also have symbolic significance, reflecting both internal hierarchy and a demonstration of control over communities (KII 11/02/2026; UNICEF 07/04/2025). Exposure to violence intensifies in contexts of territorial dispute, where rival groups target girls associated with OCG members or use them to send a message (KII 24/02/2026 b).

Exit from these unions is highly constrained. Girls who attempt to leave may face threats, violence, or retaliation (KII 02/03/2026 b; UNICEF 07/04/2025). Early pregnancy further entrenches these dynamics, increasing dependency and creating additional protection risks for both girls and their children. If the OCG member is killed, goes to prison, or abandons the girl, she is left economically vulnerable, facing heightened risks of hardship, social exclusion, and retaliation (KII 24/02/2026 b; KII 02/03/2026 b).

Movement restrictions and coercive control

Movement restrictions for women and girls are central to OCG territorial control. Movement is not only physically constrained by violence but also socially regulated through fear, intimidation, surveillance, and informal curfews. In areas under OCG control, informal territorial borders and contested zones limit mobility, as crossing neighbourhood boundaries can expose women and girls to harassment, extortion, sexual violence, or retaliation, particularly when movement is deemed unauthorised or suspicious (KII 12/02/2026; KII 18/02/2026; ICG 12/11/2025).

These dynamics are reinforced by gender norms that position women in more controlled and visible roles within communities, increasing scrutiny over their movements. As a result, women and girls often adopt self-restriction and self-confinement strategies, limiting activities such as attending school, going to work, or accessing markets, which further reduces their access to essential services and social networks (KII 12/02/2026; ACAPS 11/08/2025).

Healthcare access is particularly affected. Fear of violence and insecurity along transit routes can prevent women from attending prenatal check-ups or seeking medical care, especially when health facilities are in areas under the control of different OCGs or require crossing unsafe zones (KII 24/02/2026 b). These constraints illustrate how fragmented territorial control forces residents to navigate multiple OCG boundaries to reach services. Similar constraints affect access to education, livelihoods, and humanitarian assistance.

Threats against community leaders and public officials

In Ecuador, women often liaise with OCGs to address community issues and facilitate access to public and humanitarian services (ICG 12/11/2025). These women face significant protection risks, including threats, intimidation, and forced displacement (KII 12/02/2026; KII 11/02/2026).

This occurs with notable frequency in affected areas and relates not only to service delivery but also to securing safety guarantees and resolving conflicts, especially amid limited state presence (KII 12/02/2026; KII 11/02/2026). NGOs and humanitarian organisations depend indirectly on these women who bridge access in insecure zones (ICG 12/11/2025).

These risks are shaped by gender norms that position women as primary caregivers for families and communities, a dynamic that often channels them into visible leadership roles, such as coordinating neighbourhood initiatives, humanitarian support, or social programmes. This visibility increases their exposure to coercion, threats, and intimidation. Threats against women leaders often extend to their children or family members (KII 11/02/2026; KII 26/02/2026). Women community leaders also face severe mental health pressures, including burnout, chronic stress, anxiety, and fear of retaliation; they sustain community initiatives and household responsibilities with little institutional support, frequently at the expense of their own wellbeing (KII 26/02/2026).

Violence and intimidation also target women in public roles, including prosecutors, judges, prison officials, and municipal employees, reflecting broader attempts by OCGs to influence local governance structures. These threats are often linked to criminal investigations, corruption pressure, or territorial governance disputes. Women in these positions may face heightened risks compared with male colleagues, as their visibility, gender, and authority can make them specific targets within broader attempts to assert control or extract compliance (KII 19/02/2026 a; ONU Mujeres Ecuador 12/10/2024).

Other impacts of OCG presence and territorial control

Mental health

Women's mental health has deteriorated amid prolonged violence, economic hardship, and social instability. Key informants report widespread symptoms of chronic stress, anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder, driven by fear of violence, particularly of child recruitment (one of the most frequently cited stressors), family involvement in OCGs, and the disappearance of relatives (KII 20/02/2026 a; KII 11/02/2026). Access to mental health services remains limited, with insufficient specialised professionals and weak referral pathways at the local level, which typically involve primary health centres, NGOs, and community organisations (KII 23/02/2026).

Women experience high emotional burden from caregiving and social pressure, particularly in OCG-controlled areas. Female heads of household often face intense responsibility to prevent children and adolescents from joining OCGs within a context of strong social control that tends to blame mothers. At the same time, insecurity has increased women's caregiving demands. Safety concerns have led many to escort children to and from school or spend money on transport to ensure safer mobility. These additional responsibilities and costs place significant economic strain on women-headed households, compounding the emotional burden associated with protecting children in high-risk environments (KII 19/02/2026 b; KII 20/02/2026 b).

Impacts are severe in households that experience femicide in Guayas and Los Ríos. Children who lose their mothers often present severe psychological distress. In many cases, grandmothers assume caregiving responsibilities at an advanced age, while also facing limited access to livelihood opportunities and income. This dual burden can lead to physical and emotional deterioration as they struggle to provide care and financial support. Support for these families is largely informal, with few formal social protection mechanisms available, reflecting the intergenerational impacts of violence against women as GBV consequences extend beyond direct victims, reshaping family structures (ALDEA 09/12/2024; KII 18/02/2026).

Sexual violence, early unions, and forced pregnancies – often resulting from sexual violence or coerced relationships with OCG members – particularly affect adolescent girls, with serious consequences for their wellbeing (KII 24/02/2026 b). Evidence from northern Ecuador (Carchi, Esmeraldas, and Sucumbíos) shows that these forms of violence are linked to increased risks of suicidal ideation, particularly in contexts with limited support networks and prolonged exposure to trauma. Adolescent suicide is likely underreported given both classification issues in health reporting systems and social stigma, with some cases recorded as accidental poisoning or misattributed to relational causes, obscuring underlying drivers such as violence, coercion, and abuse (UNFPA 08/2021). Although the analysis focuses on northern border provinces, this comparison is relevant for Guayas and Los Ríos, where communities are currently facing similar dynamics of violence by OCGs and disruptions to support services.

Displacement

Escalating violence and OCG control drive growing displacement. In 2024, armed violence and insecurity displaced 80,747 people (43% women, 57% men) as they sought safer conditions (3iS 12/12/2024). In 2025, Ecuador hosted an estimated 368,800 displaced people (an increase of 356.79%), including 116,264 displaced by violence and 61,233 by criminality. Women represented 50% of displaced people, men 44%, and 6% preferred not to disclose their gender. Most IDPs were aged 15–24 (45%), followed by children aged 5–14 (17%). Other displacement drivers were economic hardship (35%) and livelihood losses (27%) (3iS unpublished). Many displaced households comprised young mothers with children, increasing protection risks and barriers to employment, housing, and basic services in areas of arrival (UNHCR/DP 31/07/2025). Data disaggregated specifically for Guayas and Los Ríos is unavailable.

In Guayas and Los Ríos, displacement often functions as a survival mechanism for women and girls. Women-headed households frequently flee to escape GBV, sexual exploitation, extortion, and threats of child recruitment. In some cases, reporting violence to authorities or organisations may itself trigger threats and force households to relocate (KII 26/02/2026; KII 19/02/2026 b; KII 11/02/2026). Displacement is frequently underreported and remains largely invisible owing to the absence of an integrated system to register, monitor, and respond to internal displacement, as well as fear of reporting and limited access to formal registration mechanisms (UNHCR/DP 31/07/2025).

Displacement patterns are often internal and short-distance, occurring within the same neighbourhoods, parishes, or cantons. Households typically remain within or close to OCG-controlled territories, allowing them to retain access to livelihoods and family networks while balancing security risk. This reflects fragmented OCG control and limited resources for long-distance relocation (KII 26/02/2026). That said, staying nearby may still expose women and girls to OCGs (KII 11/02/2026; UNHCR 30/05/2025). Female leaders and community organisers are particularly at risk, and for many households, short-distance displacement represents the only available strategy (KII 11/02/2026).

Legal gaps worsen these risks. Ecuador lacks a specific legal framework recognising internal displacement caused by violence, limiting formal protection mechanisms. As a result, displaced households frequently relocate without assistance or registration, contributing to the invisibility of the crisis (UNHCR/DP 31/07/2025).

These gaps disproportionately affect women, especially young mothers, who rely on informal networks and precarious livelihoods to sustain their households, heightening exposure to exploitation and other protection risks while relying on informal networks and precarious livelihoods to sustain their households (KII 11/02/2026; UNHCR 20/06/2025).

Displacement and insecurity further undermine livelihoods. Women and women-headed households forced to relocate often struggle to secure employment and may experience discrimination based on their neighbourhood of origin. In Guayas, young women from areas such as Socio Vivienda – widely associated with OCG presence – are frequently denied employment (KII 12/02/2026). Mobility constraints also limit access to work, as transport services often refuse to enter these areas because of insecurity, limiting residents' ability to access workplaces outside their neighbourhoods. These dynamics aggravate women's isolation, reinforce OCG territorial control, and leave them exposed to extortion, coercion, and economic manipulation (UNHCR 30/05/2025; KII 12/02/2026).

In provinces such as Los Ríos, displacement has become a survival strategy against limited economic opportunities and weak institutional presence, but relocation often results in livelihood loss and disrupts community support networks essential for childcare, informal employment, and protection, including family support systems, neighbourhood groups, and informal childcare arrangements (KII 24/02/2026 a; KII 20/02/2026 b; KII 11/02/2026). These disruptions have gendered impacts given women's reliance on these networks for care and income, and displacement can significantly increase unpaid care burdens and reduce the ability to generate income (RLI 09/02/2026).

Disappearances

Women's disappearances linked to OCGs are a significant protection concern. In 2025, women accounted for 55.3% of missing person cases in Ecuador (4,034), while men represented 44.7% (3,257). Guayas recorded the second-highest number of women's disappearances nationwide, an increase of 2.8% compared to 2024 (1,710 cases in total, with women representing 47.5%). Notably, approximately 60% of women's disappearances attributed to OCG involvement in 2025 occurred in this province (MDI accessed 20/02/2026). These disappearances are primarily associated with trafficking, sexual exploitation, and other forms of OCG-related violence (KII 20/02/2026 b).

Los Ríos recorded the fifth-highest number of women's disappearances in 2025, an increase of 8.5% compared to 2024 (342 cases in total, with women representing 63.7%). In contrast to Guayas, women represented the majority of missing people (218 cases or 63.7%). There has also been an increase in disappearances linked to sexual harassment and abuse, suggesting that OCGs and other perpetrators may be targeting women and girls for exploitation or intimidation by (MDI accessed 20/02/2026).

Many of these disappearances are associated with OCGs abducting women and girls for trafficking and sexual exploitation (KII 20/02/2026 a). In many cases, these disappearances are believed to end in femicides unregistered because bodies are not recovered (KII 18/02/2026).

Disappearances, especially men's, have also been reported in the context of increased militarisation, linked to security operations and broader conflict dynamics. Women are often at the forefront of search efforts for missing relatives, organising collective actions to demand information and accountability, including through locally based groups such as the Committee of Families of Detained and Disappeared Persons in Los Ríos. These roles may expose them to threats, intimidation, and retaliation, as well as stigma and significant emotional distress (KII 11/02/2026; Amnesty International 22/09/2025; CDH 31/01/2025).

Child recruitment and use

Child recruitment combines coercion, economic incentives, and social pressures, particularly in contexts of poverty, limited state presence, and violence (UNICEF 07/04/2025; KII 24/02/2026 a). In Guayas and Los Ríos, economic vulnerability and peer-based recruitment appear particularly prominent, closely linked to the illegal economies and territorial control dynamics described above. High levels of violence, children's disappearances – some of which are linked to recruitment and exploitation – and recruitment reflect the intensity of these dynamics (UNICEF 07/04/2025).

OCGs target children and adolescents to sustain and expand operations. In a 2025 national survey, 8.1% of adolescents reported belonging to an OCG (R4V 18/12/2025). Recruitment often begins through peers (58.6% of cases occur through neighbourhood friends and 24.2% through schoolmates), exposure to local insecurity, school dropout, and displacement patterns, which can make adolescents more vulnerable to involvement in criminal networks (UNICEF 07/04/2025).

OCGs recruit boys and male adolescents for operational roles, such as lookouts, drug couriers, or contract killers (UNICEF 07/04/2025; ACAPS 11/12/2024). In contrast, they recruit girls into domestic and logistical roles and for sexual exploitation (KII 11/02/2026; R4V 18/12/2025; UNICEF 07/04/2025; ACAPS 11/12/2024). Girls' recruitment often occurs through coercion, manipulation, or abuse by OCG members, placing them in situations of exploitation, including sexual exploitation and forced domestic or logistical roles. In some cases, families may face pressure through threats, extortion, or coercion by relatives linked to OCGs, limiting their ability to prevent these situations, particularly in contexts of poverty (KII 11/02/2026; UNICEF 07/04/2025).

Women's forced involvement in OCGs

Women's involvement in OCGs has increased, reflected in rising numbers of detentions as well as reported recruitment patterns. Approximately 450 women linked to OCGs were detained in 2024, although the proportion relative to total OCG-related detentions is unconfirmed. While some women may enter because of financial hardship or inadequate livelihood opportunities, many are pressured through threats, manipulation, or the involvement of relatives already linked to OCGs (Primicias 25/01/2026; KII 06/02/2026).

Within OCG structures, women face heightened GBV risks. They are often assigned roles such as surveillance, communication, or goods transportation – including into prison systems, where families may be pressured to deliver items for OCGs (KII 26/02/2026). In many cases, OCGs also use women as scapegoats, having them assume responsibility for crimes, as criminal networks exploit gender stereotypes that make women easier to coerce (El Comercio 15/09/2025). Women may face sexual violence, coerced intimate relationships, and other forms of abuse as part of their incorporation into these groups or as a means of control and punishment (Primicias 25/01/2026; KII 26/02/2026).

Legal processes and detention criminalise women associated with OCGs. A protection gap exists because the justice system often treats women experiencing coercion and violence within OCGs as perpetrators, limiting their access to legal and protection mechanisms. Detention conditions then expose them to GBV, including abuse and exploitation (Primicias 25/01/2026; KII 26/02/2026).

Reduced livelihoods

Structural poverty and labour informality, heightened by the territorial expansion of OCGs, increasingly constrain livelihood opportunities in Ecuador. Economic precarity is particularly acute in coastal provinces such as Guayas and Los Ríos. In 2022, multidimensional poverty affected around 50.5% of the population and exceeded 76% in rural areas in Los Ríos (UNICEF 07/2024). Women face additional barriers to stable employment in Los Ríos, with only 20.2% accessing adequate employment compared with 32.7% of men, and are disproportionately concentrated in informal and unpaid work, including domestic and care responsibilities (UNICEF 07/2024; UNFPA 11/07/2025). OCG territorial control further constrains livelihoods through extortion systems, informal taxation, and restrictions on movement and business operations, limiting access to labour markets and increasing economic insecurity, particularly for women (KII 20/02/2026 a).

Gender dynamics shape the economic impacts of the crisis. Women often bear the primary responsibility to sustain households in contexts of violence and incarceration, including generating income to support detained relatives and covering costs for food and informal payments within prison systems (InSight Crime 12/2024). They also take on caregiving roles for children orphaned by femicide or disappearance. In many cases, grandmothers or other female relatives assume care responsibilities at an advanced age while also generating income (KII 18/02/2026; ALDEA 09/12/2024).

At the same time, increased caregiving responsibilities constrain women's ability to engage in full-time livelihood activities, limiting their income-generating capacity. Limited earnings and insufficient state support force many into debt – primarily through informal lenders and family networks – to cover basic needs such as food, education, and healthcare (ALDEA 09/12/2024). When femicides are linked to OCGs, children and caregivers may face additional protection risks (ALDEA 09/12/2024; Amnesty International 23/09/2025).

Some caregivers spend up to USD 8 daily on transportation to accompany or monitor children's movements around school to reduce recruitment risks, further straining already-fragile household finances and limiting their ability to maintain employment (KII 20/02/2026 b).

OCGs often extort businesses, farmers, and informal workers, leading to reduced operating hours, changes in working days, prolonged inactivity periods, and, in some cases, closure – particularly affecting informal workers who rely on street-based activities (ACAPS 11/08/2025; La Hora 23/04/2024). OCGs also restrict movement and economic activity through curfews or fees for entering certain areas. In Guayas, informal tolls of USD 10–15 and curfews limit economic activity during evenings (KII 20/02/2026 a). These disproportionately affect women relying on informal livelihoods, such as street vendors. In Los Ríos, extortion can lead to the closure of small businesses owned by trans women, particularly beauty salons and spas, if owners are unable to sustain OCG-imposed payments (KII 04/03/2026).

Trans women also report exclusion from employment, services, and access to basic goods such as food, reflecting broader patterns of marginalisation that further limit livelihood opportunities. Many are pushed into informal economic activities – particularly street-based economies and, in some cases, sex work – with heightened exposure to sexual exploitation and extortion (KII 04/03/2026). Migrant and refugee women face similar barriers, largely linked to legal status, documentation requirements, and discrimination in hiring processes (KII 12/02/2026). These constraints reinforce cycles of economic vulnerability and increase exposure to exploitation and violence.

Reduced access to essential services

Table 3. Indicators of access to services and livelihoods in Guayas and Los Ríos

Indicator	Guayas	Los Ríos	National
% of households without access to the basic services	37	54	30
% of households without access to the public water network	12	25	19
% of chronic malnutrition among children under five	13	12	17
% of net middle school non-attendance	13	19	13
% of net high school non-attendance	29	29	25
% of underemployment	23	28	19

Note: basic services include connection to official electricity, gas/electric cooking, waste collection, sewage, and public water networks. Public water network access does not guarantee water treatment processes (INEC accessed 17/02/2026; INEC 04/12/2019). The net school attendance indicator represents the percentage of children officially enrolled in the education level corresponding to their age. Underemployment refers to individuals earning below the minimum wage or working fewer than the standard hours despite willingness to work more (INEC accessed 17/02/2026).

Sources: ACAPS using data from INEC (accessed 03/03/2026); INEC (accessed 17/02/2026)

Education

Insecurity and OCGs' influence in schools

Violence is increasingly affecting schools in coastal areas, particularly in provinces such as Guayas and Los Ríos. Armed incidents, homicides, and kidnappings occur in and around educational institutions, reflecting broader insecurity and leading students, teachers, and families to perceive schools as unsafe environments. These perceptions are translating into reduced attendance and early departures from school (Insecurity Insight 31/12/2025; KII 02/03/2026 b).

OCGs exert growing influence over school environments, using them for intimidation and recruitment both within school premises and in surrounding neighbourhoods and transit routes. In some cases, OCGs infiltrate school premises by making

openings in perimeter walls, reflecting both infrastructure vulnerabilities and intentional access. OCGs leave threatening pamphlets, explosives, and, in extreme cases, dismembered body parts of adolescents near schools to instill fear, reinforce territorial control, and send violent messages to children and adolescents linked to rival OCGs (KII 02/03/2026 b). On 23 December 2025, in Pascuales parish, Guayaquil, unknown gunmen abducted a student in the streets, took him to his school, and killed him in front of other students (Insecurity Insight 31/12/2025).

Teachers and school authorities also face threats and extortion. Educators, particularly in the coastal areas, report avoiding reprimanding students or assigning low grades for fear of retaliation from OCG members, as some are directly affiliated with these groups through both direct recruitment and informal ties to family members or local networks. In some cases in Guayas, students affiliated with OCGs have delivered threats referencing teachers' families, placing razor blades on their own tongues or presenting photos of teachers' children alongside bullets. These dynamics undermine teachers' authority and contribute to a climate of fear (KII 02/03/2026 b).

Girls face specific risks. As well as in public spaces, OCG members abduct adolescent girls directly from schools. The groups coerce the girls into exploitation or abuse, and refusal can lead to threats, disappearances, and homicides (KII 02/03/2026 b).

Violence within schools is compounded by inadequate infrastructure. Poor privacy and unsafe conditions in school bathrooms, including facilities without doors, have been reported in multiple schools, turning these spaces into places where sexual harassment and abuse can occur. This further undermines safety, particularly for girls, illustrating how infrastructure gaps intersect with protection risks in education environments (KII 02/03/2026 b).

Access disruptions and school dropout

Overlapping crises, including insecurity, displacement, and climate-related hazards, increasingly disrupt education access. Security incidents, threats, and OCG territorial control have led to the temporary closure of schools or a shift to virtual learning, affecting the continuity and quality of education (KII 23/02/2026). OCG presence also affects school environments, while violence and displacement interrupt schooling as children face administrative barriers such as lack of documentation, enrolment requirements, and limited school capacity when relocating (KII 12/02/2026; KII 02/03/2026 b). Flooding further compounds disruptions as schools are repurposed for emergency response (KII 02/03/2026 a).

School dropout remains a major concern, particularly at the secondary level as attendance significantly declines among adolescents aged 15–17. Enrolment has decreased in both Guayas and Los Ríos despite an increase in the number of schools. In Guayas, the number of educational institutions increased from 2,555 in 2022 to 2,606 in 2024, but upper secondary enrolment declined from approximately 223,500 to 216,900 students. Similarly, in Los Ríos, the number of institutions increased from 817 to 837, but enrolment fell from 46,278 to 44,108 students. Gender-disaggregated data is not available (UNICEF accessed 26/02/2026).

Drivers include economic hardship, insecurity, and displacement, which push adolescents into work or out of the education system. Insecurity and intimidation in and around schools – particularly risks of violence, recruitment, and unsafe travel – lead families to withdraw children out of fear (KII 20/02/2026 b; KII 02/03/2026 b). These dynamics increase the risk of affiliation with OCGs for boys and, for girls, exposure to sexual violence, coercion, exploitation by OCG members, and adolescent pregnancy, while also reinforcing long-term economic vulnerability and reduced life opportunities (KII 23/02/2026; KII 20/02/2026 b; KII 19/02/2026 b).

WASH and shelter

Safe water access

Access to safe water remains a major concern, reflecting longstanding infrastructure deficits in coastal provinces. In some coastal communities, residents have lived for decades without reliable access to potable water, a pattern reported across both urban and rural areas (KII 06/02/2026; *ecuavisa* 22/03/2026). In 2023, 73.4% of children under five in Guayas had access to water free from *E. coli*, compared with only 61.1% in Los Ríos, where nearly 39% of children still consumed contaminated water at the point of consumption. These differences reflect infrastructure gaps and rural–urban disparities affecting water quality (UNICEF accessed 26/02/2026).

In areas affected by organised crime, territorial control over basic services compounds these structural deficits. In cantons such as Durán (Guayas), OCGs influence water distribution, extorting water trucks entering certain neighbourhoods. They often pass on these costs to households through higher prices and, in some cases, restricted service delivery. As a result, households may reduce consumption or rely on unsafe water sources, further limiting already precarious water availability (KII 26/02/2026).

As women and girls are primarily responsible for securing water and managing household needs, they are often the ones interacting with water providers in OCG-controlled areas – particularly at collection points, during water distribution visits, and when negotiating access with suppliers. This increases their exposure to harassment, coercion, and violence (KII 19/02/2026 b; KII 20/02/2026 a).

Climate hazards compound WASH vulnerabilities. Flooding events in areas such as Babahoyo, in Los Ríos, often cause sewage systems to overflow, making toilets unusable and forcing temporary relocation or repeated short-term displacement (*Expreso* 14/03/2026). During these movements, women and girls may face increased protection risks, including harassment and violence in insecure or poorly lit neighbourhoods (KII 24/02/2026 b).

Shelter

Shelter needs are increasing in the context of violence and displacement. The State insufficiently recognises internal displacement, limiting response mechanisms and shelter availability for families internally displaced by violence (KII 19/02/2026 b; KII 11/02/2026; UNHCR 30/05/2025). As a result, families typically seek temporary refuge with relatives or acquaintances for short periods, as overcrowding and fear of exposing host families to violence force many to relocate again or return to the areas from which they fled (KII 02/03/2026 b; UNHCR 30/05/2025).

Gender dynamics further shape shelter vulnerabilities, as women represent a significant proportion of displaced adults and often assume responsibility for securing housing while protecting children from risks such as recruitment. Data on the proportion of women-headed displaced households remains limited (KII 11/02/2026). In some cases, the lack of shelter options increases exposure to exploitation. A UNHCR study conducted between November 2024 and March 2025 with 327 Venezuelan, Colombian, and Ecuadorian individuals across ten cities in Ecuador, including Guayaquil (Guayas), found that limited livelihood opportunities significantly increase women’s vulnerability. Faced with barriers to accessing accommodation, women may resort to potentially exploitative coping mechanisms, including survival sex (UNHCR 30/05/2025).

Access to safe accommodation is further constrained for women fleeing OCG-related violence, as shelters face risks of perpetrators tracking survivors given limited capacity to ensure protection and lack of specialised protection infrastructure (KII 12/02/2026). Discrimination also affects access, with trans women facing barriers when seeking accommodation given stigma from landlords, as well as risks of extortion and violence that make relocation after threats more difficult (KII 04/03/2026).

Health

Infrastructure and access barriers

Ecuador's public health system is structurally weakened, with infrastructure limitations, medicine shortages, and corruption affecting medical supply distributions, compounded by the recent security crisis (IFRC 17/05/2025). These challenges affect multiple levels of the system, including procurement, distribution, and service delivery at local health facilities (La Hora 24/03/2026; KII 24/02/2026 b; KII 20/02/2026 b). Medicines often remain in storage facilities but fail to reach health centres as a result of corruption, logistical failures, and supply diversions, contributing to preventable morbidity and mortality (KII 20/02/2026 b; Primicias 03/02/2026; El País 07/12/2025). In provinces such as Guayas and Los Ríos, insecurity constraints and OCG territorial control further lead to temporary service suspensions and staff withdrawal (KII 24/02/2026 b).

Specialists also increasingly refuse to work in neighbourhoods under OCG control, a trend reported across affected areas in Guayas and Los Ríos, contributing to severe shortages of qualified medical personnel (KII 24/02/2026 b; El Comercio 11/12/2022).

In this context, insecurity and discrimination create additional barriers for already marginalised groups. Migrant and refugee women – primarily from Venezuela and Colombia – face compounded vulnerabilities linked to irregular status and discrimination in service provision. In areas with OCG presence, mobility restrictions, extortion risks, and insecurity further limit their ability to travel safely to health facilities and discourage them from seeking care. As a result, many delay or avoid accessing health services, increasing the risk of untreated conditions and reliance on informal or unsafe alternatives (KII 12/02/2026; GTRM Ecuador 24/10/2024). Transgender women similarly report avoiding health services owing to stigma, compounded by risks of harassment and violence in OCG-controlled areas (KII 20/02/2026 a; KII 04/03/2026; efeminista 28/11/2025).

The expansion of OCGs has disrupted access to health services, particularly sexual and reproductive healthcare. Women in insecure areas report difficulties in attending prenatal check-ups and other essential services owing to insecurity during travel and cost constraints (KII 20/02/2026 a; KII 24/02/2026 b). Organised crime is also linked to illegal economies involving the control and smuggling of medicines,

which diverts supplies from public health systems and contributes to shortages and price increases, as well as influencing the allocation of contracts to capture financial resources (KII 19/02/2026 a; Vistazo 04/03/2026).

In certain communities, churches operate as informal outpatient centres, hosting medical and dental brigades. One key informant mentioned a community project focused on training young women as health workers. That said, these roles may also increase their exposure to violence, as operating in OCG-controlled areas can place them at risk while travelling, interacting with communities, or negotiating access, exposing them to surveillance, threats, or retaliation (KII 20/02/2026 b).

Health risks

The expansion of OCG territorial control, combined with weakened health infrastructure, WASH deficits, and access barriers, is increasing health risks in Guayas and Los Ríos. Damage to services, insecurity, and extortion limit access to care, while exposure to contaminated water and overcrowded conditions heighten the spread of infectious diseases, such as diarrhoeal diseases, dengue, and respiratory infections. GBV linked to OCG dynamics – such as sexual violence and exploitation – contributes to rising sexual and reproductive health risks, including adolescent pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections, and reduced access to prenatal care (KII 24/02/2026 b). These dynamics are particularly acute in Los Ríos, where poverty, limited health service coverage, and weaker institutional presence increase vulnerability; the province reports some of the highest levels of adolescent pregnancy in the country. In 2022, the provinces with the highest rate of live births among girls aged 10–14 were Morona Santiago (6.79), followed by Pastaza (4.92) and Los Ríos (4.83). Adolescent pregnancy is closely linked to sexual violence, exploitation, and early unions (Vice Presidencia de Ecuador 24/12/2025; INEC 29/06/2023).

Tuberculosis reached its highest levels in 2025, with incidence rates of 138.2 cases per 100,000 in El Oro and 126.6 in Guayas and increasing risk in Los Ríos and other coastal provinces. Prisons are a key driver: 2,576 cases (24.4% of 10,562 nationwide) were reported among people deprived of liberty (MSP 23/02/2026). The burden of coping with these conditions often falls on women, who are responsible for supporting detained relatives (KII 26/02/2026).

AGGRAVATING FACTORS

Climate and natural hazards

Guayas and Los Ríos are highly exposed to climate hazards and extreme weather events, including flooding, landslides, and wildfires, with heavy agricultural dependence amplifying vulnerability to these shocks. Recent events indicate increasing frequency and intensity of flooding and extreme rainfall, further heightening these risks (Copernicus 09/03/2026; Peralta 28/01/2022; IOM 2024). Livelihood disruptions and reduced access to services from these events also create conditions that enable OCGs to expand into illegal economies, such as illegal mining, deforestation, and drug trafficking, further driving environmental degradation and reinforcing territorial control (ACAPS 11/08/2025). Conversely, illegal mining and deforestation degrade ecosystems, increasing susceptibility to climate shocks and diminishing natural barriers against extreme weather (WB 09/2024; AF 02/2026).

Women, who are disproportionately involved in informal work and face higher unemployment rates than men, as well as low-income households living in high-risk areas, are particularly affected, as climate shocks disrupt income sources; increase caregiving burdens related to health risks, displacement, and infrastructure damage; and limit access to services (Pinto and Mirzabaev 15/06/2025; UNDP 08/03/2022).

In early 2026, rainfall levels in Guayas and Los Ríos exceeded seasonal averages, triggering flooding, river overflows, and infrastructure disruptions (KII 02/03/2026 a; Copernicus 09/03/2026). Authorities declared different alert levels across the country in response to these conditions, including an orange alert status for Guayas (in response to recurrent flooding and high numbers of affected people) and red alert for Los Ríos as a result of critical hydrological risks and recurrent river overflows (OCHA 13/02/2026; SNGR 11/02/2026). Flooding and rising river levels pose a recurrent threat in the Guayas River Basin, particularly in Daule, Salitre, and Santa Lucía, where heavy rainfall and increased levels in the Daule–Peripa Reservoir frequently lead to inundations, agricultural losses, and displacement (ecuavisa 10/02/2026; Primicias 09/02/2026). In 2025 alone, flooding in Santa Lucía affected approximately 9,000 people, while hundreds of hectares of rice crops were lost in Salitre (ecuavisa 10/02/2026; Primicias 09/02/2026).

The impacts of flooding extend beyond immediate physical damage and contribute to disruptions in mobility, economic activities, and access to essential services, including through the closure of key transport routes such as the Jujan–Babahoyo road and damage to schools and health facilities, which in some cases can lead to prolonged service disruptions (Primicias 03/03/2026 and 28/02/2026). In areas where OCGs exert territorial control, these disruptions can further constrain humanitarian access and reinforce the isolation of affected communities (KII 02/03/2026 a).

Climate-related shocks also aggravate economic vulnerability, particularly in agricultural areas. Recurrent flooding in Los Ríos has led to repeated losses of crops of rice, maize, cacao, and bananas, undermining local livelihoods and increasing economic insecurity (Expreso 05/03/2026; KII 20/02/2026 b; KII 02/03/2026 a). In OCG-controlled areas, these losses are more difficult to recover from as households may face additional pressures, such as extortion and informal taxation. This intersection between environmental shocks and criminal control deepens livelihood insecurity and limits coping capacity (Expreso 05/03/2026; KII 02/03/2026 a).

Response and assistance gaps

Government responses to address GBV and protection risks affecting women and girls remain limited, particularly owing to constraints in institutional capacity, policy prioritisation, and resource allocation. These challenges have been further aggravated by recent institutional restructuring, which has reduced operational capacity through the weakening of specialised programmes and diminished focus on gender-specific protection. In July 2025, the Ministry of Women and Human Rights merged with the Ministry of Government, removing a dedicated ministry for women's rights, gender equality, and GBV prevention and attention (Primicias 26/07/2025). Civil society organisations report that this change could affect specialised GBV services and support mechanisms for women and LGBTQ+ individuals, as well as the State's capacity to collect gender-specific data and develop protection policies (CEPAM 29/07/2025; OHCHR 01/12/2025; Primicias 26/07/2025). As security responses increasingly focus on military approaches to organised crime, the specific risks for women and girls may not be fully addressed. Military operations can also create additional protection risks, such as harassment, sexual violence, and excessive use of force (KII 20/02/2026 a).

At the same time, weak institutional oversight continues to undermine access to justice for survivors of violence. Corruption within police and judicial institutions contributes to persistent levels of impunity, affecting investigations and prosecution processes and discouraging women from reporting violence (ICG 12/11/2025). For children of femicide victims, state support is also limited. Although caregivers receive a government 'orphanhood allowance' (USD 97–130), it is widely considered insufficient (ALDEA 09/12/2024). This amount covers only up to 14.4% of the basic family basket (USD 899.73 in February 2026), leaving caregivers to absorb most of the financial burden; even when combined with a minimum wage income, households face a monthly deficit exceeding USD 200, increasing economic vulnerability (INEC 03/02/2026). This is consistent with findings from a 2024 study by Fundación ALDEA, which analysed 151 cases of children and adolescents affected by femicide across 15 provinces, wherein 97% reported that reparation measures, including financial support, were insufficient. Caregivers, frequently older women living in poverty, may also lack information about eligibility requirements or receive misleading guidance, further limiting access (ALDEA 09/12/2024).

State security response

In January 2024, the State declared internal armed conflict, expanding the deployment of armed forces to support public security operations across high-violence areas (ACLEDD 11/12/2025 and 03/06/2025). While these operations were initially associated with a temporary reduction in homicides, trends have not been sustained, with homicide rates subsequently increasing (MDI 19/07/2024). This military approach also creates protection risks, including exposure to abuses by security forces, which particularly affect women and girls (KII 26/02/2026; KII 19/02/2026 a; ACLED 03/06/2025).

On 3 March 2026, Ecuador and the US announced the launch of joint military operations targeting OCGs (BBC 04/03/2026; El Comercio 04/03/2026). The cooperation is expected to last two years and focuses on intelligence sharing and logistical support (Primicias 05/03/2026). As security operations intensify, criminal activities may shift to neighbouring cantons or provinces. This could generate new humanitarian needs and protection risks, including femicide, sexual exploitation, and displacement, particularly affecting women and girls in marginalised communities (El Comercio 04/03/2026).

In communities affected by OCGs, the presence of military and police forces can create additional barriers to accessing support, as fear of retaliation, mistrust in authorities, and prior experiences of abuse discourage survivors from reporting (ACLEDD 03/06/2025). This is compounded by the limited availability and accessibility of social protection and gender-focused services related to funding shortages, geographic accessibility, and weakening GBV prevention and response mechanisms (KII 20/02/2026 a).