


# Chapter 9

## Routes of Desperation: The Darien Jungle as a Migratory and Drug Trafficking Corridor From a Gender Perspective

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter examines the Darién, a remote rainforest on the border of Colombia and Panama, as a critical migration corridor and a site of violence. Considered one of the most dangerous routes in the world, it is traversed for hundreds of miles by people fleeing poverty and persecution. The route is controlled by armed groups like the Clan del Golfo (AGC) and is shared with drug trafficking, creating a high-risk environment for migrants. Vulnerable populations, especially women, children, and LGBTQ+ people, face sexual violence, human trafficking, and death. The analysis underscores that migration is not random, but rather conditioned by global inequalities and restrictive policies. The study criticizes Panama's “Plan de Firmeza” policy, which prioritizes insurance policies and criminalizes migration, displacing people toward more dangerous routes.*

### INTRODUCTION

The Darien Gap is a vast green lung extending across the borders of Panama and Colombia with its depths holding the mightiest rivers in Panama. This site is classified by experts as an impenetrable jungle and is also considered one of the most biodiverse places in the world (Lacher et al., 1998). However, this did

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not deter drug traffickers from Colombia—and later migrants from various other countries—from transforming the site into an irregular passageway for travel and trying to reach the United States. For the traffickers, the route was for drugs, for the migrants, their lives. The Darien Gap is territorially comprised of a jungle block extending over 16,803 km<sup>2</sup>, making this area a border that is too difficult to navigate, particularly due to the limited land transportation options, as the interruption of the Inter-American Highway lies right in this region. That is why it is called the Darien Gap. Internationally, this route was long considered—until early 2025—one of the routes with the greatest migratory flow yet the most dangerous in Latin America. It has primarily been both traveled by those attempting to migrate from the south to the north of the continent and controlled by organized crime groups, especially the Gulf Clan (Krylova, 2024; Fernández, 2025).

The Gulf Clan—also known as the Gaitanista Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AGC)—controls large areas of the region and engages in criminal activities, such as drug and arms trafficking and extortion. This armed group imposes regulations and controls the daily life and economic activities of the population (Human Rights Watch, 2023). The conditions—palpable in the rugged terrain, absence of security forces, and the dense, rainy jungle cover—created the right habitat for facilitating these illicit activities by Colombian rebel groups and drug traffickers.

## **The Main Actors**

The Gulf Clan (AGC) constitutes the largest narco-paramilitary group in Colombia. The ELN (National Liberation Army), which controls eastern areas of Darien (Rabasa et al., 2002). The Mexican cartels, especially the Sinaloa cartel, are the partners in the drug export chain. Also active in the region are a few local gangs, primarily the so-called “Los Rastrojos” and “La Constru,” who facilitate logistics (Idler, 2019). These groups follow a business model, tactics, and strategies of control; they engage in drug trafficking, arms trafficking, territorial control, and they levy illegal taxes on everything that moves within their territory. Familiar with the secret entrance and exit points of the jungle, they use this exclusive knowledge to maintain checkpoints, which also serve as offices. They have developed logistics networks; their expert guides—almost always indigenous—direct drug caravans and prevent operations. They build mobile camps and infiltrate local authorities and even police and security forces in general. Thus, the Darien is shaped not only by state policies of securitization and outsourcing but also by the widespread control of non-state armed actors. While Foucault's theory of biopower illustrates the state's capacity to manage life, it is insufficient to capture the dynamics of the Darien. In this context, the logic of governance is better understood through Mbembe's (2019) concept of necropolitics. These armed groups operate as necropolitical sovereigns, exercising

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