

Central American migrant women

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Abstracts: *The article documents and analyses the topic of violence in Central American migration, with a specific focus on migrant women in the current South-North mobility regime. We start by tracing the conditions that push women to undertake the migratory path in their countries of origin, more specifically in the Northern Triangle countries of Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala; we then analyze the stage of transit, in order to highlight some of the great challenges that women face in their path towards the destination country (be it Mexico or the United States); lastly, we shed light on the border-crossing experience and on some life stories in the context of arrival. Through this work we aim at demonstrating that the journey of Central American women is shaped by different forms of violence in every step of migration, and how the mobility and border regime is strongly compromised by the lack of application of a human rights approach. The personal contribution to this work is given by a fieldwork realized through eight qualitative interviews with experts in the field.*

Keywords: *Women, migration, violence, borders, Central America.*

Sommario: *L'articolo documenta ed analizza la tematica della violenza nella migrazione centroamericana, concentrandosi sull'esperienza specifica delle donne migranti nell'attuale regime di mobilità Sud-Nord. Si parte tracciando la condizione che spinge le donne ad intraprendere la migrazione a partire dal contesto di vita di molte di esse all'interno dei Paesi di origine nel cosiddetto Triangolo Nord del Centro America (comprendente specificatamente Honduras, El Salvador e Guatemala); successivamente si analizza il momento del transito, al fine di evidenziare alcune delle grandi sfide cui incorrono le migranti durante il percorso verso il paese di destinazione (sia esso Messico o Stati Uniti); infine, lo sguardo viene rivolto al momento dell'attraversamento del confine e ad alcune storie di vita nel contesto di arrivo. Attraverso que-*

sto lavoro si intende dimostrare come il percorso delle donne centroamericane sia attraversato da diverse forme di violenza in ogni momento della migrazione, e di come il regime di mobilità e di frontiera sia fortemente compromesso dalla mancata applicazione di un approccio finalizzato al rispetto dei diritti umani. Il contributo personale a questo lavoro è fornito da un lavoro sul campo realizzato attraverso otto interviste qualitative con esperti nel settore.

Parole chiave: *Donne, migrazione, violenza, confini, America Centrale.*

Introduction

In October 2018 the phenomenon of the *caravanas* from Central America transiting across Mexico was hitting the news all over the world, turning the spotlight on an area of the world that does not often feature in European headlines. At that time, over 1,000 people coming mostly from Honduras, but also from El Salvador and Guatemala – all countries known as being part of the so-called Northern Triangle of Central America – were travelling thousands of kilometers, attempting to cross at least two international borders, in an odyssey supposedly directing them to the US southern border. Despite most of the people participating in the caravan were women, girls and children heading north in search of better life conditions, the phenomenon attracted a lot of controversial public debates, fed by the xenophobic rhetoric of the then US President, Donald Trump, who proclaimed that “many gang members and some very bad people are mixed into the caravan heading to the southern border” (BBC 2018), where thousands of US troops had been sent in order to prevent the flow of migrants from entering the country. The Trump administration clearly intended to criminalize the migrants, and generated a wave of hate, also spread through social media (Gandini, Fernández de la Reguera and Narvárez Gutiérrez 2020: 15).

The October 2018 caravan was only the first of many that would come in the following months and years. While the phenomenon was not the first to occur across the Central American region and Mexico, it had a strong impact at both social and political level, also incited by images circulating in the media, showing thousands of migrants attempting to cross the Suchiate River or being blocked by the authorities along the Guatemalan-Mexican border. With

an ever-growing majority of women and children taking part in the migratory flows from Central America and with an exacerbation of their conditions of travel along the route (Rodríguez Chávez 2017: 16), this research aims to bring the reader to a more focused understanding of the phenomenon of female migration in the area, as well as to increase knowledge of and shed light on what is actually happening in terms of a humanitarian crisis along the international borders of this region – characterized by strong socio-economic inequalities and lack of a solid rule of law – all the while focusing on the experience of migrant women, in order to demonstrate the peculiar gendered characteristics of transnational migration in this context.

The article will try to answer the research question that is formulated as follows: what is the narrative that women and borders have in today's context of Central American migration? Through this research, we state that the experience of women in migration must go hand-in-hand with the study of international borders, as migration itself entails a non-stop effort to overcome them. By studying the experience of migrant women along the migratory itinerary from the Northern Triangle countries to the US, walking through Mexico, the research not only aims to recognize the role of agency of migrant women as active social actors, a group that has historically been excluded from public and political discourse, but also to uncover the characteristics of life in an area of the world where gender asymmetries particularly impact on the journey and life of those looking for a better future.

We find that the inequality system and the several discriminations that migrant women encounter in different moments and spaces of their migration experience are particularly entrenched in an unbalanced gender system that fuels the context of violence against them. For this reason, migrant women find themselves extremely vulnerable on every step of their journey. Despite this, migrant women demonstrate a lot of strength, courage and resilience in their efforts to improve their life conditions and those of their families.

This study is therefore important because it goes in depth into the different ways in which women collide with a system that does not guarantee them safety, dignity or wellbeing, both in the country of origin but also during their travels, striving to find better life opportunities. By touching on the ways that migrant women are constantly discriminated against and violated before, during and after the migratory transit, the research should call not only for the

implementation of policies that are adequately directed to the people subjected to constant human rights violations, but also for a solution to the structural roots that are causing violence against women, not only within the area of origin but also along the migratory trajectory. We therefore argue that the current border regime in Central America is strongly compromised by a lack of application of a human rights approach in the context studied, and show how the rights of migrants, and especially migrant women, are particularly infringed in this context.

The innovative part of this study is provided by the insights and contributions obtained during fieldwork, realized through eight qualitative interviews carried out online with experts in the field. All interviewees play different roles within public and non-governmental institutions, both within academia and civil society organizations, and are or have been working with migrant women in the field. The results of the fieldwork also reveal the conditions and the complex dynamics that affect the rights of people who decide to leave and migrate somewhere else, forced by the circumstances of the place where they were born and grew up, as well as shed light to some aspects of the lives of migrant women after displacement and forced mobility. This study also applies border theory to a context of current humanitarian crisis, that is the one related to Central American migration flows, contributing to the earlier work of the sociologist Abelardo Morales Gamboa.

The article is organized in three sections: the first focuses on the theoretical production of border theory related to migration, on the mobility regime and the production of borders in Central America in past and present debates, and finally on the binomial political violence and displacement in the region. The purpose is to provide an overview and understanding of population movements along international border crossing, with a focus on the area that is object of this study. The second part describes the methodology and fieldwork. In the third section, research results are presented and analyzed according to the different phases of migration: before the migratory journey, *why do they leave?* the transit experience, *what happens during the journey?*, the border-crossing moment, *what happens after the mobility?* Finally, we develop the conclusions.

Theoretical framework

Border studies and migration

The theoretical framework must not overlook the border practices intrinsic to the phenomenon that it is studied, as both a place experienced by migrants, but which also legally, politically and socially have a meaning for and an impact on the life of the people wishing to cross them. The role of borders is important inasmuch it allows for a definition on the role that this element plays within global processes such as migration. In this perspective, critical reflections on the study of borders – or border areas or regions – allow us to narrate and document the situation of humanitarian crisis present not only within the areas of origin but in the places of transit, such as along the migratory routes, and the regions divided by international borders. Borders do in fact create distinctions, determine differences and create the premises upon which inequalities are legitimized (Cella 2006: 77). Borders and the spaces associated with them are dealt with according to the social sciences, to investigate the relation they have with migration (Simmel 1908). Accordingly, we argue for the need to justify the necessity of going beyond the traditional geopolitical and symbolical stance associated with borders, in order to study a space articulated by the same subjects that transit across them. Particular attention is then given to the social migrant actor, thought of as the main person able to provide a profound and critical perspective on border studies. By pointing to the migrant subject as main actor experiencing the border and therefore giving meaning to it, we claim that border life is highly permeated by humanity and by all contradictions dictated by socio-political forces.

The analysis of borders is presented as an exercise in epistemological and post-colonial research, in line with political philosophers Mezzadra (2007, 2008) and Mezzadra and Neilson (2014), who conceived the border as a methodological tool that allows us to bring to light all conflicts happening on them, and in particular all the power relations and exploitation practices that are established in global processes such as the ones relative to migration. Hence, the importance of exploring the empirical dynamics of borders and adopting the point of view of the people who are the object of study (Zago Spíndola 2016).

Mobility regimes in Central American, past and present

The sociology of migration comes as a useful tool that enables us to understand this complex migratory system within the region and refers to a complex field that analytically embeds social relations produced within a given territory and on a macro-structural scale among States, markets and populations, articulated according to the logic of social (and international) relations and power. At the same time, such relations need to be placed in a geopolitical perspective that produces certain forces working as catalysts in a given geographical space (Sassen 2008: 323). For this reason, when dealing with the Central American migratory system, we mostly refer to the social subsystem embedding States, actors driving the global market, and persons “on the move”, who thanks to their mobility create a new set of social relations between Mexico, Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Belize and Costa Rica, all the while bridging boundaries with the migratory system of the North: Mexico, United States of America (USA), and Canada. (Varela Huerta 2016: 3). The latter group, thanks to their geopolitical power, have exerted a great influence on the region since the end of the 19th century. One of the most visible implications of US involvement in Central America was its support to the dictatorships which developed in the region in the period 1950-1975. In addition, socio-economic transformations and the modernization of agriculture leading to the geographical expansion of export products (mostly coffee and bananas) and soil deterioration due to technical improvements in the means of production (especially agrochemicals) have paved the way for a new form of displacement (Cortés Ramos 2003: 34).

The relationship of subordination and dependency entrenched in the North-South post-colonial ties within the region not only implied an overflowing of political borders, but also of the different ways of living and organizing social life, at both institutional and interstate level, but also, in a more bottom-up perspective, at family and community level. Migration towards the US has deepened this relationship and its asymmetry, giving birth to new dynamic forms of territorialization and special reordering, where different forms of socio-spatial reproduction found their expression in the different flows of migration in the region. While in the first phases of the migratory phenomenon in the area and at least until the 1980s, the cross-border Central American

migrant was an invisible actor, not so prone to integrate within social dynamics and often depicted as a marginal figure, it is in this contemporary phase of transnational migration that he/she has become a necessary element of integration and global dynamics, mostly driven by the labour market. The most evident territorial contradiction is given by a separation between two areas that are only geographically close: the North, with a larger access to services, technology and other resources, and the South, a workforce provider. The separation line is drawn by borders and border areas, where these dynamics intersect and produce even more inequality and exclusion (Morales Gamboa 2003: 47-48).

The problems of inefficiency and dependency that the region is facing still nowadays, together with widespread violence and inequality, reveal the great vulnerability of an area subject to dependency on the US; while the latter is not to be blamed entirely for the current conditions of Mesoamerica, it is evident how the struggles of the region greatly influence the people's decision to flee in search of better conditions, even when they are aware of the risks they may face along the way. Violence, in particular, remains a constant that has often been denounced by civil society representatives and human rights advocates.

The politics of violence, violence and displacement

Researchers have generally found a strong correlation between the high levels of delinquency in the region and its impact on the population in relation to their decision to migrate (Hiskey, Malone and Orcés 2014: 2). Among the possible effects that violence has on migration, some variables of correlation are reported: the threat of being in danger in the 12-month period prior to departure (with survey respondents being expected to leave or who have thought of leaving due to their sense of insecurity or because they have been victims of crime); also the low level of trust in the government as the engine to combat crime is quoted among the reasons for people to escape (*ibid*: 6). Results finally suggest that being a victim of crime and corruption in Central America, as well as the feeling of threat and insecurity, increases the likelihood of people planning to migrate in the not-too-distant future. The violence that is currently being experienced in Central America is therefore one of the elements

generating forced displacement in the region, which may also take several forms (Cantor 2014: 34-68).

The traditional strategies used by migrants to cross borders (such as paying intermediaries, such as *coyotes* or *polleros*), added to the implementation of a series of programs and State actions that incremented the control practices, persecution and detention of migrants within the country as well as along the border, have recently been pushed even further, to the point that during the Obama administration the number of deportations of Central Americans reached historic levels (Villafuerte Solís and García Aguilar 2017: 45). Besides the actions being carried out by the northern country, Mexico also launched the *Plan Integral de Frontera Sur* (PIFS), theoretically meant to propose a regular way of crossing, but with the purpose of hermetically sealing the southern border and preventing Central Americans from going north. Starting with the migrant family crisis in 2014, the United States pressured Mexico to intervene in the issue and prevent migrants from crossing its national territory. Again, the result of the implementation of this program was an increase in the number of deportations and detentions – especially within the minors’ subgroup. The policy of exacerbation of the measures to control and contain the borders in recent years in both Mexico and the US belongs to a strategy of security maintenance which has had the effect of creating high human, economic and social costs for migrants and their families (*ibid*: 60). The restrictive policies of Mexico and the US, together with the militarization of the US southern border, oblige migrants to travel and live in Mexico clandestinely, with a constant fear of the threat of deportation (París Pombo 2017: 114).

Fieldwork analysis

In order to answer the research question, methods of qualitative research have been used. Field work has been based on a series of interviews carried out online (via videocalls) with experts who have been studying the phenomenon as academic researchers and persons working in civil society organizations in the human rights field who provide assistance to migrants (and migrant women more specifically). Qualitative research carried out via interviews with experts on the topic have proved fundamental inasmuch they not only complemented

the academic material and the several reports written by specialists and academics¹, but also enriched knowledge of and shed some real-life experience on the context of Central American migration and the experiences of migrant women. The method was preferred also in light of the fact that the understanding of the social phenomena studied for this research has been made possible through the narration of the facts in the words of the interviewees (Della Porta 2010: 12). By talking with the experts, it was possible to gain more insights and collect real life data on the topic, as well as to reconstruct social processes pertaining to the object of study.

Interviewees and the institutions and/or organizations they work in are listed here below for those persons who gave their consent for their names to be reported:

1. Prof. Josefina Manjárrez Rosas, professor/researcher of History and Coordinator of the Department of Gender Studies at the Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla, Mexico.
2. Hannah Hollandbyrd, policy specialist at Hope Border Institute/Instituto Fronterizo Esperanza, El Paso, Texas, United States of America.
3. Prof. Amarela Varela Huerta, professor/researcher at the Academy of Communication and Culture of the Universidad Autónoma de la Ciudad de México, Mexico.
4. Márcos Tamariz, deputy head of Mission at Doctors Without Borders – area Mexico and Central America, Mexico City, Mexico.
5. Luísa María Mendoza Godoy, head of participatory and collective processes with migrant women at Centro de Derechos Humanos Fray Matías de Córdova, Tapachula, Mexico.
6. The 6th interviewee asked to remain anonymous; the person works as a researcher in an NGO in Guatemala in the field of public health with a human rights approach.
7. Daniela Flores, former general coordinator of Las Vanders NGO, Mexico and Honduras.
8. Miriam González Sánchez, communication coordinator of Imumi Ngo, Mexico – Instituto para las Mujeres en Migración.

1 See for instance Cortés Maisonave and Manjárrez (2017), Menjívar and Drysdale Walsh (2019), Rojas Wiesner (2017), Varela Huerta (2017), Willers (2017).

Research results

Before the migratory journey: why do they leave?

Research findings have shown the extent to which women are subjected to violent practices in their home countries and how much this impacts on their choice to leave, as well as shedding light on the social background of women in relation to migration before they undertake their journey. The pre-migration phase is important as it shows the reasons why women decide to relocate. At least five factors were found as motives pushing women to migrate: extortion and death threats carried out by criminal groups; the need to assist and support children as mothers; violence being suffered in a domestic context, with the male partner being the perpetrator, extreme climate change events, health.

Regarding the first motive, social violence and extortion seem to be connected to the fact that women have to pay a small rent or war tax (*renta* or *impuesto de guerra*) on their economic activities to local criminal gangs, and the *maras* oblige them to collaborate with them, for instance to assault other people. Threats are also used in order to persuade them to be at their service for anything they are requested to do. Criminal gangs² (such as *maras* and *pandillas* street gangs) do play an important role in the choice of women to leave their countries of origin. Many families live where criminal gangs operate and come into conflict for territorial control, and often women are obliged to marry a member of the *pandilla* and therefore become an affiliate of the criminal group. Sometimes, gang violence is also directed at the children or adolescents rather than their mothers, and this is another reason leading women to choose to escape with their children; often women move out with their family from their area of living and are found again by the *pandilleros*, so international migration, meant as escaping as far as possible and to another country, represents the only and most extreme solution to find safety.

It is worth noticing how most of the interviewees often refer to two constant elements when answering questions on what pushes women to migrate from Central American countries: the first element being that such migra-

² For a detailed and extensive explanation on the criminal groups operating in Central America, I recommend reading the author Cantor (2014).

tion, especially in the case of women, is a “forced” one, and the second being the widespread context of violence that leaves them no choice but to literally run away. In this regard, interviewee professor Manjárez, historian and coordinator of the Research Center of Gender Studies at the University of Puebla (Mexico), highlights that these two elements, together with widespread criminality and state absence, make the lives of Central American women so unbearable that their choice to migrate is almost compelled.

Climate change is also quoted among the reasons for Central American migrants to relocate abroad, as was explained by the deputy head of Mission of Doctors without Borders, Dr. Marcos Tamariz. Other interviewees highlighted the deep connection between climate change events and health and gender-based violence. For example, extreme climate events are an added element fuelling the already precarious and vulnerable life conditions of many persons living in Honduras: hurricanes Eta and Iota in 2020 damaged or destroyed most of the health centers of Honduras, leading many people without proper health care in their areas of origin. Due to the hurricanes, almost 100,000 Hondurans were left without access to medical care (MSF 2020). Another public health issue related to migration arises from the interviews: sexual violence as a constant element permeating Central American women’s lives in their countries of origin, with specific reference to the Honduran situation. Sexual violence is not only closely related to the context of criminality that is typical of several areas in Central American countries (often used as a weapon serving the gangs’ purposes), but also as a problem occurring both in a more domestic-intimate context, and as a result of the great vulnerability caused by extreme climate events. In this regard, recent research also found how climate change can amplify existing social inequalities and negatively impact particularly on women; for instance, according to the Global Gender and Climate Alliance report (2016: 30), climate change-related disasters are also associated with increases in gender-based violence, and that is particularly evident in the developing world. In the words of Dr. Tamariz, it seems that as result of the hurricanes that affected Honduras in 2020, sexual violence against Honduran women rose markedly. Therefore, climate change, health and gender-based violence are so interwoven in the context of Honduras that violence against women is not only something happening as a result of the patriarchal structure of the intimate family context (as in the case of marriage

and relationships between men and women), but also as a consequence of the widespread context of violence fuelled by criminal activity and exacerbated by the vulnerability of the population under extreme climate events. All those causes, together with lack of action on the part of the state, are catalyzing factors pushing women to relocate

However, gender-based violence, especially that perpetrated by male partners, has been reported in the interviews as a common denominator in the constant violation of women's rights; many women from Northern Triangle countries find in migration the only strategy of survival in the femicidal context of origin they often face in their home countries. In most cases, this is carried out by a person known to the victim, namely a husband or a male partner³.

Violence is carried out not only by criminal gangs or in domestic contexts, but also by the state. The state is often held responsible by the interviewees for the unsafe conditions in which its inhabitants live, and for failing to guarantee a dignified life and provide access to support in cases of mistreatment, but also for clearly participating and having an active role in the perpetration of those same crimes; impunity is also a recurrent element that is mentioned in the interviews. The general widespread context of violence is systematic and structural in the sense that it includes a wide range of actors who participate and play a role in women's decisions to migrate, by either committing crimes or not providing care and assistance where needed through the implementation of specific laws and policies.

Another research result relates to the experience of women belonging to sexual minorities, such as transgender women and lesbian women. Based on their gender identity and sexual orientation, Central American people belonging to the LGBTQ community face one of the highest rates of discrimination and gender-based violence in the region. For instance, NGO representatives report cases in the Northern Triangle countries where women belonging to the LGBTQ community are persecuted and have no option other than escaping their countries of origin. In Honduras transgender women receive the

3 For instance, by taking femicide (or feminicide) as a statistical indicator, the absolute rate of femicide reported in 2016 in Guatemala is 193 (2.3 per 100,000 women), in Honduras 264 (5.8 per 100,000 women), in El Salvador 256 (7.6 per 100,000 women) (Cepalstat 2021). It is to be noted that such data do not include several cases which have gone unreported or have been not properly collected or harmonized.

worst treatment, to the point that it is common to read in newspapers about transgender women being stoned by her community because of her identity (Amnesty International 2017). The level of persecution against them is so high that those people constitute one of the most vulnerable groups of refugees of the Americas.

Transit experience: what happens during the journey?

Transit routes are also extremely dangerous for women since they are often subjected to sexual violence, as has been documented by several organizations, journalists and academic researchers. According to reports, approximately 80% of Central American women and girls are raped during their transit in Mexico to the US (Bonello and Siegal McIntyre 2014). One of the most feared risks for women migrants crossing Mexico is riding the train, sadly known among the migrant community as *La Bestia* (“The Beast”)⁴, or *El tren de la muerte* (“The Death Train”). The train is mentioned in the stories of the interviewees as a place where many attacks, abductions and sexual assaults happen; in addition, migrants who climb to the top of the train can easily fall from it. Many of them die, and many of them get very badly injured. Migrants who come back with an injury have a very hard time when dealing with social stigma and lack of state care. Often women fall into human trafficking networks present in several areas close to the southern and northern borders in Mexico, and stories of abductions on the *La Bestia* are very common.

The condition of vulnerability is exacerbated in the case of migrant women travelling with their babies. Often women ask to travel with a partner (usually a man), in order to reduce the risks of being caught or violated. Risks are extremely high for migrant women, as “most of the obstacles women faced during transit were related to exposure to different forms of gender-based vio-

4 This means of transportation is a private commercial cargo train that crosses the southern Mexican State of Chiapas from the border of Guatemala and stretches towards the north of the country, until it reaches the US-Mexican border. This train is known as a highly dangerous means of transportation associated with physical harm (many persons have been killed falling from it or have suffered arm amputations), but also because the train’s route is targeted by state authorities and criminals.

lence, the limited access to financial resources, and a lack of access to decent work in the places where they stop during their journey. Such obstacles arise from the increasingly difficult conditions of transit, but also from the lack of other kinds of resources and capacities that facilitate migration (e.g. the weakness of solidarity networks) and increase the risks women face during transit” (Willers 2017: 5).

At the same time, stories of women being collected during fieldwork demonstrate how different those women were as individuals in their personal experiences, but also how dramatically common the discrimination, obstacles and dangers they face are in relation to their experience of border crossing. According to the scholar, such “difficulties arise from the context of undocumented status and the particular gender regime: the necessity to hide from governmental control and the impossibility of travelling in main routes of transportation expose migrants to assaults and extortions of crime groups and places a lot of stress on migrant women, especially on mothers who travel with their children” (*ibid*: 7-8).

Sexual favors are also signaled by interviewees as a toll that women have to pay in order to continue their journey. Not only does it happen with members of criminal organizations active in the transit area that migrants might encounter while crossing a specific border region, but even within the same group of migrants travelling together. Women are then obliged to maintain their sexual “obligations” both to receive protection during the route, and to guarantee the company of the person they ask for protection. Sexual favors are in this case a price than migrant women have to pay as a currency of exchange that enables them to continue their journey; often such favors are extorted. However, women also demonstrate a great ability to implement some survival strategies along the route: traveling with a group of people (the so-called *caravanas*) makes them feel more comfortable during transit, even though the risk of being assaulted even by the members of the same group or the people accompanying them is a risk they still face. This shows that women are so desperate to escape their contexts of origin that they want to find strategies of self-protection and survival to make their travel north as safe as possible. Some of the strategies that migrant women have been found to adopt in order to reduce the risks of being caught in violence include disguise, with women disguised as men to avoid being violated or assaulted during their

journey (for instance, cutting their hair, wearing men's clothing, and hiding their physical characteristics, Cortés Maisonave and Manjárez, 2017: 10). Many women prefer not to travel alone, so they hire the services of a man (the *coyote* or *pollero*), who is supposedly helping them transit; in many cases, they also negotiate the company of another man on the train or in general along the route. However, as the findings highlight, travelling in a group or with another man does not completely eliminate the risk of being robbed or violated.

Given how women are trapped as victims of several kinds of gender-based violence, they often receive treatment for unwanted pregnancies. There are cases of migrant women travelling on the route who are pregnant and seek an abortion; those women have often been raped during transit and are unable to access a safe abortion either in their country of origin or in the host country. Often migrant women are advised by the *polleros* or *coyotes* to take a contraceptive pill before undertaking the journey in order to avoid the risk of getting pregnant. Many of them do not report the violence due to fear of deportation. Often the responsibility for such violence is attributed not only to the criminal organizations active in the border regions along the routes covered by migrants, but also to the state at a broad level, in particular to the military and to a lesser extent the *Guardia Nacional*, the Mexican national police force introduced in 2019 by the Mexican government in order to combat the same organized crime perpetrators. The Mexican migration authorities are also reported as agents who operate in cohabitation with criminal organizations, and who perpetrate the very same crimes against migrant women.

As the research findings demonstrate, the pervasive situation of sexual violence that migrant women face on the travel route is a persistent pattern that is clearly related to gender misconceptions present within Mexican society, but also on the migratory route more generally. This situation involves a high number of actors repeating the violence, from the authorities to human traffickers, to police officers and the community in general, even within the same group of migrants travelling together. Sexual violence is interiorized as a thought, a price that has to be paid by migrant women if they want to cross the border or transit through a specific area. It shows that women must obey and submit to certain standards imposed on them in order to obtain guarantees of safety during the trip, as well as pay for their personal security through sexual favors. Whether migrant women buy their safety through a sexual favor for a fellow

companion to obtain protection, pay an intermediary who would help her cross the border or conduct a certain transaction with migration authorities to encourage the resolution of their migratory status, women still fall easy prey to criminal behavior and are not immune to various kinds of violence during transit. While we are more likely to be threatened with guns, women are the ones confronting sexual violence the most (Díaz Preto and Kuhner 2015: 25).

Border-crossing and after: what happens after mobility?

On the southern border between Mexico and Guatemala, we have similar testimonies to the ones shared on the US border situation, even though the actual physical border is not a wall but is represented at the present moment by thousands of Mexican National Guards impeding transit and border-crossing for migrants. An interviewee from the Centro de Derechos Humanos Fray Matías in Tapachula (Chiapas, Mexico), Luisa Mendoza, explains how migrants attempt to cross it in two ways, the first by a bridge in the city of Ciudad Hidalgo⁵; the second, way more dangerous, by crossing the Rio Suchiate river. Having arrived after a long and perilous journey, as we have seen, refugees should be able to ask for international protection and start a procedure with the Migration authorities, but the situation at the southern border between Mexico and Guatemala is more complex. On one hand, migrants are often asked by the same migratory authorities at the border not to enter Mexico, they are pushed away, escorted back and invited to wait or come back in the following days; on the other hand, migrants are arrested and incarcerated in detention centers.

At the time of writing, another dramatic development in Tapachula, the first Mexican city migrants find after crossing the border with Guatemala, has made the general situation even more complex. The Guardia Nacional is often said to be the responsible authority that is arresting migrants at the border and taking them to the Estación Migratoria Siglo XXI, the biggest immigra-

⁵ The bridge is called Puente Internacional Rodolfo Robles, and it connects the Mexican town of Ciudad Hidalgo (Chiapas), with Ciudad Tecún Umán (Guatemala). The bridge is built on the Rio Suchiate.

tion detention center in Mexico, located in Tapachula and authorized by the Instituto Nacional de Migración (a government institute dealing with migratory procedures). It is clear in the words of the interviewees that the Mexican authorities are detaining migrants as if they had been committing a crime for the simple fact of crossing the border; moreover, these authorities are also held responsible for the extremely brutal conditions that migrants are obliged to live in. The risk of being detained by the police or migration authorities in Mexico is one of the reasons why migrants prefer not to cross the border in a more regular way (i.e. via the most common routes leading to Tapachula or other towns along the southern border of Mexico, where they can apply for asylum or regularise their immigration status), and instead find alternative routes and points of entry to Mexico, thus avoiding the risk of encountering the authorities and being apprehended or detained. However, finding an alternative way to enter Mexico illegally entails other risks, perhaps even more dangerous, since migrants have to pay for someone to help them transit and might face other obstacles and travel in very unsafe conditions.

The governmental response to the humanitarian crisis is that of reinforcing the police authorities at the border in order to prevent migrants from entering Mexico, carrying out routine checks and in general strengthening their capacity to either drive them away or apprehend them and send them to detention centers. This also happens to those migrants whose status as refugees for humanitarian reasons has been granted. Even though the law allows them to move freely around the country, the authorities are preventing them from exiting the state of Chiapas, and very often push them back and deport them to their home countries or incarcerate them in detention centers. As a result, family separation has also occurred, generating a context of greater vulnerability.

Luisa Mendoza of the CDH Fray Matías signals how migrants are criminalized and taken advantage of even within the offices of Comar⁶, and finds how reluctant the migratory authority is to collaborate with the Human Rights Centre. The Centre Fray Matías reports misbehavior on the part of the migratory authorities, and also finds much resistance and little willingness

6 The Mexican Commission for Refugee Assistance, a governmental organization responsible for processing refugee status recognition applications.

to collaborate with them for the purpose of assisting migrants. Misbehavior is evident when the authorities purposely withhold the truth and information, collecting money illegally from migrants and preventing lawyers from entering the offices with the migrants they assist. Interviewee Miriam González, communication coordinator of the Imumi Organisation (Instituto Para Las Mujeres en Migración) also reports the brutality of the Mexican army in using strong enforcement procedures in order to ensure regular entry into the country: this also explains why many refugees do not want to stay in Tapachula, especially women travelling with their children, who are often unable to ensure dignified conditions for themselves and their families.

While the state is formally obliged to comply with international standards of protection, this is often not translated into actual implementation of the law; since the outbreak of the 2020 pandemic in particular, migrants have found it much harder to obtain a visa on humanitarian grounds. On a different note, Dr. González explains that the pandemic situation resulted in the closure of the borders, and the small budget given to the offices of Comar, resulted in a limited capacity of the office to process migration paperwork. These factors, together with widespread xenophobia, the Mexican President's anti-immigration discourse, the lack of proper state response and the pandemic situation, have made it extremely complex to provide an adequate response to the situation of great vulnerability which refugees are exposed to on the southern border.

As much as the situation at the border might sound complex, and worsened by the decisions of the Mexican government on the matter of migration policies, it seems appropriate to mention another issue on the Mexican border, related to two actions undertaken by the state authorities in the context of Central American migration. One is the question of what is happening in detention centers, and the other is deportations. We have already mentioned how migrants prefer to find alternative routes to the official ones for fear of detainment and deportation. Interviewees often mention the cruel and inhuman treatment that migrants receive in detention centers both on the southern border between Mexico and Guatemala and the northern border between Mexico and the United States.

Life in detention centers along those two borders is extremely degrading for migrants, often resulting in great distress and harsh life conditions, especially for

women and LGBTQ persons. Instances of torture carried out by the migration authorities, as well as accounts of suicide are also mentioned as part of the degrading treatment and its consequences; NGO representatives interviewed report cases of abuse, discrimination, racism and beating among other cases of human rights violations. Responsibility, also in the US case, is imputed to the government, its policies and the way migration is dealt with by border authorities.

Deportation is another harmful tool used by migration authorities in both receiving countries: in the period covering the pandemic, both Mexico and the United States have implemented deportations because of US policy, Title 42. In August 2021, at the southern border, the general situation that has been faced is that of migrants arriving on flights from the United States' southern border to the major cities of Chiapas, and then escorted by bus by migration authorities to Guatemalan crossing points. Deportations are happening without respecting the limited number of people who can be deported (namely 100 persons per day), during unscheduled times (mostly during the night, when deportations are not supposed to take place), and often families with children and adolescents, as well as pregnant women (the social groups most vulnerable to Covid) are also known to have been carried to points of the southern border, most of them in Guatemala, that are not authorized by law.

In the case of other border towns along the northern border between Mexico and the US, Marcos Tamariz observes a growing situation of vulnerability for migrant women in Reynosa (in the state of Tamaulipas, Mexico, located on the Mexican side of the border with Texas); while some migrant women travelling with their children are let cross the border and do not incur further risks while crossing it, in many other cases they are let cross the border and then abducted, with the purpose of being expelled and deported back to their countries of origin. Also in this case, deportations are happening at night, without notifying migrants of their rights, explaining to them what their options are or giving them the chance to apply for asylum or regularise their migratory status.

While it is clear that women face all sorts of discrimination, both along the route and once approaching the migration authorities in an attempt to cross the border, it is also true that some virtuous examples of resilience, strength and positiveness on the side of women can be detected. In the migrant camp at Matamoros (in the State of Tamaulipas, Mexico, another town close to

the border with Texas, built as a result of the MPP program, also known as “Remain in Mexico”, under Trump administration), migrant women found a way to build positive relationships and a community within it. This observation sheds some light on the life that women have in migrant camps, in a context where violence against women is widespread and happens at all levels. Another example of resilience is given by another interviewee in Tapachula, who gave testimony on how women can find their own way of improving their life conditions through collective action: by selling characteristic cooked food in the streets, women are able not only to make a small living but also to build a network and exchange experiences and information, hopefully leading them to opening up to new possibilities. Such examples are mitigating the panorama of discrimination and xenophobia they often face as foreigners and migrants in the host country. However, on the other hand, experiences involving violence, kidnapping and murders of migrant women have also come to light, showing how the positive examples of migrants coping with a harsh reality and traumatic life events do exist, but the socio-political system does not protect them, nor properly implement a human rights approach.

In general, research findings collected show different sides and shades of migration for Central American women: one is a reality of empowerment, of life re-building, of resilience, strength and willingness to overcome the traumatic experiences faced before and during the journey. Even though human rights organizations and researchers who have been and are working in the field do not have much chance to follow up on the thousands of stories of migrants whose life they intersect with, it has been possible to grasp different ways through which migration improved their lives. In one case a woman was riding on the Train *La Bestia* with her children, on the way to the United States, and was assisted by the Red Cross in the city of Ciudad Serdán (State of Puebla, Mexico), and found her daughter being harassed by an agent of the Instituto Nacional de Migración. Finally the woman was able to reach the United States together with her children, and sent a message saying that she was all right. However, empowerment does not come without a cost. For NGOs working to assist Central American women, such as Doctors Without Borders and Centro de Derechos Humanos “Fray Matías”, the psychological impact on migrant women’s lives in their contexts of origin and during transit is so high that women become very unwilling to talk about their experiences,

even with the people working to provide them with the necessary aid. However, women often find a lot of strength in themselves by providing care for their children or for other migrant women with whom they often share similar experiences. Psychological counselling, as well as processes where they can be heard and share their feelings and information with specialists and women in similar situations, make it easier for them to process their grief and find motivations to carry on with their lives and journeys.

Another side of migration is the one associated with social stigma. Many migrants do not make it to their preferred country of destination, therefore for those women whose migratory journey was interrupted, life becomes even worse. A researcher from an NGO working in the field of healthcare in Guatemala tells the moving life story of a Honduran woman who, after undertaking the journey, falls from the *La Bestia*, has her legs amputated and is unable to use a prosthesis due to a medical mistake; the woman is then forced to go back to Honduras to the same environment that she wanted to escape from. A great proportion of migrants who are back in their home country face great social stigma, especially women and returned migrant women with disabilities. Not only are returned or deported migrant women stigmatized because of their disabilities caused by the incidents along the migratory routes, for not having completed the journey, but also because they are often associated with sexual violence, a risk that many of them face during the journey.

Conclusion

Through this study, we realized how borders and border spaces become intrinsically human, weaving together cultural, political and societal practices. Borders have been found to be the bearers of profound (post-)colonial narratives and implications, given how they contribute to the establishment of a problematic dialogue between the global North and South. At the same time, we realized how violent and bloody borders can be in today's context of migration. We also learnt how international border crossing carried out by migrants is constantly producing and transforming that space, thanks to the way migratory flows traverse it; migratory flows have precise points of attraction and pushback, inasmuch as much as barriers and opportunities

exist within the migration experience. Fieldwork provided extremely interesting insights on the societal problems afflicting Central America and Mexico, but also partly the United States, in relation to the context of migration in the region – in particular, by looking at borders through the gender filter we were able to demonstrate all the contradictions of a society that does not respect women and affects the lives of a great segment of the migrant population in the area.

Violence was a common denominator that came up frequently during interviews, showing how it is a visible and persistent reality on all steps of the trajectory. In order to understand the path of women along the migratory itineraries, it is imperative to focus on structural factors that characterize some of their lives back home, as well as the conditions that still persist during and after the journey. Testimonies given by interviewees reveal the range of aggressive acts perpetrated against migrants (especially against migrant women) by the migration authorities, the police and other armed officers, and even within the same group of migrants. All these actors, by becoming violent agents and agents of violence, perpetuate the patriarchal system and intervene both internationally and locally in the governance of space and in the inappropriate acquisition of women's bodies, especially at the border.

Another result has to do with the rigidity of the border policies. While most of them are conceived in terms of diminishing migration flows, they fail to prevent irregular border crossings both in Mexico and the US, increasing the conditions of vulnerability during the transit, especially for migrant women. Migration policies are clearly directed at controlling the flows during transit in Mexico by detaining migrants or deporting them back to their home countries against their will, and this hardening of border policies at the southern and northern borders of Mexico is translated into harsh practices against migrants as well as generating more insecurity, especially for women. The actions of those who participate in the violations of migrants' lives are framed according to a regime that impedes circulation, denies fair access to or transit through the territory and criminalizes migrants. Migration policies should be designed and implemented according to a human right approach which takes gender into consideration as one of the fundamental variables in times where women are increasingly taking part in migratory flows.

In the framework of this research, we understand borders, therefore, not

only as complex legal-political practices of separation between countries, full of political significance, but also as entities giving rise to forms of oppression other than the political, such as that based on gender, class, ethnicity and nationality, as well as undocumented/documented status.

In order to think about the Central Americans' journey across the borders, we must first contextualize their everyday reality, a reality made up of many challenges and a continuum of violence that in most cases does not leave them space for emancipation and empowerment. Very sadly, their reality is permeated by structural violence, and often their arrival in the new country does not grant them the freedom they expected. The space they walk across is a space made of danger, fear and insecurity, where violence is evident, not only to a great extent in the relationship women have with their male peers and partners, but also with a series of other actors including criminal organizations and their affiliates, authorities, traffickers and even other migrants, a wide range of actors who make the journey for those women extremely perilous and challenging.

For as long as human rights violations keep on being perpetrated at all stages of the journey, as fieldwork results show, it is imperative to call on the responsibilities of those actors that are supposed to act as guarantors of the rights of persons also (and perhaps especially!) at transnational level. The weakness of the political apparatus in ensuring that dignified life conditions are respected in all steps of migration, regardless of the country where migration takes place, is clearly highlighted. While many interviewees pointed to institutional authorities as being among the major perpetrators of human rights violations during transit, it seems important to underline that the same national and international institutions should comply with the legal standards of migration and adopt a human rights approach in order to ensure that the rights of migrants are respected. Migration is a right, people have the right to migrate if conditions of life back home do not allow them to live respectably, and a human rights approach should be applied at all stages of the migratory journey to ensure that migrants are treated according to human and legal standards.

Studying the border from a gender perspective allows us to frame an area of study according to the point of view of a category that shows a great level of vulnerability in the country of origin, and whose position is exacerbated during the whole process of migration. For this reason, it is important to keep

on talking about and researching the role of migration in Central America, the plight of migrants there and their mobility in that space, by recognizing the role of agency in their experience, to highlight the situations of discrimination and violation they face in their social, political, economic, cultural and human rights.

Finally, a few limits in this investigation can be pointed out. Firstly in this study no migrant women could be interviewed because of the conditions in which the research was carried out (by online means); however, many interesting insights were gathered thanks to the input provided by interviewees. Secondly, despite a risk of generalizing the experiences of women, it must be very clear that the data gathered for this research are not intended to provide an aggregated truth, nor a universal story that pertains to every migrant woman in this context, but just to document some of the many stories that can be heard in the region, and that constitute a reality in that context.

The research findings on post-mobility are mainly focused on the experiences that migrants have with border-crossing and when dealing with authorities and migration procedures. It was not possible to collect many data on the life of migrant women after migration (either in the new country of destination or in the home country following deportation), but some results are also shown in this respect. This impossibility of collecting data on the post-migration experience is due especially to the nature of the interviewees chosen for the field research, and the difficulty arising when searching for contacts, organizations and online blogs where it was hoped to find more data. However, the data collected so far could be expanded and might provide the grounds through which further research can be conducted in the future on this topic.

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