



HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS ACROSS INTERNATIONAL BORDERS: LIFE STORIES OF CENTRAL AMERICAN WOMEN ON THE MOVE

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**Human rights violations across international
borders:
life stories of Central American women on
the move**

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Preface

A border is a temptation. To cross it may mean to improve a *performance* or to have dared too much. In both cases, it is a transgression (*trans*, beyond, and *grèdi*, to pass). But going beyond a border can be a necessity. At least it is for all those migrants who leave their communities of origin to escape a war, a famine, an environmental crisis or, more simply, to improve their living conditions or follow their ambitions. The border, the political one, thus becomes the threshold (*limen*), the place of encounter with the other, the stranger. It is the place where different identities meet, where our identity is amplified and that of the other is de-powered.

The re-discovery and enhancement of the values that are the foundations of our identity suddenly find a profound meaning at the moment of contact with migratory experiences. The State closes its borders. Their openings are maintained where there are economic or geo-political interests, but the filtering function is accentuated when you speak only of people. It is a “tightly woven” sieve when it comes to welcoming the foreigner.

But however impermeable the borders may be, men and women continue to move and will continue to find the strength and strategies to overcome any physical and bureaucratic barriers that may arise. There is no wall that cannot be overcome. There is no fence that cannot be crossed. There is no customs officer that cannot be circumvented. Especially when the place of destination is far preferable than the place of departure. The border thus becomes just a concept. A virtual obstacle. A symbol that is necessarily weakened along the path of growth and renewal.

The following pages tell the stories of women travelling along and across borders. Identity and political borders. Borders that describe their gender belonging where fragility and despair turn into strength against the abuse suffered in the family and the pitfalls of the journey.

Thousands of women and their children leave the lands of Central America to reach Mexico and from there move towards the United States. A journey made up of expectations and hopes, but also of violence and resilience. The women leave countries where they experience social inequality and insecurity conditioned by obedience to criminal gangs and family abuse. Thus, escape becomes a compulsory choice. In all this,

the absence of the state is heavy in protecting women with specific laws and policies, if not also in punishing the perpetrators. Discrimination and violence continue during the migration process. Women fall into human trafficking networks and sexual favours become the currency to pay for the journey. Furthermore, the author does not fail to point out the involvement of migration authorities working in concert with criminal organisations and the vulnerability of women belonging to the LGBT community. Abuses and human rights violations do not end even when the last border is crossed. Thus, the *caravanas* become a strategy of survival and risk reduction.

Ashanti Collavini tells us about violent borders – linked to gender migration – but also about interesting narratives that redefine border spaces and migration flows. Women, with their courage and experiences, give birth to new boundaries (and identities) in the relationships woman-man, employee-owner, migrant-resident that arise from an increased self-awareness.

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HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS ACROSS INTERNATIONAL BORDERS: LIFE STORIES OF CENTRAL AMERICAN WOMEN ON THE MOVE

Ashanti Collavini

Como significo esa violencia: la significo como un mensaje para todas, en el continente, como un mandato de masculinidad violenta que demuestra que tanto los civiles, como los funcionarios, como los militares, como los polleros, como los propios migrantes pueden disponer de nuestros cuerpos, porque nuestros cuerpos quieren ser denunciados como desecharables. Pero también me provoca hablar de esa violencia, a veces me provoca distancia porque veo que todo el mundo basuriza la existencia de las compañeras, dicen “es que los migrantes, sus vidas son desecharables”, es que yo creo que los migrantes importan y que tú importas, por el hecho de existir y también creo que yo importo y mi hija importa y por lo tanto logro ni que tú ni que mi hija ni yo seamos desecharables y mucho menos las mujeres migrantes.

(Amarela Varela Huerta, 2021, interview by author)

Introduction

In 2018 I had one of those once-in-a-lifetime opportunities of studying in Mexico City for a research track semester in the framework of a study programme, and I remember being there during a particularly delicate period for the country: the first being the transition of Presidency, with the current President Andrés Manuel López Obrador taking office on 1st December 2018; the second I remember being how many voices were spread around October on the so-called *caravanas* of migrants from the Northern Triangle of Central America transiting across Mexico¹. It was the 6th caravan that Mexico had experience with, however it was the first during the Trump administration and it was made of about 1000 persons, mostly women and children. While back then the Mexican government eased the transit of those persons across the country to the north, the US

¹ Central America, or Mesoamerica, is here used to define mostly the region encompassing the so-called Northern Triangle of Central America (El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, also referred as NTCA), while also including other countries such as Nicaragua, Belize and parts of Costa Rica. According to the statistical data, most of the displaced people historically come from the NTCA, the northern part of Central America, which shares a lot in terms of socio-economic structure <https://www.unrefugees.org/emergencies/central-america/> (last access: 13.03.2022).

government's attitude was quite different, criminalizing the migrants, sending troops to the southern border of the country and generating a general wave of hate, also spread through social media (Gandini, Fernández de la Reguera and Narváez Gutiérrez, 2020). This experience made me realize I wanted to commit to study this phenomenon taking place in the region that I almost had no knowledge about: I wanted to understand the conditions spurring migration in the region, as well as those characterizing the transit experience, through the perspective of the women taking part in it, in order to go into depth into how their lives are crossed by gender unbalances in the different moments of the migratory journey.

This study looks at Central American gendered migration and Mexico as a country of transit and destination. Critical reflections on what is happening along the borders or border areas pertaining such specific area of the world firstly allows us to narrate and shed light, through the words of the persons involved in the phenomenon as experts and direct witnesses of the issue, to what is happening in terms of humanitarian crisis not only at the actual border in Mexico (being it the southern border between Mexico and Guatemala, or the northern border between Mexico and the United States), but also within the countries of origin. Secondly, the research analyses the border contemporary situation in the region in relation to those who experience borders and the spaces associated with them in the first place, with a gender perspective.

This study is aimed at recognizing migrant women as public agents, active social actors and protagonists of the migratory flows in the different moments of the migratory trajectory, in order to understand the implications that bordering practices have in their life, from the very moment they decide to leave their country of origin, to the moment they enter and attempt to settle down in the new context of arrival. Fieldwork results therefore reveal the conditions and complex dynamics that impact on the right of those persons who decide to leave their country of origin, forced by the circumstances of the places where they were born and grew up in, as well as documents the severe levels of abuse happening during the displacement and upon crossing international borders in contemporary times.

The Instituto Nacional de Migración (the INM, the Mexican National Institute of migration dealing with all procedures pertaining to migration matters) registers every year a huge number of persons entering the country irregularly with the purpose of reaching

the United States². The majority of transmigrant fluxes entering Mexico comes from Central American countries, especially Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador. Most of them enter the country in an irregular way, without documents to travel, with the certainty they will find better employment opportunities, provide dignified health and education conditions for their children, reunite with their family members and live a life free of violence. A great proportion enters Mexico through the Soconusco border region, in the Mexican southern State of Chiapas.

In recent years, the presence of women and children from Central American countries has played a great role in the increase of flows from the region, across Mexico and heading to the Southern border of the US. Many of these women travel with their children and are recorded in what is known as the “household unit”, according to the statistics on migrants apprehended by the US Border Patrol³. Since 2014, migrants and children, as well as unaccompanied migrants below the age of 18 have significantly grown as a subgroup of migrants travelling north. Such strong upsurge, together with a general increase in the number of participation of Central Americans, distinguishes this particular period from the past flows of migration. However, on top of the immigration control practices being undertaken in both Mexico and the southern US border, the general condition of Central American migrants is also exacerbated by their exposure to the action of organized crime groups, the increase presence of smugglers, the shift to more dangerous routes, and other factors such as theft, extortion and kidnapping (Rodríguez Chavez, 2017).

The topic of border-crossing in relation to violence and gendered vulnerability along migratory routes is not new. The relation between women seeking mobility at borders and the violence perpetrated against them has been object of recent studies both in the European and non-European spheres, as for instance in the case of the analysis on EU policies along the Moroccan-Spanish borders (Tyszler, 2019), in the case of African women during transit and upon arrival to Italy (Quagliarello, 2019), or again in the documentation of several cases of gender abuses along the EU borders in Greece, Serbia

² Most recent statistical data may be consulted here: http://portales.segob.gob.mx/work/models/PoliticaMigratoria/CEM/Estadisticas/Sintesis_Graficas/Sintesis_2020.pdf.

³ For statistical data on apprehensions carried out by the US Border Patrol along the US southern border and divided by nationality in the time frame 2007-2020, see: <https://www.cbp.gov/sites/default/files/assets/documents/2021-Aug/USBORD%7E3.PDF>. Most of the apprehended persons are the ones coming from the Northern Triangle countries.

and France (Freedman, 2016). Many of these studies show that, despite the differences in the political and legal systems of each context, refugee women are the ones who experience the most vulnerabilities, and that, despite the frequent presence of policies aimed at protecting the rights of migrants, there is a clear incompatibility between the institutional response in the reception system and the human rights discourse.

In Europe, violations against Central American migrant women on the move seem barely present in public and academic discourse, with few exceptions (Cortés Maisonave, 2018). Despite widely present in Latin American academic and humanitarian work, there seems to be a gap in existing European knowledge concerning the stories of women in transit from the Global South to North in a Latin American perspective. 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. Besides, this research also applies border theory to a context of current humanitarian crisis, that develops according to three geographical and political axes (the Northern Triangle countries, Mexico and the US), contributing to the earlier works of social sciences scholars in the field.

The essay is organized in three sections: the first focuses on the theoretical production on border studies related to migration, with a special focus on a feminist perspective, as well as touches upon gendered policies and the role of NGOs working in the field of women's rights in the Central American area. The scope is to provide an overview and understanding on population movements along international border crossing, as well as to present the theoretical approaches adopted in the research. The second part describes the methodology and points to a few limits to this investigation. In the third section, fieldwork research results are presented and analyzed according to the three different phases of migration: before the migratory journey, *why do they leave?*, the transit experience, *what happens during the transit?*, the border-crossing moment, *what happens after the mobility?* Finally, we develop the conclusions.

The ultimate objective of this research is to understand what it means to be a migrant woman in today's context of mobility regime in the Central American region, where border spaces are intrinsically permeated by violence, but also by great resilience and

bravery. 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 and wellbeing, in their strive to find better life opportunities. By touching on the ways that migrant women are constantly discriminated and violated before, during and after the migratory transit, research on the topic should call not only on the implementation of policies that are adequately directed to the target population object of constant human rights violations, but also to solve the structural roots that are causing the violence against women, not only within the area of origin, but also along the migratory trajectory.

1. Theoretical framework. Making sense of the space in the context of gendered migration

Our point of departure is the relationship between space and the subject who transits across its borders, lives in it and makes use of it: it is then appropriate to conceive the space in human terms, a place that sheds light on many contradictions that are typical of the globalized world we are living in and worth investigating. The interconnected world emphasizes on many cultural, social and political problems that turned the space in a concrete field of study, and all different issues are extremely bound to the concept of border as the first mechanism through which the human dimension of the migrant¹ can be investigated upon. In agreement with Cella (2006), when individuals cross or wall along borders, whether the process is more or less dramatic, they perform a distinction that is often translated into space. Despite borders being often depicted as symbolic, or metaphorical elements, the experience of migrants with borders is highly influenced by the materiality of the border itself. Whether borders are conventional, geographical, real or abstracts, they reveal the complexity of mechanisms happening around them, at both individual and collective level. As Osti wrote, “[...] border is an archetype, a primordial instrument used to impose order on reality. [...] a sign of division, not always hostile but certainly marking a difference in space and in the mind” (2015, 12-13).

1.1. Power, space and borders in the social sciences

When reading the border and the many intrinsic contradictions that characterize it, it is impossible not to frame it according to the concept of space, where the border is situated, in relation to power. Power is defined by Osti as “the parallel of spatial density with social relation”, given by the capacity to control land or resources which often results into asymmetrical society (*ibid*, 13). Bourdieu (1999), used to think of space as the

¹ The term “migrant” is here used as a general term that indicates a person who moves across international borders, including refugees, asylum seekers, economic migrants, environmental migrants and broadly, persons who do not physically fall within these legal and not legal categories. More in general, “migration” and “migrants” are used in this essay to define any movement of people from one nation-state to another, or from one region to another.

materialization of different forms of power and of interaction of different forces, where subjects show their capitals and structure their differences in a continuous tension that produces space itself. According to him, living the space means producing meaning and taking possession of it. By this logic, then, borders are made sense of and appropriated by the specific socio-ethnic groups who live in it. They crystallize social relations, including power relations.

For a long time, in the academia, borders were thought of as static and invisible ontological elements, materializing in a physical line that could be drawn from one place to another, symbolizing a precise geographical demarcation. They were also often conceptualized as separate socio-spatial entities. However, in the past few decades border scholars have started to realize that borders could go beyond that, and instead acquired different meanings, functions and qualities, as the interest shifted from *what* borders were to *how* they were socially constructed. The constructivist approach to borders started to look at them not as mere physical and visible entities, such as a fence, a wall, a river or a mountain, but more on how borders contributed to give meaning to dynamic societal practices, how they could be seen as potential of change and points of disruption. The social construction of borders led them to be studied as something relational, and not given (Sevastianov *et al*, 2015). Not an abstract concept, but more of a space that is regulated, made use of, shaped and interpreted by the societal groups that experience it. According to Simmel, the space exists only when social interactions happen on it, and the border delimits the space and the community living on it, protecting it from the outside world, and dictating the rules. The famous quote by Simmel “The border is not a special fact with sociological effects, but a sociological fact with that forms itself in space” (Simmel, 1992/1908, 697) explains rather well the concept of border as an entity that is socially constructed.

Today, many migration patterns around the world fit the image of illegal border-crossing practices that are always associated with how borders are located in the space, points that migrants have to encounter and face along the way; detention centers, asylums offices, interception of refugee boats at sea, acquisition and storage of personal data and other institutions and practices of this kind constitute the complex bordering processes that the sociology of space also investigates. Moreover, technologies for surveillance such as radars, satellite, censors, cameras and ICTs all contribute to the bordering of space and

its qualities, to the way the space is perceived by law-enforcement authorities and to how differently this is envisioned by migrants (Rosière and Jones, 2012). As such, the transformation of borders in the past decades has been described as the reconfiguration of territorial borders, in other words, borders framing the territorial nation-state, therefore a system that reproduces networked patterns of surveillance and control both inside and outside the border area in the respective state (Ellebrecht, 2013). The growing use of such technical equipment creates a strong dilemma in border studies, since it argues that the stronger or more complex border control practices are, the tougher restrictions on border-crossing procedures can be, with an increase of income of organized crime that works on transborder level in smuggling drugs, weapons, and even humans. As a result, such attractive activity leads to a worsening of crimes committed on inter-border scale, among which human rights violations and the emergence of new barriers (Sevastianov *et al*, 2015).

1.2 The epistemological approach on borders

Many critical approaches on the study of borders in contemporary times are related to such geopolitical implications of borders, with borders being read as elements organizing the (inter)national system, drawing a separation line between nation-states and closing off on global flows; however, if indeed borders have become instruments that manage and regulate the transfer of people and goods along its lines, on the other side they have become tools that articulate the very same transformations that globalization brought about; for instance, power, politics and violence offer strategical key tendencies that should not be kept separate in the study of borders. Considering such contributions made in the study fields of international migration and borders, it becomes clear how the relationship that migratory flows have with borders needs to be enriched and investigated even further than its so called “geopolitical” or globalization-related implications.

In the framework of this research, I consider particularly useful to adopt the theoretical point of view of two scholars, Mezzadra and Nielsen (2014) who, instead of looking at the border as a concrete object of study, they think of it from an epistemological perspective, which is embodied by their own expression of “border as a method”. This means that borders allow for a critical analysis on power relationships, supremacy,

subordination and exploitation, as well as a place of conflicts taking place on them: border not only a strategical place for political intervention, but especially as an epistemic element that sheds light on real global processes, such as conflicts. Conflicts are the result of the diverse actions in which migrants experience borders, once they decide to cross them, especially in relation to the different forms of survivals they adopt in such space they compete for. According to this perspective, borders are dramatically witnessing forms of violence, often leading to death, but also practices of resistance: borders as political institutions, but also as places where social practices of equality and freedom are built altogether. Borders, they argue, cannot overlook migratory processes, as mobility reveals the intensity of border tensions and conflicts happening along the borders. (Mezzadra, 2007). Their starting point is the experience of migrants with borders: how migrants embody borders, how they experience them, what are their capacities to confront the challenges associated with borders, how they organize their life in relation to the borders they cross.

1.3 The feminist approach on borders

Segura and Zavella (2012) underline the urgent need to tackle border areas as regions where power structures of capitalism, patriarchy and race meet, and where structural violence hits them the most. Due to the fact that borderlands are places of profound socio-cultural and economic transformation, they are the perfect exact locations where the experience of women could be studied, therefore borderland theory provides the site where contestation of patriarchy, racism and heteronormative structures can be interrogated: “By exploring multiples sites of gendered control and contestation, borderland feminist projects reveal the complex representations, experiences, and identities that Latinas, other women, and men construct in the context of globalization, transnational migration, social formations, and imaginaries that span national borders” (Segura and Zavella, 2008). According to Cortés Maisonave (2018, 2019), a *feminist border-crossing analysis* is needed in order to interrogate on the multiple meanings that borders can have; in this theoretical perspective, border is epistemologically studied upon and analyzed by taking into consideration patriarchal power relations and associating them to mobility regimes. Hence, feminist analysis of borders entails an interpretation of

events surrounding the experience of women as border-crossing subjects, occurring in a context highly permeated by power and hierachal relations.

The connection between women and migration has slowly emerged as an area of research at least for two reasons: on one side, the so-called “feminization of migration”, describing the increased sex or gender ratio of women relative to men in migration streams (Castles *et al*, 1998); on the other hand, the feminization of points of view on migration (Vause, 2009). The exclusive attention towards the male migrant worker has been contested in the past by feminist scholars, who demonstrated the relevance of subjected motivations pushing women to migrate². While the existing literature has mostly focused on the women who leave rather than those “who stay behind” (Cortes, 2016), migration trajectories are more and more investigated according to the female point of view. Either alone or in groups, whether moving to access the job market or looking for better working conditions in a foreign country, women often provide for the family and create migratory female networks and family reunifications abroad. Labor, for instance, is one of the core points surrounding female experiences of migration. Worldwide, the most common female figure associated with migration is that of the domestic worker and caregiver. According to Mezzadra and Nielson (2014), in the last decades labor not only has become more and more feminized, but there is also an explosion in the number of women who work outside their family nucleuses on a global scale. In the scholars’ view, this happened as a consequence of great changes brought about emancipation movements and, more generally, as a consequence of a more heterogeneity of the labor force.

To conclude, the border migratory space, as any other space built over power relationships – as it has been argued –, contributes and feeds the gender social order entrenched in the relation between men and women. Gender is therefore central in migration studies and can’t -and should not – be left aside by political authorities and civil society representatives in all agendas when dealing with this matter. Analyzing gender patterns in migration is essential inasmuch it shows the impossibility of considering women as neutral workers, who only exist outside power relations ascribed to their bodies.

² For instance, to negotiate complex marital relationship or to overcome gender hierarchies in the country of origin.

1.4 Gender-based violence and migration

When it comes to migration, and even more to illegal migration, space and borders are often characterized by violence. Migratory systems and laws on migration, on different geographical scales, have been modelled around the attempt to identify, expel or include the category of “illegal migrant” (Mezzadra and Nielson, 2014): enhancements on border control practices are just a result of this process. Filtering and selecting migrants over the border through different forms of violence are tensions that make borders very dynamic and that justify violent operations against target-migrants made in the name of governance and homeland. It is clear that the phenomenon of migration is often related to violence, exploitation and human rights violations³, but how is that different when it comes to women and sexual minorities on the move?

In particular, violence deserves some attention as the driver of migration as well as a constant accompanying migrant woman along their paths. We specifically talk about forms of violence that hit women and sexual minorities in particular on the grounds of gender⁴. Gender-based violence in particular is explained through two main lenses in the existing literature: on the one hand, violence is seen as part of the dominant socio-cultural system that regulates relations between genders, also known as the patriarchal system (Connell, 2006), which reproduces and maintains gender inequalities by allowing greater benefits to men (Segato, 2018). Studies confirm that the lower the social status of women in relation to that of men, the higher the frequency of forms of violence against them. In most cultures, expectations on gender roles are taught and learned by men and women and culturally internalized in society (Danna, 2007). The second explanation, on the other hand, refers to the inability of men to accept the increased independence that women are gaining (Leccardi, in Magaraggia and Cherubini, 2013). This longstanding struggle for gender equality would explain why violence continues to be perpetrated, in a society where women are increasingly recognized as active subjects and capable of self-

³ <https://en.unesco.org/themes/fostering-rights-inclusion/migration> (last access on 4.07.2022)

⁴ The term “gender-based violence” is preferred upon the more generic expression “violence against women”: the first is preferred in light of the fact that it includes not only the category of women and girls, but also to men, boys and persons belonging to the LGBTQ community, since they also target of victimization on the base of their gender and sexual orientation, despite the phenomenon is primarily affecting women and girls worldwide. Key facts can also be found here: <https://www.who.int/en/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/violence-against-women> (last access on 13.03.2022).

determination. According to this perspective, aggression is therefore conceived by men as a tool to restore order and hierarchy, born as a result of their intolerance towards the loss of the right to exercise power (Kimmel, 2000). Women and sexual minorities who are in mobility are even more vulnerable and experience harsher forms of marginalization. In the Latin American context, researchers have shown for instance how environments where structural, political, and symbolic violence are normalized in a more or less visible way are decisive factors in pushing women to migrate (Varela Huerta, 2017). However, not all women who experience violence are able to flee from their countries of origin, as only a few can seek protection in foreign countries, and usually those are women who have access to social networks and information, and can rely on a certain amount of financial resources in order to realize their wish to migrate. Usually, this is only a small proportion of women compared to those who are unable to join migration flows (Menjívar and Drysdale Walsh, 2019). When women are able to migrate, often by themselves and not accompanied by their male partners, they are generally portrayed as subjects capable of breaking the existing order created by patriarchy, more specifically the socio-cultural traditions that relegate them to a subordinate role within the domestic domain. They refuse such regime or social expectations and, by moving out of their own context, they disobey and fight against the private-public division imposed on them (Moncó, in Cortés and Manjárrez, 2017).

All in all, the condition of vulnerability during migration is undeniable: women willing to work abroad, go out of their home country and undertake a risky journey in search for better life conditions is enough to generate conflictual situations and violence along their way. Their status is realized in a context where precariousness, loneliness and vulnerability dominate the whole migration process, since the very beginning -therefore, in their country of origin, where such women experience the most social inequality and generalized insecurity, as well as during the process of border-crossing itself and arrival/stay in the new host country; by conceptualizing migrant women as subjects are risk, we recognize that they face contexts and situations that might threat and endanger their physical as well as psychological integrity, especially when on undocumented mobility because of their socio-economic status (Rojas Wiesner, 2017). It is then clear how violence can not only be a trigger that compels women to migrate, since they are not

able to pursue a dignified life in their own country, but it does not allow them either to freely move in search of better life conditions because of their gender.

Finally, it is deemed relevant to point out that violence and discrimination are highly interrelated: inequalities are the breeding grounds to violence, and in context where the rates of poverty, unemployment and general lack of services, the levels of insecurity and violence increase. In such societal context, women tend to be at greater risk, and their willingness to break with the existing socio-cultural order indicates agency, bravery and great capacity to resilience. In their search for better life conditions, women are willing to live a life free from violence (Asakura and Torre Falcón, 2013).

The sociology of international relations is again useful to identify and comprehend the experience of women seeking mobility with borders, especially in relation to power and domination. According to Butler (2016), the vulnerability of women comes from the different mechanisms of oppression to which they are caught, anchored in their specific geopolitical, socio-cultural and historical contexts. The identification of these forms of oppressions allows us to denounce the social and political situation faced by migrant women and sexual minorities in their attempt to cross borders (Tyszler, 2019).

1.5 Policies, gender and the role of NGOs in advocating human rights in Central America and Mexico

Central America is not only the poorest region in Latin America, it is also recognized as the most violent and insecure area in the non-conflict world (UNPD, 2009). While we know that different forms of violence have been perpetrated and denounced for a long period in the recent and less recent past of the region, and that most of the countries in the area are still recovering from their traumatic experiences of civil wars and political conflicts in the 80s, it is also true that violence is still today a recurrent pattern in the present of the region, not only happening across the urban areas, but also involving the regions outside the capital areas, as well as the areas less affected by urbanization and often out of the control of the State. Although the region, through the signature of peace agreements, has taken steps towards the consolidation of a democratic regime after the bloody period of the conflicts, it is also to be recognized that widespread inequality, poverty, and political instability are still shaping today's picture of the area. 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. Today, the countries that have the highest rates of expulsion are the Northern Triangle countries, that also have the highest level of violence and delinquency. Hence, the connection between violence and migration is very high, possibly leading to the conclusion that violence is one of the main reasons that produce forced displacement in the region (Hiskey, Malone and Orcés, 2014). Besides, scholars of the International Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) have also framed internal displacement in the Northern Triangle of Central America as a phenomenon that is highly associated with organized criminal violence, reaching the epidemic proportions in the area in 2017, with an estimated number of 432.000 internal displaced persons between El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras⁵.

At the same time, the Triangle of Central America has attracted particular international attention due to the high levels of extreme forms of crimes committed against women, which continue to be on the rise. Given the context of economic inequality, scarce resources and weak institutions, impunity prevails within the justice system and this impacts quite a lot in the management of crimes against women, with most of the crimes going unrecognized and unpunished. As a result, sexual assault and harassments, domestic violence, labour rights violations (such as forced pregnancy testing) and extreme forms of violence such as femicides continue to shape the women's rights situation in the area without any kind of state intervention especially in poorer and more marginalized communities. Despite organized crime is often regarded in hegemonic literature as the main actor contributing to the widespread context of violence in the region⁶, other scholars point to the fact that it is not the only one (Prieto Carrón *et al*, 2007; Varela Huerta, 2017). The State is also often held responsible. For instance, according to Ronderos (2011), in Honduras gender issues remain to remain wildly neglected in the design and implementation of national social and economic policies. Despite most Central American governments have moved forward towards democracy and the respect of human rights by creating policies aimed at addressing the correlation between equality, women's empowerment and poverty reduction, they failed to

⁵ <https://www.internal-displacement.org/publications/understanding-and-estimating-displacement-in-the-northern-triangle-of-central-america> (last access on 13.03.2022).

⁶ With data showing that perhaps only 15% of the homicides are directly linked to organized crime groups in the region (Varela Huerta, 2017).

implement them due to lack of funding, weak machinery for women's representation in policy and legislative processes and no direct link to national plans for an inclusive and holistic national development policy. While policies exist and human rights are present in public political debates, they are treated with less interest and the economic and growth development tend to me more prioritized (*ibid*; Sagot, 2013).

According to Varela Huerta (2017), the State in Central American countries (as well as in Mexico), plays a great role in perpetrating the crimes. The scholar talks about "violence of the State and government of death" in relation to the state responsibility in not investigating and prosecuting the crimes of violence against women: the lack of judicial structure, impunity, neglect, collusion with organized crime and discredit towards the institutions make it very hard for the victims of crime to report the crimes and obtain justice and therefore, according to the scholar, the State has a responsibility in failing to protect its citizens and causing many Central American women to migrate abroad.

Given the constant flows of Central Americans transiting through Mexico mostly on their way to the US, it is relevant to touch upon very briefly on the migratory policies, where scholars fundamentally notice again a great discrepancy between a human rights discourse and the search for national security. As a matter of fact, adherence to human rights is pursued through the signature of laws and international agreements in order to obtain legitimacy at international level and among the Mexican community living in the US; at the same time, national security serves the purpose of attracting great financial benefits through the negotiations with the US government, benefits that are also used to increase the institutional violence committed against migrants (París Pombo, 2016). The Mexican way of managing the migratory flows is often carried out via the deportation and detention of undocumented migrants.

On a more positive note, however, the scholars have also recognized that in the context of the state's failure to comply with democracy and human rights, women and feminist grassroot organisations are still playing a fundamental role in denouncing the increase in poverty and in particular in women's rights violations, and through demonstrations they have gained confidence in empowering themselves and contribute to social and political change. This is the case for Honduras for instance (Ronderos, 2011), but also at wider level in all countries of Central America, that have been active since many years in their advocacy around femicide and gender-based violence in general and have been

instrumental in getting those issues on to the public agenda (Prieto Carrón, 2007). At the same time, organizations working for the rights of migrant people in Mexico still put a lot of effort in denouncing the human rights violations carried out by the authorities along the borders and migratory routes (París Pombo, 2016).

The response of grassroots organizations towards the respect of human rights is various and has been regarded as outstanding considering the extremely difficult conditions of work and lack of resources (Aguilar, 2005). Several strategies are also adopted: for instance, in Mexico and Guatemala women's organisations have developed many projects on gender-based violence, from offering support to women survivors with help lines, with counselling and psychological therapy to training community leaders and organizing workshops with young men in order to contribute to the prevention of violence, promoting equitable gender relations and empowering women by raising awareness on their rights (Prieto Carrón, 2007)

2. Fieldwork and methodology

Field work has been based primarily on methods of qualitative research, in particular via a series of eight interviews carried out online (via videocalls) with experts who have been studying the phenomenon as researchers and persons working in civil society organizations within 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 on the topic and academics¹, but also enriched the knowledge as well as shed some real-life experience on the context of Central American migration and the experiences of migrant women with migration. 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). 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 is listed here below for those persons who approved and shared their consensus for their names to be reported:

- 1) Prof. Josefina Manjárez 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) Marcos Tamariz (Deputy Head of Mission at Doctors Without Borders – area Mexico and Central America, Mexico City, Mexico);

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

- 5) Luís María Mendoza Godoy (responsible person of participatory and collective processes with migrant women at Centro de Derechos Humanos Fray Matías de Córdova, Tapachula, Mexico);
- 6) The 6th interviewee has asked to remain confidential; the person works as a researcher in an NGO in Guatemala in the field of public health and with a human rights approach;
- 7) Daniela Flores Serrano (ex 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).

The professors were chosen because their work has been previously read. The remaining persons were selected upon a personal search on NGOs working in the field of human rights and migration in the area object of study.

However, it is essential to point out a few limits on this investigation. The first, that in this study, no migrant woman could be interviewed, due to the conditions in which the research was carried out (online and out of the context of study). However, it is also to be recognized that *in situ* field research would have presented a few problems, not least that there are several practical and logistical barriers to participate in research pertaining to the area of violence, especially in relation to migrant populations (O'Brien Green, 2018). Given the complexity and sensitivity of the topic, as well as its psycho-social implications, sometimes relying to the persons who provide their services to vulnerable populations is the most feasible solution (Leye *et al*, 2014), although this implies that the persons directly involved in the research (migrant women) are unsilenced and “spoken for”. During the interviews, many persons shared their difficulty of being able to talk with them directly, especially in relation to personal experiences of violence. However, many interesting insights were gathered thanks to the inputs provided by interviewees, all experts who are or have been working in contact more or less closely with migrant women in the field, from an academic and/or human rights point of view.

The second limit stands in the fact that sharing stories might lead to a risk of generalizing the experiences of women, however it must be very clear that the data gathered for this research do not want to provide an aggregated truth, nor a universal story that pertains to

every migrant woman in this context, but just a document of some of the many stories that can be heard in the region, and that constitute a reality of that context.

3. Research results

3.1 Why do they leave?

Research findings have shown the extent to which women are subject to violent practices at home and how much this impacts on their choice to leave the country. For this last reason, it is important not to exclude the social background of women in relation to migration before they undertake their journey, because it shows the reasons why women decide to relocate even if they are aware of the risks and perils they may undergo during their transnational transit in and out their home country. With an always growing estimate of women participating in the Central American exodus as a strategy for survival in their home countries (and more recently with children), women account for a great proportion in today's context of migration to Mexico and the US, therefore in this section we ask what is the reality that women face in their countries of origin, that leads them to such dramatic choice of abandoning the place where they grew up, went to school and maybe started a family.

Extortion and death threats carried out by criminal groups has been often quoted by interviewees as a recurrent issue, which often translates in the fact that women have to pay a small rent or war tax (*renta* or *impuesto de guerra*, Willers, 2016) on their economic activities to local criminal gangs, and the *maras*¹ oblige them to collaborate with them, for instance to assault other people. Threats are also on the agenda, in order to persuade them to be at their service for anything they are requested to do, even marrying criminal group members; sometimes gang violence is also directed to the children or adolescents and not to 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*², so international migration, meant as escaping as far as possible and in another country, represents the only and most extreme solution to find safety:

¹ See Cantor, 2014.

² Id.

La violencia puede ser estructural, de pandillas y de pandillas puede llegar a ser que se están dando conflictos en las diferentes zonas donde las personas están viviendo o también, que quieren obligarlos a hacer parejas de algún pandillero. Entonces, si se niegan, pues las amenazan. Entonces se tienen que huir porque sino, pues las pandillas están ocupando todo el territorio, y entonces, aunque se vayan a otro lugar, pueden hacerlo, pueden disfrutar, tener otro lugar de para vivir, sí, pero se van comunicando, entonces las encuentran y entonces, siempre es huir a otro lugar. Tapachula es un lugar muy cercano a Guatemala, entonces muchas personas han encontrado acá a sus agentes persecutores, entonces pueden llegar a pensar que aquí están a salvo digamos, pero de repente se cruzan en la calle y la ven, que es alguien que les estaba persiguiendo también en Guatemala y El Salvador, Honduras y entonces, toca moverse aquí a otro lugar. También en esto mismo de las pandillas puede ser por el cobro del derecho de piso, si tienen algún local, o viven nada más en una colonia que es muy muy peligrosa, pues eso, cobran el derecho de piso para poder entrar o salir. O, si la pareja de alguna de las mujeres forma parte de la pandilla y tienen un problema con él, entonces eso va a repercutir en toda la familia y pues va a correr el riesgo toda la familia.

(Interview no. 5)

Lo que hemos detectado nosotras es que algunas mujeres salen porque hay amenazas, o sea, no hay amenaza directa hacia ellas, pero sí a sus hijas e hijos. Entonces, por ejemplo, al hijo lo están amenazando para que entre a la banda local si no van a dañar y entonces ellas toman la decisión de irse, o la hija la están hostigando, o fue abusada y entonces ellas toman la decisión de salir.

(Interview no. 8)

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 how such migration, especially in the case of women, is a “forced” one, and the second being the widespread context of violence that leads them no other choice than literally running away. To this regard, interviewee professor Manjárez, historian and Coordinator of the research center of Gender Studies at the University of Puebla (Mexico), highlights how 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:

Esta migración que la pueden llamar forzada [...], de huida, de personas que no tienen otra opción mas que salir, huyendo de sus países, porque no hay condiciones, en el caso de las mujeres y los hombres también. De Centro América están huyendo precisamente porque cuando uno escucha sus

relatos, sus historias de porque salieron, es que no hay ninguna posibilidad de seguir viviendo ahí, hay mucha violencia, estructural, de pobreza, pero que está aderezada con esta violencia de las otras pandillas, de las maras, como lo señala Rita Segato, que está como un “gobierno dentro de un gobierno del estado”, pero es el crimen organizado que hacen y deshacen, y hacen lo que quieran, y hay mucha impunidad, y las autoridades no están haciendo nada para proteger a los ciudadanos, entonces hay muchas extorsiones a los ciudadanos, hay muchas violaciones a las mujeres, desapariciones en fin, entonces la gente vive amenazada constantemente, si no cumplen con las peticiones de estos grupos, pues los asesinan a algun pariente, violan a las mujeres.

(Interview no. 1)

Las principales causas -no son exhaustivas, pero son las principales causas de las mujeres para salir de su país para migrar, está la violencia: la violencia generalizada en los países, la violencia en razón de género, ya sea hacia ellas o hacia sus familias, toda la parte económica, es decir, la pobreza, y en los últimos años, los desastres naturales. Si pudiéramos catalogar así como migración forzada tiene que ser porque hay todo un sistema que las está obligando a salir, ninguna persona - eso sí, es como eso, si es algo como una base clara- ninguna persona, o ninguna mujer y su familia un día se levantó y dijo “vamos a migrar”: hay, digamos, toda una situación detrás que se les está obligando a migrar.

(Interview no. 8)

The State is often held responsible by the interviewees for the unsafe conditions to which its inhabitants live, and for not only guaranteeing a dignified life and providing access to support in case of mistreatment, but also for clearly participating and having an active role and involvement in the perpetrations of those same crimes; impunity is also a recurrent element that is mentioned. The general widespread context of violence is systematic and structural in the sense that it includes a wide range of actors that participate and play a role in the choice of women to migrate, by either committing crimes, nor providing care and assistance where needed through the implementation of specific laws and policies:

Si tú ves los índices de violencia por parte de las maras, 3 de cada 10 delitos son cometidos por maras y 7 de cada 10 delitos y violaciones a derechos humanos [...] son cometidas o son consecuencia de la violencia de Estado, o sea los perpetradores son funcionarios en activo: policías, militares, miembros del sistema de justicia, entonces si, salen por violencia pero por tres tipos de violencia, no es violencia de pandillas sino más bien la violencia de Estado que llevan los índices de

impunidad, al ratos a 90 y tantos por ciento como en México, y al rato o sea 56% del tema de Honduras[...].

Hay miles de carpetas de investigación que no se resuelven, de por sí ya bajo que es el índice de denuncia por parte de la ciudadanía de delitos y violaciones a los derechos humanos, entonces hay una violencia de estado que podríamos llamar como de desamparo, hay un desamparo institucional a las demandas de apoyo por parte de mujeres maltratadas, explotadas, violentadas; no hay políticas públicas que ofrezcan salidas de emergencia para las mujeres que están viviendo violencia.

(Interview no.2)

[...] Si además hablamos como de Haití en términos de que no hay protección hacia las mujeres, hay una constante en violencia, no sólo violencia, digamos, entre pares, si no que hay violencia institucional, donde no está penada la violencia sexual, las mujeres casi no denuncian, pero no denuncian porque no quieran denunciar, sino porque no hay un sistema que les pueda brindar justicia. Vamos viendo cómo eso es algo que se repite en los diferentes países centroamericanos, además del propio contexto de cada país. Entonces, eso a lo mejor en términos simples es lo que va haciendo, que obliga a las mujeres a migrar, o a desplazarse.

(Interview no. 8)

Economic violence is also quoted by Prof. Varela Huerta, professor at the Universidad Autónoma de la Ciudad de México, as the one kind of violence that is often neglected or forgotten about. Such economic violence, resulting into poverty, together with domestic violence and impunity, makes it impossible for a woman in the Northern Triangle countries to live a dignified life:

Hay una violencia de mercado que es la que cada vez que dejamos en el olvido y es: si tu le preguntas a una mujer en el trayecto entre Honduras hasta la frontera sur de México, te puede contar que se está lleno porque gana USD\$ 75 al mes en el Walmart.

(Interview no. 2)

According to the researcher, this is part of the neoliberal model of Central American states that relies very much on the dependency from the United States (Varela Huerta, 2017); still today, as we have seen in the previous chapter, Central American has been mainly administered from European and North American enterprises – together with some businesses using Mexican capital, that follow the logic of accumulation for deprivation. The neoliberal logic is then responsible for the massive exodus of the Central American population, generated from the precarity of social conditions present in all domains of

life, including work and socio-economic environments, leading its people to escape social and institutional violence:

Pero si tú le preguntas a esa misma mujer en el centro del país porque huyó, te puede decir que además de porque no tenía para comer, porque estaba sufriendo violencia sexual por parte de un familiar en su casa; y si le preguntas a esa misma mujer porque emigró en el norte, te puedo decir que lo hizo porque cuando pidió ayuda al sindicato para ganar más dinero, cuando pidió al Ministerio Público ayuda para detener la violación por parte de su familia, ninguna de las dos instancias le ayudaron entonces pues está fugando también por la impunidad.

(Interview no. 2)

Huyen también por temas económicos, por buscar mejores posibilidades económicas y que eso también al final son violencias estructurales porque no se dan las posibilidades ni de conseguir empleo, ni desarrollarse plenamente, ni de tener acceso a educación, entonces también se están buscando diferentes posibilidades y huyendo de la violencia.

(Interview no. 5)

Climate change is also quoted among the reasons for Central American migrants to relocate abroad. Extreme climate events are just an added element fueling the already precarious and vulnerable life conditions of many persons living in Honduras, threatening the entire food security and housing systems of the populations:

El desastre natural del Eta y Yota, nosotros trabajamos directamente en las comunidades de Choloma, en el Departamento de Cortés, y que ahí fue uno de los departamentos más afectados por los huracanes y que, por ejemplo, son muchas de estas comunidades que quizás estaban asentadas de manera irregular, y entonces no tenían papeles de propiedad y que con la destrucción de estas comunidades y de los espacios y todo eso, pues se ha vuelto, pues lo perdieron todo. Entonces no había forma de regresar a sus comunidades, ni de hacer nada; en este caso, pues no estamos hablando solo de él que gane el dinero y que ha perdido su fuente de trabajo, sino que estamos hablando realmente de lo que es el livelihood y la estructura del hogar.

(Interview no. 4)

Access to proper health care as a further element catalyzing migration came out as another research result; proper geographical reference is given in relation to the border regions between Mexico and Guatemala, namely the Mexican southern state of Chiapas, and its neighboring Guatemalan *departamentos* of San Marcos and Huehuetenango.

Guatemalans crossing the Mexican border in order to find better medicines and health services, also in the case of pregnancies and pre-natal care, is a core aspect in the work of Doctors Without Borders in the region:

El acceso a la salud es un punto muy importante para entender desde la perspectiva de [Médicos Sin Fronteras] la migración. Entonces, cuando entendemos que la composición de estos flujos migratorios ha evolucionado, donde ya no estás simplemente compuesto por jóvenes y adultos hombres, busquen otros trabajos y todo lo demás, hay que rascarse que también hay toda una evolución de una población mixta para familiares y demás, que obviamente las necesidades de salud se vuelven más agudas. Tenemos entonces una situación en la frontera, donde históricamente, estas comunidades de San Marcos y Huehuetenango han sufrido violencia estructural, en donde hay un abandono histórico por parte del Estado central y donde el acceso a los servicios básicos, principalmente incluyendo la salud, se empezó a volver más agudo. Entonces, era interesante ver que en algunos momentos, pues han habido estas situaciones en adónde va la gente para dar a luz, si había una mayor accesibilidad del lado mexicano chiapaneco o guatemalteco? Vemos eso por ejemplo con el acceso a los medicamentos en donde para las comunidades les es muy difícil y que saben que cruzando el lado hacia Tapachula y los demás van a poder encontrar los medicamentos y ese tipo de cosas.

(Interview no. 4)

It is relevant to point out that the access to health is not only strictly related to migration, as the interviewees report, in relation to the choice of Guatemalan persons to cross the border between Guatemala and Mexico in search of medicines and better health care (especially for women in need of natal care), but also to climate change, given how the natural disasters of hurricanes Eta and Yota in 2020 damaged or destroyed most of the health centers of Honduras, for instance, 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 care³.

Besides, the relationship between public health and migration (with public health issues being a catalyzing factor of migration) is clearly related to the experiences of women when it comes to sexual violence as a constant element permeating Central American women's lives in their countries of origin, with specific reference to the Honduran

³ <https://www.msf.mx/article/huracanes-iota-y-eta-medicos-sin-fronteras-amplia-su-intervencion-en-honduras-ante> (last access on 24.10.2021).

landscape. Sexual violence is not only highly related to the context of criminality shaping the social reality of several areas of Central American countries (often used as a weapon serving the gangs' purposes), but also as an issue occurring both in a more domestic-intimate context, and as well as a result of the great vulnerability caused by extreme climate events. To 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, climate change-related disasters are also associated with increases in gender-based violence, and that is particularly evident in the developing world countries (Global Gender and Climate Alliance, 2016).

More in depth, it seems that as result of the hurricanes that affected Honduras in 2020, sexual violence against Honduran women rose to a great extent. Therefore, sexual violence carried out against women as an urgent public health issue is not only related to the widespread context of criminality and domestic violence, but also to a further wave of violence exacerbated by the extreme climate events, together with a lack of specific policies aimed at protecting women and lack of knowledge on sexual and reproductive rights for the victims, as it is framed here below:

Otro de los otros factores que también hemos trabajado durante bastante tiempo es el entender, por ejemplo, las víctimas de violencia sexual en Honduras, que es una de las problemáticas que atendemos ya desde hace muchos años y en donde identificamos realmente la problemática de salud pública en Honduras.

Entonces la violencia sexual, de hecho hemos trabajado desde otra perspectiva de violencia, que es la violencia urbana, para entender cuáles son las víctimas de espacios extremadamente conflictivos y violentos, en donde no se puede trazar una línea clara entre violencia doméstica y violencia de maras, porque ese análisis es muy difícil porque muchas veces las mismas parejas son parejas de mareros, o sea no es necesariamente la violencia sexual como herramienta de guerra, como a veces se ha interpretado, eso lo vemos muy muy, muy rara vez, pero es decir, es que estamos en una situación, en un contexto en donde la violencia es omnipresente y entonces esto se traduce también en una violencia doméstica, pero creo que la interpretación de la violencia doméstica es un término que no le da suficiente luz a la problemática.

Cuando uno habla de violencia doméstica uno se imagina una explícita, de simplemente problemas de relaciones interpersonales, pero cuando lo tenemos que ver de un análisis contextual más amplio, entonces lo que vimos es que, por ejemplo, en donde fueron los huracanes en noviembre y la respuesta que tuvimos después es que también habían víctimas de violencia sexual, incluso dentro

de los albergues, o sea, es donde las situaciones no era simplemente que una situación de violencia, sino también de vulnerabilidad bastante amplia, y del conocimiento de la impunidad que existe ante estas situaciones y que para nosotros el problema es que no hay un protocolo que permita una atención a las víctimas de violencia sexual de manera idónea, principalmente porque hay bastantes obstáculos que tienen las mujeres, uno para conocer sus derechos sexuales y reproductivos, la cuestión del acceso a la píldora anticonceptiva de emergencia es fundamental para nosotros como problemática estructural.

(Interview no. 4)

Gender based violence, and in particular the violence perpetrated on the wife, ex-wife, female partner or ex female partner from a man, typical of patriarchal system of domination and subordination, should require a separate analysis, given how often it has been reported in the interviews as a common denominator that leads women's rights to be constantly violated and impact on their choice to leave the country; many women from the Northern Triangle countries find in migration the only strategy of survival to the femicidal context of origin they often face in their home countries:

Yo creo que los motivos del éxodo son el patriarcado, la cultura machista, misógina y feminicida, el continuum de violencia feminicidas que hay en la zona de origen.

(Interview no. 3)

Such kind of violence is very much coherent with the indexes of violence against women reported in the Latin American context, also falling outside climate change causes (PAHO, 2012). More and more scholarly works address the dimension of sexual-domestic violence as one of the triggers in the decision of women leaving their countries, in order to escape the violence, they often face within the family-domestic environment. According to Morales Gamboa (2015), more concretely femicide violence is the most perpetrated form of violence against women in Central American countries, with empirical data being widely reported also by human rights activists and organizations. For instance, by taking femicide or feminicide as a statistical indicator, the absolute rate of femicide reported in the year 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 database⁴, updated data to 24.07.2021).

What is striking regarding the widespread culture of femicide violence against women, is that most of the times this is carried out by a known person of the victim, namely a husband or a male partner.

En el caso de las mujeres hay mucha violencia doméstica general, violencia de género y general, pero muchas mujeres también han salido de sus relaciones con sus parejas porque hay violencia sistemática dentro de los hogares y de las familias, y entonces tienen que salir, no tienen ninguna posibilidad.

(Interview no. 1)

The risks to life that women face in their contexts of origin is so dramatic that their only way they can avoid being trapped in a spiral of violence within their home environment and protect their wellbeing, is fleeing from home:

Los riesgos tienen que ver con la protección a la vida. Es decir, cuando yo veo amenazada mi vida por la violencia o porque no tengo las condiciones para solventar mi sobrevivencia en condiciones mínimas que garantice la educación, la salud, la legislación, vivienda, el derecho al trabajo, pues entonces las personas buscan las maneras de seguir su curso de vida y acompañar a sus familias en este proceso, entonces es cuando deciden migrar, entonces de los riesgos para las mujeres, básicamente tienen que ver con la violencia que viven en sus hogares, la violencia de género y la violencia contra las mujeres, pero también hemos visto casos de mujeres que se van por amenazas como extorsiones o violencia del crimen organizado, y estos son como algunos de los riesgos en el país de origen.

(Interview no. 6)

Femicide⁵, understood as the killing of woman on the base of her gender, is only the last step of a continuum of violence that women undergo especially within the domestic

⁴ <https://cepalstat-prod.cepal.org/cepalstat/tabcador/ConsultaIntegrada.asp?idIndicador=2780&idioma=i> (last access on 26.07.2021) It is to be noted that such data are among the ones collected, however several cases are not even reported nor properly collected or harmonized.

⁵ Femicide, meant as the gendered killing of a woman, is also very much present as a social phenomenon in Central American countries to a great extent. The wording has experienced a great fame within the academic debates. It was coined for the first time in 1976 by the feminist sociologist and criminologist Diana Russell who, during the proceedings of the First International Tribunal on Crimes against Women in Brussels, argued on the need of coming up with a new term encompassing all murders of women on the

environment, therefore should not be regarded as an isolated episode, but more of tragic ending of a long series of verbal, physical, symbolical and psychological abuses that take many different forms (Carcedo, 2010).

The continuum of violence that women undergo long before their journey begins, is well emphasized in the research findings, to the point that an organization working in providing integral support to migrants and asylum seekers in Mexico (Las Vanders), has had to open a special department on “letal violence” for those women who are trapped in a spiral of violence at home, making their lives extremely hard to the point that migration becomes the only solution to a life free from violence. The “letal violence” label includes torture, acid attacks, multiple aggressions and different forms of sexual harassment:

Hay un nivel de estrés que es imposible que la gente no se quiera salir de ahí. Nosotras acompañamos a procesos migratorios, lamentablemente hace dos años, se tuvo que abrir el área de acompañamiento en materia de violencias letales, que no sólo acompaña a las mujeres migrantes, sino acompaña temas de violencia letal como han sido temas de tortura, temas de ataque con ácido, temas de agresiones multitudinarias, agresiones sexuales.

(Interview no. 7)

The above-mentioned scenario implicates how much violence shapes the lives of women before they undertake their journey, and how this impacts on their choice of relocating. It is also worth mentioning that besides the broader social group of women choosing to face migration or displacement as the only solution left for them, we should also quote another social group, that of women belonging to the LGBTQ minority.

Daniela Flores, previous coordinator of Las Vanders, mentions how extremely dangerous the life of transgender women is within their contexts of origin. For instance, in Honduras transgender women receive the worst treatment, to the point that it is common to read on

base of their gender. After the word entered in the Anglo-Saxon vocabulary and defined as “the mysogenous killing of women by men, as a manifestation of gender-based violence” (Russell and Redford, 1992), it started to be used in everyday language and discourse, and to be recognized as a serious phenomenon affecting the whole society at a global level. In particular, the concept has been also fully integrated in the Latin American context. In Mexico in particular, the wording has been so influential that it has been integrated within the political, media, legal and social discourses, until it was even adopted into the academic debates and translated into the Spanish equivalent of *feminicidio* by the Mexican anthropologist Marcela Lagarde. According to her, the term not only embraces the gender motivation behind the murder of a woman, but it also embeds the incapability of the state in not being able to guarantee the safety of its citizens (Russell and Hermes, 2006).

the news about the fact that a transgender woman is stoned by her community. Lesbian women are also often obliged to conversation therapy to “correct” their sexual orientation. The level of persecution against the LGBTQ community is so high that those persons constitute one of the most vulnerable groups of refugees of the Americas⁶.

Hemos tenido casos de estas llamadas violaciones correctivas, hacia mujeres lesbianas que en algunos países de origen les hacen ir a una comunidad, agresiones sexuales con una carga extrema de odio, en donde lo que quieren es que haya una normativa heterosexual, para sistematizar un sistema patriarcal. Y las personas salen huyendo. [...]

Aquí en la prensa en Honduras es muy fuerte, de pronto tu abres el periódico, y lees que “un él que se convirtió el ella es apedreado en la comunidad”, o sea a una mujer trans, le niegan la posibilidad de asumirse como mujer trans, y aquí apedrean a las personas. Las persiguen, no pueden salir, se burlan de ellas.

(Interview no. 7)

3.2 What happens during the transit?

Transit routes are also extremely dangerous for women since they are often objects of sexual violence, and this aspect has been documented by several organizations, journalists and academic researchers. According to reports, approximately 80 percent of Central American women and girls are raped during their transit in Mexico to the US (Bonello and Siegal Mcntyre, 2014).

For instance, 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”), or *El tren de la muerte* (“The Death Train”)⁷. The train is often mentioned in both reports and stories of the interviewees as a place where many attacks, abductions and sexual assaults happen; besides, migrants who climb to the top of the train, could easily fall from it. Many of them die, and many of them get injured very badly. The migrants who come back with an injury do have a very hard time when dealing with social stigma and lack of State care. Besides,

⁶ <https://www.amnesty.it/america-centrale-le-persone-lgbtqi-fuga-discriminazione-violenza/> (last access on 13.03.2022).

⁷ Such means of transportation is a private commercial cargo train that crosses the southern Mexican State of Chiapas with the border of Guatemala and stretches towards the north of the country, until it reaches the US-Mexican border. Such train is known as a highly dangerous means of transportation associated with both several physical harms (many persons have been died by either falling from it or suffering from arms amputations), but also because the train’s route is targeted by authorities and criminals.

women often fall into human trafficking networks present in several areas close to the southern and northern borders in Mexico and active along the train route. The experiences of migrants on the train also came up during some interviews:

Es una situación muy difícil estar en el tren, porque bueno, vimos un caso particular de un hombre que se cayó del tren y le amputaron las piernas, no he visto muchas mujeres que se hayan caído del tren, pero si que hay muchos casos de mujeres que han sufrido violencia dentro del tren, hay muchos asaltos al tren, hay un lugar donde la población se dedica a eso, o sea sacar el tren y la población participa para robarse la carga del tren... también hay crimen organizado, nos comentaron una de las personas que manejaba el tren, nos contó que se han enfrentado con... pues con gente que va armada, que han detenido al tren, y unos tuvieron la oportunidad de escapar porque se escondieron en un vagón que está como protegido, nadie puede entrar, entonces pudieron robarse como otras cosas pero no lograron acceder al vagón principal, hay muchos riesgos entonces obviamente la gente que se sube al tren se enfrenta precisamente a eso, que los vayan a asaltar, a que se los lleven, a que violen a las mujeres... o sea hay muchas historias también muy dramáticas en ese sentido porque no hay protección y además porque luego son las mismas autoridades quienes participan en el saqueo, en el robo, en las violaciones, entonces no hay una protección de nada.

(Interview no. 1)

The relationship between health and migration becomes very evident also during the transit, as the risks to which migrants are constantly exposed to make them extremely vulnerable. Constant care is provided by NGOs working in the field; besides psychological and mental health problems, migrants travelling in groups (*caravanas*) are often treated for high levels of fatigue, but also dehydration and for common symptoms. Again, migrant women are the ones whom interviewees referred to as the most exposed to violence, discrimination and vulnerability:

Lo que nosotros trabajamos en general es que el marco de atención de las personas migrantes en la ruta migratoria en los países de tránsito suele ser bastante débil y eso tiene que ver con una condición estructural, de cómo se da respuesta a las personas habitantes de estos países en términos de salud. Para nadie es un secreto, digamos que El Salvador, Guatemala y México tienen serias deficiencias para garantizar la salud a sus propios habitantes y eso también redonda, digamos, en el marco de atención y de protección que pueden tener las personas migrantes de una ruta migratoria. Entonces encontramos que van con padecimientos de enfermedad común, podríamos decir, y hay otras personas, por ejemplo en caravanas hemos visto que también hay una afectación, sobretodo hay un impacto en la salud psicológica, en la salud mental de las personas, pero también hay afectaciones físicas; en el caso de caravanas, por ejemplo, hay el desgaste, digamos, por el

recorrido y en el caso de personas que emigran, o sea, los flujos migratorios constantes y por goteos, pues que requieren atención médica en algún momento, por deshidratación, por alguna enfermedad común.

(Interview no. 6)

Se señala que las mujeres padecen este tipo de violencia y la sexual es la que predomina, hay estadísticas también, no sé cuántas mujeres creo seis cada diez era el último dato de Amnistía Internacional, [...] el hecho de que algunas son llevadas por el crimen organizado para la trata de personas, y el tema de la violación sexual, entonces si, están muy expuestas. [...] También vimos casos donde hay gente que las lleva y las mueven para la trata a Estados Unidos, y las quieren vigiladas, no pueden hablar con nadie, las hacen callar, y ahorita con una pandemia que da la impresión de que todo está detenido no te puedes mover, pues hay menos denuncias aunque te digo, las ONGs siguen denunciando la violencia en contra de las migrantes; aunque con el confinamiento, la violencia sigue.

(Interview no. 1)

Some NGOs established some offices along the more common routes of migration in order to provide first aid and health-care treatment to the migrants; many of them are victims of different forms of violence, with women usually being the first and main social group targeted by criminality.

Sexual favors are also signaled in the research findings as a tool that women have to pay in order to continue their journey. This not only happens 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” in order to be able to walk through a specific area, to receive protection during the route, and to guarantee the company of the person they ask to for protection. Sexual favors are in this case a prize that migrant women have to pay as a currency of exchange, that enables them to continue their journey. Several times, such favor is exhorted:

También estamos terminando un estudio en donde recogemos información que, por ejemplo, las mujeres se ven obligadas a mantener relaciones sexuales, por ejemplo, para obtener protección de los compañeros de viaje, es decir, una mujer accedió a tener relaciones sexuales con una persona que va, digamos, dentro del mismo grupo, para poder ser protegida por esta persona o para garantizar la compañía de esta persona durante el viaje.

(Interview no. 6)

Las que cruzan este territorio sufren violencia sexual porque piden favores a los hombres para protegerlas.

(Interview no. 1)

La violencia comunitaria, algo que nosotros hemos visto que tiene un componente digamos que puede matizarse, es que las mujeres viajan por carretera. Y entonces al viajar por carretera, lo que encontramos es mucho extorsiones. Extorsiones para poder seguir su camino.

(Interview no. 8)

As a result, the need to preventive care to sexual assaults arises in the case of migrant women, since they are the most exposed to sexual violence. It is not to be forgotten that women belonging to the LGBTQ community are also extremely at risk of incurring into high levels of violence and discrimination along the migratory route:

Lo que si observamos claramente las cuestiones de población LGBT, entonces viendo la cuestión desde una perspectiva mas amplia, sí hay una diferenciación importante y grandes niveles de vulnerabilidades de la comunidad LGBT, eso es evidente, pero que se materializa de manera muy clara a lo largo de la ruta migratoria, donde puedo decirte que un porcentaje muy importante de la población que identificamos como víctimas de violencia extrema o tortura son miembros de la comunidad LGBT y entonces nosotros tenemos un centro especializado para la atención de estos casos extremadamente severos y reitero, realmente es la población LGBT que se ve fuertemente representada en esta población.

(Interview no. 4)

The situation of great distress that hits migrant women is well captured in the following paragraphs. Given how women are trapped as victims of several kinds of gender-based violence, they often receive treatment for undesired pregnancies, even though many women do not report the violence perpetrated against them, for fear of deportation. This is well reported in the words of Dr. Tamariz: the fieldwork of Doctors Without Borders on the Guatemalan side of the border with Mexico is focused on providing a response to such issue, for instance by informing migrant women on their sexual and reproductive rights, as well as offering pre-exposition kits of prophylaxis in case of violence; while it is clear that NGOs can't prevent sexual violence to happen, they can prevent its

consequences and offer for instance pre-natal, childbirth and postnatal health-care to pregnant women who undertook the journey:

Nosotros estamos metidos más en la situación de la seguridad de las mujeres en tránsito entre Guatemala y México, por ejemplo tuvimos una exploratoria al principios del año, en lo que era el norte del Petén, porque habíamos recibido de Quatzaualco muchísimos reportes de víctimas de violencia sexual, en este tramo, y lo que habíamos significado era un aumento bastante importante de casos de mujeres que habían sido agredidas sexualmente en lo que era el tramo entre Flores y Quazacalcos, principalmente del lado guatemalteco. Entonces, la idea era de enviar una respuesta y de ofrecer kits de profilaxis pre-exposición, con la idea del minimizar las posibles consecuencias de salud de estos incidentes. O sea, no podemos evitar que existan estos incidentes, pero podemos prevenir las consecuencias que estos pueden tener.

[...] Hay reportes también de, por ejemplo, mujeres que hablan sobre la violencia sexual, que es como esta misma moneda de de tránsito, digamos que nosotros no entramos en ese detalle, pero lo que sí sabemos son las consecuencias en términos de salud física, pero también mental, y entonces sabemos muy bien de los terribles traumas que puede generar este tipo de situaciones. Entonces, nuestra respuesta se ve más bien enfocada a tratar de que las personas puedan tener una atención médica.

(Interview no. 4)

A lo largo de la ruta migratoria también hay personas, o hay mujeres que emigran embarazadas y, entonces, requieren atención prenatal y luego, cuando dan a luz, requieren también atención neonatal y de postparto. Eso digamos en términos generales. Pero sí digamos el derecho universal a la salud, lo deben garantizar todos los Estados y la normativa institucional, pues manda a los Estados a brindar atención a las personas migrantes, independientemente de su estatus migratorio. Eso digamos a grandes rasgos. Entonces sí, digamos en términos generales hay una relación bastante estrecha, digamos entre la migración y salud, por lo que implica el tránsito migratorio, y los riesgos que corren las personas que emigran.

(Interview no. 6)

Dramatically enough, other interviewees working as NGOs representatives report cases of migrant women travelling during the route who are pregnant and ask for abortion; those women are often raped during the transit, and are unable to access to a safe abortion procedure in both the country of origin and in the host country; often migrant women are recommended by the *polleros* or *coyotes* to take the contraceptive pill before undertaking

the journey, in order to avoid the risk of getting pregnant. Many of them do not denounce the violence due to the fear of deportation:

Hay un punto [cerca de Puebla, México] donde hay la Cruz Roja, tienen convenios con en el Estado de Puebla porque ahí pasa el Tren y la Cruz Roja está ahí para apoyarlos, hay momentos en donde - entonces nos comentaba una de las personas que trabajan en la Cruz Roja - habían casos de mujeres pues, que estaban buscando como abortar, para ver cómo podían apoyarlas, entonces obviamente esto conlleva una denuncia con la ley, pues se supone que si se les puede apoyar a las mujeres aunque no sean mexicanas, pero pues obviamente por miedo de que sean deportadas no denuncian.

(Interview no. 1)

[...] Hemos tenido registros de casos de migrantes que fueron agredidas sexualmente en la frontera con Mexico y que las deportan embarazadas, sabiendo que no van a poder tener un acceso a un aborto seguro.

(Interview no. 7)

En relación a que enfrentan las mujeres en la ruta migratoria....mira con decirte que una de las redes de coyotaje, digamos que organizan los viajes y que cobran por el traslado a los territorios, recomiendan a las mujeres que para lograr embarazadas en caso de violencia sexual, empiecen a tomar anticonceptivos antes de salir, digamos antes de iniciar la ruta migratoria.

(Interview no. 6)

People belonging to the network of narcotraffic were signaled among the major perpetrators of violence in the case of migrants' transit along the route, as well as members belonging to smaller criminal groups such as the *pandillas*, who take advantage of the situation of general uncertainty and vulnerability of migrants:

Entonces ahí lo que encontramos realmente es que el grupo de narcotráfico ahí está muy presente. Pero no es su especialidad, también lo que encontramos ahí son pequeñas pandillas, grupos criminales que acusan de la población migrante porque se encuentran en un lugar extremadamente salvaje y alejado de todo, y están desprovistos de todo sistema de protección, acompañamiento, y entonces eso hace que sean presas fáciles.

(Interview no. 4)

También funcionan red de trata y narcotráfico en México sobretodo, no quiere decir que en Guatemala no hay, que es uno de los países de tránsito, pero particularmente en México, pues esta situación se ha agravado, porque las rutas migratorias están siendo más inseguras, más difíciles [...]

También a las mujeres a lo largo del tránsito migratorio están en riesgo de caer en las redes de trata.

(Interview no. 6)

However, what stands out as particularly striking is that again, often the responsibility of such violence is attributed not only to the criminal organizations that are active in the border regions and along the routes walked by migrants, but also to the State to a broad level, in particular to the military and, to a lesser extent, to the *Guardia Nacional*, the Mexican national police force, introduced in 2019 by the Mexican government in order to contrast the same organized crime perpetrators. Migratory Mexican authorities are also reported as agents who operate in cohabitation with the criminal organizations, and who perpetrate the very same crimes against migrant women:

La violencia es violencia del Estado, porque participan todas las autoridades, a nivel macro, como el ejército; de la Guardia Nacional no he escuchado tantas quejas, pero si hay este también, pero en otro nivel tenemos otros actores como el crimen organizado, que violenta a las mujeres, u otra personas que enganchan a las mujeres solas sin protección, estos también las están violentando.

(Interview no. 1)

También hay que decirlo, las autoridades migratorias están en contubernio, digamos, con las redes de crimen organizado, es decir, funcionan como un solo ente, como un solo organismo, digamos que pone en riesgo la vida de las mujeres y de las personas migrantes. En el caso de hombres, por ejemplo, se suele decir que pasan como mulas, es decir, que les obligan a transportar droga y bueno, esos son como los riesgos a los que se enfrentan las mujeres, sobre todo en el tránsito migratorio.

(Interview no. 6)

Research findings also demonstrate the great ability of women to implement some strategies of survival along the route: for instance, traveling with a group of people (the so-called *caravanas*) makes them feel more comfortable during the 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, as research results show:

Y lo que vimos en los últimos años sobre todo esto, bueno, sobretodo a partir de octubre de 2018, con todo este tema de los exodos centroamericanos (llamados caravanas), es que las mujeres tenían una percepción que al viajar en grupo eras mas seguras frente a la violencia. Sin embargo, no garantizaba... no es que hicieran tránsito libre de violencia, entonces eso no lo garantiza, porque muchas veces la violencia es dentro de ese mismo grupo, o viajaban con quienes ejercen violencia hacia ellas. No es que viajar en grupo elimine digamos, o disminuya la violencia que pueden sufrir a lo largo del camino, sino más bien esta percepción que ellas tenían de que estaban acompañadas. Y eso hacia como entre más seguro, entre comillas, su viaje, pero no necesariamente.

(Interview no. 8)

Women are so willing 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, given the awareness of the perilousness and vulnerability that they are exposed to along the route to the North:

Nosotras teníamos contacto en Honduras, una colega que trabaja en un Centro de Estudios de la Mujer en Honduras, nos estaban solicitando qué les diéramos como herramientas a las mujeres de las comunidades, y tips para que ellas pudieran llegar seguras a México y a la frontera norte, porque todo lo que se escucha, de la violencia, de las violaciones, del crimen organizado, de Migración que las detienen, entonces como para ayudarlas que buquen rutas seguras, tips para que ellas llegaran seguras a la frontera norte, es que ellas tienen que salir, o sea que no hay otra opción, y entonces tienen que buscar estrategias para movilizarse, las mujeres están buscando estrategias para moverse, o sea se salen porque no hay de otra pero están buscando la mejor manera de hacerlo, para no enfrentar precisamente todos estos riesgos que la mujer enfrenta en la frontera, entonces a través de las caravanas, con toda la familia, en grupos grandes, de apoyarse a los varones, de los el travestismo también, de disfrazarse de hombre, el hecho de utilizar pastillas anticonceptivas, porque pues también hay muchas muchas violaciones en el camino.

(Interview no. 1)

As it is reported above, some of the strategies that migrant women have found to adopt in order to reduce the risks of being caught in violence include disguise, with women disguising as men in order to avoid being violated or assaulted during their travel (for instance, cutting their hair, dressing men clothing, and hiding their physical

characteristics – also in Cortés Maisonave and Manjárez, 2017); besides, women prefer not to travel alone, but instead they hire the services of another 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 group or with another man does not eliminate completely the risk of being robbed or violated.

3.3 What happens after the mobility?

The research findings pertaining the post-mobility and border-crossing moment are mainly focused on the experiences that migrants have with border-crossing and when dealing with authorities and migratory procedures. For instance, qualitative data on deportations⁸ and life in detention centers documents the current situation at borders and provides qualitative data on the after-migration moment.

It was not possible to collect many data on the life of migrant women after migration (both in the new country of destination and in the home country as a result of deportation), however some results also shown to this respect. This impossibility of collecting data on the “after migration” experience is due especially to the nature of the interviewees chosen for the field research, and the difficulty arising when searching for contacts, organisations and online blogs where it was hoped to find more data. However, data collected so far could be expanded and might provide the grounds through which further research can be conducted in the future on the topic.

On the northern side of the Mexican border, we have the testimony of policy specialist Hannah Hollandbyrd, working at the Hope Border Institute in El Paso, Texas: by reflecting on the way the US border is violently maintained by US government and police authorities, she constantly reminds us of the risks to which migrants incur both while transiting to the US, and once reaching the wall, the physical border:

⁸ In the United States deportation rate has been increasing since the 1990s, with a significant growth after the reforms being implemented as a consequence of the 9/11 terroristic attack that were meant to externalize national security policies in the US and control the flow of persons coming from the southern neighbor countries. In 2013, the rate reached one of its highest peaks, with 430 thousand deported migrants coming from Mexico and Central America countries. Most recent data show that in the period 2014-2018, Mexico deported back to the Northern Triangle countries 1.7 million migrants, while the comparable US figure was 1.1 million for the same period. Source: <https://www.cato.org/blog/mexico-deported-more-central-americans-us-did-2018> (last access 13.03.2022).

Is it at different form of violence well it's it is a lot of, you know, I can't speak to every person and I've never been in that situation, but people I have talked to, like on the Mexican side for example there is a lot of smuggling groups that people are paid to bring them, and if there were actual legal pathways to migrate, then someone could just go to port of entry and seek asylum or if there were more visas for Central Americans for example so people could just apply for a visa and then travel, there would not be the need for smugglers, and so people would not have to put themselves in that situation, but that's you know what people do what they have to do, so those smuggling organizations are very violent and very exploitative, so women often face, at least from what I've heard and what I have talked to, there is a lot sexual violence, and people are just put in very inhumane conditions, and then it's just incredibly risky and any number of things could happen along the way, and then when... let's say someone was able to come into the US like they might be detained or in border control custody, there is well-documented patterns of harassment of migrants and abuse of people in custody, denying people of medical care or food, or just being disrespectful [...]

I think maintaining a country's border is inherently sort of a violence exercise. [...]

I would like to believe that there is a way to do it that's not violent, that's the vision but our border has definitely become more and more violent over the years not in terms of criminal groups, it's the way that it's maintained that's very violent, we have the building of the wall, you know it's ugly and people will try to cross it and they will fall over, and hurt themselves really badly, we have the Title 42 exposure policy in place which was put into the affect at the beginning of the pandemic to essentially close the borders and so Trump said this is a public health order because of the COVID-19, we have to stop, you know, we have to close our border and some people cannot seek asylum, certain categories of people are not able to come in but we know it was an excuse to do what they had always wanted to do, just to close the border, and that it's still in effect and so people are seeking asylum, will come to the board of entry and will just be turned away and then sometimes immediately kidnapped because some groups know who the migrants are, they're able to identify them, they prey on people who are in those situations.

(Interview no. 2)

On the other side of the country, namely at the Guatemalan-Mexican border, the majority of migrants currently arriving in Tapachula, Mexico are mainly women coming from Honduras, to a lesser extent women from Guatemala and El Salvador are also participating in migration processes, but also women from Venezuela, Cuba and Haiti (with those last, language barriers make it more complex to communicate and assist); most of them are unwilling to stay in Tapachula, and the use the border city as a point

where they can access first information and first assistance, to then prosecute their journey northwards, to the Centre and North of the country:

La mayoría no quiere quedarse en Tapachula, es muy cercana a la frontera, entonces la mayoría dice que no se quieren quedar por eso, por cuestiones de seguridad, y también porque se da, pues hay muchísimas informaciones, entonces de repente las ciudades del Centro y Norte del país se mueven más económicamente, entonces eso es algo que llama muchísimo a las personas con las que hemos tenido contacto. La idea es moverse, Tapachula de repente va sirviendo para poder tener un primer acceso a las informaciones, a los acompañamientos, y a partir de acá, pues ya iré viendo las posibilidades y entonces decidir para dónde ir, eso es lo que pueden estando acá en Tapachula.

(Interview no. 5)

On the southern border between Mexico and Guatemala, we have similar testimonies than the ones shared on the US border situation, even though the actual physical border is not a wall, but it is represented at the present moment by thousands of Mexican National Guards impeding the transit and border-crossing to migrants: 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 Hidalgo⁹; the second, way more dangerous, by crossing the river Rio Suchiate. Once arrived, after a long a perilous journey, as we have seen, refugees should be able to ask for international protection and start a procedure at the Migration authorities, however the situation at the southern border between Mexico and Guatemala is more complex: on one side, 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.

Bueno, la mayoría viene y ahorita la situación ha como variado un poco, porque podrían o deberían de poder cruzar el puente, en Ciudad Hidalgo, y entonces necesitan protección internacional, hablar con migración ahí y entonces solicitar esta protección internacional, que desde inmigración pueden llevar un proceso en el que se les vaya facilitando este acceso. Se estaba viendo que no les estaban

⁹ The bridge is called Puente Internacional Rodolfo Robles, and it connects the Mexican city of Ciudad Hidalgo (Chiapas) with Ciudad Tecún Umán (Guatemala). The bridge is built on the Rio Suchiate.

recibiendo, llegaban al puente las personas y entonces les rechazaban y les regresaban, les decían: “no, pues, vayan de regreso e intenta mañana” o si vienen con niños y niñas, nada más se armonizó la ley, entonces, de la que decían de que no se pueden detener a niños y niñas y entonces, para no hacerse cargo de esta situación y tener que ellos buscar las canalizaciones, que es algo difícil de resolver, más bien les regresaban y les decían que intentaran de otra forma, en otro momento, entonces, eso también es una cosa, el otro es que intentan cruzar por el río.

(Interview no. 5)

At the moment of the interview (October 2021), another dramatic fact happening in Tapachula, the first Mexican city migrants find after crossing the border with Guatemala, makes the general situation even more complex: the Guardia Nacional is often told to be the responsible authority that is arresting migrants at the border, and taking them to the Estación migratoria Siglo XXI, the biggest immigration detention center in Mexico - located in Tapachula and authorized by the Instituto Nacional de Migración (a governmental institute dealing with migratory procedures). It is clear in the words of the interviewees how the Mexican authorities are detaining migrants as if they had been committing a crime, for the simple fact of crossing the border; moreover, such authorities are also held responsible for the extremely brutal conditions that migrants are obliged to live in:

Y lo que hacen los Estados cuando una migrante centroamericana pasa de Talismán a Tapachula, o de Talismán a Tabasco, o a Ciudad Hidalgo, de Guatemala a México, lo que hace es que con ese cruce sin los papeles o sin el visado, lo que la ley mexicana, la Ley de Extranjería y a nivel internacional, digamos, todas las convenciones sobre migración establecen como una falta administrativa, como si tú te saltabas a la la entrada del metro, que no es un delito es una falta administrativa, entonces los Estados así lo tenían controlado, pero los sistemas de Extranjería lo convierten en un delito y te encierran en el centro de detenciones, en una carcel, eso es la criminalización de la migración, pero no es un fenomeno específico de Tapachula, es una lógica global, propia de la era de de la securitización de las migraciones.

(Interview no. 3)

Están ahorita muchísimos agentes de la Guardia Nacional y les están deteniendo, hay muchos casos que ahí mismo les regresan, y hay muchos casos donde los llevan, y los detienen en las carreteras y las llevan a la estación migratoria y entonces están obligando a las personas a buscar via alternas.

(Interview no. 5)

The risk of being detained by the police or migratory 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 cities along the southern border of Mexico, where they can apply for asylum or regulate their immigration status), and instead find alternative routes and entrances to Mexico, thus avoiding the risk of incurring into authorities and being detained or apprehended. However, finding an alternative way to enter Mexico irregularly entails other risks, maybe even more dangerous, since migrants have to pay for someone helping them transit and might face other obstacles and travel under very unsafe conditions. In certain cases, migrants who make it to Tapachula do so because they were able to safely cross the river and apply for family reunification (if they have this possibility) or enter to Mexico to apply for international protection under the “tarjeta de visitante regional”, a visa that is granted to citizens of Guatemala, Belice, El Salvador y Honduras, that allows them to stay in the Mexican southern States for up to 7 days for touristic purposes¹⁰:

Entonces, buscar vía alternas es muchísimo más peligroso, porque entonces tienen que pagar dinero...una es eso es que a veces tienen que pagar cantidades muy altas, hay empresas de buses, que hacen viajes de Guatemala para acá, entonces empiezan a decir, bueno, vamos a pasar por la frontera, entonces no trae documentos, tengo un amigo que podría ayudarte, nada más que cobra tal cantidad, entonces ahí estamos por corrupción, o sino también por vías muchísimo más peligrosas y entonces no van a cruzar de forma segura, pero seguro de un lado o del otro están corriendo muchísimos mas riesgos, entonces, eso es obligar a las personas a buscar diferentes vías. Quieren lograr llegar hasta aquí, es porque han hecho...pues eso, por el río o de repente tenían una tarjeta de visitante regional que están dando a personas guatemaltecas, hondureñas o salvadoreñas, y entonces lo que hacen es romper con eso, y entonces se pasan de los días en los que pueden estar acá, que son 5 o 7, ahorita no me recuerdo muy bien, y entonces ya logran llegar hasta aquí a Tapachula y a prolongar su estancia, y entonces buscar el acceso a la protección internacional, a lo mejor a una regularización si tienen la posibilidad por vínculo familiar.

(Interview no. 5)

However, not all migrants are lucky enough to obtain an appointment at the Offices of COMAR (the Mexican Commission for Refugees Assistance, a governmental

¹⁰ <https://www.gob.mx/tramites/ficha/tarjeta-de-visitante-regional-para-originarios-de-guatemala-y-belice-y-residentes-permanentes-en-esos-paises/INM278> (last access on 13.03.2022).

organization responsible for processing refugee status recognition applications), and INM (Instituto Nacional de Migración), and the process of application is extremely difficult to carry out. The reasons that are mentioned by interviewee Luisa Mendoza are twofold: on one side, the COMAR is currently saturated in its numbers, with migrants being able to obtain an appointment in order to process their asylum requests only very late (at the present moment, they might even wait for up to three weeks):

Ahorita en este momento (bueno, desde el principio del año), las personas se están quedando muchísimo tiempo en Tapachula porque se ven obligadas, es por la ley mexicana, las diferentes políticas migratorias han venido creando diferentes muros, entonces, en un primero momento fueron (esto fue el año pasado) lo que hicieron fue cancelar los trasladados por parte de la COMAR por partes del norte del país, podían hacer trasladados del Centro para abajo. Después de esto, pues ya empezaron a poner muchísimos, muchísimos filtros para decidir a quién van a atender y a quien no para trasladar los diferentes estados del Centro y Sur de País, y ahora, a parte con eso, pues la militarización de las fronteras y van bajando cada vez el muro y fueron complicando muchísimo la situación para los diferentes caravanas que intentaron cruzar al punto de que el río estaba totalmente cubierto de la Guardia Nacional y el Ejército de Guatemala también sacó a muchos elementos para que estuvieran cuidando el río del otro lado y también en la frontera con Honduras. Entonces se fueron creando muchas barreras, las personas lograban llegar hasta acá, tenían acceso a los procesos con la COMAR para solicitar refugio, pero las citas estaban para las fechas muy lejanas con Migración y con la COMAR para fechas muy, muy lejanas. Entonces veíamos personas que iban a tener el primer contacto en tres meses para poder iniciar el la solicitud de asilo, entonces vimos pues que el procedimiento que se iba alargando y alargando hasta que eran 45 días hábiles, pero podría duplicarse. Entonces eso puede llegar a tardar más de 100 días y ahora las personas no siquiera han podido tener acceso a una primera cita, la COMAR está saturada y no tienen citas de aquí hasta diciembre, bueno hasta diciembre está llena, entonces ahorita está tratando de ver las formas en las que van a resolver eso. Entonces igual estamos esperando porque las personas vienen y esa es la pregunta: "que puedo hacer?" porque no han tenido ni siquiera acceso a una primera cita.

(Interview no. 5)

On the other side, 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, carry out routine controls and in general strengthen their capacity in order to either push them away, or apprehend them and send them to detention centers. This happens also to those migrants whose status of refugee for humanitarian reasons has been

granted. Even though the law allows them to freely move 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 also occurred, generating a context of greater vulnerability:

Entonces, en los puestos de migración y de la Guardia Nacional, que está para salir de Tapachula, se han ampliado muchísimo los retenes y también los controles. Y entonces si antes las personas no podían salir con una constancia, ahora nada más lo pueden hacer quienes tienen residencia permanente, entonces, aunque tengan la resolución positiva y que sean reconocidas como personas poseedoras de la protección internacional, no pueden moverse a otros Estados del país, nada más si tienen ya la residencia permanente, si tienen visa humanitaria o la tarjeta por razones humanitarias no pueden moverse a otro estado del país porque les dicen que esa es nada más para estar en Chiapas. La ley no lo marca así, pero quienes están en los puestos de control están diciendo esto y entonces los regresan. Y lo regresan, digamos, algunos se dan la oportunidad de decir, bueno, no pueden pasar, regresense y otros lo que hacen es detener, llevar a la estación migratoria.

(Interview no. 5)

The same information is also shared by Marcos Tamariz of Doctors Without Borders, who also makes a reference to the harsh conditions of the detention centers:

Primero que nada, como siempre, durante mucho tiempo, hició la frontera olvidada, la frontera fue olvidada durante muchísimos años porque no se reconocía la importancia que podría haber entre los flujos de centroamericanos en México y todo eso hasta que empezaron las funciones de las caravanas, en ese momento en que realmente toma relevancia y entonces se estructura una respuesta gubernamental que va de cierta manera en contradicción con un discurso político. Entonces lo que encontramos es que hay un discurso completamente contradictorio a este principio del que habla de Derechos Humanos, de acceso y todo eso y lo primero que vemos es un reforzamiento por parte del Instituto Nacional de Migración, trabajo con la Guardia Nacional y todo lo demás, sin olvidar lo que son las situaciones en las estaciones migratorias, que es la situación de cómo se manejan los albergues y el acceso a los albergues, y que todo esto obviamente se ve acelerado y complicado durante el período de la pandemia.

(Interview no. 4)

The context of criminalization of migrants happens at all levels, from the state and governmental response of the humanitarian crisis of refugees, to the actual

implementation of the law. Migrants are taken advantage of even within the offices of COMAR, and patterns of abuses are well reported by human rights representatives. For instance, the following testimony shows how much resistance the migratory authority demonstrated in their lack of collaboration with the Human Rights centre: the Centre Fray Matias denounces misbehavior on the side of the migratory authorities, and also finds much resistance and little willingness to collaborate with them for the purpose of assisting migrants. Misbehavior is evident when the authorities are purposely withholding the truth and information, collecting money illegally from migrants, preventing lawyers from entering the offices with the migrants they assist; interviewee Miriam González, communication coordinator of the IMUMI Organization (Instituto Para Las Mujeres en Migración) also shares the brutality of the Mexican army in using strong enforcement procedures in order to ensure a regular entry within the country. This also explains why many refugees do not want to stay in Tapachula, especially women travelling with their children, often unable to ensure dignified conditions to themselves and their families:

Hay demasiada resistencia, que siempre es decir que bueno, que están haciendo las cosas bien, que se están llevando los procesos como marca la ley, que si hacen las cosas de alguna forma que digamos fue indebida, es porque la gente les obligó y orilló a esas acciones. Pensaría en cuando se han acompañado a las personas, la regularización migratoria para que se puedan tramitar los diferentes procesos administrativos, incluso cuando vamos acompañando a las personas, incluse se da esta criminalización del trabajo que se está realizando porque se dice que tiene que entrar sólo a las personas que está haciendo el procedimiento, aunque se diga que se está acompañando en calidad de representantes legales, se han cerrado las puertas muchísimas veces y entonces, ya no se tiene acceso a ver qué es lo que les están diciendo a las personas en realidad, porque obligan a que entren solas. Y esto lo hace en ese marco de criminalizar, porque hay muchos, muchos tramitadores que llegan así con un folder con muchísimos trámites que están cobrando a las personas, por eso sí entonces estaban poniendo en la misma línea a nosotros que estamos acompañando y a las personas que estaban ejerciendo estos actos de corrupción. Y entonces, aunque intentemos dialogar con ellas, tenemos que explicar que es lo que estamos haciendo, y aunque ya sepan que es lo que estamos haciendo, porque aparte, pues no solo al Fray Matías, con muchos de ellos lo que hacen es cerrar la puerta y decir pues no. O sea, ustedes están tramitando y lo que sea y que entre solo persona.

(Interview no. 5)

La otra situación que está pasando es lo que estamos viendo en Tapachula, y es que ante la falta de respuesta, la situación que está pasando en Tapachula es consecuencia de la falta de respuestas, de tanto del Instituto Nacional de Migración como de la Comisión Mexicana de Ayuda a Refugiados, y además es una situación que no empezó hace unos meses, o sea, no empezó a finales de agosto, cuando empezamos a ver estos grupos de personas queriendo o intentando salir de Tapachula, y esta brutalidad de acción por parte del Instituto Nacional de Migración y la Guardia Nacional, no fue hace unos meses, las personas llevan ahí incluso más de un año, esperando por una regularización migratoria o respuesta a sus solicitudes de asilo, pero no han tenido respuesta por parte de las autoridades, ya sea por dilación en los trámites, porque están tardando los trámites más o porque simplemente no hay una respuesta frente a sus necesidades y lo que vimos es, evidentemente, como tú no tienes las condiciones para poder permanecer en un lugar para encontrar trabajo, un lugar donde vivir y no estar viviendo en la calle, para poder que tus hijos e hijas vayan a la escuela, acceder a la salud... Estas personas claro que desde esta desesperación, empezaron a salir de Tapachula y bueno vimos todo lo que sucedió (hay videos, fotografías) que han corrido por cientos sobre estas agresiones del Instituto, tratando de frenar esta situación.

(Interview no. 8)

Other kinds of weaknesses of the refugee system in Mexico are documented through the words of the interviewees: the collapse of the asylum system due to the lack of human resources, together with a high deployment of police and members of the Army, often condemned for unproper behavior towards the migrants, makes it quite hard for the Central American asylum seekers to be assisted at the border. Reference is given to how the state system is dismantled by the use of NGOs and international organizations working in the field to replace the State in its duties of protection of the population:

Los índices de demanda de asilo han crecido en 700% anual cada año. [...] Cuál es el problema: que mientras existen 30,000 efectivos de la Guardia Nacional (30,000 soldados), hay solamente menos de una centena de delegados de la COMAR en todo el país, o sea tenemos 30,000 Fuerzas Armadas desplegadas para torturar las familias migrantes y menos de una centena de agentes para levantar las revisiones de asilo: son los que tenemos ahora es un colapso de un sistema de asilo que por cierto está siendo desmantelado a través de la terciarización, algo que ya hizo Italia, que ya hizo España, que es la subrogación de labores, que deberían de ser ejercidas por el estado a agencias internacionales o ONG, es lo que llamamos la industria del humanitarismo migrante, como "Open Arms", que serían labores que digamos que los Estados están obligados a proteger la vida de los seres humanos y por una serie de leyes, normas y que combinan de Extranjería con la ciudadanía, esas competencias que deberían de ser del orden estatal acaba siendo depositadas en una compleja trama de organizaciones humanitarias, eso es lo que está

pasando con el refugio en México, entonces si tú comparas las peticiones con las concesiones verás que es prácticamente imposible conseguir asilo en México.

(Interview no. 3)

While the State is formally obliged to obey to the international standards of protection, this is often not translated in the actual implementation of the law; since the outbreak of the 2020 pandemic in particular, migrants experience a drastically reduced possibility of obtaining a visa for humanitarian reasons; on another note, the pandemic situation resulting into the closing of the borders, the small budget that is given to the offices of the COMAR (the Mexican institute dealing with refugee processes, resulting in a limited capacity of the office to process the migratory procedures), together with widespread xenophobia, the anti-immigration Mexican President's discourse, the lack of proper State response and the pandemic situation, make it extremely complex to provide an adequate response to the situation of great vulnerability which refugees are exposed to in the southern border:

En general los Estados están obligados a cumplir el marco de protección, es decir, se conoce como MIRPS, que es el marco internacional de protección a los que los Estados están obligados. Bueno, lo que hemos visto últimamente es que México ha reducido drásticamente las visas por razones humanitarias. En los últimos tiempos, digamos, había habido una emisión bastante más amplia de las visas por razones humanitarias y en este periodo, sobre todo a partir del año pasado y este año, estas visas han reducido considerablemente.

(Interview no. 6)

Es el resultado de la falta de respuestas de las autoridades, pero además respuestas que tienen que ver con voluntad política, porque hay la legislación mexicana en materia de asilo y de migración...ahí digamos, hay opciones para que se pueda regularizar esta población, por ejemplo: estancias por razones humanitarias o visitante temporal o permiso para trabajar o por unidad familiar... muchas de estas familias ya han tenido hijas e hijos en México y entonces una regularización puede ser a través de esa vía o quiénes están solicitando asilo porque digamos caen dentro de todos los supuestos que la ley establece y los marcos internacionales para solicitar asilo. Sin embargo, hay toda esta parte. Y también hay un componente ahí, en el caso de la COMAR en específico, de una falta de apoyo estatal para fortalecer a esa institución. La COMAR (la Comisión Mexicana de Ayuda a Refugiados) es la instancia en México encargada de, pues de gestionar toda la parte de asilo. Sin embargo, en el país sólo hay 6 oficinas. El presupuesto fue mucho menor, tanto el año pasado como este, a sus necesidades, entonces, después, además, el contexto de la pandemia

que cerró, e hizo que cerraron sus oficinas, digamos todo esto empezó a retrasar mucho procesos. Por ejemplo, el cierre por cuestiones de la pandemia, terrible, todo el mundo lo vivimos, nadie estaba preparado para esta situación. Pero además, si a esto le sumas poco presupuesto y además, si a eso le sumas una capacidad limitada, o sea, con 6 oficinas en todo el país, con lo que eso implica en términos de capacidad limitada en términos de personal y en términos de infraestructuras, hay una problemática y algo en lo que se ha insistido desde la sociedad civil al Gobierno mexicano es fortalecer a la COMAR para que pueda tener mejor, entonces a eso, todo eso súmale que también, por ejemplo, el tema del idioma, es algo que también atraviesa. A esa parte va sumando el tema del racismo, el tema de la xenofobia, pues se va haciendo mucho más grande el abismo para poder...de lo que está sucediendo en el sur del país, entonces eso es un poco lo que está sucediendo, se complica y además, lo que concluye ahí, lo que está sucediendo y no hay una respuesta efectiva. Cuando empezamos a mirar en público, esta situación que están viviendo las personas, es que actuar de migración, de esta violencia que exerjeron, lo que escuchamos desde el Presidente de México es que "si vamos a contener a las personas, lo mas es lo que pueda en el sureste", y además a eso, a esa parte, en estos grupos de personas que empezaron a salir de Tapachula y que empezaron a ser agredidas, muchas de esta población, o tenía un documento de estancia por razones humanitarias o ya había sido reconocida como refugiada en Mexico, y sin embargo para las autoridades de migración esto importa poco y empezaron a haber deportaciones hacia Guatemala de población que ya tenía una situación regular en el país y eso también lo que generó fue separación familiar. Entonces, mientras que ninguna legislación, esto está avalado. Sí empezaron a realizar este tipo de acciones en, digamos, en contraste con acciones que sí están en la legislación –como esta regularización migratoria que es posible. Entonces eso es un poco lo que está pasando a grandes rasgos lo que está sucediendo en el sur de México.

(Interview no. 8)

As much as the situation at the border looks complex and deteriorated by the choices of the Mexican government on the matter of migratory policies, it is deemed appropriate to mention another delicate issue happening at the Mexican border, that is related to two actions undertaken by the State authorities in the context of Central American migration: one is the issue of what is happening within the centers of detention, and the other with deportations. We have already mentioned how migrants prefer to find alternatives routes other than the officials ones, in the fear of detainment and deportation.

Interviewees often mention the cruel and inhuman treatment that migrants receive in detentions centers in both 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 a great distress

and harsh life conditions, especially for women and LGBTQ persons. Themes of torture carried out by the migratory authorities, as well as the theme of suicide are also mentioned as part of the degrading treatment and its consequences:

En términos generales es que hay períodos bastante convulsos en los centros de detención, incluso en 2020, se podría decir que hubo un motín entre comillas, hubieron personas muertas en alguno de los centros de detención porque la autoridad migratoria, al querer contener digamos el conflicto que había, pues hizo su extremo uso de la fuerza y pues fueron resultados lamentables. En general, los centros de detención suelen ser lugares, digamos donde cuesta garantizar los derechos de las personas, es decir, a pesar de que el Estado mexicano es parte de los convenios y tratados internacionales para garantizar la protección de las personas, en los centros de detención, se dificulta mucho y también se dificulta (que es lo que yo te puedo decir) el acceso a la salud para las personas, es decir, todas las personas que pueden tener VIH, por ejemplo, o enfermedades que requieran atención, en los centros a veces no se garantiza el derecho a la salud y pues es complejo, digamos estar en un centro de detención, las condiciones son bastante difíciles, tanto en los centros de detención de México como en los Estados Unidos.

(Interview no. 6)

In detention centers, women are found to be looking for strategies of survivals for themselves and their children. For instance, they put their babies in holes dig in the ground in order to protect them from the high temperatures, as it is documented below.

La migración en México, por ejemplo, y también en la mayoría de los países de América Latina, es una falta administrativa, y una de las cosas por las cuales deberíamos de luchar es la abolición de las cárceles migratorias, que son estos centros de detención, de extrenalización de migrantes, que son aberrantes. [...]

En los centros de detenciones tenemos registradas como organización unas situaciones que son muy complejas. [...] Hemos detectado temas sin agua potable, baños que están en mal uso, o sea anti-higiénicos.... Hay una cosa muy fuerte... vimos unos hoyos en la tierra. Y preguntamos que eran y porque estaban ahí, y una de las mujeres migrantes nos dijo: es que cuando sube el calor muchísimo, metemos a nuestros bebés en los hoyos para que se mantengan frescos. En este momento, hay que buscar estrategias de vida en este contexto donde las condiciones de vida son totalmente indignas.

(Interview no. 7)

If looking at the situation at the northern border, between Mexico and the United States, it does not look any better. NGOs representatives interviewed report cases of abuse, discrimination, racism and other cases of human rights violations. The responsibility, also

in the US case, is imputed on the government, on its policies and the way migration is dealt with by the border authorities:

En los Estados Unidos tenemos reportes de maltrato y discriminación, de racismo, de incluso agresiones por parte de la autoridad migratoria que les privan de la alimentación, también les hacen estar en lo que se denominan como cuartos fríos o congeladores donde permanecen a temperaturas muy bajas. La idea es que es como un proceso para evitar las infecciones, digamos que pero pues la verdad es que si la pasan bastante mal, las personas migrantes en los centros de detención, tanto en México como en Estados Unidos.

(Interview no. 6)

En donde tenemos casos, por ejemplo complejos que ahí no puedo hablar mucho por temas de seguridad, pero casos complejos y agresiones sexuales al interior de los centros de detención, y el tema de suicidio. Un migrante se rebeló, los acostaron a todos en el patio, los pegaron en las nalgas y en los espalda, y le dijeron que si alguno se paraba, lo iban a matar a golpes, y esta no es la Guardia Nacional solamente! Ese tipo de ejemplos dan pauta en esperar lo peor en términos de mujeres y de personas de la comunidad LGBT, porque el hecho de que como migrante se les está prácticamente castigando por el hecho de haberse atrevido a ser migrantes, a las mujeres y a las personas LGBT se les aumenta ese castigo. Es un problema que está sumamente invisibilizado y hay que señalizarlo todo el tiempo, porque efectivamente con el extractivismo y la necropolítica tan violenta que se va exacerbando siempre más, pues claro que le va pegando muchísimo más a toda esta comunidad. Hay que señalarlas, no se puede vivir en un mundo así. Hay que generar empatía para generar un cambio.

(Interview no. 7)

When people do manage to cross, they are put into Border Patrol Custody which is very ill-suited for human beings and so it's cold, there's not good food, yeah it's just not like a good space to be in, and then when you have a border that has been violently maintained, of course the most vulnerable people are going to get the most caught in that so migrant women tend to be very strong but also vulnerable in that context, and so yeah so, you know, women become victims of lots of different kinds of violence within that whole structure, and I think there is you know people are responsible, like there is clearly the US government is responsible for perpetrating this, we are far enough along that we know what happens to people, we know what we could do to make those things not happen but the government chooses not to take the approach of least harm and so people will get hurt.

(Interview no. 2)

Deportation is another harmful tool used by migratory authorities in both receiving countries: in the period covering the pandemic, both Mexico and the United States are implementing deportations as a result of the US policy, Title 42. Only during 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 migratory authorities to Guatemalan crossing points. Deportations are happening without respecting the limited amount of persons that 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 most vulnerable social groups to Covid) are also detected to be carried in points of the southern border, most of them in Guatemala, that are not authorized by the law. Migrants are also deported without being told their rights, a practice known as *deportación en caliente*¹¹:

El 21 de marzo es 2020, es decir, un día después, la Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores en México emitió una nota informativa diciendo que va a aceptar esas expulsiones de personas migrantes y que aceptará 100 personas al día, provenientes de los países centroamericanos, con excepción de aquella población vulnerable a la covid, como es la niñez, o las mujeres embarazadas, por ejemplo. Y se empiezan a ver estas expulsiones, principalmente en la franja de la frontera norte mexicana. Eso no implicaba que también existían expulsiones en Estados Unidos directamente a los países de origen de las personas, pero digamos México acuerda eso y empiezan las expulsiones. En agosto pasado lo que vimos es que parte de esas expulsiones bajo título 42 empezaron a ser vía aérea directamente desde Estados Unidos, específicamente al aeropuerto de Tapachula, Chiapas, y de Villahermosa, Tabasco. Llegaban esos vuelos, y en la pista de aterrizaje ya los esperan autobuses que están escoltados por los agentes del Instituto Nacional de Migración y la Guardia Nacional;

¹¹ The *deportaciones en caliente* are defined as “the expulsion of migrants or refugees without them having access to the due procedures and without being able to challenge that act through an effective judicial remedy. In other words, they occur when the State Security Forces and Bodies expel migrants or refugees without due protection or guarantees. These people do not have the opportunity to explain their circumstances, apply for asylum, or appeal the expulsion.

They are usually collective and contrary to international law. They usually occur at the border, but can also occur shortly after asylum seekers have crossed the border or have arrived” <https://www.es.amnesty.org/en-que-estamos/blog/historia/articulo/que-son-las-devoluciones-en-caliente-7-claves-para-comprenderlo/> (last access on 13.03.2022).

así que bajan las personas, suben al autobús y las personas y esos autobuses son llevados la mayoría a la frontera con Guatemala. Sin que a esta población se les pueda brindar información sobre su derecho a solicitar asilo en México, si se lo quieren, o a regularizar su situación migratoria, si así lo desean, pero además de que están siendo expulsadas, lo que se ha documentado por muchas organizaciones también del Sur, es que están siendo expulsadas a Guatemala por puntos no establecidos para la expulsión o deportación de personas. México tiene, digamos, acuerdos con Guatemala de cuáles son los puntos por donde se pueden deportar a las personas expulsadas, y estos puntos por donde están siendo llevadas estas personas no son incluso me parece, -no sé, no estoy bien segura, pero a finales de agosto me parece el Gobierno de Guatemala emite una nota diplomática, tanto el Gobierno de México como de Estados Unidos, diciéndole que estas personas que están dejando ahí quieren esta cosa y porque, porque las están dejando por esos puntos que no están establecidos para tal. Y además, se ha documentado que son expulsiones que se están llevando a cabo de madrugada. También hay un horario establecido para deportar a personas que, digamos, no están cumpliendo. Pero además, en esta documentación, digamos en lo visual, porque no hay, no hay algo público, un documento público que diga, por ejemplo, que diga: "hoy deportamos a tantas personas, bueno, expulsamos a tantas personas, a México, vía aérea." O que el Instituto Nacional de Migración, diga: "hoy expulsamos tal personas". Pero lo que hemos visto en la documentación visual, yendo al aeropuerto y justo en el momento en el que salieron del vuelo, es que bajan, hay más personas de las que México se comprometió, o sea más de 100 personas al día. Y hemos visto que también hay niñez y adolescencia, no sabemos, porque evidentemente no hablamos con las personas, no hemos podido hablar con las personas, si son familias, son niñas o niños no acompañados, o sea, no sabemos, digamos la composición, pero visualmente lo que tú puedes ver, es que en el aeropuerto se están bajando del avión mujeres, niñas, niños, adolescentes, hombres, entonces, bueno, esa es una situación que está pasando, que sigue pasando desde agosto de este año.

(Interview no. 8)

Fuimos unas de las convocantes a esta audiencia pública sobre migración. Ahí, en ese sentido, se habló de los pushbacks con las deportaciones en caliente, es decir la gente entra, la saca. Entra, la agarra. No se les están hablando de sus derechos como primer punto, o sea hay una falta grave, una violación grave porque no te están diciendo que tú puedes acceder a este refugio, de hecho hay algo que se les ha llamado el "retorno asistido". Claro, esto no es un retorno asistido, esta es una deportación, el retorno asistido puede ser llamado así solo si es seguro, y esto no se puede garantizar. Las personas están huyendo...de la violencia, de la violencia económica, del sistema alimentario. Hay que complejizar los contextos y la visión en donde están viviendo las personas.

(Interview no. 7)

In the case of other border cities along the northern border between Mexico and the US, Marcos Tamariz observes a growing situation of vulnerability for migrant women in the city of Reynosa (in the state of Tamaulipas, Mexico, located at 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 into further perils while crossing it, in many other cases they are let cross the border and then they are abducted, with the purpose of being expulsed and deported back to their countries of origin. Also in this case, deportations are happening overnight, without notifying migrants of their rights, explaining them what their possibilities are, or giving them the chance to apply for asylum or regulate their migratory status:

El problema es que ante un sistema de inmigración regional que sigue criminalizando y persiguiendo a la población migrante -un grande numero de hombres y mujeres se nos escapan de nuestra atención, entonces sabemos muy poco sobre qué es lo que está sucediendo en su ruta. Lo que sí podemos saber es como te mencionaba que hay los riesgos mismos durante el tránsito de ataques, que al ser utilizadas para pasar. Si vemos lo que está sucediendo con las mujeres migrantes en Reynosa: en algunas partes de la frontera, hay un negocio, entonces le dan como tres oportunidades para cruzar la frontera. Las situaciones que tenemos son bastante diversas porque algunas puede que logren tranquilamente cruzar, incluso, considerando que algunas están con menores, entre comillas podría ser que sea “más fácil”, pero nosotros lo que vemos es esta historia de, por ejemplo, de deportaciones, en la noche, a las 2:00 AM. A las 11 la noche, a las 5:00 en la mañana, que son deportadas y entonces son dejadas a la entrada del puente, o sea cruzan el Instituto Nacional de Migración, salen y están en la calle y lo primero que pasa es que estan secuestradas, tienen que correr por su vida, los niños con los que estan acompañadas estan en la misma situación de vulnerabilidad y que es una situación de práctica de deportación absolutamente inhumana.

(Interview no. 4)

Another line through which the situation is being made more complicated for a migrant woman is the possibility to enter the country as an asylum seeker willing to obtain the refugee status on the grounds of gender violence. To this regard, policy specialist Holladbyrd mentions the difficulty of the US asylum system in recognizing gender-based violence as the ground through which Central American migrant women could apply for asylum; while recognizing that violence against women is one of the elements driving thousands of Central American women to flee from their countries of origin, she also acknowledges state collusion and lack of government protection as motives that help

those crimes being perpetrated, as well as the lack of a proper definition into the legal system¹².

A lot of women are coming from domestic violence situations, or gender-based violence and there are certain sessions with the attorney in general that put regulations in place that were explicitly designed to limit the availability of asylum or to limit the scope of asylum so that people fleeing from domestic violence wouldn't fit into that definition, but basically the asylum system was set up to protect people who are fleeing, or being persecuted because of their identity, because they might be part of a particular group or because yeah because of some aspect of their identity and it's also envisioned to be violence by the state, or collusion by the state, and of course I mean when people, when women are victims of domestic violence often there is State collusion because the police or different actors won't step in to protect in that scenario so even if it's a partner who has been a victim of violence the state is unable or unwilling to step him to address that but domestic violence has not always been recognized as a form of legitimate violence, obviously the whole feminist movement has tried to bring it out and say: this is a societal problem, it's not just a fight between the man and the wife, it's actually part of the whole thing, you know what we face as women, and also LGBT people, transwomen, and gay people.

(Interview no. 2)

On the other hand, Mexican asylum law does include the gender perspective as a motive fueling migration, meaning that Central American women can apply for refugee status on the grounds of the violence being perpetrated in their countries of origin, however the persons in charge of processing asylum requests, as well as the lawyers assisting asylum seekers lack of the proper knowledge to this regard; another obstacles that impedes migrant women to obtain the refugee status on the grounds of their gender is language barrier, or because the refugee status is requested by the partner travelling with them (those last cases are especially true for Haitian women, whose culture relegates to the private sphere and unable to participate in the public life); the fact that women might be travelling with their children does not make it any easier for them, according to the law, in moving forward an asylum request:

¹² A discussion on a reform of US asylum law that would include gender-based violence is currently taking place, however it is yet to be seen whether asylum-seekers women could be granted the status of refugee as a particular societal group affected by gendered discrimination: <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/analysis/2021/9/21/the-uneven-path-to-gender-based-asylum-in-the-US> (last access on 13.03.2022).

Para las mujeres, aunque por ejemplo en el tema de asilo, la ley establece que como mujer tú puedes ser reconocida como refugiada por violencia de género, pero lo que pasa es que el conocimiento de los agentes de la Comar o la argumentación que pueden ser quienes acompañan jurídicamente a estas mujeres, no está tan explorado y eso hace que se mermen las posibilidades que se reconozcan a las mujeres como refugiadas por razón de género. Y esto tiene que ver como con algo más grande, es decir, este deber ser de las mujeres que las ponen en la parte privada y a los hombres en la parte pública hace también situaciones, por ejemplo, si son familias, las mujeres son las que se quedan en casa a cuidar a las hijas y los hijos, mientras es su pareja, quien sale a ver todo el tema de su regularización migratoria, incluso muchas mujeres, por ejemplo, en el caso de mujeres haitianas no saben hablar mucho español, porque quienes están en la parte pública son los hombres, entonces ellos tienen esta oportunidad de poder, digamos, comprender mejor el español. O muchas veces la solicitud de asilo la empieza la pareja, y entonces, bajo sus causas, es que hacen esta ampliación para toda la familia, pero no es la mujer específico, digamos si su situación, la que hace que se les reconozca o por la que empieza un trámite de asilo, entonces eso va mermando posibilidades a las mujeres, va haciendo mucho más complejo, para que el proceso ya sea de regularización migratoria o de ser reconocidas como refugiadas en México no refleje las circunstancias o causas de las mujeres, sino es más en función de la familia. [...]

En esa parte, no siempre tener hijas e hijos facilita, incluso mujeres que ya están en México que ya tuvieron hijas e hijos mexicanos... Eso no facilita que ellas puedan regularizar su situación migratoria.

(Interview no. 8)

Another side of migration that is relevant to point out is the one related to the uncompleted migratory journey: there are many migrants, among which women, who did not make it to their preferred country of destination, therefore for those women whose migratory journey was interrupted, life becomes even worse: social stigma coming from not having completed the journey, or for having undergone physical and sexual violence along the journey, becomes the reality that many women face once returned to their home country. A researcher from an NGO working in the field of health-care in Guatemala shares a moving life story of an Honduran woman who, after undertaking the journey, falls from the train 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 to their home country face great social stigma, and especially women and returned migrant women with disabilities:

Y lo vemos con las con las mujeres que son retornadas a sus países de origen, que luego que han sido estimatizadas por haber intentado la ruta migratoria y ya se consideran, digamos, mujeres como objetos devaluados, porque se tiene esa concepción de que todas las mujeres que atraviesan la ruta migratoria, todas enfrentan violencia sexual, y esto no es así, hay un buen porcentaje, pero hay que dejar claro, digamos, que no todas las mujeres enfrentan violencia sexual, hay que consultar las estadísticas para dar un dato exacto, porque si hay un estigma, digamos sobre todo en las mujeres, que retornan a sus países, que enfrentan este estigma, además de los riesgos que vivieron en tránsito, sobre todo cuando son de comunidades indígenas, suelen ser rechazadas, digamos, porque son mujeres que, en teoría ya “no valen nada”. [...]

Ahora en sentido negativo hay una historia que podría resumir bastante bien, digamos lo duro que es este trayecto desde una mujer que ha retornao con discapacidad. Es hondureña, y la historia de esta mujer a mi me ha afectado muchísimo, es sobre los riesgos que se enfrentan en la migración. Ella emprende su tránsito migratorio por violencia con su pareja y se va. Cae una red de trata en México y ahí la hacen drogadicta, y tardó muchos años en salir de esta red, y cuando sale digamos, ella aspira, digamos, a continuar su trayecto migratorio para llegar a Estados Unidos. Sube a la Bestia, pues si iba alcoholizada o drogada todavía de esta adicción en la que la misma red de trata la tenía, para mantenerla ahí detenida y se cayó. Entonces ya pidió su dos piernas en este accidente en la Bestia. El acceso a la salud fue bastante difícil para ella, en este proceso en que le amputan las dos piernas, una fue mala amputada, y entonces ahora tampoco pude usar prótesis y regresa a su País de origen que es Honduras. Y en Honduras pues enfrenta a que no sólo había salido de una condición bastante vulnerable y bastante débil en la garantía de sus derechos, sino que ahora regresa en una condición que la pone en una situación de mayor vulnerabilidad. [...] Para mí el Plan Frontera Sur es el responsable de que las personas decidan iniciar rutas mucho más inseguras que las tradicionales, que quieran buscar pasos donde no haya autoridad migratoria, pero tampoco hayan seguros ni garantizados, acceso a servicios, alimentación, salud, porque son rutas que son nuevas y que son mucho más peligrosas y que enfrentan las personas, caen en las redes de trata o de narcotráfico y este digamos es lo que se implementa en 2014 con el Plan Frontera Sur. Es decir, abilitar rutas migratorias que son mucho más complejas y mucho más peligrosas para las personas.

(Interview no. 6)

Besides social stigma in the home countries, another reality shaping migrants' everyday lives in the host countries are racism and xenophobia. Life stories coming from interviewees demonstrate another side of the reality that migrants face as foreigners in a host country, not only within the institutional structures of reception (i.e. in detention centers, at the migration offices), but also in the community:

Bueno, a todo esto también hay un componente que cruza y es el racismo. El racismo, tanto por parte de la comunidad, como por parte de las autoridades, hay historias, relatos. Nosotros sacamos un informe sobre la situación de las mujeres haitianas en Tapachula. En ese documento parte de lo que registramos es, por ejemplo, también en términos de las historias de muchas mujeres haitianas, diciendo que reflejan este racismo. Racismo en la comunidad en el sentido de que por ejemplo muchas de estas personas cuentan de... "Pues yo salgo y cuando intento cruzar una calle los autos no se detienen pese a que... Pues estoy embarazada e intendo pasar por un cruce donde hay un semáforo donde tengo que cruzar", o diciendo "mi esposo saldrá desde muy temprano a las 5:00 a la COMAR para ver cómo va nuestro trámite y a veces son las 6:00 PM y todavía no lo han atendido, mientras hay otras personas que llegan y son atendidas." O "Mi esposo vio un anuncio que dice que se solicita ayudante de mecánico, para componer coches. Y él fue a preguntar y le dijeron que no, que ya se había ocupado la vacante. Y él volvió a regresar al otro día y volvió a ver el letrero". Digamos, la parte del racismo está, y es un componente también... o quienes dicen a quienes quieran rentar un espacio para vivir, les dicen que no les rentan a "negros". Este racismo está transversal tanto en la comunidad para integrarse como en las autoridades. Y eso es algo que pocas veces está mencionado, en lo que hemos visto de la información, entonces, por un lado no empezó hace poco, es una situación que lleva ya más de un año.

(Interview no. 8)

Concluding remarks

Thanks to the study sketched in this essay, we were able to find a thread between violence, border spaces and gender inequality within the mobility regime of an area of the world that has been experiencing – and it still is, great challenges and difficulties at both socio-cultural and political level.

The first chapter provided a theoretical ground on which to build the fieldwork presented in the third chapter. More in depth, in the first chapter we framed the main conceptual and methodological concepts related to the role of the migrants-subjects and their relationship with the spaces they cross, as well as defined the importance and the contradictions of borders, meant not only as geopolitical constructions of the Nation-State, but especially as spaces created, lived, experienced and made sense of by the persons walking across them. We also touched upon the role of the State in the perpetration of the crimes committed against women showing that, despite the presence of clear policies aimed at protecting women, Central American governments are partly responsible for pushing women out of their countries. We then switched the focus on the role of NGOs and how their advocacy for human rights is indispensable in both sending and receiving countries during the entire process of migration. After a brief section on the methodological tools and challenges connected to the research, by drawing on the theoretical approaches, the third chapter presented the results of the fieldwork, by looking at where women stand within the context previously described. We tried to shed light on the extremely difficult situations faced mostly by migrant women (and partly LGBTQ persons) in the contemporary context, exploring the dimension of gendered migration in Central America in an all-round approach, encompassing, within a multidisciplinary perspective, key elements of this complex trajectory. More in particular, we divided the findings in three sections dealing respectively with first: exploring the reasons why women decide to migrate as well as their life conditions in the countries of origin; secondly, the conditions that women confront once they undertake the migratory journey, looking and the vulnerability that many of them face along the transit and some of the strategies they adopt in order to survive; finally, we looked at the actual border-crossing experience and after mobility path, observing and taking notice of key-features events

happening along the border interested by Central American migration – including authorities, community and NGOs reception of migrant women.

Migrants attempting their journey from Central America is a field of study in continuous evolution, given how current the phenomenon is nowadays, and certainly less researched with the context of the much-debated border between Mexico and the US or bordering processes in European migration. The work explored the subjective dimension of migrant women, by collecting qualitative data and learning about their stories through the words of the persons who are studying or have studied the phenomenon in the first place, and drawing on the experiences of those who are working in organizations and institutions aimed at ensuring the respect of the human rights and dignity of migrant persons in the region.

Through this research, we realized how borders acquire a different dimension than the geopolitical meaning that traditionally they were associated with: border spaces became intrinsically human, weaving together cultural, political and societal practices. Borders have also found to be holders of profound human and (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 the action of migrants is constantly producing and transforming the space, thanks to the way migratory flows walk across it; migratory flows have precise points of attraction and pushback, 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 contradictions of a society that does not respect women and affects the lives of a great segment of the migrant population in the area. Studying borders and migration from a gender perspective allowed to understand all nuances of a complex socio-political phenomenon, how such experience is reflected in the lives of those women, and how borders intersect with gender. Drawing attention on migrant women's experiences along the borders not only allows us to study a current phenomenon that does not often hit the headlines of European (and Italian) newspapers, but also to

make more visible a situation of human rights violations occurring along the southern and northern border of Mexico: by interviewing nationals of Guatemala, United States and Mexico, it was possible to gain several perspectives on the topic, as well as grasp the multifaceted dimension to an issue occurring at transborder level.

Violence was a common denominator that came up frequently during interviews, showing how it is a visible and persistent reality in all steps of the trajectory. In order to understand the path of women along the migratory itineraries, it is impellent 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 shared by interviewees reveal the multiple aggressive behaviors perpetrated against migrants (and especially against migrant women) from the migratory 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, reproduce the patriarchal discourse and intervene both internationally and locally in the governance of space and in the inappropriate acquisition of women's bodies, especially at the border.

In one of the theoretical sections, we have seen how violence has been recognized by scholars as one of the catalyzing elements of migration in the region, to the point that it can be considered highly correlated to displacement, and this has been proved very clearly by research findings. The consequences of this are quite tragic: we found how women are the persons hit the most by the several forms of violence: institutional violence, structural violence, criminal violence and domestic violence (or violence taking place within the more intimate, private sphere) are all to be found within a patriarchal system that hits them the most, and that is why the gender look proved to be fundamental, as it allowed to shed light on the characteristics and the conditions that are proper to female migration, revealing the continuity of violence in the migration experience of women.

Another result has to do with the rigidity of the border policies: while most of them are conceived in terms of diminishing the flows of migration, they indeed fail to prevent irregular border crossings both in Mexico and the US, incrementing the conditions of vulnerability during the transit, especially for migrant women. Migration policies are clearly directed at controlling the flows during the transit in Mexico, by detaining migrants or deporting them back to their home countries against their will, and such hardening of the border policies at both the Southern and Northern border of Mexico

translates in harsh practices of management of migration flows, as well as generates more insecurities especially for women. The actions of those who participate in the violations of migrants' lives are framed according to a regime that impedes the circulation, denies a fair access or transit through the territory, and criminalizes the migrants. Migratory policies should be designed and implemented according to a human rights approach, that takes into consideration also gender 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 way to forms of oppression other than the political, such as those based on gender, class, ethnicity, nationality, as well as undocumented/document status. Migrant women, through the practice of escaping their contexts of origin, shape the borders and give them a new meaning; not only borders limit their transit, and challenge the binomials "foreign-national", "legal-illegal", "documented-undocumented", "victim-agent", but also demonstrated how other forms of oppression legitimize their vulnerable status and impacts on their journey.

Before, during and after the transit brings with it extremely difficult challenges: being a woman, undocumented, with lack of resources and with certain ethnic traits place women in a un unfavorable condition, especially when the policies of the host countries – being it Mexico, or the US, are aimed at limiting a fair access across borders to those persons, without taking into consideration the broader context those women escape from, what causes such displacement taking place in epidemic proportions, nor the conditions of their travel.

In order to think about the Central Americans' journey across the borders, we must first contextualize their everyday reality, a reality made of several challenges and continuum of violence, that most of the times 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 that make the journey for those women extremely perilous and challenging.

While human rights violations keep on being perpetrated in all moments of the journey, as fieldwork results show, it is impelled 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 on the responsibility of the institutional authorities as among the major perpetrators of human rights violations during the transit, it seems significant to underline that the same national and international institutions should obey to the legal standards of migration and adopt a human rights approach, in order to ensure that the rights of the migrant persons are respected: migration is a right, persons have the right to migrate, if the conditions of life back home do not allow them to live respectably, and a human rights approach should be applied in all moments of the migratory journey, in order to ensure that migrants are treated according to human and legal standards.

Finally, interviews proved fundamental in understanding the role of NGOs working in the field of human (women's) rights of migrant persons: their commitment towards the respect of a life decent and free of violence is undeniable and immense, and huge praise and recognition should go to those who are working at the forefront of the migratory crisis and that are helping migrants in several ways: from legal and psychological assistance, to healthcare, self-empowerment and abuse-denouncement.

Hence, studying the border from a gender perspective allows not only to give visibility to a social category that used to be invisible within the academia until not so long ago, especially in relation to the participation of women in migration, but also 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 moment of migration. For this reason, it is important to keep on talking about and researching on the role of women in migration in Central America, as well as their mobility within the space, by recognizing the role of agency of their experience, in order to highlight the situations of discrimination and violation they face in their social, political, economic, cultural and human rights.

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Abstract

The essay documents and analyses the topic of violence in Central American migration, with a specific focus on migrant women in the current mobility regime South-North. 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, that include Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala; we then analyze the moment of transit, in order to highlight some of the great challenges that women incur in their path towards the destination country, being 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.

Parole-chiave

Donne; Migrazione; Violenza; Confini; America Centrale.