NOTAS SOBRE MIGRACIÓN Y DESIGUALDADES

Seminario MIGRACIÓN, DESIGUALDAD Y POLÍTICAS PÚBLICAS

CHALLENGES FACED BY MIGRANT WOMEN IN TRANSIT THROUGH MEXICO

Alejandra Díaz de León | María López | Eréndira Barco González

Between 2021 and 2022, the total number of migrant families and women crossing through Mexico to the United States has increased. According to our observations and civil society organizations' reports, most migrants in transit through Mexico, including families, consider Mexico as a transit country and not a destination. However, many migrants are forced to remain in our country over increasingly longer periods of time until they raise funds or formalize their migratory situation.

Even though men and women experience the violence and precarity during the migration journey, we have identified, in our fieldwork, that women also face four kinds of gender-associated violence: violence on the migrant routes, transnational violence, xenophobic violence and institutional violence.

This brief presents an analysis of the current situation of migrant women who are temporarily delayed in their migratory process throughout Mexico. Based on our fieldwork with migrant women in Mexico City and documentary analysis on the dynamics of violence women experience in transit, we discuss the main issues identified and their implications for public policy. In our conclusions we make recommendations in four areas.

Red de Estudios sobre Desigualdades de El Colegio de México

EL COLEGIO DE MÉXICO

CONTEXT

The profiles of migrants have diversified in all regions of Mexico, including the central part of the country where Mexico City is located. According to the UN, in 2022 the top nationalities of people moving through Mexico irregularly were Venezuelans, with a total of 97,078 people detected (22% of the total), Hondurans with 72,928 (16%) and Guatemalans with 69,515 (16%). They were followed by Cubans (9%), Nicaraguans (9%), Colombians (6%) and Ecuadorians (6%). Of those in an irregular migratory situation in Mexico, 61% were adult men, 23% adult women, 9% boys, and 7% girls. The number of unaccompanied boys and girls decreased from 77,608 cases in 2021 to 70,019 in 2022. The percentage of unaccompanied boys and girls in the total figure of irregular migrants was 16 in 2022.

To obtain further disaggregated data for migrants, we used the 2021 report of the Red de Documentación de las Organizaciones Defensoras de Migrantes (REDODEM) (Documentation Network of Migrants' Defense Organizations). These data collect information on foreign-born people in transit through Mexico and on foreigners present along the Mexico-United States border. According to the REDODEM, the profile of migrants in transit has changed. Its allied and affiliated institutions have noted an increase in the amount of people migrating as family groups since 2020. In 2021, in the southern region of Mexico, 43% were unaccompanied, and 54% travelled with family members. US Customs and Border Patrol (CBP) encounter data show an increase in the number of migrant families between 2020 and 2021.

The United States remains the main destination for most the people to whom the REDODEM provides services. In the southern region, for instance, three out of four people wanted to go to the United States, while one out of three wanted to remain in Mexico. In the central region, three out of five wanted to go to the United States, while three out of ten said they wanted to stay in Mexico and the rest did not have a clear idea. In the northern region, the majority also wanted to reach the United States. In the shelter where we did fieldwork, the staff confirms most people there mention the United States as their final destination, although plans may change along the way.

Since November 2020, the Mexican government has proposed alternatives to detention that prohibit the detention of children and adolescents in Mexican migratory stations. There are government shelters in Mexico City run by the Sistema Nacional para el Desarrollo Integral de la Familia (SNDIF) (National System for the Comprehensive Development of the Family). However, because these shelters do not have sufficient space to lodge children and families, the local government sends some migrants to shelters run by civil society.

In Mexico City, there are shelters where people can stay for more than three months such as CAFEMIN, Casa Tochán, Casa Frida, Casa Mambré and Casa Fuente. Especially since 2020, these civil society shelters have often been overcrowded, causing lack of water, food, medical and psychological care. On several occasions, the organizations that run these

shelters have had to open temporary spaces in nearby neighborhoods or elsewhere in order to accommodate as many people as possible. Local and municipal governments in Mexico City have also opened areas for migrants to stay. Despite these efforts, the lack of lodgings forces many migrants to live on the streets.

WOMEN ON THE RUN: A NARRATIVE OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN TRANSIT THROUGH MEXICO

In January 2023, Alejandra Díaz de León and María López began a research project seeking to understand how migrant women in transit through Mexico narrate and interpret the violence violences, especially gendered violence, that they endure during their migration process, as well as their strategies and mechanisms for moving forward. To this end, they interviewed migrant women as well as the staff of Casa Mambré, a Scalabrinian shelter for medium-term stays in Mexico City, between January and November 2023.

In our research and daily experience with civil society in Mexico, we have identified three main challenges faced by women on the move: a) issues related to obtaining documentation and migration permits in Mexico that will allow them to continue their journey to the United States, b) challenges to finding work and becoming independent, and c) the dynamics of violence they face and the stress they endure.

1. Problems to legalize their situation in Mexico and in the United States

The REDODEM, which has three member shelters and three allied shelters in Mexico City, estimates that three out of five migrants they helped in 2020-2021 wanted to arrive at the United States. In contrast, three out of ten wanted to stay in Mexico. The rest were unsure of their plans. According to civil society representatives, the observations of Eréndira Blanco, director of Casa Mambré (not part of the REDODEM), and with to our research experience, about half the migrants consider the option of remaining in Mexico, while appropriate conditions to cross to the United States come up.

In our research, we found that women are usually undecided about what to do, particularly after experiencing violence during their transit. One migrant woman we interviewed was paralyzed from moving forward because she feared what would come next if she decided to continue on to the United States with her granddaughter and grandson. Moreover, she felt she couldn't go back because she was terrified to return to Honduras, where gangs had threatened her family.

> I spoke with the lawyer and … she told me… "I can get you a refugee status in Mexico", but I do not want to stay in Mexico. It is not that I do not want to, I already know I cannot stay in Mexico… I don't know… It is that … all right, I worked here, but we are paid very little (María,[1] Honduras, 40 years old).

We have noticed that there is confusion among migrant men and women about the procedure to remain in Mexico and the paperwork required to do so. Alejandra has observed the

[1] In every instance we use pseudonyms to refer to interviewees.

informational workshops that take place in Apizaco, Tlaxcala, and has seen that, when the lawyer asks migrants about their knowledge of the process to apply for asylum in Mexico and the United States, more than three quarters of the participants say that they know nothing or very little about the subject. During her fieldwork, several migrants have asked Alejandra for help in understanding the paperwork the Instituto Nacional de Migración (INM) has given them.

Despite the availability of legal assistance and the fact that several organizations offer workshops about a refugee status in Mexico, we have found that women are confused in Mexico City too. In interviews we observed that ten out of fifteen women had incorrect information about the legal avenues to "apply for papers". Moreover, we found that they trusted what family members of friends told them more than what shelter workers or experts said. Every woman thought that the paperwork to apply to remain in Mexico was too long and cumbersome. The vast majority, as we will discuss further, were thinking about applying for asylum in the United States.

Civil society organizations have reported that it is very hard for people who wish to legalize their situation in Mexico to do it while in Mexico City, due to the inefficiency and limited resources of the INM and the Mexican Commission for Refugee Assistance (COMAR/Comisión Mexicana de Ayuda a Refugiados). Of the fifteen women we interviewed in the shelter facilities, eight were fleeing domestic, gender-based or criminal and state violence. The rest were Venezuelan women, whose numbers have increased in recent months; they left because of the poverty they experienced in the Chavista regime. None mentioned gender violence as a reason to abandon their country. Whatever the reason for leaving, each of the women we interviewed wanted to go to the United States. Each of them was waiting for their appointment with the United States authorities in the US-Mexican border to request a refugee status, although, as we have shown, some were uncertain of the grounds on which they would claim it.

On January 18, 2023, the Office of Customs and Border Protection (CBP) launched the CBP One app to schedule appointments for people seeking asylum in the United States. Instead of going to the border and claiming asylum, people have to make an appointment through the app to be interviewed at designated entry points. CBP opens about a thousand appointments per day, so thousands of people are competing to get an appointment at 9:00 a.m., when the system opens each day. It is not easy to obtain an appointment. Demand is high and the program quickly becomes overloaded. Additionally, the application has a lot of trouble recognizing certain physical characteristics, such as skin color. The system uses geolocalization, and people can request an appointment from Mexico City. The application also requires a smartphone with internet access to work. This delays the process for those who have lost or sold theirs *en* route. One Venezuelan woman we interviewed had broken her mobile phone and was saving to buy a new one so she could make her appointment. Some people wait months for an appointment. One activist told us that "Mexico City has become the new border."

The CBP app only allows applicants to make an appointment at a time. Even though the United States government has said that children's appointments would be scheduled at the same time as their family members' appointments, activists from Texas, California and Arizona have reported that sometimes children's appointments are scheduled and not their parents', or vice versa. The possibility of forced separation or of having to cancel the

appointment to try again puts families in a difficult position. One of our interviewees got an appointment for her two-year old daughter, but not for herself. She finally decided to cancel her daughter's appointment and try again.

Another problem that we have identified related to their appointment with the US authorities is that migrants must arrive at the United States entry ports in the border at the date and time programmed. In theory, Venezuelans, Haitians, Cubans and Nicaraguans can make the journey at a set time without fear of deportation if they show their confirmation email (personal communication by a lawyer to Alejandra). The other nationalities must continue taking care not to be detained, even though they have an appointment.

Migrants must have money to pay for the transport to the northern border. Three-quarters of the women we interviewed said they had no help from relatives, so they have to work to raise the necessary funds while waiting for their appointment, as we shall see below.

2. Work and Economic Independence

For many migrants, regardless of their gender, it is important to earn money while on the move. Few have economic support from their families and instead many have dependent family members migrating with them or in their places of origin. One of the women we interviewed was working to save for the journey, while trying to send money back home in Honduras.

Some women leave their countries alone, but many travel with all or some of their children, while others leave their kids with family members, almost always grandmothers. Those who leave their children behind send money back to help support them; while those travelling with their children worry about keeping them healthy and cared for during the migration process. We also observed that migrant men also need to send money as quickly as possible, but they do not usually migrate with their children in as high a proportion as migrant women do (as shown in detention figures of the INM).

The majority of Central American migrants have low levels of education. Most and/or used to work at home, in commercial activities or in the field, before undertaking a migratory process. Several of the women we met were illiterate. Due to their migratory condition, most migrants can only obtain poorly paid positions in the service sector, or in the Mexican informal economy. Some of the women interviewed worked in factories or in sweatshops in Mexico City, for about 207 pesos a day (a bit over 10 US dollars). The biggest challenge they face is being able to save to continue their trip North and being able to pay in the checkpoints administered by corrupt authorities. There is also the "derecho de piso" or right to travel quota, which is demanded by criminal groups.

> Ay, but in Mexico, from the moment you enter, my god! … Mexico is super tough. Right now I really don't know what to do next, if by train, or if there is an option via bus, but if we do take the bus, where do we get the money to pay the cops then? (Lucía, 30 years old, Colombia)

Most of the women we met had jobs in industrial areas outside of the city. Many commuted between one and a half and two hours each way every day. They also had to use several modes of transport including buses, the subway and walking. They spent around 40 pesos

(just over two US dollars) a day on transport alone, an important part of their salary. Many were able to go to work because they could leave their children or grandchildren at the shelter under the care of the staff.

3. Violence and stress

With the exception of women from Venezuela, most women left their countries to flee from gendered violence, whether criminal, state, domestic or a mix of all. One of our interviewees fled because her husband hit her in the stomach while she was pregnant, and she lost her baby. Another, from Colombia, had been running away from guerrillas, paramilitaries and her country's police since she was 12 years old. Unfortunately, as we shall show, leaving their countries does not prevent the violence women face. Our interviews confirmed that state, criminal and even domestic violence follows women across borders.

Throughout the migratory route, women are victims of robbery, abuse, sexual violence, kidnapping and trafficking. Although there is a context of discrimination and generalized violence against migrants in Mexico, women are also victims of sexual violence and symbolic violence. In our fieldwork, we have found that women are often surprised by the intensity of the violence they experience in Mexico and are afraid to continue travelling north.

Several of the women we met, were still being threatened by their partners or by criminal organizations in their home countries. In calls with their families or friends left behind, for example, they learned of episodes of violence against their families; and many realized it was not possible to return safely. Other women tried to keep a low profile even in Mexico (e.g. not using a mobile phone, not giving details of their whereabouts, not posting their location on social networks) for fear that their partners would be able to follow them across international borders. Staff at the shelter where we conducted the interviews confirmed that partners sometimes find the women and follow them wherever they go.

Some migrant women feel it is dangerous to be out on the street, especially far from the area where they feel safe. Some of the women we interviewed consider Mexico City to be huge, violent, and unfriendly. They go out in groups when they go for a stroll or shopping. In several interviews, women expressed concern about another migrant woman who wore shorts to go out and hang out with people on the street. They were very worried that "people out there" might do her harm. Even though we saw no evidence that it could be dangerous for the woman to go out and talk, the fear of the other women shows their representation of Mexico City.

In her work with migrants, Eréndira has observed that access to justice is virtually non-existent for migrants transiting Mexico. When migrants manage to report abuse, authorities assign a certain degree of responsibility to the victim or question their rights. They often claim that the victims' statements are not logical, or they judge their behavior.

Because there are no adequate spaces to care for victims, migrant shelters have begun to specialize. They have acquired protective measures for migrants, learned how to protect them, and offer legal advice, orientation, and accompaniment. When women are in these spaces, where they feel safe and protected, they begin to analyze and understand the violence they have experienced throughout their lives. With the assistance of female psychologists and social workers who provide mental health care and psychosocial support in emergencies, women start talking about their experiences at homes and along the migration process. It is at these

moments, according to the shelter's psychologist, that many of them understand the violence that forced them to leave and can name their suffering. Although it is a delicate process, the psychologist thinks that this new way of understanding helps them to see how far they have come.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the challenges identified above: **1)** problems to regularize their status in Mexico and the United States, **2)** a need to find work and become independent, and **3)** the experience different types of violence, we present the following recommendations.

1. TO MAKE THE REGULARIZATION of migrants in Mexico easier and to request appointments to obtain United States' visas, we propose:

- **a.** That the INM and the COMAR make further efforts to clarify and speed up the documentation obtaining process in Mexico. The INM and the COMAR should visit the shelters frequently to provide information workshops in a clear and simple language that all migrants can understand.
- **b.** Increase the resources of the shelters. This will allow them to hire lawyers specialized in migration and refugee law, and who can become permanent staff and give advice to migrants.
- **c.** Provide regular training for migration lawyers and shelter staff so that they can explain Mexican legislation to migrants in a clear and simple way.
- **d.** Establish cooperation agreements with civil society in the United States so that they can regularly train Mexican shelters personnel on changes in migration, refugee and asylum legislation in the United States.

2. FACILITATE MIGRANTS' ACCESS to jobs in the formal economy so that they can achieve economic independence during their stay in Mexico.

- **a.** Create programs that facilitate the labor insertion of migrants in Mexico, even if they stay for short periods of time.
- **b.** Facilitate the registration of children into day-care centers and schools at all stages. This will guarantee children's access to education and facilitate the work of their parents or caregivers.

3. INCREASE AND IMPROVE the number of migrant accommodation facilities.

- **a.** Increase the budget of those institutions that already provide services to migrants (including families) so that they can provide basic services such as water, food and shelter, as well as more specialized services such as legal aid or psychological therapy.
- **b.** Increase federal and local budgets to support the creation of new shelters for migrants, particularly in places like Mexico City and the northern cities, where migrants spend more time waiting for their appointments to request asylum in the United States.

4. ENSURE THAT CONTAINMENT and control policies and practices in Mexico are gender sensitive.

- **c.** Train judicial personnel in dealing with the specific issues impacting migrant women in transit.
- **d.** Train criminal justice administrators to communicate with victims in an assertive manner, explaining the rights of migrants and the procedures they may face in a clear empathetic way.
- **e.** Ensure that authorities are trained to understand the unique situation of migrants in Mexico. Train the authorities to treat migrants with dignity and care. We suggest organizing workshops that use real case studies to help authorities understand how to respond to different situations they may face.
- **f.** We suggest that the "Protocol to Judge with a Gender Perspective" created by the Supreme Court of Justice in 2020 is an excellent tool to bestow judicial institutions a gender perspective. We suggest continuing to train judicial personnel in the use of the Protocol and ensuring that everyone in the justice system in Mexico is aware of it.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

ALEJANDRA DÍAZ DE LEÓN is a Lecturer in the Sociology Department of the University of Essex. She was an Assistant Professor at the Center for Sociological Studies of the El Colegio de México until December 2023. Using ethnography and participant observation, she studies how people in transit through Mexico form ties of solidarity and trust amidst a violent milieu. She is the author of the book "Walking Together: Central Americans and Transit Migration through Mexico" (University of Arizona Press, 2023). She is currently developing a project about climate crisis and migration.

MARÍA LÓPEZ is Professor of Sociology and Deputy Director of the Global Diversities and Inequalities Research Centre at London Metropolitan University. She has researched extensively on the dynamics of violence against gendered, sexualized and racialized displaced groups in different global settings. She is the author of academic papers, policy briefs and the books "Homosexuality and Invisibility in Revolutionary Cuba" (2015) and, with Stephen M. Hart, "Gender Violence in Twenty-First-Century Latin American Women's Writing" (2022). Her current research focuses on violence against migrant women in transit through Mexico and the resettlement policies for Afghan refugees in the UK.

ERÉNDIRA BARCO GONZÁLEZ is a migrants' and refugees' human rights defender. She holds an undergraduate degree in Social Work from the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM). For over nine years she has been defending and accompanying migrants and refugees, survivors of several types of violences in their home countries, in transit and in their destination. She coordinates de Programa de Acompañamiento Integral (Comprehensive Accompaniment Program) of the SMR (Scalabrinianas Misión con Migrantes y Refugiados en la Ciudad de México/Mission with Migrants and Refugees in Mexico City).

EDITOR OF THE SERIES: Claudia Masferrer | march 2024
TRANSLATOR: Lucía Rayas

NOTAS SOBRE MIGRACIÓN Y DESIGUALDADES
@SeminarioMigdep
migdep@colmex.mx
migdep.colmex.mx