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RESEARCH ARTICLE

'En México, desde que usted entra... ¿de dónde tenemos para pagar a los policías?' Institutional Machismo Affecting Migrant Women Heading North

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ABSTRACT: In 2023, Mexico was a transit and destination country for more than 700,000 undocumented migrants, the highest number ever recorded. Many of them are women and girls. While both men and women are exposed to violence on their journey, undocumented migrant women experience specific forms of violence and discrimination at the hands of migration guards, workers in state detention centres and migrant shelters, and bureaucrats. Drawing on concepts of male chauvinism, institutional violence and state violence along the migration route, and feminicidal violence, as well as data collected in a migrant shelter in Mexico City in 2023, this article focuses on institutional machismo as a set of violent norms by state officials, migration agents and shelter workers that exacerbate the dangers of undocumented women's journeys and jeopardise their ability to overcome the gender values they have learned. This article also shows how women's narratives of the journey reveal that some women have begun to articulate a more egalitarian understanding of gender roles. For them, the migration journey becomes a transformative experience from which they emerge empowered.

KEYWORDS: Mexico, migrant women, narrative, State violence, gender-based violence, feminicidal violence

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1. Introduction

More than 13.4 million undocumented migrants were registered on Mexican territory between 2019 and 2024, according to the National Migration Institute (INM for its acronym in Spanish) (INM 2024). In 2023, an

unprecedented number (more than 700,000) of displaced refugees, asylum seekers and people in need of international protection in a situation of mobility northwards[1] were registered in Mexico, exceeding by 77% the record number registered in 2022 (IOM 2024, 3). In 2024, 1.7 million international migrants arrived in Mexico, of whom 47.3% were women (UN DESA 2025). Added to this is the growing number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) due to conflict and violence or disasters - over 11,000 and over 196,000 respectively in 2023 (Global Migration Data Portal 2025). Most people entering Mexico illegally travel to the United States (US). In 2023, more than 2 million were apprehended at the northwest border (IOM 2024, 4).

In Mexico, undocumented migrants experience very high rates of impunity for crimes against their integrity (Le Clercq Ortega, Cháidez Montenegro and Rodríguez Sánchez 2023, 7). This occurs in the context of hash migration policies and practices that aim to contain the arrival of undocumented migrants in the US, often in violation of their rights (Black and Viales Mora 2021). In addition, with the arrival of President Trump in January 2025, the idea that undocumented migrants are criminals has been reinforced in political discourse and legally through the tightening of conditions for legal entry into the US (Debusmann 2025). For example, the CBP One application through which facilitated interviews with US authorities, has been cancelled and there are plans to reinstate the Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP 1.0 – often referred to as the 'Remain in Mexico' programme). The criminalisation of undocumented migrants is also accompanied by a significant increase in military involvement in migration tasks, including the deployment of large numbers of troops to the US-Mexico border (Chishti and Putzel-Kavanaugh 2025). In Mexico, which often responds to the needs of the US, we anticipate the continuation arbitrary detention, extortion, lack of empathy and corruption – understood as 'the abuse of public power for private gain' (Corona-Treviño 2023) – on the part of the authorities.

Approximately 31% of undocumented migrants travelling north through Mexico are women and girls (IOM 2024, 3). While all types of people are exposed to violent dynamics during their journey through Mexico, the literature suggests that migrant women experience specific forms of violence and gendered discrimination at the hands of multiple actors, including migration guards (popularly known as *migra*), workers in state detention centres and migrant shelters, and bureaucrats in the INM, among others, who are mostly men (López et al. 2024; Estévez 2017; Fernández de la Reguera 2020). The slow and changing bureaucracy, combined with the negligence and hostility of state officials, exacerbates women's sense of entrapment and hopelessness. Without resources and driven by a sense of urgency to reach their destination, many women make decisions that endanger their lives and those of the children travelling with them (López et al. 2024). As we will see, state violence and neglect therefore increase the dangers women face on their journey and reduce their chances of overcoming the male chauvinist values they have learnt.

Drawing on concepts of male chauvinism (Gutmann 2007; Fuller 2012; Castañeda 2020), institutional violence in the region (Pita 2017), state violence against undocumented migrants in Mexico (Institute for Women in Migration (IMUMI) 2022), feminicidal violence (Lagarde 2006), and original data collected in 2023 from migrant women and workers at a migrant shelter in Iztapalapa (Mexico City), I refer to institutional machismo as a set of exclusionary and violent norms and practices against undocumented migrant women by, among others, corrupt and negligent state officials, migration agents and shelter workers. Institutional machismo exacerbates the dangers of their journey, further jeopardising their ability to overcome the violence many of them are fleeing. Additionally, it reinforces the values they have internalised, making them feel that violence and degrading treatment are inevitable due to their gender (Segato 2010, 113).

Although some of the women interviewed for this study did not overcome the difficulties they experienced, partly due to the negligence and hostility of the authorities, several women showed through their narratives of the journey how they had begun to strengthen their agency and articulate a more egalitarian understanding of gender roles. In these cases, although the narrative of the journey cannot be seen as an emancipatory mechanism, it emerges as an 'embryonic space of resistance' (Author et al. 2024). In this regard, I argue that

[1] From now on I will use the term 'undocumented' migrants, migrants in a situation of mobility and asylum seekers to refer to this group of people.

for many women, the migration process becomes a transformative experience from which they emerge empowered and autonomous.

I begin with a brief context of state violence against undocumented migrants in transit through Mexico. I then present a brief theoretical approach and official data on institutional machismo against undocumented migrant women heading north and explain my methodology for this research. Next, I discuss how state violence and institutional machismo manifest along the migration process for my participants, with a breakdown by violence and state agents. I explain how the women's narratives of the journey reveal some of the women's mechanisms for overcoming obstacles and redefining gender roles. Finally, I present my conclusions.

2. State violence against undocumented migrants in Mexico

Mexico is a major destination for regular migration, with almost 44 million people arriving in the country in 2023 (IOM 2024). In 2023, Mexico was also a transit and destination country for more than 700,000 undocumented migrants, the highest number ever recorded (IOM 2024, 3). Between 2018 and 2019, thousands of people arrived at the Mexico-Guatemala border in the so-called caravans from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras (Wurtz 2020; Rosas-López, Guilamo-Ramos and Mora-Rivera 2023). The largest migrant caravan began in Honduras in October 2018 with 1,200 people; by the time it reached Mexico, it had grown to approximately 7,000 people heading towards the US (Rosas-López et al., 2023). Some research suggests that by travelling together, the caravans provided migrants with greater security and visibility (Torre and Mariscal 2020).

Migration flows in Mexico are a changing phenomenon. From January to April 2021, 97% of undocumented migrants came mainly from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras. However, from 2021 to 2023, the number of Venezuelans increased by 130%, accounting for 29% of the total (IOM, 2024). Between 2022 and 2023, arrivals from Senegal, Haiti and Ecuador increased exponentially, while the number of Nicaraguans decreased by 52% and Cubans by 35% (IOM 2024).

Most undocumented migrants enter Mexico with the intention of reaching the US. People registered in the CBP One app to schedule asylum appointments and submit data for travel authorisation. The number of US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) interventions at the US–Mexico border has increased in recent years (Bersin, Bruggeman and Rohrbaugh 2024, 29). In 2023, 2,542,074 migrant apprehensions were recorded at the US border (IOM, 2024, 3).

During the Joe Biden administration (2021–2025), the US asylum system was out of reach for many asylum seekers at the US–Mexico border. Nevertheless, the US government facilitated humanitarian parole for citizens of Cuba, Haiti, Nicaragua, and Venezuela and Secure Mobility Offices helped adjudicate entry permits for migrants from Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, and Guatemala (Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA) 2025). The US government maintained several other legal protections for asylum seekers, including Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) and Temporary Protected Status (TPS). However, in January 2025, the Donald Trump administration cancelled the CBP One app, which allowed undocumented migrants to schedule asylum appointments and submit data for travel authorisation at the US-Mexico border, and reactivated plans to reinstate the 'Remain in Mexico' programme, among other measures, making legal entry into the US even more difficult.

While it is fair to highlight the solidarity and professionalism of many migration officials and armed police operating along migration routes in Mexico, it is reported that in order to protect US interests in stemming migration flows to the US, many undocumented migrants are detained, their rights violated and their journeys temporarily or permanently interrupted (Varela-Huerta 2019). This happens in part because migration officials and guards - many of them military and ex-military (IMUMI 2022, 4) - have the power to intercept and detain suspicious people based on their behaviour, skin colour or clothing (INM 2021). Partly as a result of carrying out civilian tasks with a military dynamic designed to defeat an enemy – rather than to protect civilians – undocumented migrants increase their risk of being arbitrarily extorted, discriminated against or assaulted by

the authorities (Human Rights Watch 2021; Sánchez 2024). There are also reports of migration guards forcing people to walk for hours in order to physically weaken and detain them (Aristegui Noticias 2021). Most of these systematic human rights violations go unreported due to fear of deportation and a lack of resources to report cases (Amnesty International 2020; Black and Viales Mora 2021).

Furthermore, undocumented migrants in Mexico face one of the highest rates of impunity in the world (Le Clercq Ortega et al. 2023, 7). In the IGI-2020 (Global Impunity Index), Mexico has an index of 49.57 points per 100,000 inhabitants, while Slovenia has the lowest index (20.26 points per 100,000 inhabitants) and Thailand the highest (62.82 points per 100,000 inhabitants). The three states with the highest levels of impunity are Mexico (74.55), Baja California (69.84) and Veracruz (65.56). This is partly due to Mexico's lack of institutional capacity to define security policies and provide access to justice (Le Clercq Ortega et al. 2023). In this respect, Mexico has an average of 4.36 judges per 100,000 inhabitants, which is low compared to the global average of 17.83 per 100,000 inhabitants (Le Clercq Ortega et al. 2023).

Undocumented migrants also experience corruption, understood as 'the abuse of public power for private gain' (Corona-Treviño 2023). Corruption costs Mexico 5% of its gross domestic product (GDP) per year (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) 2017). It disproportionately affects vulnerable groups, by draining public resources and facilitating actions that disregard ethical principles and integrity (McMann, Seim, Teorell and Lindberg 2020). As we will see later in this study, arbitrary detention, neglect or extortion by authorities discourages many migrant women from coming forward and reporting. To avoid being intercepted by the police, some women take alternative routes or make decisions that further increase the risks of the journey.

The safety of asylum-seekers is also compromised in state detention centres for migrants. There are currently 54 centres, the four with the highest capacity being located in Tapachula (Chiapas), Acayucan (Veracruz), Villahermosa (Tabasco) and Iztapalapa (Mexico City) (INM 2024). In April 2023, following the fire at the Ciudad Juárez detention centre that killed 45 migrants, the INM temporarily suspended the activities of 33 centres and formally asked the National Human Rights Commission (CNDH for its acronym in Spanish) to review their status and determine which should be closed, rehabilitated or allowed to continue operating (INM 2024). In June 2023, the government launched a civil protection programme, supported by the Mexican Commission for Refugee Assistance (COMAR for its Spanish acronym) and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), among others, to ensure the safety of undocumented migrants in situations of mobility.

Some migrant detention centres are run by the National Guard as a military institution (Human Rights Watch 2021; Ávila Morales, Díaz de León and Andrade 2017). This has serious consequences for undocumented migrants, especially women, who require care with an intersectional focus (IMUMI 2022). Fernández de la Reguera (2020) presents the Siglo XXI migration station in Tapachula (Chiapas) as a highly militarised space where 'low-ranking' officials and armed police demand obedience from those intercepted along the route and offer them limited access to health, security and justice. She also reports how INM and CBP personnel arbitrarily detain migrant women, regardless of whether they are pregnant or sick, their age, or whether they are travelling with children and/or other dependants.

2. Institutional machismo on the route

During their journey through Mexico, undocumented migrant women are often exposed to specific forms of gender-based violence and discrimination (IMUMI 2022). Mexico has very high levels of gender-based violence, including feminicide, kidnapping, trafficking, extortion and injuries (Executive Secretariat of the National Public Security System (SESNSP for its acronym in Spanish) 2025). Migrant women arrive in a country where an average of 9 women were violently killed every day in 2024 (Cámara de Diputados 2025). Of the cases of violence against women registered in 2024 (32.7% of registered cases of violence), only 0.67% were classified as feminicides, 9.48% as 'other crimes against personal freedom' and 4.33% as 'other crimes against life and physical integrity' (Executive Secretariat of the National Public Security System (SESNSP for

its acronym in Spanish) 2024). This raises the question of how feminicides are recorded, and whether attacks 'against personal freedom' and 'against life and physical integrity' should also be classified as feminicidal violence, since they can seriously endanger women's physical integrity.

Over the years, the debate on what Radford and Russell (1992) originally termed 'femicide', has increasingly pointed to the responsibility of state forces. In 1978, the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) called on authorities to make agreements to prevent and prosecute cases of femicide and to guarantee women's fundamental rights and freedoms on an equal basis with men (Article 3) (UN 1988). In the same vein, the Convention of Belém do Pará (Inter-American Commission on Women 1994) urged the states in the region to make an effective commitment to women's safety by providing resources to prosecute and punish aggressors. States were also urged to provide specialised services for women victims of violence and, where appropriate, counselling services for all members of the family (Inter-American Commission on Women 1994).

Lagarde (2006) coined the term 'feminicide' following the discovery of women's bodies half-buried in the desert and dumped in the rubbish dumps of Ciudad Juárez in the early 1990s. The term 'feminicide' focuses on the social and cultural prejudices against women held by both men and women, as well as by members of state forces and institutions, including the police, migration guards and immigration officials. These prejudices reproduce the ideological basis of male chauvinism, which exalts virility and the superiority of men over women (Gutmann, 2007). Male chauvinism refers to 'a set of beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours' based on the opposition of the masculine and feminine as distinct and mutually exclusive and 'the superiority of the masculine in areas considered important by men' (Castañeda 2020, 25). Several studies call for a rethinking of male chauvinism in the region, suggesting that while it is very much a part of life in the region, masculinity is beginning to be deeply contested, reflecting the difficulties faced by men in a world where old values are in decline (see Fuller 2012).

Building on the concept of feminicide, I refer to institutional machismo as a form of institutional violence (Pita 2017) that operates through a set of discriminatory and violent norms and practices directed against women by corrupt and negligent state actors that undermine their chances of escaping the dynamics of violence from which they are fleeing. In this respect, state forces contribute to the creation of a dysfunctional and corrupt socio-legal space in which women feel their integrity and their families are at risk (Estévez 2017).

I focus on four types of exclusionary and corrupt practices by state actors that threaten women's integrity and undermine their chances of escaping the dynamics of violence from which they are often fleeing. Later, I will support this with the stories of the women interviewed for this work.

First, many of the women interviewed described feeling trapped in a complex and ever-changing legal system for seeking asylum in both Mexico and the US. Particularly those women who were desperate to reach their destination, complained about the slow and opaque nature of the application process for an interview with the US authorities at the northern border through CBP One, a mobile application created by the US CBP to schedule appointments with the US authorities at the border with Mexico. While the CBP One app facilitated the orderly arrival of more than 1.5 million migrants between October 2022 and December 2024 (Chishti and Bush-Joseph 2025), research shows that it was flawed, with the application frequently crashing and displaying error messages, failing to match faces, and offering too few appointments for the number of people waiting (Pinto 2023). Some organisations have also reported that the application's poor services violated international law by denying access to those who could not read, write or speak English, Spanish or Haitian Creole, as well as those who did not have mobile phones or access to the internet (Amnesty International 2023; Robert Strauss Center for International Security and Law 2023). As we will see, all of this exacerbated a strong sense of entrapment among migrant women, which affected their anxiety levels and led some of them to make poor decisions. President Trump's decision to disable it in January 2025 left refugees and asylum seekers at the border without appointments.

Second, the slow process of obtaining asylum in the US, coupled with the lack of response from the Mexican authorities, leave women at risk of being intercepted and attacked with impunity by criminals, traffickers and others. Many women recounted their experiences of physical violence with the migration guards (*migra)* and corrupt officials. Several organisations show that sexual harassment is a normal practice in remote areas or on

trains by people they identify as criminals, traffickers, fellow migrants, migration guards and corrupt officials. For example, Doctors Without Borders reported in 2018 that almost a third of the women who benefited from their care programmes were victims of sexual violence (Doctors Without Borders 2018). In his book *Los Muertos y el Periodista*, the journalist Óscar Martínez states that migrant women are raped for fun while travelling through Mexico, as the perpetrators know they will not be reported or arrested (Martínez 2021, 177). It has also been reported that sexual violence or the threat of sexual violence is often used by guards and state officials to terrorise women (Amnesty International 2020, 15). Regarding sexual abuse by armed state agents, reports show that in 2015, around 97,000 women over the age of 15 were subjected to violence by military or naval personnel. In 13.7% of cases they were groped, touched or forced to undress; in 19.7% they were kicked, punched, pinched and pushed; in 18% they were subjected to surveillance and monitoring; and in 4% they suffered rape or attempted rape (Reyes 2021, 2). Torreblanca and Vela Barba (2019) also report violent and discriminatory behaviour by agents of the Ministry of Defence (Sedena) and the Ministry of the Navy (Semar). The threat of being abused and assaulted by migration guards and state officials during the journey exacerbated the women's sense of hopelessness and mistrust.

Third, in the women's accounts of their journeys, there is also a continuum of references to neglect and abuse at the hands of migration guards (*migra*) and INM and COMAR officials in accessing information and assistance in seeking asylum and shelter. In their stories, gender-based violence often intersects with racism and classism (IMUMI 2022; Corona-Treviño 2023).

The fourth practice relates to poor support and limited access to information, freedom of movement, water and food in migrant shelters. According to Fernández de la Reguera (2020), the neglect and hostility towards women in public spaces is often manifested in shelters run as penal institutions with a military regime. We will see how, even in these cases, the neglect of the relevant authorities, such as the INM and the DIF, creates a strong sense of frustration and forces some women to take decisions that increase the risk of being attacked by others along the migration route.

The women's accounts of institutional violence also reveal the mechanisms they use to overcome obstacles and continue their journey north. For example, to avoid encountering the authorities at checkpoints along the way (*retenes*), many women often decide to take alternative routes, risking their lives and those of their families. With no resources and abandoned by the authorities, many women have no choice but to sleep in parks or bus stations or beg on the streets to buy food and water and pay for bus tickets. To avoid travelling alone, some women stay with abusive partners or enter into relationships with violent men they have just met.

Moreover, while many women demonstrate their capacity for autonomy and agency in the migration process, they still share with men the gender structures that have been ingrained in them from an early age. In this regard, Segato (2010, 113) speaks of 'moral violence' as a kind of 'symbolic imprisonment' that undermines their self-esteem and leads them to perceive the abuse they receive as something natural. However, as Butler points out, gender roles are cultural constructed based on the sex assigned at birth and women perform their gender according to what they have learned from other women (Butler 1990). To the extent that the construction of gender is contextual, repetitive and imitative, it can change. The stories of migrant women – what they tell and also what they keep silent – show an incipient resistance to male power and control, including that of the state, and their strategies of care and survival that empower them. In this sense, the journey becomes a transformative experience, leading many women to begin to challenge learned gender structures that perpetuate the superiority of male powers, including corrupt and negligent authorities.

4. Methodology

Most of the information in this article was gathered during two visits in 2023 to a migrant shelter in Iztapalapa (Mexico City) and follow-up interviews with some of the shelter's participants and professionals. Together with Alejandra Díaz de León, I conducted 15 in-depth interviews with migrant women, two focus groups (one with 12 women and one with 14 women), and interviews with a volunteer, the shelter's psychologist (three times) and the director (twice). In 2024, I conducted online follow-up interviews with three

migrant women who had reached the US. The psychologist at the shelter in Mexico City, with whom I am still in contact, told me how some of my participants had fared.

The shelter is located in Iztapalapa (Mexico City), a neighbourhood with high levels of violence and insecurity. In the area, 70.5% of the adult population feel unsafe, 35% have experienced some kind of conflict or confrontation and only 7% trust the authorities (National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI for its Spanish acronym) 2023). The shelter provides psychosocial support and counselling, education and physical health care to around 30 people who have suffered, or are at serious risk of suffering, violations of their rights.

I interviewed people from Ecuador, Honduras, Guatemala, Colombia, Venezuela, Haiti, Cuba and Afghanistan. The women were travelling in groups, with their partners, or with their children or grandchildren. None of the women were travelling alone. Some women had left their children behind in their countries of origin and were hoping to be reunited with them in the US. All the women were in a hurry to get their documents and continue their journey north. The women travelling with minors believe that travelling with minors makes it easier for them to enter the US legally.

When I first visited the shelter in Mexico City in January 2023, most of the women said they were fleeing gender-based violence, including persecution and extortion by their partners. On my second visit at the end of the year, most of the people were Venezuelans who had fled for economic or political reasons. There was also a strong gender component in cases where women were fleeing local gangs, organised crime, poverty and/or lack of opportunities. In almost every interview, women invoked their gender identity and/or their role as caregivers as mothers or wives to recount their experiences of the journey, including the fear of encounters with migration guards and officials.

All of the interviewees felt that they were halfway through their journey north. All the women, particularly those travelling without a partner and with dependent children, said they were eager to continue their journey and reach their destination, but feared falling into the hands of corrupt male authorities who would abuse them or detain them near the border.

The purpose of the interviews with the women was to learn first-hand about their experiences of gender-based violence at the hands of the authorities during the migration process, their mechanisms of resistance and the extent to which the journey had been a transformative experience for them. The aim of the focus groups was to break the ice with the participants and build trust. The experience was emotional for many of the women who felt comfortable sharing their experiences viva voce with other women, many of whom had been through similar situations. In this sense, we felt that sharing their experiences empowered them and encouraged them to talk about and heal their traumas. During the interviews, we created a space of engagement, respect and listening where the women could express themselves freely without having to justify their choices or the contradictions in their stories. By listening to their stories, we showed interest and respect for them. I noticed that some of the women were beginning to question the learned gender stereotypes that underpinned the dynamics of the violence they had fled and continued to face. I felt that others were not ready to talk about this.

In all the narratives of the migration process, it emerged that the journey was neither bidirectional nor perfectly planned, nor were they passive victims of the system. The women often mentioned changes of plans, temporary stops to rest or to save money to continue their journey. For some women, this was their second attempt after being intercepted and deported. It is very difficult to capture in a single article the multiple situations these women face and the different stages they were going through at the time I interviewed them.

Before conducting the interviews, I obtained ethical approval from my university (London Metropolitan University) and we informed the shelters of the aim of the project and how we would ensure that we did not breach any ethical boundaries. All interviews and focus groups were recorded with prior informed consent and the transcripts were anonymised. All names used in this article are pseudonyms. The participants' stories provided incredibly rich data for my research, which was funded by the Center for US–Mexican Studies, University of California San Diego, US.

5. Results: women's accounts of institutional machismo on the route

5.1 Forced entrapment

The women interviewed for this study stated that they were travelling with a sense of urgency to reach their destination, to be reunited with their families and to find stability and safety. The majority of women wanted to reach the US, but some women were open to being sent to Canada. The women eagerly awaited their appointments with US authorities at one of the border crossings on the US-Mexico border via the CBP One app. The women complained that the application provided very little information, crashed frequently and, as Pinto (2023) points out, offered too few appointments for the large number of applicants. Gisela, a Venezuelan woman travelling with her two children and her husband, expressed her concern and frustration at the opaque application process through the app:

> We're going through the process on the website, which isn't easy, you have to wait... because there are thousands of people registering... whether they will call me or not... they don't call everyone... it's a matter of luck... there are words that are in English, well, I don't understand them... when I went to log in, it was deleted, and I have to go back again... so I'm writing to the lawyer, but she's busy too… I really don't know what to do... (Gisela, Mexico City shelter, January 2023)[2]

Some women complained that the success of the process also depended on having a reliable mobile phone and being able to use it, which was a problem for women with limited knowledge of technology or who could not read or write. Daniela, an Ecuadorian woman with very limited literacy skills who was travelling with her two young daughters, expressed her frustration at the problems she was having accessing the application with her mobile phone. 'I bought this mobile phone, it's useless... sometimes… it's on by itself and it turns itself off and it doesn't want to switch back on' (Daniela, Mexico City shelter, November 2023).

The slowness and dysfunctionality of the application created a sense of entrapment and anxiety among women, especially those without partners and with dependent children, or those fleeing their ex-partners or local gangs. This was the case for Alba, a Honduran woman fleeing local gangs in her country who was travelling with her two grandchildren, aged 13 and 14. The slow processing of her paperwork to travel to the US left her feeling anxious and trapped in Mexico City, particularly as she had just learned that the gangs had located their whereabouts: 'I want to leave because... It's not the first time that people from Honduras have come to Mexico to kill people... They don't play games... And here I am... I don't know what to do' (Alba, Mexico City shelter, January 2023).

Alba was so eager to continue her journey that she even considered turning her grandchildren over to the US authorities as unaccompanied minors in order to increase their chances of leaving Mexico City. Two months after our interview, the woman was living in Mexico City on a humanitarian visa that allowed her to stay in the city for one year. The city offered her anonymity and the possibility of finding work, albeit in the informal labour market. The visa also prevented her from being deported to Honduras and allowed her to eventually travel north in search of work. Eight months later, the shelter psychologist told me that Alba was still in Mexico City, recovering from the abuse she had suffered at the hands of her ex-partner, whom she had met at the shelter. Alba's main concern was still for the safety of her grandchildren, who had mental health problems related to past trauma. She was making final preparations to move with her two grandchildren to Monterrey, where she hoped to find work and meet with US authorities. The woman was confident that travelling with minors would make it easier for them to enter the US legally.

[2] The translations are my own.

5.2 Migra violence in remote areas

The lack of response to asylum claims in the US, coupled with the lack of alternative from the Mexican authorities other than to continue waiting, leads some women to take the bus to the border, putting themselves at risk of being intercepted and assaulted with impunity by migration guards and corrupt officials.

This was the case with Zulay, a Venezuelan woman travelling with her five-year-old daughter and two girlfriends, whom I interviewed in November 2023. Desperate to reach the US and be reunited with her family, the woman shared her plans to continue the journey without permits. She anticipated the risk of being intercepted by migration guards along the way:

> I feel trapped because I feel like if I take my daughter and leave... I can buy a ticket and get on a bus and go to the border, and I can't do that because then they kidnap you, they extort you, the immigration guards take you down, they send you back, they do this, they do that... why do they have to keep me here like this? (Zulay, Mexico City shelter, November 2023)

In follow-up interviews with shelter staff, I learned that the women had finally made up their minds and left the shelter on their own, taking a bus north. A few days later, they told shelter staff that police officers had intercepted their bus near the border and brutally assaulted Zulay's friends, who were recovering from their injuries in hospital. The shelter's psychologist said of the impunity of the acts:

> They pull down their trousers, their underwear, they take off their clothes – they take off their clothes and touch them. One woman told me, 'I know it's not because they're searching me, I know they're not looking for drugs... I know they wanted to touch me, because that's what they do to all the women... They can do it... because there is no punishment... I assure you they have done it countless times' (Psychologist, Mexico City shelter, January 2024).

Zulay also told shelter staff that she believed the guards did not attack her because she was carrying her sleeping daughter. Zulay and her daughter had turned themselves in to US authorities and crossed the border. For Zulay travelling with her young daughter protected her from assault and ultimately sped up entering the US legally.

Other women also recounted violent encounters with police on the journey. Gabriela, a Colombian woman travelling with her partner and six-year-old son, said that of all the countries they had travelled through, Mexico was the one where they had received the least help from state forces and the most harassment and extortion from the police:

> Ah, in Mexico, from the moment you enter, my God... Mexico is very difficult... Right now, I don't even know what we're going to do. Should we take the train or the bus? Where are we going to get the money to pay the police? (Gabriela, Mexico City shelter, January 2023)

Women described their strategies for preventing state agents from stealing their money at checkpoints. For example, Daniela, the Ecuadorian woman, said that she hid the money in her young daughters' clothes: 'We always had to give them something... I hid it... I put it like this in my daughters' clothes, like this, making strips, I put it in there so they wouldn't...' (Daniela, Mexico City shelter, November 2023).

To avoid encounters with the authorities, many women take alternative routes, increasing their risk of being kidnapped and sexually abused by local gangs and others. Adriana, the Guatemalan woman travelling with her partner, described how they were intercepted by a group of men wearing balaclavas and carrying machetes while walking along a remote route in Veracruz. The woman was unable to say whether they were policemen working for local gangs or members of the organised crime network in the area. Adriana spoke of the serious risk of becoming a victim of sexual violence: 'Because it wasn't my will, but... four men, about three men, they grabbed me by force and no, even if it wasn't your will' (Adriana, Mexico City shelter, January 2023).

As the psychologist at the Mexico City shelter pointed out in a follow-up interview in January 2023, many women in transit tend to avoid talking openly about sexual assault because it is a painful subject. For Adriana,

a woman should not be considered guilty if she has been sexually assaulted by strangers. This interpretation of the facts can be seen as a mechanism to free herself from the shame associated with sexual harassment.

Adriana also expressed her frustration with Mexico's complex bureaucracy: 'There are places where they don't ask for papers, because even where we are working, they don't ask us for papers, not one single paper. But in other places they do, there on the border they do...' (Adriana, Mexico City shelter, January 2023). Several women shared Adriana's views, as we will see below.

5.3 Neglect and hostility from the government authorities

Women express frustration at being neglected and discriminated against by INM and COMAR officials when trying to access information, assistance and shelter in Mexico. Gisela, the Venezuelan woman travelling with her two children and her husband, recounted her experience with the unsympathetic officials in Tapachula:

> They sent us back, and I said to my husband, 'as long as it takes, until they give me my permit... I'm not going any further.' ... we went to the immigration office... we slept in the queue for three nights, because there were many Haitians, many Cubans, many Dominicans... And then, well, everyone has to wait their turn, right? ... we slept there, on cardboard... And then they gave us a sheet, they took our photo, from there we had to go to an ecological park... (Gisela, Mexico City shelter, January 2023)

The director of the Mexico City shelter distinguishes between the treatment of migrant women at local and state level. She mentioned that the Mayor's Office of Iztapalapa has spaces that offer refuge to migrant women who are victims of gender-based violence. This contrasts with the lack of support and male chauvinism that has been noted in some of the actions of COMAR and INM towards undocumented migrant women:

> For example, we have seen cases of mothers with children from different fathers... This is where the re-victimisation begins: 'Why does this one have one father, this one has another and...?', without thinking about the causes or the situation of why they have different fathers, right? Or in the COMAR interviews: 'But how is a man going to have the resources to come from Honduras to Mexico and look for you?' (Director, Mexico City shelter, November 2023)

Similarly, a volunteer at the Mexico City shelter explained that in remote areas, migrant women are further neglected by state agents, to the extent that, for example, migrant women victims of sexual violence often decide not to formalise their complaints and continue their journey:

> The staff of the public prosecutor's office are not prepared... they throw it away... as if it wasn't important... also the remoteness of the centres... they had to send someone and the boss said: 'I'm not going there.' He sent someone else.... he didn't want to come because it was too far away... Oh my God, really?' (Volunteer, Mexico City shelter, November 2023)

As IMUMI (2022) and Corona-Treviño (2023) note, women's accounts of gender discrimination and neglect often intersect with racist and classist behaviour. State forces thus contribute to a socio-legal space in which women feel their integrity is at risk (Estévez 2017). In this regard, a Venezuelan lawyer travelling with her three-year-old daughter shared her disappointment after a confrontation with an immigration guard: 'I am in a country where I have no voice... Where I am nobody, where I have no one to call, nowhere to complain' (Lucía, Mexico City shelter, November 2023).

Several women explained that the lack of resources and support from the authorities led them to sleep in parks or bus stations and to beg for water, food and money to pay for bus tickets or accommodation. In such a precarious situation, some women continued to suffer from a lack of support and understanding from the authorities. Gisela, the Venezuelan woman travelling with her husband and two young children, said that the police had evicted the family from a park in Tapachula and they ended up sleeping in the bus station. Two

young Afghan women, who did not speak Spanish, said that the police offered no help when their mobile phones and money were stolen while they were sleeping in a park. This situation increased their risk of being attacked by criminals, fellow travellers and other people they met along the way. Daniela, the Ecuadorian woman travelling with her two young daughters, was begging on the street when a man offered her money in exchange for one of her young daughters:

> I told him: 'Even if I'm crazy, I'm not going to sell my daughter' ... I stood up and shouted at him: 'What's wrong with you?' I told him... 'My daughter may be starving, but leave her alone... Get out of my way,' I said (Daniela, Mexico City shelter, November 2023)

5.4 Shelters like prisons

Some of the women interviewed for this study spoke of the poor support they received in some migrant shelters which operated with protocols that they felt were similar to those of penal institutions. As Fernández de la Reguera (2020) notes, male chauvinism, racism and classism converge in state migrant centres and shelters, where derogatory values are manifested in a lack of understanding and hostility towards women.

Gabriela, the young Colombian woman, described her experience in a migrant shelter run by the National System for Integral Family Development (DIF for its Spanish acronym) in Palenque, where she had been sent by the police. She said that residents had limited access to information, food and water, were confined to their rooms for most of the day, and were not allowed to go out to work. Despite her repeated requests, Gabriela explained well her feeling of being trapped, as she felt that both the shelter staff and the government officials were turning a blind eye to her precarious situation:

> Totally trapped. Terrible, terrible, terrible... They wouldn't let my child go out. I did everything I could. I went to Migration, they couldn't do anything, they said it was the DIF's responsibility. I went to the DIF, they couldn't do anything, they said it was Migration's responsibility, because it was Migration who had brought us to the shelter. And so they washed their hands of it (Gabriela, Mexico City shelter, January 2023)

The woman finally fled the shelter a month after her arrival. But before continuing her journey north, she returned to the INM and DIF offices and explained why her family had decided to leave: 'I came back to show my face, because we are not ungrateful' (Gabriela, Mexico City shelter, January 2023). Gabriela proudly stressed that they had returned to give an explanation to the authorities because they were undocumented migrants, 'not criminals' fleeing the authorities.

A young illiterate Honduran woman named Isabel, who was travelling with two young children, one of them a six-month-old infant, recounted a similar experience in a shelter near Mexico City. Isabel explained that at the shelter she and her children were not allowed to have access to their room during the day, so she had to sleep in the common areas with her newborn baby: 'I didn't want to be there anymore. I wanted to be somewhere where I could rest, where my children could be safe... I felt trapped there.' (Isabel, Mexico City shelter, January 2023). Despite the difficulties, including her lack of literacy, which made it difficult for her to access government information, Isabel was transferred to the Iztapalapa shelter (Mexico City), which was more suitable for families with young children.

These testimonies show, on the one hand, the inadequate and somewhat coercive support given to women and children in some migrant shelters and, on the other hand, the agency of some women to continue to develop their agency to make strategic decisions.

5.5 Women's empowerment

The narratives of some of the women interviewed for this study show that they had begun to distance themselves from the idea of being passive individuals with no agency. As Fuller (2012) points out, some women were in the process of beginning to challenge the learned ideas that exalts masculinity and the men's

'natural qualities' as superior to women's. For them, the journey becomes a transformative and empowering experience. This was the case for Zulay, one of the Venezuelan women attacked by the police near the US border, for whom the difficulties of the journey had led her to reconsider the husband's role and to emphasise her physical strength and agency: 'Yes, I have become very strong because I also depended a lot on my husband... because he is the man, he is the strongest, he is the one who says what we are going to do... But now... I even feel that I am stronger than him' (Zulay, Mexico City shelter, November 2023).

For Daniela, the Ecuadorian woman who had to beg to feed her young daughters, the journey made her reflect on her ex-husband's lack of support in raising their daughters: 'And where was the father? I was alone... he always said to me: "Who's going to love you if you're ugly?" ... when he came home drunk... he always hit me...' (Daniela, Mexico City shelter, November 2023). Daniela's narrative showed that despite the difficulties she had experienced in the migration process, partly due to the lack of care from the authorities, she had begun to reflect in a new light on her role as a mother and wife, as well as on the idea that women are inferior to men: 'I worked alone to provide for my daughters... That's why I'm telling you that none of you should say anything to me or reproach me for not dressing well, for not eating well... for not wanting to do anything...' (Daniela, Mexico City shelter, November 2023)

Two months after our interview, Daniela met with US immigration officials and was transferred with her two daughters to a shelter in New York, pending resettlement. In New York, Daniela secured school places for her daughters.

Daniela and Zulay are examples of how some women navigate the difficulties of the journey, overcome the dynamics of violence and exclusion they are fleeing, and begin to challenge the idea that gender-based violence is inevitable because of their gender, as Segato (2010) explains in her approach to the notion of 'moral violence'.

6. Conclusion

All the women interviewed for this study said that they had begun the migration process because of violence and lack of opportunity in their home countries. They had all registered on the CBP One app and were waiting for their appointments with US authorities at the US-Mexico border. The women complained about the complexity, slowness and ever-changing bureaucracy for asylum seekers in the US and Mexico. The women were aware of the convenience of obtaining the necessary permits to travel safely and avoid being intercepted by migration guards, deported or sent back to Mexico's southern border. They also feared sexual abuse. All of the women in this study had experienced, witnessed or been told of hostility and violence at the hands of migration guards (la migra), INM and DIF migration officials and state detention centre staff. Some reported violent episodes in migrant shelters.

As noted in the literature, violence by state forces and impunity contribute to a corrupt socio-legal context in which women feel their integrity is at risk (Estévez 2017). This paper argues that along migration routes in Mexico, institutional violence (Pita 2017) entangles with male chauvinist values (Castañeda 2020), racist and classist prejudices (IMUMI 2022; Corona-Treviño 2023), resulting in institutional machismo. A set of gender-based discriminatory and violent practices, deeply unsympathetic to women's specific needs exacerbate the risks of the journey for women. Moreover, this paper seeks to understand how institutional machismo, combined with the complexity and opacity of the asylum application process and the lack of resources and social networks, limits their ability to break free from the learned values that often make them believe that such violence is inevitable because they are women (Segato 2010).

Interviewing our participants in a shelter in Mexico City allowed me to hear first-hand accounts of the migration journey and observe the conditions of women's 'entrapment', partly due to the lack of response from the authorities. Alba's story was particularly shocking, as she had just learned that organised crime had found her and her grandchildren and was coming for them. Meeting them allowed me to better understand why many women take desperate decisions that endanger their lives and the lives of their families. Such decisions and their consequences also have a strong gender component. For example, months after our interview, I learned

that Alba had failed to leave Mexico City and, in search of companionship and protection, had begun a relationship with a man she had met at the shelter who had abused her. I also learned that Zulay and her friends, tired of waiting for their appointment with the US authorities, took a bus and were sexually assaulted by police near Mexico's northern border.

The narratives of the journey also highlight the mechanisms by which women overcome such obstacles and redefine their roles as autonomous women, reversing the idea that men's 'natural qualities' are superior to women's (Butler 1990; Fuller 2012). However, we have seen that the process of gender identity development is long, complicated and multi-speed. Although there is a general consensus on the frustration of feeling ignored and abandoned by the authorities, there are differences in the articulation of their experiences. Some women were reluctant to speak openly about the sexual violence they may have witnessed or suffered. In contrast, Zulay spoke proudly of her physical strength and leadership over her husband. The difficulties of the journey had made Daniela reflect on her solo role in providing for her daughters without the support of her husband. Gabriela emphasised her agency in escaping from a migrant shelter that operated like a prison, and her honesty in returning to the INM and DIF offices to explain the reason for her sudden departure, thus distancing herself from the idea that undocumented migrants are criminals. For these women, the journey becomes a transformative and empowering experience. The current hostile environment under the Trump administration suggests that migration containment policies in Mexico will intensify, increasing the dangers faced by the most vulnerable groups, including undocumented migrant women travelling north. Research on institutional violence against this group is therefore more necessary than ever. It highlights the limited resources and the prevailing male chauvinism of the authorities responsible for supporting this particular group and the minors who often travel with them. It also problematises the notion of this group beyond that of mere victims or criminals on their way to the US. By focusing on their narratives of the journey, we highlight their agency and ultimately call for a gender perspective in the control and containment of undocumented migrant women along the routes through Mexico.

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