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RESEARCH ARTICLE

GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE, MIGRATION AND (DIS)EMPOWERMENT: WOMEN AND TRANSWOMEN MIGRANTS IN THE AMERICAS

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ABSTRACT: Migration can be a result of, exacerbate, produce and in some cases reduce gender-based violence (GBV). GBV is part of a continuum often manifesting from childhood to adulthood and from origin, through transit, and (un)intended destinations. Repeated GBV experiences can lead to complex trauma, impacting survivors' mental and physical well-being, and their decision-making abilities. Nonetheless, GBV survivors may also develop resilience and posttraumatic growth, which can positively influence their agency and foster empowering transformations. This study explores how women and transwomen migrants experience the complex intersections of GBV continuums, survival migration, and (dis)empowering agency transformations in the Americas. The study used participatory arts-based methods within a mixed-methods framework to produce an analysis focused on how GBV is experienced, challenged and transformed by women and transwomen migrants crossing and settling in Mexico. The analysis considers GBV in homelands and in transit-destinations as a continuum that intersects with criminal violence, structural oppression, transmisogynistic and homomisic values. The study further delves into how migrants form solidarity networks challenging oppression and engaging in processes of reflection, re-interpretation, and the enactment of new ways of being and doing. Migrants' narratives and artistic creations reflect not only complex GBV experiences, but also positive psychological changes that shape their agency, often leading to an expanded ability to make strategic life choices – empowerment.

KEYWORDS: agency, gender-based violence, Latin America, migration, transformation.
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1. Introduction

Migration adds a multifaceted layer of complexity to persistent gender-based violence (GBV) dynamics which position women and gender-diverse migrants in heightened precarity situations. GBV is part of a continuum manifesting in spaces of origin, transit, and (un)intended destinations (Krause, 2015). Particularly among those who have, at least partly forcibly migrated, GBV is endured multiple times, leading to prolonged trauma accumulation severely impacting their decision-making abilities, their physical and psychological wellbeing (de Silva, Glover and Katona, 2021).

Even though violence and traumatic events are real parts of migrants' experiences, they are not solely depositaries of said violence. Violence is power and where there is oppressive power there is resistance and opportunities for growth and transformation. Positions of marginality can be a "site of radical possibility, a space of resistance… a central location for the production of a counter hegemonic discourse that is not just found in words but in habits of being and the way one lives" (hooks, 1990, p. 341). This study explores how women and transwomen migrants experience the intersections of GBV continuums, survival migration in the Americas, and processes of (dis)empowering agency transformation.

Contextualised in the migration landscape in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC), this study uses the notion of 'survival migration' to describe the situation of LAC migrants who fall in between legal categories of refugeehood. Survival migrants are "persons who are outside their country of origin because of an existential threat for which they have no access to a domestic remedy or resolution and who may fall outside the dominant legal interpretation of a 'refugee'" (Betts, 2010, pp. 361, 364). In some cases, survival migrants need immediate humanitarian support while in others, "they may not be returnable and have an entitlement to temporary or more permanent forms of protection" (Betts, 2010, p. 364). This notion is highly relevant to thousands of migrants in LAC.

In recent years, the migration landscape in LAC has undergone rapid changes in mobility patterns and international politics of migration governance, with South-South mobility gaining prominence (Smith and Masferrer, 2023). While emigration from LAC to the U.S.A., Canada, or Europe continues, LAC has transformed into a space of intraregional migration (Selee, Lacarte, Ruiz Soto, Chaves, Mora, and Tanco, 2023). Nevertheless, migration studies have largely continued to focus on South-North mobility.

At the exit of LAC and at the entrance of the 'American dream', Mexico has emerged as a mixed migration hub where thousands of migrants (temporarily) settle, and (permanently) transit. The country functions as a vertical border separating the Global North from the South through its territory and restrictive migration policies (Varela, 2018). It is complex to refer to Mexico as the end of the 'South' because it is geographically in the north. This complexity is further exacerbated by the fact that the name of the superpower nation in the Americas, arrogantly uses the name of the continent as the name of its country. The South, however, is not merely a geographical area, but rather a dynamic construct concerned with power distribution in the global order (Quijano, 2008; Sud and Sánchez-Ancochea, 2022). Therefore, this paper sees Mexico as part of South-South migration processes.

Mexico is increasingly becoming an unexpected transit-destination for asylum seekers, refugees and other migrants who leave their countries in search of safety and opportunities. Since 2020, regular and irregular migration have increased, with the migrant stock, including recognised refugees, rising by 37 percent since 2015, reaching 1.7 million in 2024 (53 percent men) (UNDESA, 2024). The best available figure on irregular migration is the one provided by the National Migration Institute (INM) which in 2024 reported a record number of over 1,400,000 detention events (Gobierno de México, 2024b, 2024a). Additionally, in 2021,

Mexico became and remains one of the countries with the highest number of new asylum claims worldwide (UNHCR, 2021).

Refugee status is being used as a transit permit and has become virtually the only way to gain access to migration documentation for survival migrants, mainly from Central and South America and the Caribbean. Due to limited capacity of the Mexican Commission for Refugee Assistance, low political will and border externalisation practices that have transformed Mexico into a stop gap to contain migrants in the South, many asylum applicants must wait for months in cities where they lack social networks and income-generating opportunities (Ríos-Rivera, 2024b). This involuntary immobility exacerbates migrants' existing challenges, pushing them into accentuated conditions of vulnerability and precarity, a form of legal violence generated by the asylum-migration regime (Menjívar, 2011).

Many LAC migrants who reach Mexico fleeing violence and precarity do not find safety there, and face further violence at the hands of criminal organisations, government agents including immigration officials, and other actors (HRW, 2022; Vedovi, 2022; Isacson and Martens, 2023). Regardless of their sexual orientation, gender identity and expression (SOGIE) migrants are at risk of violence in the hostile Mexican migration context. Extensive research has emphasised that women and gender-diverse migrants are more likely to be exposed to exclusion, poverty, and violence, not only when crossing Mexico but also in spaces of origin and longer-term settlement (López Ricoy, Andrews and Medina, 2021; Torre Cantalapiedra, 2021).

In this context, women and gender-diverse migrants confront continuous forms of GBV which are part of wider power structures reproducing vulnerability in origin, transit, temporary and longer-term destinations. Nonetheless, agency is also part of the story. Although limited by oppressive power structures, migrants demonstrate agency and navigate violence by forming solidarity networks and creating ambivalent spaces for empowerment. Agency is about having the option to act or not to act, and about deciding upon goals people value and have reason to value (Alkire, 2008). The 'expansion of agency' is empowerment, transforming from a situation of denial of the ability to make strategic life choices to an expansion in said ability (Kabeer, 1999).

While acknowledging the oppression faced by migrants, I argue that the intersection of GBV and survival migration involves not only oppression, but also agency, the formation of solidarity networks, and posttraumatic growth, ultimately facilitating empowering agency transformations. Drawing on interactions with LAC migrants in three Mexican cities, I use a situated intersectionality approach to locate GBV within wider power structures, while uncovering the ways in which migrants exercise and expand their agency. The study employs a participatory arts-based research approach, enabling migrants to create photo-narratives expressing their experiences, sharing them with others, and engaging in reflective processes.

In what follows, I introduce the conceptual framework, focusing on GBV, complex trauma, posttraumatic growth and agency expansion. I then present the findings, dividing them in two broad categories: homeland and transit-destinations, while maintaining the notion of continuums to examine how violence, displacement and agency transformations occur throughout life, from childhood through adulthood and from origin, through transit and (un)intended destinations.

2. Gender-based violence in migration and agency transformations

GBV refers to violence rooted in sexed-gendered norms, and inequality structures that disproportionately targets women, transwomen and other gender diverse people. It encompasses various forms of violence including physical, sexual, psycho-emotional, and socio-economic abuse, targeting persons based on their

sex, gender, sexual orientation or gender identity (Freedman, Sahraoui and Tastsoglou, 2022, p. 5). Although GBV is experienced by people of all genders, women, transwomen and other gender diverse people are the main targets, with men being the predominant perpetrators (Phillimore, Block, Bradby, Ozcurumez, and Papoutsi, 2023).

"Women, gender non-conforming people, sexual minorities are regularly misrecognised", increasing their risk of living in precarity – a politically induced condition, in which failing social and economic support networks increase the risk of "disease, poverty, starvation, displacement, and of exposure to violence without protection" (Butler, 2015, 2009, p. 2). The misrecognition often materialises in violence. Between January and September of 2024 at least 244 trans and gender-diverse individuals were murdered, mostly in LAC (TvT, 2024). Simultaneously, violence against women, remains high, with six women being murdered every hour globally (Broom, 2020). Gender-based inequality and abuse are also experienced in other aspects of social life including institutional rights, education, and work. Such disparities are sustained by hetero-patriarchal regimes that render feminised and gender diverse identities as dangerous and often impossible to survive.

Migration complexifies GBV dynamics, as it can be a result of, exacerbate, produce and in some cases reduce GBV, depending on multiple intersecting factors of inequality and identity (Phillimore, Block, Bradby, Ozcurumez, and Papoutsi, 2023; Tastsoglou and Nourpanah, 2019). GBV and is part of a continuum with diverse manifestations overlapping in spaces of origin, transit, temporary or longer-term settlement (Goodson, Darkal, Hassan, Taal, Altaweel and Phillimore, 2020; Krause, 2015). Many migrants, especially women, gender-diverse and feminised people, have experienced GBV before they framed their migratory projects with the risk of violence being amplified during migration and when settling (Latouche, 2023; Phillimore, Block, Bradby, Ozcurumez, and Papoutsi, 2023).

The triple trauma paradigm is a useful framework for exploring gender-based violence as a continuum of traumatic experiences across migrants' lives, from places of origin, through transit, to (un)intended destinations (Miller and Rasco, 2004). It is important to note that these migratory stages are not linear, as migrants adapt and change their plans and decisions based on various individual, interpersonal, and policy-level factors. Transit spaces can sometimes become destinations and vice-versa, while origin locations often transform into transitory spaces and destinations. Especially for those who have experienced some degree of forced migration, GBV is often experienced multiple times throughout their lives and complex mobility processes, leading to prolonged polyvictimisation and trauma accumulation – or complex trauma, exacerbating existing inequalities and disadvantages (de Silva, Glover and Katona, 2021). Complex trauma encompasses situations that overwhelm individuals' "capacity to control, cope with, or withstand […]. [T]hey cause fundamental and life-altering psychophysiological harm" (Ford and Courtois, 2020, p. 4).

Even though repeated GBV experiences can result in complex trauma, severely impacting survivors' mental and physical well-being, as well as their decision-making abilities, research has shown that survivors may also develop resilience and posttraumatic growth, , which can positively influence their agency (Sabri and Granger, 2018; Taylor, Charura, Williams, Shaw, Allan, Cohen, Meth, and O'Dwyer, 2024). While it is critical to explore how migrants face gendered oppression, it is equally essential to examine how they resist, negotiate and transform their agency individually and collectively. Agency is a temporally embedded process informed by the past, oriented toward the future and situated in the present (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998, p. 963). It involves a person's limited but real ability to make independent choices within their circumstances (de Haas, 2021, p. 14).

The expansion of agency is empowerment (Ibrahim and Alkire, 2007). Though this notion has been overly used, diluting its meaning and strategic value, empowerment acknowledges inequalities, and is concerned

with transforming power relations and contesting gender inequality along with other intersecting factors such as class, race, and ethnicity (Batliwala, 2007; Cornwall, 2016). Empowerment is a multidimensional and relational process of agential change, where transformations may occur in one area of life but not others. It refers to the "expansion in people's ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them" (Kabeer, 1999, p. 437). Agency, resources, and achievements are necessary for making strategic choices, where agency entails observable action and "meaning, motivation and purpose that individuals bring to their actions; their *sense* of agency or 'power within'" (Kabeer, 1999, p. 438). It encompasses the capacity to act – or not to act – and make choices that shape individuals' lives and influence others (Ozkazanc-Pan, 2019). Such exercise of agency involves a process of critical consciousness that challenges, or changes norms, practices or institutions that perpetuate subordination (Kabeer, 1999).

LAC women and transwomen survival migrants crossing and settling in Mexico represent experiences where GBV, survival migration and agency transformations intersect. Research has explored GBV experiences in this context highlighting the amplified risks that women face. While research is increasingly focusing on the experiences of transwomen and other gender-diverse migrants, recognising that 'gender issues' are not only about feminised experiences, the emphasis often remains on women (Landeros, Rios Garcia, Cano Padilla, Maas Pérez, and Scalisse García, 2022; López Ricoy, Andrews and Medina, 2021; Ramírez Ramos, Nazar Beutelspacher, Zapata Martelo, Sánchez Ramírez and Salvatierra Izaba, 2020; Torre Cantalapiedra, 2021). Furthermore, GBV studies in LAC migration contexts tend to centre on the multiple forms of violence faced by migrants. Even though such an endeavour is important and necessary, focusing solely on vulnerability and violence can conceal the power migrants possess and use not only to avoid violence, but to resist and reach their goals.

A small but growing body of work has explored dynamics of resistance, resilience and transformation among women, men and gender diverse migrants in the Americas, mainly in Mexico and its borderlands. Recent studies have used the concept of 're-existencia' (re-existence) to show how migrants transform their ways of 'being-in-the-world' through practices of solidarity that move beyond survival (Glockner, Borzacchiello, Torres, Faria, Danze, Herrera-Martínez, García-Figueroa, and Niño-Vega, 2024). Other studies have demonstrated that, despite experiences of GBV and discrimination, migration can support the "development of resilience through new ways of living gender and sexuality" (Valenzuela and Anguiano-Téllez, 2022, p. 1). Relatedly, Brigden (2018) questions a narrative of gendered violence that is purely based on subordination, exploring migration journeys as 'survival plays' where migrants manipulate gendered performances which "potentially reinforce or destabilize gender dichotomies, generating social ambiguity" (Brigden, 2018, p. 112). Encounters between strangers can enable new performances and interpretations of gender scripts. When new ways of 'being and doing' emerge as material and cultural possibilities – as it occurs through migration – the integrated character of unquestioned propositions of culture begin to vanish (Kabeer, 1999). That is when a critical consciousness may become possible, potentially triggering processes of agency change and ambivalent spaces for empowerment.

Empowerment involves a transformation from a situation of denial of the ability to make strategic life choices to an expansion in said ability (Kabeer, 1999). Arguably, women and transwomen who at least partly, involuntarily migrated and who have faced GBV, have been denied said ability. However, such an oppressive denial is not static, it is continually negotiated, resisted, and transformed through migrants' agency. As migrants navigate the field of migration, including its governance mechanisms, informal authority structures and local contexts, they do not only react. They relate to each other, reflect, set goals,

and transform. Without overlooking oppression, I argue that some of these transformations are rather positive and may be experienced as empowering agency transformations.

Participatory arts-based research (PABR) methods can be valuable tools for studying the complex interplay between gendered oppression, and agency transformation in migration. These methods have been long used by grassroots organisations, artivists and local communities to explore social justice, reveal power imbalances, build networks and challenge oppression, emerging as a "means of creating critical awareness or raising consciousness." (Leavy, 2020, p. 24). When used "responsibly and ethically arts-based methods can facilitate empathetic responses and horizontal channels of learning: both of which are critical to dismantling oppression and advancing social justice" (Oliveira, 2019, p. 537). While PABR has been increasingly used in migration studies, only a small but growing body of work has explored issues of GBV and transformation using these methods, with scholars calling for more PABR (Bagley and Castro-Salazar, 2019; Lopes Heimer, 2024; Martin, 2023; McIlwaine and Ryburn, 2024; Serafini, 2020).

Given these absences and calls for scholarly attention, I use an intersectionally situated[1] lens to explore how LAC women and transwomen survival migrants experience GBV continuums, and (dis)empowering processes of agency transformation. As I incorporate PABR, I further shed light on how these methods can open spaces for reflection about ones' situation and past experiences, triggering processes of critical consciousness, and influence agency change.

3. Methodology[2]

My methodology was shaped by my perspectives, identifications, and experiences. I engage in this research as a *mestiza* woman with a personal and familial history of migration. I follow a phenomenological approach to explore experiences, interpretations, and meanings people give to their actions. I used a QUAL□quan mixed-methods research (MMR) design for complementarity and development purposes (Greene, 2007; Schoonenboom and Johnson, 2017). As GBV and (dis)empowerment are complex and multidimensional, using MMR allowed for the exploration of its various aspects from multiple perspectives. Further, I incorporated the PABR method photovoice, which combines participatory photography with narrative creation to enable spaces where people can share their stories through photos they take and narratives or voices they add to their images. It allows for a relaxed and open bond bridging social and cultural gaps and allowing participants to share only what they want and shape the research agenda (Carlson, Engebretson and Chamberlain, 2012; Wang and Burris, 1997).

My exploration was undertaken in three Mexican cities: Tapachula, bordering Guatemala, Mexico City, and Tijuana, bordering the USA. From October 2022 to July 2023, I collaborated with 10 civil society organisations (see acknowledgments) to offer nine group photovoice workshops comprised by two 3-4 hours sessions, photo-elicited group discussions and individual interviews with 57 refugees and other survival migrants who identify themselves as women, transwomen, transmen and gay men. Food was offered at all interactions and research collaborators kept their photographs on an SD card. My collaborators countries of origin are Colombia, Cuba, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Haiti, Mexico, Nicaragua, and Venezuela. They were aged between 21 and 67 years old at the time of our first interaction, with most of them (78 percent) being between 23 and 42 years old.

[1] Situated intersectionality "is highly sensitive to the geographical, social and temporal locations..." (Yuval-Davis, 2015, para. 12).

[2] This research project is part of my doctoral project in Migration Studies at the University of Oxford and was ethically cleared by the Social Sciences and Humanities Interdivisional Research Ethics Committee.

Through the workshops my collaborators and I co-created spaces where we explored creative techniques while engaging in group conversations about identity and self-perceptions, values, past achievements, aspirations, and about how migration can transform one's life externally and internally. I also asked for their support with completing a survey questionnaire covering sociodemographic details, mobility plans, housing arrangements, and psychometric scales on stress, self-efficacy, life satisfaction, and locus of control. After the photovoice sessions I invited my collaborators to an individual life-story interview while reminding them that they were free to not take part of the interview. Offering the group photovoice workshop before the interview helped us 'break the ice', engage creatively and connect at a deeper level. Individual interviews where long and deep with many of my collaborators disclosing experiences that they had never talked about before. I am a trained psychologist, and before embarking on this research I ensured to refresh my knowledge about psychological first aids, how to support people in situations of emotional overflow, and on how to prevent vicarious trauma. After the interviews, my collaborators and I maintained contact over social media and had an interview six months later. Coupled with that, I carried out interviews with experts, activists, practitioners, government agents and local community members.

This paper analysis focuses on the cases of transwomen and women migrants who shared experiences of GBV, processes of reflection and transformation at different stages of their migratory journeys. I draw on my collaborators' stories shared during the photovoice workshops, group discussions and in individual interviews. I use an interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA) which is based on the fundamental principles of phenomenology, hermeneutics and ideography (Pietkiewicz and Smith, 2014). Even though IPA integrates an ideographic approach, researchers have highlighted that it can also be used to analyse group data and to produce more general claims based on individual lived experiences (Love, Vetere and Davis, 2020). As I noticed among my collaborators "…, there may be instances where people find it easier to talk openly about their personal perceptions and experiences in a context in which these experiences can be shared with similar other." (Millward, 2006, p. 431). GBV is a shared lived experience with groups offering a supportive structure to share and empathise with one another. I further integrated thematic analysis using line by line coding on NVivo 14 and incorporating visual data generated by my collaborators, who chose their own pseudonyms for photo credits and quotes.

While I use the term 'research collaborators' to acknowledge their expertise and contributions to knowledge co-creation, time and resource constraints limited their involvement beyond data co-production and shaping research methods. Furthermore, as this project was self-funded, I would not have been able to remunerate my collaborators for their time in analysis and co-writing, which further restricted opportunities for co-authorship. Due to these limitations, I recognise this project was not fully participatory, but rather integrated participatory elements.

4. Intersections of GBV, migration, solidarity and transformation

In this section, I delve into the complex interplay between GBV continuums, migration, support networks, and transformative experiences among women and transwomen survival migrants. By situating migrants' experiences in the broader contexts of their lives at homelands and transit-destinations, I examine how GBV and survival migration intersect, shaping psychological responses, creating challenges and opportunities for individual and collective agency, and empowerment.

4.1. Homeland: continuums of violence and survival migration

Violence rooted in childhood

Survival migrants frequently report adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) that persisted over time, signalling complex trauma. Most of my collaborators shared different ACEs which some of them linked with their current challenges in adulthood. Some of the main ACEs included neglect, parental death or lack of a caregiver figure, alcohol or drug abuser in the household, parental divorce, observing violence against women in the household, physical and sexual abuse, and especially among gender-diverse migrants, abuse due to their sexual orientation, gender identity and expression (SOGIE). While I distinguish between these forms of violence, they are all interrelated and situated within contexts of socioeconomic inequality and institutional violence (Menjívar, 2011).

Neglect in childhood was experienced mainly physically and emotionally. Physical neglect manifested in food insecurity, lack of housing and clothing, and child labour. This often related to parental death, caregivers' abandonment, alcohol or drug abuse. Parental absence or inability to care for children often resulted in the need for children to live with foster families and relatives, involving multiple additional forms of abuse. The following narratives exemplify some of these complex dynamics.

> ML.: Unfortunately, my father was a merchant, but he was also an alcoholic. I had a problem with family dysfunction. When I was about 10 years old, my mom and dad separated. Guatemalan refugee woman, 34 years old.

> Carolina: I grew up with another family. My real mother gave me away when I was four months old. She gave me to a family […]. They raised me, but they didn't raise me the way they should have. My dad, when I was 8 years old, he started abusing me. Not only him, but also one of my mother's brothers... Salvadorian refugee woman, 23 years old.

> Jenifer: I didn't grow up with my dad because he was very discriminatory. He left my mom because I was like this.
> Abril: like this?
> Jenifer: Yes, a person of diversity. He got upset and ashamed of me. I was discriminated by my brothers. Oh no, I couldn't stand it anymore, so I went with my sister. They used to beat me, they said things to me, and I moved away from them. My mom always accepted me... Although the first days were terrible because she hit me because she didn't want me to be like this. But later she accepted me, but my brothers, they always discriminated me. Honduran asylum seeker transwoman, 23 years old.

Physical abuse in childhood often co-occurred with sexual abuse. My collaborators often shared part of these experiences at the group photovoice sessions realising their shared challenges while empathising and encouraging each other, highlighting the strength they have had in continuing to move forward. The individual interviews served as soundboards for my collaborators to reflect about their complex traumatic experiences and make sense of them in a different light. As my collaborators shared their stories, I identified a behavioural pattern. Those who experienced child maltreatment and especially those who witnessed violence against their mothers or sisters, often engaged in abusive relationships later in life. Research has shown that childhood exposure to violence can increase the risk of GBV later in life, through normalisation, learned behaviour, and intergenerational trauma dynamics (Ford and Courtois, 2020; Kidman and Kohler, 2020; Mitchell, Jones, Turner, Beseler, Hamby, and Wade, 2021)

> Florecita: So, my dad gave a lot of bad life to my mom. When I saw that he beat her, I interfered. I didn't care if my dad was going to hit me. I interfered. That's how he put a lot of hatred on me. When I was 8 years old, they threw me out on the street. I went with my brother and that's how I left home and started working. Salvadorian refugee woman, 45 years old.

Florecita tried to return to her family home a few years later but was not allowed in by her father who also severely maltreated her sisters and mother. Daughters defence of mothers often exacerbates violence leading them to leave home and reflecting deep rooted misogynistic believes. The only available option she was able to take was moving in with a young man whom she recently met and who later became the father of her children. Like many Central Americans, Florecita had to navigate the presence of gangs. Her new neighbourhood was surrounded by gangs fighting against each other which made it difficult to walk across the gang-dominated territories. She had to obey the time curfew and figure out safe zones. Complex experiences of violence, trans-misogyny and discrimination intersect with local, national and transnational processes of inequality that construct systemic conditions of vulnerability.

Leaving home to survive

Internal dis-placement often precedes international migration. Internal dislocations among my collaborators were largely motivated by GBV along with other concomitant forms of violence at multiple scales. As in the cases of Florecita and Jenifer, when violence at home becomes impossible to survive, living elsewhere arises as the only option. Such moves often occur not far away even in the same neighbourhood. Sometimes, these dis-placements are experienced as liberatory while other times they are the only option to survive.

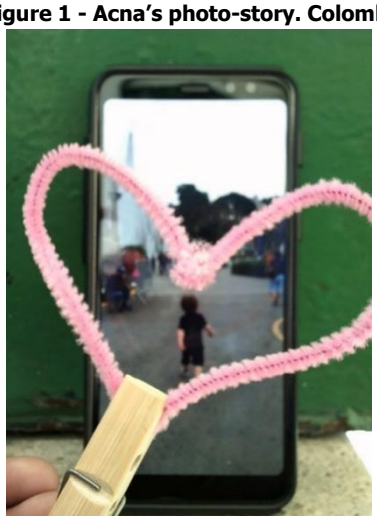
Keyli, a Salvadoran refugee woman first left her family home after years of domestic violence. 'But I will leave one day, and so I did', she said. She moved in with her boyfriend's family when she was pregnant at around the age of 16. She felt liberated from her family's problems and abuse, but quickly after she moved in with her partner's family, she began to face economic, physical and psychological abuse by her partner and his family. She had to return to her family home.

Internal displacements do not occur due to isolated cases of toxic intrahousehold dynamics, they occur within structures of organised crime, structural and political violence. State fragility and generalised violence is widespread in LAC. Before moving internationally, some of my collaborators firstly moved internally to other cities or villages. Motivators are multiple and often include generalised violence, lack of livelihoods opportunities, patriarchal oppression and transmisogynistic and homomisic values ruling gangs, streets and homes. When a gang member realised that the woman he liked had a girlfriend, he threatened both of them to take their lives unless they left their hometown. Gabriela and her partner quickly left their homes and moved to an isolated rural area to protect their lives. After nearly two years of living in precarious conditions, without the possibility to return and afraid of being threatened again due to their sexual orientation, they decided to leave their countries in search of safety and opportunities.

The case of many Venezuelan migrants also exemplifies the intersection between internal and international mobility. Acna, a young Colombian-Venezuelan migrant travelling on her Colombian passport to avoid legal violence, constantly travelled between Colombia and Venezuela to buy groceries. She referred to those moves as trips within the same country. 'There are no migration checkpoints, one can go in and

out' she said. The worsening situation in Venezuela combined with a difficult relationship with her son's father motivated her to leave Venezuela in search of opportunities. She had to leave her son with her relatives and is afraid of losing him due to her ex-partner's threats of taking her son away from her. She's determined to reunite with her boy. She expressed part of her experience through her photo-story (Figure 1).

Figure 1 - Acna's photo-story. Colombian-Venezuelan migrant woman, 24 years old.



I decided to leave everything. Leaving you was the hardest. Even having a cesarean section in the intensive care unit. But there is one God who helps everyone. Better late than never to find each other ♥
Acna.

Source: *Created through a photovoice workshop in Mexico City, March 2023. (User rights granted to author).*

4.2. Transit-destinations: navigating GBV and internal transformations

Leaving again due to gendered violence

International displacement is often not a single experience, and partly depends on geographies and the power of the passport. Many of my Caribbean collaborators, mostly Haitians but also Cubans, have gone through at least one preceding international move before reaching Mexico. More prominently after the 2010 earthquake which exacerbated already existing socioeconomic and political difficulties, some Haitians sought opportunities in South American countries, mainly Chile and Brazil but also French Guyenne. Irna, first left Haiti due to fear of re-experiencing sexual abuse by a member of the foreign military in her country. She went to Venezuela since 'it is a communist country and it is easier for me to get a visa', she said. She met the father of her son there and after some time she found herself in a severe situation of intimate partner violence and she had to leave again, that time with her son. Persecuted by her ex-partner, she sought safety in Brazil where she was supported by a local organisation and made valuable friendships with women and other migrants. 'They welcomed me with wide open arms', she told me while smiling. After some years in Brazil and after having learnt Portuguese, she was found by her persecutor and she had to leave again. She embarked on a third migratory process, now headed to the US. She crossed nine countries and the Darien jungle before reaching Mexico.

Even though Irna's path has been very challenging, she recognises the role of organisations in helping her to keep on going. I met her when I gained contact with an organisation facilitating a psychosocial support program for Haitian women in Tapachula. Irna enthusiastically expressed how valuable it has been for her

to be part of the program, learn about GBV, develop strategies to prevent it and build networks with other Haitian women to talk about their stories, reflect together and challenge violence and inequality.

Continuums of violence and solidarity

Migrant's processes of mobility through Mexico are not linear. While some of them start their journeys with a US-American dream in mind, others realise that it will be a lot more complicated to cross into the US and stay in Mexico for more extended or indefinite periods of time. Organisations, activists and scholars have denounced in multiple occasions that US border externalisation practices use Mexico as a vertical border dividing the South from the North. This contains migrants in Mexico, often pushing them into conditions of clandestinity and vulnerability (Ríos-Rivera, 2024a). Such legal violence intersects with gender and other axes of identity creating a matrix of oppression where women and gender-diverse migrants' lives are at heightened risk.

Through my ethnographic work at the southern and northern border and in the Mexican capital, I identified that many women who leave Tapachula without documents are being pushed to irregular routes where they are gang raped. On different occasions, migrant women in an irregular documentation situation, shared with me that they were stopped on route from Tapachula to the neighbouring state of Oaxaca. They were stopped by officials of the National Migration Institute who got them off the bus where they were travelling and dropped them by the road not too far from Arriaga town. Migrants are being intercepted by criminal groups who systematically rob and rape them, especially women. One of my interlocutors who shared such a story showed possible symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder including nightmares, difficulty to concentrate, and sudden memories of the traumatic event. Numerous organisations and journalists have condemned this situation.

Even though migrants experience extreme forms of violence in transit, some of them receive support from organisations and other migrants. Civil society and religious organisations offer spaces that can be safe havens for survival migrants. Some of these organisations offer different forms of temporary support beyond food and housing, including legal advice, business skills and language training, medical and psychosocial support, GBV awareness raising, among others. Although existing shelters and support programs are not enough to cover survival migrants' needs they serve as spaces for connection and relative calmness where migrants build networks, help each other, reflect about their lives, revise their plans and strategise their next steps. "I feel calm and relaxed… I have had time to think", said a Colombian asylum seeker talking about her time at a shelter.

LGBTQI+ organisations are central in offering safe spaces for gender-diverse migrants. Generally, these organisations were perceived as more open and supportive than religious organisations and those that lacked dedicated LGBTQI+ spaces. While challenges existed, many of my gender-diverse collaborators highlighted that they felt valued by these organisations. For some, being asked about their pronouns and referred to by their preferred name was novel and meaningful. Most of these organisations also offer training on gender diversity, discrimination and human rights which migrants described as important knowledge they lacked before arriving in Mexico. This training helped migrants feel more confident expressing their identity and defending themselves. "We know our rights better now", said a group of gender-diverse migrants in Tijuana.

Free gender confirmation treatment (hormones) is also provided. My transwomen collaborators highlighted this as extremely helpful and critical in their gender transition. Some began taking hormones due to the simplified access through organisations. Nevertheless, the treatment benefit ended when they left

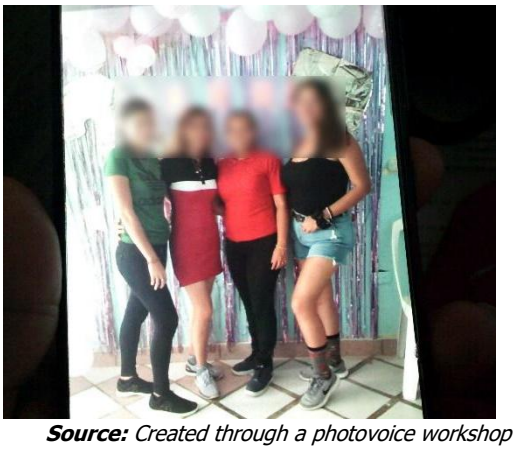
shelters, which was challenging for those who were not able to pay for private treatment. They saw reverse physical changes which generated anxiety and added to the emotional distress they were already navigating, underlying the ethical and health concerns about the provision of hormonal treatment by organisations.

Migrants connect and form solidarity networks which are crucial for building resilience and to cover caregiving needs. Women and transwomen migrants form networks of support and solidarity often by attending organisations' programs. Migrant women, in particular, tend to create care networks to look after each others' children. This enables women's participation in paid work, and liberates time for them to complete long migratory administrative procedures.

Networks are also critical for housing arrangements which need to be organised as migrants are forced to wait in transit spaces. While there are shelters throughout migrants' routes, they sometimes have no available spaces, and they are temporary. Migrants usually are allowed to live at shelters for about one to three months with a few shelters allowing stays until the completion of migratory procedures. Many migrants get stuck in Mexico, forced to wait for documentation to move freely, leading them to remain in transit spaces where they must find paid work to cover rents and living expenses. Organisations and shelters try to cope with restrictive migration policies that generate migrants' containment and overcrowding at specific locations. In trying to support as many migrants as possible, shelters introduce time limitations resulting in the need for alternative housing arrangements that can involve risks, including overcrowding, toilets and bedroom sharing which often lead to physical and sexual abuse, especially for children, women, transwomen and other gender-diverse migrants.

Women and transwomen often live together in groups to share rent costs, care for each other, and cover caregiving needs. One of my collaborators who fled GBV perpetrated by gang members in El Salvador, spent about three years in Tapachula living with a group of women she met at a migrants' work program (Figure 2). This not only helped her reduce living costs and provide a safe space for her daughters, but also to learn new ways of living. While these arrangements stem from abusive situations, the networks reflect migrants' collective agency, the formation of new relations, and ways of being and doing through practices of solidarity that go beyond survival.

Figure 2 - L de A.'s photo-story. Salvadoran refugee woman, 34 years old.



My friends

This photo represents my present, my future because it is one more achievement in my life, because these people have taught me to live in a different way. Because they are unconditional in my life, because they are one more achievement for me. Their friendship is the most valuable thing I have found in my path.

L de A.

Source: *Created through a photovoice workshop in Tapachula, November 2022. (User rights granted to the author).*

Expansive transformations

The photovoice workshops and life-story interviews contributed to migrants' processes of reflection and in some cases, helped them reinterpret their experiences and reconnect with themselves. A Nicaraguan refugee woman who fled intimate partner violence (IPV) created a photo-story where she represented her 'broken' past (left side) and 'shinny' present (Figure 3). When she talked to the group about her creation, she shared part of her struggles in dealing with her ex-abusive partner and reflected about how much stronger she felt in Mexico and about her plans to stay. Her story encouraged other women in the group who also escaped IPV, to share their stories and realisations of their sense of agency or power within.

Figure 3 - Mujer empoderada's photo-story. Nicaraguan refugee woman, 34 years old.

When I was at home, I felt broken. I didn't know if I was myself or not. But I made myself feel that I was indeed myself and that I am worth a lot. Seeing myself in a mirror I cleaned my face, and there I discovered who I was. Being where I am, I took a photo and saw that it is me and that I am worth a lot. I shine like a star.
Mujer empoderada.

Source: Created through a photovoice workshop in Tapachula, November 2022. (User rights granted to author).

My collaborators narrated changes in their self-perceptions, realising their strength, increased self-confidence and empathy, signalling processes of agency expansion and growth after traumatic events. As Dayreny, a Salvadoran refugee transwoman in Tapachula, shared, "This process has made us stronger. We feel more capable". Nicole, an Ecuadorian asylum seeker woman in Mexico City, said, "I feel stronger". Essie, a Haitian refugee woman in Tijuana who fled repeated sexual GBV, stated, "I am no longer the weak woman who used to cry and cry. Now I feel strong, I can keep going. If I could get out of the jungle [the Darién], I can get through this too". These self-perception changes also involved increased empathy and compassion for others. Madison and Ale, gender-diverse migrants in Tapachula, discussed this during a group discussion.

> Madison: Before, I was hypocritical and selfish. I had everything at hand. I didn't know what people suffered until I began my journey. Everything changed.
> I used to see an immigrant and not help them. Now I see the suffering one goes through. I didn't ask for money in my country. Now I've had to.
> Ale: She's right. Now I think, if I have something, I can share with others. Five people can eat from the same dish.

Research shows that these experiences may signal posttraumatic growth (PTG), understood as positive psychological changes experienced after traumatic events (Joseph, Murphy and Regel, 2012). Rather than viewing traumatic events as positive, PTG centres on individuals' responses to trauma and its aftermath – even when facing consecutive traumatic events. Migrants' narratives, reflect psychological changes that shape observable forms of agency, decision making and consecutive actions. This cognitive reframing process can enable new self-perceptions and influence agency, often leading to an expanded ability to make strategic life choices.

New interactions in new spaces can vanish previously unquestioned social norms and naturalised forms of oppression, generating processes of reflection, imagination, and the enactment of new ways of being and doing. As such, migration processes not only involve external change, but also internal change that can lead people to re-interpret past experiences and re-create themselves, often involving agency change and expansion. As Sandro Mezzadra (2011) notes, this is not a romanticisation of migrants' capabilities, nor a denial of violence, but rather an acknowledgement of the complexity of agency and oppression in migration.

Conclusions

This paper explored how LAC women and transwomen survival migrants differently experience GBV continuums, support networks, and ambivalent processes of agency transformation. From a situated intersectionality approach, GBV was located within wider power structures that produce vulnerability throughout migration processes. By drawing on learnings gathered through my interactions with women and transwomen migrants and their photo-narrative creations, this paper contributes to growing analyses that explore the intersection of GBV, migrants' agency and transformations throughout migratory processes.

GBV is part of a continuum where its diverse manifestations overlap in spaces of origin, transit and (un)intended destinations (Goodson, Darkal, Hassan, Taal, Altaweel and Phillimore, 2020; Krause, 2015). Migrants' narratives confirm that continuums of violence and survival migration are rooted in childhood and evolve through adulthood. A nascent body of research has shown that adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) can last into adulthood leading to complex trauma and negative wellbeing outcomes, increase the risk of GBV later in life (Solberg and Peters, 2020). Abuse in childhood amongst my research collaborators confirmed preceding research as it seemed related to GBV in adulthood. ACEs do not occur in a vacuum. These are part of wider structures of generalised violence and inequality, within heteropatriarchal systems that maintain trans-misogynistic and homomisic values producing gendered vulnerability and precarity. Further research is necessary to help shed light on the intricate relationships between ACEs and negative adult experiences among displaced communities.

This study helps uncover continuums of internal and international displacement largely motivated by GBV along with other concomitant forms of violence at multiple scales. Leaving family homes due to extreme violence was not uncommon. Women and transwomen migrants often left their family homes to live elsewhere only to face more violence, leading them to make an international move in search of safety and opportunities. Domestic violence is not the only trigger. State fragility and precarity has led many women and transwomen migrants to look for security and opportunities abroad and leave their children behind causing tremendous emotional pain and distress (see Acna's photo-story in Figure 1).

International displacement is also a continuum and for some migrants it is not a single experience. As shown in section 4.2, many Caribbean migrants, mostly Haitians, have gone through multiple international

moves before reaching Mexico. Haiti is facing a long lasting political, socioeconomic and environmental crisis that has led thousand to leave. Due to exclusionary visa regimes, many Haitians fall in conditions of irregularity with minimum options for regularisation which push them into migrancy, precarious jobs, overcrowded housing and heightened gendered violence risks. Once in Mexico, survival migrants face multiple forms of violence. As denounced by activists and organisations, my collaborators confirmed that irregular migrants are pushed into clandestine routes where they are abused multiplying the accumulation of trauma.

Even though LAC women and transwomen survival migrants face violence and precarity, they also receive support, make choices that preserve life and transform their agency. The role of organisations is critical in covering the work that governments do not do. They do not only offer humanitarian aid, but also psychosocial support, training and even gender confirmation treatment, and are important spaces that foster solidarity networks among migrants. Even though organisations are central for migrants' survival, some activists have raised that they are part of border externalisation-internalisation processes that sustain efforts to contain migrants within the limits of the Global South (Faist, 2019).

Support not only comes in the form of institutional aid, but also from the solidarity networks migrants form. As reflected by my collaborators, forming new relationships help migrants to develop new ways of living, enabling agency transformations (see L de A's photovoice on Figure 2). Moreover, spaces for critical consciousness and self-reflection further facilitate the re-interpretation of oneself and traumatic lived experiences, influencing agency, often leading to an expanded ability to make strategic life choices.

One can question the extent to which agency and its expansive transformation manifest in face of GBV and structural oppression. However, as discussed above, agency is a "limited – but real – ability […] to make independent choices" (de Haas, 2021, p. 14). Agentic behaviour is always limited by structures which, as suggested by critical realist theorists, emerge from agency, work beyond it, and have the generative capacity to modify the power of its constituents and to exercise causal influences (Archer, 1995, p. 174). As such, agency and its transformations are influenced by multiple intersecting factors that fluctuate at the individual, institutional and social-relational level with changing power relationships shaping decision-making processes.

Using a participatory arts-based research (PABR) approach was critical for studying gendered oppression and agency transformation in migration. This helped my collaborators and I to co-construct empathic relations, while generating more horizontal channels blurring 'researcher-researched' interactions. PABR is a powerful "means of creating critical awareness or raising consciousness" (Leavy, 2020, p. 24). The photovoice group workshops fostered connection, imagination, critical reflection, and re-interpretation of experiences.

While I incorporated participatory elements, the scope of my project being part of my doctoral journey, limited the extent to which I was able to create more collaborative strategies were migrants had more space to shape the research agenda. Nevertheless, I maintained a critical view of my research practice and explored how to enable collaboration at different research stages. I offered my collaborators to choose their own pseudonyms, I maintained contact with most of them and reached out to them to confirm parts of their stories, and to check for interpretations or terms used. I have also invited some of them to share parts of their experiences at photovoice exhibitions. While collaboration in research involves different levels at all research stages, I suggest future research to explore creative ways to engage research participants as collaborators as much as they can and want while compensating for their time.

Finally, it is crucial to examine GBV and migration as complex and non-linear processes, where power, oppression and agency intersect. Migrant women and transwomen are not only subjects of oppression, as emotion-able agents, they reflect, re-imagine and engage in ambivalent processes of transformation with empowering potentials.

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