

Agency dis/empowerments in migration:
Latin American and Caribbean gendered mobilities in
Mexico

Doctoral dissertation

By

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Para papá Ueyo, Carmen, don Alberto y Carmelita

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Abstract

Migration brings new opportunities and constraints that affect the choices migrants make and their ability to act upon them, or to exercise agency. It can enable individuals to renegotiate their social roles, develop new aspirations and access resources that may expand their ability to choose and act, thereby fostering empowerment. However, migration also poses significant challenges and limitations that often result in disempowerment. This research examines the ambiguity of dis/empowerment by exploring how migration shapes the choices migrants make and their ability to act upon them, including the option of choosing not to act. The research focuses on women and gender-diverse migrants as they navigate complex migration structures in Latin America. It investigates how sociopolitical and psychosocial factors, as well as gender and sexuality, all play a role in shaping their ability to make valuable choices and act upon them, across time and changing spaces of origin, transit and destination. Analysing how women and gender-diverse migrants make valuable choices and act upon them throughout their migration processes, is central to grasping not only structural constraints, and persistent gender-based inequalities, but also how migration may bring about some ambivalent spaces for autonomy and empowerment, or agency expansion. Such an endeavour is key to address critical academic knowledge gaps, while offering valuable policy insights.

Employing an innovative mixed-methods and multi-sited research design, this study integrated arts-based research methods and participatory elements, namely, photovoice, a form of participatory photography, alongside life-course interviews, and surveys. This methodological approach was used to co-generate data with Latin American and Caribbean (LAC) women and gender-diverse migrants, local community members, experts, human rights defenders and practitioners in Mexico's southern and norther border, and in its capital.

Findings reveal complex cycles of internal, circular and onward migration, driven by compounding structures of violence, precarity, gender-based violence, and emotional distress. Migration to or through Mexico emerges as an alternative for LAC migrants. Nevertheless, the country's role as a US migration buffer, transforms its territory into a migrant containment zone. The instrumentalisation of the legal figure of asylum as a migratory documentation pathway, aids border externalisation through containment efforts, limiting migrants' choices, and generating heightened exposure to risks, poverty and significant psychological distress. The ambivalent role of humanitarian spaces, including shelters and organisations, is analysed in relation to how they simultaneously hinder and facilitate migrants' capabilities to choose and act, or to negotiate agency.

Despite these conditions, women and gender-diverse migrants actively negotiate and assert agency, employing cognitive and spiritual coping strategies, developing solidarity networks, and collective action. The research demonstrates psychological growth as empowerment, characterised by enhanced perceptions of personal strength and self-efficacy, though limited by political and socioeconomic constraints. The analysis of how gender and sexuality shapes migrants' agency, reveals concurrent geographical and gender transitions, which are both facilitated and undermined by migration and

asylum regimes. These transformative journeys are conceptualised through the Nahua philosophy-inspired Gloria Anzaldúa's (2015) *Coyolxauhqui* process, interpreting migration itself as *nepantla* or an "in-between state" that fosters reconstruction of new personal, social and political ways of being and doing.

This research makes significant theoretical, methodological, and empirical contributions to the field of migration studies, while also offering policy-relevant insights. Theoretically, the study broadens the understanding of agency, its expansion and contraction, or dis/empowerment, as relational, negotiated, temporally and contextually situated processes. It acknowledges the interconnectedness between internal psychological processes, as well as external, social, cultural and material factors influencing agency, or the ability to make valuable choices and act upon them in contexts of migration. This constitutes an important contribution to the field of critical migration and border studies, as well as to the sexuality and psychology of migration research areas. Methodologically, it expands research possibilities, proposing the use of arts-based and participatory approaches for co-producing nuanced data and insights. Empirically, it provides new evidence on women and gender-diverse migrants' ability to make choices and act upon them, in underexplored South-South migration contexts. Policy-relevant insights advocate for human rights-based approaches that recognise migrants as agents, promote intersectionality in policy design, address systemic gender-based violence and specific protection needs.

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Abbreviations

COMAR	Mexican Commission for Refugee Assistance
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
GAC	Gender Affirming Care
GN	National Guard
GBV	Gender-based violence
INM	National Migration Institute
IPV	Intimate Partner Violence
LAC	Latin America and the Caribbean
LGBT+	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, plus

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1 Introduction

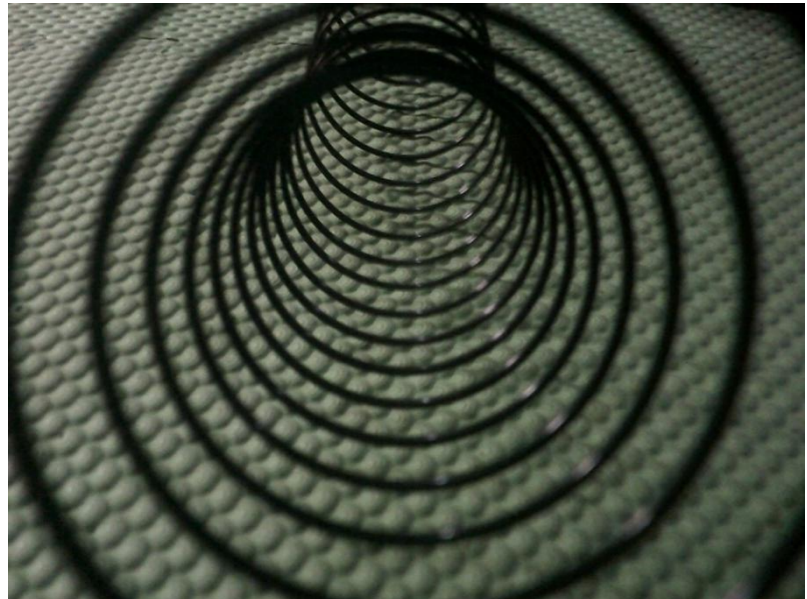
*Even if it has been very difficult, I feel stronger now.
Florencia, Salvadoran woman with refugee status,
45 years old. Interview in Tijuana, May 2023.*

Photo-story 1: “Laberinto” by Karla Juarez.

Labyrinth

This photo for me represents the struggles, difficulties, anxieties, stress that we go through day by day. It is as if each line represented a turn and a day, and that in the end we will find a way out. It means so many things that maybe this paper would not be enough to write them down.

Karla Juarez, Honduran woman with refugee status, 33 years old.



Source: Created during a photovoice workshop held in Tijuana, Mexico. June 2023. Photo prompt: ‘Self-portrait without my face’ (User rights granted to author).

Note: Each title, or the choice not to include one, was decided by the photographers.

Florencia’s narrative and Karla Juarez’s photo-story capture the ambiguity at the core of this dissertation: disempowerment and empowerment within migrants’ layered journeys. Despite pervasive challenges and disempowering difficulties, migrants’ mobility experiences reveal an increased sense of self-confidence and trust in their ability to define valuable goals and act upon them. This entails migrants’ navigation of mobility as a constant negotiation of power where restrictive structures limit their ability to act, and yet, they creatively “find a way out”, as Karla Juarez expressed. In this intricate process, they encounter both adversity and opportunities to develop material, personal, and collective resources that expand their ability to make valuable choices and act upon them, or to exercise agency.

The experiences of women and gender-diverse migrants navigating hostile socioeconomic and geopolitical structures, encompass not only oppression, but also solidarity, collaboration and transformation of containment spaces into sites of (collective) resistance. These experiences also foster internal changes in self-perceptions and as well as transformations in migrants’ ability to negotiate agency, or how they make choices and act upon them. Analysing how migrants negotiate

and transform their agency as they navigate mobility and immobility, is central to grasping not only structural constraints, but also how migration may bring about some ambivalent spaces for autonomy and empowerment, or agency expansion (Bastia, 2013a; Yeoh et al., 2014; Ongwech et al., 2024). Such an endeavour can address critical academic knowledge gaps, while offering valuable policy insights. Therefore, this research aims to explore how migration shapes processes of agency transformation among women and gender-diverse migrants as they navigate complex migration structures in Latin America.

Migration constitutes an act of agency, enabling individuals to redefine their social roles, cultivate novel aspirations, and acquire resources that may foster agency change and empowerment, or the expansion of agency. Empowerment and migration are both processes of social and personal transformation that are temporally embedded and situated within structures of power (Giddens, 1984; Castles, 2010; Amelina et al., 2016). Empowerment is, however, a contested notion that has been misused by mainstream development and neoliberal agendas which often conceive it as a product that can be provided through financial assistance, or programmes aiming ‘to empower’ better consumers (Batliwala, 1993; Wong, 2003; Cornwall, 2016). Despite its challenges, I employ the term critically and flexibly, considering its personal, relational, political, economic and contextual dimensions.

Empowerment is grounded in the recognition of inequalities and collective struggles for social change. It denotes a multidimensional and temporally situated form of positive transformation of agency (Kabeer, 1999a; Ibrahim et al., 2007). Empowerment is a processual notion that recognises individuals as the key drivers of their transformation journeys, as agents that negotiate agency by pursuing goals they deem valuable (Sen, 1985a). It involves changes at a psychological, behavioural, social and political level, individually and collectively, within the limits of existing power structures. From this perspective, and in line with Ibrahim and Alkire (2007), Kabeer (1999a) and Mahmood (2001), I conceptualise empowerment as *the expansion of the ability to negotiate agency in a context where this ability was previously denied* (see Chapter 2). This expansion leads individuals to see themselves as able and entitled to make valuable choices and act upon them, in ways they did not perceive themselves to be capable of (Rowlands, 1997). This expansion is not dependent only on individuals’ internal processes and self-realisations. Rather, it is fundamentally constrained by existing power structures that influence access to and control over personal, material and social resources, shaping alternatives and choices. Therefore, exploring processes of agency transformation must contemplate both, its expansion and contraction, or dis/empowerment, as well as variations over time and space.

The notion of dis/empowerment is highly relevant to the situation of women and gender-diverse survival migrants whose lived experiences are shaped by gender and sexuality. Their embodied genders and sexualities are not only identity markers, but structuring axes of power socially and historically constructed within systems that marginalise feminised and gender-diverse identities. These dis/advantage dynamics intersect with other power systems such as race, class, and nationality, forming a matrix of differentiated vulnerabilities and possibilities to negotiate agency (Scott, 1986; Crenshaw, 1991; Risman, 2004). Dis/empowerment recognises the complexity of women and gender-

diverse survival migrants' experiences, as they navigate systems of oppression and disempowerment while carving spaces for autonomy and empowerment. Survival migrants are individuals who have been compelled to migrate due to existential threats without domestic remedies, and who often fall outside the dominant definition of a 'refugee' (Betts, 2010). This migratory condition combined with their gender identity, expression and sexual orientation, along with other markers of inequality such as race and class, create social conditions of vulnerability that expose them to heightened marginalisation and risks. However, as hooks (1990) argues, marginalised positions serve as powerful spaces where counter-hegemonic practices emerge, manifesting in discourse, and ways of being and doing.

Even though violence and precarity are undeniable parts of survival migrants' experiences, migration can enable spaces for agency negotiations and empowerment. Migration can expand material resources and achievements (Flores-Hernández et al., 2012; Chowdhory et al., 2022). It can translate into expanded sexual freedom, identity exploration, greater sexual equality and rights, while fostering enhanced self-perceptions, resilience and psychological growth (Carrillo, 2004; Bagnoli, 2009; Umer et al., 2019). However, these effects are not always positive, nor they are universal or guaranteed, and are constrained by power structures that limit socioeconomic opportunities and rights (Eryar et al., 2019). Migration should not be seen as a straightforward path to empowerment. Migrants' capabilities are shaped by intersecting factors such as gender, sexuality, class, race and ethnicity, alongside structural limitations influenced by socioeconomic and political dynamics (Piper, 2008). It is therefore crucial to recognise that empowerment and disempowerment co-exist and are multidimensional, time-bound, and context-specific.

Social, economic and political structures in spaces of origin, transit and destination, fundamentally influence survival migrants' ability to negotiate agency at each stage of the migration process. Within these overarching structures of power, migration structures, including in/formal powers, asylum systems, regulatory frameworks, policies, and procedures governing migration and asylum, shape who migrates or not, how they migrate, the documentation they can access, and their lived experiences (Hennebry and Hari, 2021; Sigona et al., 2021; Düvell et al., 2022; Herrera-Rosales, 2025). As I elaborate further in Chapter 5, these migration structures often generate conditions of "confinement in motion" – where migrants face restrictions and unfreedom while migrating or in transit (Balaguera, 2023a). This is particularly relevant for individuals with precarious legal status, including those who seek asylum, pushing them into prolonged immobility, uncertainty and unfreedom (Balaguera, 2023a; Ongwech et al., 2024). This confinement, especially in countries that bridge the Global South and the North, like Mexico, Turkey or Morocco, often aligns with broader logics of border externalisation through migrant containment (Casas-Cortes et al., 2015; Şarlak, 2025; Landau, 2025). The intersection of migration structures and containment logics, with social categories of difference, such as race, class, gender and sexuality, creates additional layers of restriction on migrants' agency. Within this context, women and gender-diverse migrants, in particular, face compounded barriers as migration systems and asylum regimes often fail to address their specific needs (Bastia, 2013b).

While migrants' agency is shaped by power structures in lands of origin, transit and destination, these structures are also influenced – although not proportionately – by the exercise of migrants' individual and collective agency (Giddens, 1984; de Haas, 2021). Importantly, spaces of origin, transit and destination, are not rigidly demarcated. These fluctuate throughout migrants' layered journeys, with transit locations often becoming destinations and vice versa. To emphasise this fluid and dynamic interplay, I refer to them as “transit-destinations”. Despite the limitations imposed by power structures, such as institutions, informal actors, generalised violence, migration and asylum systems, migrants develop strategies to maximise agency, resist and form solidarity networks. As such, they negotiate their autonomy within the boundaries of state and non-state control, developing new skills and alternative ways of doing and being in the world (Mezzadra et al., 2013).

Agency and its transformation in migration, is not solely about navigating external obstacles, it also involves internal psychological processes that are temporally and spatially situated within the broader contexts of migrants' lives. As revealed in Chapter 6, psychological processes, encompassing distress, resilience and psychological growth can shape agency and decision making. Considering such internal processes acknowledges that empowerment and migration are not only about external change but also about internal transformations situated in time and space. “Migrating, then, is not ultimately about where you are, but who you are” (Carling et al., 2018, p. 954) or who you become. Within this transformatory process, gender and sexuality play a critical role, as geographical mobility often entails stepping over boundaries that are associated with (actual or perceived) sexual differences (Cvajner et al., 2021). These boundary crossings lead to encounters between strangers, resulting in novel gender performances and unexpected sexual meanings that can create a new social self and sexual agency negotiations (Aguilar, 1999; Brigden, 2018; Cvajner, 2019). Therefore, geographical mobility not only transports practices across borders but also exposes individuals to new sexual ideologies that influence sexual behaviour and identity adaptations (Carrillo, 2004; Stambolis-Ruhstorfer, 2013). As I explore further in Chapter 7, such adaptations often involve corporeal changes, representing a form of migration from a gendered sexual identity to new self-understandings.

To conceptually grasp these complex and non-linear transformations of agency in survival migration, this research draws upon the *Coyolxauhqui* notion. In Nahua philosophy, *Coyolxauhqui* is the moon and warrior woman who was dismembered by her brother, *Huitzilopochtli*.¹ Gloria Anzaldúa, queer Chicana writer, poet and theorist, reinterprets *Coyolxauhqui* in processes of migration, as a metaphor of fragmentation, whether personal, cultural, or societal, and then, reconstructing and reframing these pieces in a new way (Anzaldúa, 2015, p. 19). *Coyolxauhqui* is a continuous process of making and unmaking of “our psyches and patrias (homelands)” in new constructions (Anzaldúa, 2015, p. 19). This process involves cycles of disempowerment, fragmentation, reconstruction and empowerment of the self within power structures, offering a powerful lens to understand the transformative experiences of survival migrants. I integrate this dynamic notion to conceptualise empowerment as

¹ Nahua refers to a broad linguistic group across central Mexico. It integrates peoples who spoke Nahuatl and share related cosmologies and traditions, including the Mexicas, often referred to as Aztecs.

evolving processes of *conocimiento* (awareness/knowing). Anzaldúa proposes five stages in this trajectory: *desconocimiento* (un-knowing), the traumatic event/s at an individual and collective level that led to fragmentation – emulating *Coyolxauhqui*'s dismemberment; *nepantla* (in-betweenness), the beginning of a process of reconfiguration, migration and re-membering; and the reconstruction of a new self through active and conscious reconstructions. This culminates in *conocimiento* (awareness/knowing), representing the re-emergence of the self with new social, political, and emotional understandings, although limited by existing structures; and finally, the continuity of the *Coyolxauhqui* process, which acknowledges that individuals continually experience dis/empowerment, dismemberments and re-memberings or re-assemblings, depending on multiple converging factors that vary across time and space.

This dynamic concept offers a framework to understand how survival migration, oppression and trauma experienced by women and gender-diverse migrants, can lead to fragmentations alongside transformative self- and collective re-makings, or processes of dis/empowerment. These processes unfold within specific temporal and spatial contexts, and are shaped by existing structural constraints. Therefore, I adopt a situated intersectionality approach and a temporal lens guided by the life-course perspective, to analyse how overlapping power systems that generate social categories of difference, are context-specific, historically contingent, and evolve across individuals' life-courses (Elder et al., 2003; Yuval-Davis, 2015).

Some of the existing research on how women and gender-diverse survival migrants negotiate and expand their agency in migration has enabled a more integral understanding of these complex processes. However, most research tends to hold a violation-centric view, emphasising oppression and victimisation, obscuring the power migrants have to negotiate individual and collective agency, forge solidarity networks, resist, and influence oppressive structures (Marnell, 2022; Ongwech et al., 2024). Moreover, research gaps remain concerning how migration transforms sexual meanings and crosses boundaries of identity and practice across time and space (Manalansan, 2006; Cvajner et al., 2021). Research on how humanitarian systems – including shelters, organisations, governmental institutions, and multilateral organisations – respond or overlook the needs of women and gender-diverse migrants is also limited (Michelis, 2023; Rumbach et al., 2014; Valiquette et al., 2021). Furthermore, a reduced geographical focus centred on South-North mobility has left South-South migration underexplored (Herrera, 2019; Stang, 2019).

Scholars have called for the inclusion of a truly intersectional approach that considers race, ethnicity, class, and other intersecting identities alongside sexuality and gender in the examination of migrants' agency (Bastia et al., 2023; Mayo-Adam, 2020; Yang et al., 2024). Such an approach shall account for the constraints imposed by existing socioeconomic and geopolitical structures in specific timescapes and spaces of origin and transit-destination. To address these research gaps and calls for scholarly attention, preceding research has advocated for the adoption of a situated intersectionality lens and a transnational life-course perspective, which are crucial for understanding how migrants' agency change is influenced by their past experiences across multiple social and cultural spaces – including before migration. Innovative mixed-methods techniques and participatory, arts-based

approaches have also emerged as valuable methodological tools to elucidate these complex dynamics (Blidon, 2016; Erlinghagen, 2021; Moralli, 2024; Lopes Heimer, 2024).

In view of these critical knowledge gaps and calls for scholarly investigation, this research explores how women and gender-diverse survival migrants negotiate, assert and expand their agency as they navigate migration structures within Latin America. From a situated intersectionality lens, this project seeks to identify the key intersectional factors that shape migrants' agentic capabilities. Specifically, the following research question is explored:

How do migration experiences transform the agency of Latin American and Caribbean women and gender-diverse survival migrants?

This main research question is examined by investigating the following subquestions:

- To what extent do sociopolitical structures, psychosocial experiences, and gendered/sexual identities in origin, and transit-destinations, constitute migrants' agentic capabilities?
- In what ways do the intersection of these factors affect migrants' access to and utilisation of material, social and psychological resources, thereby influencing their capability to negotiate and expand their agency?

Mexico, a country of origin, transit and destination, is a key migration hub, making it an ideal case where these questions can be explored.

Research context

In recent years, the landscape of migration in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) has experienced rapid shifts in mobility patterns, migrant demographics, and migration governance policies (Smith et al., 2023). While outmigration from LAC to the US, Canada, or Europe persists, intraregional migration within LAC has become increasingly prominent (Selee et al., 2023). Despite this trend, migration studies have largely maintained their focus on South-North mobility. While the terms Global South and North are subject to debate and lack precision, they remain valuable as analytical and policymaking tools. The South and North are not merely geographical areas, but rather dynamic territorial, relational, structural and political constructs concerned with power distribution in the global order (Quijano, 2008; Sud et al., 2022).

Mexico, in the geographical north but economically in the South, has emerged as a key migration hub where thousands of LAC and extracontinental migrants (temporarily) settle, and (permanently) transit. Although Mexico's role as a sending and transit country has been extensively examined, its function as a settlement area has received comparatively less attention (Wiltberger, 2022). Furthermore, issues of gender and sexuality remain particularly underexplored, often limited to the production of sex-disaggregated data. Considering these absences and growing South-South migration trends, my research focuses on Mexico as a site of both transitory and more permanent settlement for LAC women and gender-diverse survival migrants.

For many survival migrants, Mexico represents the last country before reaching the north, it symbolises the anteroom to the "the American dream". However, its restrictive migration policies

and geography create a vertical border, marked by obstacles that limit migrants' agency, leading to confinement in motion, insecurity, and lack of protection (Varela, 2018). While some migrants see Mexico as a destination from the onset of their journeys, for many, it has become a permanent transit space and an unexpected destination. Since 2021, the country has witnessed a significant increase in both regular and irregular migration, alongside a surge in the number of asylum claims, a majority of which remain unprocessed (see Chapter 3).

Mexico's approach to migration and asylum governance is complex and often contradictory, oscillating between humanitarian and migrant containment strategies. These ambivalent positions are driven by both external pressures and internal political dynamics. Despite the existence of progressive legal frameworks for migration and a rhetoric that suggests a benevolent government committed to protecting migrants, the Mexican state, in practice, employs various control measures to identify, contain, and deport migrants. This is, in part, a consequence of Mexico's role as a buffer for US immigration control, leading to the implementation of strategies that externalise border control responsibilities, effectively shifting them from the US to Mexico (Casas-Cortes et al., 2015; Şarlak, 2025; Landau, 2025).

Coupled with the intensification of migration control and border securitisation, which are aided by Mexico's accelerated process of militarisation of public security, the instrumentalisation of refugee status and complementary protection supports migrant containment efforts. This approach uses the overwhelmed asylum system as the primary means for survival migrants to obtain migratory documentation even if they do not want to stay in the country. Consequently, the asylum system's capacity is strained, functioning as a means of migration containment. The Mexican Commission for Refugee Assistance (COMAR) has repeatedly reported that their capacity and budget is not enough to process all applications, and the case backlog is high. Between 2018 and 2022, more than 610,000 asylum applications were registered, with COMAR having been able to assess only 30 percent of them. Asylum applicants must, therefore, face long waiting periods for their resolutions in cities where they initiated their asylum cases, often with scarce support networks. While the asylum system presumably aims to fulfil its mandate by processing, analysing, and adjudicating asylum claims, its instrumentalisation reinforces containment strategies and diminishes its ability to effectively execute its primary function. As the head of the refugee commission in Tijuana, confirmed in an interview "there should exist other forms of documentation for migrants who don't want to apply for asylum in Mexico". This leads to the system failing both asylum seekers who intend to stay in Mexico and other migrants who are simply looking for safe passage (*Movilidad de refugio y migración en México*, 2023).

This situation is supported by infrastructures of containment, encompassing a range of spatio-material tactics including policies and services, aimed at restricting and controlling migratory agency, strengthening US border externalisation practices through physical and digital mechanisms (Casas-Cortes et al., 2015; Torre-Cantalapiedra et al., 2021; Şarlak, 2025; Landau, 2025). Many migrants experience such containment situation as a form of imprisonment. One of my collaborators illustrated this through a photo-narrative created while he and his partner awaited their asylum resolutions:

Photo-story 2 by Ale.



*I see myself as just another migrant.
People are migrating while silencing
and repressing themselves out of fear
of being recognised. We are prisoners
trapped in the midst of freedom.*

*Ale, Salvadoran asylum-seeking
trans man, 29 years old.*

Source: Created through a photovoice workshop in Tapachula, December 2022. Photo prompt: 'Self-portrait without my face' (User rights granted to author).

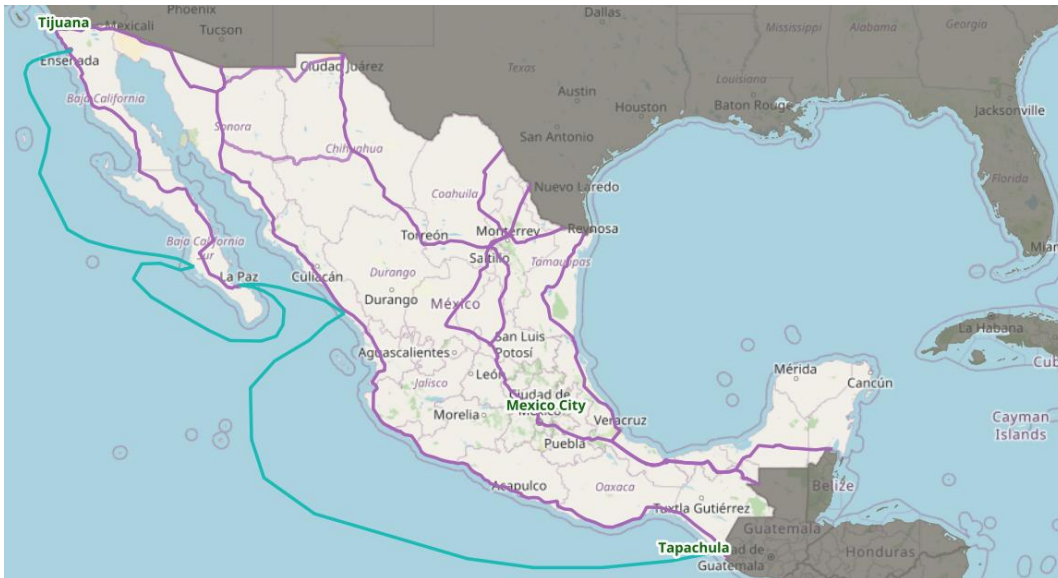
These complex dynamics occur within one of the most dangerous countries in the world (ACLED, 2024). Violence and insecurity in Mexico confluence with high levels of multidimensional poverty, inequality, widespread corruption, impunity, the war on drugs, arms and human trafficking, with migrants fleeing to and through Mexico from similar circumstances (Rodriguez, 2016; ONC, 2021; CFR, 2025; Crisis Group, 2025). Violence against women and gender-diverse people is a key part of the country's security crisis. 63 percent of women over the age of 15 reported that they have been victims of some type of violence during their lives, and government data suggests that 10 women per day are victims of femicide in the country (Amnesty International, 2021; OHCHR, 2023a). Mexico presents high levels of violence and hate crimes against gender-diverse people (Sin Violencia LGBTI, 2024). Organisations have repeatedly reported significant human rights issues involving violence, discrimination and authority abuse against these groups (Advocates for Human Rights, 2022; Beer, 2024). Despite progressive laws that protect women and gender-diverse people's rights, the rule of law is weak, with corruption, state neglect and impunity sustaining violent pluralities.

Within this context, Tapachula in Chiapas (south), Mexico City (centre) and Tijuana in Baja California (northwest) have become significant mixed migration hubs, functioning as transit and settlement zones along heavily traversed migratory routes (Figure 1). As a primary entry point for migrants, the southern town of Tapachula has the largest number of asylum applications in the country (COMAR, 2024). Many migrants get stuck there due to complex migration and asylum governance practices that slow down documentation processes, effectively creating a bottleneck that contains migrants in the southern region. For many, Tapachula is experienced as an open-air prison policed by the National Guard, the National Migration Institute, and informal actors (Villegas et al., 2025). Mexico City is characterised by the second highest number of asylum claims, serving as a key transit and settlement location. Many reach Mexico City to try to expedite the process of getting migratory documentation, to join relatives and to find socioeconomic opportunities, with some eventually settling there. Tijuana is home to the busiest border crossing in the world and serves as a gateway to

the US and an area of settlement. Due to restrictive immigration policies, many migrants have had to wait in Tijuana for procedures to enter the US.

These three cities, Tapachula as an entry point, Mexico City as a transit and settlement zone, and Tijuana as an exit, border enforcement and settlement area, are key to understanding migrants' experiences and the factors shaping how they make valuable choices and act upon them, or how they negotiate agency. Examining migrants' agency in these contexts can reveal how they navigate restrictive structures, and externalisation regimes while forming solidarity networks and carving spaces for autonomy and empowerment.

Figure 1. Main migration routes through Mexico.



Source: Created by the author.

Methodological approach

My methodological approach was shaped by my experiences and background, including my identity as a *mestiza* cisgender woman with a personal and familial history of migration.² Guided by a transfeminist and phenomenological approach, I employed a mixed-methods and multi-sited research framework, and integrated participatory arts-based elements (Valencia, 2018; Domínguez et al., 2022; Dodgson, 2023). Within this methodological framework, and leveraging my expertise in psychology, I adopted a “radical listening” stance, fostering an interest in understanding others’ “standpoints and axiological positions” without trying to change them, while remaining open to being changed (Kincheloe, 2004; Tobin, 2009, p. 505). This stance acknowledges ongoing power relations, trying to reduce asymmetries, fostering researchers’ self-awareness, active listening, relational and

² The term *mestiza-o* is generally used in Latin America to describe people of mixed ancestry with a European and an indigenous background (Gonzalez-Barrera, 2015).

participatory exchange. This methodological approach is grounded in my theoretical framework, enabling me to co-create a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of how migrants negotiate and expand their agency within restrictive migration structures. Furthermore, it opened spaces where research collaborators expressed their interpretations of their lived experiences not only orally but through more creative means.³

Based on my experience collaborating with migrants in Mexico and East Africa, I chose to integrate participatory arts-based research methods (PABR). I recognised that relying solely on more traditional methods such as interviews, has limitations in generating an in-depth and nuanced understanding of lived experiences, thereby affecting the profundity of academic and policy-relevant contributions. As recommended by preceding migration research, I combined PABR with more traditional techniques, namely, interviews and observations (Bagnoli, 2009; Moskal, 2010; Carlson et al., 2012; Saksena et al., 2021). This combination of methods was crucial to truly engage in the radical listening of my collaborators' experiences. I specifically used the photovoice method, alongside photo-elicited group discussions, interviews and surveys.

Photovoice mixes participatory photography and narrative creation, fostering a conducive environment for research collaborators to articulate their experiences through images they capture and accompanying 'voices' or narratives they create for their images. These creations, which I term photo-narratives or photo-stories, are then collectively discussed among research collaborators, promoting critical dialogue and consciousness (Schenker et al., 2014). In my research context, this method offered unique advantages over other arts-based approaches. Photovoice centred collaborators' voices by putting the lens in their hands, fostering expressions of agency through self-representation and visual storytelling. It helped redistribute power in the research process, allowing collaborators to decide what they wanted to share (Valiquette-Tessier et al., 2015; Budig et al., 2018). Since photography is a highly accessible medium that does not require specialised skills, this method was inclusive for individuals with different backgrounds and skills (Woodgate et al., 2017). It was also adaptable and suitable for its implementation and was highly attractive for organisations with whom I collaborated to conduct my fieldwork (see next section). This method offered nuanced data about migrants' agency, capturing subtle moments of decision-making while representing the contradictions and ambivalence of agential negotiations.

Although the photovoice method involves challenges that I discuss in section 4.4, it emerged as an ideal technique that I combined with other methods, including life-story interviews and surveys. Life-story interviews were employed to situate collaborators' visual narratives within the wider context of their life trajectories, recognising agency's dynamic nature, being influenced by past experiences, future aspirations, and present circumstances (Emirbayer and Mische 1998). To complement these visual narratives, surveys were administered to provide a systematic account of demographic

³ I use the term 'research collaborators' to refer to the individuals who took part of my research project, acknowledging their active role in co-producing knowledge.

characteristics, employment and migratory status, mobility plans, and housing arrangements. The survey questionnaire integrated psychometric scales designed to measure psychological constructs relevant to the exploration of agency, such as sense of belonging, perceived stress, self-efficacy, life satisfaction, and freedom of choice and control (see Appendix III). The combination of visual data, with the depth of the interviews and the breadth of the surveys, enabled the generation of nuanced understandings regarding the complex experiences of collaborators and their strategies for negotiating agency as they navigated migration structures.

Fieldwork

I conducted research activities in Spanish and French in-person in Tapachula, Mexico City, and Tijuana from October 2022 to July 2023, supplemented by online interviews from May 2023 to January 2024. I collaborated with ten civil society organisations (CSOs) to conduct observations, volunteer my support, facilitate nine group photovoice workshops (three per city) for survival migrants, and conduct life-story interviews with workshop participants, while maintaining contact with them during the six months following our first interaction. I initiated contact with the CSOs, presenting my project and offering volunteer support in exchange for their participation. Shelter staff appreciated this mutual support approach. I collaborated with Hospitalidad y Solidaridad, ‘Ventanilla’ of the Ayuntamiento de Tapachula, and Casa Frida shelter in Tapachula; CAFEMIN shelter, Casa Fuente shelter, and Sin Fronteras IAP in Mexico City; and Centro 32, Camino de Salvación shelter, Casa Arcoíris shelter, and Espacio Migrante shelter in Tijuana.⁴

The engagement with organisations and shelters, enabled me to gain contact with survival migrants. 57 Latin American and Caribbean survival migrants identifying as women, trans men, trans women, and gay men, took part of my project, including their participation in group photovoice workshops, surveys and interviews. The workshops were facilitated first, surveys were administered during the workshop sessions, and were followed by life-story interviews and a follow up interview six months after our first interaction. Migrants were openly invited to take part in the workshop by myself and shelter staff. Participation was voluntary and migrants were informed of their right to decline participation in the workshop or interviews without negative consequences. The workshops were held at the shelters’ facilities in private spaces.

Each workshop comprised two 4-hours sessions and focus group discussions, scheduled at a time convenient for the participants. No monetary compensation was offered, refreshments were provided at all interactions, and collaborators were given an SD card with the photographs they created using the cameras I provided, and which were returned at the end of all workshops. Collaborators expressed their satisfaction with the workshop and individual conversations, noting that these interactions provided a valuable space for connection, sharing concerns, and feeling heard.

⁴ I received ethical clearance (reference: R82469/RE002) to carry out research activities.

Through the workshops, my collaborators and I co-created spaces where we explored creative and participatory 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. After the photovoice sessions I invited my collaborators to an individual life-story interview which lasted one to two hours. All photovoice workshop participants completed the interviews. Offering the workshop before the interview helped us 'break the ice', facilitating deeper, more open discussions during the interviews. As a trained psychologist, I was equipped to manage potential situations of emotional distress, while preventing vicarious trauma. After the interviews, my collaborators and I maintained contact over social media and had an individual interviews six months later which enabled a situated understanding of their agential negotiations across time and space. Coupled with that, I carried out interviews with experts, activists, practitioners, government agents and local community members. In total, 77 individuals took part of the research and I carried out 96 individual interviews, and nine group photovoice workshops (18 sessions, see sample and research activities distribution in Table 2).

I conducted the qualitative data analysis in Spanish and French, developing coding frameworks in English using NVivo 14. The quantitative data analysis was conducted using STATA 15. My analysis integrates the qualitative and quantitative data using an arts-informed eclectic approach and combining thematic analysis (TA) and interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), alongside descriptive and inferential statistics for the quantitative survey data (Kaplan, 2004; Knowles et al., 2008; Capous-Desyllas et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2020). This mixed analytical approach enabled me to meaningfully integrate the different types of data sources, using the most suitable methods for each chapter depending on its specific focus. I employed a staged methodology where TA was conducted first to identify themes, specific cases, experiences, and interpretations, which were then further explored using IPA. I subsequently refined the TA and IPA analysis iteratively.

Inspired by the work of previous scholars like Capous-Desyllas and Bromfield (2018), Day et al. (2024), and Tinkler (2013), I developed specific techniques for analysing photovoice data. I applied a double hermeneutic, analysing photographs first as visual data, and integrating verbal data at a subsequent stage (Capous-Desyllas et al., 2018; Tsang, 2020). This approach entailed an intra-case and inter-case analysis, combining IPA and TA, and integrating a constant comparative method (Thompson et al., 2021). Additionally, I employed a collaging technique, creating assemblies of photos and narratives representing themes that surfaced from the mixed methods data (Day et al., 2024) (see example Figure 25). I consecutively analysed the quantitative data through descriptive and inferential statistics and also created QGIS maps to visualise the mobility patterns of my collaborators. I integrated the qualitative and quantitative components at two points: analytical and results points of integration (see detailed analytical strategy in Chapter 4, section 4.3).

There are several limitations to my study, which I discuss further in the Conclusion chapter. A major one, pertains to my limited capacity to develop a fully participatory project where my collaborators were able to frame the research questions, its methods, analysis and outputs. This was mainly due to time and resource constraints that I faced as a DPhil student conducting this project on my own.

However, I incorporated spaces for collaborators to provide feedback on the photovoice workshop prompts, its contents, and duration as well as checking some of my interpretations of their narratives at the analysis stage (see details in section 4.2.2). Due to these limitations, I do not claim this project was fully participatory, but rather that it integrated participatory elements.

This methodological approach, while involving ethical implications, risks and limitations, facilitated an immersive engagement with collaborators in each study context. Key ethical implications related to the use of visual participatory methods, limits to co-production and emotional distress during fieldwork (see Chapter 4, section 4.4, and Chapter 8). Despite the ethical and methodological challenges, this approach proved optimal for answering my research questions. It allowed for the development of nuanced interpretations of my collaborators' own interpretations of their agential negotiations (double-hermeneutic) through diverse modes of data generation. Furthermore, this methodology also prompted me to question my own biases and knowledge gaps, while considering how these affected the analysis and conclusions.

Dissertation structure

This dissertation is divided into two parts comprised by six chapters, along with the introduction and conclusion chapters. The first part encompasses chapters 2, 3 and 4, establishing the theoretical, contextual, and methodological grounding for the research. Chapter 2 concentrates on the conceptual foundation for understanding gendered empowerment, exploring the intricate relationship between power, agency, gender, and sexuality within migration contexts. It offers a perspective that recognises the dual role of power structures, both as mechanisms of oppression and as sources of opportunity. This acknowledges individuals' power to perpetuate, resist, and transform power structures through their agential negotiations and ambivalent opportunities for empowerment. Chapter 3 situates the study of gendered empowerment within the broader framework of migration and asylum structures in Latin America and the Caribbean. The Chapter focuses on Mexico's role as a country of transit-destination and a space of migration containment, while examining the situation in the main countries of origin of LAC migrants in Mexico. Chapter 4 details the methodological strategy employed to co-generated data to address the research questions.

Part two utilises primary data to investigate the factors that shape migrants' ability to negotiate, assert, and expand agency as they navigate complex migration structures. Chapter 5 concentrates on the role of structures in origin and transit-destinations and how they shape and are shaped by migrants' agential negotiations. The chapter explores how structures of precarity and violence in countries of origin impact migrants' agency, driving processes of internal, circular, and onward migration. Mexico's containment infrastructure is analysed by exploring how migrants navigate this infrastructure, including humanitarian spaces, adapting to constraints while developing resources to negotiate their agency. Collective dimensions of agency are analysed by looking at how migrants develop solidarity networks with other migrants, and form coalitions with organisations to advance their goals. Chapter 5 is instrumental in developing an intersectional understanding of the complex factors that shape migrants' agency. Moreover, it is essential for contextualising the subsequent

chapter, which explores the influence of psychosocial factors on migrants' evolving agency as they navigate complex structures.

Chapter 6 centres on positive and adverse psychosocial experiences as inherent parts of the migratory process, and how these shape migrants' agency. Psychosocial factors are analysed by situating them within the broader context of migrants' lives, spanning from childhood to adulthood, and from origin to transit and temporary destinations. This temporally situated lens offers a layered understanding of migrants' agential negotiations, illustrating the interconnectedness of past experiences, present realities, and future aspirations within migrants' life-course (Erlinghagen 2021; Lønning 2020). The chapter offers a multidimensional analysis beginning from migrants' pre-migration experiences, revealing the impact of adversity and emotional distress experienced from childhood through adulthood in places of origin. Psycho-emotional experiences in migration are further analysed, exploring migrants' narratives of stress, anxiety, confusion and potential complex trauma, as psychologically disempowering. The co-existence of positive adaptations is also explored by examining cognitive coping mechanisms, social support networks, sociability, self-efficacy, and an internal locus of control as protective psychological factors. Beyond reactive coping strategies, migrants' experiences of psychological growth are examined as psychological empowerment, evident in the enhancement of perceptions of personal strength, sense of control, self-efficacy, and empathy. These complex processes of psychological distress, growth and empowerment, are conceptualised through the lens of the *Coyolxauhqui*, representing an evolving process of trauma and fragmentation, towards the reconstruction and reframing of the self (Anzaldúa, 2015). The impact of oppressive structures in limiting psychological growth is also considered, nuancing the role of psychosocial factors in overall processes of empowerment.

Chapter 7 draws upon the findings of Chapters 5 and 6 to study how migration structures and psycho-emotional experiences intersect with gendered sexual identity, influencing how gender-diverse migrants negotiate their sexual agency. The chapter situates gender-diverse migrants' sexual agency within the broader context of their lives, highlighting migrants' early strategies of sexual agency negotiations. The intersection between familial rejection due to nonconforming gendered expressions, community and state violence, reveals a critical influence on gender-diverse individuals' migratory agency. Migration, therefore, emerged as a material possibility, a resource to escape the threat of death, and a way to negotiate sexual agency, embodying gender in new and agentic ways. However, migration governance and humanitarian systems, generate conditions of "confinement in motion", constructing situations of violence that reinforce structures of oppression that migrants escaped from in their lands of origin (Balaguera, 2023a). Even if migration severely limits agency, the chapter demonstrates that it can, at the same time, also be a catalyst for sexual agency empowerment. As migrants navigate structural restrictions, they also build solidarity networks and find innovative ways to negotiate and expand their agency.

PART I: Gendered agency dis/empowerments in contexts of migration

2 Agency transformations: a conceptual framework to dis/empowerment in migration

2.1 Introduction

This chapter provides a conceptual grounding for understanding the theoretical underpinnings of this thesis. It explores the intricate relationship between agency, gender, and sexuality within migration contexts, focusing on how these elements intersect and influence the experiences of individuals as they navigate complex migration structures. The chapter begins by offering an overview of the interrelated concepts of power and agency to elucidate dis/empowerment as processes of agency contraction and expansion (Section 2.2). The chapter continues with an overview of the evolving categories of gender, sex, sexuality and gender-diversity (Section 2.3.1). These conceptual perspectives are applied to gender-diverse and women migrants, while offering an overview of how gender and sexuality have been investigated in migration studies (Section 2.3.2).

In the final section, 2.3.3, I elaborate on how migrants negotiate agency and go through processes of dis/empowerment or *Coyolxauhqui* journeys, while navigating structural constraints. Drawing on preceding research, I discuss that agency, and its transformation in migration, is not solely about overcoming external obstacles, but also about internal psychological processes of self-reflection, and critical consciousness. Finally, I introduce the capabilities and aspirations approach as a framework to analyse how structural factors, psychosocial aspects, gender and sexuality intersect, shaping processes of migrants' agency dis/empowerment while they navigate survival migration across spaces of origin, transit, and more permanent destination. This chapter is essential to understand the conceptual approach adopted throughout the dissertation.

2.2 Agency dis/em(power)ments

Empowerment is a complex and contested notion that denotes processes of positive agency transformation (Kabeer, 1999a; Ibrahim et al., 2007). While often framed as a desirable state – being empowered – it is sometimes misleadingly conceived as something that can be provided purely through resources such as financial assistance, or development programmes. Scholars, activists, and development experts have widely critiqued this perspective as it risks oversimplifying the personal, relational, political and contextual dimensions of empowerment. Particularly in relation to women, the term has become a 'buzzword', conflating gender with women, thereby obscuring gender diversity, and eroding its original meaning and strategic value (Batliwala, 2007; Kabeer, 2012; Cornwall, 2016). Despite these issues, I choose to employ the term in a critical and adaptable manner.

To fully grasp the complexities of empowerment processes, it is essential to first consider the interrelated concepts of power and agency. The next subsection elucidates these concepts, followed by a comprehensive exposition of the notion of empowerment.

2.2.1 *Power and agency*

Power has been interpreted as a relational capacity exercised as power over-others, power-to do, power-within, and power-with others. The concept of power-over is seen as the ability to compel others to act despite resistance or to set agendas in ways that influence or manipulate decision-making (Dahl, 1957; Bachrach et al., 1962; Weber, 1978). Scholars have also highlighted how social structures shape values and beliefs, leading those who experience domination to acquiesce in their own subjugation (Dowding, 2006). Power-to refers to the ability to attain desired outcomes and to resist (Pitkin, 1972; Allen, 1999). Power-over, has been seen as a derivative from power-to act by imposing one's will on others. It is often, though not always, associated with domination (Allen, 1999; Lukes, 2005; Pansardi, 2012). Resistance, is another form of power-to act that entails an opposition to domination (Allen, 1999).

Power-within, and power-with describe processual, dynamic concepts often theorised in relation to empowerment. Power-within is about recognising one's capacity to set and pursue meaningful goals – to assert agency (Kabeer, 1999a). “Such power cannot be given; it has to be self-generated” (Kabeer, 1994, p. 229). Power-within encompasses self-consciousness, and the recognition of individuals' self-worth, capacity to act and exert control over their lives. Within the field of psychology, this self-recognition may be understood as self-efficacy or the belief in one's ability to succeed in situations or tasks, influencing choices, persistence and goal achievement (Schunk, 1995; Wilson et al., 2016). Empowerment processes frequently originate from within (Kabeer, 2005). Power-with, on the other hand, refers to the collective power that emerges through collaboration, where groups working together can achieve more than individuals working alone (Williams et al., 1994; Howard-Grabman, 2007). Processes of critical consciousness lead to the recognition of the shared aspects of subordination that signal its “collectively enforced and thus, its collectively changeable character...” (Kabeer, 1994, p. 253; Hughes et al., 2003).

From a structurationist standpoint, power is understood through dynamic relationships between agents and structures. I adopt this perspective as it emphasises the relational, temporal, and spatial dimensions through which power is structured by and structures agents' capacities for action (Giddens, 1984; Allen, 2004, 2021; Haugaard, 2010). This view recognises the dual role of power structures in both perpetuating oppression and offering possibilities. It also acknowledges the role of agency and how individuals perpetuate, resist, and transform power structures. This view aligns with Bourdieu's ideas on “internalisation of externality and externalisation of internality” (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 72). He argued that power is culturally and symbolically created through practices shaped by habitus within fields. Habitus refers to durable yet adaptable dispositions formed through socialisation, enabling individuals to act while reproducing societal structures (Bourdieu, 1977, 2000). This dialectical relationship between structures and agency entails that practices result from both external constraints and agential adaptations (Navarro, 2006).

Agency broadly refers to the capacity to act intentionally in an environment (Kauffman, 2000; Segundo-Ortin, 2020). It is not merely an individual trait, and arises from the dynamic interplay between agents' embodied capabilities and the opportunities and constraints in their environments

(Segundo-Ortin, 2020; Hodges, 2023). Agents may be seen as “ecologically embedded purposive organisms”, with the body being an active element in shaping experience and enabling interaction with the world (Segundo-Ortin, 2020). Agents have the capacity to adapt and negotiate their behaviour in response to what their environments offer for reaching goals, and to shape their environments through their actions (Fulda de la Garza, 2016, p. iii). In this sense, agency involves negotiating power, where individuals engage with, submit to, resist, or subtly shape dominant structures and norms through their choices and actions.

Agency is dynamic, fluctuating over time, space and across different dimensions of our lives; it is shaped by the past, oriented towards future possibilities and contingent upon present circumstances (Emirbayer et al., 1998). Agency encompasses individuals’ capacity to negotiate power to act, or not to act, to pursue goals that are valuable for themselves, for their community, or other groups (Sen, 1985b; Schwarzer et al., 1995; Alkire, 2008). It is shaped by structures at the macro, meso, and micro level, as well as by psychological processes (Emirbayer et al., 1998; Alkire, 2008; Drèze et al., 2013; Cense, 2019; Segundo-Ortin, 2020). At a psychological level, agency is influenced by our values, beliefs and emotions, shaping our relatively autonomous agentic behaviour, enacted through the definition of value-based goals and consecutive actions. Given that agency involves intentional decision-making and actions rooted in individual values, it becomes crucial to examine individuals’ motivations for value selection.

According to the social psychological self-determination theory (SDT), a person is autonomous when they willingly engage in behaviours aligned with values they fully endorse. SDT posits that these values, learnt through social interactions and culture, are integrated through repetitive enactments and cultural re-enforcements (Chirkov et al., 2003).⁵ Autonomous choice, guiding agentic behaviour, is relative and driven by intrinsic and extrinsic motivation sources along a continuum of lesser to greater internalisation of values regulating behaviour (Deci et al., 1985; Ryan et al., 1989, 2000). Internalisation indicates the acceptance of a social value or regulation, whereas integration denotes the expanded adoption of that value into one’s own, so that it will subsequently stem from the sense of self (Deci et al., 2000, p. 71). This process is non-linear, as some values are easily internalised, while others may not be, depending on individual experiences, social contexts and power relations (Deci et al., 1990, 2000; Sheldon et al., 1997). Integrated values are crucial in shaping agentic choices and subsequent actions, and therefore, considering individuals’ values is crucial when exploring agentic behaviour. This view acknowledges the ecological interconnectedness between internal aspects, as well as external, social, cultural and material factors influencing agency.

⁵ Values, in social psychology, refer to long-lasting beliefs shared by individuals or groups about what is desirable, worthwhile, and morally right. Values motivate behaviours and influence attitudes (Schwartz, 1992; Nazirova et al., 2024).

Agential capacities should not be understood as pre-existing attributes independent of power dynamics, but instead as the outcome of these power operations (Mahmood, 2001, p. 210). Agency is situated within a framework of power relations that “do not simply dominate the subject, but... form the conditions of its possibility” (Mahmood, 2001, p. 210) (i.e., *subjectivation*).⁶ Mahmood proposes an understanding of agency not only as resistance to domination, but as a capacity for action that emerges from specific relations of subordination (Mahmood, 2001, p. 210). This approach to agency aligns with the concept of strategic negotiation, wherein individuals navigate their environments negotiating choices to achieve desired outcomes, recognising how social structures, norms, policies and relationships shape choices and actions (Schalet, 2010; Barcelos et al., 2014). Therefore, strategic negotiation entails calculated decisions and tactics to maximise agency.

Considering these perspectives, I understand agency as a constrained ability to make valuable choices and act upon them, including the option not to act. This ability is negotiated throughout time and space, within structures which, as suggested by critical realist theorists, emerge from agency, work beyond it, and can modify it (Archer, 1995; de Haas, 2021). These structures involve “patterns of social relations, belief systems, and behaviour”, including sociocultural, economic and political frameworks (de Haas, 2021, p. 14). Intersecting axes of power such as class, race, gender and sexuality, reinforce social orders, limiting or expanding people’s opportunities and resources, and shaping their ability to negotiate and expand their agency.

2.2.2 *Dis/Empowerment: the contraction and expansion of agency*

“Empowerment is like obscenity, you don’t know how to define it but you know it when you see it” (Shetty, 1991, p. 8).

The roots of empowerment are intrinsically linked to the transformation of unequal power relations and social change, drawing inspiration from diverse sources such as popular education, feminism, psychology, and liberation theology (Freire, 1972; Simon, 1994; Cornwall et al., 2005). Its fundamental concern lies in challenging power imbalances and contesting inequality in favour of those who have had limited opportunities to exercise control over their own lives (Batliwala, 2007; Cornwall, 2016). Empowerment is inherently a multidimensional, relational, temporal, and context-specific process of agency change (Samman et al., 2009). It cannot be bestowed by others and entails changes occurring at a psychological, behavioural, social and political level, individually and collectively, within the limits of existing power structures. This notion recognises individuals as the key drivers of their transformation journeys, as agents that negotiate agency by pursuing goals they deem valuable, within the constraints of prevailing power structures (Sen, 1985a).

⁶ In line with Foucault, Butler refers to subjectivation, as the processes and conditions that produce a subject’s subordination and which are also the means through which she becomes an agent (Foucault, 1980; Butler, 1997).

In line with Ibrahim and Alkire (2008), Kabeer (1999a) and Mahmood (2001), I conceptualise empowerment as *the expansion of the ability to negotiate agency in a context where this ability was previously denied*. It represents a positive transformation of agential capabilities, guiding individuals to view themselves as able and entitled to make value-based choices and act upon them, in ways they did not perceive themselves to be capable of (Rowlands, 1997). This transformation entails a journey of self-awareness, critical consciousness (Freire, 1972; Kabeer, 1994, 1999a), and capacity for self-expression (Sen, 1997). Importantly, this expansion is not solely dependent on individuals' internal processes and self-realisations. Rather, it is fundamentally constrained by existing power structures that shape access to and control over personal, material and social resources.

The interlinked dimensions of resources and achievements are central to processes of agency empowerment. Resources refer to the means through which agency is exercised, including access, and future claims on psychological, economic, social, and cultural resources (Kabeer, 2005, p. 14). While access to resources can potentially lead to empowerment if individuals are able to act upon them, power structures, along with their associated rules and norms, often create disparities in resource distribution, leading to disadvantages (Alsop et al., 2005; Mahmud et al., 2012; Aziz et al., 2021). Therefore, resources fundamentally shape capabilities. Achievements, on the other hand, are outcomes or realisations of valuable goals attained through the exercise of agency using available resources. If empowerment is understood as an iterative and relational process where changes in one dimension give rise to changes in others, then achievements can also be regarded as resources and often serve as concurrent 'building blocks' (Mahmud et al., 2012; Goldman et al., 2014).

This perspective of empowerment aligns with the concept of development, defined as a process of broadening people's freedoms and the choices available to individuals (Sen, 1985a). These freedoms include opportunity freedoms or capabilities and process freedoms or agency. Capabilities concern people's real and effective (not only formal) opportunities to enjoy beings (states) and doings (activities) they consider important (Sen, 1985b) in a given environment or context. While both concepts describe processes, human development focuses on enlarging choices, whereas empowerment involves expanding the ability to intentionally choose and act upon these choices (Strandberg, 2001).

The denial of choice may be seen as disempowerment. However, perspectives on disempowerment can become problematic if they neglect how individuals exercise agency and their power to make strategic life choices. Manifestations of disempowerment may be interpreted as such only when the failure to achieve one's goals reflects some limitation on the ability to make strategic life choices (Kabeer, 1999b). Strategic life choices refer to first order choices which are critical for people to live the lives they want.⁷ First-order choices are those such as choice of livelihood, whether and who to marry, whether to have children, etc. (Kabeer, 1999a). These choices vary throughout a person's life-

⁷ "These strategic life choices help to frame other less consequential choices, which may be important for the quality of one's life but do not constitute its defining parameters" (Kabeer, 1999a, p. 437).

course, shifting based on spatial and temporal contexts and shaped by opportunity freedoms or capabilities. For individuals to make strategic life choices, viable alternatives must exist and be seen, along with the option not to choose (Kabeer, 1999a, p. 437).

The interpretation of choice requires the consideration of opportunity structures (institutions, laws, social norms, networks, income), ‘strategic compliance’ and the option of choosing not to choose autonomy (Agarwal, 1997, p. 25; Nussbaum, 2001). Furthermore, hierarchies of decision-making in households and communities, and levels of participation in such decisions are also essential factors to consider (Rowlands, 1997; Kabeer, 1999b; O’Hara et al., 2018). When interpreting choices, it is also critical to analyse their varying degrees of consequential significance in influencing outcomes and their transformatory significance in changing unequal power relations (Kabeer, 1999a). For instance, deciding on children’s health has important well-being implications, but if such decisions are generally expected from women, they carry little transformatory significance. Conversely, a woman’s ability to control her migratory documentation in a context where men are typically expected to do so can have significant consequences, potentially transforming gender relations when such control becomes commonplace. Similarly, choosing to express a masculinised gender identity while navigating dangerous migration routes may improve safety by reducing the risk of sexual abuse. However, this choice may lack transformatory significance, as it reinforces the idea that feminised bodies are abuseable.

The internalisation and integration of cultural values, along with dynamics of internalisation of domination and oppression, are key to interpreting choice. How does power operate in contexts where inequalities seem to be sustained by a choice made by subordinate groups? For example, women who socially exclude divorced or single women, trans women who marginalise others for having hairy bodies, or migrants who discriminate against others based on skin colour or language skills, may appear as exercising autonomous choice. Nonetheless, these actions may be driven and reinforced by individuals’ subordinated status, perpetuated by daily practices that become ‘taken for granted’ (Kabeer, 1999a).

Bourdieu’s concept of *doxa* helps explore the articulation of unquestioned realities (Bourdieu, 1977). Doxa refers to basic beliefs that sustain the naturalised social realities which shape habitus. The paradox of doxa is that it allows for the socially arbitrary nature of power relations to be misrecognised, reproducing these relations in a self-reinforcing manner (Deer, 2014). When alternative ways of being and doing emerge – as it often occurs through migration – the integrated character of these unquestioned propositions of culture begins to vanish (Kabeer, 1999a). This creates space for critical consciousness, potentially triggering processes of agency transformation and empowerment.

Critical consciousness refers to cognitive processes of reflection, imagination and re-presentation of new realities that challenge inequality and oppression (Castoriadis, 1997; Andrews, 2014). It emphasises the capacity to critically analyse social conditions, question dominant narratives, and reimagine possibilities for justice and equity. Material inequalities, however, determine people’s capability to critically reflect, imagine, and create alternatives. The recognition of this capability

defines opportunities to aspire and pursuit valued states of being and doing, individually and collectively (Castoriadis, 1997). This recognises individuals' dialectical ability to internalise norms that uphold their subjugation, while actively reshaping these norms through power negotiations, resistance (Khader, 2020), and the agential exercise of subtle forms of power or "weapons of the weak" that operate through daily practices (Scott, 1990).

Processes of empowerment do not arise only from individuals' awareness of their power-within and ability to critically reflect, imagine, and create new realities. Material resources, support networks and capability structures significantly influence individuals' ability to define valuable goals and intentionally act upon them. Unbalanced power structures, precarity and violence, perpetuate disadvantage, undermining individuals' real and perceived capabilities to act upon what they value. These limitations do not only result in material deprivations, but also in psychologically distressing states, impacting cognitive functions and decision-making (see section 2.3.3). Therefore, exploring processes of agency transformation must contemplate both, its expansion and contraction, as well as variations over time and space. This exploration also requires contemplating the dynamic interplay between empowerment in some areas of life and disempowerment in others, both influenced by internal and external factors.

2.3 Gendered empowerment in migration contexts

"Migrating, then, is not ultimately about where you are, but who you are" (Carling et al., 2018, p. 954) or who you become.

Empowerment is grounded in the recognition of inequalities and marginalisation, and it is, therefore, highly pertinent to the experiences of women and gender-diverse migrants (G. Sen, 1997, p.2). Gender and sexuality function as a framework of dis/advantage, structuring inequality and producing hierarchies that regulate access to psychological, social and material resources. Importantly, gender and sexuality, intersect with other systems of inequality such as race, class, and migratory status, constructing a complex matrix of privilege and vulnerability (Scott, 1986; Crenshaw, 1991; Risman, 2004). This section builds on this perspective, elaborating on how the notion of gendered dis/empowerment may be applied to the experiences of women and gender-diverse migrants, integrating the *Coyolxauhqui* lens to interpret cycles of fragmentation and reconstruction or empowerment. The discussion firstly offers an overview of the evolving categories of gender, sex, and sexuality, while expounding on the persistent power structures that perpetuate the marginalisation of women and gender-diverse people. The chapter continues with an introduction of how gender and sexuality issues have been examined within migration studies. This is followed by a targeted application of gendered dis/empowerment to women and gender-diverse migrants' experiences, considering how sociopolitical structures, psychosocial processes, and gender-sexuality intersections configure individual and collective agency across spatiotemporal scales. Finally, the aspirations and capabilities framework is presented as an analytical tool to help analyse processes of dis/empowerment in migration.

2.3.1 *Gendering empowerment: a gendered conceptual framework*

The conventional sex/gender binary defines gender based on the biological classifications of female and male, onto which societal meanings and values are projected (Richardson, 2020). This biology (sex)/ culture (gender) dichotomy implies the perception of the body as a material fact in which gender is deposited. I adopt a postmodernist and queer approach that emphasise that sex, as a biological label, is also a construct that materialises through a forcible reiteration of regulatory norms and practices (Butler, 2006, 2009). The sexed body is “transformed into his or her body, the body is only known through its gendered appearance...” (Butler, 1988, p. 523). This process is dynamic and continually rearticulated, operating performatively through the repetition of acts governed by social norms and expectations, thereby creating systems of privilege and disadvantage. Sex-gender functions as a structuring axis of power that organises societies and perpetuates inequality (Riley et al., 2003). As an analytical category, is a useful political tool that allows for the enunciation and denunciation of pervasive forms of oppression against feminised and diverse bodies (Paredes, 2012).

Sexuality is an integral part of this ongoing articulation of the relational sexed-gendered body, through which gendered sexual practices are enacted. Sexuality can be generally understood as the ways individuals experience and express themselves as sexual beings, including sexual behaviour, orientation and gender identity (Kalra et al., 2010; Ferrante-Wallace, 2014). It must be understood within the social, historical, and moral contexts in which individuals operate (Reynolds, 1992). From a postmodernist view, sexuality like gender, is not a static truth. It is partial, fragmented and constantly reinvented. Within this dynamism, normative forms of sexuality emerge through historical processes constructing sexual scripts which guide individuals’ sexual beliefs, desires, and behaviours (Laumann et al., 1995). These scripts are the catalogue of behaviours and statuses acknowledged by a social group, including the rules, penalties, and expectations controlling these behaviours (Laws et al., 1981, p. 2). Cis-heterosexuality, for instance, is a reified idea transformed into a normative sexual script, determined based on external genitalia and the prioritisation of human reproduction.⁸

Gender and sexual identity and expression relate to how we experience and express our understanding of ourselves as gendered and sexual beings. The notion of *gendered* sexual identity emphasises how sexuality, identity, and gendered norms are interconnected, shaping individuals’ performative articulation of their sexual orientation (i.e., emotional, romantic or sexual attraction), gender identity (i.e., sense of self in relation to gender/s) and expression (i.e., external manifestation of gendered identity) (Tasker et al., 2002; Butler, 2006; Paredes, 2012). The body is central to this self-articulation, being the site where gendered sexual identity is performed, inscribed, and transformed (Lemma, 2023). Gendered sexual identity and expression are materialised in bodies based on schemes of perception and the reiteration of social norms and practices, transforming bodies into structuring social categories. In this sense, sex and gender, may be thought of as symbolic borders where different

⁸ Cis-heterosexuality refers to the normative alignment of two dominant identity categories: cisgender and heterosexual (Francis, 2025).

precepts mark the sociocultural guidelines for sexual behaviours defined by genitalia (Zarco et al., 2019).

Gender diversity refers to the ways individuals embrace and express gendered sexual identities that differ from the gender norm within a given specific context (Hammack et al., 2023). The more specific term ‘trans’ is used to describe persons whose gender identity is different from the sex they were assigned at birth (OHCHR, 2023b). ‘Queer’ is often used as an inclusive anti-heteronormative term that refers not only to homosexual and trans people, but also others whose sexuality is deemed “peripheral” (Yue, 2009, p. 69). This term broadens the focus beyond lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) identities, recognising the fluidity of gender diversity beyond binary frameworks. However, these terms – LGBT with additions like intersex, asexual, and ‘plus’, and especially queer – tend to be regarded as constructs that may not fully represent the experiences of gender and sexual minorities globally (Mole, 2021). Therefore, influenced by my research collaborators’ recommendations, I use the gender diversity and gender-diverse people as umbrella terms encompassing heterogeneous expressions, orientations, and identities.

Within the continuous reproduction of sex-gender and sexuality, “women, gender non-conforming people, sexual minorities are regularly misrecognised” (Butler, 2015). This misrecognition renders their bodies vulnerable to precarity – a politically induced condition in which the failure of social and economic support networks disproportionately increases the risk of illness, poverty, violence, and forced displacement (Butler, 2009). This notion is critical to study social inequalities, since it moves the focus from the individual to the structures that sustain their marginalisation. For gender-diverse people and women, precarity often materialises in violence. (Trans)femicides and the killings of gender-diverse people based on their sexual orientation, gender identity, and expression (SOGIE) persist globally. Gender-based violence is prohibited by international law including relevant regional instruments, it is considered a crime, a moral wrong, and a public health issue, with its effects infiltrating all aspects of social life, including institutional rights, education, and employment (WHO, 2021; OAS, 2025). These disparities are upheld by patriarchal cis-heteronormative structures that deem feminised and gender-diverse identities as dangerous and often impossible to survive.⁹ Feminised and gender-diverse bodies are not only murdered with overwhelming sexual cruelty, but they, especially trans, are also socially erased for defying the biological mandate of living in a medically assigned body that does not align with their gender identity (Valencia, 2018, p. 29).

Gender-diversity is not a new trend. Gender-diverse people, including trans individuals, have been recognised and embraced in various cultures throughout history (Martens, 2016; Stonewall, 2020; Independent Lens, 2023). In recent years, gender-diverse people, particularly trans women, have gained greater visibility in public discourse, reigniting the classic question: “What is a woman?”. At the same time, a fierce debate has emerged among feminists and others regarding whether trans

⁹ Cis-heteronormativity is a system of beliefs that privileges heterosexuality and cisgender identities, often leading to discrimination and marginalisation of LGBT+ individuals (Kinitz et al., 2022).

women are to be considered women and whether non-trans women should assume ourselves as cisgender women (Lamas, 2023). These debates have far-reaching consequences beyond feminist circles, often exacerbating the marginalisation and life-threatening risks faced by feminised identities who do not fit the socially authorised ‘female model’. However, there is no one way of performing ‘female’ nor is there one type of body to enact such performance. Instead, the reproductive and performative practices of trans/womanhood and gender diversity are shaped by sociohistorical and cultural contexts, which vary widely across the globe. Therefore, these phenomena must be analysed through a time- and context-specific lens that situates gender diversity within its unique social and cultural frameworks.

Marta Lamas, a Mexican feminist anthropologist and political scientist, helpfully reminds us that from the second wave of feminism, thousands of women claimed not to be defined by their bodies. Drawing an analogy to racism, they denounced sexism as the form of discrimination that unfairly treats individuals based on sex. Feminists critically questioned the nature versus nurture debate concerning sexual bodies and socially constructed beings, highlighting that gender is embodied through a process of internalising beliefs about what women and men should be. Such fruitful reflections helped de-essentialise sociocultural postulates about sex-gender. However, recent discussions, particularly from some feminist groups, express concerns about gender fluidity and its perceived potential to erode the specific struggles and rights of cisgender women, especially if trans women are considered women. While it is crucial to acknowledge the specific impacts of gendered oppression on cisgender women’s lived experiences, this perspective may reinforce an essentialist paradigm of biological dimorphism. This paradigm often strengthens cis-heteronormative norms and delegitimises gender-diverse identities, despite their shared experiences of gendered oppression and their parallel entitlement to rights (Lamas, 2023). Furthermore, reducing complex processes of identity formation to a simplistic biological dimorphism, risks regressing historical progress achieved in gender equity struggles and the protection of human rights of people of all genders.

In view of these challenges, and from a constructivist standpoint, I support a plural transfeminist agenda grounded in Latin America. This approach recognises diverse gender systems, understanding genders as lived realities rather than static biological categories. Sayak Valencia, a Mexican research activist, sees transfeminism as an epistemological tool that goes beyond simply integrating transgender discourse into feminism, and does not position itself as a replacement or improvement of existing feminisms. Rather, it functions as a network that engages with experiences of gender transition, migration, *mestizaje*, vulnerability, race, and class, linking these to the historical memory of social insurrections. Its goal is to create spaces for marginalised subjects often excluded by hetero-white-biologistic feminism (Valencia, 2018, p. 31). Transfeminisms call for inclusion of those outside the socially accepted definition of women – “those who are poor, lesbian, black, older, indigenous, trans, migrants, who do not conform to Western aesthetic norms, all of whom are systematically impacted by globalised, feminised violence” (Audre, 1984, p. 107; Valencia, 2018). This stance, while deeply inclusive, does not dismiss the specific struggles of cisgender women based on sex-based and socialisation-based differences, nor does it aim to conflate the unique experiences of cis and trans women. Instead, it acknowledges the pervasive mechanisms of sexism and their

materialisation on feminised and gender-diverse experiences. By building bridges of understanding and collaboration, this agenda aims to dismantle all forms of sexism and marginalisation that disproportionately impact feminised identities (Domínguez et al., 2022; Neuhouser et al., 2022). The recognition of this shared experience of feminised vulnerability underlines the critical importance of exploring the lived experiences of women and gender-diverse people.

Importantly, gender does not operate in isolation but intersects with other social axes of power like class, race, and nationality, constructing differentiated conditions of advantage and marginalisation. Nevertheless, as power relations, inequalities are not static, they are continuously resisted, negotiated, and transformed. Positions of marginality are “also the 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). In face of pervasive violent dynamics that produce precarity among women and gender-diverse people, I propose a gendered approach to empowerment. This approach is grounded in a situated intersectionality lens that recognises how structures of power shape inequality differently across specific contexts, locations, and historical conditions (Yuval-Davis, 2015). I examine migrants’ agency expansions and contractions, while focusing on the intersection of gender, sexuality and migration, while acknowledging how other intersections like class and race, further complexify migrant’s experiences.

It is crucial to recognise that processes of agency change are neither linear nor exclusive to the migration experience itself. Rather, they are situated within the broader context of migrants’ lives and the specific contexts they navigate. Consequently, a temporally and contextually situated perspective is indispensable for capturing the fluid dynamics of agency change. Dis/empowerment processes are shaped by pre-migration experiences, including traumatic events, by individual identities, values, and choices. These processes are deeply influenced by structures of disadvantage and opportunity, thereby structuring agency and being structured by it. I, therefore, explore agency transformations as part of a life continuum, directed towards future aspirations yet constrained by existing structures in migration contexts. To this end, I draw on a situated intersectionality framework and a temporal lens guided by a transnational life-course approach. Before delving into the application of gendered empowerment to the specific case of women and gender-diverse migrants, I offer an overview of how gender and sexuality issues have been addressed within migration research, identifying areas requiring further scholarly attention.

2.3.2 Gender and sexuality in migration studies

Migration research generally assumed that the typical migrant was a heterosexual man driven by economic reasons while women were included only as companions (Mole, 2018). Even though migration among women and gender-diverse groups has been part of global migration for centuries, it was only in the 1980s that their roles and gender issues began to receive scholarly attention (Donato et al., 2016; Remennick, 2016; Palmary, 2021). Today, we know that about 48 percent of the 281 million international migrants including refugees, are women (IOM, 2024a). However, feminist scholars have argued that merely including women in migration estimates is insufficient (Datta, 2004). It is crucial to also consider the role of sexuality, and the experiences of gender-diverse people,

and how gendered norms and practices structure social life at different scales: individual, household, community, nation and region (Erel et al., 2002; Carrillo, 2004; Castañeda, 2006). In addition, scholars have called for a ‘sexual and emotional turn’ in migration studies, recognising migrants as sexual beings, and acknowledging emotions like love as central to migration decision-making and spatial behaviour (Mai et al., 2009, p. 296).

Identifying global trends in sexuality and migration is difficult, mainly due to the lack of reliable disaggregated data on sex, gender, and sexuality, especially in countries that criminalise same-sex relationships (UNODC, 2020). Moreover, collecting reliable data on gender diversity and sexuality is complex, requiring institutional capacity, inclusivity, and voluntary disclosure from migrants – who may choose not to reveal their gender identity or sexual orientation (Chossière, 2021). This data gap limits policy and practice efforts to protect migrants’ rights and to enlarge the economic and social benefits of migration (Hennebry, Hari, et al., 2021).

The focus on sexuality in migration studies is still considered incipient but in evolution, and it has been considered as the ‘fourth age’ of migration studies (Green, 2020). Migrants’ sexual lives, love, and intimacy are key aspects of the migration experience (Cvajner et al., 2021). The focus on sexuality has grown in part due to an increased attention in the sociological study of sexuality following the AIDS pandemic of the 1980s and 1990s. Intersectionality approaches combined with a growing interest in sexual rights and migration as sexual emancipation, also contributed to the growth in sexuality and migration analyses (Crenshaw, 1989; Altman, 2004; Manalansan, 2006).

The growing attention to gender and sexuality issues in migration studies, has allowed for a more nuanced, intersectional and integrative understanding of the sexual and gendered dimensions of migration (Manalansan, 2006; Cvajner et al., 2021). Sexuality, like gender, shapes mobility experiences and it can motivate migration through desires for freedom, identity exploration, escaping discrimination and violence, or the search for greater sexual equality and rights (Carrillo, 2004, p. 59; Luibhéid, 2004). Those who migrate because of their sexuality could be referred to as “sexual migrants” (Carrillo, 2004, p. 58). However, migration motivations are intersectional and cannot be reduced exclusively to one motivator. Gender-diverse people often face discrimination that limits their socioeconomic prospects (Cantú, 2003). Hence, analysing their migration must include sexuality, alongside structural factors including generalised violence, political oppression, context-specific socioeconomic conditions, as well as personal motivations.

In the evolution of the analysis of sexuality in migration studies, different useful concepts have emerged. The term *sexilio* or *sexile* was coined to describe the exile of people due to their sexual orientation (Guzmán, 1997). *Sexilio* has been broadly understood as “an expulsion based on sexuality” (Careaga-Pérez et al., 2017). Relatedly, the notion of *queer diaspora* has surfaced as an intersection of queer theory and diaspora studies emphasising that diaspora mobilities “produce new experiences and understandings of sexuality and gender identity” (Wesling, 2008, p. 31). The study of *sexual citizenship* has also been key, particularly concerning citizenship rights (Epstein et al., 2014). This concept is especially relevant for trans migrants and refugees since they simultaneously

navigate challenges to access documentation that recognises their migratory status and their gender identity.

Research on sexuality and migration may be clustered in three perspectives: sexual migration, where sexuality emerges as a primary motivator for mobility; sexuality of migration, which explores shifts in sexual practices, norms, meanings and interpretations; and lovescapes, focusing on changing collective expectations and sexual landscapes that structure erotic life across spaces of origin, transit and more permanent settlement (Cvajner et al., 2019). Scholars advocate for more in-depth analyses of sexual change in migration, an area that remains relatively underexplored (Cvajner et al., 2021; Cortés, 2023).

In Chapter 7, I further explore how research into the sexual dimension of migration reveals that mobility often entails stepping over boundaries that are associated with (actual or perceived) sexual differences (Cvajner et al., 2021). These boundary crossings lead to encounters between strangers, resulting in novel gender performances and unexpected sexual meanings that can create a new social self and sexual agency negotiations (Aguilar, 1999; Brigden, 2018; Cvajner, 2019). Therefore, geographical mobility not only transports practices across borders but also exposes individuals to new sexual ideologies that influence sexual behaviour and identity (Carrillo, 2004; Stambolis-Ruhstorfer, 2013). In this sense, the notion of *going-gender* has been used to describe how migrants strategically adapt their sexual agency and gendered behaviours across different cultural contexts (Stenbacka et al., 2020). Such adaptations often encompass corporeal changes, involving a form of migration from a gendered sexual identity to new self-understandings.

The notion of *nepantla*, a Nahuatl language word that means ‘in-between space’, is highly relevant for elucidating these gendered and geographical boundary crossings. Gloria Anzaldúa invites us to think about *nepantla* as “the threshold of transformation”, as the experience of being in a liminal and transitional space, “that uncertain terrain one crosses when moving from one place to another, when changing from one class, race, or sexual position to another, when travelling from the present identity into a new identity” (Anzaldúa, 2015, p. 56). As I further elaborate in Chapter 7, new ways of negotiating (sexual) agency while crossing borders and territories, represent states of *nepantla* where individuals transit transitional spaces at different scales. *Nepantla* allows for the exploration of in-betweenness and transformation in migration, not only at a material and geographical level, but also across personal and psychological dimensions.

While the study of sexuality and migration has grown, research remains limited, particularly on sexual change in migration, or how sexual migrants experience transformation and reconfiguration of their gendered sexual identity and expression (Cvajner et al., 2021; Valenzuela et al., 2022). Scholars have also emphasised that the exploration of sexual change in migration requires a view that does not only focus on oppressive power but also on resistance and expansion of collective and individual agency – empowerment (Lewis, 2014; Monteros-Obelar et al., 2018). Furthermore, adopting a transnational life-course perspective could facilitate understanding how sexual agency, identity, expression, and bodily transitions are shaped by migrants’ life stages, unfolding in multiple national contexts, and influenced by institutions, historical processes, and transnational relations (Erlinghagen, 2021).

Additionally, given the complexity of the study of sexuality and gender issues in migration, scholars have also argued for the use of mixed quantitative and qualitative approaches in combination with participatory arts-based methods (Leavy, 2020; Aziz et al., 2021). Only a small but growing body of work has used arts-based research (ABR) to explore issues of gender, sexuality and empowerment in migration contexts with scholars calling for further inclusion of participatory ABR (Bagley et al., 2019; Lopes Heimer, 2024; Martin, 2023; McIlwaine et al., 2024; Serafini, 2020).

Research on sexuality and migration also remains limited in geographical scope, focusing largely on South-North flows, even though South-South migration accounts for 38 percent of global migration (Donzelli, 2013; World Bank, 2016). This limited geographical focus constrains the development of scholarly knowledge that considers specific South-South dynamics, which are shaped by colonial legacies, inequality, socioeconomic precarity, indigenous cultural diversity, and alternative epistemologies that do not neatly align with frameworks derived from South-North experiences. While the terms Global South and North are subject to debate and lack precision, they remain valuable as analytical and policymaking tools. The South and North are not merely geographical areas, but rather dynamic territorial, relational, structural and political constructs concerned with power distribution in the global order (Quijano, 2008; Sud et al., 2022). The Global South also incorporates countries that are north of the equator, like Mexico, while the Global North includes nations geographically in the south, like Australia. Although these classifications may obscure the heterogeneity within migrant populations, they are useful for emphasising inequalities and dynamics across regions (Bakewell et al., 2009). Scholars have called for greater recognition of the Global South's significance in migration studies (Bastia et al., 2019; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2020). In response to these gaps, this research critically examines South-South and South-North mobility as part of a nonlinear continuum, viewing migrants as sexual, gendered, and emotion-able agents.

2.3.3 Agency dis/empowerments in in/voluntary im/mobility

Migration adds a multifaceted layer of complexity to persistent gender-based violence dynamics which position women and gender-diverse migrants in heightened precarity situations. Extensive research indicates that women, and gender-diverse migrants face a higher risk of violence, exclusion, poverty, and discrimination, often experienced as a continuum across spaces of origin, transit, and (un)intended destination (López Ricoy et al., 2021; Menjívar et al., 2018; Rios-Rivera, 2025; UN, 2022). However, migrants navigate these environments by employing tactics to maximise their ability to negotiate agency. Even though violence and precarity are undeniable parts of women and gender-diverse migrants' experiences, and constitute the conditions of their survival, they are not merely passive recipients of said violence nor are they defined solely by these oppressive experiences. Violence is power and where there is oppressive power there is resistance and opportunities for growth, agency transformation and empowerment.

Migration is an act of agency; it enables individuals to renegotiate their social roles, develop new aspirations and access resources that may lead to agency change and empowerment. Migration can expand resources and achievements in the form of enhanced education and labour outcomes, reducing inequality and poverty while contributing to development (Flores-Hernández et al., 2012; Chowdhory

et al., 2022). It may improve women's status within the household by entering new sectors of employment or by sending remittances to support their families (Pfeiffer, et al., 2007; Bolaji, 2022). Migration could translate into expanded sexual freedom, identity exploration, greater sexual equality and rights (Carrillo, 2004, p. 59). Furthermore, it can foster enhanced self-perceptions, resilience and psychological growth (Bagnoli, 2009; Umer et al., 2019). However, these effects are not always positive, nor they are universal or guaranteed, and are frequently constrained by power structures that limit socioeconomic opportunities and rights (Eryar et al., 2019).

Migration should not be seen as a straightforward path to empowerment. Migrants' capabilities are shaped by intersecting factors such as gender, class, race and ethnicity, alongside structural limitations influenced by socioeconomic and political dynamics (Piper, 2008). A simplistic view of migration as inherently empowering risks reinforcing the notion that migrants – especially those emigrating from countries in the Global South – escape oppression, precarity and gender regimes by moving to the 'Global North heaven' (Withers, 2019; Dannecker et al., 2021). Migrants often encounter new gender regimes that may be equally or more restrictive than those they left behind (Piper, 2008). Furthermore, newly encountered freedoms under conditions of structural containment and legal uncertainty can result in involuntary immobility, forced return, narrow job prospects and exploitation (De Genova, 2002; Hennebry and Hari, 2021; Şarlak, 2025). It is therefore crucial to recognise that empowerment and disempowerment co-exist and are multidimensional, time-bound, and context-specific.

Some scholars call for more nuanced views of agency that account for the multiple constraints within which agency is negotiated. Sociopolitical structures, psychosocial aspects, sexuality and gender issues, are key intersectional factors that need to be considered when studying migrants' agential negotiations. Sociopolitical structures are relevant not only in spaces of transit and destination, but also in countries of origin, fundamentally shaping survival migrants' agency and their aspirations and capabilities to migrate. In spaces of origin, labour markets, visa regimes, and situations of generalised violence, play a critical role in shaping migratory agency (Feldmann et al., 2022; Hammoud-Gallego et al., 2023). Coupled with that, migration structures, including in/formal powers, asylum systems, regulatory frameworks, policies, and procedures governing migration and asylum, actively influence who migrates or not, how they migrate, the choices migrants' make, and their lived experiences (Hennebry and Hari, 2021; Sigona et al., 2021; Düvell et al., 2022; Herrera-Rosales, 2025). Border regimes and institutional labels such as 'refugee', 'asylum seeker', and 'economic migrant' are key parts of these structures shaping migrants' agency. These labels are "powerful definitional tools" that influence perceptions, define access to resources, recognition and rights, fundamentally shaping migrants' ability to negotiate agency (Zetter, 1991, 2007; Crawley et al., 2018).

Migration structures often generate conditions of "confinement in motion", particularly for those with precarious legal status, including asylum seekers, pushing them into prolonged uncertainty and unfreedom while migrating or in transit (Balaguera, 2023a; Ongwech et al., 2024). This responds to a broader logic of migration containment where states manage migration and asylum flows by confining migrants within specific territories (Casas-Cortes et al., 2015; Şarlak, 2025; Landau, 2025).

This containment results in waiting zones where migrants are temporarily settled but lack a clear path to permanent documentation (Bailey et al., 2002; Triandafyllidou, 2022). The intersection of migration structures with social markers of identity, such as race, class, gender and sexuality, creates additional layers of restriction on migrants' agency. Within this context, women and gender-diverse migrants, in particular, face compounded barriers as migration systems and asylum regimes often fail to address their specific needs (Bastia, 2013b). This leaves them more exposed to violence, exploitation, and marginalisation.

While migrants' agency is shaped by sociopolitical power structures in lands of origin, and transit-destination, these structures are also influenced – although not proportionately – by the exercise of migrants' individual and collective agency (Giddens, 1984; de Haas, 2021). Migrants, borders, and the state influence each other, structuring migrants' imaginations, aspirations and behaviour, as well as border-making practices, institutions, and instruments of control (Mezzadra, 2011; Cordero et al., 2019; Castillo, 2023). Analyses of migrants' agency in their mobility experiences are central to grasping not only how agency is negotiated within structural constraints, but also how migrants strategically negotiate agency individually and collectively, shaping these very structures while carving ambivalent spaces for autonomy and empowerment (Bastia, 2013a; Yeoh et al., 2014). Despite the limitations imposed by power structures, such as institutions, informal actors, generalised violence, migration and asylum systems, migrants cultivate strategies of resistance and solidarity. They negotiate their autonomy within the boundaries of state and non-state control, developing new skills and alternative ways of doing and being in the world (Mezzadra et al., 2013).

Agency and its transformation in migration, is not solely about overcoming external obstacles, it also involves internal psychological processes that are temporally and spatially situated within the broader contexts of migrants' lives. Psychological processes, including emotional experiences of distress and growth throughout migrants' life-course in childhood and adulthood, and in origin and transit-destinations, can shape agency and decision making. Survival migration, in particular, can lead to repeated experiences of violence, resulting in prolonged polyvictimisation, trauma accumulation, and impaired cognitive functioning, which affects the ability to exercise agency (de Silva et al., 2021). Migration also presents challenges and potential traumatic experiences that can trigger or worsen anxiety, stress, and mental health issues. Research has shown a higher prevalence on mental conditions among refugees and other migrants. Common mental health conditions among these groups include depression, complex posttraumatic stress disorder, anxiety, chronic pain, and grief (Steel et al., 2009; Kirmayer et al., 2011; Andersson et al., 2018; Charlson et al., 2019; Babatunde-Sowole et al., 2020; Blackmore et al., 2020; Pike et al., 2020).

Positive psychological processes can also influence migrants' agency. Studies have shown that migrants, including those who have survived violence and traumatic events, may develop resilience and stress-related growth such as posttraumatic growth, which can positively influence their agency (Sabri et al., 2018; Taylor et al., 2024). Other positive psychosocial aspects include adaptive coping mechanisms, self-efficacy, internal locus of control, social support and sense of belonging (Chan et al., 2016; Pearce et al., 2016; Van Bortel et al., 2019; Céspedes et al., 2021; Graham-Brown, 2021).

Spirituality is also critical in shaping and often enhancing agency as it can contribute to a sense of meaning and purpose in life with cognitive, experiential, and behavioural aspects (Helminiak, 2006). These psychological processes can enhance migrants' capacity for self-reflection and critical consciousness, factors that research has identified as pivotal in processes of agency change (O'Hara et al., 2018; Cardenas et al., 2022; Jones et al., 2024).

Considering such internal processes acknowledges that dis/empowerment and migration are not only about external change but also about internal processes of transformation which are situated in specific contexts and occurring in specific stages of migrants' life-courses. Migration can lead people to perceive themselves differently, value new states of being and doing, develop new aspirations, and new forms of negotiating agency. "Migrating, then, is not ultimately about where you are, but who you are" (Carling et al., 2018, p. 954) or who you become. This dynamic process of ongoing transformation of agency in migration, aligns with the notion of *Coyolxauhqui* as developed by Gloria Anzaldúa (2015). In *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro*, Anzaldúa reinterprets the story of the moon, *Coyolxauhqui*, and her experience of traumatic dismemberment, as a decolonial lens to understand fragmentation and reconstruction in conditions of displacement, marginalisation and border crossings. The "*Coyolxauhqui* imperative" describes this ongoing process, it is a "symbol for reconstruction and reframing, one that allows for putting the pieces together in a new way" (Anzaldúa 2015, 20). This reconfiguration influences and manifests in the way agency is negotiated. Therefore, *Coyolxauhqui* can be interpreted as a dynamic temporally situated process of agency dis/empowerment, influenced and sustained by existing power structures, and situated in specific contexts.

The aspirations and capabilities framework is instrumental in understanding how agency is negotiated throughout the social navigation of migration structures while considering both, external and internal psychological aspects (Triandafyllidou, 2018; Carling et al., 2018; de Haas, 2021). This framework posits that migratory agency extends beyond merely moving and settling in a new location. It encompasses individuals' ability to choose and pursue what they value during the migration process even when facing constraints. This includes the option to stay, recognising migrants as active agents who negotiate, respond to, and even, subtly but meaningfully, transform the social forces around them (Emirbayer et al., 1998; Sen, 1999; Carling et al., 2018; de Haas, 2021; Torre-Cantalapiedra, 2024; Herrera-Rosales, 2025). The option to not move is not only relevant at the onset of migrants' journeys, but also during transit, and in temporary or longer-term destinations. 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. Therefore, migrants' experiences involve not only movement but also immobility, stopping, changing plans, waiting and settling (Brigden et al., 2016; Haas, 2017).

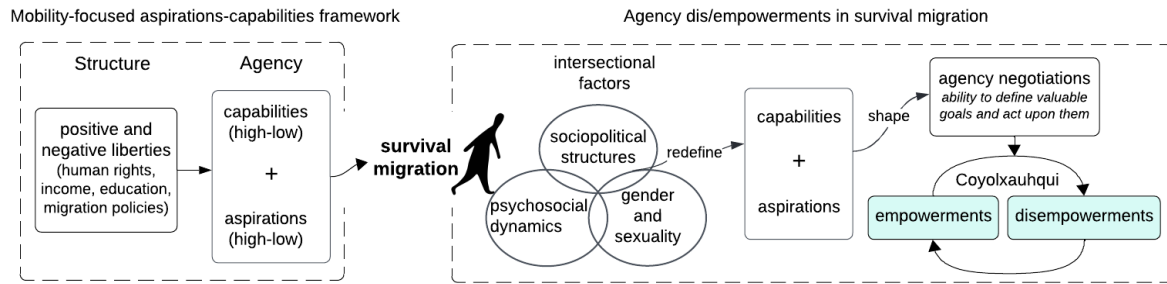
The aspirations and capabilities approach sees migration as a result of the interplay between individuals' aspirations and capabilities to migrate within the context of perceived geographical opportunity structures (de Haas, 2021, p. 17). Aspirations to migrate are influenced by what

individuals value, encompassing both life aspirations and the real or perceived geographical opportunities available to them. Capabilities are shaped by positive ('freedom to') and negative ('freedom from') liberties (Carling et al., 2018; de Haas, 2021). High migration aspirations may not materialise if individuals' capabilities to migrate are low, resulting in involuntary immobility. Conversely, high aspirations coupled with robust capabilities can lead to voluntary mobility (Carling, 2002; de Haas, 2021). In contrast, individuals with low aspirations and limited capabilities to migrate – those who have never considered migrating arguably because they do not have the capabilities nor resources to do so – may be in a position of acquiescent immobility (Schewel, 2015, 2020). Individuals with low aspirations but high capabilities may experience voluntary immobility or be subject to involuntary mobility, such as survival migration (Mata-Codesal, 2015; Leerkes et al., 2017) (see left-side section of Figure 2).

This framework is flexible enough to consider subjective experiences, perceptions, and observable manifestations of agency. It acknowledges that aspirations – framed by people's values that inform goal setting processes – are influenced by past experiences as well as "culture, education, personal disposition, identification, information and the images to which people are exposed" (de Haas, 2021, p. 18). Capabilities (opportunity freedoms) including resources, social, political and economic structures, can shape aspirations or the 'capacity to aspire', which allows individuals to reflect on and imagine valued states of being and doing, ultimately guiding their agentic choices (Appadurai, 2004; Czaika et al., 2012).

Capabilities and aspirations are therefore fundamental to analysing processes of agency dis/empowerments in migration. These are profoundly influenced by multifaceted intersectional factors at the sociopolitical and psychosocial levels, with gender and sexuality acting as key structuring axes of power, although influenced by other intersectional dimensions such as race, class, and nationality, shaping lived experiences. The dynamic interplay between these complex factors redefines capabilities and aspirations, shaping how migrants negotiate agency, leading to agential empowerments and disempowerments or *Coyolxauhqui* processes of fragmentation and reconstruction, which, in turn, further reformulate capabilities and aspirations. The diagram below illustrates this conceptual framework, including a broad representation of the aspirations-capabilities framework focused on mobility. As such, migrants' agency dis/empowerments, are shaped by the intricate relationship between key intersectional factors, capabilities, and aspirations.

Figure 2. Conceptual framework of agency dis/empowerments in migration



Source: Created by the author, with the aspirations-capabilities framework adapted from de Haas (2021).

2.4 Conclusion

This chapter aimed to provide a conceptual foundation for understanding gendered dis/empowerments in migration. In structuring an in-depth understanding of the notion of empowerment, I elucidated the interrelated concepts of power, agency, structure, and motivational autonomy. From a structurationist view, power is interpreted as a relational ability asserted through dynamic relationships between agents and structures (Giddens, 1984; Allen, 2004, 2021; Haugaard, 2010). These perspectives recognise the dual role of power structures, both as mechanisms of oppression and as sources of opportunity, recognising individuals' power to perpetuate, resist, and transform these structures through their agential negotiations. This dialectical relationship between structures and agency entails that practices result from both external constraints and agential adaptations (Navarro, 2006).

Agency is conceptualised as the constrained ability to make valuable choices and act upon them, including the option not to act (Sen, 1985b; Schwarzer et al., 1995; Alkire, 2008). The role of values is discussed to explain how autonomous behaviour is always relative to the socially integrated values that lead agentic autonomous behaviour (Deci et al., 1990, 2000; Sheldon et al., 1997). This view acknowledges the ecological interconnectedness between internal aspects, as well as external, social, cultural and material factors influencing agency. In recognising this interplay, agency is situated as a capacity for action that emerges from specific relations of subordination (Mahmood, 2001, p. 210). Such capacity is exerted through strategic negotiations, wherein individuals navigate their environments to achieve desired outcomes, recognising how social structures, norms, policies and relationships shape their choices and actions (Schalet, 2010; Barcelos et al., 2014).

Based on the conceptual understanding of power and agency, I adopt the concept of empowerment as individuals' expansion of the ability to negotiate agency in a context where this ability was previously denied (Kabeer, 1999a; Mahmood, 2001; Ibrahim et al., 2007). Key dimensions in this process are resources and achievements. Resources refer to the means through which agency is exercised, noting that these should not only be available but should be controlled by individuals to be empowering tools (Kabeer, 2005, p. 14). Achievements are outcomes or realisation of valuable goals and can serve as resources (Mahmud et al., 2012; Goldman et al., 2014). The integration of cultural values, dynamics of internalisation of domination and oppression, and processes of self-reflection are vital for interpreting choice. Therefore, I discussed the concepts of doxa and critical consciousness,

explaining how migration can disrupt deeply ingrained cultural propositions (doxa) and open space for critical consciousness, agency change and empowerment (Bourdieu, 1977; Castoriadis, 1997; Kabeer, 1999a). Nevertheless, processes of empowerment do not arise only from individuals' psychological processes, material resources, and unbalanced power structures undermine expansion and often lead to disempowerment. Therefore, exploring processes of agency transformation must contemplate both, its expansion and contraction, as well as variations over time and space.

Gendered notions of empowerment were addressed by providing an overview of sex, gender, and sexuality from a postmodernist perspective that views these analytical categories as fluid and structuring axes of power and inequality (Butler, 2006; Richardson, 2020). I introduced gender diversity concepts, adopting a plural transfeminist lens grounded in Latin American thought (Valencia, 2018; Domínguez et al., 2022; Neuhouser et al., 2022). Recognising the violence and precarity faced by women and gender-diverse people, I proposed a gendered approach to empowerment, viewed through the lens of situated intersectionality. I highlighted the multidimensional nature of empowerment processes and the importance of understanding what individuals' value and how they make choices to achieve value-based goals. The chapter also reviewed existing research on sexuality and gender in migration, identifying gaps, particularly in relation to sexual change during migration, and emphasised the need for a transnational life-course perspective and innovative techniques such as participatory arts-based research. These offer powerful tools for examining agency and sexual change in migration. Moreover, I noted the predominant research focus on South-North migration flows, which has left South-South mobility processes comparatively underexplored.

The final section brings together these arguments, stressing the importance of examining processes of agency transformation and dis/empowerment among women and gender-diverse migrants in Global South contexts. While migration can foster empowerment, it is situated within structures of inequality, requiring a critical examination of how individuals navigate, resist and shape these structures through their agential negotiations. Analyses of migrants' agency in their mobility experiences are essential to understand both the structural constraints they face and the ambivalent spaces for autonomy and agency expansion that they carve in migration. The transformation of agency in migration involves not only overcoming external obstacles but also internal processes of self-reflection and critical consciousness that are influenced by complex psychological processes, including trauma, resilience and growth, which shift throughout migrants' life-courses. As such, dis/empowerment is understood as ongoing processes of fragmentation and reconstruction or *Coyolxauhqui*. Migration and empowerment are interconnected processes of change, involving a change in external circumstances, and a shift from denial of the ability to make strategic life choices to an expansion in said ability.

To conclude, I introduced the aspirations-capabilities approach as a framework enabling the analysis of how sociopolitical structures, psychosocial aspects, gender and sexuality intersect, redefining capabilities and aspirations, and shaping processes of agency dis/empowerment. This conceptual framework is highly pertinent to the case of Latin American and Caribbean (LAC) women and

gender-diverse migrants in Mexico, navigating structures of containment while carving ambivalent spaces for autonomy and empowerment. The insights from this chapter are, therefore, foundational to the concepts underpinning this research and essential to understand LAC migrants' experiences of dis/empowerment. This conceptual chapter leads to chapter 3 on the research context, delving into the migration landscape in LAC and specifically in Mexico.

3 Migration dynamics in the Americas and Mexico's role as a regional hub

3.1 Introduction

This chapter aims to situate the study of gendered empowerment within complex migration structures in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC). It focuses on Mexico's role as a country of transit and destination, and an instrument for migration containment, while examining the situation in the main countries of origin of LAC migrants in Mexico.

The chapter presents LAC as a space increasingly characterised by intraregional migration. People migrate due to various compounding reasons including persecution, generalised violence, fragile economies, extreme poverty, and persistent forms of gender-based abuse and inequality. These issues are exacerbated by persistent gender inequality, and neoliberal violence, enacted through policies that sustain foreign control and extraction of resources, perpetuating regional inequalities (Springer, 2016; Feldmann et al., 2022). Amid deteriorating conditions in origin countries, many LAC migrants have negotiated their migratory agency by looking for safety and opportunities in neighbouring nations, with some using Mexico as a destination or as a stepping stone in their journeys to the US.

Mexico's multifaceted role in migration processes within LAC is examined through an analysis of its legal frameworks, which, while progressive and human rights-based, are inconsistently applied and oriented towards migrant containment. This approach is influenced by US externalisation practices and their adoption by Mexico through the management of migration as a national security issue. The chapter further introduces Mexico's migration and asylum trends, explaining links between the decrease in asylum applications, and record high detention events.¹⁰ An overview of the situation in the main countries of origin of LAC migrants in Mexico: Venezuela, Haiti, Cuba, El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala, and key migration drivers are introduced to help understand how migrants negotiate agency as they move from their countries of origin through third countries and into Mexico. Following a major migration route from southern to northern Mexico, the chapter presents three migration hubs, hosting large numbers of refugees, asylum seekers, and other migrants: Tapachula, Mexico City and Tijuana.

The chapter is essential to contextualise the study findings, enabling a deeper understanding of the structural constraints and facilitators shaping women and gender-diverse migrants' ability to negotiate and expand their agency.

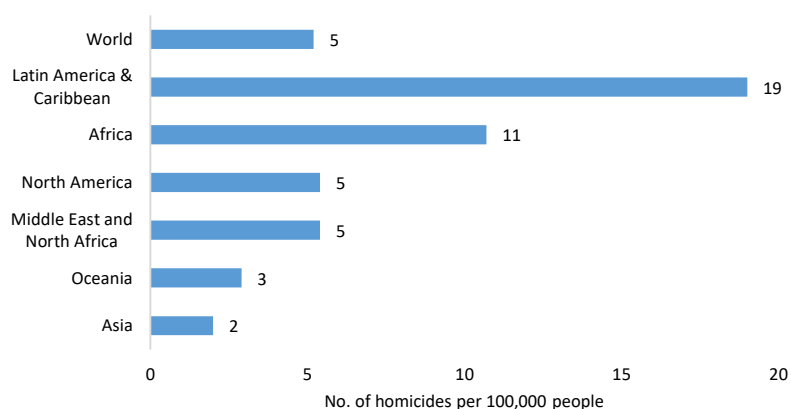
¹⁰ Given the in-person fieldwork period (October 2022 to January 2024), the data and trends presented are current as of 2024.

3.2 Migration and gender dynamics in Latin America and the Caribbean

Migration is central to the sociocultural, political and economic make-up of LAC. The region has been a territory of mobility for multiple intra- and extra-continental populations, with 'forced' and 'voluntary' mobility overlapping throughout migrants' trajectories.

In recent years, LAC's migration landscape has undergone rapid changes in mobility patterns and international politics of migration governance, with South-South and North-South mobility gaining a prominent role (Smith et al., 2023). While South-North migration continues, this pattern began to shift towards the end of the 20th century. Civil wars, foreign interventions, economic decline, political and security crises, and high rates of intentional homicide (Figure 3), have led thousands of Latin Americans and Caribbeans to out-migrate, often to other countries in the region (Selee et al., 2023; Smith, 2023). Furthermore, the 2007-2009 recession has also contributed to LAC's migration changes affecting the attractiveness and opportunities in the North (Gandini et al., 2015). Patterns of North-South migration can also be observed, with growing numbers of US-Americans¹¹ and Canadians, moving to countries like Mexico, Panama and Ecuador, as well as return or deported migrants, humanitarian and development workers moving South (Dixon et al., 2006; Selee et al., 2023; Masferrer et al., 2023). Intra-regional migration flows converge with rising immigration from outside the region, and historical processes of internal mobility and displacement (Caicedo et al., 2022).

Figure 3. Intentional homicide rates in Latin America compared to other regions and the world's average, 2023



Source: (UN World Population Prospects, 2024).

Since 2010, the migrant population in LAC has almost duplicated from 8.3 million in 2010 to 17.5 million in 2024, representing the greatest relative increase in international migration worldwide (UNDESA, 2024). Venezuelans, as well as people from northern Central America (Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador), Cuba, and Haiti, Colombia, Ecuador and Chile, have moved in higher

¹¹ I use the demonym 'US-Americans' to refer to people from the US. This demonym acknowledges the fact that all people from the American continent are Americans.

numbers in search of safety and socioeconomic opportunities. Most of them remain within the region and do not reach the US (UNHCR, 2023; Selee et al., 2023).

LAC's mobility processes have often been framed as a crisis or invasion, with a focus on immigration to the US, overlooking intraregional mobility (del Bosque, 2024). Some media sources fuel such a narrative by depicting thousands of migrants at the border of the Global North or at one of its external borders, in southern Mexico. However, this representation neglects the fact that many migrants do not aspire to reach the North, while others face numerous barriers that undermine their ability to reach their migratory goals. Notwithstanding ongoing out-migration from LAC to the US and to a lesser extent to Canada, LAC has increasingly transformed into a space of intraregional migration, where asylum seeking and other forms of mobility converge, complexifying existing migration structures.

3.2.1 Progressive legal frameworks, and their inconsistent application

Migration and asylum normative frameworks in LAC have been often acknowledged as progressive and grounded in human rights principles (Zapata et al., 2023; Fernández-Rodríguez et al., 2024). After the fall of late 20th century dictatorships mainly in Central America, human rights were brought to the front of political discourse and were adopted into legal and policy frameworks. These frameworks acknowledge the human rights of migrants, aligning with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Zapata et al., 2021; Hammoud-Gallego et al., 2023). The Inter-American Court of Human Rights (IACtHR) has been instrumental in delineating nations' responsibilities to refugees and other migrants in LAC (Fangary, 2021). The IACtHR affirms that all individuals within a state's jurisdiction are entitled to basic human rights protections, including the right to due process, access to justice, protection from discrimination, family unity, and migrant children's rights (IACtHR, 2019). Furthermore, the IACtHR underscores the principle of *non-refoulement*, prohibiting states from devolving individuals to a country where their life or freedom would be threatened (UN, 1951).

In line with a human rights approach, the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol, and the 1984 Cartagena Declaration on Refugees serve as the cornerstone of international refugee law in the region. The Convention and its Protocol have been ratified nearly by all LAC countries (except Cuba). The Cartagena Declaration is a non-legally binding landmark regional instrument that expanded the Convention definition of a refugee following the US-intervened Central American civil wars during the 1980s (Cantor, 2013; Goodfriend et al., 2024). While the Convention defines refugees as those fleeing a "well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a social group or political opinion", the Cartagena Declaration expanded the definition to include those fleeing "generalized violence, foreign aggression, internal conflicts, massive violation of human rights, or other circumstances seriously disturbing public order" (UN, 1951, p. 14; UNHCR, 1984, p. 36).

The Cartagena Declaration has shaped the design and interpretation of refugee law and policy in the region, but its application has not been even across countries. Fifteen countries have integrated the Declaration's broader refugee definition into their national laws to varying degrees (Freier et al.,

2020).¹² Countries have adopted the Declaration through modifications and exclusions of specific aspects. Some have formally integrated it into their refugee or migration legislation, while others often interpret domestic laws in light of the Declaration's principles. In the absence of explicit legal guidelines, certain countries implement the Declaration's definition through the practices and procedures of their refugee status determination systems, often assessed on a case-by-case basis (Freier et al., 2022).

Other key instruments have also influenced migration and refugee law and policy in the region.¹³ The Global Compact on Refugees and the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration provide non-binding frameworks for international cooperation promoting dialogue and responsibility-sharing on migration and refugee issues (Acosta et al., 2022). These Global Compacts encourage states to adopt their principles into national legislations, but application disparities remain.

The lack of clarity in the implementation of these progressive frameworks leads to its discretionary application, providing protection to some while leaving others unprotected, and in legal limbo, exacerbating structural-based vulnerabilities (Esthimer, 2016). These practices are applied to complex situations of migrants, where some motivations, such as fleeing generalised violence or persecution, may qualify them for refugee status, while others such as poverty, lack of medical services, and gender-based violence do not fit dominant legal interpretations of 'refugee'. Consequently, those categorised as 'economic migrants' are deemed unworthy of protection and assistance, even when life risks prevail. This legal distinction between refugee and migrant, creates a differentiation in which obligations are owed to some, while others are perceived as less deserving of an international response (Zetter, 2007; Hamlin, 2021).

The concept of "survival migration" coined by Betts (2010), is valuable in highlighting the gaps in international protection frameworks and particularly relevant in the LAC context, where displacement occurs due to complex factors such as gang-violence, gender-based abuse, socioeconomic precarity and political oppression, which do not neatly adapt to dominant refugee definitions. It refers to the situation of those who have migrated due to existential threats without domestic remedies, and who often fall outside the dominant definition of a 'refugee' (Betts, 2010). This concept may be interpreted as a notion that recognises agency in mobility rather than simply as having been 'forcibly displaced' by external forces and devoid of agency. Such migratory choice often constitutes a constrained and yet, agentic act. I consequently adopt the notion of survival migration, as it recognises the limited but existent possibilities to negotiate and assert migratory agency. While this notion considers those who fall outside the 1951 Refugee Convention definition of a refugee, in the context of Latin America,

¹² Argentina, Brazil, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay, have at least partly, adopted the Declaration's definition of refugee into their legal systems. Some countries, like Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Panama, and Venezuela, have not integrated the Cartagena definition at all (Freier, Berganza, and Blouin 2022).

¹³ Some of these include the International Convention on the 1965 Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the 1966 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, the 1984 Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, the 1990 International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families, the 2000 Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, and the 2006 International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance (UN, 1965, 1966, 1979, 1984, 1990, 2000, 2006).

refugeehood is also determined by the 1984 Cartagena Declaration. Therefore, I refer to these two instruments as the core frameworks establishing the refugee definition.

Within this intricate legal framework, gender inequality persists across institutional, cultural, social and personal levels, structuring gendered marginalisation, shaping migrants' access to resources and opportunities to negotiate agency.

3.2.2 Gender dynamics in LAC

Gender inequality persists, manifesting at various scales. Gender-based violence against women and gender-diverse people remains high with two thirds of women aged 15 and older reporting having experienced some form of violence during their lives, and at least 12 percent disclosing sexual violence which doubles the global average of 6 percent (Naciones Unidas y RCP LAC, 2024). Furthermore, estimates indicate severe levels of lethal violence against gender-diverse people. In 2023, seven of the ten countries with the highest number of reported murders of trans people were located in the Americas (Sánchez-Garzoli, 2025). These alarming figures illustrate deeply engrained patterns of violence against feminised and gender-nonconforming identities, producing structural conditions of precarity and marginalisation.

Mirroring the inconsistent implementation of migration legal frameworks, progressive legislation intended to safeguard the rights of women and gender-diverse people is applied unevenly, thereby perpetuating gender inequality and violence in the region. Nearly all the countries in LAC have legislation addressing domestic violence, and approximately 80 percent have adopted international legal instruments to prevent and respond to violence against women (UNICEF, 2023; World Bank, 2024a). Likewise, most nations have de-criminalised same-sex sexual activity, and several have recognised same-sex marriage, adoption rights, and legal changes to names and gender identity markers on official documents (Sin Violencia LGBTIQ+, 2024). Nevertheless, legal enforcement is uneven, and social stigma prevail, exposing these groups to widespread violence and discrimination.

Importantly, gender-based violence is aggravated by intersecting systems of inequality, including race, class, age, and migratory status, compounding existing vulnerabilities. Together, these intersections form a matrix of inequality that renders women and gender-diverse migrants particularly vulnerable to further violence, exploitation and marginalisation. The persistent forms of inequality and violence confronting women and gender-diverse people in the LAC region extend beyond national borders, being reproduced, transformed, and often intensified throughout migration processes.

Within this complex regional landscape, Mexico has emerged as a migration crossroad and often a stepping stone for LAC migrants searching for safety and economic opportunities further north. However, persistent gender inequality, coupled with increasingly restrictive migration and asylum systems, US-Mexico externalisation through containment practices, and pervasive violence and crime that preys on migrants, have led thousands to extend their stays in Mexico, transforming it into an unexpected destination.

3.3 Mexico: a stepping stone and an unexpected destination

This section offers a critical overview of Mexico's migration structure including its asylum system, examining its ambivalent role as a humanitarian state and territory of migrant containment. Additionally, it sheds light on the conditions prevalent in the primary countries of origin of migrants in Mexico and offers insights into the situations in the study locations: Tapachula, Mexico City, and Tijuana.

Mexico is the second-largest Latin American country in terms of population size and economy. With a population of nearly 130,000,000, the country grapples with high levels of poverty and inequality, with at least 36 percent of the population experiencing multidimensional poverty and a Gini index of 43 (CONEVAL, 2022; World Bank, 2024b). Moreover, Mexico faces significant security and violence-related challenges, making it one of the most dangerous countries in the world (ACLED, 2024). These dynamics are influenced by a confluence of factors, including multidimensional poverty, inequality, widespread corruption, impunity, collusion between officials and criminal organisations, the 'war on drugs', arms and people trafficking, with migrants fleeing to and through Mexico from similar circumstances (IACHR, 2015; Rodriguez, 2016; ONC, 2021; Crisis Group, 2025). Some scholars have referred to these dynamics as "violent pluralities" where a myriad of state and nonstate actors perpetrate violence (Arias et al., 2010; Vogt, 2013).

Violence against women and gender-diverse people are central in Mexico's security crisis. The country ranks low, at 147 out of 181, on the Women, Peace and Security index (Institute for Women, Peace and Security, 2025). 63 percent of women over the age of 15 reported that they have been victims of some type of violence during their lives, and government data suggests that 10 women per day are victims of femicide in the country (Amnesty International, 2021; OHCHR, 2023a). Furthermore, levels of violence and hate crimes against gender-diverse people are high (Sin Violencia LGBTI, 2024). Organisations have repeatedly reported significant human rights issues involving violence, discrimination and authority abuse against these groups (Advocates for Human Rights, 2022; Beer, 2024). Despite progressive laws that protect women and gender-diverse people's rights, the rule of law is weak, with corruption, state neglect and impunity sustaining violent pluralities.¹⁴

The Mexican government has responded to the violence crisis by accelerating the militarisation of public security. The constitution has been reformed and the National Guard (GN) security force has been created, authorising the use the military for public security and civilian police functions, including the detention of migrants in collaboration with the National Migration Institute (INM) (see details in 3.3.1) (Ibarra, 2021; Kryg et al., 2024). Before the consolidation of the GN, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights expressed its concern with the engagement of the armed forces in civilian police duties (IACHR, 2015, p. 60). These concerns have been accompanied by numerous reports on human rights violations by the armed forces against citizens and migrants

¹⁴ Mexico ranks 118 out of 142 countries in the World Justice Project's Rule of Law Index, scoring worse than El Salvador and Guatemala (WJP, 2024).

(Moncada et al., 2022; Verduzco et al., 2023; OHCHR, 2024). Nonetheless, today, the intimidating armed members of the GN together with the navy and the military, police the country and its borders.

In the geographical north but economically in the South, Mexico has emerged as a key migration hub where thousands of LAC migrants depart from, (permanently) transit, and (temporarily) settle. It ranks as the second most significant country of origin for international emigrants and accommodates the world's largest migration corridor at its northern border with the US. Increasingly, Mexico is also becoming an unforeseen destination for many migrants (IOM, 2024a). The next section provides an overview of Mexico's migration and asylum legal frameworks, policies and mobility trends.

3.3.1 Migration and asylum governance, and externalisation practices

Mexico's governance of migration and asylum is complex and often contradictory, oscillating between humanitarian approaches and containment strategies. These ambivalent positions are influenced by external pressures and internal political factors. Despite a rhetoric that portrays a benevolent government that protects migrants, in practice, the Mexican state employs various control measures to identify, detain, and deport migrants, including asylum seekers. More prominently since the beginning of the 21st century, migration has increasingly been managed as an issue of national security, including through border externalisation and containment practices that compromise migrants' human rights (Casas-Cortes et al., 2015; HRW, 2016; Torre-Cantalapiedra et al., 2021; Şarлак, 2025; Landau, 2025).¹⁵

Like other LAC countries, Mexico has a progressive migration policy framework and an inconsistent application (Zapata et al., 2023). The country has ratified the 1951 Refugee Convention, its 1967 Protocol, and the 1984 Cartagena Declaration on Refugees. It is one of seven countries participating in the Comprehensive Regional Protection and Solutions Framework, and is part of the Global Compact for Migration. The constitution recognises equal protection and rights for nationals and foreigners (Cámara de Diputados, 1917). The 2011 Migration Law establishes migration policy principles, while the Law on refugees, complementary protection, and political asylum delineates humanitarian protection protocols (Cámara de Diputados, 2011a, 2011b). The INM and the Mexican Commission for Refugee Assistance (COMAR), are the main entities managing transit, stay and permanence in the Mexican territory.

Migrants can remain in Mexico as visitors, temporary or permanent residents, through various documentation pathways (Cámara de Diputados, 2011b; Ornelas et al., 2021). Undocumented entry or stay is not considered a criminal offence, and migrants can apply for regularisation, subject to exceptions and a fine of up to £270. However, authorities can detain those unable to demonstrate

¹⁵ The 20th century also witnessed anti-immigrant practices that led to the illegal removal of many Chinese immigrants including their Mexican-Chinese descendants (Gomez, 2019).

their regular migration status (CNDH, 2022).^{16,17} To avoid irregularity, asylum seekers must submit their application within 30 days of entering the country (COMAR, 2021a). Once in a regular situation, migrants can formally work. While access to education and healthcare is not legally conditioned on documentation, in practice, migrants face administrative obstacles to access these rights.

In terms of humanitarian protection, Article 11 of the Constitution establishes that anyone can apply for asylum and obtain it if their case is valid.¹⁸ The Law on refugees, complementary protection and political asylum aligns with international standards and is guided by the principles of non-refoulement, non-discrimination, no penalty for irregular entry, best interests of the child, family unity, and confidentiality. Humanitarian protection is granted under the three categories explained below, and the resolution process typically takes months, despite the legal deadline of 45 days (Cámara de Diputados, 2011a; Sin Fronteras IAP, 2016):

- (i) Refugee status. Foreign born people can request this status if they have a well-founded fear of persecution or have fled due to threats to their lives from generalised violence, foreign aggression, internal conflict, or human rights – an approach that combines the Convention and the Declaration's definitions. Refugees have the right to assistance, health care, education, work, family reunification, identity and travel documentation, and permanent residency. Asylum seekers may apply for a Visitor Card for Humanitarian Reasons (TVRH) which enables them to work whilst they wait for their resolution. Applicants must remain in the state where they applied and visit the COMAR or INM offices weekly to confirm they are still interested in protection.
- (ii) Complementary protection (CP). It ensures non-refoulment for people whose lives would be threatened if they returned to their country of origin. It may be granted to applicants who are denied refugee status, although denial does not necessarily result in CP. CP enables access to permanent residence, but with fewer rights than refugee status. CP beneficiaries do not have the right to family reunification, derivative recognition of refugee status to family members, nor access to public services and refugee integration programmes. Furthermore, CP may be revoked if the original reasons for granting it no longer exist.
- (iii) Political asylum is granted to foreigners who have fled their countries due to dangers to their life, liberty, or security from political ideas or activities directly related to their public profile (SRE, 2016). Political asylum is managed by the Secretariat of Foreign Affairs (SRE) and considered an issue of foreign policy. Political asylees enjoy the same rights as refugees and further discretionary protections from the SRE.

Despite having a progressive migration and asylum legal framework like other LAC nations, Mexico has not consistently nor sufficiently applied its well-designed policies, leaving thousands unprotected or in legal limbo, and immobilised within its borders. This inconsistent and inadequate application is partly rooted in Mexico's role as a US immigration buffer, where the asylum system, along with the

¹⁶ Exception may apply to those going through a process of deportation or voluntary repatriation, See Article 145 of the Migration Law 2011 a fine applies for adult migrants in an irregular situation who are married or in a union with a Mexican citizen or permanent resident, or who are parents or caregivers of a minor who is a Mexican citizen or permanent resident.

¹⁷ In 2021, the municipality police carried out most migrant detentions and presented them to the INM (Ureste, 2021).

¹⁸ Refuge is the legal figure used in Mexico while political asylum is granted only to few cases based on specific criteria. To ease readability, I refer to refuge as asylum interchangeably.

securitisation of borders and of key migration routes, contribute to the immobilisation of migrants, containing them in the South. This entails an externalisation through containment strategy where a state manages migration, and asylum flows by containing migrants within specific territories. This effectively shifts US border control responsibilities beyond their own borders and into Mexico (Casas-Cortes et al., 2015; Şarлак, 2025; Landau, 2025).

Mexico's compliance in serving the US as an external border is largely driven by economic pressures and incentives including international treaties, pushing states to grant asylum even if security conditions cannot be met (Smith, 2023). Externalisation practices have occurred for decades, often involving transfers of resources to the Mexican government for development and security. A clear example is the Mérida Initiative through which the US Congress allocated millions of dollars to Mexican military, police agencies, and to the INM to curb migration (París Pombo, 2022). These practices have intensified since Trump's first administration (2017-2021).

US border externalisation processes in Mexico can be better understood by considering how former US migration policies have relied on their implementation in Mexico.¹⁹ For instance, the 'Waiting lists' or 'metering' (February 2016 – November 2021), involved the listing of migrants who presented themselves at the Mexico-US border to request US asylum. The lists were passed on from Mexico to US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) who allowed a limited number of asylum seekers to begin their application process. These lists preceded the Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP) or 'Remain in Mexico' (January 2019-October 2022), which allowed US asylum applications at the border to be processed in the US while sending people back to Mexico to wait for their hearings. Title 42 was established in parallel (March 2020-May 2023), enabling the rapid expulsion of migrants and asylum seekers to Mexico, presumably to protect public health. The Circumvention of Lawful Pathways rule (CLP) or 'Asylum ban' came in shortly after the end of Title 42, requiring migrants to have an appointment confirmed via the CBP One app to request US asylum (Homeland Security, 2023, 2024; Rios-Rivera, 2024; Martínez, 2025).

Digital technologies, such as the CBP One app, have supported the implementation of these US policies in Mexico. Since January 2023, CBP One became the main way to apply for asylum and humanitarian parole in the US. Asylum-seekers could schedule appointments through the app, to start their US asylum application process from Mexico. The process assigned a limited number of daily appointments with applicants being put in a lottery-like system after filling in their applications. They were notified the following day whether they had received an appointment, with those not allocated an appointment having to restart the process the next day. The CBP One app was cancelled in January 2025.

Externalisation processes do not thrive simply through external pressures; the support and adoption of national practices are necessary for externalisation goals to be reached. As former president López Obrador repeatedly said "the best foreign policy is the internal one" (López Obrador, 2022). At least

¹⁹ I analyse the policies that were relevant during my fieldwork from October 2022 to January 2024.

two Mexican migration policies have aided these processes: the militarisation of public security and the expanded use of the asylum system as a stay-on-site documentation strategy that contains migrants in the territory as they wait for migratory documentation that unlocks mobility.

Mexico's militarisation strategy has had a direct impact on migration issues, and the securitisation of borders and of key migration routes. Since its creation in 2019, the GN has been deployed to the northern and southern borders to support the INM in identifying and detaining migrants in an effort to deter northward migration (Moncada et al., 2022; Animal Político, 2023). The INM and the GN have been integrated into Mexico's migration infrastructure, securitising the borders and the entire territory through numerous migration checkpoints established on roads, highways, airports and bus stations (Ramírez, 2024; Nochebuena, 2025). Racial profiling is systematically used to detain individuals who are 'likely' to not be Mexican, resulting in several cases of indigenous and black Mexicans being detained by the GN and the INM on suspicion of being foreigners (Lakhani, 2022).

Coupled with the intensification of migration control and surveillance aided by the militarisation process, refugee status and complementary protection have been used as the main documentation pathway for survival migrants, aiding containment efforts. This overly use of international protection mechanisms overburdens institutional capacity, failing to provide adequate protection. Being the main documentation pathway that enables safe mobility by avoiding clandestine routes and detention, survival migrants are compelled to apply for asylum, even if they do not want to stay in Mexico. The asylum application process involves a residence requirement, forcing claimants to remain in the state where the process was initiated, and await their documentation in areas where they have scarce support networks. Determination of refugee status or complementary protection should take up to 90 working days, but data demonstrates that thousands of claimants wait over a year (Asylum Access Mexico, 2019a; UNHCR, 2022a). This generates dense waiting zones where migrants get stranded, with some leaving without documents, taking irregular routes that expose them to significant risks including detention or falling in the hands of criminal groups.

The use of refugee status as the main form of documentation for survival migrants is problematic, not only because Mexico's position as a 'safe country' is questionable, but also because having refugee status in Mexico might affect the applicant's chances of gaining asylum in the US – which is the objective for many. The widespread use of refugee status supports border externalisation through containment efforts, linking the US asylum process with Mexico's (Rios-Rivera, 2024). This link can favour the US given that Mexico follows a wider definition of refugee, while the US uses a more restrictive one (Asylum Access Mexico, 2019b). This means that, it might be less cumbersome to acquire refugee status in Mexico than in the US. Under the CLP rule, one exemption applied to those who were denied asylum in a third country, including Mexico. However, how could asylum seekers fulfil this criterion if Mexico lacks the capacity to assess asylum applications? (see asylum application trends and processing capacity in the next section). In some cases, migrants are granted refugee status or complementary protection while in many others, their applications are not processed, resulting in a legal limbo that confines them to cities where they initiated their asylum claims. As human rights defender Guillermo Naranjo stated in an interview in Tapachula, "the strategy is to tire people out"

so that migrants return to their countries of origin or move elsewhere. This situation illustrates the legal obstacles posed by migration and asylum regimes, severely affecting migrants' ability to make valuable choice and act upon them, or to negotiate agency.

3.3.2 *Un/Welcoming migration and asylum practices*

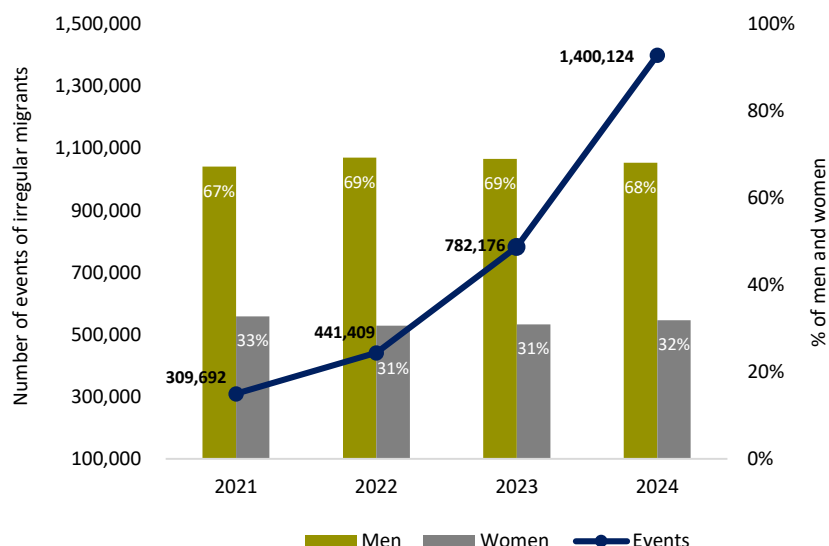
Especially since the second half of the 20th century, Mexico has been an important country of settlement for migrants and refugees fleeing Europe and other LAC countries (Gatrell, 2000; Faret et al., 2021). By the late 20th and early 21st centuries, LAC migrants, continued to cross and settle in Mexico mainly due to civil wars, authoritarian regimes, generalised violence, precarious living conditions, and migration policy changes shaping aspirations and capabilities to migrate (Selee, 2020).²⁰ In recent years, the operation and conflict among organised crime groups, *mano dura* (iron fist) policies against drugs, human trafficking, extortion, kidnapping, gang recruitment, socioeconomic and environmental deterioration, coupled with state fragility, have pushed thousands of LAC migrants to seek safety and better living conditions in Mexico and beyond (Wilson Center, 2019; ICG, 2021; Frank-Vitale, 2023).

Mexico represents the last country before migrants reach the North, the entrance to the “the American dream”. However, its restrictive migration policies and geography create a vertical border, filled with obstacles that limit migrants' agency, leading to involuntary immobility, insecurity, and lack of protection (Varela, 2018). While some migrants see Mexico as a destination from the onset of their journeys, for many, it has become a permanent transit space and an unexpected destination.

Official statistics report that regular and irregular migration in Mexico have sharply increased. The migrant stock including recognised refugees, has risen 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 INM which in 2024 reported a record number of over 1,400,000 detentions (Figure 4). Detentions are reported as ‘events’ and include foreigners ‘presented’ to the INM, and ‘referred’ to government shelters, or whose migratory regularisation was initiated by the authorities (Gobierno de México, 2023). Referred migrants are mostly women, families and children. The 2024 increase in the number of detentions in Mexico coincided and partly produced, a sharp drop in migrant apprehensions by the US Border Patrol, from about 250,000 in December 2023 to roughly 53,000 in September 2024 (US CBP 2024). Former US president Biden praised the Mexican government for helping to stop migrants before they reached the US-Mexico border (Debusmann, 2024).

²⁰ The terms ‘generalised violence’ and ‘indiscriminate violence’ connote that violence is widespread, random, and affects all alike (Holzer, 2012, p. 5)

Figure 4: Events of irregular migrants registered by the INM 2021-2024, by share of men and women*



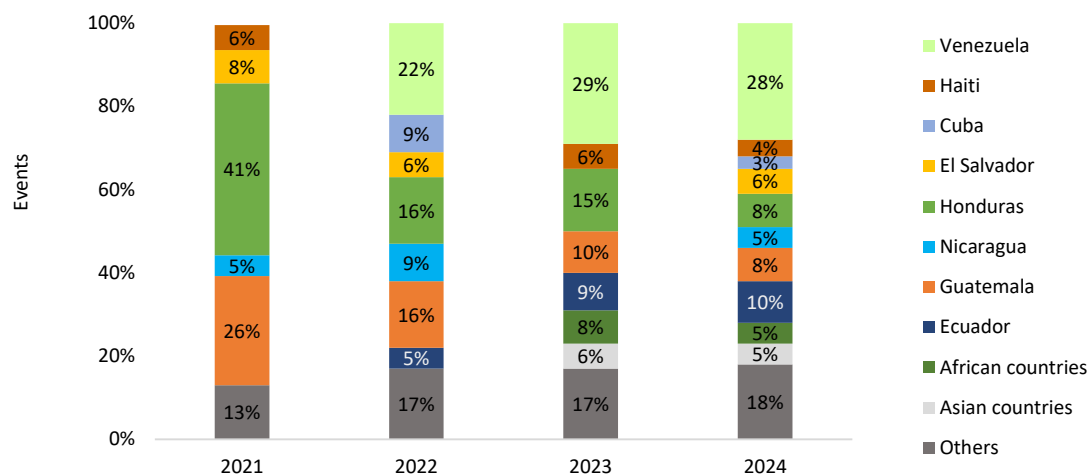
Source: (Gobierno de México, 2021, 2022a, 2023, 2024a, 2024b).

*Events refer to the number of times a migrant was 'presented' or 'referred' by the INM. Migrants may be 'presented' or 'referred' more than once.

Approximately three-quarters of the detention events recorded in 2023 involved migrants who were 'presented' to the INM and subsequently placed in migratory stations or detention centres. These facilities have a maximum stay duration of 36 hours, which was reduced from 15 working days prior to March 2023 (Cámara de Diputados, 2011b; Suprema Corte de Justicia de la Nación, 2023). However, organisations have reported cases of migrants remaining in these stations for over six months (Aguilar et al., 2019). Conditions are precarious, and human rights violations have been widely reported including the fire of a northern Mexico station in 2023, that resulted in 40 migrant fatalities and 28 injuries (Moncada et al., 2022; Romo, 2023). Cases of attempt and suicide are also often registered (Observatorio de Migración, 2016; CNDH, 2019). Furthermore, reports show that upon detention, the INM has bused migrants back to the southern border from where they may restart their north-bound journeys and therefore, the 'events' figure may double- or triple-count migrants encountered by the INM (Clemente, 2024). Detention numbers provide only a rough estimation of the magnitude of irregular migration suggesting that there might be thousands more facing irregularity.

In 2021, most detainees were Central Americans, while South Americans and Caribbeans were more commonly detained from 2022 (Figure 5). This change may respond to a US policy shift and its implementation in Mexico. In October 2022, the US announced a new humanitarian parole program for Venezuelans, later expanded to Cubans, Haitians, and Nicaraguans, allowing them to live and work in the US for two years under a US resident sponsorship (USCIS, 2023). Those who had entered Panama, Mexico, or the US without authorisation were rendered ineligible (AIC, 2023). Notably, the program was intended to accommodate a maximum of 360,000 migrants, and was contingent on Mexico's agreement to accept US expulsions of the same number of migrants (Homeland Security, 2023).

Figure 5. Rate of events by main countries of origin, 2021-2024

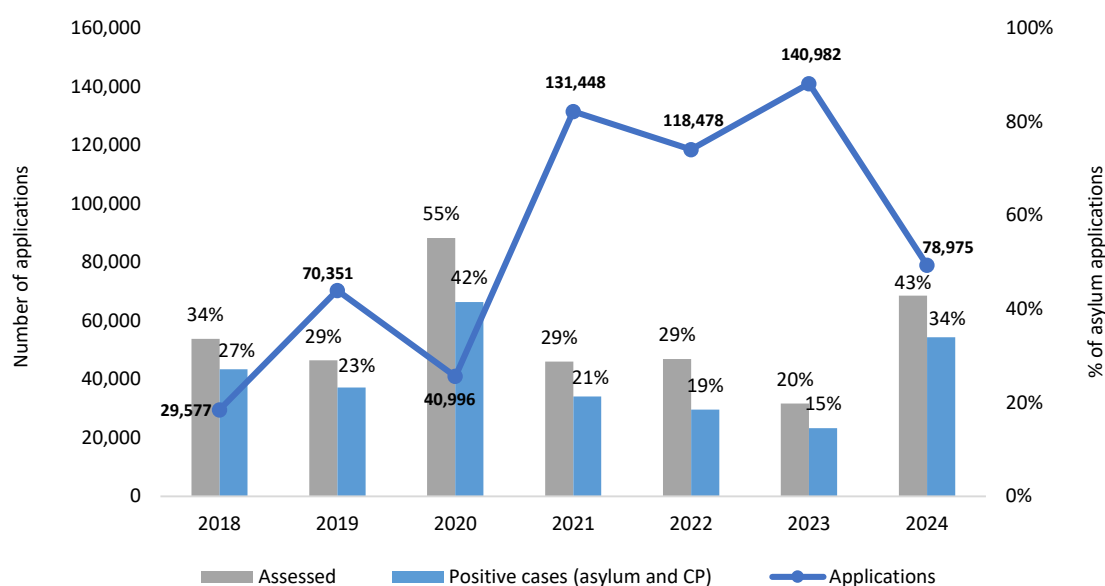


Source: (Gobierno de México, 2021, 2022a, 2023, 2024a).

The 2024 increase in migrant detentions concurred with a sharp drop in asylum applications, after a peak record of claims in 2021 and 2023. The number of asylum applications received by the COMAR increased from nearly 30,000 in 2018 to over 140,000 in 2023, with a sharp reduction in 2024 (Figure 6). Applicants were mainly from Central American and Caribbean countries (Figure 8), and most of their claims were received in Tapachula, Chiapas at the southern border (64 percent), followed by Mexico City (centre) and Tijuana, Baja California at the northern border, showing a distribution throughout common migratory routes (see Figure 1 for the main migratory routes in Mexico).

The COMAR has repeatedly reported that their capacity and budget is not enough to process all applications and the case backlog is high, especially for Caribbeans who have the lowest assessment rates (Hernández, 2023; COMAR, 2024). In 2023, the COMAR assessed only 21 percent of asylum applications and only 15 percent resulted in positive resolutions. In 2024, when the number of applications halved compared to 2023, the COMAR duplicated its assessment rate. Between 2018 and 2022, more than 610,000 asylum applications were registered, with COMAR having been able to assess only 30 percent of them leaving more than 420,000 people in legal limbo – especially Caribbeans (COMAR, 2024). On average, 43 percent of Central Americans' applications (Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala) were assessed between 2021 and 2024, compared to 22 percent of Caribbeans (mainly Haiti followed by Cuba).

Figure 6. Rate of assessed asylum applications and positive resolutions in relation to number of applications in 2018-2024*



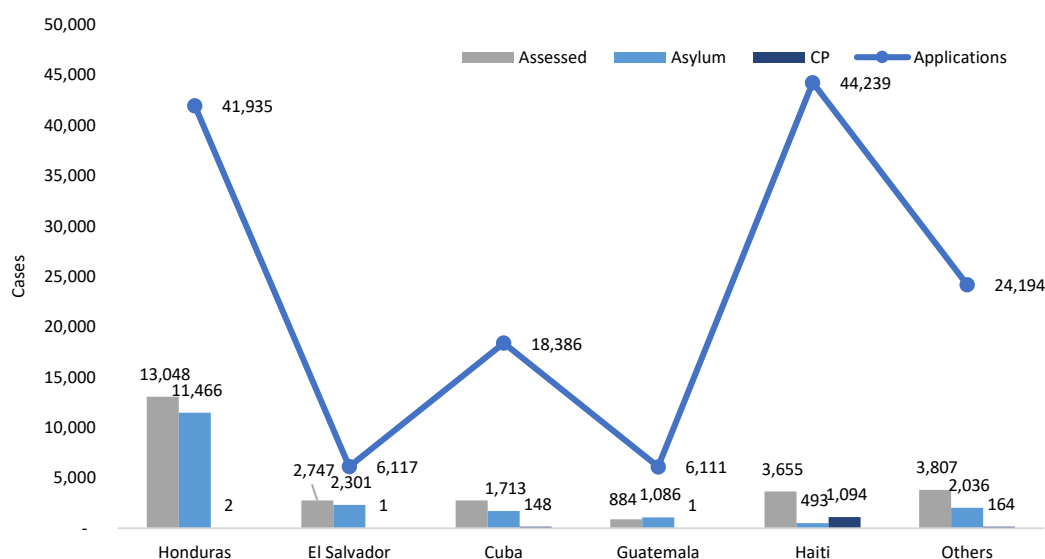
Source: (COMAR, 2021b, 2022, 2023, 2024).

*Positive resolutions include positive determinations of asylum status and complementary protection (CP). The COMAR monthly reports present discrepancies. This graph uses the numbers reported by the end of each year.

Positive asylum resolutions have been granted mainly to Hondurans and Salvadoreans, while most complementary protection (CP) cases have been granted to Caribbeans (Figure 7, Figure 8). Even though Haitians comprise one of the largest asylum applicant groups, in 2023, only 3 percent of positive asylum resolutions were granted to them, while 78 percent of the cases that received complementary protection were granted to Haitian applicants. When comparing the total number of Haitian applications to the number of positive resolutions, only 0.3 percent received asylum and 0.8 percent CP. Research has reported a bias against Haitian applicants citing COMAR staff's limited Haitian creole language skills and racial discrimination against black Haitians (CRGS et al., 2024). Added to that, Haitian migrant's previous migratory experiences may influence their cases, since many first fled to South American countries (mainly Chile and Brazil) before moving to Mexico (see more details in 3.3.3). As many did not arrive directly from Haiti, they are often classified as 'economic migrants'. They cannot be returned to South America (most do not have migratory status there), nor to Haiti where the humanitarian and security crisis has reached "alarming levels", hence making their cases eligible for asylum (UN, 2025). The head of the COMAR in Tijuana acknowledged in an interview, that, according to refugee law, it is problematic that Haitians are not being granted asylum.²¹

²¹ Venezuelans have been most often granted complementary protection and 30-45 day transit permits.

Figure 7. Number of applications, assessed cases and granted asylum or CP by country of origin, 2023



Source: (COMAR, 2023).

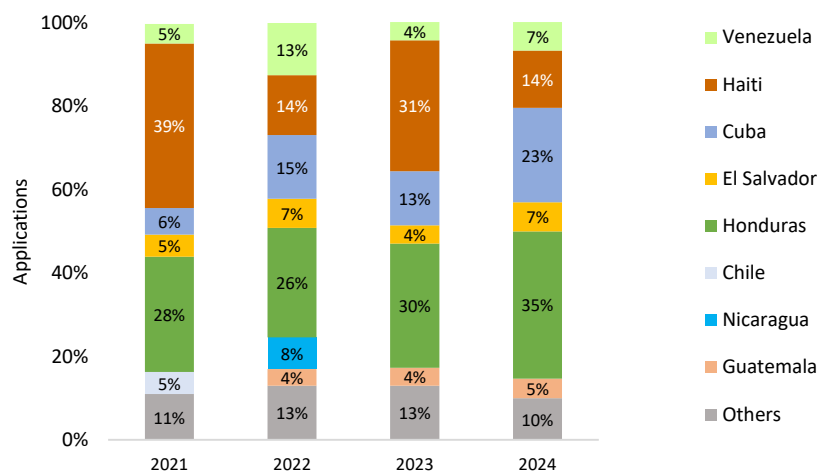
CP: complementary protection.

Note: Other countries include Afghanistan, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, and Venezuela. The government provides positive resolutions data only for the countries of origin presented in the figure.

Venezuela is another noteworthy case since Venezuelan refugees disappeared from COMAR's records for 2023-2024. Simultaneously, Venezuelans became the most commonly detained nationality group due to irregular migration (Figure 5; Figure 9). In 2021 and 2022, Venezuelans were one of the main groups granted positive asylum resolutions, while in 2023 and 2024 no positive asylum resolutions were granted to them. The 'missing' Venezuelan refugees might not indicate that their presence in Mexico decreased, but rather that they may have bypassed the refugee agency, attempting to cross the territory without migratory documents, and being detained by migration officials and criminal groups. Some Venezuelan migrants have been granted temporary documentation and complementary protection by the Mexican government, but this is often not accepted by migration authorities leading to detentions.

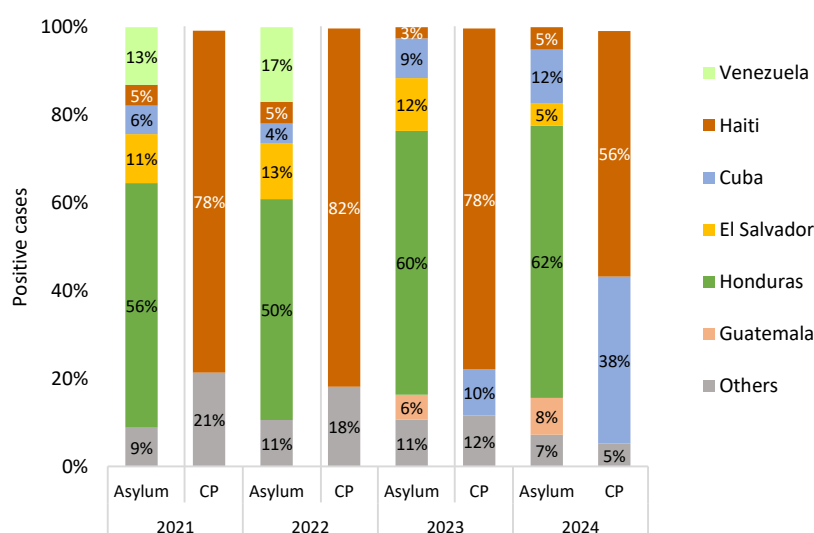
The number of asylum claims sharply decreased in 2024, a year that also registered a major increase in migrant detentions. This drop did not necessarily indicate a lower number of people in need of international protection or of documents to cross Mexico. Instead, it might be partly explained by the government strengthening of efforts to prevent mobility to the north, multiplying the number of National Guard members deployed throughout the territory to identify and detain migrants (Moncada et al., 2022; Ureste, 2022; Ruíz, 2025). Added to that, the reduction in asylum claims may also be explained by migrants' analysis of policy-related obstacles and security concerns, leading them to avoid the asylum process and retain their capability to move, although without migratory documents.

Figure 8. Asylum application rates by main countries of origin, 2021-2024



Source: (COMAR, 2021b, 2022, 2023, 2024).

Figure 9. Positive cases of asylum and complementary protection by main countries of origin, 2021-2024



Source: (COMAR, 2021b, 2022, 2023, 2024).

CP: complementary protection.

Although existing policy frameworks are designed to uphold human rights protections, their inconsistent application exacerbates migrants' challenges. Despite this difficult situation, survival migrants face complex conditions in their countries of origin, contributing to the factors that drive their out-migration. The next section provides an overview of the main countries of origin of LAC migrants in Mexico, which coincide with the countries of origin of my research collaborators, helping to contextualise my findings.

3.3.3 *The journey from home: situation in main countries of origin*

Figure 10. Main countries of origin of LAC migrants in Mexico



Source. Created by the author using OpenStreetMap, QGIS.

Venezuela has transitioned from being a country of immigration to one of out-migration, and today it is the origin of one of the largest exoduses in the world. By mid-2024, more than eight million people had fled Venezuela, 6.2 million of them were considered refugees or other people in need of international protection (R4V, 2024; UNHCR, 2024a). Especially since the end of 2014, but with a consistent downward trend since the 1970s, economic deterioration including the collapse of price of petrol, hyperinflation, shortages of food, medicine and services, and security concerns have precipitated Venezuelan out-migration (Rocha et al., 2021; Posso et al., 2023). The failure of public services and growing violence, have created a humanitarian emergency, leading many to seek safety and better living conditions abroad (Feldmann et al., 2022).

Contemporary dynamics of Venezuelan migration deepened since 2014, with scholars identifying two major waves (Olinto, 2021; Devis-Amaya, 2024). The first one, during Hugo Chavez's government (1999-2013) and mainly after the 2002 coup attempt, was comprised by people with higher socioeconomic status (Parent et al., 2018). The ongoing and larger second wave from 2014 onwards, shows more diverse backgrounds reflecting the deepening crisis (Olinto, 2021). With the consolidation of migration flows, migrants' profiles have become more diverse (Massey et al., 1990). Some scholars have noted a relationship between migrants' profiles and geographical distance from Venezuela. For example, Venezuelans in Mexico – many of whom arrived by plane – tend to have higher socioeconomic status than those in neighbouring countries (Gandini et al., 2020). However, since 2018, their profiles have diversified showing lower socioeconomic status, with more using precarious travel arrangements (R4V, 2019; Chaves et al., 2020).

Most Venezuelans (at least 6.7 million), have remained in neighbouring LAC countries, accessing a variety of legal statuses with the least common being refugee status (R4V, 2024). Even though

Venezuelans represent the largest nationality of asylum seekers worldwide (1.3 million as of 2024), only 369,826 have received refugee status, mostly in Spain, Brazil, the US, and Mexico (R4V, 2024). Many are in a situation of survival migration, relying on temporary protection and other statuses that provide limited protection.

Colombia hosts the highest number of Venezuelan survival migrants (about 2.8 million). It implements the Temporary Protection Statute for Venezuelan Migrants (ETPV) to guarantee legal status until May 2031 (Gobierno de Colombia, 2021; R4V, 2024). Peru follows Colombia, hosting about 1.6 million Venezuelans, and introduced a humanitarian visa and a Temporary Stay Permit Card (CPP) to facilitate legal migratory status to Venezuelans. Initially, these documentation pathways were relatively accessible, but requirements have become more stringent (Amnesty International, 2020; Gandini et al., 2020). Economic hardship, limited job prospects, integration difficulties, coupled with political and security issues in hosting countries, have led some Venezuelans to onward migrate to seek better opportunities further north (UNHCR, 2022b; CDP, 2024).

Many Venezuelan migrants on their way north are indeed onward migrants who firstly sought opportunities in other LAC countries, while others have travelled directly from Venezuela. Many of these survival migrants, especially those of lower socioeconomic status, use precarious forms of transport and move north through the Darién jungle in Panama. In the first quarter of 2023, more than 400,000 people crossed the Panamanian jungle (63 percent of them were Venezuelans) (Muñoz-Pogossian et al., 2023).

Mexico's approach to Venezuelans has fluctuated over time, oscillating between restrictions and protections. Especially with the second wave of Venezuelan migration, Mexico has implemented stricter entry requirements and increased border enforcement, leading to a new visa requirement in 2022 (Chaves et al., 2020; Gobierno de México, 2022b)²². At the same time, Mexico has acknowledged Venezuela's crisis and continued to offer international protection including asylum, complementary protection, and 10–45-day transit permits, enabling mobility towards the northern border (Chaves-González & Estrada, 2020; Folle et al., 2020). Yet, these protections have been inconsistently applied and unevenly accessed by Venezuelans. The Mexican government has also reached a deal with the Venezuelan government on the return of migrants (TerMaat, 2025).

Haiti is also undergoing a severe crisis that combines extreme poverty, socioenvironmental and health emergencies, political turmoil and gang violence pushing thousands to migrate internally and to other countries. There are at least two million Haitian migrants worldwide, including over 360,000 refugees and asylum seekers and more than 1,000,000 internally displaced people as of 2024 (UNDESA, 2024; UNHCR, 2024b; IOM, 2025). More prominently since the 2010 earthquake, followed by a tropical storm some days later, a hurricane in 2016, and another earthquake in 2021,

²² Venezuelans were previously not required to obtain a visa to enter Mexico and needed only a passport; however, a new visa requirement was introduced in January 2022.

thousands of people have steadily left the poorest country in LAC (World Bank, 2023). The assassination of President Jovenel Moïse in July 2021, further exacerbated the situation leaving the country in a vacuum of power (Douyon, 2023). Former acting Prime Minister Ariel Henry, nominally ruled the country from 2022 to May 2024, amidst protests demanding his resignation, a gang-controlled capital and international intervention (Mohamed, 2024). In 2023, the acting government failed to hold elections, and the last democratically elected officials left office (Concern Worldwide, 2025). A UN-supported international security mission led by Kenya has been deployed, and Ariel Henry has resigned, being replaced by the Transitional Presidential Council which later appointed Garry Conille as the new Prime Minister (UNHCR, 2024b).

Numerous organisations have repeatedly reported pervasive sexual violence against women and children, with health systems on the verge of collapse and alarming levels of crime (UN, 2023; France-Presse, 2023). This crisis impacts the everyday lives of Haitians to a degree that people fear leaving their homes to access food and water. Gang control – mainly G-Pep and G9 – is nearly omnipresent and the fragile government has been unable to manage the situation, repeatedly requesting international support (Ioanes, 2023; Sanon et al., 2025).

Unlike Venezuelans who have mostly migrated to neighbouring countries, many Haitians have not found refuge in the Dominican Republic with which they share the island of Hispaniola (Mérancourt et al., 2023). Haitian migrants' humanitarian protection needs have not been addressed by a range of host countries, denying international protection, hence, reflecting important integration challenges that have fuelled onward migration (Lacarte, 2023). Due to the escalating humanitarian and security crisis in Haiti, in November 2022, the UNHCR urged states to stop the forced return of Haitians to their country (UNHCR, 2022c). Nevertheless, expulsions continue (Harb, 2023).

Many Haitians initially migrated to LAC countries, mainly Brazil and Chile, in the aftermaths of the 2010 earthquake, and moved further north as socioeconomic and political conditions deteriorated in said host countries (Yates, 2021; de Montigny, 2023). Construction workers were in demand to prepare for the 2014 World Cup and the 2016 Olympic games in Brazil. Haitians became one of the largest immigrant nationalities in Brazil during those years. However, after the Cup and games' job rise, the Brazilian economy stagnated, political unrest grew, and job opportunities decreased leading many Haitians to continue their search for opportunities and safety (Torrado et al., 2021). Another important destination was Chile which before 2018 allowed Haitians to enter without a visa and regularise their stay with a job offer (Jimenez et al., 2023). Piñera's government (2018-2022) brought tight migration policies that made it difficult for Haitians to access documentation and employment which for some resulted in the decision to start their journeys north (*Por qué los haitianos se van de Chile*, 2021).

Similar to Venezuelans, regularisation programmes for Haitian migrants have focused on temporary and complementary protection such as humanitarian visas in Brazil, temporary job permits in Chile, and complementary protection in Mexico (Selee et al., 2023; CRGS et al., 2024). These options provide some temporary relief but do not ensure the same level of protection as refugee status, which has been granted far less often. This has created a two-tiered system, where certain Haitians are

granted greater rights and opportunities than others, despite the critical humanitarian crisis in Haiti (Freier et al., 2021).

The complex conditions in Brazil and Chile, combined with Haitians inability to return to Haiti have driven thousands of Haitians to embark on long journeys from South to North America, through the dangerous Darién jungle. Together with Venezuelans and Ecuadorians, Haitians were the largest nationality group reported to have crossed the Panamanian jungle in 2023 (Panamá Migración, 2024). Some Haitians crossing LAC from South to North manage to enter into the US, while many other increasingly stay in Mexico (see Figure 1).

Cuba. Over decades, Cubans have abandoned their nation's deteriorating political and socioeconomic situation. In absolute terms, Cuba is the main sending country in the Caribbean, with estimates suggesting more than 2 million emigrants. With the intensification of the authoritarian regime's repression in mid-2021, researchers estimate that at least 1 million people left the island between 2021 and 2024 (Albizu-Campos, 2024; IOM, 2024b).

At least since 1959, Cuba has seen several waves of people leaving the island with growingly diverse profiles (Boswell, 1993). The early waves of emigration, often referred to as the 'golden exile', consisted primarily of those opposed to the new regime (Duany, 1999). This initial wave and the one following the early months of the Revolution, led to an exodus that prevailed during the Castro administration, peaking in 1965, 1980, and 1994 (Rodriguez, 2025).

The recent exodus, which peaked since late 2021, has been driven by a series of factors. These include one of the worst economic crises on the island, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the US embargo, leading to shortages of basic goods, limited income-generating opportunities and services (WOLA, 2023; Vassolo, 2023). Along with these economic factors, the crackdown following the July 2021 protests, political repression and human rights concerns have further exacerbated the desire to leave (Perlmutter, 2022). Cuban migrants' profiles are diverse. While earlier waves tended to consist mainly of people with higher socioeconomic status, recent waves include people of diverse socioeconomic strata including the presence of family groups and unaccompanied minors (Favre, 2023).

The US continues to be the main destination for Cuban migrants, although LAC countries have become an important area of settlement where they access diverse forms of migratory documentation (Bengochea et al., 2023). Geographical proximity, specific policies favouring Cuban immigration to the US, and established diaspora communities maintain the US as a key destination. Nevertheless, US policies and border control practices have resulted in a reduction of Cubans aiming to enter and settle in said country (Clary, 2018; Morales et al., 2025). Consequently, Latin American Countries like Costa Rica, Panama, Nicaragua and especially Mexico, have seen an increase in Cuban arrivals (Blitzer, 2016; BBC, 2025; AFP, 2025).

Various forms of visas and temporary protected status are the main forms of documentation provided to Cuban nationals in LAC (Acosta et al., 2022; Selee et al., 2023). Especially after the cold war, Mexico's approach to Cubans has been more restrictive, though also granting limited humanitarian

protections, mostly in the form of complementary protection. While some Cubans may hold a “US-American dream” in mind, especially when leaving, recent migration policy changes and border securitisation have led thousands to settle in initially regarded transit countries like Mexico.

The Northern Central American countries of El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala have gone through several waves of violence and economic crises which have internally and internationally displaced thousands of people. While each country presents unique characteristics, they share important aspects that make useful a joint presentation.

UNDESA's migrant stock data reports that by mid-2024, there were at least 4.6 million migrants from Northern Central America (NCA), showing a 14 percent increase compared to 2020 (UNDESA, 2024). Furthermore, by 2024, there were more than 770,000 refugees and asylum-seekers from NCA (UNHCR, 2024a). These numbers, however, do not account for irregular migration which is the most common form of migration from NCA, suggesting that NCA migration is likely higher than what official statistics report (Ward et al., 2023). Together with Mexico, NCA countries have some of the world's highest homicide rates, although El Salvador has reported decreasing rates in recent years (World Bank, 2021). Limited livelihoods and precarity, along with generalised violence, and mass police arrests, mostly in El Salvador, are some of the main factors driving people away from NCA (Saenz et al., 2023; Frank-Vitale, 2023; Mejia et al., 2024).

Although NCA mobility within the region has a long history since before the colonial period, a sharp increase is noted in the late 20th century due to civil wars, political turmoil and foreign intervention spearheaded by the US government (Portes, 2017; Batz, 2021). These crises indeed gave birth to the Latin American definition of a ‘refugee’ as described in the Cartagena Declaration which emphasises the “the problem of Central American refugees” as a driver of intraregional cooperation (UNHCR, 1984, p. 22). Historically, the main destination for NCA migrants has been the US, with Mexico serving as a stepping stone and often a space of more permanent settlement (Feldmann et al., 2022).

Mexico's approach to Central American migration has evolved over time. During the 1980s civil wars, Mexico generally offered protection to those fleeing conflict, shifting towards a stricter approach in the 1990s (Smith, 2023). The 2000s saw a sharp increase in Central American migration transiting through Mexico, accompanied by stricter border enforcement and detention. Notably, the 2010s observed the rise of the so-called ‘migrant caravans’ comprised by large groups of migrants – mostly from NCA – travelling through Mexico towards the US (Frank-Vitale, 2023). This is a mobility strategy that enhances safety in numbers. The 2018 caravan was one of the largest to reach the US-Mexico border. This mobilisation was treated as a national security issue by Mexico and the US, with governments trying to prevent migrants from reaching the north. The US government quickly threatened with financial sanctions and the Mexican government deployed hundreds of members of the National Guard to uphold the border (Morales et al., 2023).

The Mexican government has opened documentation pathways including refugee status and complementary protection, as well as support programmes such as temporary work permits, especially during migrants' wait for migratory documentation, and access to some services including health and education. However, civil society organisations, often through international funding,

provide the main structures sustaining migrants' humanitarian needs through shelter and food, as well as services including legal assistance, psychosocial and psychiatric support. Even though many migrants from NCA aim for the US and attempt to enter the country, many find themselves stranded in Mexico, either due to Mexico's complex migration policies or the difficulty in accessing regular immigration and protection pathways in the US.

3.3.4 Navigating Mexico from south to north: Tapachula, Mexico City and Tijuana

Many LAC survival migrants enter Mexico by land through the southern border and follow different routes to the north. Some get stuck and eventually stay in Mexico, while others arrived with the intention to settle there. The Western or Pacific route, the longest one (approx. 4,000 km), is reportedly one of the safest routes and thus, many migrants use it, especially women, gender-diverse migrants and family groups. Along this route, Tapachula in Chiapas, Mexico City and Tijuana in Baja California have emerged as important mixed migration hubs becoming areas of transit and settlement (Figure 11, Figure 12, Figure 13). Even though knowledge gaps prevail, some recent studies provide an overview of the living conditions of LAC migrants and refugees in these locations (see Table 1).

Figure 11. Tapachula in relation to Southern Mexico and Northern Central America

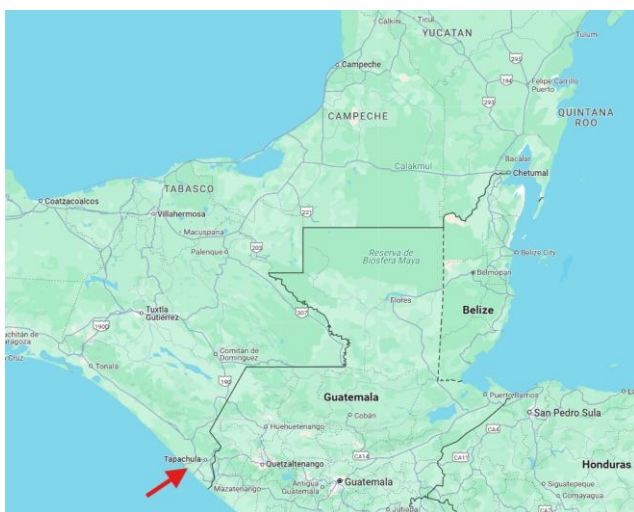


Figure 12. Mexico City in relation to Central and Southern Mexico

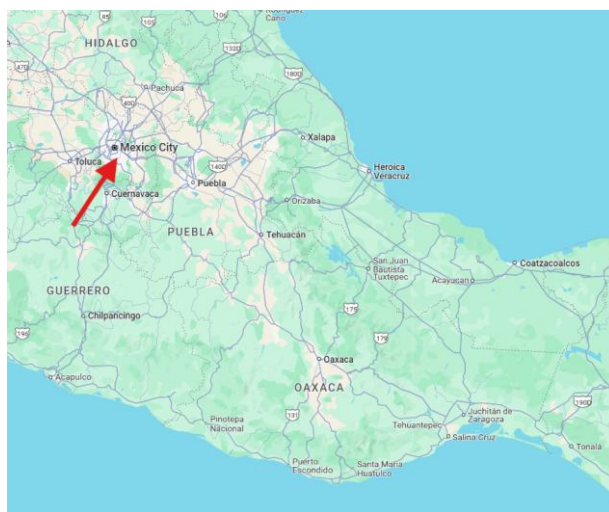
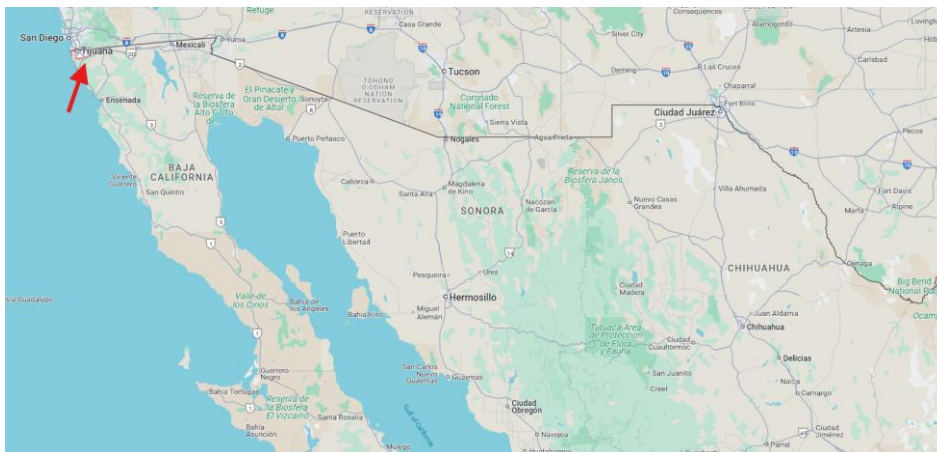


Figure 13. Tijuana in relation to Northwest Mexico and Southwest US



The southern town of Tapachula is a first stop for migrants and has the largest number of asylum applications in the country (COMAR, 2024). Many migrants get stranded there due to complex migration and asylum governance practices that slow down documentation processes, serving as a bottleneck that successfully contains migrants in the South. For many, Tapachula is experienced as an open-air prison policed by the GN, the INM, and informal actors (Villegas et al., 2025). Mexico City has the second highest number of asylum applications, serving as a key transit and settlement location. Many migrants reach Mexico City, a political and administrative centre hosting several organisations' headquarters and government agencies, to try to expedite the process of getting migratory documentation, to join relatives and to find socioeconomic opportunities, with some eventually settling there. Tijuana is home to the busiest border crossings in the world, it is a gateway to the US and an area of settlement. Due to restrictive immigration policies, many migrants have had to wait in Tijuana for procedures to enter the US.

These three cities, Tapachula as an entry point, Mexico City as a transit and settlement zone, and Tijuana as an exit, border enforcement and settlement area, are key to understanding migrants' experiences and the factors shaping their agency change processes. Examining how migrants negotiate agency in these contexts can reveal how they navigate oppressive structures, violence, and externalisation regimes while forming solidarity networks and carving spaces for autonomy and empowerment.

Table 1. Living conditions among migrants and locals in Tijuana, Mexico City and Tapachula.

Indicator	Tijuana	Mexico City	Tapachula
Sociodemographic characteristics			
Inhabitants	1,922,000	9,209,000 21,804,000 including the metropolitan area	353,700
Sex of residents	~50% women	~52% women	~52% women
Sex of migrants	~30% women	~50% women	~30% women
Education of locals	Secondary school: 32% High school: 27% Bachelor's: 14%	Secondary school: 27% High school: 26% Bachelor's: 22%	Secondary school: 26% High school: 24% Bachelor's: 19%
Living conditions			
Multidimensional poverty	Baja California: 22.5% (extreme poverty: 1.5%)	32%: (extreme poverty: 4%)	Chiapas: 75.5% (extreme poverty: 29%)
	In all entities, women are more likely to be poor than men.		
Population without access to water, sanitation, and electricity	Water: 1.1% Bathroom: .7% Sewage: 1% Electricity: .3%	Water: 3% Bathroom: 1% Sewage: 1.5% Electricity: .5%	Water: 7.6% Bathroom: 2% Sewage: 1.6% Electricity: 1%
Housing of migrants	Most live in rented accommodation in marginalised and insecure areas. Overcrowding and toilet sharing is common. In Tapachula, homelessness is common.		
	Most live close to CSO shelters.	Most live in the borough of Cuauhtémoc, where crime incidence is high.	Most live in the north-west, in areas with high crime incidence
Labour force participation among locals	Baja California employment rate: 40% women, 61% men. Monthly income: \$275.	CDMX employment rate: 44% women, 56% men. Monthly income: \$220	Chiapas employment rate: 33% women, 67% men. Monthly income: \$195.
Labour force participation among migrants	Employment rates are higher in Tijuana, followed by Mexico City and Tapachula. Women overwhelmingly occupy the informal sector and lack of access to childcare limit their participation. Migrants generally occupy vulnerable and risky positions.		
Occupations among migrants	Documented: factories, restaurants, security. Undocumented: construction, house painting, hotels.	Venezuelans have higher employment rates than Central Americans and Caribbeans, and tend to occupy formal positions.	Most migrants have casual work. Most do domestic work, construction, waste management and sales.

Sources: (COLEF, 2018; IOM, 2018, 2022; MMC, 2018, 2022; Silva H, 2019; INEGI, 2020; Secretaría de Economía, 2020; CONEVAL, 2022; Juárez, 2022).

3.4 Conclusion

This chapter situated the study of gendered empowerment within complex migration structures in Latin America and the Caribbean, focusing on Mexico's migration structure. By outlining historical migration dynamics in LAC, the chapter positions the region as an area of increasing intraregional mobility, marked by insecurity, humanitarian and economic crises that have contributed to the displacement of thousands. Although LAC's migration and asylum policies are guided by progressive legal frameworks, their application is inconsistent, leading to rigid legal definitions that grant protection to some, deny it to others and leave many others in legal limbos. Paralleling the irregular enforcement of migration legal frameworks, legislation designed to protect the rights of women and gender-diverse individuals is implemented inconsistently, thereby maintaining deeply engrained gender inequalities and violence which are strikingly high throughout the region.

Within this complex legal and gendered regional landscape Mexico was introduced as a migration hub, where thousands of migrants depart from, transit, and settle. The country context was presented by signalling its high inequality and insecurity levels, as well as the militarisation process of public security, which has impacted migration management and migrants' human rights protections. Like other LAC nations, Mexico's legal framework follows a progressive approach, and a similarly inconsistent application. Migration and asylum trends were examined, exploring the coincidental increase in detention and the drop in asylum claims which signals governmental efforts to reduce migration to the north by containing it in Mexico.

This introduction to Mexico's migration context was followed by an overview of the situation in the main countries of origin of LAC migrants, key migration drivers and their mobility processes from origin through third countries and into Mexico. This enables the reader to better understand migrants' experiences and situate their gendered agency negotiations within broader geopolitical contexts and structural constraints. The chapter closed with an examination of the situation in three of the main migration hubs in Mexico: Tapachula an entry point, Mexico City a transit and settlement area, and Tijuana an exit, border enforcement and settlement area. Overall, this chapter is fundamental to situate the study of migrants' agency and its transformation in migration, by considering the various structural factors that influence it beyond individual dynamics. The next section builds on Chapters 2 and 3 to explain the mixed-methods approach utilised to explore agency change and dis/empowerment in this context.

4 A mixed-methods approach to researching agency change in migration

4.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the methodological strategy employed to explore how migration shapes women and gender-diverse migrants' ability to negotiate and expand their agency.²³ I integrated participatory arts-based elements within a mixed-methods and multi-sited framework. This strategy combined photovoice, photo-elicited group discussions, surveys, and individual interviews at two points in time. This methodological approach is grounded in my theoretical framework, enabling me to co-create a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of migrants' processes of agency negotiation within restrictive structures, while challenging dominant research paradigms.

The chapter outlines the research design, the specific qualitative and quantitative methods used and justifies the methodological choices made. It also presents the procedures followed for data generation and analysis, data protection strategies, ethical considerations, and risks. Furthermore, the chapter offers a reflection on how my own biases and interpretations shaped the research findings and its conclusions.

4.2 Research design

Given the dynamic and multifaceted nature of agency negotiations in migration, this research employed a phenomenological approach, integrating a QUAL+quan mixed-methods (MM) design, and a multi-sited strategy. The phenomenological lens, focusing on lived experiences, facilitated an in-depth exploration of the dynamics between power structures and agency, as well as the interpretative and meaning-making processes of research collaborators (Kiguwa, 2019; Dodgson, 2023). The QUAL+quan notation indicates that the core component was qualitative and the supplemental component was quantitative, while the plus sign refers to the concurrent implementation of the components (Schoonenboom et al., 2017). The MM approach, used for complementarity and development purposes, enabled me to answer various dimensions of my research questions through different methods (Greene, 2007; Peltó, 2017; Schoonenboom et al., 2017). Relying only one method would have overlooked important dimensions of agency and empowerment, limiting my conclusions. Furthermore, the multi-sited approach emphasised the importance of relationality and in-betweenness in understanding migrants' experiences, and social networks across borders (Boccagni, 2016; Fauser, 2018).²⁴

Within this framework, I adopted a “radical listening” methodological stance, fostering an interest in understanding others' “standpoints and axiological positions” without trying to change them, while remaining open to being changed (Kincheloe, 2004; Tobin, 2009, p. 505). The objective is the

²³ The methodology was ethically approved by the Social Sciences and Humanities Interdivisional Research Ethics Committee of the University of Oxford (R82469/RE002).

²⁴ Since the inception of the concept of multi-sited ethnography, scholars have highlighted its usefulness for studying processes occurring at various scales, including migration, globalisation, and transnationalism (Marcus, 2012).

expansion of dialogue, fostering active listening, relational and participatory exchange. It acknowledges ongoing power relations, trying to address and reduce asymmetries and fostering researchers' self-awareness and reflexivity. Rooted in Paulo Freire's thought, this methodological stance is a critical and ethical tool particularly instrumental when collaborating with individuals in marginalised circumstances. This approach was essential for developing a more nuanced understanding of the complex, transnational, and interconnected nature of mobility processes and how they influence migrants' agency at different locations and temporalities (Datta, 2016; Fauser, 2018).

4.2.1 *Methods and collaborators*

Building upon my experience with migrants and people in marginalised situations in Mexico and East African countries, I chose to integrate participatory arts-based research (PABR) methods in combination with interviews, observations, and surveys. This methodological choice stemmed from the recognition that relying only on more traditional research methods such as interviews, has limitations in generating a deeper and more nuanced understanding of lived experiences, affecting the depth of academic and policy-relevant contributions. Furthermore, migration scholars have also recommended the integration of PABR with more traditional techniques like interviews and observations (Bagnoli, 2009; Moskal, 2010; Carlson et al., 2012; Saksena et al., 2021). This combination of methods was crucial to truly engage in the radical listening of my collaborators' experiences, helping co-create transformative spaces where they expressed what was important to them, enabling multidimensional understandings of their agential negotiations in contexts of migration. The subsequent discussion will define PABR, followed by an overview of the photovoice technique used to collaborate with migrants, and the specific qualitative and quantitative methods utilised.

Arts-based research (ABR) adapts the principles of creative arts at different stages of the research process, usually incorporating participatory methods (Matarasso, 2019; Leavy, 2020). ABR seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of social phenomena, utilising the arts as an inquiry and representation method (Greenwood, 2019; Lenette, 2019). Participatory approaches are typically integrated into ABR methods, fostering an in-depth and integrative exploration of research questions while creating spaces for sharing, learning, and co-creation. This approach recognises the experiences and knowledge of research collaborators while enabling spaces for them to control how their stories are represented (Oliveira, 2019; Leavy, 2020; Moralli, 2024).

Participatory research encompasses research designs, methods, and frameworks that are aligned with ABR's central premises, engaging individuals with lived expertise, or stakeholders with 'insider' knowledge, in active roles throughout the research process.²⁵ This involves sharing decision-making and ensuring that research remains relevant to their lives (Jagosh et al., 2012; Vaughn et al., 2018).

²⁵ A stakeholder is any individual, group, or organisation who affect, or could be affected – positively or negatively, directly or indirectly – by the research process and its outcomes (Ballesteros et al., 2023).

Levels of participation vary throughout the research cycle and these may be decided at different ‘choice points’, which range from information, consultation, involvement, collaboration, to empowerment of participants (Vaughn et al., 2020). These levels of participation fluctuate at different stages of the research, such as the study design involving a community consultation to inform the design, while the data generation might entail collaborating with communities as research partners, or empowerment, where communities lead the research decision-making processes. In detailing my research strategy, I will refer to these ‘choice points’, illustrating how I engaged stakeholders at various stages of my research.

I specifically used the photovoice method, alongside photo-elicited group discussions, interviews and surveys. Photovoice combines participatory photography and narrative creation to foster a relaxed environment where individuals can share their stories through photos they capture and narratives or voices they add to those images – I refer to these creations as photo-narratives or photo-stories. Consistent with previous studies, the use of this technique in my research fostered a sense of agency and empowerment, as participants documented their own experiences and controlled how their stories were told (Wang et al., 1997; O’Malley et al., 2020). Since photography is a highly accessible medium that does not require specialised skills, this method is inclusive for participants from different backgrounds and language skills (Woodgate et al., 2017). Although the photovoice method involves important challenges that I discuss in section 4.4, it emerged as a viable technique that I combined with other methods. I used photo-elicited group discussions – embedded in the photovoice workshops – alongside life-story interviews and surveys.

Recognising agency as a dynamic construct shaped by past experiences, future aspirations, and present conditions, life-story interviews, alongside follow-up interviews conducted six months later, were employed in alignment with a transnational life-course approach, situating collaborators’ narratives within the wider context of their life trajectories (Emirbayer and Mische 1998). This encompassed key moments in childhood, transitions to adulthood, and geographic mobility. The life-story interviews were also key to contextualise migrants’ photo-narratives within their life experiences. Migrants’ visual narratives were complemented with surveys which provided a systematised account of demographic characteristics, employment and migratory status, mobility plans, and housing arrangements. The survey questionnaire integrated psychometric scales measuring psychological constructs that are key to explore agency. These included sense of belonging, perceived stress (PSS-4 scale), self-efficacy (GSE scale), life satisfaction, and freedom of choice and control (see Appendix III). The scales included in the questionnaire have been tested in Mexico and other Latin American countries.

The combination of visual data, with the depth of the interviews and the breadth of the surveys, enabled me to generate nuanced understandings about my collaborators’ complex experiences and their strategies to negotiate agency as they navigated migration structures.

Collaborators

My research collaborators included 10 civil society organisations (CSOs), and 77 adult individuals. I collaborated with 10 CSOs that I identified during my pre-fieldwork phase, explained below. I

volunteered once or twice a week for most of them, and this allowed me to gain contact with survival migrants. 62 of my collaborators were survival migrants, four were members of the Mexican local community, and 11 were key informants including experts, human rights defenders, practitioners and government officials. Survival migrant collaborators included Latin American and Caribbean cisgender women (46), gender-diverse individuals (11), and cisgender men (5). Survival migrants' countries of origin are Colombia, Cuba, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras, 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. Most (77 percent) had some form of official migratory documentation, mainly refugee status (45 percent) and temporary humanitarian protection (22 percent). All migrants I collaborated with were supported by CSOs and, I approached them in person at the CSOs premises. Women and gender-diverse migrants took part of the photovoice workshops and individual interviews while men participated only in individual interviews (see details in the next section). All research activities with survival migrants were conducted at the CSO premises.

Locals included three women and one man residing in proximity to migrant shelters in each city. Key informants included five experts and human rights defenders, two UN practitioners (UNHCR and IOM) in Tapachula and Mexico City, and four government officials including the coordinator of the Liaison office of the Tapachula City Council, the Municipal Director of Migrant Assistance for the Tijuana City Council, the head of the Refugee Commission in Tijuana, and the Coordinator of the Baja California State Human Rights Center. Furthermore, I had several informal interactions with migrants, locals, experts, practitioners and human rights defenders at various points during my fieldwork, mostly during observations. The analysis relies mostly on the insights shared by women and gender-diverse survival migrants, and key informants.²⁶

Table 2. Sample

Location	CSOs	Photovoice workshops	Collaborators (workshops & interviews)	Individual interviews					
				1st interview women & GD migrants	2nd interview women & GD migrants	Migrant men	Locals	KIs	Total
Tapachula	3	3	20	19	10	2	2	3	36
Mexico City	3	3	17	16	6	2	1	3	28
Tijuana	4	3	20	18	7	1	1	5	32
Total	10	9	57	53	23	5	4	11	96

²⁶ Information shared by men and members of local communities was used to complement the research findings. However, a detailed analysis of their experiences was not included, as this fell beyond the scope of the study and risked producing an incomplete or overly simplified interpretation.

*GD: gender-diverse, KIs: key informants.

4.2.2 *Procedure for data generation*

The research data generation was divided into two phases that I reproduced in each city: pre-fieldwork, and in-person and remote fieldwork. I conducted in-person fieldwork in Spanish and French between October 2022 and July 2023, and remote fieldwork from May 2023 to January 2024.

Pre-fieldwork

This initial phase aimed to lay the groundwork for in-person fieldwork by soliciting feedback to refine the methodological strategy, gaining insights into each city's unique characteristics, and establishing contact with relevant organisations to propose volunteer assistance and facilitate research activities. I adopted a consultation level of participation, involving a series of informal unstructured online conversations with experts and practitioners – some of whom I already knew. Additionally, I reviewed news, websites of organisations and government institutions that assist or work with migrants and refugees.

At the informal conversations, I introduced my topic to experts and practitioners, seeking their guidance on my methodology, logistics, potential collaborating organisations, and further expert connections. My interlocutors offered valuable perspectives, affirming the significance of investigating how agency evolves within migration contexts. They expressed particular interest in the PABR elements and a desire for deeper understanding. My interlocutors also shared security, health and safety advice, and recommended fieldwork dates to avoid the rainy seasons, which could have impeded mobility and caused delays. During this period, I also organised a crowdsourcing campaign to purchase cameras and SD cards. Generous supporters enabled me to buy the needed equipment. I have maintained contact with most of the individuals that took part of this research stage, regularly updating them on my research progress via informative emails that include links to publications and scholarly works on PABR methods.

The pre-fieldwork phase followed an iterative design, beginning remotely from Oxford with preparations for Tapachula. During my last month in Tapachula (month three), I commenced pre-fieldwork for Mexico City and began to create connections for Tijuana which I formalised during my last month in Mexico City. This escalated approach allowed me to use my time efficiently, facilitating immediate engagement in observations and volunteering upon arrival in each city. This was particularly critical for Tapachula where I began my fieldwork.

In-person and remote fieldwork

In this phase I familiarised myself with the city contexts, expanded my network, and co-produced data through observations, informal conversations, group photovoice workshops, surveys and interviews. I followed a two-step approach where I first conducted observations and built trust with organisations and migrants, and then I conducted photovoice workshops, interviews and surveys.

During the first month of my stay in each city, I dedicated my time to getting familiar with the urban environment, volunteering for organisations (Table 3), establishing connections and building trust

with migrants, conducting observations, and expanding my network with organisations, experts and government officials. I devoted the remainder months to conducting photovoice workshops, and interviews, alongside continued observations during periods without scheduled workshops or interviews.

Every fieldwork day, I took photographs and audio-recordings describing my observations, interactions, interpretations, and sensorial experiences, including smells, sounds, and emotions. I used these recordings to write detailed fieldnotes over the weekends. In the next paragraphs, I describe how I approached the data generation phase in each city.

Table 3. Organisations per location

Organisations	Tapachula	Mexico City	Tijuana
HyS	X		
Ventanilla	X		
Casa Frida	X		
CAFEMIN		X	
Casa Fuente		X	
Sin Fronteras		X	
Centro 32			X
Camino de Salvación			X
Casa Arcoíris			X
Espacio Migrante			X

Tapachula, Mexico City and Tijuana

Tapachula

Many migrants who enter Mexico by land, do so by crossing the Suchiate River by the border between Tecún Uman, Guatemala and Ciudad Hidalgo, Mexico, about 37 km from Tapachula. To cross into Mexico, migrants take a *balsa* (raft) from Guatemala. My collaborators confirmed that they can be charged between 50-200 USD to cross the river, with non-Spanish speakers being charged higher prices. I was charged 30 Mexican pesos (about 1.5 USD) to cross in the opposite direction, from Mexico to Guatemala, returning by the official border bridge, just a few meters away from where I took the *balsa*.

Figure 14. Raft crossings between Guatemala and Mexico. Figure 15. Official border crossing bridge Rodolfo Robles.



Source. Irregular raft border crossing (left) and regular bridge border crossing (right). Photographs taken by the author from the Guatemalan side.

Upon arriving in Tapachula, migrants often seek refuge at one of the shelters, settled on the street where other migrants camp, or those who can afford it, find a room at one of the various spaces rented by locals. Others go directly to the COMAR to initiate their asylum application process. Civil society organisations, religious groups and international organisations are the main entities addressing migrants' needs. Even though there are several government and non-government programmes, the situation in Tapachula is overwhelming, often being described as an 'open air prison' with unmet humanitarian needs and high poverty rates among locals and foreigners.

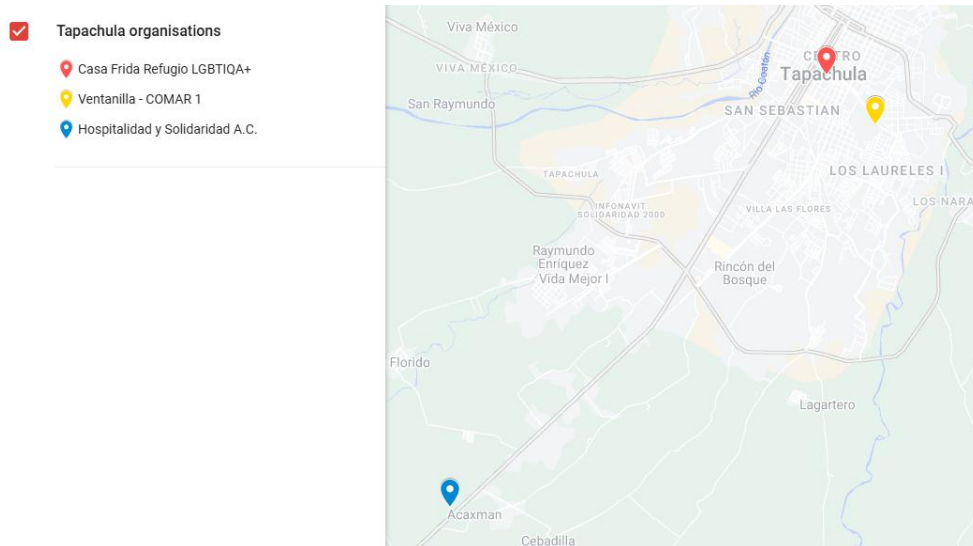
I dedicated my first week to conducting observations, talking informally with migrants, cycling/walking around areas where migrants congregated, namely outside the offices of the COMAR, the INM, shelters, and government offices.

I soon began volunteering at Hospitalidad y Solidaridad shelter (HyS) where I had volunteered in January 2021. Funded by UNHCR and run by HyS, this is the first shelter in the country exclusively dedicated to migrants seeking asylum or with refugee status. HyS has a capacity for 300 people, prioritising women, families and gender-diverse individuals, but it also has a dedicated space for single men. HyS hosts migrants referred by COMAR and organisations. It is located about 12 km away from the city centre (Figure 16), getting there on public transport takes about 45 min. and costs 3-5 USD (return) which is a significant amount for migrants who have limited financial resources to fund their journeys. I generally used public transport and cycled to get to places. After falling ill and feeling exhausted, I decided to take my car from Central Mexico to Tapachula and used it during the last month of my stay.

I supported HyS' *ropería*, a warehouse where migrants were provided with hygiene products, shoes and clothes. This allowed me to interact with residents, get familiar and have informal conversations about their backgrounds, experiences at the shelter, and plans. I also sometimes served meals in the dining hall, which further helped me build trust.

During my first weeks, I submitted my research methodology, including a detailed description of the photovoice workshop, to HyS' advisory board for ethical clearance. This board is comprised by practitioners and academics who gave me valuable suggestions on logistics and referral pathways for participants showing signs of mental distress. After obtaining HyS' approval, I began dissemination and invitation activities (see next section for details), reducing my volunteering duties to focus on the photovoice workshop and individual life-story interviews.

Figure 16. Organisations in Tapachula.



Source. Created by the author on Google maps.

Volunteering for HyS was essential for gaining trust of the 'Ventanilla' information centre, and Casa Frida LGBT shelter. The Ventanilla, funded by IOM and run by the Tapachula Council, hired migrants seeking asylum as incentive workers under a government work program while they awaited documentation. I presented my project to the Ventanilla managers, and after clarifying their questions and upon confirming my HyS volunteer role, they agreed to invite some of their migrant workers to participate in the photovoice workshops. Ventanilla's managers allowed migrants to take part of the workshop and interview during their working hours without any additional workload. Women were openly invited and only those interested attended. Some women preferred not to participate indicating that no work incentives were attached to their participation. At the workshop, I reiterated that participants were free to withdraw without any negative consequences.

Finally, I gained contact with Casa Frida LGBT+ shelter at a social gathering, where they expressed interest in my project, and asked about the inclusion of trans women. While my initial research design did not explicitly exclude trans women or other gender-diverse migrants, I had not actively pursued collaborations with them. During my observations, I informally talked to some gender-diverse migrants, confirming the significance of their presence and gendered challenges. Reflecting on these insights, I recognised the influence of sexuality on their agency change processes during migration. Consequently, after consulting with my supervisors, I decided to broaden the scope of my research to include trans women and establish a collaborative relationship with Casa Frida.

I dedicated my last weeks in Tapachula to conducting interviews with my photovoice workshop collaborators as well as with experts, practitioners and government officials. With migrants' consent,

I shared digital versions of their photo-narratives with the organisations that hosted the workshops. These were shared via email or through an in-person presentation to staff. I finalised with a series of observations at previously unvisited border crossing points, shelters, parks and government offices. Concurrently, I dedicated time to prepare my Mexico City fieldwork, arranging volunteering collaborations with organisations.

Mexico City

After obtaining documentation or even without it, many migrants leave Tapachula, with Mexico City being a common transit or destination point. Many migrants in Mexico City have already spent some months in Tapachula or in other areas of Southern Mexico. Others arrive directly in Mexico City by plane, bus or car, or by using the roof of the ‘La Bestia’ cargo train which crosses the country from south to north. Some migrants stay in Mexico City for a few months as they work to fund their onward journeys moving to northern cities like Tijuana, while others eventually settle in the City. Upon reaching Mexico City, migrants tend to seek refuge at shelters or find their own accommodation, with some sleeping on the street.

For those without documentation, the COMAR is usually their first stop. The Mexico City COMAR is presumably faster than the one in Tapachula, leading some migrants to request asylum there instead. The Mexico City office used to be located in the middle-class neighbourhood of Juárez about three km away from the city centre. In May 2024, the government attempted to relocate this COMAR office in response to local residents’ complaints about the presence of migrants camping outside the COMAR and in nearby parks. The government first attempted to move the COMAR to another middle-class neighbourhood, the Verónica Anzures, but residents demonstrated against this relocation, and the government had to find another space. The office remained closed for about three months, extending migrant’s wait even longer. The COMAR was finally relocated to the lower-class neighbourhood of Granjas de San Antonio in Iztapalapa – an area known for its high criminality rates. While I did my in-person fieldwork before this change was done, I perceived a negative sentiment against migrants among residents and business owners who complained about their presence in the area.

I used my first week in Mexico City to conduct observations, talking informally with migrants and locals, walking around areas in the city where migrants gather, including outside the COMAR offices, and by the ‘La Bestia’ train tracks.

I visited a migrant shelter in Huehuetoca, about 64 km away from Mexico City, where some migrants go on and off ‘La Bestia’ (Figure 17). The shelter’s proximity to the train tracks made it a significant point for those in transit. Even though I had arranged a meeting with the shelter managers, I was not allowed in since staff had no record of my visit. Consequently, I engaged with migrants outside the facility who had also been refused access. Two families and solo travelling men were waiting outside, hoping to board la Bestia. The families chose to remain together outside rather than be separated, as the shelter only admitted women and children, excluding fathers. I conducted observations and spoke with migrants for about 1.5 hours, leaving when they began walking towards the area where they could climb on the train as it slows down – not to allow migrants to go on, but because the terrain

forces the train to do so. I did not go to that area, as I had been advised by practitioners and migrants not to go there due to the presence of criminal groups. I observed ‘La Bestia’ as it passed while migrants proceeded towards this ‘boarding zone’.

Figure 17. La Bestia passing next to a migrant family in Huehuetoca



Source. Migrant families watching La Bestia as it passed by a migrant shelter. Photograph taken by the author.

During my first weeks, I also conducted observations and offered a photovoice workshop at a migrant shelter dedicated to Afghan refugees. The shelter was funded by UNHCR and managed by a civil society organisation (CSO) whose director I had met during my pre-fieldwork stage. Even though Afghan refugees were not my research focus, I facilitated two photovoice workshops for groups of young and older women. This contact with the Afghan community helped expand my understanding about the experiences of migrants of diverse nationalities and language skills.

A few days later, I began volunteering for CAFEMIN and Sin Fronteras. I assisted CAFEMIN with teaching Spanish to Afghan and Haitian migrants, translating documents into English and French, supporting children’s activities, and conducting a few dance and yoga classes for women. This allowed me to engage with the migrant community. During my third week, CAFEMIN received a donation of an old school building, which they repurposed into additional shelter space (CAFEMIN Obrera on Figure 18). Some residents were transferred to CAFEMIN Obrera to free space. The new installations required significant renovation, and staff were quickly assigned to prepare the space. I volunteered to support CAFEMIN Obrera, and identified areas where I could conduct the photovoice workshop. The coordinators agreed to having the workshop at CAFEMIN Obrera. Some residents already knew me from the other shelter which helped me build trust with new residents.

At the request of the shelter coordinators, I facilitated a 2-hour women’s circle session. I personally invited women staying there – about eight joined and we used an empty room which we had to clean before using it, helping us get familiar as we cleaned together. Women were grateful for the space to talk and connect and I invited them, as well as other women in the shelter, to the photovoice workshop

that I conducted the following week (see next section for details). I reduced my volunteering support for CAFEMIN to focus on the workshop and interviews.

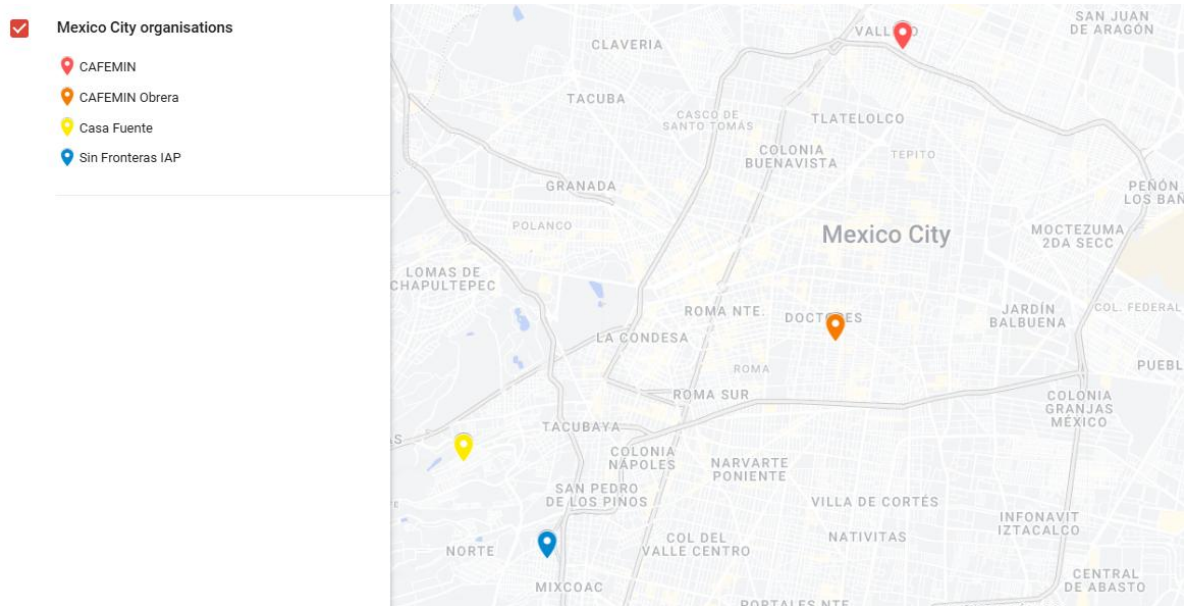
In parallel to my engagement with CAFEMIN, I supported Sin Fronteras' 'Day Centre' which organises activities to bring migrant communities together, and connecting them with services, shelter and support offered by other organisations. Sin Fronteras is an advocacy organisation and does not provide on-site accommodation. I assisted with receiving migrants seeking services, offering them food, and helping co-organise activities. During this period, Sin Fronteras invited migrant women and other migrant advocacy organisations to take part of the Mexico City women's day demonstration and to create signs together at their premises. I joined this activity and the demonstration, helping me connect with practitioners and experts, and learn more about migrants' struggles and interests.

During my initial weeks as a volunteer with Sin Fronteras, I shared the photovoice workshop outline with the psychological support team for their clearance. Once the workshop was approved, I liaised with Sin Fronteras' communications, and legal support teams to set a date for the workshop and invite migrants to join (see details in the next section). I reduced my volunteering support to dedicate my time to the workshop and interviews.

As I concluded my engagement with Sin Fronteras, I asked them for recommendations of potential collaborating organisations. They recommended Casa Fuente shelter and connected me with the manager. After introducing my project, Casa Fuente's manager agreed to host the workshop and interviews and asked me to invite residents during lunchtime. I joined the residents for lunch, announced the planned photovoice workshop for women and gender-diverse people and invited them to join, registering interested participants. I facilitated the workshop the following day and scheduled subsequent interviews.

I used my last weeks in Mexico City to conducting individual life-story interviews with my photovoice workshop collaborators as well as with migrant men, experts, practitioners and government officials. With collaborators' consent, I shared a digital version of the photo-narratives with organisations via email. I also used these weeks to prepare my Tijuana fieldwork and arrange volunteering collaborations with organisations.

Figure 18. Organisations in Mexico City.



Source. Created by the author on Google maps.

Tijuana

Even though Tijuana is one of the most dangerous cities in Mexico, it has one of the lowest poverty rates attracting both internal and international migrants. Foreigners and Mexicans make their way to Tijuana to try to cross into the US, to take advantage of the work opportunities that the city offers, or to re-build their lives after having been deported or removed from the US.

Documented migrants who can afford it, prefer flying to Tijuana rather than using land routes which are well-known for migrant kidnapping and abuse. On a flight from Mexico City to Tijuana, a route commonly used by migrants, I observed numerous passengers from Latin America and the Middle East. I overheard Colombians discussing strategies for navigating migration checks and the necessary documentation for entry into Tijuana. Mexican migration authorities selectively request migration documentation from passengers who ‘appear to be foreigners’. As I passed through the checkpoint, the authorities let me in, while ‘foreign looking’ passengers had to wait in a separate line to be checked.

Many LAC migrants who reached Tijuana intended to cross into the US by applying for asylum or humanitarian parole through the CBP One app. Migrants had to wait in Tijuana for months until getting a CBP One appointment and being allowed into the US. During the wait, some migrants changed their minds and decided to settle in Mexico instead. Most of the migrants I interacted with were waiting for CBP One appointments.

In my first week, I familiarised myself with the city, conducting observations at the border wall, where organisations provide information to migrants. I also began to volunteer for Espacio Migrante, whom I identified and connected with during my pre-fieldwork stage. At Espacio Migrante’s cultural community centre, I co-hosted events and activities, and I offered a dance class for shelter residents. Additionally, I was requested to support a study on obstetric violence against migrant women and interviewed some pregnant women residing at the shelter. These interactions were extremely helpful

to expand my understanding of migrants' experiences and to strengthen trusting relationships with shelter residents.

Espacio Migrante collaborates with several organisations across Tijuana, other Mexican states and the US, enabling me to network and learn from their partners. They often co-host a range of activities including cultural and arts-based events, workshops, training and informative sessions, and delivery of humanitarian assistance. I participated in informative sessions led by US-American lawyers on the impact of policy changes (end of Title 42) and helped provide food at one of the largest shelters in Tijuana (Embajadores de Jesus).

I connected with other organisations including Centro 32, which I knew about thanks to one of my collaborators, a Salvadoran refugee trans woman, whom I met in Tapachula, saw again in Mexico City and then again in Tijuana. She shared the contact of Centro 32 which facilitates capacity building and leisure activities for migrants at shelters. Centro 32 invited me to join them on some of their shelter visits to create contacts and offer my research activities. This led me to Camino de Salvación and Casa Arcoíris LGBT+ shelter. When I visited Casa Arcoíris, the coordinator was receptive to my project, especially since I was volunteering for Espacio Migrante, and I was accompanying Centro 32. Furthermore, two of the shelter residents were my research collaborators from Tapachula, which helped build trust.

The Casa Arcoíris coordinator was concerned about excluding residents who were not trans women or cisgender women, as this could reinforce rigid gender and sexuality understandings. They requested me not to limit the workshop to cisgender women and trans women, and to open it to other gender-diverse people as well. After assessing the risks, trade-offs and ethical implications, I consulted my supervisors, and I decided to include other gender-diverse people, greatly enriching my research although with implications that are discussed in the limitations section of the Conclusions chapter.

Thanks to Centro 32, I gained contact with Camino de Salvación, which is a religious shelter located at the outskirts of Tijuana. I facilitated a photovoice workshop and interviews at their facilities. I did not have many interactions with the shelter managers, but they were supportive of my research activities.

Alongside my collaborative work with organisations, I engaged in observations and attended diverse events involving migrants, primarily at border crossing points and governmental migration offices. Major policy changes occurred during my stay in Tijuana: the end of Title 42, the expansion of the use of Title 8 and the 'asylum ban'. Title 42, a US policy enacted during the COVID-19 outbreak and beyond, resulted in the removal or denial of entry to foreigners based on perceived health risks, undermining the right to seek asylum at the US-Mexico border. I conducted observations at the border wall in areas frequented by migrants, who were hoping to enter the US following the policy's end.

I used my last weeks in Tijuana to conduct individual life-story interviews with my photovoice workshop collaborators as well as with migrant men, experts, and practitioners. Additionally, I

A mixed-methods approach to researching agency change in migration

conducted online interviews with my Tapachula-based collaborators, with whom I had previously interacted six months prior.

Figure 19. Organisations in Tijuana.



Source. Created by the author on Google maps.

Group photovoice workshops design and participatory modifications

Inviting collaborators. The strategies I implemented to invite survival migrant collaborators were developed in coordination with organisations. These included posters and flyers, in-person approach and snowballing. For some organisations, I created flyers which I delivered to migrants, pasted posters on the walls and announced the workshop during shelter mealtimes. These materials were approved by organisations. Other organisations created invitation flyers using the information I provided to them (see examples Figure 20, Figure 21, Figure 22). Organisations shared the draft flyers with me for approval, and they shared them via their social media handouts including WhatsApp groups.

Figure 20. Invitation flyer template.



Source. Created by the author.

Figure 21. Flyer for workshop at Sin Fronteras.



Source. Created by Sin Fronteras, Mexico City.

Figure 22. Flyer for workshop at Espacio Migrante.



Source. Created by Espacio Migrante, Tijuana.

The workshop design was informed by training I undertook, conferences on visual and arts-based research methods, as well as recommendations from my collaborators. Before my fieldwork, I tested the workshop and adapted it based on participants' feedback. I included several participation points where collaborators provided suggestions on content, duration, and sessions frequency.

Each group was comprised by five to seven participants which is the recommended group size for photovoice workshops. Based on feedback from practitioners, participants and other interested migrants, I reduced the initial four two-hour sessions to two four-hour sessions. Migrants also suggested holding the workshops in the afternoons after 2 pm such that those with childcare responsibilities could arrange care. Childcare needs were indirectly accommodated by the workshop timing, and some women brought their children to the workshop room. Children were present in three groups, one per city, and were looked after by their mothers, workshop participants and me.

The subsequent section outlines the workshop content, which remained consistent across all cities.

Session one began with introductions and icebreakers. I started with a sensorial activity that involved smelling essential oils and guessing the scents. This created a calm and relaxed environment. I then showed a set of photos of people representing different emotions and moods, asking participants to pick the photo that best represented the way they felt. This was followed by typical name and country of origin introductions.

I used a Power Point presentation to guide the workshop. I provided a detailed explanation of my research project, contents of the workshop, and alignment of expectations. I then requested collaborators' consent to take part in the research project including the workshop, a survey questionnaire, an individual interview, sustained contact on social media during a five-six-month period, and a second individual interview at the end of the five-six-month period. The research activities were listed as separate 'tick-boxes', and collaborators were able to only select the ones they wished to join. I carefully explained the consent form and mentioned that, in the last session, I would request user rights (not copy rights) for them to allow me to use four of the photo-stories created in

the workshop. I clarified questions and we continued with setting ground rules, which centred on confidentiality, and privacy.

I then introduced the photovoice technique, gathered collaborators' ideas about what they imagined the technique involved, showed examples, and continued with a photo dialogue. Collaborators observed and discussed various images. I used the SHOWED method, which provides a guide for questions used to facilitate photo-elicited group discussions. SHOWED is commonly used for photo dialogues and stands for: S... What do you SEE here? H... What's really HAPPENING here? O... How does this relate to OUR lives? W... WHY does this problem or situation exist? E... How could this image EDUCATE others (the community, policy makers, etc.)? D... What can we DO about the problem or situation? These questions generated insightful conversations and served to familiarise my collaborators with observing and discussing images together.

After the photo dialogue, I handed out the digital point and shoot cameras which they returned at the end of each session. Cameras were numbered and each collaborator used the same camera throughout the sessions. They kept their photographs on an SD card that I provided at the end of the final session. Upon handing out the cameras, I explained how to use them and introduced a few photography techniques, emphasising the power of images to communicate and tell stories. I then suggested a practical photo-making activity to familiarise collaborators with the cameras. For all photography-making activities, I offered the option to leave the workshop room and take photos outside, avoiding people's faces. Collaborators engaged enthusiastically with the treasure hunt, taking several photos and playing with the cameras. The atmosphere was cheerful and relaxed.

The next sections of the workshop focused on the creation of photo-stories and photo elicited discussions. I suggested four prompts to inspire collaborators' photographic creations. These prompts were developed based on my theoretical framework of agency and its expansion: (i) self-portrait without my face – an effective starting point for exploring self-understandings and identity, including gender identity, (ii) what is important in my life – a prompt that allowed an analysis of migrants' values and what they consider significant, (iii) my past achievements – enabling the examination of resources and accomplishments, (iv) my future goals – as agency is oriented towards the future, exploring aspirations is essential. We covered prompts (i) and (ii) in session one and prompts (iii) and (iv) in session two. For each prompt I requested collaborators' feedback, asking for their opinion about it and potential modifications before suggesting the use of the prompt as inspiration for creating a photo.

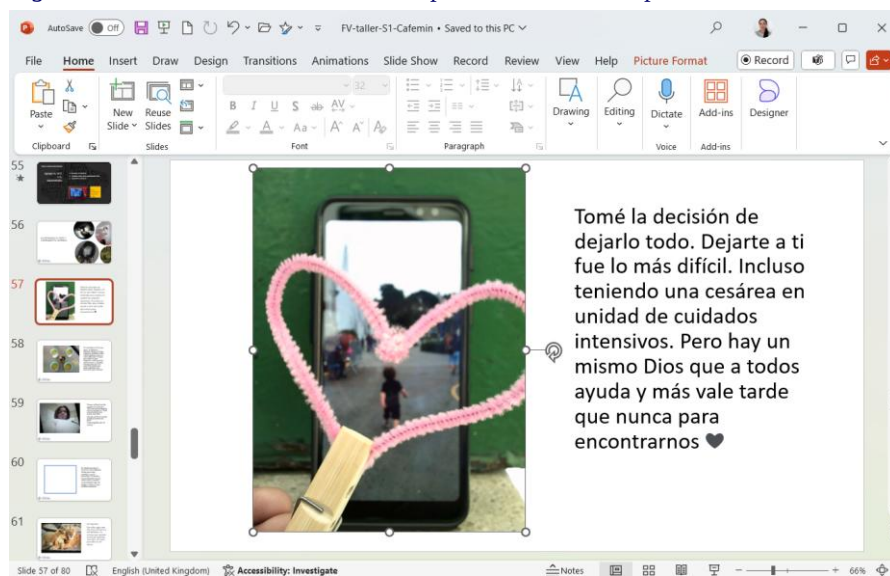
I brought materials to spark collaborators' imagination and creativity, including clothing and fabrics, fairy lights, make up, candles, random words cut out from magazines and newspapers, coloured paper, markers, pencils, and pipe cleaners for crafts. I encouraged my collaborators to use any other materials available in the room, and their own objects. Upon suggesting the first prompt, most collaborators showed interest and began exploring the materials. Some participants would take longer to engage with the activity, and some remained seated while thinking what to create.

Collaborators took several photos and chose their favourite ones. To introduce the practice of creating a photo-narrative or a 'voice' for their photographs, I asked them to discuss their selected photographs

with a partner and describe what it represented for them, allowing space for them to talk not only about the prompt but about other topics that were relevant to them in that moment. I continued by introducing the idea of a ‘voice’ for their images and showed some examples from other projects. After that, I asked them to write a ‘voice’ for their images, encouraging them to create a title, story, poem or any words that could accompany their images and that could express what the image meant to them. I offered the option to dictate their narratives to me or to not create any narrative if they preferred that.

To create their ‘voice’, I suggested visualising their selected photograph on the camera screen and writing a narrative while viewing the photo. Once they finished writing, I asked if they would feel comfortable showing their photo-stories to the group – they all accepted. I connected their cameras to my lap-top, and projected their photos on the wall. I copied their selected image to the Power Point presentation and asked them to dictate their ‘voices’ to me, which I then wrote next to their images (Figure 23). My collaborators were able to see the photo-story taking shape live on the projection. With the photo-stories projected on the wall, I invited them to share more about the piece leading to a photo-elicited group conversation, encouraging radical listening.

Figure 23. Photo-stories created at the photovoice workshop.



Source. Screenshot of the collective creation of photo-stories in a workshop setting in Mexico City.

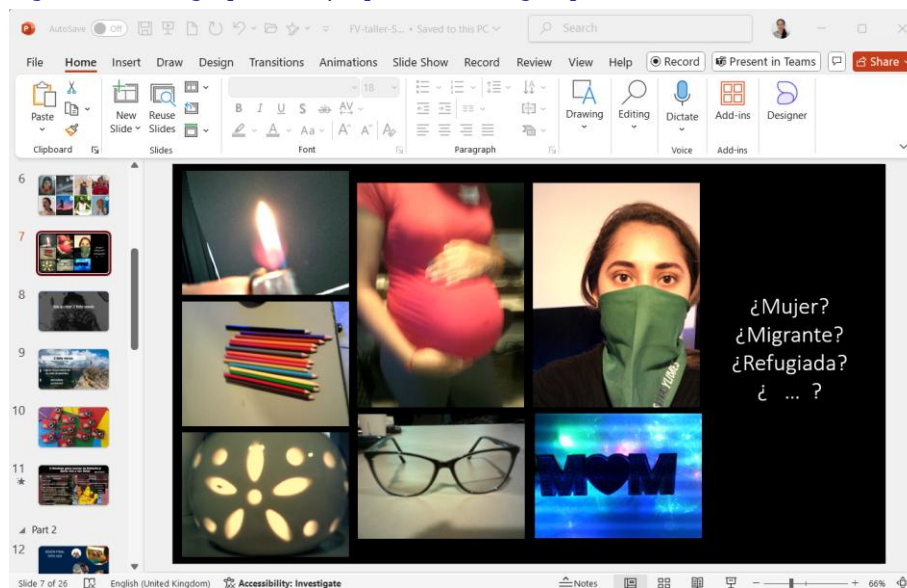
After the presentation of the photo-stories created with prompt one, we had a break during which I distributed the paper-based questionnaire, asking them to complete it in their own time and bring it back to the next session. I also collected phone numbers from my collaborators and asked for their permission to be contacted over WhatsApp after the workshops and interviews. I used a dedicated phone and sim card to communicate with my collaborators.

We continued with prompt (ii) what is important in my life. I introduced the prompt and invited my collaborators to create a photo and a narrative. Similarly to prompt (i), I asked them if they were comfortable sharing their photo-stories with the group. I connected the cameras to my lap-top, projected their photos, and wrote their narratives or ‘voices’ as they dictated them to me (Figure 23). We closed session one with a celebratory tone for their creations and I introduced the prompts for the

next session: (iii) my past achievements, (iv) my future goals. I sent WhatsApp messages to remind collaborators about the second session date, time and location.

Session two. After an activity to ‘break the ice’ and re-familiarise with each other, we carried out a photo-elicitation exercise using the self-portraits that collaborators created in session one (Figure 24). The aim was to explore issues of identity perceptions, self-representation and how these might have changed in migration. I asked participants about their perceptions of gender and migrant identities and how these self-perceptions may have changed throughout their migratory processes. This conversation lasted about an hour, and collaborators continued the conversation even during the break.

Figure 24. Photographs used for photo-elicited group discussion.



Source. Photographs created by Merino, ML, Ison, Carolina, Ara, XXN, Dojadi (from top left to bottom right) at Espacio Migrante, Tijuana.

I continued by introducing prompts (iii) my past achievements, and (iv) my future goals, and handed out the cameras, inviting them to share their opinions about the prompts and suggest changes. I used two different techniques for the creation of photo-stories using each of these prompts. First, I invited them to take a photograph inspired by the prompts. The photographers spent around 15 minutes capturing their images.

When all my collaborators had returned to the workshop room, I asked them to focus on prompt (iii) and to form pairs. Each person in the duo picked a coloured paper and pen and exchanged them with their partner such that each person had the paper and pen chosen by the other. Next, each photographer took turns to show their photo to their partner and discuss it. The photographer then dictated a narrative or a ‘voice’ for their photograph, which the ‘writing partner’ transcribed on the paper chosen by the photographer. The ‘writing partner’ read the narrative back to the photographer to verify if they wanted any changes done before showing it to the group. This process was repeated for each person in the pair.

Collaborators shared their photo-stories with the group in a similar way to how it was done for the previous prompts, with the ‘writing partner’ voicing the narrative of the photographer. The

photographer observed their photo projected, listened to their own story through their partner's voice, and saw their story written on the projection. With the photo-story projected on the wall, I asked collaborators to share more about the piece, leading to deep conversations about their past achievements, which they recognised as critical resources for their future goals. For prompt (iv) my future goals, I asked collaborators to use the photograph they had created or to take a new one if they preferred. Once they were all comfortable with their photographs, I invited them to write their own narrative. After that, we repeated the process of projecting their photo-stories and discussing them.

In the final part, I requested user rights for four of the photo-narratives created in the workshop. The user rights form allowed participants to retain copyrights and only granted me with the right to use their images and narratives for specific purposes – excluding any commercial use (see the form in Appendix IV). The form also included a field for photographers to specify the pseudonym under which they wanted to be credited. They retained the camera's SD cards with all their photographs, and I shared a digitised copy of their four selected photo-stories via WhatsApp. Furthermore, I offered the option to print a photograph of their choice using a small photo printer I had brought. Some chose to print a photograph that they created at the workshop while others chose a different photograph.

During the printing, I reminded collaborators about the upcoming individual interviews and scheduled appointments usually for the next day or a few days after the workshop. I also reminded them that they could skip the interview if they preferred that, and two did so. Furthermore, I mentioned the possibility of organising exhibitions in the UK and potentially also in Mexico, and that I would keep them informed. They all expressed enthusiasm and raised no objections to the idea of a future exhibition. With their consent, I shared a digital version of their photo-narratives with organisations.

Individual life-story interviews, remote contact and second interview

I carried out individual life-story interviews with 53 collaborators at the premises of the organisations. All of the interviews, except for one, were audio-recorded with my collaborators' consent – I took notes during the unrecorded interview. Three interviews were held in French and the rest in Spanish.

The interviews were semi-structured. After building rapport, I explained my interest in understanding their life-experiences from childhood to the present moment and how they have made important decisions while reminding them that they were free to stop the interview if they wanted to and to only share what they wished to. I began by asking them about themselves – their birthplace, upbringing, and about their family. Depending on the details shared, I would ask about their studies, work experience, access and control over resources, health, relationships, migration trajectories including how they took the decision to migrate, their migratory goals and status, and reasons behind applying or not for documentation. I further asked about the most transcendental decisions they had taken in their lives and about their aspirations. I began the interview conclusion by exploring if and how they felt they had changed throughout their mobility experiences, by comparing their present self to their former self in their home countries. Finally, I explored the concept of empowerment, asking what it meant to them and whether migration could be empowering. I closed with gratitude and asked them if I could stay in contact with them over social media, and if I could reach out to them in five-six months' time for another interview over the telephone.

During the five-to-six-month period following the in-person interactions, I maintained regular communication with my collaborators via WhatsApp (once every two weeks). The objective was to understand how their life experiences evolved, remain connected, keep them informed about the project and arrange the second interview. Even though all collaborators agreed to a second interview, I was able to maintain WhatsApp contact with 38 of them and interviewed 23 of them.

The second interviews were conducted mostly via WhatsApp call, with the exception of two in-person interviews in Tijuana, with collaborators I had met in Tapachula. These interviews focused on changes experienced since our last interaction. After obtaining consent and securing permission to audio-record, I began by asking: “What has happened since we last met?” I delved into their decisions to stay, move, or alter their plans, the most significant choices they had made during the past five to six months, and the obstacles and enablers they had encountered along the way. We also discussed their current plans and aspirations. Additionally, I invited them to reflect on any changes in self-perceptions compared to the first interview. To deepen our conversation, I asked about their thoughts on empowerment and whether their understanding of it had evolved. After the second interview, I reduced contact but continued to send messages every two months. I have maintained communication with some participants, while others became unreachable after changing their phone numbers.

Interviews with migrant men, locals and key informants

During the photovoice sessions period, I also conducted individual interviews with migrant men, local men and women, and ‘key informants’ including experts and human rights defenders, UN practitioners, and government officials. These interviews were audio-recorded with participants’ consent and had a maximum duration of two hours. I invited migrant men residing at shelters or who received support from organisations, to participate in individual interviews. The objective was to explore differences between them, and women and gender-diverse migrants, as well as to enrich my understanding of their lived experiences. I approached men with whom I had already interacted informally at the shelters or organisations. The interviews followed a life-course approach where I asked them about their lives before migration up to the moment of our interaction, including their background, studies, work, resources, health, relationships, migration aspirations, and status in Mexico. Finally, we discussed their perceptions concerning how migration experiences differ between men and women.

I also interviewed locals residing near migrant shelters at organisations’ premises or at cafés. The objective of interviewing locals was to expand my understanding of the local contexts, attitudes towards migrants, as well as discriminatory attitudes. I interviewed key informants to better comprehend the policy context in each city, including their views on the instrumentalisation of asylum, externalisation practices, documentation pathways, support programmes, migrants’ profiles and decision-making capabilities, local communities’ perceptions of migrants, and the empowering potential of migration. These interviews were held at informants’ offices or at cafés.

Communication strategies

I used various strategies to communicate with each collaborator, including (i) donors, (ii) women and gender-diverse migrants, (iii) organisations, and (iv) key informants.

Donors. I received donations through a crowdsourcing campaign to purchase cameras and SD cards. I sent donors informative emails with photos showing the cameras as well as some workshop participants taking photos. None of these photos showed photographers' faces or any details that could risk their identity privacy.

Women and gender-diverse migrants. I regularly reached out to them during the six-month period after the workshop, and informed them about exhibitions (described below).

Organisations. I shared Power Point presentations including a summary of my project, and participants' photo-narratives with their consent. Organisations did not receive user rights for the photo-narratives and were requested to collaborate with the research in case of being interested in using the photos for any purpose. None of the organisations has used the photo-narratives in any way. I maintain email contact with all these organisations, providing updates such as my website, articles, and papers. While I have not been able to co-create an analytical output in collaboration with the organisations – mainly due to time restrictions on both sides – they have responded positively and expressed appreciation for my efforts to stay in touch and share outputs.

Key informants. I have also maintained contact with key informants and shared updates including my website, articles and papers about this project.

Privacy and data protection

I stored all the data generated using Nexus365 One Drive and backed it up using the University's HFS service. My devices to collect, protect and manage data were my Windows 11 laptop and Android 11 phone, both devices were encrypted, and password protected.

I obtained written consent from women and gender-diverse migrants who took part in the photovoice workshops and oral consent from my other interlocutors including migrant men, key informants, and local communities. Paper-based consent records, as well as user rights forms and paper-based survey questionnaires were placed in a folder for transfer from the interview location to my flat in every city, where they were stored in lockable drawers. I scanned the paper-based forms and questionnaires and securely stored them in encrypted folders.

Audio recordings including oral consents were transferred from the recording device (my password protected and encrypted phone) to my computer and were securely stored. I then deleted them from the original recording device. Interview transcripts were been saved as password protected files and in encrypted folders. I anonymised interview transcripts and fieldnotes by removing names and identifiers. I also generated unique participant numbers and maintained a password-protected and encrypted spreadsheet that links these numbers to participants' names.

The digital photographs and captions for which participants provided user rights (200 in total) were stored in password protected and encrypted folders.

4.3 Data management and analysis

4.3.1 Data organisation and preparation for analysis

I produced qualitative and quantitative data that I organised according to their respective sources. I classified the *qualitative* data into four sources, (i) fieldnotes, (ii) photo-elicited group discussion notes, (iii) interview transcripts, and (iv) photo-narratives. I initially compiled the data into Word documents and then classified and coded these using NVivo 14. I organised my *fieldnotes* by creating one Word document for each location (Table 2), structuring them chronologically with one fieldnote for each fieldwork day. I used a template to ensure the fieldnotes were produced in a systematic and organised way, including a summary, location, participants, length of the observation, detailed description including photographs, interpretations, and relevance to my research questions.

For each *photo-elicited group discussion* conducted during the workshops, I created a Word document (nine in total), taking thorough notes of collaborators' comments with their consent. I produced 96 *individual interview transcripts* and classified these according to the type of participant: women and gender-diverse migrants, migrant men, local community members, and key informants.

I organised the *photo-narratives* by generating Word files, one per location, including all the photos and narratives generated during each workshop. The files were organised by group and theme, with themes corresponding to the prompts. At the theme classification level, photo-narratives were listed per participant using their unique identification number and not their names.

Table 4. *Qualitative data sources per location.*

Location/Sources	Fieldnotes	Group discussions	Interviews	Photo-narratives
Tapachula	1	3	36	74
Mexico City	1	3	28	58
Tijuana	1	3	32	68
Total	3	9	96	200

Quantitative data was generated through surveys and interviews with women, men and gender-diverse migrants who joined the photovoice workshops (see Appendix III). I inputted the questionnaire data into Stata 15 and prepared the data for analysis by recoding, labelling and defining variables, as well as by producing scores for the psychometric scales (see scoring in Appendix V). I further enhanced the data set by quantifying qualitative information shared through the interviews, such as town of origin, number of relocations before arrival in Mexico, and mobility patterns after our first interaction.

4.3.2 A mixed approach for the analysis of mixed methods data

My analysis integrates the qualitative and quantitative data using an arts-informed eclectic approach and combining thematic analysis (TA) and interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), alongside descriptive and inferential statistics for the quantitative survey data (Kaplan, 2004; Knowles et al., 2008; Capous-Desyllas et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2020). This mixed analytical approach enabled me to meaningfully integrate the different types of data sources, using the most suitable methods for each

chapter depending on its specific focus. The next paragraphs explain the implications of the use of this combined analytical approach.

For my *qualitative data*, I used two complementary approaches: TA and IPA. TA is a flexible method for analysing and identifying patterns (themes) within qualitative data (Braun et al., 2006). IPA is an idiographic approach that focuses on lived experiences, interpretations and meaning-making processes of research collaborators (Tuffour, 2017). It aims to capture the meaning that collaborators ascribe to their experiences in light of their personal and cultural beliefs, their values and the context. IPA uses a ‘double-hermeneutic’ by which the collaborator interprets their lived experiences and then, the researcher interprets the collaborator’s account to understand the meaning that participants attach to their experiences within specific contexts (Montague et al., 2020). This entails a careful consideration of researchers’ own biases and assumptions (Capous-Desyllas et al., 2018). TA and IPA are compatible approaches since they highlight the significance of understanding the perspectives and experiences of research collaborators (Nowell et al., 2017). These approaches are well-suited for the type of data that I co-generated and useful for answering my research questions.

I used a staged approach to combine TA and IPA. I first conducted TA to explore the qualitative data generated through life-story interviews and photo-elicited group discussions, identifying themes and specific cases, experiences and interpretations which I then further explored through IPA. I subsequently refined the TA and IPA analysis iteratively and integrated the findings to gain a more holistic understanding of my collaborators’ experiences. I conducted the data analysis in Spanish and French, developing coding frameworks in English.

I followed a systematic approach to analyse the qualitative data, broadly using Bazeley’s four-stage model: read and reflect, explore and play, code and connect, review and refine (Bazeley, 2013). I first got familiar with my data by reading the transcripts, reflecting on my assumptions, biases, and interpretations, while taking note of emerging themes. I later did line by line coding, grouped the codes and created a coding framework which I iteratively refined as I moved forward combining intra-case and inter-case analysis.

While my analytical strategy for photovoice data was inspired in the work of previous scholars like Capous-Desyllas and Bromfield (2018), Day et al. (2024), and Tinkler (2013), I developed specific techniques for my project. I applied a double hermeneutic, analysing photographs first as visual data, and integrating verbal data at a subsequent stage. This double hermeneutic involved understanding the meaning that collaborators ascribed to their photo-stories within the broader contexts of their experiences and adding my own interpretations. Furthermore, this double-hermeneutic analysis was contextualised within the social circumstances in which the creations were produced. This approach entailed an intra-case and inter-case analysis, combining IPA and TA, and integrating a constant comparative method (Thompson et al., 2021).

I examined the 200 photographs first, separately from the narratives or ‘voices’ that accompany them. I approached the creations by examining each collaborator’s series, carefully inspecting the elements that stood out in the photographs, their composition, light, visual aspects, as well as their emotional impact, the feelings and thoughts they evoked, annotating my own interpretations. For each series, I

took into account the guiding prompt, remaining open to the emergence of themes extending beyond it. Subsequently, I incorporated the narratives into my analysis, systematically reading, annotating, and coding them based on emergent themes.

Following a constant comparative method, I contrasted the photo-narratives with the comments my collaborators made about their creations during the focus group discussions, and life-story interviews, shaping coding frameworks that I iteratively refined. Within this dynamic process, I integrated reflexive spaces in which I identified and noted my own reactions, processes, and biases. This data integration process was guided by an adaptation of Tinkler's (2013) steps for analysing photographic data.²⁷ My adaptation entailed: (i) contextualise (how do the photos fit into the participant's lives?), (ii) contrast and connect (how do the photos explain, expand, modify or contradict participant's narratives and vice-versa?), (iii) re-observe (what is said in the photo-narrative and in the interviews? what is not said?), (iv) re-interpret (how does re-observing enable new interconnected interpretations of participants' lived experiences?). Additionally, I employed a collaging technique, creating assemblies of photos and narratives representing themes that surfaced from the mixed methods data (Day et al., 2024) (see example Figure 25). This technique is a powerful tool to illustrate complex experiences within phenomenological analysis.

Figure 25: Photo collage



I consecutively analysed the *quantitative data* through descriptive and inferential statistics while acknowledging the limitations of the small, purposively selected sample (Kaplan, 2004). I also created QGIS maps to visualise the mobility patterns of my collaborators, tracking their routes from origin to Mexico and to other countries they moved to after our first interaction.

I integrated the qualitative and quantitative components at two points: analytical and results points of integration. The analytical integration occurred in two stages. First, I conducted qualitative analysis

²⁷ Tinkler's steps include: i) look (what do participants see?), (ii) contextualise (how do the photos fit into the participant's lives?), (iii) listen (what is said? what is not said?), (iv) juxtapose (how does the talk compare to the visual?), (v) watch (how do the participants interact with the photographs?), (vi) trace (in what ways is the total narrative irreducible to the discrete narratives based on individual photos?) entailed (Tinkler, 2013, p. 193)

(TA, IPA and visual analysis) followed by quantitative analysis as described above (Öhlén et al., 2009; Schoonenboom et al., 2017). The second phase involved revising and refining the codes, as well as categorising them into themes (coding framework). I then connected the quantitative data with emerging themes and carried out further quantitative analysis by using inferential statistics where appropriate. These two stages were iterative and reinforced one another. The results point of integration was accomplished in the writing stage, where I jointly presented quantitative and qualitative findings while integrating theories and insights that helped me explain the research outcomes in relation to my research questions.

4.4 Ethical considerations

My integration of mixed-methods, arts-based approaches and participatory elements, involved specific ethical considerations, and potential risks, which are addressed in the following paragraphs. The study limitations, including methodological ones, are discussed in the Conclusions chapter. The discussion of ethical aspects presented below addresses issues of consent, privacy, photo-voice exhibitions and psycho-emotional risks.

The *informed consent* process was complex due to the project's multiple elements, and it was confusing for some of my collaborators. I, therefore provided detailed oral explanations to ensure that collaborators understood the implications of their participation and allowed time for questions and clarifications, while checking with them individually if they preferred not to participate. The consent form presented the research activities as optional, allowing my collaborators to choose which parts they wanted to engage in. Additionally, I integrated consent confirmation at the beginning of each activity, emphasising collaborators' right to withdraw at any time. These strategies helped me strengthen an ethical relationship with my collaborators.

The use of *images and privacy* is another important ethical issue. During the workshops, group agreements were established including avoiding photographs of faces, not uploading photos to social media, and only using the camera I provided, rather than collaborators' phones. This helped mitigate the risk of publication without consent. Furthermore, I provided simple forms to request user rights, rather than copyrights over their creations. This allowed them to keep ownership and control over their creations. I also administered model consent forms for collaborators who appeared on the photos that I took during the workshops, ensuring none of these showed identifiable traits. Additionally, collaborators could choose their own pseudonyms to credit their creations and quotes, enabling them to maintain control over their own stories and the way they were represented. Collaborators also created the titles of the photo-stories, with some of them choosing to not give titles to their creations.

Exhibitions. I have organised six exhibitions in the UK. Due to time and financial constraints, I have not been able to organise the exhibitions in a participatory manner with the direct involvement of my collaborators who are located across Mexico and the US. While an online co-curation could have been pursued, many of my collaborators do not have Wi-Fi nor laptops, making it very challenging to coordinate virtual participation. Furthermore, many of them work or are on the move which further complicates the possibility to find consensus on convenient times to hold online calls. I have,

however, informed them about these exhibitions and confirmed their consent to have their creations on display. All of them have agreed and have expressed their gratitude for sharing their experiences, struggles and strengths. One of my collaborators created a short video where she talks about her migratory experience and participation in the workshop. With her consent, I show this video at exhibitions.

Psycho-emotional risks. Another significant ethical aspect relates to the complex and sensitive nature of the topics discussed during the photovoice workshops and interviews. Several of my collaborators shared stories and memories of difficult experiences for the first time. “I’ve never said this to anyone”, commented a Guatemalan woman in Tapachula. Often, these stories were related to experiences of violence, sometimes leading to situations of emotional distress. As a trained psychologist, I was able to provide a space for listening and support. The psycho-emotional risk was not only for my collaborators but for me as well. Listening to the emotional pain of research collaborators can cause vicarious or secondary trauma, and affect the psycho-emotional well-being of researchers (Barnett et al., 2009; Nikischer, 2019). To mitigate this risk, I updated my psychological first aids knowledge and took a course on vicarious trauma at the University of Oxford, which was tremendously helpful in protecting my well-being.

4.5 Reflexivity

Reflexivity broadly refers to researchers’ assessment of how their own biases, assumptions, privileges and personal experiences shape the research process and its outcomes (Navarro, 2006; Gu, 2020). Reflexivity is important in migration studies as it can help avoid reinforcing stereotypes or imposing preconceived ideas about migrants’ experiences, (Horvath et al., 2019). It can also help manage ethical dilemmas concerning informed consent, privacy and representation, and prompt researchers to acknowledge the limitations of their own perspectives (Berger, 2013; Kumsa et al., 2015). Reflexivity is key to engage in “radical listening” and can enable researchers to recognise their positionality and power dynamics present in the research processes, fostering more equitable and ethical research relationships (Rubin et al., 2017). These reflexive processes can help researchers offer more nuanced interpretations of migration experiences, fostering the inclusion of diverse perspectives and avenues for knowledge cocreation (Holland et al., 2010; Löhr et al., 2020).

Reflexivity is essential in migration research that uses participatory arts-based methods. It can help assess if and how the research process genuinely centres migrants’ voices. It prompts researchers to acknowledge the subjective nature of interpreting migrants’ artistic expressions and to be cognisant of their own biases and presumptions (Knoblauch et al., 2008; Capous-Desyllas et al., 2018). Moreover, reflexivity can foster researchers’ awareness of their own vulnerabilities, which can help build trust with collaborators and openness to learning from migrants’ experiences, enabling a more collaborative and equitable research relationships (Yong et al., 2019). In what follows, I provide a series of reflections about how my own positionality, biases, and assumptions shaped the research process.

Shifting my research focus

I initially embarked on this DPhil journey with the intention of collaborating with women refugees and migrants in Kenya. After a reflexive process I changed my geographical focus to Mexico. Since 2019, I have worked as an international consultant on forced displacement issues in East Africa and lived in Kenya for two years. As part of my work, I got engaged in a large Kenya-based research project and intending to use part of that data for my DPhil.

As I made progress in my DPhil research during my first year, my supervisor Alex questioned me: “why Kenya?”. This question resonated with my own doubts about conducting my research in Kenya and relying on my employer’s data, echoing my supervisor Carlos’ words: “the DPhil is a learning experience”. I realised that conducting my research in Mexico, would allow me to delve deeper into migrants’ experiences and form more collaborative relationships, with fewer language and cultural barriers than in Kenya. Furthermore, I recognised that conducting my project in Mexico would give me greater control over the research approach and its methods. Believing in local transformation and the value of local knowledge systems, I accepted that I felt more able and entitled to conduct my research in Mexico than in Kenya. I undertook an exercise of critical consciousness that led me to redefine my DPhil project. After discussing with my husband and consulting with my supervisors, I decided to shift my focus to Mexico, reducing my working hours in Kenya, and embracing this new research path. This focus shift was an empowering experience for me.

Identity

I engaged with this research as a mestiza cisgender woman from Mexico City with an academic background in psychology and migration studies, and with a personal and familial history of migration.²⁸ Over the past 11 years, I have been a documented migrant in different countries in the Global South and North where my presence has been perceived as that of an ‘economic migrant’ from the South or an ‘expat’. Family members are also migrants, mainly in the USA, some of whom migrated without documents and have been deported, while others live in fear of being arrested and sent back to Mexico. This background certainly shaped my understandings of my collaborators’ experiences.

Identifying myself as a Latin American woman collaborating with Latin Americans helped me build culturally sensitive relationships with my interlocutors. To be brown-skinned and speak Spanish with a Latin American accent gave me some insider privileges such as attracting little attention when conducting observations and accessing social spaces more easily. While cultural proximity was particularly helpful with my Spanish speaking interlocutors, I faced more pronounced cultural and language barriers with my Haitian interlocutors. Even though many Haitians speak French, some of them, especially women with lower levels of education only speak Creole. This made it difficult for me to approach them as I speak French but not Creole. My language skills might have influenced the composition of the photovoice workshops since all my Haitian collaborators speak both French and

²⁸ The term mestiza-o is generally used in Latin America to describe people of mixed ancestry with a European and an indigenous background (Gonzalez-Barrera, 2015).

Creole, and some of them also speak Spanish. Notably, my Haitian collaborators expressed their gratitude for conducting the workshop and some interviews in French since many activities offered to migrants by organisations are often conducted only in Spanish.

I perceived that my nationality was generally helpful to build rapport, but it affected some interactions. I noticed that my nationality affected some of my migrant interlocutors' willingness to share their opinions concerning the Mexican community. When I noticed this, I would reassure them that their stories would be kept confidential and made comments like 'I know migrating in Mexico can be challenging' or "living in Mexico is not easy, even for me as a Mexican", this encouraged them to share their opinions more openly. My nationality and affiliation with Oxford University also helped me gain access to organisations, practitioners, activists, experts and government officials.

Another identity-related aspect that I realised had an impact on my interactions with research interlocutors was my gender, my appearance and my accent specially in Tapachula and Tijuana. My cisgender female identity was crucial in helping me interact with women and gender-diverse migrants. Many women made comments like 'we can talk between women', highlighting the trust they felt when interacting with me, as a woman. Furthermore, trans women and other gender-diverse collaborators further noted a sense of ease attributing it to their perception of my gender. Trans women would often note that they felt they needed not to compete with me, in terms of beauty standards, given my non-transgender identity, while other gender-diverse people emphasised the value of enabling spaces where people of various genders could openly converse and learn together.

In terms of my accent and appearance, in both cities, people immediately recognised that I was not from there, this was noticed through my clothing and my '*chilanga*' accent (from Mexico City). A group of collaborators in Tapachula even commented on my clothes at one of the workshops. This did not make me feel uncomfortable, but on the contrary, it opened a conversation about cultural differences in clothing styles, helping us feel closer in our differences. My distinct accent also affected my interactions, particularly with Mexican interlocutors (international organisations' staff, activists, experts and government officials). As someone from Mexico City who had studied and lived abroad, I was often perceived as higher-class. I sometimes felt I had to explain that I do not have a wealthy background and had accessed education through scholarships. I noticed that this justification helped generate a more equitable ground for our interactions.

Finally, another aspect that influenced my interactions was that I travelled by motorbike during my fieldwork. When my interlocutors saw me on the motorbike or saw my helmet, they became interested and asked about my experiences as a woman driver. This helped 'break the ice' and created more horizontal interactions where I was not the only one asking the questions.

Security and self-care

My previous experience volunteering at migrant shelters in Mexico and working at refugee camps and internally displaced people settlements in Sudan and East African countries, had prepared me for the potential physical and mental risks I could face during my fieldwork. I have spent several months living in said settings and have experienced physical exhaustion and vicarious trauma while doing so.

To protect my well-being, I decided not to stay in shelters this time, and instead rented a room in an area where I felt safe and could rest and recover after each day of research activities. This had a crucial positive impact on my ability to cope with the complexities of the settings, the difficult stories of my collaborators, and my own reactions.

Navigating Tijuana posed greater challenges for me, mainly due to my lower understanding of the city compared to Mexico City and Tapachula, the culture which I perceived as more ‘US-Americanised’, driving styles, and the fact that it is one of the most dangerous cities in the country. To feel more secure, I spent some weeks familiarising myself with the city and expanding my network among academics and organisations’ staff.

Driving a motorbike in Tijuana was particularly challenging since the higher driving speed compared to other areas of Mexico meant I had to be extra cautious. Parking my motorbike has also a concern since locals mentioned that motorcycles are often stolen. Harassment while driving was common. The most concerning incident was being stopped by two ‘police officers’ after I had an interview at the refugee commission. These men refused to show me their ID card, but they demanded me to show them mine and asked me why I was in Tijuana. I felt intimidated and showed them my Oxford University ID, and they let me go. Another researcher shared a similar experience with me, and some practitioners argued that showing them that I was affiliated with a foreign university was useful to keep me safe, ‘they don’t want to attract international attention’, practitioners said. Researchers and especially journalists in Mexico, are systematically abused. I knew I was at risk. After this encounter I did not return immediately home, I used another route and ensured I was not being followed. Said episode occurred towards the end of my fieldwork. I limited my time out, stopped using my motorbike and began using public transport and alternative routes. This experience deeply permeated my understanding of migrants’ fear of police in Mexico.

Relationship with organisations

Collaborating with civil society organisations (CSOs) was key for me to better understand the context, connect with migrant interlocutors and engage with key informants. Nevertheless, these collaborations did not come without challenges, including volunteering tasks and communication, workshop invitations, and staff attendance to workshops.

Even though volunteering tasks were straightforward, it was challenging to specify my tasks. Generally, I was assigned to an area within organisations, but the area coordinator would not always assign tasks to me. I would then contact other areas where I could help and spent time informally talking to migrants. As I got familiar with the organisations’ operations, I started to support other areas that could help me gain further contact with migrants.

Workshop invitations managed by organisations required me to very closely follow up with their communications team. On one occasion, there was a conflict among staff which affected my project, as invitations were not sent. I attended on the day and time of the workshop, ready to deliver only to realise that nobody had been invited. The staff member overseeing my project apologised and took on the invitations’ task, and I delivered the workshop two days later. On another occasion, an

organisation took on the invitations' task, but I realised that participants had not been informed about the nature of the activity and some of them joined because they were told to do so. I explained to them that they were free to not join the workshop and that there would be no negative implications attached. One participant left and another one skipped the individual interview. The rest stayed and raised comments like 'I like taking photos and talking with others, I want to stay'.

Another challenge was related to organisations' interest in joining the photovoice workshops. I emphasised the importance of not joining the workshops because their involvement could have inhibited my collaborators. Even though most organisations acknowledged this and did not join, one staff member did join a session on the day. Though initially apprehensive, I allowed them to take part as they seemed respectful and did not appear to inhibit the other participants, who fully engaged in the activities. I later realised their interest was not in surveillance but rather in learning the photovoice technique. A few days later, the staff member contacted me to request more information about the method, which I provided.

Reflexivity in analysis and interpretation

Cognisant of how my own biases and assumptions could influence my data analysis and interpretations, I maintained a memo noting my reactions to my collaborators' stories, questioning my own interpretations. However, at confirmation of status stage, my examiners helped me identify two major biases: an overall political activist tone in my writing, and an inclination towards demonstrating migrants' agency even in face of oppression.

The first bias is linked to my commitment to amplifying migrants' voices and perspectives, and the fact that human rights violations against migrants must end, with policy and programming being essential in that change. While I maintain this view, I realised that my contribution was centring more on policy impact than on scholarly knowledge production, risking the duplication of activists' claims and adding little new value to migration studies. With this in mind, I use part of my study to bring forward the necessity of a policy framing for refugee and migration studies.

The second bias on migrants' agency, seemed to unduly valorise the limited agency that migrants demonstrate, in face of oppressive structures. These reflections have led me to produce a more nuanced analysis that does not only recognise migrants' agency and its expansion, but that also reflects on how these processes operate in ambiguous ways, demonstrating the interactions of personal, social, and structural factors.

4.6 Conclusion

This chapter explained how I co-generated data to answer my research questions. I used a methodology that acknowledges how individuals interpret, articulate, and represent their lived experiences throughout their life-course, and not only during migration, while centring their voices, self-representations, and meaning-making practices (Kihato, 2009).

Anchored in my theoretical framework and guided by a phenomenological approach, this research utilised multi-sited, mixed-methods, and participatory arts-based research elements. This

methodological approach enabled a dynamic exploration of migrants' agential negotiations. The combination of photovoice, with life-story interviews and surveys proved valuable in building trust with collaborators and producing nuanced interpretations of their lived experiences, which would have been difficult to achieve by relying only on more traditional methods. Furthermore, the multi-sited approach allowed for a comparative analysis across different contexts, enriching the understanding of how agency is shaped by local conditions and transnational dynamics. Collaborations with organisations were also key, as they enabled an in-depth exploration of how humanitarian systems, policies and their implementation shape migrants' agency.

The analysis of the data generated through this complex methodology entailed a multidimensional approach. I combined thematic analysis (TA) and interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), as well as innovative techniques for analysing visual data. Furthermore, descriptive and inferential statistical analyses were integrated to elucidate the research questions.

While this methodology involved ethical implications, risks and limitations, this approach allowed me to immerse myself in each study context, generating nuanced interpretations of my collaborators' interpretations of their own agential negotiations (double-hermeneutic) through various modes of data generation. This methodology also prompted me to question my own biases and knowledge limitations, while considering how these affected the study analysis and conclusions. Overall, my mixed-methods and multi-sited strategy proved optimal for answering my research questions.

This chapter is critical to understand the next part of the thesis presenting the analytical chapters where women and gender-diverse migrants' ability to negotiate and expand their agency is analysed in relation to sociopolitical structures (Chapter 5), psychosocial aspects (Chapter 6), gender and sexuality (Chapter 7). Furthermore, it outlines analytical strategies that may guide future research using similar methodologies in migration contexts, potentially offering meaningful insights into the complexities of migration.

PART II: Negotiating agency in im/mobility

This part aims to address the research questions through primary data analysis, investigating the factors that shape women and gender-diverse migrants' ability to negotiate and expand their agency as they navigate complex migration structures. Chapter 5 concentrates on the role of structures in origin and transit-destinations, and how these shape and are shaped by migrants' agential negotiations. Chapter 6 centres on positive and adverse psychosocial experiences occurring throughout migrants' life-course and shaping migration drivers. Chapter 7 draws upon the findings of Chapters 5 and 6 to study how migration structures and psycho-emotional experiences intersect with gendered sexual identities, influencing how gender-diverse migrants negotiate their sexual agency. This part of the dissertation provides a key analytical contribution which is further integrated and elaborated in the final conclusive chapter.

5 Structures, containment and agency

5.1 Introduction

I don't feel independent because we're reliant on appointments – whether it's with COMAR or the one from over there [the US]. But in the end, we can keep moving forward. That [the appointments requirement] is just part of the process, but it won't stop us.

Fer, 25-year-old Venezuelan woman seeking asylum. Photo-elicited group discussion in Mexico City. March 2023.

Fer's narrative reflects part of the structural challenges that migrants navigate as they negotiate migratory agency, acknowledging these challenges as only “part of the process”. Like other migrant women in the photo-elicited group discussion, Fer had faced months of confinement in Tapachula before reaching Mexico City. While Fer described instances of structural oppression, she also conveyed a sense of control through strategic compliance, fulfilling these requirements in order to achieve her goals. This signals a dynamic and bidirectional power relationship, although an unbalanced one, between migrants and migration structures.

Migration structures fundamentally influence survival migrants' ability to negotiate their agency at each stage of the migration process in origin, destination, and spaces of transit that often become destinations and vice versa. Migration structures consider in/formal systems of power, including regulatory frameworks, policies, and procedures managing migration and asylum by governments, multilateral institutions, organisations, and other in/formal actors (Düvell et al., 2022; Herrera-Rosales, 2025). Within these systems of power, migration infrastructures operate through “systematically interlinked technologies, institutions, and actors that facilitate and condition mobility” (Xiang et al., 2014, p. 122). They actively influence who migrates or not, how they migrate, and their lived experiences (Lin et al., 2017; Sigona et al., 2021). From a structuration theory approach, these infrastructures not only shape migrants' agency but are also influenced – although not proportionately – by the exercise of migrants' individual and collective agency (Giddens, 1984; de Haas, 2021). This chapter aims to analyse these processes by exploring how survival migrants, depending on their intersecting social positions and life stages, dynamically negotiate their migratory agency, making choices about their mobility processes within migration structures in spaces of origin and transit-destination.

Research shows that migration systems as well as social, economic and political structures in countries of origin, influence survival migrants' agency, their aspirations and capabilities to migrate (Scholten, 2022). These structures are gendered, constructing differentiated experiences based on gender-sex categories which are compounded by intersecting axes of power such as class and race. As I demonstrate in this chapter, structural factors in origin countries, create complex underlying conditions that, while not the sole determinants, influence survival mobility, shaping perceptions

concerning migration opportunities, desirability and capabilities of moving (Czaika et al., 2022). In the Latin American context, labour markets, visa regimes, and situations of generalised violence and gender-based oppression, play a critical role in shaping survival migration patterns (Feldmann et al., 2022; Hammoud-Gallego et al., 2023). Conditions of precarity in countries of origin and perceived opportunities in potential transit-destinations, combined with visa regimes that facilitate or limit mobility, have a crucial impact on migratory agency. For example, as I demonstrate in my analysis, ‘mule’ trips between Cuba and Caribbean countries depict how the lack of food and daily use products in Cuba, leads many women to seek opportunities abroad by buying products in visa-free countries, and reselling them in Cuba. Visa regimes shape migrants’ limited choice of transit-destination countries, leading them to opt for those that require easier to access documentation and where income-generating opportunities are likely to be available. Moreover, generalised violence, political oppression and gender-based violence, intersect with these economic and visa-related limitations, further propelling aspirations to migrate, shaping mobility routes, desired destinations and ‘stepping stone’ countries (de Haas, 2021). This perspective allows for an understanding of structures as transnationally interconnected, generating gendered transnational effects on migrants’ agency.

Structural factors in transit play a crucial role in moulding survival migrants’ agency. Mexico, serving as both the exit of Latin America and the gateway to the “American dream”, represents a country-wide border that produces situations of “confinement in motion”. This confinement – where migrants face restrictions and unfreedom while migrating or in transit (Balaguera, 2023a) – aligns with a broader logic of border externalisation through containment. This entails state’s management of migration and asylum flows by containing migrants within specific territories, effectively shifting US border control responsibilities beyond their own borders and into Mexico (Casas-Cortes et al., 2015; Şarlak, 2025; Landau, 2025). As further elaborated in the second part of this chapter, migrants’ experiences of confinement materialise in long periods of immobility in unknown cities where they must wait for documentation to unlock mobility. This state of immobility is sustained by “waiting infrastructures”, a subsystem within the country’s broader containment infrastructure. These infrastructures ambivalently support migrants’ humanitarian needs, while simultaneously undermining their agency by fostering dependency, and limiting their mobility (Willers, 2020; Luna-González, 2021; Herrera-Rosales, 2025; Olayo-Mendez, 2025).

As migrants navigate migration containment infrastructures, they implement various agency maximising tactics such as legal contestation, collective protest, creation of transnational solidarity networks, manipulation of state systems, and strategic compliance (Mainwaring, 2016; Biner, 2018; Pugh, 2018; Schoemaker et al., 2021; Herrera-Rosales, 2023). From a critical perspective, the autonomy of migration approach is helpful to explore how migrants navigate these infrastructures. Autonomy in migration shall be understood as a relational, dynamic and contested concept that emerges from the relationship between mobility and the structural efforts that aim to control it (Mezzadra et al., 2013; Scheel, 2019). As such, autonomy may emerge in relation to migration infrastructures, border regimes and securitisation mechanisms, impacting migrants’ room to manoeuvre (Scheel, 2019). While structures of power, including institutions, informal actors, criminal groups, migration and asylum systems, limit agentic capabilities, migrants develop strategies of

solidarity and resistance, negotiating their agency within structural boundaries. As I demonstrate in my analysis, some of these individual and collective strategies, can reconfigure these structures in subtle but meaningful ways.

While migrants' agential negotiations within migration infrastructures and their influence on these have been analysed, research gaps remain. A truly intersectional approach has been called upon by migration scholars to consider how gender, sexuality, race and class interact with structural factors shaping migrants' agential capabilities (Bastia et al., 2023; Ekanayake et al., 2023). Furthermore, a temporal and spatially situated lens to studying agency is essential to account for the fluid nature of agency and structures, acknowledging fluctuations based on migrants' relational positions throughout their migration processes (Herrera-Rosales, 2025; Teo, 2025). Scholars have also highlighted the need to explore the impact of border securitisation and externalisation on migrants' agency and their ability to negotiate decision-making (Collins, 2021). Furthermore, a significant portion of migration research originates in and focuses on high-income countries, potentially overlooking critical perspectives and local contexts in the South (Masferrer et al., 2023).

In response to these calls for scholarly attention, this chapter uses a temporally situated intersectionality lens to examine how women and gender-diverse migrants negotiate agency within migration structures, while influencing those very structures through their actions (Yuval-Davis, 2015). In order to provide an in-depth understanding of the structural mechanisms shaping and being shaped by migrants' agency in transnational ways, I explore structures in spaces of origin and in transit-destination. I firstly analyse structural factors in countries of origin that influence migrants' decisions to move internally, circularly between countries, and onwardly to other countries. I continue by analysing how migrants negotiate agency when they enter the migration field in Mexico and its containment infrastructure. Finally, I explore how migrants' agential negotiations through solidarity and resistance, reconfigure parts of these structures in subtle, but meaningful ways, demonstrating the fluid nature of both, agency and structures. This chapter contributes to current scholarly discussions in critical migration studies, offering a nuanced understanding of the interplay between migration structures and survival migrants' agency. It establishes a foundation for the subsequent chapters, which employ a temporal lens guided by a transnational life-course perspective to investigate the psychosocial processes influencing migrants' agency, as well as the factors shaping migrants' sexual agency and their gendered sexual identity changes in migration.

5.2 Structured decisions to leave: from internal to circular and onward mobilities

This section explores how structural factors in countries of origin influence migrants' agency, leading people to internally relocate, circularly migrate between countries, and onward migrate to third countries. Most of my collaborators had experienced some form of mobility before arriving in Mexico. While many had faced internal displacements in the past and were undergoing their first international mobility process, others had been engaged in circular migration, moving repeatedly between their countries of origin and other countries, primarily as a strategy to generate income (López-Sala et al., 2016). Others underwent secondary international relocations after having lived for an extended period in a third country. This process, known as onward migration, emphasises how

destinations shift to become spaces of departure (Ahrens et al., 2022; Turcatti et al., 2022). For some, these relocation spaces, became ‘stepping stones’ in their onward journeys.

5.2.1 *Internal and circular mobility*

Patterns of internal mobility are not linear and often occur multiple times before becoming international processes. Internal displacements among my collaborators were motivated by multiple complex factors. Within structures of political oppression and generalised violence, poverty, domestic and gender-based violence were recurrent themes. Domestic violence and child abuse emerged as significant drivers for early-age internal displacement.²⁹ Seeking refuge elsewhere emerged as the sole recourse when household violence became unbearable. These relocations often remained within close proximity, even in the same neighbourhood. While offering a sense of liberation, these displacements ultimately represented the only viable option for survival.

Keyli, a 34-year-old Salvadoran woman with refugee status, experienced displacement early in life within a gang-dominated environment marked by socioeconomic deprivations that limited her education and employment opportunities. This was further compounded by domestic violence which significantly influenced her decision to leave her family household upon reaching late adolescence. At the age of 16, following a pregnancy, she moved in with her boyfriend’s family. She initially felt liberated from her familial difficulties, but quickly after moving in with her partner’s family, she encountered economic, physical and psychological abuse within this new domestic setting. Lacking the financial resources to independently provide for herself and her child, she found no other option but to return to her family of origin, where she was subjected to further violence. This pattern of displacement exemplifies how domestic violence and economic deprivation, can be key drivers of mobility for survival particularly for women. Keily later engaged in a new relationship and moved in with her new partner.

At the age of 34, Keily had never participated in the paid labour market, attributing this to her limited educational attainment, which narrowed her employment options to precarious, low-wage positions, such as street vending and waitressing, characterised by safety concerns due to extended hours and night shifts. Despite her interest in working, Keily’s husband believed it was best for her not to seek paid employment, as her potential earnings were deemed insignificant. This situation perpetuated Keily’s economic dependence on male partners, reinforcing patriarchal structures that limit women’s agency and economic autonomy (Pardilla, 2016). Due to housing instability, limited income opportunities and pervasive gang violence, Keily and her family had to relocate numerous times within El Salvador. Keily’s narrative illustrates how the intersections between gender-based violence and inequality, alongside structural precarity, sustains cycles of displacement and economic dependence, particularly for women. These intersecting factors create cycles of gendered

²⁹ Domestic violence is a pattern of abusive behaviour to control a partner or other family or household member. It can include violence between parents and children, adult children and elderly parents, between siblings or other members of the household. The abuse can be physical, emotional, economic, or sexual (Mahajan, 2011; Rakovec-Felser, 2014).

vulnerability and displacement and limit migrants' choices, reflecting broader Central American trends, where pervasive violence against women and poverty contribute to the drivers of survival migration (Feldmann et al., 2022).

Patterns of internal mobility intertwine with processes of circular migration, influenced by both socioeconomic and geopolitical structures, while maintaining significant ties to the place of origin (Constant, 2020). The experiences of many Venezuelan and Cuban migrants illustrate this form of mobility, characterised by repeated movements driven by livelihoods-based motivators and sustained transnational ties. Acna, a 24-year-old Venezuelan-Colombian woman whose grandparents migrated from Colombia to Venezuela in the 1970s, recounted that when the economic situation in Venezuela started to deteriorate, she began to circularly migrate between Venezuela and Colombia to buy essential goods. 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 threats from her son's father motivated her to out-migrate. However, her capability to move was restricted by her passport, "as Venezuelans, no one welcomes us because everywhere they ask us for a visa", she explained. Restricted by the migration infrastructure, she decided to process her Colombian passport, circumventing visa restrictions and expanding her migratory prospects.

Sofia, a 47-year-old Cuban woman with refugee status, also engaged in circular mobility, while working as both a nurse and an entrepreneur in Cuba. She frequently travelled to Haiti and Nicaragua as a 'mule' to purchase products for resale in Cuba. "I would buy soft drinks, like zuco or toki, all of that sells well in Cuba. Shoes, flip-flops, clothes, perfume, anything that could be sold", she recounted. 'Mules' is the term used to refer to Cubans who travel to countries with no visa restrictions, such as Haiti, Nicaragua, and Russia, to buy merchandise that is unavailable in state run shops (Gutierrez, 2024).³⁰ My interlocutors and existing studies corroborate that most Cuban entrepreneurs who perform 'mule' activities are women (Gutierrez, 2024). This activity represents an agential response to restrictive migration and socioeconomic structures, providing Cubans with access to essential products unavailable on the island. The Cuban government, unable to provide the products in demand, permits 'mules' to operate with minimal restrictions (Miranda, 2019). For over six decades, the US has enforced a series of sanctions referred to as embargo, banning trade and financial transactions with Cuba. The embargo has imposed a significant human toll, hindering the development of the Cuban economy, limiting the provision of humanitarian assistance, and making daily life more challenging for Cuban families (Oliver et al., 2022).

5.2.2 *Onward migration*

Anet, a 39-year-old Cuban national, had also engaged in circular migration between Cuba and Central American countries, before migrating to Russia from where she onward migrated to Mexico. In order to provide for her family, she also did 'mule' trips to resale products purchased in Nicaragua and

³⁰ In other contexts, like in Mexico, the term 'mule' applies to people who get engaged in smuggling operations usually by carrying contraband.

Panama. Anet and her family decided to leave Cuba for Russia at the onset of the pandemic when she was pregnant. Their choice to leave was influenced by three structural factors: a lack of reliable maternal care services in Cuba, border closures in Central America, and visa regulations that made it easier to enter Russia. She explained that they “were originally heading to Nicaragua, but with the pandemic, they closed the borders”. She voiced strong concerns about giving birth in Cuba because the childbirth facilities were inadequate, saying, “imagine, there weren’t even beds. Pregnant women were sitting in chairs because there was nowhere for them to sleep”. As travel between Cuba and Russia was not yet restricted, they decided that the best was to relocate there. “If you have money, you buy the ticket and go to Russia, just like that. You don’t need papers”, she explained.

Anet described life in Russia as challenging, mainly due to their limited Russian language skills, discrimination from locals, and fear of police detention since they lacked legal documentation for stays exceeding 90 days. Despite these difficulties, she was able to obtain healthcare services and gave birth to her daughter in Russia. Through connections with fellow Cubans settled in Russia, she secured a job at a call centre that required Spanish-speaking personnel. Although Anet and her family intended to remain in Russia, the full-scale invasion of Ukraine compelled their return to Cuba. Persistent structural constraints, including food shortages, power outages, and limited income-generating opportunities in Cuba, prompted Anet to travel to Nicaragua to procure products for resale, within days of having returned from Russia. While in Nicaragua, a friend advised her to consider not to return to Cuba and instead continue northward using Nicaragua as a stepping stone.

Anet: He told me, “Think about it”. Everyone is heading to the US. I told him, “No, but the border is closed. And what would I even do in the US? Plus, my kids are in Cuba, no”. He said, “Think about it. At least get to Mexico; in Mexico, they’re giving residency, they’re issuing documents, and at least in Mexico, you can get something, and anything helps”. And that’s when I thought, yes, that’s a good point. I thought about it so much, and in two days, I decided: I’m going to Mexico. I used the money I had, didn’t buy the merchandise, and left for Mexico.

Processes of circular mobility among Cubans are far from spontaneous, voluntary moves. Instead, they are induced by policies of precarity and exclusion, pushing people to seek opportunities within the limited territories accessible with Cuban passports and without visa requirements. Since 2021, Nicaragua has emerged as a key visa-free transit point for Cubans and Haitians to transit Central America and bypass the Darién jungle as they head north. For Cubans, the relaxation of visa requirements has facilitated travel to Nicaragua, either to purchase goods for resale or to use the country as a stepping stone to northern America (Gutierrez, 2023). The mobility processes of my research collaborators reflect a selection of transit routes and destinations based on existing migration infrastructures, fundamentally shaping their agency.

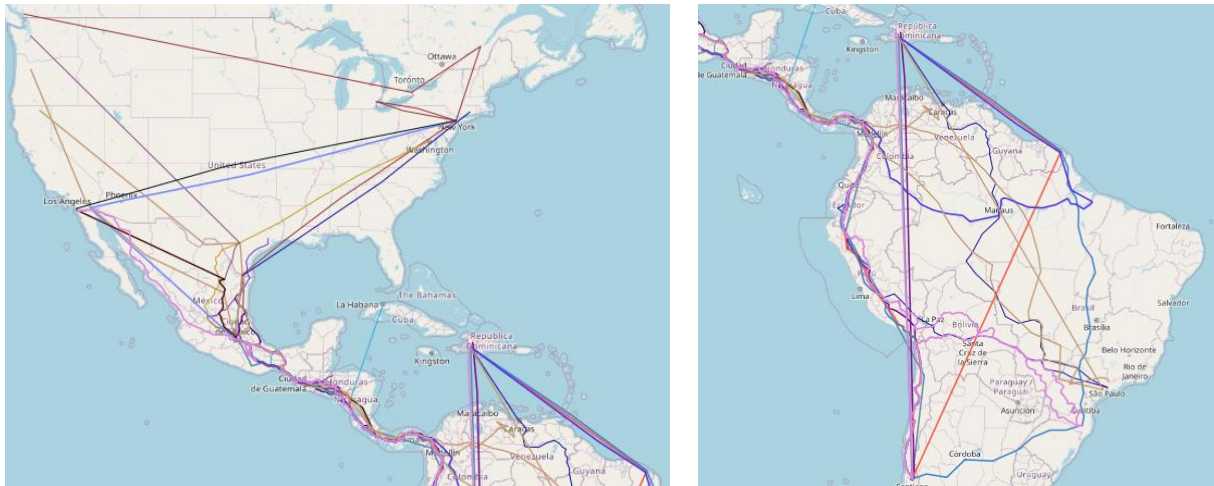
Patterns of onward migration are also significant among Haitians. Following the 2010 earthquake, which intensified existing socioeconomic and political challenges, some Haitians with sufficient resources sought opportunities in South American countries, including Chile, Brazil, and French Guiana, with the intention of migrating onward to France. Haitian migrants’ aspirations and experiences of onward mobility are intersected by gender, race, class, language proficiency, as well as by political factors at the national and international levels.

Irna, a 42-year-old Haitian woman seeking asylum, initially left Haiti due to fear of re-experiencing sexual abuse by foreign military personnel stationed in her country – this situation of sexual gender-based violence by foreign military including UN peacekeeping forces, has been documented by various organisations (HRW, 2020). She analysed the migration structure to identify countries that imposed minimal entry restrictions and travelled to Venezuela, explaining, “It’s a communist country, and it’s easier for me to get a visa”. There, she met the father of her son but soon found herself in a situation of severe intimate partner violence, forcing her to leave once again this time with her son. Persecuted by her ex-partner, she sought safety in Brazil, where entry requirements were less stringent, particularly before Bolsonaro’s administration (2019-2023).

After residing in Brazil without legal migratory documentation for several years, Irna faced increasing difficulties due to the rise of Bolsonaro’s ultra-right, anti-immigrant policies. The political instability and declining economic opportunities for undocumented migrants, along with her ex-partner eventually locating her, constrained Irna’s options and her capability to remain in Brazil. Her aspirations and capabilities to migrate were amplified when a group of Africans invited her to join their journey to the US, emphasising the significant role of social networks as crucial sources to expand migration capabilities. Consequently, Irna embarked on a third migratory process, heading to the US with her son and her African companions. She crossed nine countries and the Darién jungle, dividing South and Central America, before reaching Mexico (see select migration routes on Figure 26).

Venezuelan migrants exhibit similarly intricate patterns of onward migration. Acna, a Venezuelan native with Colombian heritage, obtained a Colombian passport and initially migrated to Peru with her aunt. However, due to economic and security challenges in Peru, they perceived that the country was deteriorating, “it was going to become like Venezuela, so we decided to leave”, she said. She contemplated relocating to Spain using her Venezuelan passport, but finally decided to migrate to the US through Mexico, where Colombians faced no tourist visa restrictions, “and if things don’t work, I could try Spain”, she said.

The experiences of Anet, Irna, and Acna, show how migration infrastructures, including legal frameworks, border policies, geopolitics and social networks, function as both, facilitators and obstacles, structuring migrants’ capability to negotiate and assert their agency. This capability is not gender neutral, with decisions being deeply influenced by gender-specific vulnerabilities that delimit choices concerning how and where to go, and whether to pause, return, or stay.

Figure 26. Select migratory routes of research collaborators throughout the Americas.

Source: Created by author based on collaborators' narratives.

5.3 Negotiating migratory agency within infrastructural containment

In this section I explore how migrants negotiate agency as they navigate Mexico's "infrastructural containment", including policies and services, aimed at restricting and controlling the movement of migrants (Şarlak, 2025). I firstly introduce how migrants develop key resources to assert migratory agency, focusing on information and migratory documentation, mainly asylum. Seeking asylum emerged as a strategy to enable safe mobility but only after facing immobility. Therefore, the instrumentalisation of the legal figure of asylum is analysed as a mechanism that aids externalisation through containment, confining migrants in the South, and extending US border control beyond their territory.

Waiting is explored as a key feature of migrant containment, supported and sustained by "waiting infrastructures". These infrastructures are comprised by shelters, organisations and programmes that ambivalently address humanitarian needs, acting as resources that enable migrant agency, while simultaneously regulating and undermining it by fostering dependency, and influencing mobility (Willers, 2020; Luna-González, 2021; Olayo-Mendez, 2025). Shelter networks, organisational operations and government programmes supported by the US and international bodies, are analysed to explore how waiting infrastructures operate and impact migrants' agency.

5.3.1 Information and Mexican "papers to go up": building resources to negotiate migratory agency

"They told us that Mexico was giving papers to go up [to the US]", shared migrant and refugee women during a photo-elicited group discussion in Mexico City. Across Latin America and even other continents, rumours abound that Mexico facilitates documentation that enables transit through the country en route to the US. These rumours, confirmed by migrants already in Mexico as well as social media posts, are key in shaping migratory agency making the idea of migration seem more attainable and less intimidating. However, navigating Mexico's migration infrastructure and accessing "papers to go up" is challenging, and requires engaging with various sources of information that are often incorrect, misleading and contradictory. As previous studies on rumour and migration have shown,

migrants frequently rely on such information, due to a lack of trusted official sources as well as the influence of confirmation bias, which refers to a cognitive tendency to selectively seek, interpret, and recall information that confirms pre-existing beliefs or aspirations (Cattaneo et al., 2021; Czaika et al., 2022).

Migrants relied on various sources to inform their decisions throughout their migratory processes. Information on migratory routes, in/formal requirements to navigate those routes including papers, as well as available assistance was shared by friends, family, and other migrants. Social media platforms, notably TikTok, Facebook, and X, also served as important information hubs, with migrants and guides or smugglers, using them to share details regarding safe routes, associated costs, migration checkpoints, and areas of potential targeting by criminal groups. Organisations also rolled-out informative campaigns including about migratory documentation, asylum processes, and services, mostly at shelters and areas where migrants gathered. The government and organisations also used official websites, and social media, mostly Facebook and X, to announce important information which required migrants to be literate in Spanish, have a smartphone and internet access.

Despite the multiplicity of sources, migrants agreed that information obtained from fellow migrants who had previously completed the journey was the most reliable. “It’s very important to have someone guiding you”, shared a Cuban woman with refugee status. Some migrants perceived that information was readily available, as illustrated by a Venezuelan migrant in Mexico City who noted, “everybody knows where to go, family members who have crossed tell you”.

However, migrants lacking a key informant had to navigate a more complex information landscape. A Nicaraguan woman with refugee status, travelling alone and without key informants, shared one of her tactics to select information to guide her journey: “someone says one thing and someone else says another. You must focus on one person; otherwise, your head gets mixed up”. The selection of information available through various sources, may be influenced by confirmation bias, prioritising information that aligns and reinforces migrants’ hopes and aspirations, while often downplaying potential risks (Czaika et al., 2021). This highlights the added layers of vulnerability constructed by migration infrastructures that limit sources of reliable and accessible information. A Salvadoran woman seeking asylum explained that it is very challenging for migrants to access information related to their migratory or asylum procedures, and integration options, due to the complexity of information infrastructures. She explained: “We must constantly search who has the information, if it is UNHCR, or ‘the Jaguar’ [Government website], or the Jesuits [international organisation] or Sin Fronteras [civil society organisation]”. This precarious information infrastructure complexifies migrants’ processes, elongates their stay in Mexico, undermining their possibilities for migratory regularisation, and increasing their vulnerability to risks.

Access to information varied significantly by gender, sexuality, and relationship status. Migrant women traveling with male partners or other male household members, often had limited access to information or control over decision-making processes, though they were sometimes consulted on significant choices like routes or whether to move forward or stay. Many women in heterosexual relationships, and particularly those with caregiving duties, were unaware of the migratory

documentation that they had applied for or the rationale behind chosen routes, as their male partners handled these decisions while they managed care responsibilities. Although exceptions existed, men commonly managed migratory documentation procedures, linked email accounts, and smartphones to follow up on applications and access information. Men were also more likely to seek information from external sources, including organisations and other migrants. Trans women, often traveling solo, typically joined groups of gender-diverse migrants, where decision-making hierarchies and control of information sources varied by literacy skills and smartphone availability. In relationships with cisgender men, trans women encountered dynamics similar to those of cisgender women, with male partners controlling information and smartphones. By contrast, lesbian women, gay men, and trans men in relationships with women generally shared control over information and decisions.

These observations highlight a critical intersection of gendered power relations and access to information in navigating intricate migration infrastructures, which exacerbate existing gendered inequalities. Migrants' information precarity is sustained by the lack of structured and accessible information sources leading to exclusion and undermining well-informed decision-making. Though digital tools, websites, social media, and apps are available, they do not fully compensate for this information deficit, leading migrants to rely on transnational information networks that can be inaccurate due to the rapidly changing migration landscape, further generating inequality between migrants. As shown by previous studies, the consequences of this information precarity are demonstrably gendered, with cisgender and transgender women experiencing lower access to and control of information resources and digital tools (Andreolla et al., 2024; Berg, 2025).

Information precarity affected migrants, and organisations throughout the country. The frequent changes in migration and asylum policies in Mexico and the US outpaced migrants' ability to stay informed and organisations' capacity to update their protocols and provide accurate guidance. Migrants frequently expressed a lack of understanding regarding documentation procedures and needed accurate information to guide their decisions. "Even us at the organisation lack full information because authorities don't share it. We know what should happen, but not how government institutions will operate", shared a human rights defender in Tapachula. Information gaps were prevalent throughout migration routes, with Mexican migratory documentation procedures being the primary concern in Tapachula, while US asylum processes were of greater concern in Mexico City and Tijuana.

Led by various sources of information, most migrants applied for Mexican migratory documentation which was mainly humanitarian protection, either refugee status or complementary protection granted by the COMAR. Few migrants recognised this documentation as part of the Mexican asylum process, rather viewing it as a 'permit' that enabled mobility throughout the country. During my fieldwork applying for asylum had become virtually the only viable means for survival migrants to secure legal migratory documentation to enable safer mobility across the country (see documentation pathways and requirements in Chapter 3). However, the application involved waiting periods of several months, during which migrants were required to remain in the state of Chiapas, where Tapachula is located.

The procedure encompassed several stages, commencing with ‘pre-registration’ through which the COMAR assigned an appointment number to asylum claimants. This system required migrants seeking asylum to check a Facebook page, where appointment dates for specific numbers were announced. Several collaborators missed their appointments due to lack of Facebook accounts, internet connectivity, or the devices required to check the page. Considering that many women have limited access to devices, this Facebook-dependent strategy may exacerbate their disadvantages. The appointment entailed the filing of an asylum case. This was followed by another appointment for an interview and then the resolution after several months of waiting. Migrants seeking asylum remained undocumented until they obtained a visitor’s card based on humanitarian reasons (TVRH). According to official regulations, the TVRH should be issued upon the filing of asylum cases, but the processing time often extended to several months. The TVRH is valid for one year and it carries the right to a work permit and the permission to travel throughout the country. While the migration infrastructure reclassified migrants as asylum seekers, migrants resisted the ‘asylum seeker’ label and referred to the TVRH card as a ‘visa’. Accessing this ‘visa’ represented an opportunity to finally leave Tapachula, and it was often regarded as a ‘blessing’, just as Mujer Empoderada recounted through her photo-narrative (Photo-story 3). Mujer Empoderada photographed a flower standing tall near the exit of the migrant shelter where she resided while awaiting her documentation. This flower represented her feeling grounded after achieving her goal of acquiring migratory documentation and assert migratory agency.

Photo-story 3 by Mujer empoderada.



A blessing that God granted me. I feel grounded, just like she is. My achievement is having made it to Mexico. Having my papers in order. I now have my visa.

Mujer empoderada, Nicaraguan woman seeking asylum, 34 years old.

Source: Created during a photovoice workshop held in Tapachula, November 2022. Photo prompt: ‘My past achievements’ (User rights granted to author).

For many migrants, seeking asylum in Mexico emerged as a strategy to negotiate agency and unlock mobility. As a Salvadoran woman with refugee status stated, “we knew that we were requesting asylum, but our objective was not to stay in Mexico, our objective was to get the document to transit through Mexico. That’s the truth”. In Tijuana, the refugee commissioner voiced his concerns over the misinterpretation of asylum as merely a means to obtain documentation, highlighting the limited

capacity of the COMAR to process asylum claims which results in protracted waiting periods for applicants. The reliance on the chronically underfunded and overwhelmed COMAR as the main institution addressing survival migrants' documentation needs aligns with Mexico's "infrastructural containment" approach (Şarlak, 2025). It encompasses a range of spatio-material tactics including policies and services, aimed at restricting and controlling the movement of migrants, strengthening US border externalisation through physical and digital mechanisms (Casas-Cortes et al., 2015; Torre-Cantalapiedra et al., 2021; Şarlak, 2025; Landau, 2025).

Despite the limitations that using the asylum system involved, migrants who were not interested in Mexican asylum often pursued it partly as a strategy to assert migratory agency while maximising safety. Crossing Mexico without migratory documents requires using clandestine routes where migrants face severe risks. On different occasions, undocumented migrants recounted that they had been stopped by officials of the INM en route from Tapachula to the neighbouring state of Oaxaca. INM officials have removed migrants from buses and left them by the road not too far from Arriaga town, Oaxaca. Migrants have been intercepted in that area by criminal groups who systematically rob and rape them, especially women. One of my interlocutors who experienced such violence showed possible symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder including nightmares, difficulty to concentrate, and sudden memories of the traumatic event. Organisations and journalists have condemned this situation (MSF, 2023).

Even with the 'visa', which legally enabled migrants to leave Tapachula using safer routes, migrants were frequently stopped by INM officers and the National Guard, who confiscated their 'visas', forced them back to Tapachula or left them by the roadside. Bus companies were part of the containment infrastructure and often did not accept 'visas' as valid travel documentation. Several collaborators recounted experiences involving being stopped, having their 'visas' confiscated and being sent back to the south, elongating their stay in Mexico. Permanent residence or 'the permanent', which is accessed if a positive asylum resolution is granted, appeared to be more respected by authorities, offering a safer means to travel with a lower risk of detention or abuse. Notably, migrant men and women agreed that securing documentation was especially critical for women and children to reduce the risk of sexual violence. According to a Haitian refugee, "asking for asylum [and getting 'the permanent'] is the only way to keep on going. They [the INM officers] break everything", highlighting the need to apply for asylum and wait for 'the permanent' to avoid authorities' abuse. This practice represents a form of strategic compliance, where migrants applied for asylum, temporarily acquiescing to immobility to maximise their future mobility potential.

5.3.2 *Waiting infrastructures supporting migrants and sustaining containment*

*They don't let us be free. After losing my freedom of movement,
I felt like I was kidnapped in this land [Mexico]. Sin
estereotipos, 35-year-old Colombian woman seeking asylum.*

Waiting was a key feature of containment in migrants' lived experiences. Migrants' overarching experience of waiting pertained the acquisition of Mexican asylum, first, and then the US CBP One

app appointment – both of which involved stay-in-place strategies that forced applicants to remain in specific locations to secure documentation. Within this overarching wait for documentation, migrants faced several other waiting layers including, delays in accessing humanitarian assistance, such as shelters, food, and healthcare, impediments in securing education for children, accessing work programmes and corresponding payments, awaiting remittances, and also for buses and other means of transport. In waiting for documentation, migrants were contained in cities with limited support services, and little or no support networks.

Humanitarian spaces like shelters and organisations partly sustain migrants' containment and are a central part of Mexico's humanitarian waiting infrastructure, which can be seen as a subsystem within the country's broader containment infrastructure. In line with critical migration scholars, this waiting infrastructure is ambivalent in nature since it supports migrants' humanitarian needs, while simultaneously undermining their agency by fostering dependency, and influencing their mobility (Willers, 2020; Luna-González, 2021; Olayo-Mendez, 2025). Humanitarian spaces play a significant role in shaping migratory routes, with many migrants choosing cities and stopovers based on shelter availability. Many of my collaborators chose Mexico City and Tijuana based on recommendations from other migrants who had found assistance in these cities. Organisations also refer migrants to one another, creating "humanitarian corridors" (Herrera-Rosales, 2025). For example, Camino de Salvación, a religious shelter in Tijuana, is connected to a church and religious shelter in Tapachula, which is also linked to a church in Honduras. Similar networks exist between shelters and organisations supporting gender-diverse migrants (see Chapter 7).

While shelters and organisations are available throughout the country, the demand is larger than their capacity. In trying to offer support to as many migrants as possible, shelters often implement restrictions on the duration of stays, which forces migrants to seek alternative housing, including resorting to sleeping on the streets. Shelter stays typically range from one to three months, with some shelters offering stays for only one day, while others allow migrants to remain until their migratory procedures are completed. While some shelters are well-organised with defined spaces allocated to women and children, men and gender-diverse individuals, several toilets and showers, dining rooms, and support including legal assistance and psychosocial programmes, the majority consist of converted houses or warehouses. In these less resourced shelters, migrants share rooms and bathrooms – which severely increases the risk of abuse for women and children – and food may be limited.

Even though shelters provide critically needed humanitarian assistance, they operate under strict rules that often mimic carceral logics, contributing to migrants' situation of "confinement in motion" and limiting their agency (Balaguera, 2023a). Shelters follow strict regulations that enable its functioning and control, but that often times infantilises residents, limiting their agency. For example, shelters' infrastructure often includes features like high perimeter fences, locked gates, 24-hour guards, fixed eating times, and mandatory curfews. In order to receive assistance, migrants must follow shelters' strict rules including biopolitical regulations that mandate the type of clothes that men and women are allowed to wear and often restrict the use of make-up. A group of migrant women in a Mexico

City shelter articulated their feelings, stating, “we can’t say that we are independent because if we were, we wouldn’t be in a shelter; but being here, we are not free”. However, many migrants abide by shelters’ rules, temporarily exchanging freedom for safety and access to resources, allowing them to conserve economic resources needed for their onward journeys. Importantly, not all shelters operate in a restrictive way, and most of them are committed to protecting and promoting migrants’ rights even despite the adoption of strict rules. However, it is crucial to critically examine the potential for humanitarian spaces to limit agency and reinforce carceral logics.

Mexico’s waiting infrastructure also includes programmes sponsored by the government, local and international organisations. In Tapachula, a work-programme benefits thousands of migrants that are awaiting permanent documentation. The programme offers positions in street cleaning, park maintenance, and administrative roles in government offices. A few organisations collaborate with this programme, providing opportunities for migrants, particularly women, to receive financial support through their participation in activities focused on migrants’ rights, gender-based violence, legal and psychosocial issues, and educational and skill-building initiatives. Although the programme’s monthly \$250 USD payment was below minimum wage and was often delayed, many migrants acknowledged its support, using the funds for living expenses, saving for their onward journeys, or sending remittances to family members. This programme, although helpful to cover immediate needs, was equally useful in elongating migrants’ stay in Mexico as moving elsewhere involved losing this assistance and non-existent social networks.

Upon securing refugee documentation, migrants gained the right to leave Tapachula and became eligible for UNHCR’s Local Integration Programme (PIL), an internal relocation initiative financially supported by the US government. This programme facilitates the transfer of refugees from Tapachula to other Mexican states, connecting them with potential employers. Although the PIL’s support varied on a case-by-case basis, PIL beneficiaries were usually supported with housing for the initial two weeks in the new city and received a monthly allowance of about \$250 USD for a longer period of time, usually for up to three months.

Several of my collaborators participated in the PIL with the aspiration to establish residency in Mexico. Nevertheless, upon relocation, most of them struggled in finding affordable housing and job opportunities. Even though the PIL tried to match migrants with job vacancies, my collaborators noted that these opportunities were low paid, did not match their skills, and were marked by instances of workplace discrimination and harassment. The very reduced two-week period of housing support also affected migrants’ capacity to find longer-term housing arrangements and employment. L de A, a 34-year-old Salvadoran woman with refugee status, recounted the difficulties of finding housing and employment within this timeframe. After nearly three years of living in Tapachula with her daughters, she relocated to another state through the PIL, where they contemplated staying. However, the scarcity of opportunities and an invitation to migrate to the US prompted her subsequent onward migration.

A Salvadoran gay couple also relocated through the PIL from Tapachula to Saltillo, Coahuila in northern Mexico where they briefly considered settling. However, on several occasions they were

subjected by frequent questioning and extortion by the police. Lex, one of the partners, explained, “It’s like they recognise you by the clothes you’re wearing, they say, ‘Aha, this one’s a migrant’”. He recounted that the police would demand to see their migratory documents and would only return them in exchange for money; several collaborators corroborated similar experiences with the Mexican police. “We’ve been robbed several times. We stayed there [in Saltillo] for about four months and then we moved...”, Lex explained. These encounters fostered a profound sense of insecurity, prompting Lex and his partner to relocate to Tijuana, drawn by the presence of a shelter for gender-diverse migrants, and its proximity to the US, revealing the workings of humanitarian corridors. “We came here [to Tijuana] because we felt it was safer [at the LGBT+ shelter] and that we were closer to the border. Also, we knew that they [migration authorities] would let us travel by plane since we already had ‘the permanent’”.

Lex reflected on this process as challenging, creating a photo-story representing his ability to overcome the challenges he faced in Tapachula and Saltillo (Photo-story 4). He photographed a photo that he took on his phone of a lake in Saltillo, describing it as both beautiful and deeply symbolic. He explained that the photo reflects his initial excitement upon arriving in Saltillo after facing confinement in Tapachula, but it also represents the struggles that ultimately drove a subsequent process of migration reflecting that stages of mobility and immobility are not linear and fluctuate. Lex’s and his partner’s experiences reveal the intersection between structures of containment, corruption and institutionalised racism and gender-based discrimination permeating migratory agency.

Photo-story 4 by Lex.



*My achievement was to overcome the reality
I was going through at that difficult stage of
my life.*

*Lex, Salvadorian refugee gay man, 23 years
old.*

*Source: Created during a photovoice workshop held in Tijuana, June 2023. Photo prompt: ‘My past achievements’
(User rights granted to author).*

Not all migrants opt to leave the cities where they are relocated to, and some willingly apply for asylum intending to remain in Mexico. Sofia, a 47-year-old Cuban woman with refugee status who migrated to Mexico with her partner, and Karpalago, a 45-year-old Honduran woman with refugee status who migrated alone, both relocated from Tapachula to central Mexico through the PIL. While they shared similar challenges to other migrants who eventually left – namely, limited housing and employment opportunities, low-paid jobs, high rental costs and discrimination – they chose to stay. Notably, from the onset of their journeys neither of them aspired to the “(US) American dream”.

Sofia had planned her relocation from Tapachula for months, stating, “Next year, once my son gets his card, we’ll move to another state”. Six months after our initial conversation, both women had left the jobs they initially secured through the PIL. Sofia found a position where she was able to use her medical expertise, though she had to retrain as a nurse since her Cuban diploma was not recognised by her employers. Although dissatisfied with her housing conditions, particularly the lack of access to a kitchen, she remained optimistic about the possibility of a promotion that would enable her family to move to a more suitable area. Karpalago, too, expressed dissatisfaction with her housing conditions but was excited about starting her own small catering business, which she combined with a salaried job.

Sofia’s and Karpalago’s experiences demonstrate that, despite the flaws, lack of capacity, and long waiting times, the Mexican asylum system generally works for what it is intended: grant international protection to those considered worthy of it, based on national and international standards. Mexico can provide relative safety and is viewed by some migrants as a viable place to seek asylum and settle. A major problem, however, stems from the use of an overwhelmed asylum system as the primary means for migrants to obtain documentation for safe mobility. This can lead to the system failing both migrants seeking asylum who intend to stay in Mexico and other migrants who are simply looking for safe passage (*Movilidad de refugio y migración en México*, 2023). The use of asylum as the primary documentation pathway, converts the system in an immobility device, containing migrants in the South and away from the North. Programmes like the PIL, funded by the US, enable the distribution of contained migrants throughout the territory. Even if the Mexican asylum system may offer protection to some, its instrumentalisation serves as a migration management tool, limiting migratory agency (Feldmann et al., 2022).

Although infrastructural containment critically limits migrants’ agency, confining them to the South, migrants actively develop and utilise various resources to negotiate and assert their agency, at times, subverting these structures. As they navigate containment infrastructures, migrants form solidarity networks among themselves and with organisations, creating spaces of collective action and mutual support. In doing so, they not only negotiate and assert individual agency but also collective agency that can shape the very structures that aim to confine them.

5.4 Collective strategies: navigating and reconfiguring migration structures together

In this section, I examine how migrants actively negotiate individual and collective agency, asserting power-with, and often shaping the very structures that aim to control them. In the first part, I analyse how certain organisations support migrants’ needs, enabling spaces for connection while also supporting their own organisational goals, illustrating mutual interests and power dynamics in migrant-organisation relationships. Additionally, I investigate how migrants develop gendered solidarity networks that function as resources to cover caregiving and housing needs. Furthermore, I analyse the role of the arts, collectives of artists, activists and migrant rights advocates, as platforms for migrants to voice their concerns, negotiate agency, advance their goals, and engage the public and policymakers in nuanced discussions about migration.

In the second part, I focus on the collective dimension of migrants' agential negotiations including intentionally coordinated actions, and collective actions without central planning which subtly but significantly shape migration structures (Scott, 1990; Sewell, 1992; Mezzadra, 2011; Landau, 2025). I introduce the case of the 'migrant caravans' and the 'Migrant Parliament' in Tijuana' as forms of coordinated collective agency that have led to changes in migration policy and practice. As less evident forms of collective agency, I introduce migrants' strategic utilisation of organisational programmes, and the CBP One app, to attain their goals. These examples enable an examination of how migrants' agency can influence migration structures. However, it is important to note that the impact of migrants' agency on these structures is not proportionate and is often countered by increased oppression and reinforced logics of containment.

5.4.1 *Solidarity networks*

Humanitarian spaces including shelters and organisations shape migrants' agential negotiations in constraining but also expansive ways. While they may limit agency, these spaces can enable opportunities for connection among migrants, providing resources that enable them to assert power-with and strengthen their agential negotiations. In doing so, organisations also advance their own goals. The experience of Irna, a 42-year-old Haitian migrant, and her engagement with organisations in Brazil and Mexico, illustrates these dynamics.

Irna migrated from Haiti to Venezuela, and from there to Brazil, where she engaged with a left-oriented political organisation that provided housing for her and her son in exchange for participation in meetings and activities in Brazil. This engagement fostered solidarity networks, particularly with other migrant women with children and Black Africans, reflecting gendered and racialised dynamics. As she stated, "they welcomed me with open arms", underscoring the supportive nature of these relationships. For Irna, her engagement with the organisation meant a means to expand her resources to negotiate agency, supporting herself and her child. This arrangement was also convenient for the organisation, which was able to recruit Irna, and others in vulnerable situations, supporting their immediate needs in exchange for their political engagement, illustrating mutual interests and power dynamics in migrant-organisation relationships.

Irna remained undocumented in Brazil and with former President Bolsonaro's administration (2019-2023), opportunities for accessing legal migratory documentation became increasingly restrictive. Such complications combined with life-threatening violence from her ex-partner, drove her to leave Brazil for the US. After crossing South and Central America, she experienced a three-year period of confinement in Southern Mexico. During that suspension period, she participated in a gender-based violence and migrants' rights awareness-raising programme. The programme was offered by an organisation that linked their activities with a government's work initiative, incentivising participation through payments. Irna described the experience as transformative. It fostered a sense of empowerment, helping her feel like "a real woman", free from fear and equipped with knowledge to defend herself in case of facing domestic violence again. She emphasised how significant it was for her to develop critical consciousness about gender-based violence and migrants' rights in a supportive group setting alongside other Haitian women with whom she forged valuable networks.

Organisational support is crucial for many migrants, helping them negotiate agency as they navigate challenging circumstances. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that this support is not uninterested, since humanitarian organisations also benefit from migrants, preserving the humanitarian-development business through ‘relief’ programmes and the deployment of internal and international migrant workers – ‘expats’ – to poor workstations. As a local community member notes, “many organisations have come to Tapachula”, increasing rental prices and adding to the ongoing gentrification process in Mexico.

However, organisations and shelters can serve as agency resources that foster migrants’ connections, working as platforms where migrants meet and create support networks. These networks enable migrants to collectively address their needs and more efficiently navigate challenges. Care networks were particularly valuable among women with child dependents. My observations in numerous shelters revealed that migrant women self-organised and developed arrangements to care for each other’s children. For example, women with dependents who secured casual labour relied on their networks at the shelter for childcare support. This support was often reciprocated through the provision of food or caregiving support. Similar arrangements would be organised when women had to handle lengthy migratory administrative procedures, which often required waiting in line overnight.

Migrants’ solidarity networks are also essential for securing housing, particularly when shelters impose limitations on the duration of stays. Migrant women often coordinated to share rent costs and meet caregiving needs. Similarly, gender-diverse migrants came together to share housing, typically forming communities with other gender-diverse people. Notably, both women and gender-diverse migrants highlighted the fact that they formed networks with individuals with whom they identified. As a Honduran woman noted, “we got together as women”, while a Salvadoran trans man said, “we reached out to a gay couple to ask them for a room”. These gregarious strategies are key for migrants to develop resources that can help them negotiate and assert their agency.

L de A, a 34-year-old Salvadoran refugee, articulated the profound impact of these solidarity networks through a photo-story, emphasising their role as a crucial resource in navigating complex migration structures (Photo-story 5). She spent about three years in Tapachula and moved in with a group of women that she met through a migrant work program. This group became “the most valuable gift I have found along my path”. Living together helped her to more efficiently navigate the migration structure by reducing living costs and providing a safe environment for her daughters while sharing caregiving responsibilities. Furthermore, this communal living fostered the development of new life skills, cultivated a strong sense of belonging, and expanded her resources to cope with challenges. The formation of such solidarity networks serves as a resource that can enhance individuals’ ability to negotiate agency. As a migration expert and IOM practitioner in Tapachula noted, “being part of a community and recognise oneself in a community, empowers you. It gives you a higher capacity to make decisions and take action”. Additionally, these networks enable migrants to expand their social strategies for coping with stressors encountered during migratory processes, a topic that I explore further in Chapter 6 (Zbidat et al., 2020; Berenzon-Gorn et al., 2024).

Nevertheless, the accessibility of migrant networks, bonding, and the formation of communities is complex and not universally guaranteed. Multiple factors, such as the availability of assistance and organisational programmes, as well as access to the internet and social media, can all play a role.

Photo-story 5: “Mis amigas” by L de A.



My (female) friends

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

L de A. Salvadoran woman with refugee status, 34 years old.

Source: Created through a photovoice workshop held in Tapachula, November 2022. Photo prompt: ‘My past achievements’ (User rights granted to author).

Collectives of artists, activists and migrant rights advocates are also key structures that foster solidarity networks, enabling platforms for migrants to articulate their concerns and advance their goals. M L., a 34-year-old Guatemalan migrant woman, joined a collective of migrant artists and activists that performed social theatre in the streets of Tijuana. “We used to do theatre here at the San Ysidro entrance [US-Mexico border]. I’ve participated in street theatre and appeared on the TV news reports on Univisión, Telemundo, TV Azteca, and on the Congressional channel where I had an interview”. M L. fled gender-based violence in Guatemala, leaving her two children behind, and was one of the many victims of child theft in Guatemala (Nolan, 2024). Her baby, a product of rape, was taken from her shortly after childbirth in a hospital, and she never saw him again. M L. voiced her pain and concerns through the street theatre group, she explained, “I enjoyed it and participated several times to express what one feels as a migrant”. Her participation in this street theatre initiative was helpful not only for her to express her feelings but was also instrumental “because through them, I was able to get help to bring my children over”. M L.’s experience highlights the power of art and activism as instruments for migrant women to voice their often silenced experiences, navigate and resist marginalisation, and advocate for their rights (Marchevska et al., 2023; López-Montero et al., 2025). This aligns with academic understandings highlighting the role of the arts, enabling marginalised groups to claim their space and voice within society, expanding their ability to negotiate agency (Smith et al., 2021). Street theatre, in particular, provides a public platform for migrants to express their feelings, talk about their experiences and challenge dominant narratives (Recio-Saucedo, 2020).

M L.’s engagement in these performances exemplifies how artistic activism can help expand migrants’ agential capabilities and translate into tangible support. Her participation in the street theatre and TV appearances proved instrumental in securing crucial support from Alejandro

Solalinde, a prominent Catholic priest and migrants' rights defender, facilitating her reunification with her children in Mexico. M L.'s artistic engagements were crucial in expanding her ability to negotiate agency, enabling her to navigate the humanitarian infrastructure effectively to achieve her goal of family reunification. In line with previous research on arts and migration, M L.'s experience exemplifies the importance of artistic and advocacy groups within Mexico's migration infrastructure, demonstrating their capacity to provide essential resources and support to migrants navigating complex and often hostile environments (Márquez, 2021).

Visual arts also emerged as critical platforms for migrants to express and resist oppressive structures, raise awareness of their lived experiences, and foster empathy and solidarity within broader communities. In Tapachula and Tijuana, collaborators mentioned murals created by migrants in collaboration with local artists, visualising their journeys, struggles, strength, and resilience (Figure 27; Figure 28). Artistic interventions have been increasingly recognised as tools that engage the public and policymakers in nuanced discussions about migration, highlighting the agency and resilience of migrants rather than portraying them as mere victims (Gaonkar et al., 2021; Massari et al., 2024). Moreover, arts-based initiatives open spaces for reflection and self-representation, helping migrants to process trauma, and build a sense of community (Mateos-Fernández et al., 2022; de Smet et al., 2024). While these artistic initiatives cannot directly resolve the systemic challenges migrants face, they contribute to advocacy efforts for policy change, fostering environments where migrants feel represented and valued, and supporting their psychological coping strategies. As such, arts-based initiatives may be seen as resources to support processes of expansion of migrants' agency, aligning with research on cultural production as a form of empowerment and social transformation (Ascenso, 2021; Cesário et al., 2025).

Figure 27: Mural in Tapachula, claiming for the end of violence against migrant women.



Slogan: "Sister, trust yourself; you don't be afraid of starting again" in Spanish and Haitian creole.

Figure 28: Mural section at *Espacio Migrante*, representing migrants' intercultural networks and diversity in Tijuana.



5.4.2 Migrant collective agency influencing structural reconfigurations

This part focuses on the collective dimension of migrants' agential negotiations including both intentionally coordinated actions, as well as collective action without central planning, all aimed at achieving shared goals (Scott, 1990; Sewell, 1992; Mezzadra, 2011; Landau, 2025). I firstly introduce the 'migrant caravans' and the 'Migrant Parliament' in Tijuana to explore how migrants coordinate among themselves and collaborate with organisations to advance collective goals, influencing oppressive structures. I further investigate a less evident form of collective agency that, though not coordinated in a formal sense, enacts shared tactics that reconfigure how migration infrastructures operate. This includes migrants' utilisation of organisational programmes to advance their objectives, as well as their strategic use of the CBP One app and its consequences on the functioning of this digital migration infrastructure.

Migrants' critical consciousness and recognition of the shared aspects of subordination that signal its "collectively enforced and thus, its collectively changeable character..." (Kabeer, 1994, p. 253) has fostered coalitions between migrants as collectives, and organisations. As Olayo (2025) notes, these coalitions can expand migrants' ability to negotiate agency and transform social relations. The so-called migrant caravans – particularly the ones from 2018-2019, along with subsequent ones – have been seen as examples of collective agency and migrant empowerment (Morales et al., 2023). These large groups of migrants, travelling predominantly on foot across borders and territories in search of greater safety and mobility, have influenced policy responses on both sides of the Mexico-US border (Ortega et al., 2021). They exemplify migrants' self-organisation and creation of networks and have been recognised as a collective strategy to assert migrants' rights, and a way to raise public awareness concerning their circumstances. Organisations and local communities have offered substantial support to these caravans. Practitioners, experts, and government officials frequently mentioned them in our conversations, acknowledging the power of these mobilisations and the role of organisations

in migrant-led processes. According to an expert in Tapachula – a point of origin and transit of numerous caravans – “organisations joined the caravans, but these movements were originally born from assembly processes initiated by people on the move. They organised themselves by nationality and began the large caravan [referring to the 2018-2019 caravan]”.

Organisations’ engagement in these migrant-led initiatives produce opportunity structures that strengthen migrants’ capabilities to negotiate agency, while also enhancing organisations’ goals and their policy advocacy efforts. In 2021, dozens of organisations called on the governments of the region to support migrant caravans, ensuring the respect for their human rights and offering the opportunity to apply for refugee status to those fleeing violence or socioenvironmental disasters (Al otro lado et al., 2021). The Mexican and US governments’ initial responses to the 2018-2019 caravans focused on containing migrants in Mexico and returning them to their home countries. The *Quédate en México* (Remain in Mexico) and ‘*Estás en tu casa*’ (You are at home) programmes were swiftly implemented to contain migrants, strengthening externalisation practices.³¹ During this period, migrant expulsions from Mexico also increased (González, 2020). These events underscore the potential of organised migrant movements in shaping migration structures and mechanisms of control.

Caravans persist as a mobility strategy, often starting in Tapachula or further south in Central America and are frequently dissolved by migration officers or by migrants themselves usually before they reach Chiapas’ border. Contemporary caravans are led by migrants and occasionally supported by organisations. However, experiences within these caravans are not uniform, and while they challenge state control and have the potential to reshape migration structures, they are also influenced by the very structures they aim to transform (Franz, 2020). A Haitian woman seeking asylum shared her experience in participating in a caravan with a group of Venezuelans and fellow Haitians. “We walked for about four hours, but the Venezuelans eventually didn’t want to walk any more”, she said. The group of Venezuelans hired transportation to be dropped off at a place where they could catch a bus. However, when the Haitians tried to board, the driver “refused to take black people” illustrating the intersection of class and race in migrants’ processes of self-organising and negotiation of collective agency.

The ‘Migrant Parliament’ in Tijuana is another significant example of a migrant-led initiative supported by the organisation *Espacio Migrante*. This project emerged from a participatory process designed to help migrants strengthen their leadership skills, raise their concerns, propose policy solutions, and advocate for their rights. Among its achievements, the parliament has produced law initiatives including on the definition of discrimination in the discrimination and racism law, protections against obstetric violence targeting migrant women, and migrant-inclusive amendments to the federal labour law. *Espacio Migrante* infuses arts-based activities into the parliament’s

³¹ The ‘*Quédate en México*’ (‘Remain in Mexico’) program refers to the US Migrant Protection Protocols that allowed applications for asylum at the southern US border to be processed while sending people back to Mexico to wait for their hearings in the US. It was terminated in October 2022. ‘*Estás en tu casa*’ (‘You are at home’) refers to an employment programme rolled-out by the Mexican government in October 2018 in the southern states of Oaxaca and Chiapas.

operations, including in brainstorming meetings, capacity building workshops, and advocacy efforts. A Salvadoran member of the parliament described his involvement as a means to “empower myself and the community... it is about summing up more people. It is a form of resistance too” (see [here](#) for a video about the Parliament that I created during my fieldwork in Tijuana).

The influence of organisations or other established groups over migrants’ collective agency is not always positive, neither one-sided nor purely ‘top-down’. Migrants critically assess organisational programmes and select those that meet their specific needs and objectives. Organisations often adopt a targeted approach to identify and prioritise support for the ‘most vulnerable’ beneficiaries, often including women, children, and gender-diverse individuals. Shelters, for instance, usually prioritise single women and children, while men are generally admitted only if they are part of a family group. Similarly, organisations providing cash-based assistance sometimes focus on specific groups, such as LGBT+ individuals. In environments marked by scarcity, migrants may strategically misrepresent their sexual orientation or gender identity to meet these inclusion criteria and access vital support. As a result, some organisations implement ‘gender identity checks’ to ensure that resources are allocated to those deemed most vulnerable according to their inclusion criteria. As noted by Cintra et al. (2023) in the South American context, these practices risk reinforcing essentialist categories and policing gendered identities, thereby raising ethical questions on the role of humanitarian organisations and the potential discrimination against those who do not fit into pre-defined categories.

Migrants have also strategically utilised internal relocation programmes to enhance their agency and depart Mexico’s impoverished southern regions to areas closer to the US. Some use UNHCR’s local integration program (PIL, discussed in the previous section) to facilitate their journey north via one of the safest modes of transport: UN buses. As Lex recounted, his relocation experience on the UNHCR bus ensured that “they [the police] did not rob us, nor did they do anything to us because we were going legally”. Eny, a Salvadoran refugee trans woman, shared a similar experience, noting that migration officers typically only inspected “documents, humanitarian visa cards, permanent residency permits, or proof of resolution” of individuals on UNHCR buses before allowing them to proceed. However, she noted that buses not affiliated with the UNHCR were often subject to requests for money in exchange for mobility.

The strategic navigation of humanitarian aid and support systems, exemplified by the utilisation of organisational programmes and the aforementioned PIL, may be seen as an indirect form of collective agency. It aligns with Scott’s characterisation of “weapons of the weak”, where subordinate groups employ subtle, often uncoordinated, acts of defiance to achieve shared objectives. Despite not being formally coordinated, the concurrent implementation of these agential strategies reflect collective, yet indirect, acts of defiance geared towards shared goals. This demonstrates migrants’ collective exercise of agency by strategically employing available resources and support systems to achieve their objectives, thereby influencing the operation of migration infrastructures. From a structurationist view, these actions, though apparently individual, contribute to a broader pattern of resistance that can subtly reshape power relations within migration structures.

Migrants' utilisation of the CBP One app represents another form of uncoordinated collective agency, that influenced the operational dynamics of the migration infrastructure on both sides of the border. Before reaching the Mexico-US border, many migrants were already familiar with the CBP One app, one of the US' digital tools of border externalisation. To avoid confinement in unknown Mexican cities, some migrants used geolocation simulators and managed to secure CBP One appointments in areas where the app would not typically function, a strategy corroborated by my collaborators and facilitated by readily available online instructions and video tutorials. This approach was concurrently adopted by numerous migrants with the shared objective of obtaining appointments. In response to this strategy, detected by US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) in April-May 2024, CBP implemented a stricter geolocation verification mechanism to ensure applicants were in central or northern Mexico at the time of appointment requests.

Modifications to the CBP app functions were also prompted by migrants' group strategies for applying for appointments, as well as the multiplication of accounts. Many migrants coordinated among themselves to apply as groups. Some of these groups were formed within humanitarian spaces, while others were created by migrants travelling together. A parallel strategy involved migrants already in Mexico submitting applications on behalf of family members, particularly dependents, who remained behind, updating them on the status so they could travel to Mexico closer to the appointment date. Additionally, some migrants created multiple accounts and submitted numerous applications for the same individuals using different accounts and devices. My collaborators reported that some migrants improved their odds of crossing into the US by using group applications and multiple accounts on different devices. While CBP denied that group applications or multiple accounts offered any advantage, they nonetheless restricted group applications and introduced additional checks to track duplicated accounts, deleting them when detected. This illustrates how migrants' strategies and utilisation of systems can lead to adjustments to migration infrastructures, reflecting a dynamic, though not balanced, interplay between migrants' agency and structures.

Finally, migrants' app usage and territorial mobility were likely to have prompted alterations to CBP One's appointment scheduling function. Initially restricted to central and northern Mexico, the scheduling function was extended to the states of Tabasco and Chiapas along Mexico's southern border from August 23, 2024, until its cancellation in January 2025. However, this function remained unavailable in the region between Tabasco, Chiapas and central Mexico (Figure 29). This narrowed the existing bottleneck in southern Mexico and created a digital border region between CBP One functioning areas. This change seemed to respond to what I observed in my fieldwork, which indicated that migrants moving to central and northern Mexico to schedule CBP One appointment were approaching the US border too closely. To deter this, CBP enabled the appointment scheduling function from southern Mexico, potentially mitigating the risks associated with northward journeys while keeping migrants further away from the US border. In conjunction with the asylum strategy as the sole form of documentation in Mexico, this modification to CBP One prolonged migrants' wait in the south and further strained organisations' capacity limiting migrants' agency. These adaptations to the CBP One app, prompted by migrants' behaviours, demonstrate how uncoordinated, collective

agency can influence the evolution of migration control technologies, stimulating continuous adaptations to respond and diminish emergent strategies.

Figure 29: Areas of Mexico where the CBP One scheduling feature is functional.



Source: US CBP One website (U.S. CBP, 2024b).

These examples demonstrate the bidirectional ways in which power, oppression and resistance are enacted by migrants and actors encompassing the migration structure. In the case of the caravans and the migrant parliament, collective agency was enacted in a coordinated and collaborative way, bringing about policy changes. While the caravans were met with further restrictions to mobility, the parliament brought about positive policy outcomes that enhanced migrants' rights and their ability to negotiate and assert agency. The instances of uncoordinated and yet collective forms of agency, including the strategic use of organisational programmes such as the PIL, and the utilisation of the CBP One, revealed that migrants' agential navigation of containment structures can alter these very structures. However, in most of the cases, the structural response to migrants' strategic negotiations, involved a more stringent migration framework and intensified efforts to contain mobility. This demonstrates that even if migrants' collective agency can influence migration structures, migrants' agency impacts are not proportionate and might be countered by increased oppression.

5.5 Chapter conclusion

This chapter addressed core aspects of my research questions, exploring how survival migrants negotiate their migratory agency within the constraints of power structures in origin and transit-destinations. By examining the diverse agential strategies employed by survival migrants, this analysis reveals that their actions are not merely reactive to structural oppression, but subtly and proactively shape the very structures intended to contain their mobility.

The chapter initially explored how structures of precarity and violence in countries of origin influenced migrants' agency, driving processes of internal, circular, and onward migration. Employing a temporal lens that considered migrants' life stages in their decision-making, the analysis revealed that patterns of internal mobility often occurred multiple times before becoming international migration. Internal relocations often occurred early in life, mainly due to intersecting experiences of generalised violence, poverty, domestic and gender-based violence. Processes of

internal mobility intertwined with circular migration patterns, as in the case of Cuban ‘mules’ who repeatedly travel to Central America to buy goods for resale in Cuba. Processes of circular migration evolved into onward migration, often aiming to the US, which was often perceived as the only viable option.

Mexico, emerged as a space of transit, and immobility, where migrants navigate its complex containment infrastructure. In traversing this infrastructure, migrants accessed and developed information resources to assert their migratory agency, ultimately applying for asylum as a mobility and gendered well-being strategy that reduce the risk of sexual abuse. The instrumentalisation of the legal figure of asylum was analysed as a mechanism that, by relying on an overwhelmed asylum system, aids externalisation through containment practices. Therefore, confining migrants in the South, and extending US border control beyond its territory. Migrants’ wait for documentation is supported and sustained by “waiting infrastructures”, comprised by shelters, organisations and programmes. These structures ambivalently address humanitarian needs, acting as resources that enable migrant agency, while also regulating and undermining it by fostering dependency, and influencing mobility.

Despite the constraints imposed by infrastructural containment, migrants actively develop and utilise various resources to negotiate and assert their agency, at times, subverting these structures. In navigating containment, migrants forge solidarity networks among themselves and with organisations, fostering spaces for collective action and mutual support. Organisational initiatives that support migrants while advancing institutional objectives were also explored, illustrating the mutual interests and power dynamics inherent in migrant-organisation relationships. Additionally, migrants’ gendered solidarity networks were explored as resources that facilitate agential negotiations while covering caregiving and housing needs. Furthermore, the role of the arts, collectives of artists, activists and migrant rights advocates was explored as platforms for migrants to voice their concerns, advance their goals, and engage the public and policymakers in nuanced discussions about migration.

Finally, the collective dimension of migrants’ agential negotiations was examined, including both intentionally coordinated actions and collective actions without central planning, which subtly but significantly shape migration structures (Scott, 1990; Sewell, 1992; Mezzadra, 2011; Landau, 2025). Cases such as the ‘migrant caravans,’ the ‘Migrant Parliament’, the strategic use of organisational programmes to advance migrants’ goals, and the use of the CBP One app were presented to illustrate how migrants’ agency can influence migration structures. However, it is important to acknowledge that the impact of migrants’ agency on these structures is not proportionate and may be countered by increased oppression and reinforced containment frameworks.

This chapter is instrumental in developing an intersectional understanding of the multifaceted factors that shape migrants’ agency, while considering how decision-making shifts across national contexts. Employing a temporally embedded lens, it situates agential negotiations within the broader context of migrants’ lives, elucidating how sociopolitical structures, precarity and gender intersect driving mobility for survival. This chapter lays key building blocks to address my research questions, specifically in relation to how sociopolitical structures shape agential capabilities. The analysis

demonstrates that these structures shape agency in gendered ways, while also being subtly reconfigured by migrants' agency. Moreover, this chapter offers a critical understanding of the influence of sociopolitical structures on migrants' agency, contextualising the subsequent part, which explores the role of psychosocial processes on migrants' evolving agency.

6 A psychosocial lens to understanding gendered agency change in migration

6.1 Introduction

I am no longer the weak woman who used to cry and cry. Now I feel strong. Essie, Haitian woman with refugee status, 34 years old. Tijuana, June 2023.

Essie's narrative resonates with a common theme among my collaborators: psychological growth and a sense of increased power within, after past adversities, which influenced their ability to negotiate agency. This growth involved a positive cognitive re-framing of adverse past events, enhanced self-perceptions, increased personal strength, and empathy. Psychological growth was often coupled with migrants' firm determination to keep on going and a strong self-belief in their capability to achieve goals, reflecting high self-efficacy perceptions. However, this positive outlook was fragmented by ongoing challenges, structural oppression, past trauma, and emotional distress signalling a co-existence of positive and negative psychosocial factors. Both aspects are key to understanding survival migrants' strategies to negotiate and assert agency within complex and often oppressive structures. This chapter explores core aspects of my research questions, by exploring how women and gender-diverse survival migrants' psychosocial experiences shape their ability to negotiate and expand their agency.

Psychosocial experiences profoundly shape migrants' agency, which entails the context-specific and temporally embedded ability to make valuable choices and act upon them, including the option not to act (Emirbayer et al., 1998; Alkire, 2008; Drèze et al., 2013; Cense, 2019; Segundo-Ortin, 2020). Psychosocial experiences encompass a dynamic interplay between individuals' psychological processes (thoughts, feelings, and behaviours) and their interactions with their social environments (APA, 2025). As explored in Chapter 5, migrants' agential negotiations are influenced by social structures of power, migration governance, humanitarian systems and gendered structures of disadvantage. This chapter expands the learnings from the previous chapter by focusing on the intricate interplay between adverse and adaptive psychosocial factors, and their influence on women and gender-diverse migrants' agency. In doing so, it employs a temporal lens guided by a transnational life-course approach, that enables an examination of agential negotiations as processes that fluctuate across migrants' life-stages, being influenced by past and current psychosocial dynamics, along with present material constraints.

A temporal lens is key to understanding the link between agential negotiations in migration and psychosocial factors. This lens allows for seeing migration processes as "layered journeys" where past experiences, present realities, and future aspirations are intertwined and situated within migrants' life-courses (Lønning, 2020; Erlinghagen, 2021). These layers of experiences affect how migrants agentially navigate their present realities and adapt to new environments (Daniel et al., 2020). Importantly, past and ongoing exposure to adverse and traumatic events, common among survival

migrants, can lead to trauma accumulation or complex trauma, fundamentally shaping migrants' agency.

Polyvictimisation or trauma occurring in a repeated and layered way across migrants' lives, can overwhelm individuals' "capacity to control, cope with, or withstand [...]. [Causing] fundamental and life-altering psychophysiological harm" (Ford et al., 2020, p. 4). These repeated experiences can evoke powerful stress reactions that override or shut down conscious or self-reflective stress responses. Reexperiencing traumatic events, nightmares, hypervigilance and hypoarousal are often observed in response to complex trauma. Furthermore, dissociation or a splitting of the self from the stressor can become automatic reactions that initially occur as a coping response to an ongoing threat but that can generalise to other situations triggering the same response, even when the situation is neutral rather than dangerous (Terr, 1990). This can affect executive functions like planning, goal setting and decision-making, which are key to negotiate agency.

Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), involving traumatic events occurring before the age of 18, include various types of abuse, child marriage, neglect, violence between caregivers, other kinds of household dysfunction such as alcohol and substance abuse; and peer, community and collective violence, can severely affect migrants' mental well-being and their ability to make choices and act upon them (Solberg et al., 2020). Research indicates that ACEs not only affect a child's development but also have lasting effects into adulthood, manifesting as mental well-being issues, difficulties in forming healthy relationships and trusting others, undermined sense of self-worth and self-confidence, and increased vulnerability to gender-based violence (Umer et al., 2019; Kidman et al., 2020; de Silva et al., 2021; Andrade et al., 2023). Furthermore, when combined with stressful and potentially traumatic events in adulthood, both in countries of origin and during migration, these experiences can generate or exacerbate anxiety, stress, and other mental health challenges. Research has consistently shown a higher prevalence of mental conditions among refugees and other migrants (Patanè et al., 2022). This prevalence varies depending on social, cultural, and economic factors, as well as on experiences of adversity, coping mechanisms, and available social support systems, with women and gender-diverse migrants exhibiting heightened post-traumatic distress related to gender-based abuse (Silove et al., 2017; Garcini et al., 2022). Critically, these cumulative adverse experiences can significantly affect migrants' ability to act autonomously and make decisions that protect their well-being.

Conversely, positive psychosocial factors also play a crucial role, often counterbalancing the effect of adverse experiences and supporting migrants' agency. These psychodynamic factors are temporally situated and influenced by past experiences and present realities, shaping future aspirations. High self-efficacy perceptions, positive self-concept, an internal locus of control, social support, sense of belonging and spirituality are all protective factors associated with increased motivation, personal initiative, proactivity towards desired outcomes, and greater well-being. These can buffer against mental challenges (Karademas et al., 2004; Luszczynska et al., 2005; Crane et al., 2019; Kaiser et al., 2021). Research has shown that despite the profound impact of past trauma and ongoing adverse events, migrants use their existing psychological resources and develop adaptive

coping strategies that foster resilience and psychological growth (Bagnoli, 2009; Umer et al., 2019). Such growth can result in improvements in self-perceptions, relationships with others, and a greater sense of personal strength, supporting processes of agency expansion or empowerment (Abraham, 2021; Taylor et al., 2024).

Complex processes of psychological distress, growth and empowerment in migration can be understood through the *Coyolxauhqui* conceptual lens. Rooted in Nahua philosophy, *Coyolxauhqui* refers to a continuous process of making and unmaking of “our psyches and patrias (homelands)” in new constructions (Anzaldúa, 2015, p. 19). It represents an evolving processes of *conocimiento* (awareness/knowning), from *desconocimiento* (un-knowing), trauma and fragmentation, through an in-between state of *nepantla*, towards the reconstruction and reframing of the self, ultimately arriving at *conocimiento* (awareness), or empowerment, and the emergence of new insights and understandings of oneself and the world (Anzaldúa, 2015). This concept is highly relevant to the ongoing experiences of women and gender-diverse migrants, as it acknowledges not only the trauma or fragmentation they endure, but also their agency and power to psychologically grow and reconstruct themselves. This notion is, therefore, instrumental in generating a non-medicalised understanding of migrants’ experiences of distress, trauma, and psychological growth as *conocimiento* or empowerment.

While research on the psychodynamics of survival migrants’ agency has widened scholarly understandings, gaps remain. A significant research gap exists in exploring the interplay between positive and negative psychosocial aspects and their impact on migrants’ agency. There is an overall focus on distress and psychopathology (Hodes et al., 2018; Silove et al., 2017; Silva et al., 2021), with fewer studies examining how these negative outcomes interact with protective aspects like generalised self-efficacy, and potential positive adaptations like resilience and psychological growth (Khawaja et al., 2017; Umer & Elliot, 2019). Moreover, an intersectional and temporally situated lens has been scarcely used to understand how factors like gender, race, class, and sexuality, interact with psychosocial factors influenced by past experiences and present realities, shaping migrants’ agency. Added to that, even if most refugees and survival migrants reside in Global South nations, most studies have focused on Global North realities (Solberg et al., 2020; Patanè et al., 2022). Furthermore, methodological research gaps prevail as most studies exploring psychosocial aspects of migrants’ experiences tend to rely solely on interviews and surveys, overlooking the potential of arts-based and participatory methodologies as trauma-informed approaches that enable expression beyond verbal language (McMahon et al., 2024).

In response to these gaps and calls for further investigation, in this chapter I examine how past and current psychosocial experiences influence survival migrants’ agential negotiations and their ability to expand their agency. Drawing on rich mixed-methods data, I delve into migrants’ artistic and narrative stories to illuminate these processes (see list of collaborators for each chapter in Appendix I). Firstly, the analysis concentrates on how pre-migration psychosocial experiences and material constraints during childhood and in countries of origin, influenced survival migrants’ agency and their migration aspirations. The second part explores how survival migrants experienced distress and

psychological dis/empowerment as they navigated the complexities of mobility and containment in Mexico. A novel contribution of this chapter is the introduction of psychological growth as a form of empowerment. This growth manifests as enhancements in migrants' personal strength, sense of control, self-efficacy, and empathy, translating into expanded forms of negotiating and asserting agency. This demonstrates that migrants' narratives are not only about oppression but also about transformation and empowerment. This chapter contributes to the psychology of migration research, offering novel perspectives that enable a more dynamic and comprehensive understanding of migrants' agency and dis/empowerment moving beyond deficit-centred and conventional paradigms.

6.2 Past adversities and the psycho-emotional drivers of survival mobility

This section aims to generate a temporally grounded understanding of migrants' agency as negotiations that are influenced by past experiences and prevailing material constraints. It explores continuums of adversity, fragmentation and emotional distress experienced from childhood to adulthood in places of origin, positioning these as key drivers of migratory agency. This underscores the relevance of psychological processes and material constraints in shaping migrants' agency.

Childhood adversities are analysed as triggers of migrants' initial experiences of mobility for survival. Emotional experiences are further analysed as potent agency drivers and determinant in migrants' decisions to migrate internationally. Fear, frustration, anger and hope emerge as intersecting affective experiences, infusing migration aspirations, which, when combined with minimum capabilities, enabled migrants to flee for survival. This section is essential to understand the next part of the chapter, which analyses the psychosocial aspects influencing how migrants negotiate agency as they navigate Mexico's migration infrastructure.

6.2.1 From childhood to adulthood: cycles of adversity and displacement

Prolonged experiences of adversity in childhood were common among survival migrants, often mirroring challenges encountered in adulthood and influencing their migration decisions. Many of my collaborators endured a range of interrelated and co-occurring adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), which some linked to their current life struggles. These ACEs included neglect, parental death or lack of a caregiver figure, alcohol or drug abuser in the household, domestic violence (including observing violence against women in the household), physical and sexual abuse, discrimination due to sexual orientation, gender identity and expression (SOGIE), as well as exposure to community and generalised violence.

Domestic violence was particularly pervasive and, for some, marked their first experience of survival mobility. For instance, ML, a 34-year-old Guatemalan woman with refugee status, recounted that her father struggled with alcoholism, which contributed to the dysfunctional dynamics in her household and ultimately led to her parents' separation when she was 10 years old. Following this, she experienced bullying and rejection by her half-brothers which eventually led her to move in with one of her aunts and her family at the age of 13. Unable to return to her family household due to the abusive relationship with her brothers, she dropped out of school, entered the informal labour market,

and remained with her aunt. Similarly, El SV, a 29-year-old Salvadoran refugee man, recounted the separation of his parents when he was a child: “my dad used to hit my mom a lot, excessively so. As a result, my mom left, and the four of us [siblings] left with her. I was about 6 years old”.

These accounts underscore household dysfunction, exposure to violence, and disempowerment, while also revealing initial patterns of survival mobility. These early experiences of fragmentation and displacement for survival are part of broader contexts of violence, and lack of protection, leading children and adults to seek safety outside ‘home’ (*casa*). However, just as it happens when migrants leave their origin lands, violence does not end upon leaving *casa* for another *casa/country*. Persistent dynamics of domestic and community violence persevere, generating cycles of displacement. Therefore, the notions of ‘home’ *casa* and *hogar* (which is closer to the English understanding of home) are questionable in this context since migrants endure numerous expulsions from spaces that might have never been considered an *hogar* but rather only a *casa*/house, a physical structure where they endured adversities and expulsions.

Along violence between caregivers that prompted migrants to relocate, physical abuse was the most frequently reported ACE, often co-occurring alongside sexual abuse. Carolina, a 23-year-old woman with refugee status from El Salvador, endured severe physical, psychological and sexual abuse throughout her childhood. She was raised by a non-biological family, as she recounted, “my real mother gave me away when I was four months old”. From the age of 8, she was repeatedly abused by her adoptive father and one of her uncles. Rosio, a 22-year-old woman with refugee status from Honduras who also experienced sexual abuse, recounted, “my mother left me with a young woman who took care of me”. She later reunited with her biological mother, who had left Honduras to seek employment in Mexico. L de A, a 34-year-old Salvadoran woman with refugee status, faced a similar situation when her parents left her with relatives while they worked abroad. These women’s stories illustrate intersecting issues of neglect, widespread child abuse, and parental migration due to poverty and lack of job opportunities. Migrant parents’ inability to take children with them and the lack of resources for childcare, led them to leave children with ‘trusted’ carers, exposing them to abuse. Some of my collaborators replicated this very pattern, leaving their own children behind due to complex reasons, mainly to avoid the dangers associated with survival migration, and their inability to take their children with them and care for them while working abroad.

These distressing accounts and their emotional repercussions are unfortunately not isolated cases. Most of my collaborators faced ACEs mainly within their households (76 percent), and in some instances also in other spaces like schools or on the streets (Figure 30). As collaborators shared their experiences, I observed a concerning trend. Most of those who experienced child maltreatment, especially witnessing violence against their mothers or other women in their households, often engaged in abusive relationships as adults. At least 54 percent of my collaborators reported experiencing intimate-partner violence (IPV), which, in some cases, became the main driver of their survival out-migration later in life (Figure 31). Existing research supports this connection, noting that childhood exposure to violence increases the risk of gender-based violence (GBV) later in life through

mechanisms such as normalisation of abuse, learned behaviour, and intergenerational trauma dynamics (Ford et al., 2020; Kidman et al., 2020; Mitchell et al., 2021).

Figure 30: Adverse childhood experiences

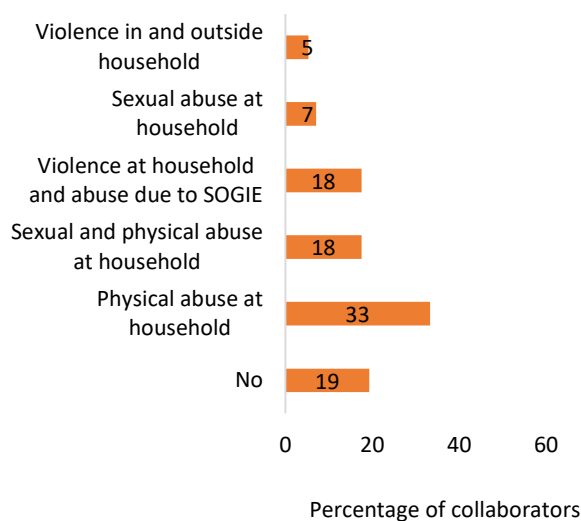
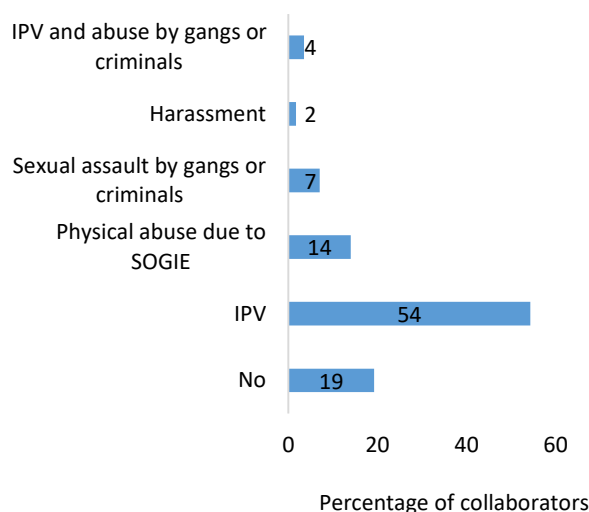


Figure 31: Adverse experiences in adulthood



Source: Author's calculation based on qualitative interviews.

Florecita's story illustrates the complex interplay between domestic violence in childhood, gendered abuse in adulthood and its linkages with survival mobility. Similar to other survival migrants, Florecita, a 45-year-old Salvadoran woman with refugee status, repeatedly witnessed violence against her mother when she was a girl. After trying to intervene, she was forced to leave her family household at the age of 8. She moved in with her brother and began working to support herself. Controlled by her abusive partner, Florecita's mother was unable to support her daughter, demonstrating the deeply rooted misogyny and gender-based violence that persist in many parts of Latin America. Florecita attempted to return to her family household a few years later, but her father refused to let her in. The only seemingly available option was moving in with a young man she had recently met, and who would later become the father of her children and her perpetrator. Simultaneously, Florecita, like many Central Americans, had to navigate the constant threat of gang violence, learning safe routes and adhering to curfew times, made everyday movement perilous. Her experience reveals how misogynistic values, and domestic and community violence intersect, perpetuating conditions of vulnerability and disempowerment, pushing women into dependency situations that expose them to further violence, and displacement, fundamentally constraining their agency.

Similarly, Dojadi, a 23-year-old Salvadoran woman with refugee status transited processes of survival mobility due to cycles of domestic violence. She first left her family household after enduring years of sexual abuse. She moved in with her boyfriend's family when she was pregnant at around the age of 16. 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 and had to return to her family household. Her relationship with her child's father became increasingly violent, generating life-risks, distress and anxiety, eventually leading her to flee from El Salvador.

Florencia's and Dojadi's experiences exemplify complex continuums of emotional distress and survival mobility within broader contexts of poverty, domestic violence, organised crime, and impunity (Koning, 2019). The cumulative impact of these processes brings significant affective consequences, including chronic forms of distress and anxiety, not only at the individual level, but also at the household and community level that can detonate further violence (de Courson et al., 2023). These interconnected scales of violence and precarity at the micro, meso and macro levels, exacerbate the challenges of survival, fostering a sense of disempowerment, and the need to preserve well-being elsewhere (Shultz et al., 2014). When these complex structural and affective factors intersect with the minimum capabilities and resources to migrate, individuals may choose to relocate, often initially to other cities and then, if capabilities allow, to other countries. These forms of mobility are part of a continuum of violence and distress. As such, migration may emerge as a limited agential alternative for survival, rooted in despair but also fuelled by a sense of hope for improved lives, and migrants' self-belief in their ability to achieve goals.

6.2.2 *The psycho-emotional drivers of migratory agency*

Emotions are potent agency drivers and a determinant piece when the decision to migrate is made. Psycho-emotional experiences like fear, despair, anger, stress, hope, excitement, and bonds with loved ones were key in motivating migration. Feeling afraid for one's well-being and that of loved ones, can trigger mobility. For instance, Ale a 29-year-old Salvadoran trans man, expressed his fear and despair as feeling "mentally overwhelmed" when recounting his experience of persecution by gangs and the police in El Salvador. "I had to leave. I was going to be killed either by the gangs or the police", he said. This state of deep psycho-emotional distress can generate a sense of lack of control and psychological disempowerment where individuals perceive themselves as unable to cope with overwhelming life demands.

Fear was very commonly mentioned as a key psycho-emotional experience driving decisions to out-migrate. Such fear was rooted on migrants' extreme vulnerability to harm at hands of intimate partners and gangs, situated within a context of state fragility corruption and impunity. O and Carolina explained these difficult experiences:

O.: I was feeling more and more afraid because I heard them say that because I reported him [her ex-partner], things would happen to my daughter or the other one [her son], and that's why I made the decision. Guatemalan woman seeking asylum, 41 years old.

Carolina: I was so scared that something would happen. I would say, 'what I don't want is for anything to happen to you [her partner]. Or for anything to happen to me', because they [the gangs] threatened him [her partner] that they would hurt me and my daughter too. Salvadoran woman with refugee status, 23 years old.

Fear intersects with frustration, anger and hope for a better future, infusing aspirations to migrate. Harly, a 22-year-old woman seeking asylum from Haiti, expressed this with visible frustration, stating that young Haitians leave their country due to "the lack of opportunity, of resources. That's why I'm here". She further highlighted gendered vulnerabilities, noting that Haitian women migrate not only for opportunities but also "to avoid machismo or because they are threatened with death". The hope

for a better future, combined with the material means to migrate, infused migration aspirations. O., when contemplating leaving Guatemala, conveyed her hope to her daughter: “there is going to be a day, when we are going to stop suffering here”. These narratives reveal a profound sense of disempowerment due to intersecting factors including economic hardship, gender-based and gang violence. Such pervasive challenges, when combined with the material resources necessary for relocation, render migration a tangible alternative for individuals seeking to transform their realities.

Migration imaginaries, shaped by social interactions and the experiences of other migrants who serve as role models, further compound these complex intersections, inspiring hope and a sense of migration feasibility (Salazar, 2011). For instance, a Honduran woman talked at a group discussion about the changes she had noticed in her migrant family members saying, “I see why a person travels to the US... I see the progress in them, it changes their future”, other women agreed with her statement. Another Honduran woman, Guerrera de Dios, talked about the progress she has noticed in her nephews and nieces who live in the US and her desire that her children had the same opportunities. Nevertheless, such opportunities in Honduras seem unattainable. “I’ve seen the progress they have made” she said. Her niece had recently graduated in the US, and “it was lovely, nothing like it would have been in Honduras”, she explained. She emphasised the educational achievements of her niece, noting the difficulty of learning English in Honduras due to high costs. These narratives denote the interplay between social imaginaries, hope and structures of precarity in countries of origin which collectively influence migration aspirations.

Hope and social imaginaries of important family members also significantly shape migratory aspirations and agency of potential migrants. The emotional weight of these relationships and migrants’ own aspirations can significantly influence their decision-making. Karpagalo, a 45-year-old Honduran migrant recounted that her mother “before she died, she told me, ‘Look, the kids are going to grow up, they’re going to get married. You have to make your life, but not here. Go to another country. Go to Europe or the US’”. Similarly, Acna, a 24-year-old Venezuelan migrant shared her mother’s words before she left, “The best thing that could happen to you is to leave, and I’m going to let you go”. These accounts show how love and concern, sadness and hope for a better future, affect migrants’ decision-making and those who stay behind. Such experiences underscore the complex and multidimensional character of migratory agency, where individual psycho-emotional experiences, social imaginaries of migration, familial influence, and material resources, converge to shape agential decisions and actions.

6.3 Psychological dis/empowerment in migration: a Coyolxauhqui process

Psychological processes (thoughts, feelings, and behaviours) are intrinsic to migration experiences. These emerge as a continuum from countries of origin, during transit, temporary and more permanent settlement. These processes fundamentally shape how survival migrants negotiate and expand their agency as they navigate complex migration structures. This section aims to provide a multidimensional understanding of migrants’ psycho-emotional “layered journeys” as they navigate mobility and containment. Through migrants’ narratives, photo-stories, photo-collages and quantitative data, I discuss disempowering and empowering experiences. My collaborators’ accounts

illustrate that distressing experiences co-exist with adaptive mechanisms and psychological growth. In part 6.3.1, I explore stress, anxiety, fear, frustration and confusion as disempowering experiences endured within contexts of abuse, impunity, and containment. From a *Coyolxauhqui* perspective, these represent fragmentation and trauma. Alongside these factors, I further discuss the ambivalent role of humanitarian spaces like shelters, in buffering and amplifying the impacts of forced immobility and negative psycho-emotional responses, revealing their complex contribution to migrant well-being.

While migrants' psychosocial navigation of the migration structure is marked by severe forms of mental distress that are compounded by their past traumatic experiences, they also develop adaptive mechanisms, which are discussed in part 6.3.2. These adaptive processes are protective psychological factors including coping strategies, like cognitive coping, spirituality, social support, and sociability, as well as self-efficacy and internal locus of control. Beyond coping and positive reactions, in section 6.3.3, I analyse psychological growth as a functional adaptation and a form of psychological empowerment operating through the "transformational processing" of adversities (Pals, 2006). This leads to enhanced perceptions of personal strength, sense of control, self-efficacy, and compassion for others. This may be seen as a *Coyolxauhqui* process where migrants face fragmentation, and trauma, navigate *nepantla* or in-between states by developing an array of protective mechanisms, and reconstruct their sense of self through the *re-conocimiento* (re-knowing or re-cognition) of new capabilities and alternatives, enabling expansive ways of negotiating agency.

6.3.1 *Disempowering experiences: navigating complex psychological distress in confining migration contexts*

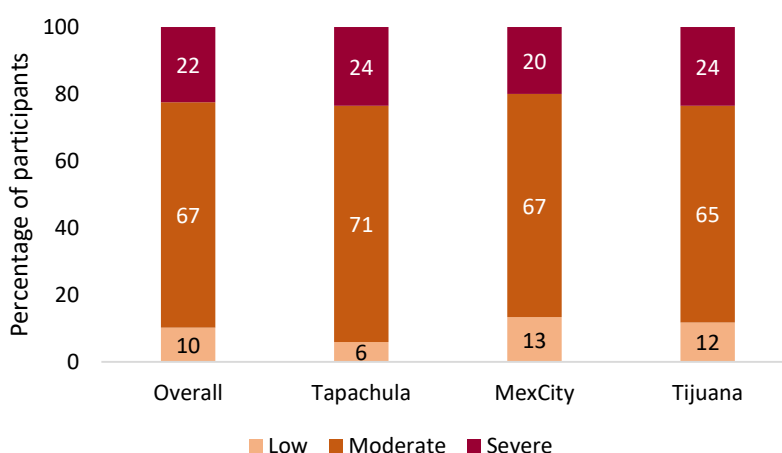
The migration context in Mexico, a space marked by migrant containment, widespread violence, insecurity and impunity, often engenders negative psycho-emotional experiences and a diminished sense of agency or disempowerment. Migration governance and humanitarian systems force migrants to wait, pushing them into long waiting periods, "confining them in motion" and critically constraining their agency (Balaguera, 2023a). This situation, compounded by migrants' personal challenges, was experienced by most of my collaborators as tremendously distressing and frustrating, resulting in a series of mental well-being challenges including overwhelming forms of stress.

Stress is a natural psychophysiological response arising from events that demand adaptation in order to maintain well-being, solve a problem or take advantage of an opportunity (Garcini et al., 2022). Stressors may be growth-promoting (eustress), or growth-stunting, leading to distress. Distress emerges when an individual's coping mechanisms are overwhelmed by stressors (National Research Council, 2008). Traumatic stressors involve events that overwhelm the ability to control, cope or withstand, compromising psychophysiological equilibrium and resulting in severe distress (Ford et al., 2020). Survival migrants often face numerous stressors throughout their lives, some of which are overwhelming, evoking powerful stress reactions, exacerbating symptoms of anxiety, depression, and complex trauma-related disorders (Shuval, 2014). These challenges can impair cognitive executive functions such as decision-making and problem solving, disrupt family dynamics, fracture

relationships, and accentuate existing vulnerabilities, fundamentally impacting migrants' agency and their ability to navigate the complexities of migration (de Silva et al., 2021; Morales et al., 2022).

Migrants' accounts reveal experiences of severe distress, some of which may be linked to prior migration processes and past trauma. Stress was partly assessed through the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS-4), a non-diagnostic tool that measures the degree to which individuals appraise situations in their lives as stressful. It focuses on their experiences of unpredictability, uncontrollability, and feeling overloaded in the past month (Siqueira et al., 2010). Nearly 90 percent of my collaborators self-reported moderate to high levels of stress (Figure 32, Appendix VI). A correlational analysis reveals a moderate but significant positive relationship between stress and past migration experiences prior to reaching Mexico. Such a correlation suggests that the accumulation of stressors throughout migrant's lives, especially in relation to survival mobility, contributes to higher perceptions of stress. This aligns with complex trauma research, which demonstrates that repeated exposure to overwhelming stressors over the life-course is common among forced migrants, and can result in the accumulation of trauma leading to dysregulated emotions and actions (Ford et al., 2020; de Silva et al., 2021).

Figure 32: Perceived Stress Scale (PSS-4)



Source: Author's calculations.

While quantitative findings provide a broad picture of migrants' psycho-emotional experiences, their narratives of fear, and anxiety, provide a deeper understanding of how distress is endured and how this negative psychophysiological experience may influence their agentic choices and behaviour. Fear and anxiety are two different but interconnected emotional and physiological responses. Fear is an intense emotion that arises as a short-term response to a clearly identifiable and present threat. It triggers the mobilisation of the organism to confront the danger or escape from it – the fight-or-flight response (APA, 2018a). Anxiety is a long-acting response focused on a diffuse threat or potentially dangerous situation, a response to uncertainty (Steimer, 2002; APA, 2018b, 2018a). In the context of survival migration, these emotional responses shape individuals' psycho-emotional lives, influencing their choices and agentic behaviour.

Most of my collaborators cited fear of abuse by criminal groups, impunity, risk of detention or deportation, and forced immobility as the main factors contributing to their experiences of overwhelming stress. These factors are interrelated with their past experiences, with migrants often referring to past and present stressful events, demonstrating a continuum of violence, fear and anxiety. For instance, in a group discussion in Tijuana, Merino, a 42-year-old Salvadoran woman with refugee status, articulated her fear of violence and danger in her country, explaining that the possibility of her children not returning home due to the risk of abuse by gangs generated tremendous distress. She also endured such a distressing concern in Mexico, where her daughter faced a kidnap attempt “I feel like I’m traumatised. My daughter is traumatised and doesn’t leave the house”, she said. Consequently, Merino avoided regular employment with fixed hours to remain at home with her daughter. Merino’s narrative exemplifies how past trauma, polyvictimisation, and present dangers intertwine to create a cycle of anxiety that severely restricts migrants’ sense of safety and their ability to negotiate and assert their agency.

Fear compounded with a sense of hopelessness, especially due to pervasive impunity and gender-specific risks. During a group discussion, migrant women highlighted their increased vulnerability, with participants emphasising that their gender heightened their exposure to risks. “A woman is exposed, she is weaker!” Merino affirmed. “Being a woman makes us vulnerable” echoed Dojadi. Women further discussed and agreed that impunity and corruption accentuate this vulnerability, leading them to implement protection strategies. As XXN, a Salvadoran refugee stated, “we are vulnerable because the laws don’t protect us. Women have to carry a stun gun. Or pepper spray. I’m afraid when I see a truck or a man...”, indicating a sense of constant threat.

This dialogue illustrates some of the emotional consequences of gender-based oppression. Their preoccupation with issues like kidnapping, corruption, impunity, and the traumatic events that they have endured, speak to broader issues of violence against women in Latin America that intersect with the specific challenges faced by migrants contributing to prolonged forms of psychological distress. These emotional experiences demonstrably impact agency, as illustrated by Merino’s decision to forgo paid labour to care for her daughter due to the fear of another kidnapping attempt. Similarly, XXN’s choice to carry pepper spray reflects a heightened state of alert and readiness to fight or flight.

Furthermore, these anxieties are exacerbated by the ever-present fear of detention or deportation. Sofia, a Cuban woman with refugee status, explained that stress and anxiety permeate migrants’ mobility processes from the outset. She highlighted that migrants are constantly devising strategies to cope with potential encounters with immigration officials. “Immigration is truly frightening. Immigration officials have a big influence on the migrant’s psyche”, she articulated. The prospect of deportation generates tremendous distress. As Sofia expressed, “if they catch me and deport me, what will I do? I have nothing left in Cuba”. This anxiety leads many to make risky choices like using irregular and unsafe routes.

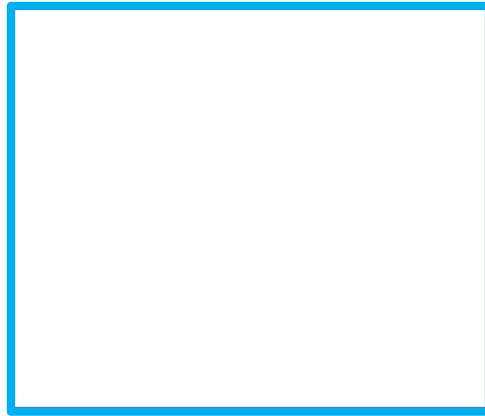
Ica, a 34-year-old Venezuelan woman seeking asylum in Mexico City, echoed Sofia. She expressed anxiety and deep frustration about her situation and the way migrants are treated by migration authorities and security forces, namely the INM and the GN. Despite having the necessary migratory

documentation to leave the state of Chiapas, where Tapachula is located, INM officials forced Ica and her family to return to Tapachula when they attempted to travel to Mexico City by bus. Upon being sent back, Ica was robbed, and when she tried to access the justice system, she was told that police were unable to assist. Overwhelmed with frustration, anger, and exhaustion, she recounted that crossing Mexico was more challenging than traversing the treacherous Darién jungle during her northward journey from Venezuela. Demonstrating critical consciousness, Ica questioned the mistreatment and abuse directed towards migrants, noting that despite their efforts to comply with legal requirement, authorities limit their rightful mobility. “They [authorities] won’t let you move forward. They get you off the bus and send you back!”, she explained. This is a practice that has been documented by scholars and organisations alike.

These narratives powerfully convey the state of alert, fear, frustration, and anger that many survival migrants experience as they navigate Mexico’s containment infrastructure. Prolonged exposure to overwhelming stressors can generate a sense of confusion and powerlessness, accentuating distress, and impair executive functioning, especially the capacity for decision-making and problem-solving, which is essential in enabling individuals’ ability to negotiate agency (de Silva et al., 2021; Valenzuela et al., 2022).

Fer’s experience during a photovoice workshop in a Mexico City shelter poignantly illustrates these combined affective challenges. Fer, a Venezuelan woman seeking asylum and her family had been in transit for about six months when she took part of the workshop. They walked from Venezuela, crossing the Darién jungle and had faced immobility in Tapachula. When I proposed the prompt ‘Self-portrait without my face’, most participants in Fer’s group readily engaged with the creative process. After writing a short narrative for their photos, I invited women to voluntarily share their photo-stories with the group by projecting their photos on the wall and having their narratives written by me on the projection (see details in Methodology). Fer said she was unable to take any photo as she found it very hard to identify something that represented her, explaining she felt fragmented, lost, and unable to find herself. The women and I listened to her attentively, with some women nodding, echoing Fer’s feelings. Demonstrating empathy and solidarity, the women encouraged Fer to express these feelings visually. While Fer initially struggled to find a suitable image, she eventually requested a simple white square be projected. I asked if she would like a border line for her square and she requested blue, while the other women affirmed, ‘yes, blue because it represents hope’.

Photo-story 6 by Fer.



In the middle of the whole process as a migrant, I feel lost, and I can't find myself. The fear and uncertainty of not knowing how and when everything will end, the danger and everything we are exposed to. Fer, Venezuelan woman seeking asylum, 25 years old.

Source: Created during a photovoice workshop held in Mexico City, February 2023. Photo prompt: 'Self-portrait without my face' (User rights granted to author).

This collaborative act of creation depicts the reframing of Fer's feelings of disempowerment and loneliness into a shared expression of vulnerability and resilience. The women mirrored Fer's feelings, elaborating on the difficulties faced along migrants' paths while highlighting the strength they all have had in continuing to pursue their goals. Nevertheless, these emotional processes crucially affected Fer's agency and her decision-making abilities. In the individual life-story interviews, she shared that she was in a constant state of fear and alert, which made it difficult to think clearly and "make good choices". Therefore, she allowed her husband to take the lead and decide for her and her family as they continued their journey north. This decision reveals the importance of social support in transit. It also reveals the perpetuation of gender roles that sustain women's dependency on men, while burdening men with mental load, pressuring them to make choices on behalf of loved ones. As a Haitian man in Mexico City noted, "It's not easy to make decisions for others... we don't know what will happen or what others think", uncovering part of the emotional challenges endured by men.

Anxiety and distress manifest in various ways as migrants' journeys evolve. Photo-stories created by migrants visually represent these affective processes, offering a deeper understanding of their lived experiences. The photo-story collage below combines three photo-stories that powerfully integrate visuals and narratives of anxiety as part of a labyrinthic journey where there is a light that represents a way out. M.'s creation (Photo-story collage 1, left) enables an interpretation of migration as "layered journeys" where migratory goals, structural obstacles and emotional experiences enfold (Lønning, 2020). Her creation shows a Canadian flag that is part of her 'journey with anxiety' and takes the viewer on a journey from her home country, signalling her reasons for migration firstly headed to the US and reframed to Canada as a goal. She realises that she felt no anxiety at the onset of her migratory process. However, the numerous obstacles faced along the way resulted in a gradual worsening of her mental state, where she feels anxious all the time and doubts her capacity to reach her goals.

Karla Juarez's monochromatic creation (centre) provides an intertwined perspective of these complexities. Her photograph depicts a spiral tunnel, evoking a sense of confusion and dizziness. Her narrative expands on the visual interpretation, explaining each line of the spiral represents 'a turn and a day', allowing for an understanding of mental distress in migration as an ever-changing process, opening room for hope and for change. Guerrero de Dios's creation (right) connects anxiety and hope by offering an image that evokes admiration and curiosity. Her creation links a labyrinthine journey with anxiety and the hope for a way out soon. When she described her image to the group, she explained that she imagined the light as a way out of the tunnel of migration suffering.

Photo-story collage 1: Labyrinthine journeys of anxiety.



My journey with anxiety

This all starts when my transition begins. My boyfriend, worried about me, decides to start this journey to the United States. Everyone said it was easy. I felt no fear or anxiety along the way. But everything starts to get very heavy to the point of being anxious all the time. From telling myself I will never get there, now our dream for the future has changed. Now it is Canada.

M., Ecuadorian trans woman seeking asylum, 21 years old. Tapachula, December 2022.

Labyrinth

This photo for me represents the struggles, difficulties, anxieties, stress that we go through day by day. It is as if each line represented a turn and a day, and that in the end we will find a way out. It means so many things that maybe this paper would not be enough to write them down.

Karla Juarez, Honduran woman with refugee status, 33 years old. Tijuana, May 2023.

A sign on the way

Looking for a way out of our anxiety, worry and difficult situation. Knowing that there is a light on our path and a hope that we will come out soon.

Guerrera de Dios, Honduran woman with refugee status, 38 years old. Tijuana, May 2023.

Source: photo-collage created by the author with photographers' consent.

These creations convey the experiences of many migrants, who in an agentic act, decide to leave their countries with hope for a better future, only to encounter challenges that situate them in a labyrinth-like situation. Each day on the move becomes a struggle, challenging their capacity to cope and withstand, generating severe forms of distress and a sense of disempowerment. These experiences compound with processes of grief due to having left loved ones behind, fear of persecution by perpetrators, confusion about what happened and how they ended up in Mexico, unable to leave. This is further complexified by past trauma, often rooted in childhood and endured through adulthood within contexts of sociopolitical and economic precarity.

Humanitarian spaces

Within this complexity, humanitarian spaces emerge as sources of support that sustain migrants' material needs, while contributing to additional forms of mental distress. Conflict between shelter residents and perceptions of maltreatment by shelter staff exacerbates mental suffering and feelings of helplessness. Brenda, a Honduran woman with refugee status who endured prolonged sexual abuse in childhood and escaped gender-based violence, shared some of her physical and psychological challenges, noting that her hair has fallen out due to the problems she has faced at the shelter. She explained that "most of the people in the shelter don't talk to me. They call me a pig, they say I'm ugly, that I'm a thief". This situation "makes me feel sadness and anger". Added to these challenges, she expressed a state of constant fear and preoccupation about her daughters' well-being, worrying that they might be abused at the shelter, just as she was when she was little. She would ask herself "is there a rapist around?". While the presence of a security camera helped her feel more secure, she told her daughters "not to cross over to where the men are. My head is always racing with thoughts", she expressed. Brenda's affective experience reveals some of the mental challenges associated with living at a migrant shelter, along with the anxiety that the risk of child abuse generates. Such a worry is not only rooted in her own childhood trauma but also in the gender-based vulnerabilities to which gender-diverse migrants, women and their children are exposed to; a situation that has been widely documented by numerous scholars and organisations (Freedman et al., 2022; UNHCR, 2024c; Beer, 2024; Rios-Rivera, 2025).

Some shelters and organisations support migrants' mental health through group workshops that encourage peer support and relaxation, while a few also offer individual psychotherapy. However, individual attention is limited due to funding restrictions, with organisations prioritising basic needs and physical health. Partnerships with international organisations help local shelters and civil society organisations deliver psychiatric support. Nevertheless, as preceding research has demonstrated, migrants on the move face unique legal and logistical barriers that disrupt continuity of care, which is essential for effective psychiatric treatment (Silove et al., 2017; Silove, 2021). Frequent relocations interrupt care, leading to relapses and worsening mental health symptoms (Ventevogel et al., 2021).

During my observations at shelters, I witnessed medics, psychologists, and psychiatrists from international organisations provide mental health support. Prior to my doctoral journey, I also provided psychosocial services myself at shelters in Mexico City and Tapachula. Tapachula's shelters, especially those supported by UN agencies, received the most frequent visits, while Mexico

City and Tijuana shelters typically had in-house psychologists providing individual and group therapy. Less resourced shelters relied on occasional visits from internationally sponsored mental health professionals. Although residents who used these services, and staff generally appreciated psychosocial services, psychiatric treatment presented notable challenges.

Some migrants, especially women, were prescribed sleeping pills and anxiolytics. While these medications provided short-term relief during their shelter stay, treatment was disrupted upon leaving the shelter, potentially worsening mental health symptoms. Shelter staff raised concerns about migrants' growing use of psychiatric medication, with a shelter coordinator in Mexico City remarking that "psychiatric treatment is loosely provided to migrants, and we do not yet know what the real consequences can be". While psychiatric treatment may offer immediate relief of symptoms, inconsistent treatment reduces the potential effectiveness of initial interventions and exacerbates symptoms when medication is abruptly stopped (Bartolomei et al., 2016). This adds yet another layer of complexity to migrants' "layered journeys", further confounding their psycho-emotional challenges, and their ability to negotiate and assert their agency.

Migrants' psychosocial navigation of the migration structure may be seen as *nepantla*, the in-between transitional space that, while marked by severe forms of mental distress that are compounded by past trauma, can create alternatives for new connections, "allowing various scenarios to merge and come into focus" (Anzaldúa, 2015, p. 108). Even though most of my collaborators narrated distressing experiences, they also illustrated how they cope with them and demonstrated psychological growth even amid adversity. Migration processes are non-static "layered journeys" where migrants navigate their current realities and adjust to new environments (Daniel et al., 2020). In doing so, they develop an array of coping strategies, fostering resilience and psychological growth, which deeply shapes their choices and value-based agentic behaviour.

6.3.2 Coping strategies and self-efficacy in the migration labyrinth

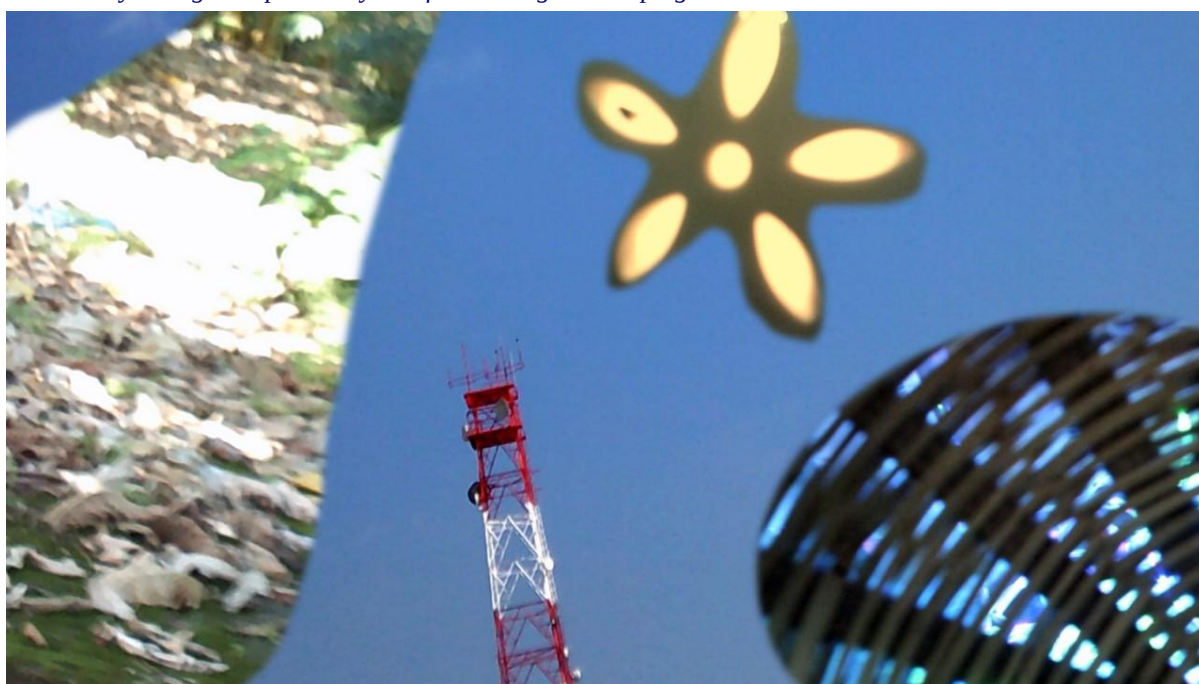
As migrants navigate *nepantla*, they develop coping strategies. These strategies refer to the cognitive and behavioural efforts employed to manage a stressful situation (Freire et al., 2020). These are vital for migrants to persevere and adapt in the face of adversity, helping them develop resilience. Among these strategies, cognitive coping, social support, and sociability were particularly relevant. Cognitive coping involves strategies that entail thought processes aimed at dealing with a stressful situation (Busscher et al., 2017). Cognitive reframing emerged as a key cognitive coping strategy by which migrants adapted the way they thought about situations, replacing negative interpretations of events with more positive perspectives (Garcini et al., 2022).

For most of my collaborators, faith in God as a benevolent protector served as a cornerstone of their cognitive coping strategies. Faith was key in enabling them to reframe their challenging experiences, generating strength and psychological energy to keep on going with perceived divine protection and blessings. Across photo-stories, group discussions, and individual interviews, women and gender-diverse migrants consistently emphasised the vital role of God and their faith as sources of energy and strength to persevere towards their objectives. The

Photo-story collage 2 below represents this.

Ison, a Honduran migrant woman, created the photo-story “The light of blessing” (middle right star) where she visually expressed gratitude to God “for not having abandoned me in this difficult process”. Karpagalo’s “A path to follow” (top left) depicted her incremental progress towards her aspirations, highlighting her trust in God as essential to achieving her “objectives, dreams, goals and future”. Ore’s creation “Trusting in God” (bottom right) represents problems that appear to be unsolvable but that, nonetheless, “we triumph over by holding God’s hand who breaks all barriers”. On her part, Oana’s image of the sky, with the red and white tower in the background symbolises her prayer to God for assistance in realising her dreams and proving her doubters wrong – especially those who bullied her due to being a trans woman. For Oana, the tower represents a ladder ascending towards her goals, with divine assistance as her support.

Photo-story collage 2: Spirituality and faith as cognitive coping mechanisms.



Karpagalo, Honduran woman seeking asylum, 45 years old. Tapachula, November 2022.

(Background sky and tower) Oana, Salvadoran trans woman seeking asylum, 21 years old. Tapachula December 2022.

(Top middle star) Ison, Honduran migrant woman, 28 years old. Tijuana, June 2023.

Ore, Salvadoran woman with refugee status, 52 years old. Tapachula, November 2022.

Source: photo-collage created by the author with photographers’ consent.

This collaged photo-stories poignantly illustrate the profound importance of spiritual coping mechanisms for migrants, echoing themes of hope for a better life and resilience amidst the challenges of migration (Hagan et al., 2003; Garcini et al., 2022). These creative narratives further demonstrate the role of faith as a coping resource that enables migrants not only to bounce back (resilience) but to bounce forward, signalling its transformative potential (Houston, 2015; Garcini et al., 2022).

Children who stayed behind in migrants' places of origin proved equally crucial as cognitive coping strategies and sources of psychological energy. While separation from loved ones caused significant emotional pain, these same loved ones also became a powerful source of motivation. Thinking about loved ones and having virtual contact with them, helped migrants to cognitively reframe adversity, inspiring them to "continue the struggle for them", as a Guatemalan migrant said referring to her children. The photo-story collage below visually depicts the profound longing and missing of family members who simultaneously represent hope for a better future. Acna's photo-story depicts her child who stayed with family members in Colombia and who she hopes to financially support once she reaches the US. R. and Sofia expressed that although leaving their family members behind in Honduras and Cuba, respectively, has been tremendously difficult, thinking about them and hoping for reunification infuses them with strength and energy, bolstering their agentic behaviour to reach that goal.

Photo-story collage 3: Family in origin as energy to keep on going.



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, Colombian-Venezuelan migrant woman, 24 years old. Mexico City, March 2023.

People who give us light

For me this has been difficult from the beginning. Leaving my family and traveling alone. I have never left my country before. The only thing that keeps me strong and happy is my family. They give me strength from my country. So, I keep going. They are my strength.

Longing

For me, the most important thing is my family. They are my driving force; I am here for them. It is very difficult for me; I miss them a lot. I count every day and every minute until I can be reunited with all of them. It is longing because it is one of the most important aspects of an immigrant's life. You have to detach yourself from what you love the most.

*R., Honduran woman with
refugee status, 24 years old.
Tijuana, May 2023.*

*They are my joy. Seeing them
happy makes me happy.*

*Sofia, Cuban woman with
refugee status, 47 years old.
Tapachula, November 2022.*

Source: photo-collage created by the author with photographers' consent.

Social support was another critical coping mechanism with the notion of 'migrating together', emerging as a recurrent theme. Collaborators highlighted the significance of being together in the journey not only to help each other preserve material well-being but to support each other emotionally. As one Venezuelan migrant, Fer, expressed "If we go together, the pain is not felt so strongly... If we cry, we cry together and help each other to keep on going...". Ica's photo-story 'A fortress to the stars' (Photo-story 7) powerfully visualises this theme, depicting the hands of her family members joined together as a team, with hers and her husband's hands in front and her children's hands behind. The image also hints at Ica's expressed feelings of insecurity and fear; her thumb nestled within her husband's hand suggests a need for protection. Furthermore, her eldest son's hand (top right) seems to support his sisters' hands, potentially reflecting Ica's reliance on him and her husband to navigate these challenges, referring to her son as her 'right hand'.

Photo-story 7: "Un fuerte a las estrellas" by Ica.



A fortress to the stars.

Ica, Venezuelan woman seeking asylum, 34 years old. Mexico City, March 2023.

Source: Created during a photovoice workshop held in Mexico City, February 2023. Photo prompt: 'What is important in my life' (User rights granted to author).

Collaborators emphasised sociability and the importance of the formation of new relationships in achieving their migratory goals. Forming 'new families' with other migrants became a common experience that emerged as a potent coping strategy, significantly influencing their decision-making processes. Sociability broadly refers to the ability of being gregarious, to interact with others and form social relationships. Preceding research has demonstrated that sociability is essential as a coping

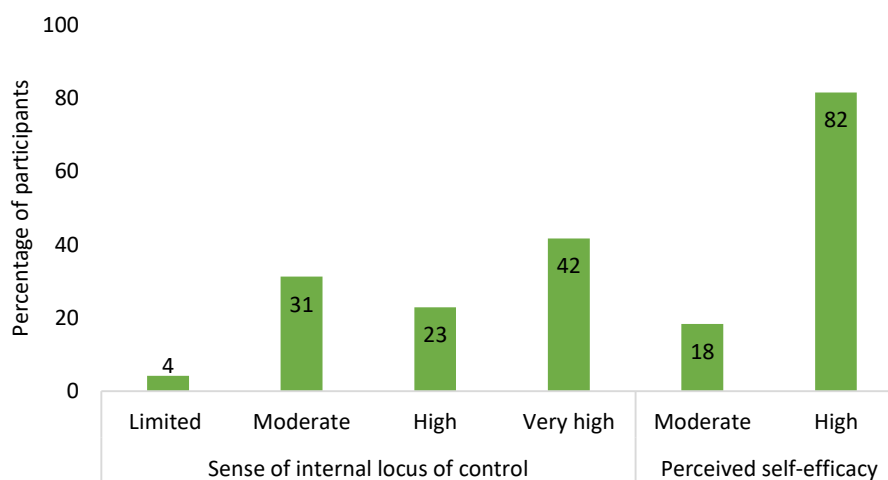
strategy for migrants, as it helps build support systems which become crucial resources to negotiate agency (Garcini et al., 2022). For instance, a Honduran migrant woman that I met in Tijuana, emphasised friendliness and the importance of “being open to others in the journey”. She joined a group of Haitian migrants she met in Tapachula, altering her original route north after she “became fond of them”. She crossed the country from south to north feeling “protected and supported, especially as a woman travelling alone”. Similarly, participants highlighted the importance of kindness and supporting others through actions like sharing food or providing financial assistance to those with fewer resources. While seemingly small, these acts of solidarity can create a sense of belonging, community and interconnectedness, which are important resources to negotiate agency in new environments (Soto-Saavedra et al., 2023).

Self-efficacy and locus of control

As I became more familiar with my collaborators’ experiences, I identified a strong sense of confidence in their ability to realise their aspirations and control their life outcomes. This self-confidence, or more accurately, perceived self-efficacy, refers to the belief in one’s ability to succeed in situations or tasks, influencing choices, persistence and goal achievement (Schunk, 1995; Wilson et al., 2016). It may be understood as a recognition of individuals’ power-within or their capacity to act and assert control over their lives (Rowlands, 1997). Individuals with high self-efficacy perceptions tend to interpret life difficulties as challenges rather than threats to be avoided (Atoum et al., 2018). Locus of control is closely related to self-efficacy and refers to individuals’ beliefs about what controls the events that affect their lives. An internal locus of control signifies a belief in personal influence over life events, while an external locus of control attributes outcomes to external factors like fate, luck, or powerful others. Individuals with high self-efficacy often feel more in control of their actions and choices (Kaiser et al., 2021). High self-efficacy and internal locus of control are associated with increased motivation, a proactive approach towards challenges, and enhanced well-being buffering against negative emotions (Karademas et al., 2004; Crane et al., 2019). All of which is central in enabling agentic decision-making and action. My collaborators reported high levels of perceived self-efficacy and sense of control over their life outcomes.³² A correlational analysis confirms a significant positive relationship between these constructs (Appendix VI).

³² Perceived self-efficacy was measured by means of the General Self-Efficacy Scale (Schwarzer et al., 1995; Bueno-Pacheco et al., 2018) while locus of control was measured through the freedom of choice and control scale (Haerpfer et al., 2022).

Figure 33: Sense of control and perceived self-efficacy



Source: Author's calculations.

Migrants' narratives confirm quantitative findings. When I asked Oana, "what helps you to keep on going?", she confidently responded: "Myself. Because I know I will achieve everything I set my mind to", illustrating her strong sense of self-efficacy and internal locus of control. Despite feeling frustrated and angry about being stuck in Mexico, Ica noted her self-determination and belief in her ability to achieve her goals. When recounting the challenges of migration she expressed that "one becomes more resolute. You draw strength because you have a goal. Strength gives you the motivation to achieve what you're going for".

The collaged photo-stories below visually portray migrants' confidence in their capacity to realise their goals and their ability to control their life outcomes. La belle Nicole (bottom left candle), represented her determination to achieve her goals despite past difficulties and without the need for external validation, reflecting a strong internal locus of control and confirming the quantitative findings. Her inclusion of key personal values (kindness, humility, wisdom, faith) further emphasises the role of values and beliefs in shaping identity and concordant agentic decision-making (Mirsky et al., 2006). "I know who I am" she said. On her part, Harly took a photo of a mermaid in a crystal ball, similarly speaking to her determination to overcome adversity and maintain control despite challenges. Harly's photo-narrative (right) describes her power to weather storms, remaining a "queen, dominating all those who" prevent her from moving forward, demonstrating an internal locus of control orientation and high self-efficacy perceptions. Finally, Merino's (middle) staircase signifies her confidence in her ability to traverse the "long road" to success. These examples of perceived self-efficacy and internal locus of control are key to understanding migrants' ability to negotiate and assert their agency and the factors enabling or undermining it.

Photo-story collage 4: Self-efficacy and internal locus of control.



I am a woman. The flames, the guilt. I set goals for myself, and I have the determination to achieve them. I don't need to compare myself to others before trusting in my abilities. I know who I am. My motto: kindness, humility, wisdom, faith.

La belle Nicole, Haitian woman seeking asylum, 32 years old. Mexico City, March 2023.

Step by step

Each step I overcome is an achievement in my life. I know that one day I will reach the top of the staircase. The road looks long, but I know I will succeed and fulfil all my projects.

Merino, Salvadoran woman with refugee status, 42 years old. Tijuana, June 2023.

This photo represents dominance despite life's problems, upheavals, and difficulties. Despite the storms, I remain strong and will always be the queen, dominating all those who try to stop me.

Harly, Haitian woman seeking asylum, 22 years old. Mexico City, March 2023.

Source: photo-collage created by the author with photographers' consent.

6.3.3 Psychological growth as empowerment

As migrants face difficulties and employ diverse strategies to cope, they also develop resilience and psychological growth. Such growth can be understood as a form of psychological empowerment as it demonstrates an enhancement of individual's sense of control, self-efficacy, and purpose (Chompukum et al., 2025). The notion of stress-related growth is particularly useful to understand migrants' processes of psychological growth (Taylor et al., 2024). This growth after adversity entails not only bouncing back (resilience) but bouncing forward, involving improvements in self-perceptions, relationships with others and greater sense of personal strength (Ssenyonga et al., 2013; Abraham, 2021). While acknowledging the challenges and oppressive circumstances faced by women

and gender-diverse migrants, their narratives reflect positive psychological transformations. These changes can enable new self-perceptions that shape decision-making, often leading to an expanded ability to negotiate and make strategic life choices – empowerment.

Positive psychological changes perceived by migrants were often framed as feeling more confident, stronger and freer after past adversities in origin and during migration. These changes relate to shifts in self-perceptions, realising their ability to overcome challenges, and increased self-efficacy. This signals a process of growth after severely distressing events, enabling new forms of exercising agency. Eny, a Salvadorian refugee trans woman explained this process in her own words, emphasising that it is “precisely all those bad things that make me Eny”. She endured multiple forms of violence in childhood and adulthood, as well as various internal and international displacements throughout the Americas, eventually reaching Tijuana after crossing Mexico and failing to settle in Mexico City. Despite the pain she has endured throughout these challenging experiences, she explained to me that now “I accept the difficult past. For every time someone told me ‘You can’t’, I turned it into a ‘yes I can’”. This narrative demonstrates how the “transformational processing” of adversities can influence agency and become a source of strength and motivation to persevere in life (Pals, 2006). Transforming ‘you can’t’ into a ‘yes I can’ emphasised the power of cognitive reframing or the shifting of one’s mindset to interpret experience in a new and more positive light (Garcini et al., 2022). This re-signification of challenges into opportunities for growth are key preconditions of psychological growth and agency empowerment.

Brenda’s photo-story evokes similar themes. Her photo of a tree bark shows deep cracks representing her “internal wounds”. Brenda’s creation, like Eny’s narrative, resonates with the notion of stress-related growth where individuals engage in transformational processing, finding meaning and developing positive change after adversity (Elam et al., 2022). The representation of her wounds, she says, reminds her that, despite adversity, she continues to persevere, making her feel “strong, brave, and experienced”. Brenda’s acknowledgment of her self-love and hope, further resonates with the notions of resilience and self-efficacy, demonstrating that migrants’ narratives are not only about oppression but also about transformation and empowerment. This does not negate the presence of tremendous violence, oppression and material constraints, which are disempowering, but rather acknowledges the complex and multidimensional interactions between oppressive structures, protective adaptations and positive psychological change.

Photo-story 8 by Brenda.



My photo reminds me that I am a woman who keeps going, even though inside I am like this. I feel strong. My photo represents all the wounds I have inside and that at the same time make me strong, brave, and experienced. And to be able to continue and to be able to feel that I love myself and there is always hope.

Brenda, Honduran woman with refugee status, 36 years old.

Source: Created during a photovoice workshop held in Tapachula, November 2022. Photo prompt: 'Self-portrait without my face' (User rights granted to author).

Migrants' narratives offer insights into psychological empowerment as a dynamic process characterised by enhanced perceptions of self-confidence, growth, and self-determination. This psychological expansion can be seen as a precondition for agency empowerment, as it involves individuals' recognition of themselves as able and entitled to make strategic life choices and to exercise agency in alignment with their goals and values. This is illustrated by Essie's experiences, a Haitian woman with refugee status who had endured repeated sexual abuse, survived the Darién jungle, and faced confinement in Mexico. She articulated her change process from "weakness to strength", saying "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, I can get through this too". Essie's determination to 'get through this', referring to her aspiration to leave Mexico, shows her enhanced perceptions of self-efficacy and her readiness to act agentially toward her goals, despite hardship and constraints. Similarly, Seymi, a Honduran migrant expressed a "weakness to strength" transformation, noting that in her country she was, "very weak. They told me "I was weak. They told me I wouldn't be able to, and now look at me, I'm about to complete 4 years [in Mexico]". Migrants' increased sense of self-efficacy and personal strength can foster processes of agency expansion by enabling enhanced self-perceptions of their ability to set goals and act upon them.

Migrants often reframed the challenging migration process as a strengthening experience. This reframing enabled the recognition of their capacity to overcome adversity, signalling processes of empowering transformation through migration. As Nicole, a 24-year-old woman seeking asylum expressed, she did not believe she was "capable of doing so many things, and today I feel like a stronger, more open-minded, and wiser person". She further articulated that she perceived a significant change in herself, feeling "like I am a different person", who is now more confident and able to voice her own opinions, "before, I didn't have my own voice", she said. Similarly, Sofia, a 42-year-old Cuban refugee, recounted part of her growth experience when she settled in Central

Mexico, having resided in Tapachula for about two years. She described her new life as, “a totally new world for me”, which she found fulfilling because it involved challenges, she successfully overcame, “and it shows me that I can”, she said.

These narratives illustrate how migration can be a catalyst for growth, leading individuals to recognise their power-within, and to feel able and entitled to make choices and exercise agency. The recurring theme of feeling “stronger, more open-minded, wiser” and essentially undergoing a personal transformation, as articulated by Nicole, was a sentiment echoed by numerous collaborators. This highlights complex processes of identity change and evolving self-perceptions that are intrinsic to the migration experience. Seymi, visually narrated her transformational process by creating a photo of her screen-printing work, reflecting on her talents, her new self, increased sense of confidence and empowered agency.

Photo-story 9: “Me descubrí” by Seymi.



I discovered myself

What you see in the image is one of my achievements, as I had never done it before. Screen printing. Before, I only dedicated myself to childcare, and I discovered that I have much more to offer. I have many talents. Now I am and I feel like a great, confident, and empowered woman.

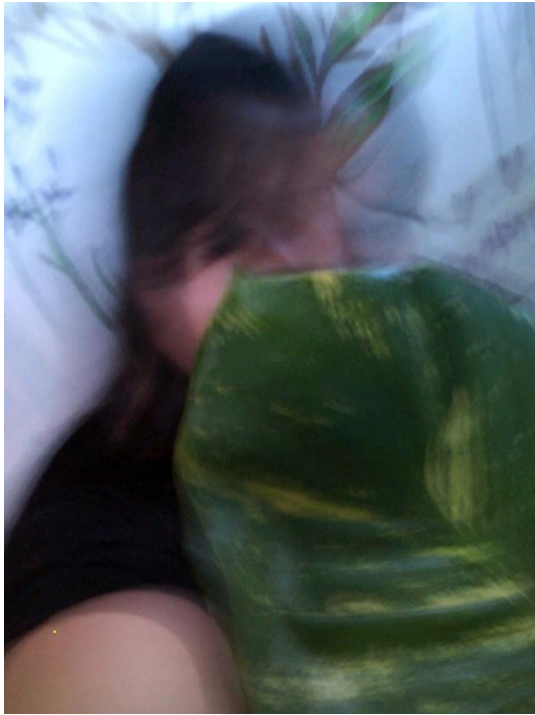
Seymi, Honduran migrant woman, 35 years old.

Source: Created during a photovoice workshop held in Mexico City, March 2023. Photo prompt: ‘My past achievements’ (User rights granted to author).

An increased empathy and compassion for others emerged as a salient theme in migrants’ processes of psychological growth. As a Salvadoran woman seeking asylum expressed “Pain makes one more sensitive”. Similarly, M. highlighted this theme during a photo-elicited group discussion, noting that “I didn’t know what people suffered until I began my journey. Now I see the suffering one goes through”. Ale corroborated M.’s view noting that “now I think, if I have something, I can share with others”. Sin estereotipos, a Colombian woman seeking asylum, echoed M.’s initial lack of awareness of or interest in the needs of others. She visually represented part of her change processes from self-centeredness to a sense of interconnectedness with the world and increased compassion for others (Photo-story 10). Her self-representation, partially concealed by a large leaf, symbolises this evolution. Her viewing of herself as a “complement for the world” that takes care of herself and

others, acknowledges that individual and collective well-being are interconnected, highlighting a shift in her values. Aligned with self-determination theory (Deci et al., 1985) (explained in Chapter 2), this reflects the integration of empathic values that now motivate her agentic choices and behaviour.

Photo-story 10: “Mi autorreflexión” by Sin estereotipos.



My self-reflection

That photo shows it. Before, I was very self-centred. I thought that, if I wasn't there, the world would stop because everything depended on me. Now I feel that I am a complement for the world to turn. Just as I take care of myself, I take care of others.

Sin estereotipos, Colombian woman seeking asylum, 35 years old. Tapachula, November 2022.

Source: Created during a photovoice workshop held in Tapachula, November 2022. Photo prompt: ‘Self-portrait without my face’ (User rights granted to author).

Migrants’ narratives reveal that psychological growth, observed in enhanced self-perceptions, a greater sense of personal strength, as well as increased empathy, can significantly shape agency changes and facilitate agency empowerment. This may be interpreted through the lens of the *Coyolxauhqui* process. From this perspective, individuals, having endured distress and trauma, navigate *nepantla* or in-between states by developing protective mechanisms, and reconstruct their sense of self. This reconstruction involves a *re-conocimiento* (re-knowing or re-cognition) of new capabilities and alternatives, enabling expansive ways of negotiating agency (Anzaldúa, 2015). However, it is crucial to acknowledge that even if processes of *re-conocimiento*, psychological growth and empowerment may arise in migration, they are embedded within structures that limit agency. Hence, leading non-linear processes of dis/empowerment where psychological growth and empowerment may not be experienced by all. Therefore, while migration can foster psychological growth, this growth is limited by imbalanced power relations, impunity, and containment infrastructures. Thus, positive psychological change within persistent structures of oppression may not necessarily lead to broader agential expansions.

6.4 Chapter conclusion

This chapter addressed part of my research questions by exploring how dynamic psychosocial experiences, shape women and gender-diverse migrants’ ability to negotiate and expand their agency.

By using a temporally situated lens, the analysis offers a layered understanding of migrants' agential negotiations that consider migrants' life-stages in decision-making, showing how past experiences, present realities, and future aspirations are intertwined, fundamentally shaping agency (Lønning, 2020; Erlinghagen, 2021).

The initial section has concentrated on migrants' pre-migration experiences, revealing the impact of both adversity and emotional distress experienced from childhood through adulthood in places of origin, and marked by gendered structures of inequality. These factors emerged as significant in shaping migratory agency, underscoring the importance of psycho-emotional processes and material limitations in migrants' negotiations of agency. ACEs were examined as pervasive events in migrants' lives, marking, for many, their first experience of survival mobility within national borders. Having experienced ACEs in the household, especially having witnessed violence against women, showed a possible connection with gender-based violence in adulthood, which for many, was the main cause of their international displacement later in life. Existing research supports this connection, indicating that early exposure to GBV can elevate the risk of GBV in adulthood. This is often mediated by mechanisms such as normalisation of abuse, learned behaviour, and intergenerational trauma dynamics (Ford et al., 2020; Kidman et al., 2020; Mitchell et al., 2021). As such, domestic violence, occurring within contexts of community violence, state oppression and poverty, was endured as an intersectional continuum throughout migrants' lives, triggering multiple forms of internal displacement and psycho-emotional distress. This eventually led many to migrate internationally for survival. Conditions of oppression sustained across time and space, can be interpreted as disempowering since they fundamentally limit migrants' ability to negotiate and assert their agency.

Migration adds a layer of complexity to migrants' challenging psycho-emotional experiences. Stress, anxiety, fear, frustration and confusion were prominent in migrants' narratives. These were analysed as psychologically disempowering experiences, endured in the face of abuse and impunity, within containment structures, which exacerbate past trauma and psycho-emotional challenges. Nonetheless, positive adaptations co-exist. Cognitive coping mechanisms, social support networks, sociability, self-efficacy, and an internal locus of control emerged as protective psychological factors, helping migrants adjust to new environments and adverse emotional reactions.

Beyond reactive coping strategies, migrants demonstrated resilience, positive psychological change and stress-related growth through the "transformational processing" of adversities (Pals, 2006). This process reveals psychological empowerment, evident in the enhancement of perceptions of personal strength, sense of control, self-efficacy, and empathy. This aligns with the *Coyolxauhqui* process, an ongoing a dynamic trajectory of trauma and fragmentation, toward self-reconstruction, and the *re-conocimiento* (re-knowing or re-cognition) of new capabilities and alternatives. *Coyolxauhqui*, like dis/empowerment, is an ongoing and unfinished process where *re-conocimientos* or empowerments, may be experienced in some areas of life but not in others.

This chapter illustrated psychological growth as a form of psychological empowerment and an integral component of broader agency empowerment, while underscoring the critical importance of a

temporally situate angle to study agency change. From this angle, psychological expansion acts as a pre-condition of agency empowerment, as it entails re-cognising oneself as able and entitled to make strategic life-choices and to assert agency in alignment with goals and values. Nevertheless, this is not an isolated process and unfolds within oppressive structures of power that severely undermine psychological growth and overall agency empowerment.

In the next section, I draw on insights from Chapters 5 and 6 to study how migration structures and psycho-emotional experiences intersect with gendered sexual identity, influencing how gender-diverse migrants negotiate and assert their sexual agency.

7 Gender identities and sexualities: sexual agency in transit/ion

7.1 Introduction

Photo-story 11: “De [...] a M.” by M..



From [...] to M.

One of my most important past achievements is becoming who I am today. I am M.. My entire family was against it.

M., Ecuadorian trans woman seeking asylum, 21 years old.

Source: Created during a photovoice workshop held in Tapachula, Mexico. December 2022. Photo prompt: ‘My past achievement’ (User rights granted to author).

At the onset of my fieldwork in Tapachula, M.’s photo-story inspired me to explore how she and other gender-diverse migrants negotiate sexual agency and transition in transit. M. underwent multiple phases of her gender transition as she migrated through Latin America. Similar to other gender-diverse migrants, she embarked on a geographical journey in search of a place where she could safely complete her transition and embody her real self. Her body became the first territory of migration where she transited from a gender to another (Zarco et al., 2019). As she walked through Latin America, her legs became instruments for her geographical and gendered transit/ion. The notion of *nepantla*, a Nahuatl language word that means ‘in-between space’, is highly relevant for M.’s transits and transitions. Gloria Anzaldúa invites us to think about *nepantla* as “the threshold of transformation”, as the experience of being in a liminal and transitional space, “that uncertain terrain one crosses when moving from one place to another, when changing from one class, race, or sexual position to another, when travelling from the present identity into a new identity” (Anzaldúa, 2015, p. 56). New ways of negotiating agency while crossing borders and territories, represent states of *nepantla*. This chapter addresses part of my research questions by exploring how gender-diverse migrants transit *nepantla*, negotiating sexual agency as they navigate migration structures.

Migration brings new opportunities and constraints that can initiate, accelerate, or impede sexual and identity changes, deeply influencing individuals’ experiences, self-perceptions and well-being. For gender-diverse migrants, identity change, affirmation and bodily transformations can be a struggle. This struggle often involves the interplay between internal psychological processes and cultural, religious, and sociopolitical structures that enforce rigid gendered social norms, limiting sexual agency. Sexual agency involves individuals’ capability to negotiate strategic choices about their sexual lives including their gendered sexual identity, behaviour, and expression (Cense, 2019). When

gendered social norms are challenged, discrimination can escalate to severe forms of violence and exclusion, which, when compounded with structural violence, poverty and inequality, can lead gender-diverse people to migrate. Such a form of mobility has been referred to as sexual migration (Carrillo, 2004, p. 58). Exploring how gender-diverse migrants negotiate their sexual agency and gendered sexual identity shifts as they navigate migration and its governance structures, is critical to expand scholarly understandings of sexual change in migration. This is an area of study that has been under-explored especially in Global South contexts (Cvajner et al., 2021).

Migration not only transports practices across borders but also exposes individuals to new contexts, structures and sexual ideologies that significantly impact sexual agency and shape identity change (Carrillo, 2004; Stambolis-Ruhstorfer, 2013). Migration implicates ‘in-betweenness’ or *nepantla* states where boundaries associated with (actual or perceived) sexual differences are crossed (Cvajner et al., 2021). These boundary crossings lead to encounters between strangers, often resulting in new gender performances and unexpected sexual meanings that can create a novel social self (Brigden, 2018; Cvajner et al., 2021). Concurrently, structures of migration governance and humanitarian systems can also influence how migrants negotiate agency and their gendered sexual identity and expression (Balaguera, 2023b).

Gender and sexual identity and expression relate to how we experience and express our understanding of ourselves as gendered and sexual beings. The notion of gendered sexual identity emphasises the interdependence of sexuality, identity, and gendered norms shaping individuals’ performative articulation of their sexual orientation, gender identity, and expression (see key concepts in Appendix I) (Tasker et al., 2002; Butler, 2006; Paredes, 2012). The body is central to this self-articulation, being the site where gendered sexual identity is performed, inscribed, and transformed (Lemma, 2023). Gendered sexual identity and expression are materialised in bodies based on schemes of perception and the reiteration of social norms and practices transforming bodies into structuring social categories. In this sense, sex and gender, may be thought of as symbolic borders where different precepts mark the sociocultural guidelines for sexual behaviours defined by genitalia (Zarco et al., 2019).

Embodying a gender or genders entails a fluid *nepantla* process of gendered sexual identity re-formation. It involves periods of accelerated transit/ion, as well as moments of pause, settlement, immobility and return. This process is never fully completed, solidified, or made permanent. Instead, it is a performative endeavour, continuously articulated, affirmed and adjusted through sexual agency negotiations across time and space (Butler, 2006). This approach challenges the idea of a “supposedly stable relationship of sex, gender, sexual practice, and sexual desire” (Camma, 2019, p. 7), disrupting rigid notions of heterosexuality and homosexuality (Brown et al., 2007). For trans individuals, embodying their gender entails aligning their bodies with their desired gender. This pursuit of identity congruence, or the alignment between external behaviour and internal self-perception, is often understood as ‘gender transition’, encompassing social, psychological, legal, physical, and medical aspects (Soenens et al., 2011; Fein et al., 2017). The process of embodying

gender is not an individual, isolated or autonomous endeavour, but rather a process that is situated within specific sociocultural and geopolitical contexts.

In the context of migration, governance systems, asylum laws, and humanitarian regimes influence gender-diverse migrants' body projects, and their gendered sexual identities. "Gender labels are associated with different rights regimes" based on a legal hierarchy of vulnerability indicators that prescribe certain forms of embodying genders and sexualities as worthy of protection (Balaguera, 2023b, p. 1792). This "legal violence" is sustained through laws, legal systems and daily practices, that often compel gender-diverse migrants to express their identity in codified ways to meet humanitarian suffering thresholds (Menjívar et al., 2012; Galli, 2019; Balaguera, 2023b). As my analysis demonstrates, in navigating migration structures, gender-diverse migrants face legal violence that restricts their mobility, induces poverty, causes gender-based discrimination, and limits their access to housing, jobs, healthcare, and gender-affirming care. This violence intersects with other forms of oppression at the household, community and state level, manifesting as a continuum across migrants' lives, from childhood to adulthood, and from origin through transit-destinations, fundamentally constraining their sexual agency.

Migrants' sexual agency, including their ability to embody their desired gender/s is, thus, influenced by both psychological processes of self-perception and behavioural change, as well as social structures of restriction and opportunity. These structures not only shape how migrants exercise their sexual agency but serve as the basis through which it is enacted. Despite facing structural barriers that constrain their sexual agency, gender-diverse migrants actively develop psychological, relational, and material resources to navigate these challenges, negotiate and expand their sexual agency.

Research on migrants' sexual agency is scant but evolving. Studies indicate that gender transitions among gender-diverse migrants can act as identity congruence strategies, enhance their attractiveness in sexual markets and expand migration pathways, but also pose health risks, especially when using risky body modification practices (Vogel, 2009). Research also suggests that humanitarian systems play a key role in shaping migrants' gendered sexual identity and expression, often leading them to adopt rigid gendered expressions that fit vulnerability criteria within limiting protection frameworks (Balaguera, 2023b). Furthermore, scholars note that humanitarian spaces including shelters and organisations are crucial for migrants' body and mobility projects. These spaces can support migrants' goals, but can also constrain them, affecting their ability to negotiate migratory and sexual agency (Valenzuela et al., 2022; Balaguera, 2023a).

While research is illuminating, gaps remain, including a disproportionate focus on transgender women compared to men, and a limited geographical lens centred on South-North mobility, leaving South-South migration experiences underexplored. Little analysis exists regarding how gender-diverse migrants experience the transformation and reconfiguration of their gendered sexual identities and how they expand sexual agency, beyond violence-centric perspectives (Cvajner et al., 2021; Valenzuela et al., 2022). Additionally, the transnational life-course approach has been scantily used despite its potential to enhance our understanding of how sexual agency is negotiated in migration and influenced by migrants' life trajectories (Kōu et al., 2015; Erlinghagen, 2021). Sexuality and

migration scholars have also called for innovative research techniques and participatory arts-based research (PABR) methods to better understand gender-diverse migrants' lived experiences (Blidon, 2016; Marnell et al., 2021; Moralli, 2024).

In face of these research gaps and calls for scholarly attention, this chapter draws on the sexual migration and sexuality of migration research angles to explore how gender-diverse migrants negotiate their sexual agency as they navigate migration (Cvajner et al., 2021). In order to understand gender-diverse migrants' sexual agential negotiations, it is essential to situate their agency within the broader context of their lives including before migration, interweaving identity and migration aspirations across spaces of origin and transit-destination.

The chapter is divided into two key sections. The first uses a temporal lens guided by a transnational life-course approach, to situate gender-diverse migrants' sexual agency within the broader context of their lives. This part identifies the enabling and constraining factors that shaped gender-diverse migrants' sexual agency in lands of origin and which represented major factors shaping their aspirations to migrate. The second section concentrates on how geographical mobility shapes sexual agency, elaborating on how gender-diverse migrants navigate containment, access resources, create networks, negotiate and expand their sexual agency.

7.2 Becoming genders in lands of origin

Becoming an embodied gender is a fluid *nepantla* process, a journey of gendered sexual identity formation that often begins early in life within national and 'home' borders. Brenda and Vargas, gender-diverse migrants, learnt from a young age that expressing non-heteronormative identities could result in serious harm. Brenda, a 36-year-old Honduran woman with refugee status, recalled how she had liked girls since she was little and used to play at getting married with her female cousin. "When we played, I felt good", she said. When they were discovered playing, they were punished and called *marimachas* ['dykes']. Vargas, a 29-year-old Salvadoran woman with refugee status in masculine transition, similarly recalled how, when she was exploring lesbianism, her father beat her with a machete after learning from a friend that she had been seen kissing the friend's daughter and punished her with not going to school anymore. These punishments fundamentally shaped Brenda's and Vargas' sexual agency as they learnt to hide their sexual orientation to preserve physical well-being.

Among transgender migrants, crossdressing was often mentioned as a common transition practice, typically occurring in childhood and early adolescence. These early explorations were also met with misunderstanding and rejection from family and community members. Jenifer, a 23-year-old Honduran trans woman seeking asylum, knew she was a girl since childhood. By the age of seven, she agentically expressed this by wearing feminised clothing, adapting her clothes to be tighter. Many of my collaborators shared similar experiences, modifying their clothing as they grew up to make them appear more stereotypically masculine or feminine. Jenifer also preferred playing stereotypically feminine games with other girls, which led to reprimands from her parents, cousins,

siblings, and grandparents. As she recounted, “everyone rejects you, and you feel like you do not know what to do. They talk among themselves and start destroying you”.

Brenda, Vargas, and Jenifer’s narratives illustrate how sexual agency, enacted through nonconforming sexuality and gender, is sanctioned through the body, language and personhood (Cammaing, 2019). These disruptive agentic behaviours signal a recognised “visible strangeness”, a “figure that is painfully familiar in that very strange(r)ness”, a figure that must be ‘corrected’ or excluded and marginalised (Ahmed, 2020, p. 21). These sanctions deeply influence individuals’ sexual agency, shaping how they make choices about their sexual identity, behaviour, and expression (Cense, 2019), pushing them to the margins and forcing them to hide.

Experiences of domestic violence due to nonconforming gendered sexual identity, orientation and expression were common (see domestic violence definition in Appendix I). This included physical violence, psychological aggression, and attempts to force gender-diverse individuals into heterosexuality and conform to gender norms. As my collaborators grew older, violence became unbearable, forcing them to relocate, seeking refuge with friends, relatives, on the streets and eventually abroad. For example, El SV, a 29-year-old gay refugee, escaped domestic violence at age 13 after disclosing his sexual orientation to his father who responded violently by forcing him out of the house. EL SV had to sleep in a park until a friend offered him a place to stay. SV’s experience denotes how he transited *nepantla*, inhabiting a liminal and transitional space not only in sexuality but in being forced to move from one place to another. His extended family’s rejection further increased his vulnerability and isolation, exposing him to heightened risks. This highlights how gender-diverse youth face overlapping forms of marginalisation in homomistic and transmic contexts.³³ Familial difficulties in understanding gender nonconformity and transition processes do not occur in a vacuum. They take place within cultural, religious, and sociopolitical structures that enforce rigid gender norms. When these norms are challenged, discrimination can extend to entire families, as gender nonconformity is often seen as sinful, disapproved by the community, religion and the state.

Domestic violence compounds with community and state violence. Ale, a 29-year-old trans man from El Salvador, was accepted by his family after initially facing rejection. Nevertheless, transmic attitudes in his country of origin, combined with generalised violence, precarity, and political oppression, eventually forced him to flee. As a teenager, Ale was detained multiple times by the police because of how he expressed his gender. The police even called his mother to tell her that he was attracted to women, and that this could lead him to become a criminal. Ale was allowed to leave the police station with his mother who accepted his identity. This harassment reflects the negative social perceptions of gender diversity in El Salvador and how these prejudices can lead to their criminalisation (Gaynor, 2018).

³³ Transmisia refers to “hate or dislike of transgender people; prejudice against transgender people” (Diversity Pride, 2021).

As an adult, Ale used to work as a taxi driver and bought a house and a car on credit. Due to his masculinised gendered appearance, he was able to “pass as a man”. Like many other Salvadorans, he had to pay gangs a fee to ensure his safety while working. For a time, he managed to earn enough to support himself and his daughter, as well as cover the gang fees. However, when the state of exception was established by President Bukele’s administration, “the situation became a nightmare”, he recounted. Multiple organisations have reported widespread human rights violations against prisoners and local communities under the state of exception in El Salvador, which has serious gendered, racialised and classed implications (Amnesty International, 2024).

Nationwide mass searches are regularly conducted by the police to identify gang members and their associates. MS-13 and Barrio 18, the largest gangs in El Salvador, are well known for the tattoos of their members. Reports suggest that, despite its inaccuracy, Salvadoran authorities have relied on tattoos as an indicator of gang membership and as grounds for detention (HRW, 2025). This demonstrates the state’s biopower, as officials scrutinise bodies, classifying those with tattoos as dangerous gang members, and those without as potentially safe. This control over life condemns those ‘linked with gangs’ based on tattoos to a life in prison.

“They check your body to see if you have tattoos”, Ale said. He has a kidney condition and feared being subjected to these searches, where police are especially violent against men. “They would have thought I am a man... I am a man, but my body is different”, he explained. While Ale was not caught in a mass search, he was stopped by police on several occasions. He was once stopped while driving his car with his cisgender female partner and wearing a gender diversity flag t-shirt. Police officers forced him to remove his clothing to check for gang-related tattoos and, upon noticing his breasts they bullied him and his partner, and violently threatened with showing them “what real men are”. Ale was detained multiple times, facing questions about gang members and sexual threats. On one occasion, he was severely beaten on his back, exacerbating his kidney condition. “I was going to be killed either by the gangs or the police”, he said. Ale sought the support of an LGBT+ organisation to flee El Salvador, leaving his daughter with family and giving up his car and house. Ale and his partner were relocated to Guatemala, and from there to Mexico where they encountered members of the gang who were persecuting them, which lead them to seek refuge in the US.

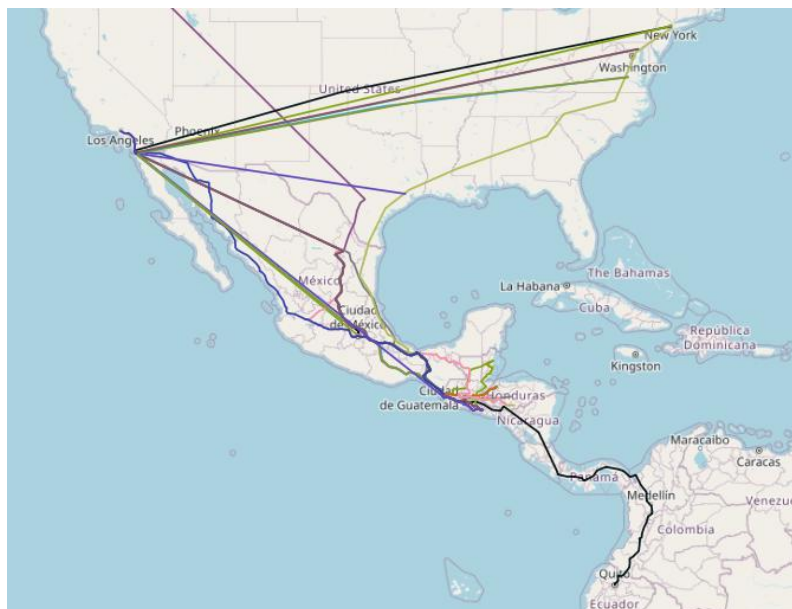
Ale’s experience shows how the intersections of transmisic attitudes, socioeconomic vulnerability, gender-based violence perpetrated by both state actors and gangs, influence sexual agency. These factors manifest differently depending on how “strange bodies” are gendered and accordingly treated (Ahmed 2020). Despite facing challenges, Ale negotiated his ability to embody his gendered sexual identity, wearing masculinised clothes, and achieving financial independence in male-dominated sectors. ‘Passing’ as a cisgender man provided a degree of protection but involved life risks, especially when being subject to police checks. When his body was recognised as a “strange”, feminised and sexually abuseable figure, his masculinity was denied, leading to sexual abuse threats to regulate his behaviour, and ‘teach’ him what it is to be a ‘real man’. As Butler notes, “to veer from the gender norm is to produce the aberrant example that regulatory powers (medical, psychiatric, and

legal, to name a few) may quickly exploit to shore up the rationale for their own continuing regulatory zeal” (Butler, 2004, p. 52).

This “necropower” sustains the right to dispose of “strange bodies” that fall outside normalised gender scripts (Mbembe, 2003; Ahmed, 2020). For most of my gender-diverse collaborators, the risk of death in their countries of origin due to compounding factors like gang violence, state abuse, trans- and homomisia at the household, community and state level, was a tangible and ever-present threat. This risk was not only a physical possibility, but also a social, political, and civil threat stemming from “prolonged exposure to violence, neglect, deprivation, and suffering” (Camminga, 2019, p. 243). Despite these dire circumstances, there are still spaces for agency and resistance, though severely constrained. While agency involves defining valuable goals and acting upon them through strategic negotiations within existing structures, Ale was forced to define a single, fundamental goal: survival. His ability to act on this goal was enabled by his material and social resources (capabilities), however limited. Although restricted by oppressive structures, there were still elements of agency in his complex decision-making process and actions. He was able to discuss his options with his partner and together, decided to ask for support from a trusted LGBT+ organisation, which was crucial in their final decision to leave. Analysing their financial and social resources, they decided, or perhaps found no other option but to give up Ale’s car and house, asked Ale’s mother to care for his daughter, and flee for survival. Even in these highly restricted circumstances, ambivalent forms of agency and resilience are still possible.

7.3 Agentic transit/ions

Figure 34: Migratory routes of gender-diverse migrants throughout the Americas.



Source: Created by author based on collaborators’ narratives.

Migration, a state of in-betweenness or *nepantla*, can shape gendered mobility processes and sexual agency. Entering new environments, and accessing new social, material, psychological, and informational resources, as often occurs through migration, can propel gender-diverse migrants’

sexual agency. Conversely, migration, and specifically survival migration, can restrict resources, exacerbate marginalisation and limit the availability of support networks. However, even when survival migration involves extreme forms of violence that limit migrants' agency, migrants negotiate and take control of areas of their lives and decision-making processes. Sexual agency in survival migration manifests in various ways that reflect migrants' limited but real ability to define valuable goals and act upon them within the confines of power structures, migration governance and humanitarian systems (Emirbayer et al., 1998; Alkire, 2008). In this part, I explore how gender-diverse migrants navigate restrictive migration structures, negotiating their sexual agency as they geographically and sexually migrate.

7.3.1 Navigating mobility and containment

Before reaching Mexico, Vargas relocated within El Salvador several times. Most times in childhood due to lack of housing and parental negligence. As an adult, she emigrated through Mexico to the US, where she requested asylum, fleeing gang violence and threats against her and her brother. In the US, Vargas found a supportive environment with her sister, who accepted her sexual orientation, allowing her to feel safer and freer to embody her gender by modifying her appearance. This perceived freedom was embodied by her decision to cut her hair after disclosing her sexual orientation to her sister, who responded with acceptance. Vargas' perception of safety was framed by her aspiration of not returning to El Salvador and her sister's acceptance which was a key source of support and validation, helping her to perceive herself as able and entitled to exercise sexual agency and express her gender.

Vargas: I used to have very long hair, and it had always been my dream to cut it. So, I thought, since I'm not going back to El Salvador, why not do it now? There's nothing holding me back—I'm not returning, and I'm going to be happy here. I'll be okay. My sister loves and accepts me. For me, it was an exhilarating and freeing experience to make that choice: I'm cutting my hair because I want to, because I can, because... I don't know, it just felt incredible.

However, Vargas faced challenges in the US. She was unable to obtain a social security number, which prevented her from accessing regular employment with better working hours, "from 8am to 5pm instead of 6am to 6pm", as she stated, reflecting the conditions of exploitation that many migrants face in the US. Legal information was in English, and she was unclear about the steps to get work authorisation. As she recounted her experience, I realised that she never attended her asylum hearings which can result in removal *in absentia* or deportation (CLINIC, 2019). Many asylum seekers miss their hearings due to lack of information, fear of authorities, and language barriers. Confused, without migration documents, and in need for employment, she decided to get a fake social security number, which led to her arrest, one-year incarceration, and deportation back to El Salvador.

Like many migrants, Vargas and her girlfriend entered Mexico via Tapachula and applied for Mexican asylum to unlock mobility throughout the country. They had to wait several months in Tapachula before receiving migratory documentation, facing "confinement in motion" – where migrants face restrictions and unfreedom even while migrating (Balaguera, 2023a). As expounded in Chapter 5, this confinement is a result of Mexico's "infrastructural containment" approach which instrumentalises the legal figure of asylum as the only viable means for survival migrants to secure

legal migratory documentation to enable safer mobility across the country. This forces migrants to wait for extended periods of time in unknown cities and with minimal support, leading them to implement survival strategies and tactics to maximise agency. Experiences of confinement in motion, are shaped by the intersection of gender, sexuality, class and other social markers. For gender-diverse migrants, the consequences of confinement impact their sexual agency in ways that vary widely across individuals.

Gender-diverse migrants often adjust or conceal their gendered sexual identity and expression to avoid discrimination and protect their well-being during confinement. Vargas and her girlfriend maintained a low profile and avoided displays of affection in humanitarian spaces and public places. Vargas' gender expression, involving more stereotypically masculine clothing and short hair, went generally unnoticed except at humanitarian spaces like migrant family shelters where, "people don't feel comfortable, they don't like seeing people like us", referring to other migrants. Other gender-diverse collaborators narrated similar experiences of discrimination mainly from other migrants. For instance, M., an Ecuadorian trans woman with refugee status who 'passed' as a cisgender woman, was initially welcomed by a religious leader, but when her identity was revealed, she was asked to leave, leading her and her boyfriend to sleep on the streets and take extra precautions to avoid assault. Gay migrant men also minimised behaviours that could have signalled their homosexuality. Nevertheless, their male bodies led to exclusion, as family shelters which are the majority, often deny access to single men, prioritising single women, women with children and family units. Trans women often opted for a more masculine gender expression, especially during transit and when sleeping on the streets. These forms of discrimination in conditions of survival migration are manifestations of necropower, exposing gender-diverse people to heightened risks and subjecting them to invisibilisation, and limiting their ability to exercise sexual agency and embody their gender (Caravaca-Morera et al., 2018).

Even if shelters and organisations provide critically needed assistance, they are part of Mexico's "waiting infrastructure" (see Chapter 5), serving as spaces of confinement with restrictions and rules to be followed. While these rules enable order and control over shelter functioning and residents, migrants often experience them as additional unfreedoms limiting their autonomy and ability to negotiate their sexual agency. For instance, some shelters prohibit the introduction of makeup into their facilities, requiring migrants to leave it in a staff-monitored area. Similarly, access to gender-affirming care (GAC) may be restricted, as in the case of Eny, a 24-year-old Salvadorian trans woman with refugee status. Without a medical examination, shelter staff did not allow her to take GAC claiming medical reasons. As Eny expressed, "I felt violated because I felt like a right was being limited. At the end of the day, each person is free to do whatever they want with their body". Eny's power to negotiate her sexual agency was undermined by her dependence on the shelter's assistance. She was not able to afford her own GAC and could not leave the shelter due to lack of financial resources, a situation that infantilised her and fundamentally limited her agency.

Experiences of confinement in motion also involved socioeconomic challenges that migrants navigated by generating income through strategies shaped by gendered sexual identity markers, and

migratory status. Migrants tend to be paid less than locals, especially in service and construction jobs. “They [local employers] take advantage and don’t pay what is right. They lower it for migrants. A Mexican can earn 200 pesos [10 USD] a day. They lower it to 150 migrants [about 8 USD]”, commented a migrant in a group discussion in Tapachula. This demonstrates the deep poverty faced by locals and migrants and the exacerbated precarity to which migrants are exposed. Within this precarity, gender-diverse migrants face additional forms of discrimination that limit their ability to access labour markets. Trans women who tend to adopt a more visible gendered expression, face compounding challenges based on their gender and sexuality, pushing them to take on precarious jobs that intersect with their gendered transitions.

Despite her qualifications, Eny faced transphobic discrimination, being denied work at beauty salons due to employers’ concerns about customer discomfort. This discrimination led her to reengage in sex work. After confinement in southern Mexico, Eny relocated to central Mexico where she found work at a hair salon. However, her income was insufficient, forcing her to supplement it through sex work to afford GAC and support her family. While sex work may not be seen as negative in itself, she expressed that she would have preferred working in a different sector and felt she had no other option. After struggling to establish herself in central Mexico, she decided to leave for Tijuana, where she accessed an LGBT+ shelter that provided free GAC, namely, hormone therapy.

Similarly, M.’s gender transition was central in her migratory process. The inability to safely embody her gender identity in Ecuador due to risk of abuse, prompted her and her boyfriend to flee. M. also experienced discrimination when seeking employment in Mexico. However, she accessed a work program in Tapachula and allocated some of her earnings to hormone therapy. After several months of waiting for their asylum resolutions in Tapachula, M. and her boyfriend relocated to Tijuana, drawn by the presence of an LGBT+ organisation offering free GAC. Like Eny, they spent about three months in Tijuana awaiting their CBP One app appointment to seek asylum in the US. During this period, M. engaged in sex work for the first time, and experienced mental health challenges, attributing them to the uncertainty of her situation. Reflecting on her experience of confinement and waiting, she said, “It has affected me a lot. I gain too much weight because I eat due to too much anxiety. Sometimes I don’t feel like eating anymore and I don’t eat. Sometimes I don’t sleep for a whole day until the next night. But right now, I know I have an appointment, I’m happy”.

Eny’s and M.’s experiences demonstrate the complex intersection of gendered identity, discrimination, poverty and confinement. They both followed similar trajectories, entering Mexico through Tapachula, and falling into confinement, eventually moving north to try to enter the US. “Confinement in motion” (Balaguera, 2023a) undermined their autonomy, fostered aid reliance, exacerbated poverty, and limited their sexual agency, affecting not only their gendered sexual identity and expression, but their overall well-being, generating emotional distress and material precarity.

Transgender migrants’ transition processes are impacted by their geographical transit, and their navigation of Mexico’s containment infrastructure, which provides Mexican asylum that does not recognise their gender identity – an additional layer of exclusion. Despite this legal violence that misgenders and disregards transgender identities, accessing documentation to unlock mobility, is

nonetheless a crucial achievement for many. For instance, Jenifer created a photo-story representing her humanitarian visa, which allows those seeking asylum to leave Tapachula, where her sex is marked as *hombre* (man) and her past name is used. Despite this misrecognition, this represented a multilayered achievement as it enabled her to travel, and help her loved ones, demonstrating her worth to those who disbelieved her.

Photo-story 12: “Cumpliendo siempre mis metas” by Jenifer.



Always achieving my goals

My fulfilled goal is to have my visa to travel to achieve my dreams, to be a better person for my family and to be able to help them. And so that many mouths are shut when they told me that I was not going to be someone in life just for being trans.

Jenifer, Honduran trans woman seeking asylum, 23 years old.

Source: Created during a photovoice workshop held in Tapachula, Mexico. December 2022. Photo prompt: ‘My past achievements’ (User rights granted to author).

Processes of gender exploration, reconfiguration and affirmation in migration, were not only influenced by structural factors but also by transnational familial dynamics. Sabel, a Honduran trans woman, had been in Mexico for about two and a half years when we met, and she did not use hormone therapy during all that time. She navigates between masculine and feminine gender expressions. Out of fear of rejection from her family, she embodies a masculine performance when speaking to them on video calls and confirmed that if she were to live near her family, she would likely leave her Sabel identity behind. However, without them, she would rather maintain her feminine identity. Her experience highlights complex states of *nepantla*, in-betweenness, exemplifying challenging negotiations between individual identity and familial expectations (Bingham et al., 2020). As she expressed in her photo-story, even if she considers her trans womanhood as part of her “true self”, she felt compelled to leave it behind to prioritise her family’s preference and avoid rejection (Photo-story 13). After crossing into the US, where some of her family members live, Sabel shifted to a masculine gay identity. This shift underscores the influence of familial gendered norms, even in a new context, and the ways in which trans individuals may adapt their identities based on their social environments (Boehm, 2008).

Photo-story 13 by Sabel.



The journey has been long and difficult, but I've turned my weaknesses into strengths and learned what it truly means to express my gender freely. Most of the struggle has been to be recognised by my family as I am now. I've broken through barriers, thanks to God who has opened doors for me. Trust and have faith, for God will always be by your side. Never doubt who you are or what you want. Always remember that where there's a will, there's a way.

This is my true self.

Sabel. Honduran trans woman with refugee status, 21 years old.

Source: Created during a photovoice workshop held in Tijuana, Mexico. June 2023. Photo prompt: 'My past achievements' (User rights granted to author).

7.3.2 Resources, support, and solidarity

Violence and exclusion are not the only experiences endured by gender-diverse migrants. As they transit/ion, they also find ways to access resources, create networks, negotiate and expand their sexual agency. Humanitarian spaces and their coordination among themselves to support migrants, solidarity networks, and the arts, arose as critical resources that supported migrants' agentic journeys and their ability to express, explore, reconfigure and affirm their genders.

Humanitarian spaces like shelters and organisations play a complex role. They are part of Mexico's 'waiting infrastructure' that confines migrants and limits their agency, but they also provide essential assistance, offering spaces for migrants to endure forced immobility as they await asylum decisions. Though scarce, LGBT+ humanitarian spaces exit and shape the routes chosen by gender-diverse migrants through word-of-mouth recommendations. Jenifer, a Honduran woman seeking asylum, recounted how she and her boyfriend accessed an LGBT+ shelter in Tapachula through recommendations. "First, we went to an [LGBT+] organisation in Guatemala, and they paid for our tickets to the border here, and we entered the LGBT+ shelter [in Tapachula]". Her experience reveals a transnational humanitarian corridor between LGBT+ humanitarian spaces which are crucial for migrants' mobility and protection.

Other collaborators, like Ale and his girlfriend from El Salvador, further explained that they sought support from a Salvadoran LGBT+ organisation that managed to get UNHCR to quickly relocate them to Guatemala. The Salvadoran organisation connected them with a Guatemalan LGBT+ organisation that funded their travel to Mexico, where they requested asylum and accessed LGBT+ shelters in Tapachula and Tijuana. These spaces provide immediate support, facilitating migration

strategies and access to safe ‘waiting zones’ where migrants connect with each other, form solidarity networks, explore and negotiate their sexual agency.

LGBT+ shelters can serve as spaces for sexual identity exploration and affirmation. Some provide free GAC, mainly hormone therapy, helping residents to expand their ability to embody their gender and encouraging some to begin a medical transition. Lex, a Salvadoran gay man started hormone therapy to support his transfeminine transition through the assistance of an LGBT+ shelter that referred him to a gender affirming clinic for free GAC. He explained that he had never felt as interested in transitioning before, but at the LGBT+ shelter, “I’ve been wearing heels more often, putting on makeup and everything. But it wasn’t until I got here...”, he recounted. While he had been curious about how trans women in El Salvador transformed their bodies, he lacked the confidence to pursue it himself. However, the connections and friendships that Lex built with other trans women at the shelter, combined with the availability of free GAC, encouraged him to transition. He emphasised how important it has been to “feel connected with some of them [trans women] whom I perhaps trust”, and who have guided him in the process. Lex interpreted his transition as an ongoing process, emphasising that he wanted to “be different, not just a gay guy, but trans... I know that’s a lifelong change. If I’m going to be trans, it will be for life”. He clarified that at the time, he identified as a man but aspired to become a trans woman in the future, as his body changed. He explained,

Lex: In the future, yes, I want to identify myself as a trans woman... It’s like the pill. Obviously, if I take the pill today, I’m not going to wake up tomorrow with long hair, a big bottom and breasts, right? What I don’t want is surgery that leaves me with something artificial. I’ve seen trans women without typical breasts, and like Sabel said [a member of the photovoice workshop], why remove a part of myself [the penis] if that’s what identifies trans women? I feel like one of those trans women who doesn’t want breasts. Or maybe I do, since I’m on hormones and thinking about it.

Lex revealed a state of *nepantla*. His gendered mobility intersected with his geographical transition where he wanted to “close a cycle” that marked the end of his life in El Salvador, a new beginning in Mexico and eventually in the US. Within a month of using hormone therapy, he noticed both psychological and physical changes, describing how he felt increasingly feminine, though he struggled to articulate exactly how. Lex relocated to the US a few weeks after our first interaction, he continued his transition there, embracing a transfeminine identity.

Ale, a Salvadoran trans man, also decided to begin using GAC (hormone therapy), during his time at an LGBT+ shelter in Mexico. In El Salvador, he never showed interest in using hormones or other medical procedures to align his body with his gender. However, in Mexico, he began hormone therapy partly as a way to cope with emotional distress and physical changes due to his inability to exercise after being hospitalised for a kidney condition. “I used to do a lot of exercise. Now I cannot, I feel so tired, and my body has changed”, he shared. Ale hoped the hormone treatment would boost his self-esteem and motivation. Although the LGBT+ shelter where he resided, did not provide free GAC, living with other transgender residents who were taking it encouraged him to do the same.

During my observations at LGBT+ shelters, I noticed that discussions about the cost, access, effects, and bodily changes of hormone therapy were common, along with other transition practices. Trans

women often used female contraceptives, while trans men commonly used testosterone injections. Those without access to free GAC relied on recommendations from other migrants to select their treatment, often purchasing hormonal products at local pharmacies without prescriptions. Residents explored not only hormone therapy but also their gender expression, experimenting with crossdressing, hairstyles, clothing, and makeup. My collaborators referenced this, as opportunities to explore and embody their gender identities alongside other gender-diverse migrants.

As demonstrated by the cases of Lex and Ale, shelters can be resources for migrants to negotiate their sexual agency, while fostering a sense of community and togetherness in the process of migrating genders and geographies. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that the provision of free GAC, while potentially empowering, can also result in adverse effects in the context of migration. Considering that migrants in Mexico are mainly seeking to move and relocate, GAC can be discontinued, leading to reverse effects, and generating distress and other affectations. Exploring the effects of free GAC, and specifically of hormone therapy, by humanitarian spaces remains a critical research area for further exploration.

LGBT+ humanitarian spaces also served as platforms for migrants to collectively express their gendered identities. The arts, such as dance and music, were important tools for migrants to explore, reconfigure, affirm, and represent their identities. These artistic expressions also contribute to advocacy efforts for policy change and foster environments where migrants feel represented and valued (Marnell et al., 2021). For instance, at an LGBT+ shelter in Tapachula, a group of gender-diverse migrants organised a dance performance in a public plaza. This plaza had been a site of conflict between local communities, the government, and migrants, as it has been often occupied by migrants who, in waiting for migratory documentation, had fallen in a situation of homelessness and been repeatedly evicted from the area. Gender-diverse migrants' use of the public space to dance and embody both unauthorised genders and migratory statuses represent an intersection of marginalised identities. Embodying a marginalised identity in public can be seen as a radical act of resistance through collective existence and joyful representation of that very identity, profoundly impacting migrants' sense of self and strengthening their belonging to an identity group. At the end of the performance, migrants engaged with the audience, mainly locals, fostering empathy and generating spaces for connection and mutual learning.

Inspired by the importance of safe spaces for gender-diverse people and the transformative power of the arts, Eny created a photo-story that encapsulates her aspiration to establish an organisation dedicated to supporting gender-diverse people and fostering artistic expression as a means of empowerment. Her creation, featuring the gender-diversity flag in the background and an LGBT+ organisation building, depicts her hand and the hand of a lesbian woman reaching out to touch each other. This, as she explained, represents connection and unity between people of diverse orientations and backgrounds, showcasing how such safe spaces can have a profound impact on migrants' aspirations and interpersonal relationships.

Photo-story 14 by Eny.



There are many goals to achieve, but I have one in particular: to create an organisation that provides support and safe spaces for people of sexual dissidence, while also having a venue to showcase art in its different branches and expressions.

Eny, Salvadoran trans woman with refugee status, 24 years old.

Source: Created during a photovoice workshop in Tapachula, Mexico. December 2022. Photo prompt: 'My future goals' (User rights granted to author).

7.4 Chapter conclusion

This chapter addressed part of my research questions by exploring how gender-diverse migrants negotiate and expand their sexual agency as they navigate migration structures, transiting sexual and geographical states of *nepantla* (in-betweenness). Talking about gender-diverse identities, entails acknowledging their unique and heterogeneous experiences (Platero, 2014). Therefore, I did not attempt to provide a rigid interpretation of *the* gender-diverse experience, but rather to provide a nuanced analysis of the ways in which gender-diverse migrants face conditions of precarity rooted in cisheteronormative structures, and how they strategically negotiate, resist and expand their agency as they navigate the challenges of migration. In alignment with the previous chapters, this chapter adopted a situated intersectionality lens and a temporal perspective, demonstrating the importance of examining agency as a dynamic process transnationally influenced by the past, constrained by present circumstances and geared towards future aspirations.

As illustrated by my collaborators, social contexts, including norms, policies, social expectations, power dynamics, and relationships are integral to how sexual agency is expressed and negotiated. This includes 'strategic compliance' to preserve well-being and achieve desired outcomes (Agarwal, 1997; Cense, 2019). In the context of migration, sexual agency manifests through complex negotiations of desires, relationships, gendered sexual identities and expressions which go beyond individual interpretations and are shaped by violent structures in lands of origin and transit-destination, as well as the constraints imposed by migration governance, and humanitarian systems (Cortés, 2023).

Following a temporal lens guided by a transnational life-course approach, this chapter situated gender-diverse migrants' sexual agency within the broader context of their lives. It examined how sexual agency relates to changes in gendered sexual identity and migrants' ability to embody their gender/s. The analysis exposed migrants' early strategies to negotiate their sexual agency. This revealed their strategies to navigate *nepantla*, embodying non-conforming genders and sexualities

that were violently sanctioned, fundamentally shaping their sexual agency. Familial rejection due to nonconforming gendered expressions compounded with community and state oppression that escalated to unbearable forms of violence, deeply influencing gender-diverse individuals' migratory agency. In line with Ahmed's work (2020), this analysis questions the idea of home and 'homeland' as a clearly defined space that was once secure and nurtured well-being, and which is left behind in search of a new 'home'. This imagination of 'home' may not exist for gender-diverse migrants whose sense of belonging to land and body, has been constantly threatened in their lands of origin. Home, nonetheless, is created in relation to communities, locations and embodied identities that become 'home' or *hogar*.

Migration emerged as a material possibility, a resource to escape the threat of death, and a way to negotiate sexual agency, embodying gender in new agentic ways. However, migration governance and humanitarian systems, generate conditions of "confinement in motion", constructing situations of violence that reinforce structures of oppression that migrants escaped from in their lands of origin (Balaguera, 2023a) and which constrain their sexual agency.

Migrants navigate these restrictive structures, negotiating sexual agency in various ways. Concealing their gendered sexual identity and expression to avoid discrimination during confinement was a crucial strategy to protect their wellbeing. Access to gender-affirming care (GAC) was essential for transgender migrants', as they navigated the obstacles and facilitators imposed by humanitarian spaces, illuminating how humanitarian systems shape sexual agency and identity. Sex-work also emerged as a critical survival strategy that enabled sexual agency, gender affirmation and economic self-reliance, but which entail tremendous life-risks including the risk of sexually transmitted diseases – an issue that is out of the scope of this paper. Seen by some as the only alternative for economic independence, sex-work enabled transgender migrants to afford GAC, with GAC enhancing their clientele and work opportunities. Importantly, research gaps remain, concerning the impact of lack of access to GAC on migrants' lives.

Transnational familial dynamics also emerged as critical in shaping the negotiation of sexual agency, demonstrating the intricacy of transitions in transit, and migrants' linked lives. Negative opinions, and attitudes of family members regarding gendered sexual identity and expression significantly impacted migrants' capacity to embody their gender, with familial geographical proximity often acting as a deterrent to authentic gender expression. Conversely, the emergence of support from 'chosen families' and newly formed social networks demonstrated to be instrumental in facilitating migrants' gender transitions.

As gender-diverse migrants navigated violent structures of confinement, they also accessed resources and created networks that critically supported their agentic journeys and their ability to express, explore, reconfigure and affirm their genders. LGBTQ+ shelters were crucial resources in migrants' journeys of gender exploration and affirmation, not only by enabling mobility, protection and providing GAT, but also by enabling spaces for connection, where migrants were able to talk, learn and move genders together guiding one another in the process. These learning communities of practice are key for gender-diverse individuals' gender becomings, where they create 'home' in

migration. The arts emerged as key elements in these communities, serving as important tools for migrants to represent their identities in public, enabling spaces for connection and mutual learning with local communities. The dance performance in Tapachula exemplified how migrants can reclaim public spaces, challenge marginalisation, and foster empathy through artistic expression. Eny's aspirations to establish an organisation supporting gender-diverse people further highlighted the transformative potential of safe spaces and artistic undertakings even within highly restrictive structures.

This chapter demonstrates that even if migration can severely limit sexual agency, it can, at the same time, also be a catalyst for empowerment. As migrants transit *nepantla*, navigating geographical and gendered mobility, migration governance structures and restrictions, they also build gendered solidarity networks and find innovative ways to negotiate gendered sexual identities, expressions and orientations, asserting sexual agency in limited, and yet expansive ways.

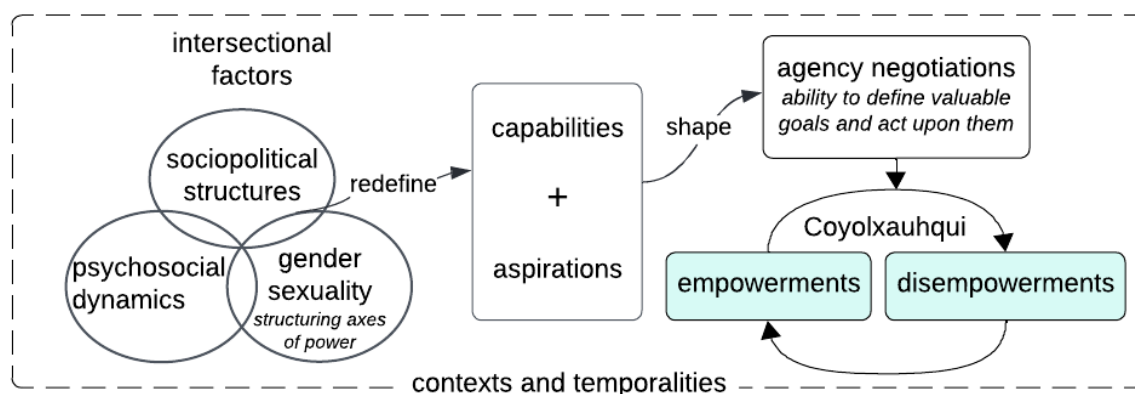
8 Conclusions

This research explored processes of agency dis/empowerment in contexts of survival migration. Centring on the experiences of women and gender-diverse survival migrants in Mexico, the study demonstrates that evolving sociopolitical structures, psychosocial dynamics, and gendered/sexual identities are central factors influencing migrants' agentic capabilities. The study illustrates how these factors dynamically intersect in specific contexts and temporalities, modulating migrants' capabilities and aspirations, thereby influencing their ability to negotiate, assert and expand their agency. The study had three objectives: first, to examine the migration processes of LAC women and gender-diverse migrants in Mexico, from origin through transit-destinations. Second, to analyse the role of Mexico's containment infrastructure and US externalisation practices in affecting migrants' agency. Thirdly, to understand how past experiences have influenced migrants' agency and decision-making processes. This research offered a nuanced analysis that emphasises both, oppressive structures and agential negotiations, challenging violence-centric views of survival migrants' experiences, and making significant theoretical, methodological, and empirical contributions to the field of migration studies.

Theoretically, the study provides a dynamic analytical framework to examine agency through a contextually situated and temporal lens, where sociopolitical structures, psychosocial dynamics, gender and sexuality emerge as key intersecting factors that refine capabilities and aspirations, and which can reshape how agency is negotiated, leading to empowerments and disempowerments or *Coyolxauhqui* processes (Figure 35). This framework may be utilised to study agential negotiations in other contexts while being flexible enough to accommodate other structuring axes of power such as race and class. Moreover, applying a dynamic lens to the aspirations and capabilities framework, constitutes another important contribution as it underscores the changing nature of structures, capabilities and aspirations.

Building on the work of preceding scholars, this study adopted a structuralist standpoint to view agency as a negotiated ability shaping and being shaped by structures. This perspective was crucial for examining the 'hidden' forms of power that survival migrants negotiate, moving beyond simplistic views of migrants as either fully independent agents or collapsed victims. Added to that, integrating social psychological interpretations to analyse migrants' processes of negotiating and expanding agency, constitutes a valuable contribution to migration studies, recognising the ecological interconnectedness between internal aspects, as well as external, social, cultural and material factors influencing agency. Furthermore, the analysis of how agency is influenced by structures of power, personal life experiences, and gender transitions, further adds value to critical migration and border studies, as well as to the sexuality and psychology of migration research. Drawing on transfeminist, queer and decolonial perspectives, including frameworks like the *Coyolxauhqui* process, this work advances conceptual tools that elucidate how women and gender-diverse migrants negotiate agency as they navigate oppressive structures.

Figure 35. Agency dis/empowerments in survival migration



Source. Created by the author.

Methodologically, the utilisation of a mixed-methods, multi-sited strategy incorporating arts-based approaches and participatory elements, has expanded research possibilities, demonstrating the potential of these approaches for co-producing nuanced data to study migration dynamics. The diverse methodological approach further enabled a multifaceted understanding of migrants' lives, allowing an examination of challenging experiences as well as adaptive strategies and psychological resources that shape agential negotiations. Furthermore, the methodology enabled a creative analysis of the data. The creation of photo-story collages constitutes a key methodological contribution which demonstrates the unique advantages of integrating researchers' creativity in the data analysis and writing process. Importantly, this research delivers new, layered evidence of women and gender-diverse migrants' agential capabilities as they navigate LAC migration structures, offering policy-relevant insights (see 8.3) that can help inform protection systems and advocacy efforts in Global South contexts.

The dissertation was structured in two parts, the first one established the theoretical, contextual, and methodological grounding for the research. The second part utilised primary data to investigate the factors that shape migrants' ability to negotiate, assert, and expand their agency in relation to sociopolitical structures (Chapter 5), psychosocial aspects (Chapter 6) and gender and sexuality (Chapter 7). The next section of this conclusion chapter delineates the main findings, followed by methodological implications, limitations and suggestions for future research, and policy-relevant recommendations.

8.1 Key findings and implications

This section offers an overview of the central insights derived from this research, along with their implications. It begins with a delineation of the core concepts grounding this study, followed by an integrated exposition of the main findings. These findings are thematically organised into migration drivers, the disempowering impacts of oppressive migration structures, and the strategies employed by migrants to cope with oppression, negotiate, and expand their agency, seen from the *Coyolxauhqui* perspective. Throughout this exposition, I elucidate how sociopolitical factors, psychosocial experiences, and gendered/sexual identities in origin and transit-destinations influence migrants' agential capabilities.

Migration brings with it new opportunities and constraints that can stifle, initiate, or accelerate processes of agency change and empowerment. Although a somewhat tired notion, my understanding of empowerment is rooted in the recognition of inequalities and collective struggles for social change, and considers its personal, relational, political, economic and contextual dimensions. Agency is at the core of this framework, and I advance a view that recognises agency as the structurally constrained ability to define valuable goals and act upon them, including the option not to act (Alkire, 2008; Drèze et al., 2013; de Haas, 2021). It is fundamentally influenced by past experiences, directed toward future goals, and constrained by present circumstances (Emirbayer et al., 1998). This ability is not an independent individual trait, rather, it involves strategic negotiations of power, where individuals engage with, submit to, resist, or subtly shape dominant structures and norms through their choices and actions (Sen, 1985a; Kabeer, 1999a; Mahmood, 2001).

Influenced by Ibrahim and Alkire (2007), Kabeer (1999a) and Mahmood (2001), I see empowerment as a process of expansion of the ability to negotiate agency in a context where this ability was previously denied. This perspective is highly relevant to the circumstances and experiences of women and gender-diverse survival migrants, recognising the influence of internal psychological processes and external material factors in shaping their evolving agency. Betts's (2010) notion of survival migration is valuable in highlighting the gaps in international protection frameworks and particularly relevant in the LAC context, where displacement occurs due to complex factors, which do not neatly adapt to dominant 'refugee' definitions. Furthermore, this concept may be interpreted as a notion that recognises agency in mobility rather than simply as having been 'forcibly displaced' by external forces and devoid of agency. The decision to migrate often constitutes a constrained agentic act, in this case, undertaken for survival. Therefore, this concept recognises the limited but existent possibilities to negotiate and assert migratory agency. This notion, however, has its risks such as the potential simplification of mobility drivers, entailing similar issues of deservingness as the 'refugee' category. Therefore, I used this term critically and in conjunction with an intersectional perspective, that recognises the complexity of migration drivers, foregrounding both structural vulnerability and strategic agency.

A temporally situated lens was key to understand the intersectional factors shaping women and gender-diverse survival migrants' agency, as they navigated structures of power, throughout spaces of origin and transit-destination. This lens appreciates the dynamic nature of dis/empowerment processes, seeing migration as mobility continuums without static arrival and departure stations and driven by multiple rather than unique factors. It sees migratory processes as not linear but instead, characterised by in-betweenness (*nepantla*), and continuous transnational "muddling through" where goals, choices and identities are continuously re-developed (Scholten, 2022, p. 241).

Migratory agency drivers

A deep engagement with migrants' visual and oral narratives revealed that structures of violence and precarity, rampant gender-based violence, and emotional distress, were key in driving repeated experiences of internal survival mobility, which evolved into processes of circular and onward migration. Across time and space, migrants' aspirations and capabilities to migrate frequently

fluctuated, reflecting their dynamic journeys. Early-life internal displacements were a common experience with gendered issues emerging as a key motivation, combined with generalised violence, poverty, and domestic violence. Childhood adversities, within contexts of poverty and violence, led many to internally relocate, initially as dependents of their caregivers and eventually as adolescents seeking safety, liberation from domestic and gender-based violence, avenues for gendered-sexual expression and identity affirmation. The analysis of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) allowed for a deeper understanding of the longitudinal factors driving migration. Indeed, many of those who experienced child maltreatment, especially witnessing violence against women in their households, engaged in abusive relationships as adults which, in some cases, became the main driver of their survival out-migration later in life. This underscores the long-term, complex influence of violence on migratory aspirations.

Within structures of oppression, violence and poverty, complex interrelated factors emerged as key migration motivators. The most frequently mentioned were life-threats by gangs, formal authorities and former intimate partners, profound poverty, lack of income generating opportunities, and worsening socioeconomic conditions in countries of origin. Importantly, discrimination due to gendered-sexual identities, were recognised as powerful drivers for gender-diverse individuals. Emotions emerged not merely as reactions, but as potent migration drivers and a determinant piece when the decision to migrate was made. Psycho-emotional experiences like fear, despair, anger, stress, interwoven with hope, excitement, and bonds with loved ones, manifested as intersecting affective states that deeply infused migration aspirations, influencing migratory agency. As such, migration arose as a limited agential capability, rooted in despair but also in a sense of hope for improved lives, and migrants' self-belief in their ability to achieve goals – self-efficacy. This combination of aspirations and the minimum material capabilities to migrate, enabled migrants to assert migratory agency as a means of survival.

Navigating migration structures

The notion of social navigation, was instrumental to examine migrants' layered agential negotiations as they navigated migration structures and their infrastructures (Düvell et al., 2022; Xiang, 2024). In the context of mobility in the Americas, these migration infra/structures largely operate under logics of externalisation through containment. In Mexico, these externalisation strategies materialise through policies, bureaucracy, and the deployment of border securitisation mechanisms that transform the territory into a nation-wide vertical border, and a space to contain and devolve migrants further south. The instrumentalisation of the figure of asylum as the main documentation pathway for survival migrants, emerged as a key mechanism that, by overwhelming the asylum system, effectively blocked migratory agency. The use of asylum in this way, converts the system in an immobility device, containing migrants in the South and away from the North.

Containment strategies construct conditions of disempowerment, which are endured as protracted waiting periods, with material, psychological and gendered implications. A situation of “confinement in motion” (Balaguera, 2023a), surfaced as a common experience where migrants were forced into immobility, which, in the words of as a trans man seeking asylum, was experienced as feeling “like

a prisoner in the midst of freedom”. Tapachula, an entry point, largely functions as a bottleneck, blocking mobility through various mechanisms, including multiple migration checkpoints, and the instrumentalisation of the overwhelmed asylum system. Migrants navigate these structurally constructed conditions of disempowerment by making choices often based on confusing un/official sources of mis/information which exacerbate their vulnerabilities. In an attempt to maximise resources and their migratory agency, some leave Tapachula using clandestine routes, risking falling in the hands of criminal groups or migration officials. Many others, especially women and gender-diverse migrants, remain in Tapachula until accessing documentation to unlock relatively safer mobility.

The psychological toll of these containment strategies is severe. Stress, fear and anxiety, are intrinsic parts of migrants’ experiences. Prolonged waiting periods, lack of income generating opportunities, coupled with insecure migration status, within a context where formal authorities and criminal groups target migrants, exacerbate pre-existing challenges and potentially aggravate complex trauma. Gender plays a critical role in these experiences, with women and gender-diverse migrants facing heightened risks. In surviving confinement, they often resort to implementing risky strategies such as sharing housing with strangers to reduce expenses, sleeping on the streets, engaging in sex work and other precarious job markets. Gender-diverse migrants in particular, often conceal their sexual orientation and gender identity, trying to ‘pass’ as cisgender to mitigate the risk of abuse.

Within this complex context and necropolitical logics, humanitarian spaces, including shelters and organisations, emerged as key actors within Mexico’s “waiting infrastructure”. My research demonstrates the paradoxical role of these spaces, as they simultaneously address migrants’ immediate needs while undermining their agency by fostering dependency and influencing their mobility choices. Humanitarian spaces often operate under restrictive frameworks that multiply containment layers. This adds another dimension of disempowerment, with both material and psychological implications, amplifying mental distress and curtailing sexual agency – for example by denying access to gender affirming care or restricting the use of makeup. Humanitarian spaces, however, are ambivalent in nature, and while they restrict agency, they also enable it by facilitating resources. These spaces played a critical role in shaping migratory routes, with migrants, especially gender-diverse individuals, choosing routes depending on the availability of LGBT+ shelters, building “humanitarian corridors” (Herrera-Rosales, 2025). International organisations, namely, the UN (IOM and UNHCR), are key players within this infrastructure, operating relocation programmes that distribute migrants throughout the territory and strengthen containment. While this entails multiple layers of oppression that fundamentally restrict migrants’ agency, women and gender-diverse migrants strategically acquiesce to this temporary domination, exchanging freedom for physical safety and implementing various agency maximising strategies.

A *Coyolxauhqui* process: coping with adversity, negotiating and expanding agency

Migrants are not merely passive recipients of oppression, they actively navigate intricate structures by implementing various coping strategies, negotiating their agency, and at times, subverting these very structures. Cognitive coping strategies were key in helping migrants persevere towards their

goals, while strengthening their sense of purpose. Cognitive reframing and spiritual coping mechanisms were particularly salient, underscoring the profound importance of positive coping strategies in enabling migrants not only to bounce back (resilience) but to bounce forward, signalling their transformative potential. Sociability and solidarity networks formed with other migrants and with some organisations also arose as vital coping mechanisms. Solidarity emerged across women and gender-diverse migrants' narratives as critical resources for them to adapt to the restrictions of migration structures, helping them cover caregiving responsibilities, housing and financial needs. These networks helped them cope not only materially but also psychologically, fostering a sense of belonging and social support. Collaborations with organisations, as well as seeking their support, was also key as a coping mechanism. These collaborations proved to be instrumental not only for migrants but for organisations as well. Similarly, participation in activist and arts collectives, emerged as a viable avenue to assert migratory agency. These groups, migrants' networks, organisations, activists and artists, can provide critical resources and support to migrants navigating complex and often hostile environments.

Beyond positive coping, adaptations and assistance, migrants' narratives demonstrate processes of agency transformation and in some cases, expansion. These transformations had implications at various levels. Structurally, migrants' narratives revealed how manifestations of collective agency, can result in the collective achievement of goals, subtly but significantly shaping migration structures. The 2018 'migrant caravans' and the 'Migrant Parliament' in Tijuana, surfaced as obvious cases of collective empowerment through intentional coordinated action between migrants and organisations, resulting in clear policy actions. However, contemporary caravans have not resulted in policy changes, signalling the limited potential of migrants' collective agency in shaping migration structures. Migrants' collective utilisation of organisational programmes to advance their objectives, as well as their strategic use of the CBP One app represent less evident forms of collective agency that, though not coordinated in a formal sense, enact shared tactics that reconfigure how migration structures operate (Scott, 1990; Sewell, 1992; Mezzadra, 2011; Landau, 2025). The strategic navigation of humanitarian aid and digital migration infrastructures (the CBP One app) may be seen as an indirect form of collective agency negotiated through what Scott (1992) characterises as "weapons of the weak". Despite not being formally coordinated, the concurrent implementation of these agential 'weapons', show subtle, indirect acts of defiance geared towards shared goals. This demonstrates that even without formal organisation, migrants' agential navigation of containment structures can alter these very structures. However, the structural response to migrants' strategic navigation of these structures, involved a more stringent migration framework and intensified efforts to contain mobility. This demonstrates that even if migrants' collective agency can influence migration structures and lead to agential expansion, migrants' agency impacts are not proportionate and might be countered by increased oppression.

At a psychological level, agency transformations and expansions were observed as positive psychological changes characterised by enhanced perceptions of self-confidence, growth, and self-determination after past adversities. This psychological expansion can be seen as a precondition for agency empowerment, as it involves individuals' recognition of themselves as able and entitled to

make strategic life choices and to exercise agency in alignment with their goals and values. Migrants' narratives reveal that psychological growth, observed in enhanced self-perceptions, a greater sense of personal strength, as well as increased empathy, can significantly shape agency changes and facilitate empowerment. However, even if processes of psychological empowerment arise in migration, it is crucial to note that these are embedded within structures that limit broader agential expansions.

Migrants' sexual agency negotiations were also shaped by migration processes and deeply influenced by past experiences. Gender-diverse migrants' stories revealed intersecting geographical and gendered sexual identity transitions. While migration opened spaces for sexual agency explorations and identity reconfigurations, oppressive structures and rampant homo- and transphobia curtailed such processes. Shelters and social support by the LGBT+ community, where fundamental in gender-diverse migrants' processes of sexual agency expansion. The experiences of gender-diverse migrants highlight how migratory processes involve complex renegotiations and reconstructions of sexual agency.

Overall, women and gender-diverse migrants' agential transformations in migration can be interpreted as a *Coyolxauhqui* process (Anzaldúa, 2015). This notion is grounded in indigenous knowledge systems of Central Mexico, and inspired in *Coyolxauhqui*, the moon, and her experience of dismemberment by her brother. This process involves cycles of disempowerment and empowerment, or *desconocimiento* (un-knowing) and *conocimiento* (awareness/knowing). This dynamic process offers a view of empowerment as a process evolving over time. It encompasses *desconocimiento* (un-knowing), trauma and fragmentation, moving through an in-between state of *nepantla*, towards the reconstruction and reframing of the self, ultimately arriving at *conocimiento* (awareness) and the emergence of new insights and understandings of oneself and the world (Anzaldúa, 2015). Hence enabling new forms of negotiating agency. This framework thus serves as a dynamic lens, revealing how experiences of survival migration, systemic oppression, and trauma can paradoxically foster transformative self- and collective remakings, rooted in both suffering and new forms of *conocimiento* (Anzaldúa, 2015).

Within this framework, migration is seen as *nepantla* (in-between state) – the uncertain terrain crossed when moving from one place, culture, or identity to another (Anzaldúa, 2015). *Nepantla* can lead individuals to redefine themselves, creating alternative ways of being and doing, while challenging *doxa* (Bourdieu, 1977). As a *nepantla* process, migration entails a form of crisis, sustained not only by challenging emotional experiences but by complex structures that perpetuate marginalisation (Anzaldúa, 2015). Nevertheless, this transitional space is also a site for reconstruction, and creation of alternative paths that can lead to building new ways of negotiating agency (Kasun, 2014; Lizárraga et al., 2018). *Nepantla* allows for an interpretation of migration not solely as a physical relocation, but as deep psychological, cultural, and gendered transformations characterised by a continuous state of transition.

8.2 Methodological implications, limitations and suggestions for future research

My epistemological and methodological approach enabled a nuanced understanding of women and gender-diverse migrants' agency transformations. The integration of arts-based research methods and participatory elements within a mixed-methods framework enabled the co-creation of safe spaces where migrants were able to articulate what was important to them. A "radical listening" methodological stance was mainstreamed throughout my research activities and interactions with all my collaborators, including migrants, local community members, experts and practitioners (Kincheloe, 2004). This stance had critical implications, especially for my interactions with women and gender-diverse migrants as it generated trusting environments where they felt free to disclose experiences for the first time, while being met with profound and non-judgmental attention. This was acknowledged by most of my collaborators, who thanked me for listening to their stories.

Radical listening entailed more than empathic engagement. Listening to participants' voices on their own terms, represents a methodological, ethical, and political commitment. In the context of survival migration in Latin America, where women and gender-diverse migrants are often silenced, ostracised, and instrumentalised, radical listening emerged as a tool for epistemic justice and self-representation platform. Importantly, this approach encourages researchers to maintain an open attitude, allowing for narrative contradiction, ambiguity, and refusal, while being accountable to the stories and knowledge that arises in the listening space (Tobin, 2009). The mixed-methods approach that I adopted, created multimodal listening spaces, further strengthening opportunities for radical listening engagement while recognising the complexity of migrants' experiences and the multidimensionality of their agential negotiations.

The integration of a quantitative lens, a secondary element in my methodology, was key to provide a systematised account of women and gender-diverse migrants' quantifiable characteristics, including demographics, employment and migratory status, mobility plans, and housing arrangements. Crucially, the survey was essential to complementing my psychological analysis of migrants' lived experiences. Contrasting and complementing migrants' narratives of distressing and adaptive psychological processes, through multiple data sources, was valuable in generating a more holistic understanding of how psychosocial factors influence their agential negotiations. Methodological interdisciplinarity, as demonstrated by this triangulation, is valuable for generating refined insights into migrants' experiences, challenges, and needs.

Nevertheless, my study carries several limitations. My methodology involved volunteering for organisations and shelters to engage with research collaborators, meaning that the study exclusively included migrants receiving organisational support. While this sampling bias was identified from the outset, establishing research relationships with migrants outside of organisations proved challenging. This was primarily because collaborators tended to be transient, staying in cities for short periods. Moreover, migrants who do not request organisational support tend to secure their own accommodation and undertake temporary jobs, limiting their availability to take part in research activities. Reaching migrants outside of organisations and shelters was further hindered by resource constraints on my part, specifically lacking the means to rent a venue. Consequently, collaborating

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with organisations, utilising their premises, and building on their networks with migrants proved to be the most conducive approach for conducting this project. However, integrating the voices of migrants who do not benefit from organisational programmes or shelters, will be important to expand the insights of future research. The evolving situation in Tijuana, for instance, with its emptying shelters (see following section on the impacts of Trump's administration) could be a key study location, where migrants are settling, likely integrating into the local and migrant resident society, and utilising fewer humanitarian services.

A further layer of selection bias emerged from the partnerships with organisations and shelters. The selection of organisations and shelters was limited by my capacity to forge connections with institutions that were open to research activities, thereby, excluding organisations adopting a different approach to academic research, which might in turn influence the experiences of migrants. As a result, the selection of organisations, and therefore, of the participating migrants, was biased towards those open to academic engagement and arts-based participatory methods, limiting the representativeness of the sample regarding the broader migrant experience. To mitigate this, future research should prioritise fostering collaborations with diverse organisations, adopting various approaches to migrant protection. This could help gain a more comprehensive understanding of both migrant experiences and organisational dynamics. Relatedly, this study did not explicitly focus on the intricate relationships between migrants and these organisations, as well as between researchers and organisations. This is an area which could offer substantial analytical insights for subsequent research.

Another important consideration related to the selection of research collaborators involves the inclusion of gender-diverse migrants, who were not initially within the scope of this research. Their integration into the study was based on the adoption of a plural transfeminist agenda which recognises diverse gender systems and understands gender not as a static biological category of individual identity, but as a structuring axis of power that shapes lived realities. This inclusive stance acknowledges the systemic impact of sexist violence on feminised and gender-diverse experiences. This shared experience of feminised vulnerability underscores the critical importance of exploring the nuanced lived realities of women and gender-diverse individuals. Even though this inclusive focus on shared experiences and frameworks of gendered oppression undoubtedly enriched the study findings, it may obscure the specific issues pertinent to each group. Even though I discussed some of the specific challenges facing each group, it will be relevant for future research to delve deeper into these specific challenges, and to consider a comparative analysis between women and gender-diverse migrants' experiences.

In terms of the participatory angle of the research, this was limited by my time and resource restrictions as a DPhil student conducting this project independently. This restricted my capacity to develop a fully participatory project where collaborators could frame the research questions and methodology. My collaborators' restrictions also influenced their ability to engage in a more participatory project. Their presence at the study cities was temporary and many of them left after a few days or weeks. While some of them delayed their departure to complete the research activities, which I truly appreciated, engaging in more participatory sessions was a privilege that my

collaborators nor I had. However, I incorporated feedback spaces on the photovoice workshop prompts, contents, and duration (see details in section 4.2.2). Due to these limitations, I do not claim this project was fully participatory, but rather that it integrated participatory elements. Future research could incorporate a fully participatory approach, involving migrants and other stakeholders from project inception to the production of analytical outputs, including potential exhibitions. This approach, however, requires careful ethical consideration including appropriate compensation for collaborators' time, avoiding extractivist logics and addressing power asymmetries.

Another limitation relates to the challenges encountered in conducting a follow-up interview six months after our first interaction. While several collaborators were open to communicating via messaging, they expressed reluctance to participate in phone calls. Others changed their phone numbers when they left Mexico with some of them sharing their new numbers over Facebook. While these limitations affected my capacity to draw conclusions about the evolving situation of my collaborators, I managed to establish contact with many of them, generating new insights about migrants' experiences and changes over time. Future research could benefit from employing longitudinal methodologies to expand scholarly and policy-relevant insights concerning migrants' processes of agency change during migration and the factors shaping migrants' aspirations and capabilities across time and space.

A further layer of limitation entails the adoption of a temporal lens, guided by the transnational life-course approach (Kõu et al., 2015). While this angle was key in illustrating the role of temporality and migrants' life-stages in their agential negotiations, the study lacked a more systematic disaggregation of decision-making processes across distinct life-stages. This limited the study insights regarding the temporal dynamics of empowerment, opening opportunities for future research to employ temporal perspectives to analyse migrants' agential negotiations.

8.3 Policy directions

The analysis of gendered dis/empowerment in the LAC context entails significant policy implications for countries of origin and transit-destination. Overall, this study promotes a policy agenda that recognises migrants as agents and not merely as passive victims, encouraging models that foster autonomy and collective engagement. By centring on the experiences of women and gender-diverse migrants, the study encourages the adoption of intersectionality in policy design and programming, moving beyond cis heteronormative frameworks. The use of mixed-methods and participatory approaches, coupled with collaborations with civil society organisations, proved instrumental in generating profound insights into migrants' experiences, the services available to them and the challenges faced by organisations, including geopolitical interest. Incorporating diverse voices into academic and policy-driven research is essential for generating grounded policies and effective solutions.

More specifically, my study demonstrates a recurring cycle of adversity and displacement that originates early in life in migrants' countries of origin and persists into adulthood and across international borders. This finding makes imperative, the need for addressing rampant violence

against women and gender-diverse individuals, domestic violence, poverty, generalised violence and political fragility in Central American countries, mainly El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala, as well as in Cuba, Haiti, Colombia and Venezuela. This does not entail a simplified ‘addressing the root causes of migration’ approach, but rather, a long-term policy strategy that needs to be implemented in combination with other policy mechanisms by governments, international organisms and organisations.

“Migration is like water, you must provide it a path”, said the coordinator of the Migrant Assistance Office in Tijuana. This suggests that migration is an intrinsic aspect of social dynamics rather than an inherent problem. However, in the context of Mexico serving as a buffer for the US, migration is largely treated as a dangerous tsunami that requires containment. Mexico’s instrumentalisation of the legal figure of asylum as a *de facto* transit permit, aids containment measures, overwhelming institutional capacity and failing both asylum seekers who intend to stay in Mexico and other migrants who are simply looking for safe passage. As my research shows, the consequences of these structures are not gender neutral. Therefore, the Mexican government shall strengthen its migration and asylum governance mechanisms to create alternative migration documentation pathways that do not forcibly transform migrants into refugees. Cooperation with the US and Canada, as well as with migrants’ countries of origin in Central and South America, will be key to address protection and socioeconomic needs, prioritising family reunification while integrating gender-responsive protocols.

Migrants’ mental challenges are severe and need to be addressed in tandem with socioeconomic opportunities and migration policies that reduce bureaucratic procedures and long waiting times. While migrants face mental challenges that might have emerged before their mobility process, migration structures, insecurity and violence generate stress, exacerbating anxiety and depressive symptoms. While mental well-being programmes focused on counselling or group activities, are valuable, they are not enough on their own. Without clear migration and integration pathways, migrants’ mental challenges will continue. Furthermore, the provision of psychiatric medication is concerning. While psychiatric care may offer immediate relief of symptoms, inconsistent treatment reduces the potential effectiveness of initial interventions and exacerbates symptoms when medication is abruptly stopped (Bartolomei et al. 2016). Frequent relocations interrupt care, leading to relapses and worsening mental health conditions (Ventevogel et al., 2021). Therefore, psychosocial care and appropriate referral mechanisms need to be urgently developed by governments, humanitarian and development institutions to ethically address migrants’ mental well-being needs. Policy interventions that speed up bureaucratic procedures, along with income generating opportunities and spaces where migrants can connect and forge networks, can have a critically positive impact on their mental and overall well-being.

Gender-diverse survival migrants’ processes of gender transition are part of their geographical mobility, involving profound transformation and identity renegotiations. Policies and programmes should be tailored to address their unique needs. Efforts that promote the de-pathologisation of non-conforming gender identities will be vital in ensuring that legal and healthcare systems recognise and affirm diverse gender expressions. Training and awareness raising initiatives for healthcare providers,

government agents and humanitarian workers on the specific needs of gender-diverse migrants is necessary to ensure respectful and appropriate support. Providing hormonal therapy is not enough on its own. Psychosocial support is critical to accompany gender transition processes. Added to that, socioeconomic programmes specifically targeting gender-diverse migrants can facilitate their integration into the paid labour market, reducing reliance on informal or exploitative work. Supporting and drawing inspiration from models like Colombia's *casas LGBTI*, which provide environments where gender-diverse migrants can connect, share experiences, and access vital services without fear of discrimination or violence, can have a lasting positive impact on the well-being of these migrant communities and their local integration.

Women and children continue to encounter heightened risks of sexual violence and trafficking throughout their migratory journeys. This is not a new finding and has been reported by numerous scholars and organisations, including my own research drawing on fieldwork conducted 10 years ago (Rios-Rivera, 2017). The situation has not improved. The systematic rape and widespread human rights violations experienced by women, children, and also gender-diverse migrants, crossing the Mexican territory, continues to be a critical issue requiring urgent attention from the Mexican government and its justice systems. Vulnerabilities extend to humanitarian spaces, including shelters, where women and children remain at risk as reported by my collaborators. It is, therefore, critical to enable safe spaces at shelters, exclusively for women and children, alongside creating separate, safe environments tailored for gender-diverse individuals. While this separation may not be a perfect solution, migrants residing at shelters who adopt this measure, report feeling safer than at shelters without these dedicated spaces. Implementing these strategies requires economic investment, reflecting the “price of rights”. However, such resource allocation is vital to adopt a truly gender-responsive protection approach that comprehensively addresses both gender diversity and specific gender-based vulnerabilities.

It is essential to recognise the impacts of Trump's second administration on migration dynamics in Mexico. Since January 2025, significant shifts have occurred, particularly along the Mexico-US border. Migration policy changes, intensified deportations, along with the continued policing of Mexico's territory aimed at migrant containment, have resulted in a sharp decrease in the number of migrants reaching the northern border. While shelters in Tijuana are reportedly nearly vacant, new shelters in Mexico City are being established, albeit with resistance from the local community, and ‘migrant caravans’ continue to be organised to exit the Tapachula bottleneck, but now heading to Mexico City, not the US (Wagner, 2025; Clemente, 2025). Asylum continues to function as an immobility device, with processes remaining protracted, and migrants facing extended waiting periods. The perceived decrease in opportunities to enter the US under the Trump administration has prompted some migrants to establish temporary or more permanent residency in Mexico, while others have returned to countries such as El Salvador, Haiti, and Venezuela, where living and security conditions are precarious. International cooperation is essential to address the protection needs of survival migrants by facilitating integration and relocation pathways. Expanded investment will be crucial to strengthening a human rights-based migration infrastructure in Mexico, not only in laws but in its implementation. This shall be coupled with sustained pressure and support from the

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international community to mitigate the impacts of US government initiatives, which will be necessary to safeguard migrants' well-being and uphold Mexico's humanitarian responsibilities.

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Appendices

I. Key concepts

Agency: constrained ability to make valuable choices and act upon them, including the option not to act (Sen, 1985b; Schwarzer et al., 1995; Alkire, 2008). This ability is negotiated within structures which, as suggested by critical realist theorists, emerge from agency, work beyond it, and can modify it (Archer, 1995; de Haas, 2021).

Domestic violence: is a pattern of abusive behaviour to control a partner or other family or household member. It can include violence between parents and children, adult children and elderly parents, between siblings or other members of the household. The abuse can be physical, emotional, economic, or sexual (Mahajan, 2011; Rakovec-Felser, 2014).

Empowerment: it refers to the expansion of the ability to negotiate agency in a context where this ability was previously denied (Alkire 2007; Kabeer ,1999a; Mahmood 2001).

Gender and sexual identity and expression: relate to how we experience and express our self-understanding of ourselves as gender and sexual beings. A person's sexual identity, sometimes referred to as their sexual orientation or sexuality, is made up of three components: their sexual attraction, which is the person they are drawn to, their sexual conduct, which is the person they engage in sexual activity with, and their sexual identity which is how a person views their own sexual self (Fredriksen-Goldsen et al., 2017). Gender identity is often used to denote one's perception of oneself as either male, female or neither (Tasker et al., 2002).

Gender-based violence (GBV): refers to any harmful act that is perpetrated against a person's will and that is based on socially ascribed gender differences. It includes physical, sexual, psychological, and economic abuse, and is rooted in power inequalities and patriarchal systems. GBV disproportionately affects women and gender-diverse individuals and is often exacerbated in contexts of displacement, conflict, and migration (True, 2012; UNHCR, 2025).

Gender diversity refers to the ways individuals embrace and express gendered sexual identities that differ from the gender norm within a given specific context (Hammack et al., 2023).

Relative autonomy: The social psychological self-determination theory (SDT) posits that a person is autonomous when they willingly engage in behaviours aligned with values they fully endorse. These values, learnt through social interactions and culture, and integrated through repetitive enactments and cultural reinforcements (Chirkov et al., 2003).

Survival migration: refers to the situation of those who have been compelled to migrate due to existential threats without domestic remedies, and who often fall outside the dominant definition of a 'refugee' (Betts, 2010).

II. Collaborators per chapter

Pseudonym or role	Nationality	Status	Gender identity	Chapter
Fer	Venezuelan	Seeking asylum	Cisgender woman	5
Keyli	Salvadorian	Refugee	Cisgender woman	5
Acna	Venezuelan	Migrant	Cisgender woman	5
Sofia	Cuban	Refugee	Cisgender woman	5
Anet	Cuban	Refugee	Cisgender woman	5
Irna	Haitian	Refugee	Cisgender woman	5
Mujer empoderada	Nicaragua	Seeking asylum	Cisgender woman	5
Sin estereotipos	Colombian	Seeking asylum	Cisgender woman	5
L de A	Salvadorian	Refugee	Cisgender woman	5
Lex	Salvadorian	Refugee	Gay man in feminine transition	5
Karpalago	Honduran	Refugee	Cisgender woman	5
ML	Guatemala	Refugee	Cisgender woman	5
Harly	Haitian	Seeking asylum	Cisgender woman	5
Eny	Salvadorian	Refugee	Trans woman	5
IOM Practitioner, Tapachula				5
UNHCR Practitioner, Mexico City				5
Human Rights Defender, Tapachula				5
Refugee Commissioner, Tijuana				5
Asylum lawyer, Mexico City				5
Local community members in Tapachula and Mexico City				5
ML	Guatemala	Refugee	Cisgender woman	6
EL SV	Salvadorian	Refugee	Gay man	6
Carolina	Salvadorian	Refugee	Cisgender woman	6
Rosio	Honduran	Refugee	Cisgender woman	6
L de A	Salvadorian	Refugee	Cisgender woman	6
Florecita	Salvadorian	Refugee	Cisgender woman	6
Ale	Salvadorian	Refugee	Trans man	6
O	Guatemala	Seeking asylum	Cisgender woman	6
Harly	Haitian	Seeking asylum	Cisgender woman	6
Guerrera de Dios	Honduran	Refugee	Cisgender woman	6
Karpalago	Honduran	Refugee	Cisgender woman	6
Acna	Venezuelan	Migrant	Cisgender woman	6
Merino	Salvadorian	Refugee	Cisgender woman	6
Dojadi	Salvadorian	Refugee	Cisgender woman	6
XXN	Salvadorian	Refugee	Cisgender woman	6
Sofia	Cuban	Refugee	Cisgender woman	6
Fer	Venezuelan	Seeking asylum	Cisgender woman	6
M.	Ecuadorian	Seeking asylum	Trans woman	6
Karla Juarez	Honduran	Refugee	Cisgender woman	6
Brenda	Honduran	Refugee	Lesbian woman	6
Ison	Honduran	Seeking asylum	Cisgender woman	6
Ore	Salvadorian	Refugee	Cisgender woman	6
Oana	Salvadorian	Seeking asylum	Trans woman	6
R	Honduran	Refugee	Cisgender woman	6
Ica	Venezuelan	Seeking asylum	Cisgender woman	6
La belle Nicole	Haitian	Seeking asylum	Cisgender woman	6
Seymi	Honduran	Migrant	Lesbian woman	6

Appendices

Nicole	Salvadorian	Seeking asylum	Cisgender woman	6
Sin Estereotipos	Colombian	Seeking asylum	Cisgender woman	6
Shelter coordinator				6
IOM Practitioner, Tapachula				6
UNHCR Practitioner, Mexico City				6
M.	Ecuadorian	Seeking asylum	Trans woman	7
Brenda	Honduran	Refugee	Lesbian woman	7
Vargas	Salvadorian	Refugee	Lesbian woman in masculine transition	7
Jenifer	Honduran	Seeking asylum	Trans woman	7
EL SV	Salvadorian	Refugee	Gay man	7
Ale	Salvadorian	Refugee	Trans man	7
Eny	Salvadorian	Refugee	Trans woman	7
Sabel	Honduran	Refugee	Trans woman	7
Lex	Salvadorian	Refugee	Gay man in feminine transition	7
Oana	Salvadorian	Seeking asylum	Trans woman	7
Human Rights Defender, Tapachula				7

III. Questionnaire

If participant is not confident reading Spanish. The questionnaire will be administered by the researcher.

Does participant read Spanish? ☐ Yes > Participant: please complete the questionnaire ☐ No > Researcher to administer questionnaire Please mark each box if you agree with the statement ☐ I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet version for the research 'Women's empowerment in the context of migration: the case of Mexico'. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily. ☐ I agree to take part of the photovoice sessions including taking photos, group discussions, a written questionnaire, and one individual session, and separate individual interviews and being contacted over social media, as detailed in the information sheet.
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Please answer the questions below. There are no right and wrong answers.

Location ☐ Tapachula ☐ Mexico City ☐ Tijuana		Date ____/____/____ Day Month Year	
1. Date of birth ____/____/____ Day Month Year			
2. Sex ☐ Female ☐ Male ☐ Other	3. Marital status ☐ Single, never married ☐ Married or in a union ☐ Divorced or separated ☐ Widow ☐ Other: _____	4. Highest level of education ☐ Primary ☐ Secondary ☐ High school ☐ Technical/short degree ☐ Bachelor's degree ☐ Master's degree ☐ PhD	
5. In the last 7 days, have you worked for at least one hour in any of these activities? Mark all that apply ☐ I did not work in any activity in the last 7 days ☐ Employee for wage, salary, commission, incentive, or any payment in kind, including doing paid domestic or farm work ☐ Own account or as an employer in a non-farm business enterprise ☐ Own or family account or as an employer on a farm holding owned or rented, whether in cultivating crops or in other farm maintenance tasks, or cared for livestock ☐ In a non-farm business enterprise belonging or run my household ☐ In an agricultural activity or cared for livestock belonging or run by my household			

☐ As an intern or an apprentice ☐ As a volunteer ☐ Other: _____	
6. Country of birth ☐ Honduras ☐ Haiti ☐ El Salvador ☐ Venezuela ☐ Other: _____	7. Is your nationality the same as your country of birth? ☐ Yes ☐ No. What is your nationality? _____ 8. Do you identify yourself as an indigenous person in Mexico? ☐ No ☐ Yes
8.1. If you consider yourself an indigenous person. With what indigenous group do you identify yourself? ☐ Nahua ☐ Maya ☐ Tseltal ☐ Tostsil ☐ Ch'ol ☐ Tojolabal ☐ Cochimí ☐ Cucapá ☐ Other: _____	
9. What is your migratory status? Remember that all the information you share will be kept confidential ☐ Mexican citizen ☐ Asylum seeker with Visitor Card for Humanitarian Reasons (TVRH) ☐ Asylum seeker without Visitor Card for Humanitarian Reasons (TVRH) ☐ Refugee ☐ Permanent resident ☐ Temporary resident ☐ Temporary visitor without documents ☐ Temporary visitor without permit to work (tourist) ☐ Temporary visitor without permit to work and with forma migratoria múltiple ☐ Temporary visitor with permit to work ☐ Regional visitor without permit to work ☐ Border worker ☐ Other: _____	
10. Have you ever had refugee status? ☐ No ☐ Yes, in Mexico ☐ Yes, in another country. Where?: _____	

11. Where did you live before arriving in this area?

- ☐ Another Mexican city. Where: _____
- ☐ Guatemala
- ☐ Haiti
- ☐ Honduras
- ☐ El Salvador
- ☐ Chile
- ☐ Brazil
- ☐ Other: _____

12. When did you leave the place where you used to live before arriving in Mexico?

____/____/____

Day Month Year

13. When did you arrive in Mexico?

____/____/____

Day Month Year

14. How did you enter Mexico? Remember that your answers are completely confidential and that you can skip any question you wish to

- ☐ By land (walking)
- ☐ By land (on a vehicle)
- ☐ By plane
- ☐ Other: _____

15. What border did you use to enter Mexico?

- ☐ Ciudad Hidalgo, Chiapas
- ☐ El Ceibo, Tabasco
- ☐ La Mesilla, Chiapas
- ☐ Airport, which one? _____
- ☐ Other: _____

16. Did you migrate alone or accompanied? Select all that apply

- ☐ Alone
- ☐ With my spouse or partner
- ☐ With children and other young dependents
- ☐ With my parents and siblings
- ☐ With other relatives
- ☐ With friends
- ☐ As part of a group with people I did not know

☐ With others. Who? _____	
17. Where do you live now? ☐ Tapachula city (if you live in another town or village close to Tapachula, select other and specify) ☐ Mexico City ☐ State of Mexico ☐ Tijuana (if you live in another town or village close to Tijuana, select other and specify) ☐ Other: _____	18. You live in... ☐ Own house or flat ☐ Rented house or flat ☐ Borrowed accommodation ☐ The street or park ☐ Shelter. Which one: _____ ☐ Other: _____
19. Who do you live with? Select all that apply ☐ Alone ☐ With my children ☐ With my partner or spouse ☐ With in-laws ☐ With friends ☐ With housemates I do not know ☐ Other: _____	
20. How long do you plan to stay where you live now? _____	
21. Do you plan to move to another city in Mexico? ☐ No ☐ Yes, to Mexico City ☐ Yes, to another city in Chiapas ☐ Yes, to another city in Baja California ☐ Yes, to another city in another state, which one? _____	
22. How long do you plan to stay in Mexico? _____	
23. Do you want to leave Mexico at some point? Yes/No	
24. If you want to leave Mexico, where do you want to go? _____	
25. If you want to leave Mexico, when will you start your move? _____	
26. On a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being not very much and 10 very much, how much do you feel that Mexico is your home? Select the number that best reflects your opinion 1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 – 6 – 7 – 8 – 9 – 10	

27. I would like to ask you about your feelings and thoughts during the last month (PSS-4). Select the option that best reflects your opinion					
27.1 In the last month, how often have you felt that you were unable to control the important things in your life?	Never	Almost never	Sometimes	Fairly often	Very often
27.2 In the last month, how often have you felt confident about your ability to handle your personal problems?	Never	Almost never	Sometimes	Fairly often	Very often
27.3 In the last month, how often have you felt that things were going your way?	Never	Almost never	Sometimes	Fairly often	Very often
27.4 In the last month, how often have you felt difficulties were piling up so high that you could not overcome them?	Never	Almost never	Sometimes	Fairly often	Very often
28. Select the option that best reflects your opinion (GSE)					
28.1 I can always manage to solve difficult problems if I try hard enough.	Not at all true	Hardly true	Moderately true	Exactly true	
28.2 If someone opposes me, I can find the means and ways to get what I want.	Not at all true	Hardly true	Moderately true	Exactly true	
28.3 It is easy for me to stick to my aims and accomplish my goals.	Not at all true	Hardly true	Moderately true	Exactly true	
28.4 I am confident that I could deal efficiently with unexpected events.	Not at all true	Hardly true	Moderately true	Exactly true	
28.5 Thanks to my resourcefulness, I know how to handle unforeseen situations.	Not at all true	Hardly true	Moderately true	Exactly true	
28.6 I can solve most problems if I invest the necessary effort.	Not at all true	Hardly true	Moderately true	Exactly true	
28.7 I can remain calm when facing difficulties because I can rely on my coping abilities.	Not at all true	Hardly true	Moderately true	Exactly true	
28.8 When I am confronted with a problem, I can usually find several solutions.	Not at all true	Hardly true	Moderately true	Exactly true	
28.9 If I am in trouble, I can usually think of a solution.	Not at all true	Hardly true	Moderately true	Exactly true	
28.10 I can usually handle whatever comes my way.	Not at all true	Hardly true	Moderately true	Exactly true	
29. Some people feel they have completely free choice and control over their lives, while other people feel that what they do has no real effect on what happens to them. Please use this scale where 1 means "none at all" and 10 means "a great deal" to indicate how much freedom of choice and control you feel you have over the way your life turns out. Select the number that best reflects your opinion None at all 1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 – 6 – 7 – 8 – 9 – 10 A great deal					
30. All things considered, how satisfied are you with your life as a whole these days on a scale of 1 to 10? (1= very dissatisfied...10= very satisfied) Select the number that best reflects your opinion Very dissatisfied 1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 – 6 – 7 – 8 – 9 – 10 Very satisfied					

Thank you so much for completing this questionnaire. Please hand it back to Abril.

IV. User rights photovoice sessions

If participant is not confident reading Spanish. The form will be administered by the researcher.

Does participant read Spanish?

☐ Yes > Participant: please complete the form ☐ No > Researcher to explain form and request participant to invite a witness (member of the group) who can sign on her behalf

1. COPYRIGHT

I (name or code of participant) am taking part in the research project 'Women's empowerment in the context of migration: the case of Mexico' and understand that, as part of the project, I have produced photographs and captions (my "**Work**"). I understand that I retain copyright in my Work and I give permission for the DPhil student Laura Abril Rios Rivera, the University of Oxford, and <Partner, if an agreement is reached> to keep copies of my Work for use as agreed below. I understand that my Work will be credited as shown below when used:

© <AGREED CREDIT LINE>

(Mark the box if you agree) I want these photographs to be credited with my real name. ☐

I would like to be credited with the following name:.....

2. CONSENT

I am happy for the DPhil student Laura Abril Rios Rivera, the University of Oxford, and <Partner, if an agreement is reached>, to use my Work and agreed quotes (audio/text) for any purpose, in any media whatsoever, anywhere in the world and without time limit. Such use may include use:

- on websites, available to anyone with internet access worldwide
- in printed materials including leaflets, books reports and postcards
- in public exhibitions where prints may be sold;
- in the printed and online press, nationally and internationally, including newspapers and magazines
- on television
- on posters and billboards

I understand that while the DPhil student Laura Abril Rios Rivera, the University of Oxford, and <Partner, if an agreement is reached> will only use my Work in line with its ethical standards, it is possible that photos made public on the internet could be copied and used by others in other ways and the DPhil student Laura Abril Rios Rivera, the University of Oxford, and <Partner, if an agreement is reached> cannot be held responsible.

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Whenever possible, the DPhil student Laura Abril Rios Rivera, the University of Oxford, and <Partner, if an agreement is reached> will withdraw images from its archive upon my request. However, where an image has already been used, it may not be possible to prevent that image being used again.

I agree that the DPhil student Laura Abril Rios Rivera, the University of Oxford, and <Partner, if an agreement is reached> may assign this permission to any third party.

PLEASE SIGN BELOW:

Appendices

_____	<u>dd / mm / yyyy</u>	_____
Name or code of participant	Date	Signature

IF PARTICIPANT IS NOT ABLE TO SIGN: Witness, please provide the information requested below

I (name or code of witness) have witnessed the accurate reading of the user rights form to the (name or code of participant), and the individual has had the opportunity to ask questions. I confirm that the individual has given consent freely. I have completed the information requested on the COPYRIGHT section of this form on behalf of (name or code of participant).

_____	<u>dd / mm / yyyy</u>
Name or code of participant	Date

_____	<u>dd / mm / yyyy</u>	_____
Name or code of witness	Date	Signature

V. Psychometric scales scoring

PSS-4 Perceived Stress Scale (Cohen et al., 1983)

4-item self-report instrument with a five-point scale.

Questions 1 and 4: 0 = Never, 1 = Almost Never, 2= Sometimes, 3 = Fairly Often, 4 = Very Often.

Questions 2 and 3: 4 = Never, 3 = Almost Never, 2= Sometimes, 1 = Fairly Often, 0 = Very Often.

Lowest score: 0 Highest score: 16

GSE General Self-Efficacy Scale (Schwarzer et al., 1995)

10-item self-report instrument with a four-point scale with values from 1 ("Not at all true") to 4 ("Exactly true"). A total score is calculated by summing all item response scores; a higher score indicates a higher generalised sense of self-efficacy.

Freedom of choice and control (Haerpfer et al., 2022)

1-item self-report instrument with a 10-point scale with values from 1 (None at all) to 10 (a great deal).

Subjective well-being (OECD, 2013)

1-item self-report instrument with a 10-point scale with values from 1 (Very dissatisfied) to 10 (Very satisfied).

VI. Means and standard deviations for psychometric scales

Table 5: Means and standard deviations for psychometric scales.

	mean	sd	min	max
How much do you feel that Mexico is your home? (1-10 scale)	6.27	3.04	1	10
Do you want to leave Mexico at some point? (Yes=1/No=0)	0.71	0.46	0	1
Perceived Stress Scale (PSS-4) score (In the last month, how often have you...)	7.45	2.73	2	13
PSS-4 1. felt that you were unable to control the important things in your life?	2.00	1.06	0	4
PSS-4 2. felt confident about your ability to handle your personal problems?	1.51	1.10	0	4
PSS-4 3. felt that things were going your way?	1.59	0.96	0	4
PSS-4 1. felt that you were unable to control the important things in your life?	2.35	1.13	0	4
General Self-Efficacy Scale (GSE) score. (not true = 1 exactly true = 4)	32.69	6.03	14	40
GSE 1. I can always manage to solve difficult problems if I try hard enough.	3.31	0.85	1	4
GSE 2. If someone opposes me, I can find the means and ways to get what I want.	3.49	0.65	1	4
GSE 3. It is easy for me to stick to my aims and accomplish my goals.	3.29	0.74	1	4
GSE 4. I am confident that I could deal efficiently with unexpected events.	3.22	0.80	1	4
GSE 5. Thanks to my resourcefulness, I know how to handle unforeseen situations.	3.27	0.78	1	4

Appendices

GSE 6. I can solve most problems if I invest the necessary effort.	3.39	0.79	1	4
GSE 7. I can remain calm when facing difficulties because I can rely on my coping abilities.	3.24	0.88	1	4
GSE 8. When I am confronted with a problem, I can usually find several solutions.	3.06	0.72	1	4
GSE 9. If I am in trouble, I can usually think of a solution.	3.18	0.73	2	4
GSE 10. I can usually handle whatever comes my way.	3.24	0.83	1	4
How much freedom of choice and control you feel you have over the way your life turns out? (1-10 scale)	7.60	2.25	3	10
How satisfied are you with your life as a whole these days? (1-10 scale)	7.18	2.71	1	10

Source: Author's calculations. Constructs assessed: sense of belonging, stress, self-efficacy, locus of control, life satisfaction.