

Exploring the migration and integration processes of Central American migrant women in
Mexico: Identifying their vulnerabilities and agency

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And in the words of singer and composer Leon Gieco

Solo le pido a Dios
Que el dolor no me sea indiferente
Que la reseca muerte no me encuentre
Vacío y solo sin haber hecho lo suficiente

Solo le pido a Dios
Que lo injusto no me sea indiferente
Que no me abofeteen la otra mejilla
Después que una garra me arañe esta suerte

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Abstract

Background and research objectives: The number of Central American migrants entering Mexico on their way to the U.S. is growing, but the restrictive migration policies in U.S. and Mexico, and the perceived insecurity at the border between both countries, has influenced the decision of migrant to stay longer periods in Mexico. Thus, making relevant the study of this migratory flow from Central America. This study explores the experiences of Central American women to identify the intersecting identities that determine their level of vulnerability, but also analyses the mechanisms women put in place to solve the challenges presented to identify their agentic capacities.

Methods: The study was conducted in Monterrey, Nuevo Leon, Mexico, using a qualitative methodology. A total of eight in-depth interviews were performed, five Central American women and three staff members of migrant shelters participated. The data was analysed using Thematic Network Analysis.

Findings: The intersecting identities of Central American migrant women shaped their experiences during their migration and integration processes. Women experience fear in several stages of their migration process, product of the vulnerabilities caused by their intersecting identities. Furthermore, women showed a great sense of agency and empowerment during both processes, as they employ a series of techniques to solve the challenges that presented.

Conclusion: Central American women's migration and integration processes are shaped by their intersecting identities of gender, economic position and migratory situation, which in consequence places women in a vulnerable situation. Moreover, the study also shows women's agency as they employed a series of activities to face the challenges presented during both processes.

Key words: gender, migration, Mexico, Central America, empowerment, intersectionality, integration.

List of Acronyms

CBP	U.S. Customs and Border Protection
COMAR	Comision Mexicana de Ayuda a Refugiados (The Mexican Commission for Refugee Assistance)
CURP	Clave Unica de Registro de Población (Unique Population Registry Code)
INE	Instituto Nacional Electoral (National Electoral Institute)
INM	Instituto Nacional de Migración (National Institute of Migration)
MPP	Migrant Protection Protocols
NSD	Norwegian Center for Research Data
NGO	Non-governmental organization
RSD	Refugee Status Determination
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

1. Introduction

1.1 Background to the problem

Migration from The Northern Triangle (El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras) to and through Mexico is not new, but recently migration flows from these countries present a modification in the “demographics, and length of stay” (Dominguez, 2019). In past decades the flows of migrants from the Northern Triangle reaching the U.S.-Mexico border consisted mostly of single men, but currently migration also includes a high number of families and unaccompanied children. According to data taken from the U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CPB), in the year 2013 the number of detentions of families at the US border with Mexico was around four percent, but in 2019 the number went up to 56 percent (A. Selee, Giorguli-Saucedo, Masferrer, & Ruiz Soto, 2019). Furthermore, by May 2019 detentions of undocumented migrants trying to cross the border into U.S. reached high levels not seen in 13 years, which in consequence made the U.S. government to put pressure on the Mexican Government to control irregular migration passing through Mexico by threatening to impose high tariffs on Mexican products (Ruiz Soto, 2020).

In response to this situation, and to avoid further complications, the Mexican government agreed to implement a series of measures to reduce illegal immigration flows (A. Selee, Giorguli-Saucedo, S. E., Masferrer, C., & Ruiz Soto, A. , 2019). Among the measures was an increase of migration control in Mexico and the expansion of the Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP)¹ (A. Selee, Giorguli-Saucedo, S. E., Masferrer, C., & Ruiz Soto, A. , 2019).

A combination of these measures and an increase in incidents of violence in the border between Mexico and U.S. (Najera Aguirre, 2016) have influenced the decision of migrants to extend their stay in Mexico, and some decide to apply for asylum in Mexico, i.e. to start the Refugee Status Determination (RSD) process with the Mexican authorities. According to the Survey of Refugee Population in Mexico 2017 (ENPORE, by its Spanish acronym), from the years 2012 to 2017 the number of refugee applications in Mexico went up by a 1700%, from 811 applications in 2012 to 14,603 in 2017 (COMAR, 2017).

For the ones who decide to apply for RSD, the process starts at the Mexican Commission for Refugee Assistance (COMAR), who gives to all applicants a document proving that they have

¹ The MPP is a program which sends migrants who applied for asylum in U.S. to wait in Mexico while their application is processed. (A. Selee, Giorguli-Saucedo, S. E., Masferrer, C., & Ruiz Soto, A. , 2019)

started their application process. Once an individual has got the document, he or she needs to apply for a “Visitor for humanitarian reasons” card at the National Institute of Migration (INM), a card which among others allows people to work legally. Then the applicant needs to fill in a form and participate in an interview at COMAR to determine their eligibility for refugee status. After this process is done, the COMAR issues a positive or negative resolution of the application for refugee status. Finally, for the ones who receive a positive resolution, they need to apply again at the INM for a permanent residency card, which allows them to stay in Mexico.

1.2 Problem statement and relevance of the study

Migration from Central America to and through Mexico is increasing, as mentioned above, and there is scarce research on migrants lives in Mexico, particularly on the experiences of migrating women. This investigation aims to shed a light on the challenges migrant women experience as part of their migration and integration processes,

My focus on women in the study is based on an acknowledgement of the importance of including a gender perspective in migration studies. Gender inequalities- the ones that exist both in the sending and in the receiving countries- have a big influence on women’s migratory processes. Furthermore, women who are victims of persecution, conflict and repression in their home countries, and in consequence were forced to move, have similar needs of protection and assistance just like men, but they also have specific needs that are related to their gender (Martin, 2012).

1.3 Research objective & research questions

The general objective of this study is to: Explore the experiences of female migrants from Central America to Mexico, with regards to their migration and integration processes, in order to identify their vulnerabilities and agentic capacities.

Sub-objectives:

- Explore the challenges women face during the migration process and what mechanisms they put in place to solve these challenges.
- Explore the challenges women face once they settle in Mexico, in relation to their household dynamics, livelihoods and social integration and how they cope with them.

2. Conceptual Framework

2.1 Empowerment

Mosedale (2005) defines empowerment as “the process by which women redefine and extend what is possible for them to be and to do in situations where they have been restricted, compared to men, from being and doing. Alternatively, women’s empowerment is the process by which women redefine gender roles in way which extend their possibilities for being and doing” (p. 252). This definition encompasses several aspects. First it defines empowerment as a continuing process. Cornwall and Rivas also stress this aspect of the term and describe empowerment as a “process, not an end point” (Cornwall & Rivas, 2015, p. 405).

Second, Mosedale’s definition includes the redefinition or transformation of gender roles; she explains that empowerment is about opening doors for women to *be* and *do* where they before had been denied that opportunity. This transformational aspect of empowerment has been also mentioned by other authors, who likewise identify the transformation of power relations between men and women as a cornerstone to achieve empowerment (Batliwala, 2007; Cornwall & Rivas, 2015; Kabeer, 2005).

As Mosedale (2005) mentions, when studying empowerment, it is relevant to do an “analysis of gender relations, the ways in which power relations between the sexes are constructed and maintained” (p. 244). This statement marks the relevance of power relations while studying women’s empowerment. In relation to this, Mosedale explains that the concept of power in social sciences has mainly been seen as *power over*, through dynamics of losses and gains. She goes further however, and presents other dimensions of power where one person’s gains doesn’t translate into other individuals loss, she identifies these as *power within*, *power to* and *power with* (Mosedale, 2005). *Power within*, is power that is internal, like self-esteem and self-confidence. *Power to* refers to the power that “increases the boundaries of what is achievable for one person” (Mosedale, 2005, p. 250), without affecting other person’s boundaries. And power with encompasses collective action, a group acting and working together (Mosedale, 2005).

Also, Mosedale’s definition of empowerment covers different aspects of the term. She explains that in order to be empowered a person first needs to be disempowered. Further, empowerment cannot be bestowed, it needs to be claimed. And finally, decision making must be about critical and important life decisions (Mosedale, 2005).

Concerning the possibilities for action Mosedale (2005) further comments about the importance of identifying the real source of constraints of action, which she says are not agents but social norms and ideas. In a similar vein, Barbara Risman explains that even though actions are influenced by an individual's interests, the social structure is the one which establishes the options to choose from (Barbara, 2004). According to Risman "we must pay attention both to how structure shapes individual choice and social interaction and how human agency creates, sustains, and modifies current structure" (Barbara, 2004, p. 433). Additionally, as mentioned by Mosedale (2005), this interconnection is such that, "if constraints to action are loosened then, by definition, possibilities for action (agency) are increased, and vice versa" (p. 255).

Another central theorist of empowerment is Naila Kabeer. Her concept of empowerment has similarities with Mosedale's definition; however she develops on other important dimensions of the term relevant for this investigation. Just as Mosedale, Kabeer explains that empowerment involves change, but she goes on further as to define power as the ability to make choices, and also defines what can be identified as a real choice. She describes that an individual must have the opportunity to choose between several options available for it to be called a real choice, and also options need to be visible by the person making said choice (Kabeer, 2005).

Moreover, for a better understanding of the term empowerment, Kabeer (2005) proposes it to be explored through three connected dimensions: agency, resources and achievements, "Agency represents the processes by which choices are made and put into effect. It is hence central to the concept of empowerment. Resources are the medium through which agency is exercised; and achievements refers to the outcomes of agency" (Kabeer, 2005, p. 14).

As Kabeer identifies agency as pivotal to the definition of empowerment, she further develops the concept and classifies two types of agency which she calls passive and active agency. Passive agency is defined as one done with a purposeful behavior, while active agency is defined as an action taken when there is little choice (Kabeer, 2005). Also, Kabeer (2005) explains that agency can have greater 'effectiveness' or can be 'transformative'. She explained that greater effectiveness of agency "relates to women's greater efficiency in carrying out their given roles and responsibilities" (p. 15). On the other hand, transformative agency is about the ability women have to act on "the restrictive aspects of these roles and responsibilities in order to challenge them" (Kabeer, 2005, p. 15).

2.2 Intersectionality

The term intersectionality was first coined by Kimberle Crenshaw as a way to address the lack of awareness and attention to the struggles of women of colour, both within feminist and anti-racist movements (Davis, 2008). Crenshaw used the concept to “denote the various ways in which race and gender interact to shape the multiple dimensions of Black women's experiences” (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1242). Her focus on the intersection of gender and race and how both interact to shape women’s of colour life experiences made visible the importance of identifying the “multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed” (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1245). Furthermore, Crenshaw (1991) recognizes the relationship of intersectionality and disempowerment. She explained that “intersectional subordination” is commonly created through the “the imposition of one burden that interacts with pre-existing vulnerabilities to create yet another dimension of disempowerment” (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1249).

Albeit intersectionality was first used to address the inequality experiences of women of colour, the term became later a reference for diverse layers of inequalities. Intersectionality’s emphasis on the differences and diversity among women has made significant contributions in the “consideration of gender, race and other axes of power in a wide range of fields” (Sumi, Kimberlé Williams, & Leslie, 2013, p. 787).

Furthermore, according to Davis (2008) intersectionality can be applied to identify how the “interaction between gender, race and other categories of difference” (Davis, 2008, p. 68), influence women’s individual experiences and access to power (Davis, 2008). Consequently, with the accumulation of a new layer of inequality, we as researchers are able to detect when women are more “vulnerable, more marginalized, and more subordinate” (Davis, 2008, p. 71), but also to see their struggles for empowerment.

2.3 Application of theoretical framework

For my thesis I choose empowerment and intersectionality as my theoretical frameworks to explore the experiences of Central American women during the migration process and their subsequent integration process in Mexico. I choose intersectionality as it allows for an analysis of migrant women’s vulnerabilities by identifying how an individual’s composite identity determine her experiences and struggles. As Willers states in her study of Central American migrants in Mexico, “for many Central American women the condition of being a woman, undocumented, foreigner, without resources and having certain ethnic traits translates into a disadvantageous position”

(Willers, 2016, p. 185), which in consequence shapes their experiences. Thus it becomes relevant to study their migration and integration experiences with an intersectional lens to identify the different layers of inequality and vulnerability they experience in those processes.

Concerning empowerment, I chose to rely mainly on Mosedale's conceptualization, as it allows a certain level of fluidity; it emphasizes empowerment as a process, not an ending point. This definition also coins the term not just as an acquired ability to make choices, but as a redefinition of boundaries of what an individual can do (Mosedale, 2005). However, I decided to combine Mosedale's theorization of empowerment with aspects of Kabeer's understanding of the concept. Kabeer's definition of power as the ability to choose and then take action fits for the analysis of experiences of migrant women and their agency. Finally, Kabeer's development on the concept of agency allows a deep analysis of the actions taken by migrant women when they are acting in constrained circumstances and in accordance with their assigned gender roles.

3. Literature Review

Migration from Central America is not a new phenomenon. For generations, Central American migrants coming from Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador have crossed Mexico in an attempt to reach the United States (Cortés, 2018; Guevara González, 2018; Najera Aguirre, 2016; Rodríguez, 2016). However, according to Garcia & Olivera (2006), research on the Central American migration phenomenon is lacking. Consequently, research on this topic with a focus on women and their migration experience is also limited and scarce (Cortés, 2018; Tinoco González, 2020). Furthermore, research shows that in recent years many migrants have decided to adjust their route and stay in Mexico for months or even years (París- Pombo, 2016); some even decide to stay permanently (Rodríguez, 2016). According to Najera, the changes in the migration patterns are a consequence of diverse events:

The reinforcement of migratory control throughout the Mexican territory, the need to obtain economic resources to continue with the trip to the United States and the subsequent temporary stay in the transit spaces, together with the impossibility or the refusal to return to the countries of origin seems to be translating into longer periods of permanence. (Najera Aguirre, 2016, p. 262)

This new migration pattern has received sparse attention from scholars, as literature on the topic focus is more on the journey of migrants than on the integration in the new destination. Particularly there is limited literature on how women integrate in Mexico, but as the numbers of migrant women who decide to stay in Mexico keep rising, the need to add research on this topic has become more relevant. As Garcia & Olivera highlighted, “the number of Central American women, subject to risks, from rape and forced deportation, and to violence and discrimination in the places of reception, is no longer a minor figure and demands centrality” (García & Olivera, 2006, p. 40).

As a starting point for my research, I present a compilation of studies on Central American migration concentrating on the migration journey and its implications, with a focus on women and their specific experiences. In the second part I present literature on the challenges women face during their integration process in a new country, focusing on household gender relations, livelihoods and social integration. Since there is limited literature on this topic on migrants from Central America, I supported the review with previous research made on migrant and refugee women living in the United States, Austria, Kenya and Australia, among others.

3.1 Mexico and Central American migration

3.1.1 Reasons to migrate

Research about migration has identified several causes that force people to move from one place to another. As Gottardo and Cyment mentioned in their paper about global migration, the reasons of migration can be in response to “violent conflict, poverty, displacement due to land grabbing, inequality, climate change, natural disasters, and environmental degradation” (Gottardo & Cyment, 2019, p. 69). In the case of Central American migrants, research has found that people migrate mainly because of poverty and the generalized violence and insecurity they experience in their home countries because of political instability and gang activity (Arriola Vega & Martínez Junco, 2020; Cortés, 2018; Najera Aguirre, 2016; París- Pombo, 2016; Willers, 2016).

For Central American women, gender violence is cited as one of the main reasons they decide to migrate. As Cortes (2018) states in her paper about gender violence and migration among Central American women, gender violence, normalized and unrecognized, is one of the main push factors that influence women’s decision to migrate. She further explains that women migrate in an aim to protect their life and the ones of their children, they move because they are in search for a life free of violence.

Likewise, Willers (2016), in her paper about experiences of central American women in Mexico, identifies three main reasons as of why women decide to migrate. First, migration happens in response to death threats and extortion from criminal groups. Second, the need to take care of and support their children as single mothers and third, because of domestic violence. On the topic of domestic violence, the author added that many times the partners who are violent can be also part of gangs or have drug problems.

Moreover, for many women the decision to migrate usually happens suddenly, which puts them in a highly vulnerable position. Willers explained that the cases when women flee their homes are particularly dramatic:

They cannot plan the way, raise money and activate their potential social capital by contacting their acquaintances or seeking information to lessen the dangers of the way. They have to leave from one moment to the next, which puts them at a clear disadvantage within a dangerous and complicated migratory route like the one Mexico represents. (Willers, 2016, p. 175)

Consequently, migration for women transforms into a survival strategy. As stated by Willers, situations of deep violence intertwine with gender inequalities to create a strong threat for women and their families. In the face of such situations women decide to move as it seems to be best strategy to assure their survival (Willers, 2016).

3.1.2 Vulnerabilities and risks

The migration journey is filled with dangers and migrants who travel into Mexico expose themselves to many life-threat risks. As identified in numerous studies about migrants in Mexico, the journey becomes extremely dangerous because of the presence of criminal organizations. It has been documented that criminal organizations such as drug cartels have gained control over migration routes all over Mexico, and in some areas they have even imposed a fee for passing, which makes it dangerous for migrants who don't pay (Guevara González, 2018; Infante, Silván, Caballero, & Campero, 2013; Najera Aguirre, 2016). This situation makes migrants extremely vulnerable to a series of abuses while traveling in Mexico. Additionally their condition as migrants without proper documentation further vulnerates them as they see themselves as "*illegals*" in a foreign country and which is perceived by them as a reason to automatically lose all legal human rights (Infante et al., 2013, p. 62). The main risks and dangers migrants face while traveling through Mexico are extortion by criminal organizations, kidnapping, assaults, homicide, threats, forced work, human trafficking, and sexual violence (Cortés, 2018; Guevara González, 2018; Infante et al., 2013; Willers, 2016).

In the case of migrant women, data has showed that they are more vulnerable to sexual violence than men (Cortés, 2018). As stated by Brigden in her research about Central American migrants, women are a target for sexual violence because they are women and also migrants (Brigden, 2018). Then, in addition to the known risks of migrating named before, women can be subject to sexual violence from rape to forced prostitution (Cortés, 2018; Willers, 2016).

In addition to the above stated risks, traveling in Mexico has become even more dangerous because of the Mexican Government's new "politics of persecution and restraint of migratory flows" (Guevara González, 2018, p. 189), created to control and stop migrants from reaching the United States border. The Mexican government has reinforced border and migration controls, and also established, across several states, migration checkpoints, inspection sites and surveillance operations on buses and trains, with the purpose to control migration (Cortés, 2018; Guevara González, 2018; Tinoco González, 2020). This has forced migrants to take new and more

dangerous migration routes as they try to avoid getting caught and deported, as stated by Brigden (2018) “This migration policing funnels migrants to the most dangerous places within Mexico, such as the drug-running corridor” (P. 112).

But the many risks of migrating are not unknown for migrants, who are aware of the danger they put themselves in once they start their journey. Literature on the topic shows that migrants are in fact aware of the challenges and risks they will face such as extortions, physical and verbal abuse, robbery, among others (Guevara González, 2018; Infante et al., 2013; París- Pombo, 2016). However, they tend to accept them as an inevitable part of their journey, “the violation of their rights is perceived as a possible event, which is part of the migration process and over which they have little control” (Infante et al., 2013, p. 61). Furthermore, the lack of capacity to control those situations come also from the fact that they lack support networks, legal knowledge, and access to health services (Infante et al., 2013).

Even though migrants have little control over the risks of the journey, studies have identified that women employ certain level of decision making in order to diminish those dangers. Women who decide to migrate know the risks involved, but they accept them as “Paradoxically, migrating can be safer than staying in their neighborhoods and towns” (Cortés, 2018, p. 47). Also, while they are migrating and crossing borders, they take decisions and evaluate the risks of certain actions (Cortés, 2018).

3.1.3 Vulnerability and agency

Nevertheless, in the midst of lack of control over the risks they face, studies have found that migrant women do show certain level of agency to face the challenges they experience during the journey. As Almudena explains:

Migrant women try to reach the north using strategies such as finding travel companions, transvesting as men and/or taking contraceptives before their trip to reduce the costs as much as possible and prioritize concrete and short-term achievements as much as possible. (Cortés, 2018, pp. 50-51)

Therefore, as stated by Willers, the process of migration for women is said to happen in two opposite extremes, one is the vulnerability processes understood as “the effects of the social system that disadvantages undocumented women” (Willers, 2016, p. 164). The other one is the agency processes which encompasses all practices women put in place to face a challenge and that contribute to their general wellbeing (Willers, 2016).

3.1.4 Non-Governmental organizations relevance

A recurring actor mentioned throughout the reviewed literature regarding Central American migration in Mexico was the migrant shelters, or “*casa de migrantes*” as people identify them in Spanish. Literature elucidated on several aspects regarding these places, which will be explained in the following lines. Authors explained that the shelters are considered secure spaces where migrants can be safe from the police and criminal organizations. Moreover, migrant shelters, mainly run by civil society organizations or the catholic church, are normally established around the main migration routes in Mexico. Furthermore, the shelters offer the migrants short-term lodging, food, small medical services, and information about human rights (Guevara González, 2018; Infante et al., 2013). Therefore, the shelters become an important actor on the migration journey as migrants rely heavily on those spaces to rest. Also, research mentioned that shelters provide an important space to establish social networks and to plan and remap the best path forward (Najera Aguirre, 2016).

3.2 Life in the new country

3.2.1 Household gender relations

In their comparative article about Mexican immigrants in North Carolina, U.S., Parrado and Flippen compared gender dynamics in the communities of origin and life in U.S. In this study the authors described the transformation of gender relations as a “dynamic process in which some elements brought from communities of origin are discarded, others are modified, and still others are reinforced” (Parrado & Flippen, 2005, p. 606). These findings function as starting point to approach the study of the transformation of gender relations among refugees, as Central Americans carry with them “memories and traumatic experiences steaming from the political upheaval in their countries, making the context and circumstances of their exit of particular importance in shaping their lives” (Menjívar, 1999, p. 105).

As stated before, migration produces changes in gender relations (Menjívar, 1999), however the main concern is whether “migration is emancipatory or subjugating for women” (Pessar, 1999, p. 585). Parrado and Flippen explained that several studies on this matter generally claimed that migration offers women greater autonomy and independence (Parrado & Flippen, 2005). On the other hand, Hondagneu-Sotelo, based on her studies of gender relations among Mexican immigrants in the United States, stresses that the alterations in gender relations and patriarchal behavior are due to “arrangements induced by the migration process itself” (Hondagneu-Sotelo,

1992, p. 394). Morokvasic, in her studies about gender and migration, also stresses this point by arguing that gender roles were not necessarily challenged as such but instead were redefined in the context of migration (Morokvašić, 2014).

Research has identified that the transformation of gender relations has gains and losses in different domains, usually gains in one domain can produce losses in another (Menjívar, 1999; Pessar, 1999). Several authors assert that as a consequence of migration some families adopt more egalitarian behaviors, rework gendered division of labor, challenge patriarchy, have gains in women's autonomy. They also note how migration reinforces labor division, patriarchy and inequalities within the household (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1992; Lawson, 1998; Menjívar, 1999; Parrado & Flippen, 2005; Pessar, 1999).

Pessar in her study on Dominican immigrant women in United States, argues that renegotiation and modification of household budgeting can be listed as a gain for these Latin American women (Pessar, 1984). Furthermore, in a more recent study, she elucidates on gains for women among Latin American and Caribbean immigrant households, as many acquire more control over decision-making and family expenditures. However, it is important to mention that these gains mostly come from women's participation in wage labor (Pessar, 2005). On the other hand, research shows that migration has also created new burdens for women, as they "often bear the primary responsibility for reconstructing domestic life in their resettled contexts" (Koyama, 2015, p. 259). Similarly, as they take the main responsibility to take care of the family, they find themselves with an increased work load as a result of the lack of network support in their new context (Morokvašić, 2014; Owino & Weber, 2020)

Regarding women's participation in wage labor there is broad literature from 1980s onwards, that argues that the incorporation of migrant women in wage labor brings benefits and burdens to them within the household, as it can "enhance women's exploitation but at the same time, women can gain independence and respect" (Morokvasic, 1984, p. 893). Among the gains of wage labor, existing literature suggests that women's access to employment can lead to increased power related to negotiating house chores, more control over resources, egalitarian relationships at home, autonomy in terms of money spending and an increase on self-esteem (Menjívar, 1999; Pessar, 1984). On the other hand, in Menjívar's study about the effects of migration on gender relations among women from Guatemala and Salvador living in California, U.S., the author argues that

being employed sometimes adds to women's existing burdens, as now "women have the economic burden alongside with domestic one" (Menjívar, 1999, p. 114).

3.2.2 Livelihoods

Research shows that refugee women face several challenges during integration in their new communities. Owino and Weber in their study of loneliness among refugee women living in Upper Midwest U.S., found that access to employment was limited due to lack of formal education among refugees in that area. Also, because of their refugee status, it is reported that they have high unemployment rates and lower earnings in comparison to other immigrants (Owino & Weber, 2020, p. 70).

Overall, studies present two important aspects of women's livelihood strategies. Firstly, they analyze how women see paid employment, secondly, the focus is on their job selection criteria. For instance, Menjívar's (1999) study of Guatemalans and Salvadorans in the U.S. showed that many women perceived paid employment more as an economic necessity for the survival of their families than as a way to achieve more liberties. Unfortunately this so called 'necessity' pushes women to take on jobs that are often "unstable, poorly paid and without benefits" (Lawson, 1998, p. 49). Several other studies have found that migrant women tend to be less selective than men, and are willing to take any low-skill and low-pay job (Jansen, 2008; Pessar, 1999), perpetuating through this "the patriarchal and racist assumption that women can afford to work for less" (Pessar, 1999, p. 581). Furthermore, Paris-Pombo (2016) emphasizes that in the specific case of Central American women in Mexico they have a hard time getting hired and their salaries can be as low as in their home countries.

Regarding job hardships for Central American migrants in Mexico, Garcia and Olivera (2006) mention how they experience rejection on the workspace because of their condition as migrant women which in consequence makes them more vulnerable:

Interactions in the workplace and in relationships with local society are marked by feelings and attitudes of rejection and offensive treatment, which makes social relationships and interactions with their immediate surroundings a precarious and fragile system for stigmatized women because of her Central American identity. (García & Olivera, 2006, p. 39)

Moreover, findings on the subject of women's livelihoods strategies, specifically paid employment, suggest that women in complicated economic situations are more prone to "start from

the bottom of the economic ladder” (Jansen, 2008, p. 186), and be more resourceful in dealing with economic adversity in order to provide for their families (Jansen, 2008; Ritchie, 2018).

3.2.3 Social integration

Kuhlman in his paper on the economic integration of refugees, discusses the concept of integration. The article presents the United Nations (UN) position on integration as the goal for settlement process, and according to the organization “if it is achieved, the refugee problem can be considered solved” (Kuhlman, 1991, p. 2). Nonetheless the process of integration is an extensive one and can present several complications. Some studies on integration challenges have pointed out that refugees might experience isolation, loneliness, inequality and even racism during the resettlement process (Owino & Weber, 2020; Wachter, Heffron, Snyder, Nsonwu, & Busch-Armendariz, 2016). In addition, language, loss of social networks and lack of strong meaningful relationships represent additional challenges refugees face (Owino & Weber, 2020).

In the particular case of Central American women in Mexico, Garcia & Olivera explain that women’s social integration in the new society can awaken sentiments of rejection among members of the local community. The authors explain that migrant women’s integration in the new society have “personal and social effects...their presence, can awaken contradictory behaviors that mix contempt and rejection” (García & Olivera, 2006, p. 32).

4. Methodology

4.1 Research design and epistemological basis of the study

In this research project I explore the experiences of migrant women who are currently living in Mexico, mainly focusing on their migration and integration processes and the way their gender, place of origin, and economic status shape those experiences. Furthermore, I aimed to shed light on the challenges they face during both processes as immigrant women, and the mechanisms they put in place to cope with those challenges. This research project was developed with an interpretive epistemological qualitative approach. The interpretive approach is suitable to my research as it, according to Neuman, seeks to study “meaningful social action” (Neuman, 2014, p. 69), in other words “interpretive researchers want to discover what actions mean to the people who engage them” (Neuman, 2014, p. 105). Finally, in alignment with this paradigm, this research aims to share “another person’s social reality by revealing the meanings, values, interpretive schemes, and rules of daily living” (Neuman, 2014, p. 107).

The research design of the study has its basis in a phenomenological tradition. Phenomenological research focuses on describing the commonalities of participants as “they experience a phenomenon” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 75), to be able to develop a deeper understanding of the main characteristics of that particular phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This research studies the migration process as a phenomenon, and further focuses on the women’s experiences of this phenomenon to capture their individual experiences and what aspects they have in common.

In phenomenology, data is collected from “individuals who experienced the phenomenon by using in-depth and multiple interviews” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 79). Accordingly, data was obtained through in-depth semi-structured open-ended interviews with migrant women (Appendix 9.1), as this tool is considered one of the best suited for qualitative research to obtain data about other people’s perceptions of realities and what they believe or think about certain situations (Punch, 2014, p. 144).

4.2 Study area

The research was performed in the northern State of Nuevo Leon, Mexico. Nuevo Leon is located in the north-eastern part of the country, near the border of the United States of America, and its capital city is named Monterrey. Nuevo Leon is considered as one of the most economically productive states in Mexico as it generates 7.6% of the national GDP (Rivera & Barcenas, 2020).

According to data from the Secretariat of Economy from Nuevo Leon, in 2020 the total population of the State was approximately 5.4 million people, with 14.5% living in poverty, and 0.5% living in extreme poverty. This data becomes relevant once it is compared to the national percentage of people living in poverty which is 42%, while those living in extreme poverty is 7.4% (Secretaria de Economia y Trabajo). Furthermore, Nuevo Leon is considered as one of the leading states in economic development, with a high number of economically active people. The state is a leader in the construction sector, and it has a high rate of foreign investment. Additionally, the state is headquarters for the most important companies in Mexico i.e. Coca-Cola, Cemex, Alfa and Vitro (Rivera & Barcenas, 2020). Because of this, the state has become an attractive destination for migrants looking for better employment and living opportunities.

In the year 2019 more than two thousand refugees settled in Nuevo Leon with the support of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and there is an expectation that the number will continue to increase in the coming years (Imelda, 2020). Additionally, and in response to the growing numbers of refugees in the State, in 2019 the UNHCR opened an local office in the state to help the growing numbers of refugees to settle (Imelda, 2020).

4.3 Recruitment of study participants

For this study, I contacted directors of migrant shelters who consequently helped me contact migrant women using the “snowball” method. As described by Skovdal and Cornish (2015), the snowball method is based on “recommendations from others who know potential participants” (p. 41). Although the main focus was on women, I also interviewed staff from the migrant shelters and their narratives were used as complementary data.

In January 2021, I visited the first shelter and interviewed its director, but since the shelter was under construction there was no opportunity to establish an interview with immigrant women. Afterwards, I visited the second shelter, where I got the opportunity to perform a face-to-face interview with the director, who also helped me to contact three women, one that was still living in the shelter and another two who used to live there with their family. Finally I visited the third shelter, where I interviewed an operative coordinator who facilitated interviews with two women who were staying at that shelter at the moment.

4.4 Participants

Initially the study was planned to interview at least 7 participants, all women from any of the following countries: Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras. Women could be either married or living in domestic partnership before migrating and after, because the objective was to know their experiences within the household, with concern to transformation of gender relations, their livelihoods and their integration process, and to identify how those three domains influence one another. I planned to divide the sample in two groups of people, the first will be refugees who have recently arrived at the city in the past 6 months prior to the interviews, and the second group will be refugees who arrived a year before the interviews. The purpose of the last aspect was to compare if there was a shift in the situations they experienced.

Nonetheless, the COVID-19 pandemic posed some challenges to the recruitment process. Therefore, I decided to expand the inclusion criteria to adjust to the new situation which in consequence also added value to my findings as collected data became more diverse. The new inclusion criteria for interviews was migrant women from Guatemala, El Salvador or Honduras, currently living in Nuevo Leon, Mexico, who have lived in Mexico for at least a year, and who, before arriving to Mexico were either married or living in domestic partnerships, but who did not have to live with a partner during the time of the interview. These criteria changed because I noted that some women left their hometown to escape a situation of domestic violence, and arrived to Mexico as single women. This would make me able to compare and contrast the migration experience of women participants and identify differences and similarities among them. Lastly, because of COVID-19 three women were currently living in migrant shelters, and two were living with their family in a house or an apartment. (See appendix 9.2)

As mentioned above, I also interviewed three key informants who are presently working at three of the main migrant shelters in Nuevo Leon. Ernesto and Manuel (pseudonyms) are directors of two different migrant shelters, and Juan (pseudonym) is an operative coordinator of the third shelter.

4.5 Methods of data collection process and limitations

Data collection was done in Nuevo Leon, Mexico, in January 2021. All the data was collected through in-depth interviews, some conducted via zoom and others face-to-face. With the support of the shelter staff, I was able to perform face-to-face interviews on the premises of the shelters,

all this with the proper measures of infection prevention in place. Since the research theme can be considered a sensitive topic, I used Skovdal and Cornish's advice on how to conduct good interviews. As stated by the authors, "one of the most important determinants of the quality of an interview is how comfortable the participants feel" (Skovdal & Cornish, 2015, p. 69), so I tried to maintain an informal atmosphere during the interview, so women could feel "valued and respected" (Skovdal & Cornish, 2015, p. 69). Another issue that arose was around the questions regarding social integration and interaction with the Mexican community. As mentioned by Skovdal and Cornish (2015), participants try to answer questions in what they believe is the correct or proper way. Hence, when participants were asked about their interaction with the Mexican community, they commonly mentioned they felt okay, without further explanation. To address this issue, I explained to them that the interview was a safe space.

Three interviews were held online via zoom, one with a director of a migrant shelter and two other with women living in a shelter. Regarding the use of zoom, it is relevant to acknowledge that collecting data via zoom for qualitative research might have impacted the findings, since there is a lack of personal connection with the participant. Sometimes women seemed uncomfortable and answered questions in a short way. Nonetheless, short answers and perceived silences on some questions might also be related to the sensitivity of the topic.

All interviews lasted approximately one hour and were held and transcribed in Spanish, although some interviews were translated but mostly to share data with my supervisor. Finally, the analysis of the data was also made in Spanish. For the chapters of findings and discussions, the quotes were translated.

4.6 Data analysis model

As mentioned by Neuman (2014), interpretive social science is related to hermeneutics, which emphasizes the process of performing a deep and thorough reading of a text with the purpose of discovering "richer meanings that are embedded within the text" (p.103). Furthermore, as stated in the phenomenological approach, the analysis of data is done through the reduction of information into outstanding statements that become themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

In line with this, the analysis of the material was done using thematic network analysis. I decided to structure my findings using a thematic model since it helps to extract and identify relevant and significant themes in a text (Attride-Stirling, 2001). Therefore, I followed Attride-Stirling's

proposed steps to do a thematic network analysis. First, after transcribing all the interviews, I used the computer program Nvivo to code the material and created a coding framework. Second, I identified the salient themes in the coded material, which then were used to create the networks (2001). The material was arranged into basic themes that then were grouped into organizing themes, and then the global themes were created.

4.7 Trustworthiness of research

A trustworthy qualitative investigation is said to have credibility, dependability, confirmability and transferability (Bryman, Becker, & Sempik, 2008, p. 267). Credibility mostly focuses on the accuracy of the findings, and their level of truthfulness from the viewpoint of the participants and readers (Yilmaz, 2013). To achieve quality in my research process and findings, I used some of Yilmaz proposed questions for qualitative studies as guidelines (Yilmaz, 2013). In order to attain credibility, I collected data from two different types of participants. The data gathered from the interviews with key informants worked as complementary data as it confirmed and supplemented the findings from my interviews with migrant women. Additionally, my findings were created from my collected data, which then was examined by my supervisor with the purpose of increasing the level of confirmability in my research.

With regards to dependability and transferability, one of my main aims was to produce information that can be shared and then also applied beyond my study setting (Malterud, 2001). To assure dependability, a description of the selected methods of research and justification for them is presented in the methodology. Additionally to achieve transferability I have attempted to provide thick description of the context and background of the phenomenon of study, all of this with the purpose of making the research relevant for future studies.

4.7.1 Role of the researcher

As Malterud (2001) states, in a qualitative research there needs to be a commitment to reflexivity during the investigation process. Referring to the effect of the researcher, Malterud (2001) further declares it an “illusion” to deny the influence of the human perspective during an investigation and explains that the appropriate way to address such biases is by reflecting on the effect of the researcher during the whole research process (p.484). Reflexibility begins when all “preconceptions brought into the project by the researcher” are identified (Malterud, 2001, p. 484), and for this research in particular I consider addressing my background appropriate.

My position as a Mexican national originally from the State of Nuevo Leon had some influence during my data collection process. Initially during interviews, I perceived some reluctance from participants to share the bad experiences they had in Mexico, as women gave short answers and mostly spoke nicely about Mexico. I believe this was because they were aware of my nationality. To address this, I attempted to make them more comfortable by explaining that the interview was a safe space, and that they were free to share their experiences without any judgment from my side. Additionally, in an aim to keep objectivity, all interviews were recorded, transcribed, properly anonymized, and subsequently shared with my supervisor to receive feedback and remarks regarding my findings. This process that helped me identify contextual details missing on my reflexions about the data.

4.8 Ethical considerations

Ethical issues can appear during the whole research process, in all stages, so it is important to consider the possible ethical challenges beforehand in order to choose the best course of action (Punch, 2014, p. 36). Regarding the instances for ethical clearance, I applied at the Norwegian Center for Research Data (NSD) for the processing of personal data for my project. The project was approved by NSD in November 2020 (Appendix 9.3). Concerning approval to process personal data in Mexico, it is relevant to mention that there are no official institutions regulating the process to perform research in the country. Some of the ethical issues emerging in this research concerned consent, privacy and confidentiality (Punch, 2014). It was important to disclose to participants the purpose of the research, the main objectives and the places where it will be published so that participants were fully aware of it and could decide to participate in an informed way. Before performing the interviews, I distributed among the participants a consent form (Appendix 9.4) that explained in Spanish the objectives and purpose of the investigation. For them to fully comprehend the documents they were signing, I provided an oral explanation of all the information in the document, allowing them to ask questions if needed. Privacy and confidentiality were also issues that emerged during data collection, so it became a priority to manage information about the participants in a safe and discrete way. Considering that women shared the hardships they experienced along the way, I prioritized the confidentiality and privacy of the collected data by anonymizing the transcripts and the notes taken. All consent forms were scanned and saved at the SAFE desktop, along with the recordings and transcripts. Additionally, all recordings and notes will be deleted when the research project is finished.

5. The migration process

Initially, my research objectives focused mainly on the women's integration experiences living in Mexico, nevertheless I also had planned to ask questions regarding their migration process to establish a background. However, during the interviews the topic of the migration process came up in a "big way" and thus was more salient than I had expected as women seemed eager to share their journey experiences by naming all the harsh situations they encountered. I therefore decided to expand my empirical focus and write extensively also about those experiences.

5.1 Beginning of the migration process

This section explores the experiences of Central American women before they start the migration journey from their home countries, their motivation to leave their country and also the decision making process they undergo before starting the journey, their coping mechanisms, vulnerabilities and feelings about the whole process.

5.1.1 Motivation

During the interviews an important theme for women to share was the reasons why they left their home countries. The experiences shared by them can be classified into two categories: fear of gangs and domestic issues.

Two women described their interaction with gang members, and they both experienced threats of kidnaping. For Maria the threats came from a close acquaintance who was part of a gang and who threatened to kidnap her sisters. In order to keep them safe they decided to leave the country: *"Well he threaten to take them [the sisters], and at the same time the announcement of the [migrant] caravan^{2 2} came out, and so we decided [she and her husband] to come with the caravan"*.

Also, Carmen explained that because her family owned a small business they experienced a series of money extortions that later transformed into serious threats to her and her family:

And well, they [gang members] see one is starting to do better in life, and they start to extort and they threaten me. They ask for a fee, and one has to pay it as an obligation, if not they will kill or kidnap or threaten you. Or I had to allow my son to get in the gang... or if we didn't pay then they will abuse my daughter.

^{2 2} A migrant caravan is the term used to identify a sizable group of individuals who are all together moving across international borders. The term became popular in 2018, and used to identify the large groups of Central American moving across borders to reach the United States (Astles).

As noted before, families, in face of a threat, and with their options reduced, decide to move and leave the country as a way assure the safety of their family. Carmen described the sense of sadness and despair she felt as a result of leaving her home after the family decided not to pay the fee to the gang:

We had no other option but to get out of the house, and they left a note, that if we stayed they would kill us. And it was very hard to leave our house, we left suddenly the next day.

Domestic problems were also mentioned by two interviewees as a reason to leave their home country. For Andrea the decision came after having issues with a former partner that harassed her on a regular basis, and with whom she had experienced domestic violence that led into an involuntary abortion. For Julia domestic problems started after the family experienced economic issues because she was laid off. The economic hardships created problems in her marriage, so she then decided to leave her husband and travel north: *“I was laid off, and from there the problems with my husband started, so I got desperate, and I said to myself: I can’t do it. So with the money I got from work I came here”*.

Interestingly, for women who stated domestic problems as main motivation to migrate, it was mentioned that with migration a sense of tranquility and freedom came after leaving their hostile home environments. Both Julia and Andrea explained how they felt in Mexico regarding the domestic situation they left behind. Andrea stated: *“Now I feel free because the man that harassed me does not do it any more... Now? Yes, I feel more calm, thank God”*. Along the same line, Julia mentioned: *“But I do feel all right, I feel like I am more useful, like more free you know”*.

5.1.2 Decision making process

Regarding the decision to migrate, findings showed that women either took the decision together with their partner, or solely by themselves. During interviews women described their role in the decision making process, narrating how their family reached to the final resolution of leaving the country. Maria declared so: *“He [partner] told me he was coming with me and I said: I am not forcing you to come because I am the one with the problem [threats] but if you want to join us you are welcome”*.

Likewise, Julia stated clearly that she took the decision by herself, and decided to leave behind her husband. Only Carmen mentioned that the decision to migrate was taken together with her partner, after the threats her family received: *“I told them no, I can’t take it anymore. I told my partner: I am leaving this place with the few money I had”*.

Interestingly, it can be noted in the above quotes that women were clearly involved in the decision making process, their decisions were respected and actions were taken. Moreover, and according to women who traveled with their partner, they mentioned that their life companions respected their decisions, even those taken during the journey.

5.2 Crossing the border

This next section explores the border crossing into Mexico, focusing on the vulnerabilities and risks women and their families experienced while crossing the border, but also explaining the strategies they put in place to face the challenges that presented during the journey. Additionally, women offered some reflections about the journey and the emotional impact it had on them.

5.2.1 Travel accompanied

A common characteristic of the journey is that women did not travel alone, some decided to migrate with their family, husband or children, or even join a group. From the interviews two things can be identified: One is that women with family travel with their children. Even though as they know that the journey can be extremely dangerous for young kids they take them along. Second, women felt safer when traveling with men or a group of people.

Maria traveled with her partner, her two children of 13 and 7 years old, and her three siblings of 17, 12 and 11 years old. The family of 7 decided to leave their country together with the newly formed migrant caravan in January of 2020. Maria mentioned the reasons as to why they decided to travel with a caravan. She explained that traveling with a big group was safer: *“Yes, I felt safer because we crossed practically almost all Guatemala by foot, but we were a group of approximately seven thousand people”*. Also, she mentioned that it was a cheaper option: *“because among all we were not going to spend a lot of money because we came walking. I left my country with only 800 lempiras in my pocket. [Approx. 33 USD]*

Among all participants Daniela was the one who traveled with the youngest children, she left Honduras with her husband and two children of three and six years old. Also Carmen traveled with her husband and her 19 year old daughter and her 18 year old son. Only two women traveled without a partner, Julia and Andrea. Julia decided to migrate with just her 12 years' old son. Likewise, Andrea traveled unaccompanied, but on the way she met a group of young men and decided to join them to feel safe. She explained that since she was traveling alone she felt scared, and the option to join a group of men seemed better because in case a threat appeared the group would protect her. Andrea's decision to join a group of men for safety points out the fact women

feel vulnerable during migration and they perceived men as protectors. Additionally, the decision to travel accompanied by men can be noted as an action women put in place to solve a safety challenge. This situation was further explained during an interview with Eduardo, a director of a migrant shelter, who shared some insights. He explained that some women in order to ensure their safety engage in sexual relationships with men who in return will offer protection. He explained that: *“Sometimes women have to look for a sexual partner to protect them. Then small cells are created where the woman feels protected. But in return she has to give sexual favors or stay in a relationship”*.

5.2.2 Vulnerabilities and risks

During interviews women exposed a series of situations that undoubtedly show the challenges of crossing the border into Mexico, and also the risks and dangerous situations they exposed themselves to cross the border. Some women explained how, in an attempt to avoid getting caught by Mexican police, they crossed through forests and rivers, sometimes without enough food and water, with no place to sleep but in the streets or public spaces, and with a constant fear of getting caught. These situations certainly portray the level of danger women encounter during their migration journey.

For instance, Julia explained that she arrived with her 12 year old son at the border between Mexico and Guatemala:

We passed through the Guatemalan migration post, where the military is, and from there we traveled around a day and a half on a bus, all the way from Honduras to Tecun Uman [Guatemalan city] where the river is, [Suchiate]. And from there I crossed the river around two in the morning, with my son... We crossed in a raft.

For Carmen the whole trip was perceived as harsh because of the lack of places to sleep and food and water: *“We arrived in about five days to Mexico. Walking, hiding from the police... It was hard because, we had no choice but to sleep in the forest, enduring hunger and thirst”*.

Moreover, as many women had no friends or family who they could ask for help once in Mexico, they slept on the streets. Julia explained that once she had crossed the border with her son, she had no place to go and decided to sleep in a public park. Likewise, Maria mentioned that she and her family did not have any place sleep when they arrived in Mexico, she explained: *“There we stayed sleeping in a park. Yeah, but I could not stay awake, my body was not responding. I felt asleep while talking, because I could not take it anymore”*.

Also participants mentioned how their routes were chosen to avoid getting caught by police or migration, sometimes even risking their individual integrity and making them feel stressed and frightened. Andrea describes how she and her group walked a lot across the bushes and finally through a river to avoid the police. Maria mentioned similarly that while at the border they waited until the police was distracted to cross the border, and even as she felt scared, she decided to cross. *He [the partner] told me: The police are distracted, let's cross right now. And I told him I was scared. Then I saw that the policemen were scattered all over the place. And I told the children to run, run, and we managed to get out on the other side of the wall.*

But the fear did not disappear when they arrived in Mexico, participants explained how the fear of getting caught made them feel stressed and trapped, even on the other side. Carmen put like this: *“When we arrived in Chiapas [Mexican border state] it became a little bit more difficult, because we could not go out without migration officers harassing us”.*

As it can be noted, the crossing of the border into Mexico is full of dangers for migrants that can include a series of situations that put them in vulnerable positions. But the danger can be further exacerbated by a hostile response towards the migrants from the Mexican Government at the Mexico-Guatemala border. Maria shared her hard experience when she tried to enter Mexico with a migrant caravan:

There [at the border] we had a series of problems with the police because they would not allow us to enter, they denied us the entry into Mexico... We were waiting to enter into Mexico, at the Suchiate river in Tecun Uman [Guatemala], border with Hidalgo city [Mexico], we were waiting for the authorization to cross the border. And then it turns out that they told us we were denied the entry. The [Mexican] President said that he would not give us authorization to cross.

Then the brawl commenced, she explained that people in the caravan reacted badly to the announcement and started to jump off from the crossing bridge into the Suchiate river. During this moment Maria mentioned how scared she was for her life, because the police was acting aggressively: *“And like everyone was waiting to see at which moment they start shooting [the police]. I said to myself, at what time they will start shooting?”.*

Maria then described that the police started hostile maneuvers by throwing stones, tear gas and even shooting blanks against the people on the river. The situation got more complicated for Maria because once the commotion began, people ran in all directions and she lost her family, which caused her to panic:

And all the people started running, and my husband ran to one side, me with three girls, one on my back, to other side. I lost my older brother and my sister. It turns out that when I turned to see where everyone was, I was missing two children and I started screaming, I almost went crazy.

Fortunately, and after gathering herself, Maria went searching for the rest of her family and found them all safe:

With whatever strength I had left, I went in the crowd to look for my little siblings. Thank God I found them safe... That is something that I will never forget... And I went back to Guatemala and could not find my husband either. Then I told my brother to go look for my husband on the other side and he was there, also looking for us.

It is important to note that during the interview Maria needed a moment to gather herself, as she burst into tears while remembering and describing that day. This shows the emotional and psychological impact the event had in her life. She even explained how she felt in the middle of the brawl between the caravan and the policemen:

In that moment one feels like in slow motion, I saw the scene in front of me and it seemed like time stopped. One feels inside a horrible, horrible situation, like time stopped and I heard the silence, such an awful silence.

In Maria's narrative another theme came up, the physical dangers of crossing the border, and how dangerous it can be for migrants even resulting in death. Maria explained:

That day a lot of people got lost, children drowned and stomped by people, dead women. Lots of people, even the policemen had open head wounds and some died. That day was awful... A lot of people could not cross.

5.2.3 Feelings about migrating

Undoubtedly, the process of leaving their places of origin and embarking on a journey to Mexico has an emotional toll that deeply affects women. During the interviews participants mentioned a broad series of feelings they experienced while migrating up north, these include sadness, regret, despair, hopelessness and uncertainty.

Julia mentioned that she sometimes regrets leaving her hometown and feels deeply sad about it, but she refuses to go back and explains how she copes with this, thus showing the deep sadness and loneliness she feels as a result of her migrating:

Yes, it is hard, sometimes I wish to go back, but then I say no. I struggled too much to come, no. What I do is to cry and ask God to take control. And well, to take back my decision of migrating,

no, I am not taking it back. And about calling [by phone call] my family [for emotional support], neither because I don't like to express what I feel.

Maria also had a strong feeling of regret, especially after the episode at the border: *“And at that moment I ask God for forgiveness for leaving my country. And I told the children we are going back to Honduras”.*

Julia also commented on how uncertain she felt once she and her son crossed the border, since they did not had a place to stay for that night so she decided to sleep in a park.

And for Maria her uncertainty and despair even took her to visit a migration post to surrender herself after crossing the border, but the station officials refuse to detain her explaining that according to the law they needed to detain people in in the streets not at the station.

But we then arrived to Tapachula, and I had no idea which way to go, and I went that same night to surrender myself at the Siglo 21 [migration post]. And well, it was like God's will because they did not arrested me there. The officers said no, that they could not arrest me, that they needed to detain me on the street.

5.3 In Mexico

5.3.1 Relevance of non-governmental organizations

Migrant women rely largely on the support and help form non-governmental organizations during their journey. Since most of them travel with limited economic resources, aid from NGOs becomes crucial since the journey is long and full of uncertainties and dangers. Therefore, the support from non-profits, civil organizations, and assistance from the community, becomes imperative for the survival of migrants and their families. Women mentioned two main aid sources, migrant shelters and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

Undeniably, and based on the all the women's narratives, migrant shelters constitute a pivotal element in the migrant's journey. Women shared their experiences at shelters and how appreciative they felt to find a place to stay. Moreover, it can be noted that shelters functioned as much more than a place to sleep and eat, but as a safe space to rest, a place to meet friends and create a network, a source of information about rights and legal resources. For some it even became a source of income as they were hired as staff. Also, their location among the main migration routes make them for accessible for migrants (see section 3.1).

Manuel, a director of a shelter who receives migrants daily, explained that, based on his first-hand experience, on a common basis they receive three groups of migrants:

Some are just passing by and want a place to recharge emotionally, physically and to rest. Others are returnees from forced return [deported from U.S.] and who come back either to settle here or to continue their journey back to their country. Others stay here in Monterrey [Capital city of Nuevo Leon] because they tried cross [to U.S.] and did not succeed or they were kidnapped and then they come to look for a safer place, and they stay here until they decide what to do, weather they try again to go up [to U.S.], return to their country or stay here.

Manuel's description shows how migrants use migrant shelters at different stages of their journey, but also it demonstrates the high degree of dependance migrants have on migrant shelters.

Subsequently, women do express a sense gratitude after being welcomed at a shelter. After staying several months in Tapachula Carmen moved to Nuevo Leon where she stayed at a shelter, she then explained how grateful she felt:

We came directly [to the shelter]. A boy we meet, and who had been at the shelter, told us that this one was the only one that was open. And thank God they [the shelter] did not say no to us, because almost all shelters... [were closed because of COVID].

Besides depending on the support from shelters, migrants also showed certain level of confidence that they can rely on shelters for help and assistance. On that account, migrants usually share information among themselves about the location of shelters. As Manuel, shelter director, shares: *"We were talking to a man, and he said 'I left my country with the information of this shelter'".*

Also, the shelters are great places to meet people and create a network, maybe even a sense of community. For example Julia, who had been living at a shelter for around a year and three months, commented on how she felt supported by the shelter staff:

Well yeah, with Mr. XX [Shelter leader], with him I have a very cool relationship. With XX [staff member], I am not that very talkative, but yes, when it is necessary to talk to someone, I speak with him and I feel free to say anything. With Mrs. XX [staff member] the same, I have a little bit more of trust with her because like she is a woman, I mean she can understand us better.

A few days after crossing the border Maria and her family found a shelter in Tapachula where they stayed for eight months. About her experience there she commented: *"Oh yes!, I made so many friendships there and Mr. XX [Shelter director] is such a great person".*

Shelters have also become a source of information for migrants as they facilitate general information about proper documentation procedures, their legal rights, work opportunities and more. As Ernesto, a shelter director, explained:

The first aspect we try to solve is the immediate situation they face: lack of living space, lack of food, thirst, clothing, that is, their basic humanitarian rights. And immediately after, precisely because we see the need for migrants to eventually seek integration in the sense of having their full rights, the due process of regularization. We try to motivate them to regularize themselves so that they can find a stable job with social security number.

Maria also explained how from the people at a shelter in Tapachula, she found out that she could apply for refuge in Mexico:

At a shelter in Tapachula, after talking with some people, they told me that here [Mexico] we could request refuge and that they would help us. Then, I decided to look for the COMAR and they explained me the process and I decided to apply.

Lastly, migrant shelters can turn into a place of work for some migrants. Two participants, Maria and Julia, explained that while staying at a shelter, they started working there, Julia explained that she got offered a job at the shelter she arrived in Nuevo Leon:

Yes, a month after I arrived to the house [shelter] I started to work. Around that time the lady that was in charge left, and then they asked me if I wanted to help them. I was hesitant, because it is not easy to work with women. But no, I took the [opportunity] I said I can do it, and here I am.

Another important non-governmental organization that women mentioned was the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Women explained how the UNHCR supported them economically and offered guidance in choosing a city to settle, depending on possible job opportunities. Two participants, Maria and Carmen, described that while waiting to obtain their refugee status documentation from the Mexican Government, UNHCR gave them a stipend for three months to help them settle. Maria stated how UNHCR helped her, and further describe how she perceived the aid as a way to support also her mental wellbeing:

UNHCR helped us a lot, thanks God. They gave me a card, with a stipend of six thousand two hundred pesos per month for three months [300 USD approx.]. Yes, I was in the middle of the process and so while I was waiting for my documents I could be free of worries about the children.

Likewise, Carmen mentioned how UNHCR helped her family when they were unemployed and waiting on COMAR's approval of their refugee status: *"UNHCR gave us a card with money so we could manage to survive those days, it really helped us a lot because to be honest we were unemployed"*.

Moreover, Daniela explained that UNHCR also guided her family to decide which Mexican city to settle. When asked about why they choose Nuevo Leon, she mentioned that they moved there after UNHCR suggested that job opportunities were good there.

5.3.2 Proper documentation

Regarding the process to obtain refugee status, women's narratives made visible two different set of feelings while waiting for their refugee application to be processed. They described how hard and stressful the waiting time was and, for the ones who finish the process, how relieved they felt once they obtained the proper documents.

Carmen narrated that the application process was extremely harsh for her and her family:

In COMAR offices we spend two sleepless nights in line [to apply] without money or food. It was hard to obtain the papers, it was like around eight months of just formalities...It was really hard to come to Mexico, and after that everything regarding the legal process was horrible.

About the length of the process Daniela stated it was perceived as long, but in contrast to Carmen's experience, it was worth the wait: *"No [complication], it was lengthy but it was for a good thing"*.

Two participants explained that since the application took too long for them, they got restless and decided to quit the process half way, Julia explained:

I despaired because I waited for around three or four months for that. [I was] in Tapachula, waiting for the documents and I was seeing that nothing moved, because it was just going there to sign and sign, and I despaired. That is why [she abandon the process].

The participants who did finished the process commented on how they felt more calm, safe and protected once they had completed it. Carmen clearly stated she stopped feeling afraid: *"[It took] Several months for them to give us the document [COMAR's positive resolution] which enable us to move around without feeling afraid"*.

Maria too described a situation where she felt protected by the documentation provided by COMAR:

Yes, because even when we were coming from Tapachula to the city [Mexico City], some supposed migration officials wanted to get us off the bus because they told me that I could not travel just with my positive resolution [Approval of the refugee status] but COMAR told me that I could travel with my resolution...but I told them no, and I asked them to please let us go, and so we manage to stay in the bus.

5.3.3 Mexico as second option

Participants commented on their original intentions for migration and almost all women declared that their aim was to arrive at the U.S.-Mexico border and cross into the U.S. But women decided to change their plans and stay in Mexico mainly because of safety concerns.

Julia explained that she left her country with the intention to cross into U.S., Mexico was never an option: *“When I decided to move, I already came with the determination to cross, and I even got to Laredo [border town]”*.

But the situation at the border with U.S. is harsh and can be dangerous for many migrants, thus this made them change their plans. Ernesto, shelter director, explained that, for the ones who do decide to try and cross the border into U.S. and fail, some return to Nuevo Leon after they had an encounter with organized crime: *“They are victims of organized crime, and that is why they return to Monterrey to think about the next move or with their families and then decide to apply for refugee status”*. Carmen also commented on how her decision to stay Mexico is connected to safety concerns: *“Yes, where I have a chance to stay I will stay, as long as my children are safe”*.

5.3.4 Vulnerabilities of traveling in Mexico

Undoubtedly, the journey through Mexico implies several risks for migrants in general, but for women the risks can even double. During the interviews women mentioned how they experience fear while traveling in Mexico, and how they perceived the U.S.-Mexico border as an unsafe area, which as explained before, influence them to change their plans of crossing into U.S.

In relation to the women’s level of vulnerability, Manuel mentioned:

Women are more vulnerable than men, migration in itself is already a motive to get abused because of their concrete situation, they are more prone to abuse by a train custodian, security guard, local police. The women double this vulnerability just because of being a women.

Maria reflected about this too, she narrated she traveled in Mexico by bus with her siblings and her children but without her partner, which made her feel unsafe:

To be honest, yes, I do believe that a women is at more danger. For instance from Mexico City to Monterrey I came alone [without her partner], and in the bus I kept thinking ‘at any moment the bus and people [police] might force us off it.

Participants talked about how they felt when traveling in Mexico, and the findings showed that the level of fear experienced by women mostly derived from stories or things they have heard. As Maria mentioned, when asked about which was the hardest country to cross, Guatemala or Mexico:

Mexico, because that's where the cartels are or the kidnappers. Because even if we traveled by bus we know we are not safe because of organized crime.

Besides the bus, migrants also use the cargo trains as means of transportation, which can be extremely dangerous as they usually jump in while the train is moving, and also they are exposed to violence by gangs. Carmen described her experience on taking the train on her way to Nuevo Leon (see section 5.3.), and how she felt terrified by it:

It was horrible, the first time I got on the train I felt like dying. We were really scared because of all the things you see on the internet and I was getting traumatized by it.

As mentioned before, many migrants had the initial plan to cross into U.S., but many desisted the idea explaining they felt scared to travel to the north border towns in Mexico, and wanted their families to be safe. Maria explained: *“Well I do want to go further up [to U.S.] but I am very scared because I travel with too many children, then it is more risky”*.

Furthermore, Julia shared an specific experience she had with organized crime while trying to cross into U.S, thus showing the level of dangerousness of the area. Julia narrated:

In Laredo [Border town] I got kidnapped by the people from a cartel, they held me hostage for a week. They asked for a ransom, but I told them how am I giving them money if did not had any. Because I did not tell them that I had family in U.S. They checked my cellphone but I had deleted everything before, and I saved all my phone contacts on a piece of paper.

As she had no economic means to pay for ransom Julia was released after a week, she explained: *Then one Sunday they told me that I was free to go, but that I needed to go back to Honduras. Then, I told them I had no family in Honduras anymore, and that if I came [to Mexico] was because I had no other choice. And then they told me ‘well, you are traveling to Monterrey then’. They sent me here, they even paid for my bus ticket and took me to the bus terminal.*

5.4 Discussion

In this study I set out to explore women’s experiences during their migration and integration process, to identify how their intersecting identities determine their level of vulnerability. Likewise, by analyzing their experiences the study aimed to recognize the instances where women showed agency in face of the challenges that they faced during both processes. Below I attempt to analyze their migration process through the theoretical lenses of intersectionality and empowerment, alongside with the reviewed relevant research material.

An overarching aspect of women's migration experience is their vulnerability, which appears in all stages of their journey and is a product of their intersecting identities as poor undocumented migrant women. As Tinoco-Gonzalez (2019) states, "in addition to the risks that mobility itself entails, there is a chain of vulnerabilities: their position within the gender order, economic marginalization, irregular situation, and in some cases, this is exacerbated by their ethnic belonging" (p. 413). This showed in different parts of the women's narratives; they expressed fears of traveling alone, of criminal organizations and of getting caught by the police. Mostly these fears emerged precisely because the women are aware of their condition as undocumented migrants, which makes them more prone to abuse, violence and marginalization.

Concerning the reasons for migration, Willers (2016) indicates that women migrate as violence and gender inequalities intertwine to create a profound threat for them and their families. In face of this situation migrating seems the only option to assure survival. This corresponds with my findings, as narratives show that women's decision to migrate was triggered by fear for their lives; for them migration was seen as a survival strategy, a way to keep themselves and their families safe and secure. Furthermore, the specific reasons presented in my findings match previous research on the topic, as threats from gangs and domestic violence was also mentioned as main motivation to migrate in Willers (2016) study. Finally, the same author explained that this particular trigger of migration happens suddenly, not allowing the women to plan or even save money for the journey. This can be noted in Carmen's narrative, who explained that after receiving threats from gang members she and her family left from one day to another without any prior arrangements.

The extreme situations involving intimidation and violence women face in their home countries force them to make the decision to migrate, as stated above. Hence, the question remains as to whether this action is an example of empowerment, or on the contrary, it is an example of the high level of disempowerment women experience. As Kabeer explains, power is shown through the capacity individuals have to choose among several options (Kabeer, 2005). Kabeer goes further as to explain agency as the process where an individual makes a choice and then takes action on it; however, she explains that there is still a certain level of agency even if decision was taken with little choice available (Kabeer, 2005). This can be identified in my findings; narratives show how women actively participated in making the decision to migrate, some made the decision by themselves or with their partners. And even though the decision to migrate was made under

particular circumstances, and apparently, they had no other choice but to leave their home towns, women still showed a certain level of empowerment in this decision, as they decided when, how, and with whom.

Another important finding regarding women's agency is the fact that when crossing the border, they take action and employ techniques to avoid or diminish dangerous and unsafe situations, as safety became the core motivation for almost all the actions they undertook. Again, here women went through a process of decision-making, choosing among several options; they made their choice and finally they put it into action (Kabeer, 2005), predominantly motivated by the need to stay safe as they all were aware of the extreme dangers of the migration journey. Findings showed that women avoided traveling alone, as participants traveled accompanied or in big groups which made them feel safer. This was also mentioned in previous research about indigenous women from Guatemala who cross the border into Mexico. For them the crossing of the border was a continuous learning experience where strategies were created and then shared collectively, one of them being traveling with a companion for safety purposes (Gracia Sain & Barraza García, 2021). Moreover, when women travel alone, they look for male companions as a safety measure. As Andrea narrated, during her journey to Mexico, she joined a group of males because she felt protected in case some threat might appear. This is also a common aspect mentioned in prior research, although in some studies it is mentioned as "sexual partner" for protection (Brigden, 2018; Willers, 2016). Nonetheless, the main idea is that women feel unsafe in the journey, and male companions are seen as protectors.

Findings also showed that women endure a high level of vulnerable and risky situations during their journey. These experiences are clearly influenced by the accumulations of layers of inequality that migrant women are subject to and a product of their identity as female undocumented migrants (Davis, 2008). Participants narrated how they experience hunger and thirst and having to sleep on the streets with a constant fear of getting caught by police. Women commented on how they took routes through the forest or even crossing rivers in order to avoid Mexican border enforcement, making the journey even more dangerous for them. This is in response to the increase of police enforcement in the Mexican south border. As Guevara describes, migrants create new migration routes as a consequence of the persecution and harassment from the Mexican government who is looking to stop irregular migratory flows (Guevara González, 2018). This situation has influenced directly their vulnerability, as Brigden mentioned in her study of gender mobility and Central

American Migration, this “migration policing funnels migrants to the most dangerous places” (Bridgen, 2018, p. 112).

Likewise, findings showed the dangerous implications of the Mexican Government’s hostile policies to deter migration. One participant narrated her particular encounter with the Mexican migration officials when trying to cross the border along with a migrant caravan. She described the event as a violent clash between migrants and the Mexican border police, where several people got injured. This violent policy against Central American migrants was also documented before in prior research. Garcia and Olivera (2006), for example described how the “aggressive detection, apprehension and expulsion maneuvers [of the police] have led to an exponential growth in violence” (p.34).

In addition to the danger of crossing the border, migrants face several other dangers while traveling in Mexico, mostly due to the presence of criminal organizations. Findings showed how women felt fear while traveling in Mexico, by train or by bus. Either way, they shared the same feeling of anxiety and distress as they felt vulnerable to criminal groups. One participant even shared her close experience with a cartel group. As she tried to cross into United States, she was kidnapped. This also resonates with Najera Aguirre’s findings as she states that migrants are exposed to “extortion, kidnapping and transit fee” (Najera Aguirre, 2016, p. 260), by criminal groups who according to Guevara Gonzalez (2018), have control over the routes migrants commonly use.

As mentioned in previous literature, migrants experience a series of vulnerable situations in their condition as undocumented individuals, which can go from kidnapping, homicide, assault and sexual violence (Cortés, 2018; Guevara González, 2018; Infante et al., 2013). Interestingly, in my findings, these situations were not described in the narratives of my study participants, (besides the one experience of kidnapping) although women did express their fear of criminal organizations, as many were aware of the potential dangers they might face as migrants. Particularly the issue of sexual violence is commonly mentioned across several literature on the matter and many researchers have pointed out how much more vulnerable women are in comparison to men. As Bridgen (2018) argues, women are targets of sexual violence because they are women and migrants. However, it is relevant to highlight that this issue was not mentioned by any of my participants in their narratives. This difference between my findings and prior research could be explained through Bridgen’s research, which identifies silence or intentional omission of facts, as a way to cope with periods of violence, stating that “these selective silences are a means

for surviving violence, protecting reputation and redefining identity in its wake” (Brigden, 2018, p. 113). But this is merely a speculation, I can by no means assure that the women in this study did in fact did experience any sexual violence. The question still remains, though, as the narratives of the women occasionally were brief and simple and it can be deduced that they did not like to engage in descriptions of uncomfortable situations. Still, regarding the emotional toll of migration – a topic which has received little attention in prior research – my findings showed women experience high levels of sadness, regret, despair, hopelessness and uncertainty.

Another possible justification to women’s perceived silence can be explained with what Infante et. al. (2013) discussed about migrants and the violations of their rights. The paper explains that the violation of rights is recognized as a possibility in their journey, and migrants assume and accept it as a risk of crossing borders. Hence, women might see any violations as an expected causality of migration and therefore not worthy of mention. This can be identified in the narrative of Julia, who shared her kidnapping experience by a criminal organization. Her description was made in a calm way, she did not share further information regarding her time in captivity, and did not seem bothered by the situation.

Findings also showed the importance of non-governmental organizations for migrants. The most common aid organization mentioned by participants was the migrant shelters. These organizations proved to be of incredible relevance for migrants, who rely deeply on them for shelter, food, creation of networks or even jobs. During their journey, all participants mentioned that they stayed at some point at a shelter, some for weeks, months or even years. For migrants shelters represent a safe space where they can stop and rest, and where they are always welcomed. This has also been identified in previous research, as Najera (2016) mentions, shelters are spaces where “migrants rest for a short period of time, establish social networks to find the best way to travel through Mexico, and receive medical assistance, among other support” (p. 261). Furthermore, regarding its relevance Rodríguez elaborated on how these non-profit organizations have recently played a significant role helping migrants by offering diverse material and humanitarian aid, and legal advice (Rodríguez, 2016).

As mentioned in the literature review, migration flows from Central America are changing. Traditionally, Mexico was identified as a territory of transit for Central American migrants on their way to United States (Cortés, 2018; Najera Aguirre, 2016; Tinoco González, 2020). However, recent research has showed that every year more migrants decide to extend their stay in Mexico.

The reasons for this new phenomenon are listed by Najera (2016), who mentions the increase of migration control from the Mexican government and situations of extreme violence at the border as the main causes migrants choose to change their stay in Mexico from temporary to permanent. This corresponds with my findings as women explained that their main purpose was to cross the border into United States, therefore Mexico was, initially by all participants, just considered as a transit country on their way up North. Nonetheless, since the border is perceived by participants as an extremely violent and dangerous area, they all decided to extend their stay in Mexico, some even permanently, to keep their family safe.

Finally, as migrants give up in their plan to travel to United States, many start the process to regulate their stay in Mexico. Findings show that women who apply to be recognized as a refugee felt anxious and stressed during the long waiting times, due to lack of certainty about the process, of sufficient economic funds and even a place to rest. This situation was also mentioned by Arriola and Martinez (2020), who explained that due to “the lengthy process, the adverse conditions of waiting and limited opportunities for economic survival” (p. 177), applicants live in uncertainty and precariousness as they wait for an answer with no legal or social security (Arriola Vega & Martínez Junco, 2020).

On the other hand, findings showed that once they received a positive answer, they felt relieved and safe. Having the proper documentation to stay in Mexico clearly gives them peace of mind as they now perceive themselves as individuals with full rights in a foreign country, which in consequence makes them feel calm and protected. One participant even mentioned that after receiving the positive resolution, she felt able to move around freely and stopped feeling scared. As explained by Rodriguez (2016), their migratory status “determines the exercise of legal rights from the moment they leave their country” (p. 57). And in Mexico, migrants without proper legal documentation lack “the possibility to move freely, unless they are willing take on the risks that this implies” (Rodríguez, 2016, p. 57)

6. Life in Nuevo Leon

This chapter explores women's experiences while they adjust to their new life in Mexico, after crossing the border and deciding to stay in Mexico for an indefinite time. I will start looking into their livelihoods, looking into the main challenges. Livelihoods findings present the main issues regarding finding a job and the activities women engage in order to assure their survival and their families'. Then, the section describes the challenges women found while looking for a place to live and dynamics within the household. Finally, the section ends by presenting women's experiences regarding social integration, their challenges but also their agency in solving those difficulties.

6.1 Livelihoods

Once in Mexico, participants dealt with the challenge of finding a stable source of income to support themselves and their families. This section describes the experiences of women as they integrate in the work force in Mexico, the hardships they experience while looking for a job as a Central American migrant but also the activities they put in place to solve the many challenges they faced.

6.1.1 Work related hardships

With regards to the main difficulty to find a job, women experienced a hard time during their search for a job because they lacked the proper documentation to be able to apply for certain jobs. They mentioned how they feel in disadvantage compared to Mexican nationals who do have all the documentation needed to work. Also, some reflected on how their condition as migrants influenced their job opportunities, showing how the intersection of their gender, class and nationality exacerbated their vulnerability.

Andrea started the application for a Refugee Status Determination by the Mexican Government (RSD) in Tapachula, border city in Chiapas, but she got restless because the process took too long and decided to move to Nuevo Leon. This is considered by COMAR as abandonment of the procedure, and when an applicant change cities the process gets dismissed. Hence, Andrea currently lacks documentation to work. When asked if it was challenging to look for a job in Mexico, Andrea mentioned: *“Well, for me it is, because I don't know my way around. I cannot get out just like that to look for a job, something can happen to me. And because I don't have the documents [to work], yes”*. Currently, Andrea has an informal job in Monterrey, she works few

days a week cleaning a house. Daniela, expressed that she postponed her job search until she had the permanent residence card, which she recently got, so now she plans to start looking for a job: *“No, [I did not work] because I did not have the permanent [residence card], until recently I got it. Now I want to look for a small job to help with the house expenses”*. Maria also commented on how, without the proper documentation, migrants can only apply for certain jobs, mostly unregulated ones. When asked if getting hired as an Honduran was difficult she explained: *“Yes, to some extent it is [hard] because they ask you for the documents, but when the job is like in a house or as a bricklayer or assistant bricklayer, it is really fast”*. Carmen also had similar experiences regarding job search, she currently has a positive resolution of the refugee status (see section 5.3) but still needs to apply for a permanent residence card. Now she works at a cardboard factory but the residence card will allow her to apply for better jobs. She explained: *“I have searched for other jobs but they ask me for too many documents, and I don’t have them all yet because I haven’t got the residence card”*.

Findings also show that this situation puts extra stress on women’s emotional stability. Carmen mentioned how she feels when rejected by her lack of documentation:

When they tell me ‘if you don’t have all the documentation, there is nothing here for you to do’. I feel as if my soul left my body, but then I say: there should be something out there for me. I always try to be positive, and thanks to God I am still hanging in there.

Julia, similarly to Andrea, applied for RSD at the southern border but left the process unfinished because she moved to another city. Now Julia lacks the documentation to work, which she mentioned is an obstacle to get hired. Julia, also commented on how being a migrant might also influenced her job opportunities:

Because they hire more people who are Mexican who have already their papers, not migrants. But why is it that they don’t hire me? because we all pay for some bad people right? Maybe other migrants have left their jobs, then people think that the rest of us are like that.

Findings also clearly show that migrants experience hostility while looking for a job, like Carmen who faced uncomfortable situations while applying for work in Tapachula:

I went to look for work, since I like to cook I arrived at a street stand where they sell roasted chicken. When I arrived, a lady was looking at me from head to toe, and then she told me that she really disliked Honduran people, and then she called me a really bad word.

Carmen added that she went to some other places looking for employment in Tapachula, but she got rejected too: *“I did not want to keep looking for a job seeing that people were rude, because I went to two other places but I got rejected too”*.

When Carmen moved from Tapachula to Nuevo Leon (see section 5.3) she started working at a cardboard factory. Carmen’s narrative regarding her job at the factory shows how limited her life is because she works long hours in the cardboard factory. Carmen explained that she works from 7:00 to 17:00 hours, from Monday to Saturday and makes \$1,200 pesos a week [60 USD]. When asked what she normally does on her free day she explained: *“Normal stuff, we wake up at nine, we make breakfast and from there we go shopping and then we come back and clean, and from there we sleep, rest”*. Also, Carmen further reflected on how the working conditions in relation to time and income was better in her home country than in Mexico:

In Honduras, I worked at a restaurant’s kitchen and I was making \$1,800 Lempiras [75 USD], which is basically the same here in pesos, money here is at the same level. Well over there I worked for eight hours and here they are longer [working hours] and less money.

6.1.2 Coping strategies to assure livelihoods

Carmen explained that after she experience uncomfortable situations while looking for employment, she decided to take another path. She described how she, while still in Tapachula, used the stipend UNHCR (see section 5.3) gave her to buy equipment to prepare food for sale and how this activity help her emotional wellbeing.

With the money of UNHCR I bought a stove, and then I meet a man from a church who helped us to get bananas. We make and sell Honduran food. I started to sell food to migrants... And from there we overcame all that trauma from the documentation process and all.

Julia also commented on how she manage to survive when she arrived into Mexico with her son. Since she had no family or network in Mexico she decided to call an uncle who was living in the U.S. and ask for money to settle, and afterwards she started looking for a job:

I called an uncle I have in U.S. and ask if he could help me, that I was in Tapachula. He sent me money, and with that money I went and payed the first month’s rent. From there I started to ask among the neighbors [for work], and I washed clothes or cleaned houses. Whatever I could find.

After settling Julia applied for refugee status at COMAR, therefore she also received money from UNHCR, but just for one month because she quitted the process. But with that money, she then decided to leave Chiapas and travel to the border in an attempt to cross over into the U.S. She

explained: *“Yes, I only received [the stipend] from UNHCR just once. And then with that money I decided to travel to the border”*.

Some participants also decided to move to Monterrey, Nuevo Leon, as a way to assure their subsistence, as Monterrey is perceived as a good city for employment. Ernesto, shelter director, pointed out that Monterrey is an appealing city for refugees because of job opportunities:

Because Monterrey is an attractive city for refugees. In this regard, even the United Nations agency [UNHCR] decided to open an office here, and create a partnership with XX migrant shelter to carry out the aid for refugees...Many migrants are of the idea that when they arrive to Monterrey is easy to look for money, work for a while, and then continue their journey.

For Maria, Daniela and Carmen, the decision to move to Monterrey was heavily influenced by employment opportunities. For instance, Carmen mentioned that because of COVID her food stand struggled to stay afloat, she then decided to leave Tapachula and moved to Monterrey:

Because of the pandemic, food was no longer sold. I did not know what to do with the little money I saved. I had some friends in Monterrey who told me there were job opportunities here. And over there [Tapachula] we were not doing anything, so I said, there is no other option than to continue up North [to Monterrey].

Once in Mexico, migrants face the struggle to support themselves since many have no network, place to stay or even proper documentation, hence it can be hard to find a job and earn an income. In relation to this, some engage in different activities to earn money, ranging from informal to formal jobs. As Manuel, a shelter director, explained when asked what economic activities migrants undertake, he said: *“They can work in domestic employment, crafts making, the kitchen, and some ask for money on the streets”*. Maria explained that once in Mexico she stayed at a shelter in Tapachula while she waited for her RSD (see section 5.3). At the shelter she worked as staff member doing cleaning duties while her partner worked outside the shelter in, as she put it, *“whatever job he can get”*. Then they moved to Mexico City, where she worked at the kitchen in a restaurant. Finally, the family traveled to Monterrey, where things got complicated due to COVID: *“He was working as a bricklayer’s assistant but because of the virus everything closed. I even got a job offer where he was working, but because of COVID he lost his job”*. Maria is currently unemployed and living at a shelter with her siblings and children, her partner decided not to stay at the shelter to be able to work outside since the shelter’s Covid regulations does not allows people who go out come back in.

Julia also explained that in Monterrey she currently works at the shelter she is at. She is mainly in charge of the administration at the women's shelter but also helps with a wide range of duties. She described that once she finishes her duties at the women's shelter, she then goes to the main house, labeled as men's shelter, and helps out there:

When I finish here [women's shelter], I go to the other house [men's shelter] and I help them because I like to be active.. I go over there and I help them to clean the main offices, and whatever else is needed. At night we [shelter staff] visit hospitals to give out food, to migrants and Mexicans too, to the people who are outside waiting for their hospitalized family members.

She further mentioned that even as the money she gets paid at the shelter is not a lot, she feels good as she is earning money and tries to save some of it: *"I feel really good because I have a job. Is not too much money I get paid at the shelter, but is an amount that helps me. Also, because I am stingy I can manage to save money"*.

6.2 Household

This section explores women's experiences in relation to housing and household aspects. Findings showed that the main challenges women found regarding housing was finding an affordable place to live and precarious house conditions. Furthermore, women describe dynamics within the household related to finances, family relations and household chores distribution.

6.2.1 Housing

Maria and her family have experienced a series of challenges regarding housing. When the family moved to Mexico City, where they stayed at Maria's brother's place but things got complicated and the brother asked the family to leave the home. Next, they traveled to Monterrey, Nuevo Leon, (see section 6.1) where the family encounter new housing problems:

Well, we rented a room and stayed there for around two days but we got kicked out because we were too many... They us that we could not stay there, because we the 5 kids plus him and me, we are seven. And they said no, that we needed to look for a big house, and well then I came here [the shelter], but I do feel good here and he is working outside.

Carmen also mentioned the hardships of finding an affordable place to live. She and her family currently rent a room in Monterrey, but she hopes to find an affordable house to live in soon: *"Yes, we wish to live at a house but they are very expensive... Well yes, God willing, we are trying to see how we manage to rent a house once the pandemic is over"*. Carmen further described how

she and her family share the tiny space they rent in Monterrey. During her description it can be noted she perceives a lack of privacy in the space she lives in with her family:

There are several 'apartments' as they call them, but they are like this small room with a hall. The only place with privacy is the bathroom and a hall. There [the hall] my daughter sleeps, and my bed and my son's bed are in the big room.

Also the decision to rent a single room is heavily connected with their income, which she perceives as insufficient: *"Ten hours of work [per day], the salary is really small, \$1,200 MXN [60 USD], sometimes it only covers the rent"*.

Furthermore, it can be noted that many families experience family separation due to their living conditions, mostly when they stayed at shelters. As mentioned above, Maria explained that because of the pandemic the shelter she is staying at doesn't allow people that go out come back, so in order to keep working to support the family her partner decided not stay at the shelter and rented a place for him, which mean they are not together and cannot meet regularly.

6.2.2 Family dynamics

It is really clear from the findings that household chores are perceived as feminine duties. Now in Nuevo Leon, Carmen explained how she and her daughter do all housework while her partner and son work, but then points out that she works too, making it clear about her position regarding housework as a woman's duty: *"Between my daughter and myself we clean and cook, and my partner and son, well they work. Well, now me and my daughter work too at the carboard factory"*.

Carmen further explained the housework distribution which is clearly gendered, even though she works it is still expected of her to perform all domestic duties: *"I wake up at 4:40 in the morning because I am in charge of preparing food... [After work] I prepare dinner, I start cooking while my daughter cleans...we start work at 6:40 am"*.

Furthermore, when asked about what does her partner and her son's chores are, she explains: *"I wash my husband's clothes and my daughter does her brother's clothes. And the men, well they lay down and rest...Well, besides helping me organize groceries they help just by eating them"*.

For Daniela household chores are also clearly defined since she stays at home while her husband works: *"My husband is in charge of everything related to rent and all, and I am in charge of domestic chores like washing, cooking, cleaning"*. She further explained her daily schedule: *"I wake up early and prepare lunch for the family. And then I do the rest of the domestic chores"*.

In relation with family dynamics, participants shared some insights about decision making in the household. For Julia things at the household have changed deeply, since she left her husband behind:

Yes, because in Honduras I was married, and I had to ask always my husband for his opinion. And here things are different, if I decide on something I just do it, and there is no one who can stop me. Then, here my life is a lot better than the one I had in Honduras.

About decision making too, Carmen shared that she and her partner take important decisions together: *“We talked about it and take the decision between both of us... We share every decision”*. This indicates how the dynamics at her household appear to be egalitarian in some aspects.

Regarding finances, Carmen commented on how now the family distributes income and compared it with her life in Honduras with a former partner: *“With my ex-partner it was like that, he told me this is for the food and don’t even ask what am I going to do with the money I am keeping. But with my current partner we share finances”*.

6.3 Social integration

Findings showed that women face different challenges while they try to navigate the new social setting they find themselves in because of the migration experience. The first aspect women’s narratives show, regarding social aspects, is the loss of their social network. Second, women mentioned their experiences regarding interaction with the Mexican community. Finally, findings revealed how women face social challenges, and what strategies they implement to solve their social difficulties.

6.3.1 Support network

When leaving their home countries women described how they left everything behind, including a strong support network. Carmen reflected on her lack of social network, when asked who she asks for help, she mentioned: *“No one, just the sweat of my brow, just our own effort”*.

Since women who migrated lost their support network, they engage in rebuilding activities in an attempt to knit new networks in the new setting. While in Tapachula, Carmen mentioned she created new friendships with whom she had a good relationship and how felt supported by them: *The neighbors I had [in Tapachula] did not want me to come here [Nuevo Leon], they said: ‘don’t go neighbor, stay’...Yes, there I felt really good because if I felt sick they would say: ‘don’t worry neighbor’ and even if it was some tea they will bring me something...over there I felt safe, more supported.*

As mentioned before, shelters can also be space where migrants build a new network. Julia commented how having new friendships in Monterrey makes her feel supported, now that she is at the shelter: *“Well, I feel really good now. I have, well I have made new friendships here. I do feel accompanied”*. Also Maria described how when she was at the shelter in Tapachula she made new friendships: *“Yes, lots [of friends] from Honduras, migrants, from El Salvador, Guatemala, Cubans, from Nicaragua. Yes, the same people from the shelter, we were a lot of people there”*. Furthermore, the connections they make during their migration journey can become significant. Carmen for example, explained how a young man she helped in Tapachula, when she sold food there, returned her help by sending her family some money for Christmas after he had come to know they were struggling. Throughout her narration it can be noted that their friendship was based on bonds of empathy and support:

People I met in Chiapas who sometimes arrived and said: ‘Friend, can you give me a plate of food, and can I pay you later? Look, I’ll pay you later’. And I said, no problem because I think, there were days that I was hungry that made me think, why am I not going to do them a favor? Right now one of the boys who asked us for a lot of credit, called my daughter and said ‘Hey, XX, how are you? and she said ‘Well, here sad because I’m not going to wear any new clothes’. He said, ‘well look don’t worry about it’ he then sent her 150 USD. Well, I told him, God bless you, at least we have money for tamales, and he said ‘No, I thank you because you took away my hunger’.

6.3.2 Interaction with Mexican society

Undoubtedly, migrants do face social hostility while trying to integrate in their new setting. Maria, explained that in Tapachula, before arriving to the shelter (see section 5.3), she and her family were resting at a public space when a police officer came: *“There the locals called the police on us. A police officer came and said ‘guys, you cannot be here because this is a public road and the neighbors are complaining”*.

Carmen too shared an experience where she felt uncomfortable and unwelcomed, she said a person made harsh comments about Hondurans, not directly to her but still making her feel irritated:

He did not said it directly to me, but he was saying it to another person. He said he strongly disliked Honduran people because they come feeling better than everyone ‘they come here all cocky asking for a residence status and the only thing they know how to do is to steal’.

Even though women experienced hostile reactions from the community members, they also mentioned some of the pleasant experiences they had during the migration process. Andrea

described how a Mexican lady offered her a space to sleep and rest when she arrived into Mexico: “[In Chiapas] I stayed with a lady who gave me some days to stay and rest, like around three days to sleep before I resumed my journey again”. Also Carmen described her interaction with a Mexican store clerk which made her feel happy, she recalls this interaction as a very pleasant social exchange: “Well, the other day I went to a small store and the owner said ‘whatever [item] you want, you just ask for it, and I can have it for you, whatever you like. He is really friendly, at least he gave me hope, the opportunity of getting what I want. Yes he was very kind”.

6.3.3 Coping mechanisms

Participants described how they manage loneliness and their longing for home. Julia commented that when she misses her life back at her home country she cries, as a way to cope. Carmen in contrast mentioned that she actually doesn’t feel alone because her family calls her:

Well to be honest I don’t because they call us [family from Honduras]. Yes, [I talk] with my mom, my dad, my siblings. We still are connected, I see them by video call. That is why I don’t feel too alone anymore.

As mentioned above women experience social rejection. Carmen mentioned that to cope with this she tries to avoid conflict, even when she really feels irritated, and decided to be polite with all people regardless of they being unpolite at her. She explained that when she heard the man said bad things about Hondurans she decided to stay quiet: “I almost answered him back, but then I said, it is not with me. I better refrain, why do I want to put myself in that situation?”.

Regarding social activities several Carmen, Daniela and Julia mentioned that they don’t like to participate in social reunions in general, so they avoid this kind of activities. However, Andrea did mention that she participates in social activities at the shelter: “Well, sometimes on Sundays, we go up to the roof and cook some food and have some sodas. Sometimes we even brake a piñata.”

6.4 Discussion

As previously mentioned, the reviewed literature regarding the integration process in the new places of settlement included material mainly from migrants settling in U.S., as research on Central American women in Mexico is scarce. Hence, in this chapter, I will attempt to discuss and compare my findings with the reviewed literature available and my theoretical framework.

As explained by David, analyzing women’s experiences through a lens of intersectionality allows one to identify how categories of differences determine their personal experiences (Davis, 2008). This is proven to be true, as throughout my findings, it can be noted that my study participants’

intersecting identities as women and migrants greatly influence their experiences during the integration process. This was also mentioned in Garcia and Olivera's study (2006), in which they explained how "Central American identity" makes women more vulnerable to rejection and aggressive treatment by the local community (García & Olivera, 2006, p. 39). Findings showed how some women experienced hostile reactions from business owners when they applied for a job, revealing how their intersecting identities as Central American migrants shaped their job search. Regarding working conditions, the reviewed literature states that migrant women are not very selective when they look for jobs, and prior research shows that women are more prone to accept jobs that are not well paid and even unstable in order to provide for their families (Jansen, 2008; Lawson, 1998; Pessar, 1999). This can be identified in my findings, as those of my study participants who had been able to find work mostly got temporary jobs in domestic services, doing crafts and cooking, or in low paying industries. One participant who had a positive refugee resolution from COMAR commented that she had a somewhat stable job, but emphasized that it was a low paying job, where she worked ten hour shifts from Monday to Saturday earning even less than what she made in Honduras. In a similar vein, two participants mentioned that they worked in the shelter they stayed in, cleaning, cooking or doing administrative work.

Also, findings show how women, in the face of challenges, put in place a series of actions to assure their livelihoods, showing women's agency and further empowerment. Participants narrated the different strategies they employ to assure their livelihoods, from investing the UNHCR stipend they received to start a food business, to asking for support from a relative, to even moving cities where they perceived there were more job opportunities. One participant narrated how, after asking for jobs in Chiapas and always receiving negative answers, she decided to use the stipend from UNHCR to buy a stove and some other utensils to start selling food to migrants. She explained that this activity was done by her and her daughter, while her husband looked for a job elsewhere. By taking action to solve a problem, she showed a certain level of empowerment. The activity of selling food is highly gendered, though, and we can see that her possibilities for action were clearly constrained by social norms and circumstances (Mosedale, 2005). Her selling of food could be classified as agency of greater effectiveness as Kabeer (2005) coins it, since this activity was done in compliance with her "given roles and responsibilities" (p.15) as a woman, not transgressing any gender norms, and her decision was mainly to make sure she and her family survive in Mexico. Additionally, the resourcefulness of the participants is echoed in prior research

which states that women are creative and capable when dealing with economic hardship (Jansen, 2008; Ritchie, 2018).

Concerning housing issues, literature indicates that asylum seekers in Mexico “suffer public insecurity because the State does not provide support in areas such as housing and education” (Arriola Vega & Martínez Junco, 2020, p. 177). This can also be analyzed with an intersectional lens as developed by Davis (2008), since problems regarding housing are related to their identity as Central American migrant women, which in consequence makes them more vulnerable and marginalized. On this subject, findings showed that the first complication for migrant women who decide to stay in Mexico, are housing challenges and precarious housing conditions. The narrations of participants showed a broad range of complications regarding housing conditions. Some were evicted from the place they rented, other decided they had better stay at a migrant shelter, and the one participant who rented a space with her family described how uncomfortable it is for them to live there as the family of four share a small room, because the family could not afford a bigger place.

As stated by Pessar (1999), one important question regarding migrant women and empowerment is if migration is “emancipatory or subjugating” (Pessar, 1999, p. 585). The reviewed literature on the effects of migration for women’s empowerment focuses mostly on the household dynamics among couples. Pessar (2005) elaborates on this topic by explaining that the increase of women’s participation in family expenditures can be considered a gain in gender relations at the household caused by the migration (Pessar, 2005). On this matter, one participant who lived with a partner in Mexico explained that finances were apparently distributed equitably, and she felt that she had a significant say on expenditures. She mentioned that back in Honduras things were different, as with her ex-partner she had no say in expenditures, but now in Mexico her new partner was more open to share finances and decisions with her. Although this does show some level of empowerment, as apparently gender roles had been redefined and there was an apparent extension of “what is possible for her to be and do” (Mosedale, 2005, p. 252), evidence is not clear as to whether access to economic resources in this case was a result of migration as the participant’s partners had changed. Regarding the possible emancipatory effect of migration, findings also show how some participants have experienced a new sense of autonomy and independence as a consequence of the migration process, but this was mostly because they left their partners behind. Furthermore, it is relevant to mention that available research on gender dynamics in migrant

households mostly focuses on women who live with a partner, in contrast with my findings where some women migrated alone.

Concerning the distribution of the household chores among those who live with a partner, data showed that women who work also are expected to perform household chores; what is commonly referred to by researchers as “the double burden” (Menjívar, 1999). Maria described that even though she and her husband work, she was in charge of all household chores like cooking, cleaning and washing clothes, while her husband and son rested. As mentioned in the literature review, participation in wage labor has its gains as it can translate into empowerment because women who work can have more control over economic resources of the household and gain more power over how money is spent (Menjívar, 1999; Pessar, 1984), among others. But, as explained by Kabeer, empowerment through paid work has its limits, “despite their increased labor input into paid work, women either continue to bear the main burden of domestic work or share it with other female members of the household” (Kabeer, 2005, p. 20). This was the case of Maria, as she further explained that the household chores were also shared with her daughter, but not her son.

According to Owino & Weber (2020), as a consequence of leaving their home countries, migrants experience a loss of social networks and lack of strong meaningful relationships, which can be identified as a challenge they face in their new destination country. This situation was also identified in my findings, as women expressed how they, when facing difficulties, they had no one to rely on, just their own efforts. Nonetheless, some did engage in some sort of network reconstruction during their migration journey, mostly they mentioned the way they made friendships with other migrants along the way who were in the same situation. By this, women show their agency, as networking can work also as a resource for them. This is similar to what Rodríguez (2016) found in her study about solidarity practices among Central American migrants in Mexico. She explained that “along the way, they [migrants] meet people with whom they share their stigmatized world and build emotional ties and ephemeral but meaningful experiences” (Rodríguez, 2016, p. 57). These kinds of friendships were further discussed by Brigden (2018), who explained that the ephemeral relationships migrants establish during their journey might translate into reciprocal friendships that function as a “migration resource” (p. 114). This was identified in the narratives of Carmen, who explained that when she had a food stand, she gave food to another migrant on the promise of paying later. She explained that she did it as she felt compelled to help them because she knew how it felt to be hungry and have no money. Then, she

mentioned that the man called them once he was in U.S. and as a “thank you” he sent money to the family of Carmen. This case shows how friendships that may seem transitory, can actually work as a resource for migrants based on reciprocity.

In their study about the sexual rights of Central American migrants in Mexico, Infante et. al., elaborate on the vulnerability of migrants, “in addition to the lack of legal protection that migrants have, among the factors that determine their vulnerability is the stigma and discrimination to which they are subjected” (Infante et al., 2013, p. 59). This has clearly a connection with their condition as migrants, as they became more vulnerable to discrimination because of their multiple intersecting identities. On this matter, findings showed that women experienced hostility and rejection at several stages of their migration and integration processes, some mentioned harsh interactions with the police or neighbors which made them feel unwelcomed.

Regarding coping mechanisms, Owino and Weber (2020), in their study of sadness among refugee women in U.S., explained that women experience isolation, loneliness, inequality and even racism when integrating into a new community, all a product of migration. Findings showed that the women face such social challenges, as some experience loneliness and social rejection because of their condition as migrants. Nevertheless, they show a certain level of agency when facing such obstacles. Some mentioned crying or making phone calls to their loved ones back home to cope with loneliness, and others just decide to stay silent and avoid any confrontations as a mechanism to deal with social rejection.

Overall women’s agency cannot go unnoticed, it is relevant to recognize the need to see women not as victims but as individuals with agency as Juliano states:

By going beyond the conception of women as victims that essentializes and fixes an identity and neutralizes the capacity for action, it is possible to make their agency capacity visible. It is about going beyond the dichotomy between passive victims and active resistances to understand gender inequalities in their complexity and delve into the multiple levels that are operating in social, political and cultural relations while living their lives despite the border , at the same time that the possibilities of emancipation are recovered in the speeches, in the practices, in the cunning and knowledge that the interviewed Central American women articulate in their daily lives. (Juliano (2006) in Cortés, 2018, p. 51)

7. Conclusion

This investigation was set to explore the experiences of Central American migrant women during their migration and integration processes in Mexico. By using the theoretical lenses of intersectionality and empowerment to analyze the women's experiences, the study was able to identify migrant women's vulnerabilities, but also their agentic capacities during both processes. Hence, this thesis has showed the challenges women experience during migration, and also the strategies they put in place to solve problems and assure their survival.

The intersection of gender, economic position and irregular or undocumented migratory situation, were identified as relevant identities shaping the women's migration and integration processes. Furthermore, these intersecting identities determined their level of vulnerability throughout all stages of both processes. However, as both processes involved situations of vulnerabilities, product of the accumulation of layers of inequalities, the migration process proved to be more dangerous as women on the move faced life threatening situations in several stages of their journey. Additionally, fear was a recurrent component in their migration path, which was clearly connected to their level of vulnerability. Fear was identified from the beginning of their journey, as a trigger of migration, as all women mentioned they escaped dangerous situations. Moreover, during their path into Mexico, fear was present all along, fear of the known dangers of migrating like kidnapping, rape, assault, robbery; fear of the Mexican border enforcement and police, and fear of the drug cartels. Thus, this shows the level of vulnerability women experience during migration. Also, women showed an awareness of the life-threatening situations they could experience and to which they could be exposed since the start of their journey, but nevertheless they decided to migrate; in this case, migration was a survival strategy. However, women showed agency and empowerment as they went beyond their vulnerabilities and employed a series of techniques to assure their survival. Before and during the journey, women analyzed their current situations and from there they decided which option was the safest for them and their families. Women put in place a series of techniques to keep them safe, such as from traveling accompanied, as it is perceived as safest, to adjust they travel plans to protect themselves and their families.

The social integration process also proved to be full of challenges, although not as much as their migration process. Once the women crossed into Mexico, their intersecting identities limited their options for housing, job opportunities and even social integration. During their integration into the Mexican society, they experienced hostile situations while interacting with the local community.

Additionally they experienced discrimination and marginalization because of their nationality and undocumented situation. Nevertheless, women undertook a series of activities to tackle the adversities i.e. investing money on a food stand, asking for money from a relative, staying at a migrant shelter, moving cities to find a job, applying for asylum, and creating new support networks with neighbors or fellow migrants, thus showing that women can be vulnerable, but they can also move beyond their complications and employ their agency to improve the situation in which they are in.

Regarding the question posed by the literature review of migration as emancipatory or subjugating, this research showed that, for the women who left their partner behind, they did feel a greater sense of autonomy and freedom as a consequence of migration. On the other hand, for the women who traveled with their partner, household roles are still clearly gendered, and they are expected to comply with their given gender roles even if both the women and her partner work.

Lastly, I would recommend a shift in the Mexican government policies towards Central American migrants, as currently the actions from the Government have been hostile and not sufficient to safeguard the human rights of migrants, particularly those of migrant women. As it is shown throughout this thesis, the participation of the Mexican Government in the protection and settlement of migrants is limited, which clearly puts migrants and migrant women in a vulnerable situation, as they do not have the right tools to adjust to their new reality.

8. References

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9. Appendices

9.1 Interview guides

9.1.1. Interview guide women

Interview Guide - Women

Country of Birth:

Age:

Marital status:

Children:

1. How was it that you came here? Did you had any complications or challenges during the refugee application in Mexico.

Home relations

2. How is the distribution of labor at your household? Do each member has an assigned household activity? Who does what? Please explain them.
3. Please explain further about your current participation in home duties, i.e. responsibilities, expected duties etc.
4. What do you do on a normal day?
5. In comparison with household life at your home town, do you feel any changes on household duties? Decision making?
6. In your opinion would you say that the situation at home has improved? In relation with family duties.

Livelihoods

1. What do you do for a living?/ How do you get food on the table?
2. What do your husband/partner do for a living?
3. What kind of jobs have you got since you arrive? / Did you changed jobs often?
4. Have you have difficulties to find a job?
5. If so, how do you face those difficulties?
6. For women who work formal or informal: Do you notice any changes in household duties after having a job/receiving income? / What does you and your husband/partner do of home work, after you started working or making income?
7. Do you feel a change on decision making after having a job? Do you feel you participate more? How?
8. Do you perceive any additional burdens/losses within household life that comes from your participation on economic activities? How do you cope with them?

Social integration

1. How is you experience interacting with the locals?/ Or community of refugees, do you feel solidarity?

2. Regarding social activities: In what social activities do you participate? how do you engage with the locals? How do you engage with the refugee community?
3. Do you have a network of friends/family in the community you are living?
4. Do you feel part of the community you are now living in? Can you share some anecdotes to explain further?
5. What are the challenges you face regarding interaction the local community, if any?
6. What activities or actions do you put in place to face those problems? / What do you do encounter problems you face?

9.1.2 Interview guide migrant shelter staff

Interview guide - Migrant shelter staff

1. Can you please provide a general overview of the refugee groups that arrive to the shelter.
2. What services are available for refugees in Casa Monarca?
3. What are the common issues refugee women face when arriving to Monterrey?
4. What are the main/common economical activities refugee women take part for livelihood strategies?
5. What are the common integration difficulties refugee women face and how do they cope with them?
6. Do you believe refugee women, and refugees in general, are welcomed in the Mexican society, particularly in Monterrey?

9.2 Participants

Table of Participants

Pseudonym	Country of origin	Age	Employment status	Marital status	Children/Age of children	Refugee status by COMAR
<i>Maria</i>	Honduras	28	Unemployed	Domestic partnership	2 children/7 and 13 years old.	Yes
<i>Carmen</i>	Honduras	41	Employed	Domestic partnership	5 children/16, 19, 18, 23 years old. (One kid's age remained unknown)	Yes
<i>Julia</i>	Honduras	30	Employed	Divorced	1 child/12 years old	Requested but unfinished
<i>Andrea</i>	Guatemala	25	Employed	Separated	None	Requested but unfinished

<i>Daniela</i>	Honduras	25	Unemployed	Domestic partnership	2 children/ 3 and 6 years old	Yes
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9.3 Ethical clearance

NSD's assessment

Print

Project title

Experiences of female refugees in Mexico

Reference number

233401

Registered

01.11.2020 av Grecia Scarlett Garza Silva - Grecia.Silva@student.uib.no

Data controller (institution responsible for the project)

Universitetet i Bergen / Det psykologiske fakultet / Hemil-senteret

Project leader (academic employee/supervisor or PhD candidate)

Haldis Haukanes , Haldis.Haukanes@uib.no, tlf: 4755589259

Type of project

Student project, Master's thesis

Contact information, student

Grecia Scarlett Garza Silva, grecia.silva@student.uib.no, tlf: 93966263

Project period

10.12.2020 - 31.07.2021

Status

26.11.2020 - Assessed

Assessment (1)

26.11.2020 - Assessed

Our assessment is that the processing of personal data in this project will comply with data protection legislation, presupposing that it is carried out in accordance with the information given in the Notification Form and attachments dated 26.11.2020. Everything is in place for the processing to begin.

NOTIFY CHANGES

If you intend to make changes to the processing of personal data in this project it may be necessary to notify NSD. This is done by updating the Notification Form. On our website we explain which changes must be notified. Wait until you receive an answer from us before you carry out the changes.

TYPE OF DATA AND DURATION

The project will be processing special categories of personal data about ethnicity, and general categories of personal data, until 31.07.2021.

LEGAL BASIS

The project will gain consent from data subjects to process their personal data. We find that consent will meet the necessary requirements under art. 4 (11) and 7, in that it will be a freely given, specific, informed and unambiguous statement or action, which will be documented and can be withdrawn.

The legal basis for processing special categories of personal data is therefore explicit consent given by the data subject, cf. the General Data Protection Regulation art. 6.1 a), cf. art. 9.2 a), cf. the Personal Data Act § 10, cf. § 9 (2).

PRINCIPLES RELATING TO PROCESSING PERSONAL DATA

NSD finds that the planned processing of personal data will be in accordance with the principles under the General Data Protection Regulation regarding:

- lawfulness, fairness and transparency (art. 5.1 a), in that data subjects will receive sufficient information about the processing and will give their consent
- purpose limitation (art. 5.1 b), in that personal data will be collected for specified, explicit and legitimate purposes, and will not be processed for new, incompatible purposes
- data minimisation (art. 5.1 c), in that only personal data which are adequate, relevant and necessary for the purpose of the project will be processed
- storage limitation (art. 5.1 e), in that personal data will not be stored for longer than is necessary to fulfil the project's purpose

THE RIGHTS OF DATA SUBJECTS

Data subjects will have the following rights in this project: transparency (art. 12), information (art. 13), access (art. 15), rectification (art. 16), erasure (art. 17), restriction of processing (art. 18), notification (art. 19), data portability (art. 20). These rights apply so long as the data subject can be identified in the collected data.

NSD finds that the information that will be given to data subjects about the processing of their personal data will meet the legal requirements for form and content, cf. art. 12.1 and art. 13.

We remind you that if a data subject contacts you about their rights, the data controller has a duty to reply within a month.

FOLLOW YOUR INSTITUTION'S GUIDELINES

NSD presupposes that the project will meet the requirements of accuracy (art. 5.1 d), integrity and confidentiality (art. 5.1 f) and security (art. 32) when processing personal data.

To ensure that these requirements are met you must follow your institution's internal guidelines and/or consult with your institution (i.e. the institution responsible for the project).

FOLLOW-UP OF THE PROJECT

NSD will follow up the progress of the project at the planned end date in order to determine whether the processing of personal data has been concluded.

Good luck with the project!

Contact person at NSD: Karin Lillevold

Data Protection Services for Research: +47 55 58 21 17 (press 1)

9.4 Information letter and consent form in English

Are you interested in taking part in the research project
“Experiences of female refugees”?

This is an inquiry about participation in a research project where the main purpose is to know more about your experience as a refugee in a new country and the activities you do on daily basis. In this letter we will give you information about the purpose of the project and what your participation will involve.

Purpose of the project

The purpose of the project is to explore the experiences of female refugees in the integration process and how they cope with challenges they face. I am interested in knowing the role distribution in the household, challenges in integration processes like finding a job, and participation in social activities within the new community.

The data collection will be done by conducting individual interviews with voluntary participants. This research project is part of a master’s thesis in Global Development Theory and Practice at the University of Bergen. All the collected information from participants will be anonymous and used solely for the purpose of a master’s thesis.

The study will explore these questions:

- To what extent has the refugee situation transformed gender relations, roles and responsibilities in the home sphere?
- Which kind of challenges do women face in relation to their livelihoods?
- Which kind of challenges do the women experience during the integration process in the community?

Who is responsible for the research project?

University of Bergen is the institution responsible for the project.

Why are you being asked to participate?

Several people have been asked to participate in this investigation. The selection criteria was: refugee women that have been in contact with either the offices of UNHCR or the non-profit organization called “Casa Monarca”, or any other non-profit that works with refugees in Nuevo Leon.

What does participation involve for you?

If you chose to take part in the project we will arrange a personal one to one interview. The interview will include questions regarding your daily activities, and it will last around 1 to 1.5 hours. The interview will be recorded and the researcher will also take notes to document all relevant information.

Participation is voluntary

Participation in the project is voluntary. If you chose to participate, you can withdraw your consent at any time without giving a reason. All information about you will then be made anonymous. There will be no negative consequences for you if you chose not to participate or later decide to withdraw.

Your personal privacy – how we will store and use your personal data

We will only use your personal data for the purpose(s) specified in this information letter. We will process your personal data confidentially and in accordance with data protection legislation (the General Data Protection Regulation and Personal Data Act).

- Besides me, my project supervisor will also have access to the personal data.
- The list of names, contact details and respective codes will be stored in my personal computer, secured with a personal password.
- Your personal data will be processed outside Mexico, all the analysis will be done at University of Bergen in Norway.
- Interviews will be recorded with a personal recorder machine, and to perform the transcription I will use my personal laptop computer with a password and save all material on the University's private server, to ensure privacy.

For security concerns only your general information will be published: age, occupation, nationality. Your name and personal information will be stored and not used for publication.

What will happen to your personal data at the end of the research project?

The project is scheduled to end June 2021. All the collected data will be stored in protected device and the final project will be available through University of Bergen. All recordings, personal information and notes will be deleted/destroyed by June of 2021.

Your rights

So long as you can be identified in the collected data, you have the right to:

- access the personal data that is being processed about you
- request that your personal data is deleted
- request that incorrect personal data about you is corrected/rectified
- receive a copy of your personal data (data portability), and
- send a complaint to the Data Protection Officer or The Norwegian Data Protection Authority regarding the processing of your personal data

What gives us the right to process your personal data?

We will process your personal data based on your consent.

Based on an agreement with University of Bergen, NSD – The Norwegian Centre for Research Data AS has assessed that the processing of personal data in this project is in accordance with data protection legislation.

Where can I find out more?

If you have questions about the project, or want to exercise your rights, contact:

- University of Bergen via Grecia Garza Silva: grecia.silva@student.uib.no or; Haldis Haukanes: haldis.haukanes@uib.no
- Our Data Protection Officer: University of Bergen: post@uib.no
- NSD – The Norwegian Centre for Research Data AS, by email: personverntjenester@nsd.no or by telephone: +47 55 58 21 17.

Yours sincerely,

Project Leader

Haldis Haukanes

Student and researcher

Grecia Scarlett Garza Silva

Consent form

I have received and understood information about the project “*Exploring the experiences of female refugees*” and have been given the opportunity to ask questions. I give consent:

- to participate in an interview
- for my personal data to be processed outside of Mexico
- for information about me/myself to be published in a way that I can be recognised
- for my personal data to be deleted after the end of the project

I give consent for my personal data to be processed until the end date of the project, approx. June 2021

(Signed by participant, date)