

# Building feminist strategies to accompaniment migrant women in transit through Mexico

## Summary

The increasing Central American and Caribbean immigration in transit through Mexico make migrant women prone to the violence that prevails in this country and that materializes in a constant violation of rights. Given the “Necropolitics” of border control exercised by the States involved and the complexity of the multiple agents involved in the reproduction of vulnerability and violence. As well as the resistance built by women in transit and the organizations that accompany them. Therefore, it is urgent to move to the next level of public policy, which is the proposal and consolidation of cities of refuge or cities of welcome. The aim of this article is to analyze the evolution of the feminization of migration and the need for a feminist perspective to understand and address it. Based on this analysis and on our own experiences of collaboration with civil society organizations, we reflect on the urgent need to introduce an intersectional feminist approach in the accompaniment of migrant women within the welcoming cities.

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## Introduction

Mexico's role in the current context of migration dynamics in North America is relevant and remarkable, as it has gone from being a country of emigration to become a country of transit migration, which has given it a new political function in the regional context. This includes a strategy of securitization of border security policies that is negatively channeled towards migration considered as irregular, many of these movements of asylum seekers. What is most alarming is that these control mechanisms, derived from the necropolitics.<sup>1</sup> Which governs border spaces, giving organized crime an open door for the trafficking and smuggling of migrants, where women are especially vulnerable.

However, despite all the risks inherent in this migratory transit, tens of thousands of Latin American women are migrating from their countries of origin to the United States. Therefore, gender is a “constitutive element of migration” and the violence to which migrant women are exposed is numerous, complex and crosses the entire long and dangerous migratory journey. However, despite the fact that migrant women in transit are exposed to extremely dangerous situations, public policies on migration, especially in Mexico, lack a gender perspective and continue to fail to place protection at the center of their actions. It is therefore urgent to alert the lack of adaptation of such policies to the real lives and experiences of migrant women, where, moreover, their voices are often not present. In this article we focus our interest on this problem.

Faced with this lack of political-legislative mechanisms for the attention and protection of migrant women, social organizations for the accompaniment of these women have been seeking to generate spaces of resistance and defense of human rights in the territory. These organizations have been carrying out their work in Mexico basically within shelters and migrant houses. These are spaces where different collectives converge and where networks can be woven and strengthened to accompany migrant women in transit.

We believe it is necessary to explore and reflect on feminist resistance and practices among immigrant women. We start from the need pointed out by decolonial feminist authors such as Espinosa et al.: articulate theory and praxis, “thinking from doing” (p. 409). And, thus, from the collective reflection between different agents,

beginning to articulate psychosocial support strategies structured from a feminist logic.

We also place ourselves in the paradigm of feminist epistemologies and methodologies, specifically in Haraway's proposal of situated knowledge and her conception that knowledge is constructed in multiple voices and from different places. Therefore, this paper intends to gather different practices, perspectives and identities of migrant women, of the organizations that accompany migrants, and also the view of professionals and researchers specialized in the field of migration, who deal with the issue of cities of welcome.

Thus, this article starts from an approach to the territory, from where the accompaniment and starting point of the cities of refuge is offered, to the feminization of migrations. Followed by an exposition of different theoretical feminist currents to understand the complexity of the experiences of women migrating in this context of violence during the Mexican transit. After this, the contextualization of the study of migrant women is important for gender studies in migration, then present the different voices involved in this critical reflection interwoven with our proposal for an accompaniment that highlights the theme of welcoming cities. We conclude with some final questions that we hope will serve as an impulse to continue the debates and intertwining of migration and feminist studies and social intervention.

## Methodology

Our study is based on the principles of feminist epistemologies and methodologies, specifically Donna Haraway's (2000) proposal of situated knowledge. It should be noted that these observations regarding the accompaniment of migrant women in possible cities of refuge were elaborated from our own experience obtained conducting fieldwork in migrant shelters in Mexico and United States. Basically, through volunteer work, using the methodological tools of ethnography participant observation.

The problem statement and the working hypothesis of this research demand a multidimensional explore methodology to enable an adequate contextualization of our object of study, which is the accompaniment of migrant women in possible sanctuary cities throughout Mexico. Thus, we intend to successively link the analytical categories and the empirical processes - migrant women in transit, accompaniment and sanctuary cities. Our theorization -feminist and gender in migration-

transforms any order of ideas determined from a social point of view of people on the move, especially women.

Fieldwork as an anthropological and ethnographic tool is used here to document common practices of the accompaniment process towards migrant women, as Pachirat says, to have an active participation through a commitment that contains the power to see and the partiality to sustain a direct dialogue with the world under investigation. Schierup and Alund point out, when studying a social event as part of the field of sociology, it is convenient to look into the social situation, the behavior of the community members to compare their behavior and reveal the underlying system of relationships between the social structure of the community. Both the physical environment and the physiological life of the community members are under scrutiny.

This is important because at this point, we could understand the role played by non-governmental organizations in Mexico that accompany migrant women. Since they are key social agents, they can collectively represent the organizations that these migrant women have been building, in terms of the consolidation of their own migratory networks of circularity and binational empowerment, and in the second place, the treatment of the cities of refuge. However, the community work of these organizations, established mainly in migrants' homes and shelters, is necessary to involve even more the rest of the local population and local governments. Particularly for those established in migrant-receiving societies, as is currently happening in several Mexican border cities.

From where it is possible to take advantage of the existence of a growing feminist movement, which would be considered as a border feminism within the geopolitical transversality. Such is the case of Ciudad Juárez, where migrant women and other migrant collectives belonging to the LGBTQ+ community can share experiences in the "Respetrans" shelter. This is a sort of community emergency staged by certain organized local actors, who have made strong incursions into the field of irregular and forced migration to fill the power vacuum left by the Mexican authorities in the absence of public migration policies with a gender perspective.

## What is known as the feminization of migration

Presently approximately 250 million people are international migrants, of these, almost half are women and girls and represent 71% percent of the victims of human trafficking and smuggling.<sup>2</sup> According to a recent UN Women report (UN Women), women represent almost half of the 19.6 million refugees in the world, in turn, women represent 73.4% of all domestic workers, who are international migrants. However, only 22 countries have ratified the ILO convention on domestic work, which recognizes the additional vulnerabilities of domestic workers to protect their rights and dignity.<sup>3</sup>

Regarding migration from Latin America in transit through Mexico, since 2010 there has been a continuous annual flow of 200,000 people.<sup>4</sup> According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the figure is even higher in Mexico: it is estimated that close to 500,000 people per year cross the country irregularly, most of them being migrants originating from the misnamed "Northern Triangle of Central America"; Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala.

Though, regarding migration from the Northern Triangle of Central America, it shows an opposite trend to the Mexican migration, since from 2006 it has maintained a sustained growth, going from 1.3 million for that same year to 1.8 million in 2015, which implies a growth percentage of 33% as opposed to the 20% decrease in Mexican migration to the same destination and in the same period.<sup>5</sup> Although,

authors such as Garcia and Gaspar,<sup>6</sup> who consider this surplus is not precisely the product of an increase in the migratory flows of women. This seems to be more related to the reduction of the stock due to the return and deportations of men, who are able to enter the United States less and less. Considering this last point, the feminization of migration may allude in a certain sense to a new kind of "crisis of masculinity". That is, as a consequence of the difficulties that men are experiencing in continuing to be the sole providers of monetary resources in the household.

This extends to migrant women in the search for new job opportunities outside the home, even outside the country of origin, even though with all the problems that derive from this. Especially during migratory displacement in irregular or clandestine conditions, this experience for many migrant women is an experience of resilience and strength for all that must be faced in this journey. In many of these cases, this violence means the continuity of the violence left behind in the places of origin.<sup>7</sup>

Violence that haunts them during transit, as these women traveling "alone" remain vulnerable, leading in some cases and at certain times to have to resort again to the protection of male migrants, for security reasons, as a strategy rather than out of conviction. From this situation, there is a notable difference in relation to migratory transit through Mexico, since a little more than half of the men, 54.7% resort to "coyotaje", while 68.9% of the women do, a difference of 14 percentage points. This flow belongs to women migrants from the Northern Triangle of Central America, as pointed out by Torre Cantalapiedra<sup>7</sup> based on data taken from the EMIF Sur 2018 survey.

The handling of statistics and migratory reality allows us to enter into what is understood here as the "feminization of migration". This is the growing number of women moving within the same traditional irregular migratory flows as men. However, despite this increase, women have been practically invisible and have not been given great importance as protagonists of their own migratory projects. According to Valencia,<sup>8</sup> there has also been a slight tendency in the last 25 years to call this period the period of the feminization of migration.

Conversely, despite this increase, they have not been given great importance as protagonists of their migratory projects. Woo<sup>9</sup> says that the presence and participation of women in international migration was not recognized or considered important, nor did it seem necessary to explain it as part of a specific process derived from the migration phenomenon. This invisibility of migrant women from Central America, was for decades due to the predominance of masculinist views in migration and development studies. In both qualitative and quantitative research, migrant women were practically ignored, even in regions where their presence was a majority. This resulted in an information deficit, especially because statistics were not disaggregated by sex.<sup>9</sup>

Hence, there is currently a need to give greater importance to the role that migrant women played and continue to play as protagonists of their migratory projects, especially in South-North flows. Likewise, the growing participation of migrant women, as pointed out by Rebolledo and Rodríguez,<sup>4</sup> who decide to undertake their migratory projects, often alone, is becoming increasingly notorious. In this context, support networks in cities that are more welcoming to migrants, women are building better fundamental survival and care strategies in transit. Unlike traditional male networks, women's networks seem to generate new patterns of circularity and permanence within traditional migration networks. But this is an observation we made ourselves in the field that requires further corroboration.

It seems that nowadays, despite not having greater transcendence, the so-called “feminization of migration” can mean and open new ways of understanding a gradual reordering of the migratory networks and of the symbolic limits that expanded significant transnational spaces that were mostly masculine. Representing, disdain their exclusion and risks inherent to mobility, an impact on the traditional roles of women within migrant transnational social life, especially in cities of better reception of migrants. As Valencia<sup>8</sup> states, the feminization of migration is calling into question gender, which should not be considered as a set of issues to be applied separately in any migration policy. Migration policy, then, should consider the existing relations between migrant men and women, especially in countries of transit migration, for the consolidation of Sanctuary Cities.

### Understanding the experiences of migrant women from the feminisms

Whatever these territorial realities, borders are the arena of the contradictions inherent to modernity/coloniality and globalization. It does not restrict international parallels, as border Necropolitics<sup>1</sup> is that which pursues bodies as migrant lives continue to globalize.<sup>10</sup> It is, in this sense, that it seems to outline the nude life of Giorgio Agamben's<sup>11</sup> *Homo Sacer*, stripped of all human rights, even the very right to life.

Current migrations are mediated by a policy of death that runs through all phases of the migration project and whose actions, consisting of the systematic denial of rights, are based on a process of dehumanization of migrant bodies and lives. Although there are shared places and violence in migrant experiences, it is important not to homogenize them. For example, following Anthias the transnational experiences of men and women are qualitatively different because women do not always have access to mobility and their movements are framed by a set of gendered cultural norms and rules.

However, it must also be taken into account that gender does not operate in isolation, but is in constant interaction and is co-constituted with other axes of oppression and privilege such as race or class, among others; and all this will cross and determine the migratory experience. In this line there are a series of theoretical perspectives that can trace the transnational intersectionality present within the migratory project of Central American women in transit through Mexico. Some of these are related to the so-called transfeminisms -in a broad sense as proposed by Sayak Valencia that include not only theorizations from the gender-gender dissidence, but also from immigrant identities.

In this way, the category “immigrant woman” presents its own connotations, but it is also important to point out that gender and migration studies can and should contribute anthropological and sociological perspectives that are not always reflected in legal texts. In other words, as mentioned by Silva,<sup>3</sup> research studies on migration and development conducted so far on women in migration, are placed in front of the law without a solution of continuity. Thus, the experiences of migrant women in transit through Mexico have not been approached and analyzed from the tools provided by feminist currents that privilege and centralize gender as the main source of oppression of all women.

This is something that was pointed out decades ago by currents such as the Chicano feminism, the American Black feminism and “Ain't we women” movement, present in the work of Kimberle Crenshaw.<sup>12</sup> This theory of intersectionality was developed by Crenshaw in the U.S. judicial context to denounce how African American women suffered specific discrimination and violence because of the

intersection between race, gender and classism. Subsequently, other dimensions of oppression have been glimpsed under the analyses of intersectionality, becoming enormously popular both in feminist militancy and in feminist academia.

Nevertheless, without questioning its great contributions, one of the main criticisms it has received is the danger of falling into an additive logic in which the different oppressive categories are conceived as independent of each other. Another criticism is raised by Ochy Curiel<sup>13</sup>:

“Intersectionality asks very little about the production of these differences contained in the experiences of many women, fundamentally racialized and poor. It thus tends toward a liberal multiculturalism that claims to recognize differences, including them in a diverse model, but does not question the reasons that cause the need for such inclusion”.<sup>13</sup>

In order to overcome this and other limitations and complexify how we approach to understand the lived experiences of women or other subaltern subjects, María Lugones proposes the coloniality of gender or modern colonial gender system. This approach highlights how the traditional norms of the sex-gender system was not imposed in the same way on colonized communities, which were differentiated based on sexual dimorphism (male/female), rather than on what has been considered masculinity and femininity.<sup>13</sup>

This reality lays important foundations that not all women will start from the same places or share the same genealogies. Furthermore, this perspective seeks to deepen the analytical capacities of intersectionality and proposes that systems of oppression are interdependent, influencing each other constantly. Which offers deeper levels of analysis beyond descriptive or additive logic. In the words of Ochy Curiel “it is not about describing that they are black, that they are poor and that they are women; it is about understanding why they are black, because they are poor and women”.<sup>13</sup> And in this case, also, why they are migrants.

Which leads us in turn to ask: what are current migratory flows subject to? Why are women, in all their diversities, exposed to specific vulnerabilities in their migratory journey? And no less important, how do they face violence, what strategies do they build to face the risks inherent to migration through unsafe routes? In this perception, we consider that Brickell & Cuomo's<sup>10</sup> proposal of feminist “Geolegality” provides elements of interest to be able to approach the lived experiences of migrant women in transit through Mexico. As feminism, Geolegality considers the varied effects of the law on women's bodies on a geographic scale, it advocates for the incorporation of analytical intersectionality in tune with the dehumanizing law that persecutes forcibly displaced women.<sup>10</sup>

In addition, Geolegality proposes ways of understanding the complex relationships between specialized forms of oppression, such as those established by border legality that excludes, marginalizes and tries to discipline migrant bodies. In addition, this perspective uses methodological tools to challenge binaries through the embedded analysis of the co-constitution of law and geographic space. With its focus on the intersections between the intimate and the global, it expands the scale of analysis on such co-constitution of law by exposing the full range of law-mediated violence.<sup>10</sup>

It further comprises embodied subjectivity as a shifting dynamic, where identities fluctuate and take place in transnational spaces that flow and connect.<sup>10</sup> In this tenor, Smith,<sup>14</sup> argues that Geolegality marks the inseparable relationship between law and space, where



the geopolitical helps forge a connection between an oppressive legal space in women's social lives. All this, within an increasingly "glocalizing"<sup>1</sup> world, where arguments can be mapped between law and geopolitics. This perspective allows us to address the socio-spatial complexity that is traced between the systems of domination and their devices (e.g., nation-states) and strategies (e.g., border securitization), and how these impact on the daily lives of women who defy the global order and occupy spaces such as cross-border spaces.

For all the above, this perspective can be elemental within geopolitics because it highlights the stories and experiences of women who migrate, denouncing the risks embodied in their transnational journey, because of the organization of nation-states and the multiple forms of violence they exercise. Feminist Geolegalities do not restrict international parallels, as the border Necropolitics that haunt migrant bodies and lives have globalized. Therefore, feminist Geolegalities can be traced in specific ways, articulating the commonality affected in different places and deciphering the geopolitical processes of capitalism.<sup>10</sup>

Conventionally, the understanding of the role played by borders can be in the sense of Geolegality by the existence of the culture of legal space that supposedly allows any state to be able to function properly. Whatever these territorial realities, borders are the arena of the contradictions of globalization and inequalities, but also an opportunity for the theoretical practice of feminist Geolegalities. Therefore, the agenda of this Geolegality must be committed to examining the intersection of bodies, law, and power to understand opportunities for feminist resistance in response to attacks on women's bodies.<sup>10</sup>

### Articulating feminist strategies for psychosocial accompaniment

Nowadays, accompaniment of migrant women in transit through Mexico is incipient. Though, there are important examples, as well as some proposals for feminist psychosocial accompaniment by civil society organizations, but these responses are still sectoral. For example, recently on the Mexico-US border, specifically in Ciudad Juárez, alliances are beginning to develop between migrant women and feminist collectives. It is well known that women who migrate build resistance throughout their migratory processes and that the very fact of migrating constitutes a challenge to the established global order.

It is here where is essential to reinforce a feminist logic that makes us overcome the existing victimizing imaginaries, from which the recognition of agency is central in the processes of accompaniment. One of the key elements for the psychosocial accompaniment of migrant women is that the professionals start from a vision based on the recognition of their agency, fundamentally deconstructing the classic victimizing and monolithic vision that has been constructed from the heteropatriarchal capitalist western view of the States, such as the Mexican State.

Also essential to pay attention to the intersectional and contextual elements that are present in the specific experiences of these migrant women: for example, where do they come from? Where are they headed? What are their motivations for migrating? At what age do they start their migratory process? Do they have support networks or are they traveling alone? Have they built up networks along the way and will they have them when they arrive at their destination? Do

they belong to the LGTBQ+ group, or do they have any disability? etc. Analyzing all these elements in detail is of utmost importance to know how these migrant women will respond (or not) to the multiple forms of violence to which they are exposed in transit and at their destination.

All of these axes have a direct influence on migration projects and how they are faced, as well as on the capacity or inability to respond to violence in a context of constant lack of governmental protection. Analyzing all these elements in detail is of utmost importance to understand how these migrant women face and construct their migratory process in order to establish the specific needs to be addressed in the accompaniment work. In short, to design accompaniment processes that are truly adapted to the life stories of these women in all their complexity. In addition, creating a climate of trust that favors sharing episodes of violence without being revictimized. For example, sexual violence in transit is one of the main problems faced by migrant women and has extremely complex physical and psychological health impacts.

Providing a space where survivors can tell their stories and be attended to by a specialized team is another key element of accompaniment. Plus, the fundamental element of active listening, which has also been a demand made by historically subalternized women (e.g., black, indigenous, sexual abuse, etc.) within feminist movements. If we are going to accompany migrant women, we must start from their own stories, from their own voices and needs. Consequently, we must start from their own experiences in order to be able to design accompaniment processes that are truly adapted to the life stories of these migrant women.

In addition, to create a climate of trust that favors the sharing of episodes of violence they may have suffered during their migratory processes without being re-victimized. As we already know, one of the main risks in transit is sexual violence, which can have extremely complex impacts on physical and mental health. Providing a space where survivors can tell their stories and be attended to by a specialized team is another key element. By sharing their experiences and building networks, migrant women strengthen their agency, increasing their capacity as political agents and agents of change.

Numerous studies show how migrant women react to difficulties through their capacity for resilience, agency and community support.<sup>6</sup> Although this is already well known, multidisciplinary support teams are needed in migration transit zones or border areas, which can provide psychological and legal support from a logic that goes from the micro level (individual), through the most immediate interpersonal relationships, to the macro level (social and community). This accompaniment will be more effective as soon as all the social actors involved are coordinated among themselves, so that they are no longer sectorized.

For this reason, the establishment of alliances between the different entities, community organizations, NGOs and a long etcetera will be a requirement for their proper functioning. In this way, these organizations are the ones that can favor an impact at the political level and be the ones to denounce the systematic violations of human rights that occur in transit zones and borderline regions. Migrant women in an irregular situation are deprived of the right to denounce, which, if exercised, can suffer the full weight of institutional violence in the form of detentions and deportations. The importance of governments at all levels is not discounted, which in some way is explained in the literature on transnationalism, whose contribution can be incorporated into the local sphere for a better understanding of the experiences of each migrant woman. This is referred to as "linear transnationalism",

<sup>1</sup>a compound expression between the words "local" and "global", these localizations as a consequence of globalization. The Spanish version makes more sense.

which strives not to break the link with the place of origin and remains connected to life.<sup>3</sup> For example, maintaining spiritual ties and founding ethnic institutions between the countries of origin and destiny.

## Conclusion

The professionals, academics, volunteers and organizations in the territory, who have to witness and denounce the Necropolitic that operates in border spaces and to do so always honoring and being faithful to the stories, needs and wills of those who challenge the global order seeking to undertake a vital project based on dignity and justice beyond the territory of a state. It is clear that, whatever the motivation for women's migration away from their places of origin, whether they decide to follow their partner or to improve their living conditions and personal development, they are international migrants with basic and elementary rights that must be resisted and fought for.

In view of this situation, the feminist migrant perspective makes a call to propose theoretical and practical updates on the condition of migrant women, whether in transit through Mexico or in any other migratory displacement. This new feminist critique must attempt to reveal, as a foundation, women's own migratory experience within their conditions of settlement and organization without losing the relationship that migrant women maintain with their communities of origin. For their part, the nascent migrant feminisms, within Geolegality, challenge at the same time the heteropatriarchy, the anti-migratory policies of submission, such as the Mexican one before their U.S. counterparts.

As well as the so-called "white feminisms". Therefore, the fourth stage of migration pointed out by Castles and Miller (2004), rather than "feminization", points towards new critical feminist perspectives. Participation in the transnational practices of migrant women redefines what Giorguli and Itzigsohn<sup>8</sup> call a "gender dimension". This consideration no longer reinforces the idea that men and women channel the experience of migration differently. For it used to be thought that men were more concerned with the loss of their status in the country of origin and that women were more concerned with understanding participation in transnational practices related to the availability of resources and family reunification.

Feminist Geolegality research has an important role to play in highlighting gender, especially the violence and injustices provoked by the emergence of state-legal apparatuses, which have materialized at the borders, a sort of intimate war in which women are immersed. A further advantage of this perspective is that geography and law are intertwined in many ways, where migrant women's identities take shape through the production of particular geographies, specifically when families are broken up and women are dislocated from their "rightful places" in the home.

Now, through the intervention of some civil society organizations that accompany migrant women, new intersectional processes of a transnational nature that redefine gender are taking place. This provokes the need to generate new autonomy projects and public policies along the lines of these same displacements of women. Especially when these rights are not recognized by the countries through which they transit, as is the specific case of Mexico with the growing migration of Central American and Latin American women, who supposedly travel alone. The growing participation of women in migratory flows, not only in numbers but also as protagonists of their own displacement projects, represents a sort of "devirilization" of traditional migrant masculinity.

Since, with the gradual loss of employment within the capitalist

system of all, the hegemonic male model of international migration is being affected, which in theory would also represent the development of feminist perspectives on migration. Therefore, this article considered that the theoretical perspective of feminist Geolegality, which is derived from Geopolitics, is the most appropriate to continue to expand this debate, because in addition to generating a critical language. Geolegality will continue to channel a utopia of emancipation, extremely necessary within the subalternity of the geolocalized zones of the Global South. Which are dehumanized by the state-legal spaces through which these migrations pass.

For all of the above reasons, new migration policies are required where the role of women is more predominant. To this end, obtaining labor rights in Mexico would be fundamental because it would favor the integration of women in social and economic terms, and very importantly, it would provide them with the opportunity to earn their own income that would guarantee them financial independence and empowerment. As for civil organizations, although their primary task is to provide accompaniment, they must continue to strengthen their work beyond the human rights approach.

They must have an increasingly strong impact on the geographic-territorial level, raising mechanisms of resistance and empowerment towards women, especially if we recognize that the welfare function of the Mexican State does not guarantee it, but on the contrary, the Mexican State persecutes and criminalizes any kind of immigrants. The idea is that these organizations have strategies of social and community organization towards migrant women from a feminist perspective, with repercussions in the design of new binational policies towards migration with a real gender configuration.

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## Conflicts of interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest for the development of this article.

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