https://doi.org/10.21670/ref.2223107

*Articles*

# *We are united by pain*. Vulnerability and resilience of Central American trans and gay migrants in transit through Mexico

# *Nos une el dolor*. Vulnerabilidad y resiliencia de personas migrantes centroamericanas trans y gays en tránsito por México

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## Abstract

This paper analyzes the experiences of vulnerability and the development of resilience in trans women and gay men from Central America who transited through Mexico to the United States between 2017 and 2020. Based on interviews conducted in a shelter for LGBT+ migrants in Tijuana, it is shown that vulnerability is expressed in acts of violence and discrimination by authorities, criminal organizations, and other migrants, in response to the sexual orientation and gender identity of trans women and gay men. In contrast, resilience developed thanks to the support provided by networks of the LGBT+ community itself in the form of chosen families and civil society spaces. From this, it is observed that even within vulnerability, mobility enables the development of resilience through new ways of living gender and sexuality.

Keywords: vulnerability, resilience, gay men, trans women, Central American migration.

*Received on January 27, 2022.*
*Accepted on November 3, 2022.*
*Published on November 14, 2022.*

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ORIGINAL ARTICLE LANGUAGE: SPANISH.

## Resumen

En este trabajo se analizan las experiencias de vulnerabilidad y el desarrollo de resiliencia en mujeres trans y hombres gays de Centroamérica que transitaron por México hacia Estados Unidos entre 2017 y 2020. Con base en entrevistas realizadas en un albergue para migrantes LGBT+ en Tijuana, se muestra que la vulnerabilidad se expresa en actos de violencia y discriminación por parte de autoridades, organizaciones criminales, y otros migrantes, en respuesta a la orientación sexual e identidad de género de las mujeres trans y los hombres gays. En contraparte, la resiliencia se desarrolló gracias al respaldo proporcionado por redes de



CITATION: Valenzuela Barreras, J. F. & Anguiano-Téllez, M.-E. (2022). *Nos une el dolor*. Vulnerabilidad y resiliencia de personas migrantes centroamericanas trans y gays en tránsito por México [*We are united by pain*. Vulnerability and resilience of Central American trans and gay migrants in transit through Mexico]. *Estudios Fronterizos*, *23*, e107. https://doi.org/10.21670/ref.2223107

la propia comunidad LGBT+ en forma de *familias elegidas* y espacios de la sociedad civil. A partir de eso se observa que, aún dentro de la vulnerabilidad, la movilidad posibilita el desarrollo de resiliencia a través de nuevas formas de vivir el género y la sexualidad.

Palabras clave: vulnerabilidad, resiliencia, hombres gays, mujeres trans, migración centroamericana.

## Introduction[1]

Central American migration in transit through Mexico has been extensively studied. Migrants coming mostly from Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador flee from political instability, violence, economic precariousness and a lack of opportunities that prevail in their countries of origin. For migrants transiting north, the Mexican territory has become a space of containment characterized by the progressive tightening of Mexican immigration policy in the last two decades, manifesting in detentions on the southern border of Mexico and constant raids throughout the length and breadth of the country, as well as a growing number of deportations (Anguiano Téllez & Lucero Vargas, 2020; Castillo, 2006).

Academic research and journalistic reports have documented the obstacles that Central American migrants face in their journey through Mexican territory when trying to reach the United States. Likewise, how these obstacles materialize in experiences and situations of vulnerability related to the constant violation of human rights has been analyzed; in Mexico, there is an extensive network of exploitation that includes abuses by authorities, merchants, employers and, in extreme situations, criminal organizations that extort, kidnap or involve migrants in human trafficking (Bustamante, 2018; Castillo & Nájera Aguirre, 2016; París-Pombo, 2016, 2017).

According to Bustamante (2018), the vulnerability suffered by migrants is the product of an asymmetric relationship of power in the social interactions that they establish and that result in a stigmatization associated with their migratory status. Several studies have examined specific groups of migrants, such as women, infants or ethnic groups; they analyze how situations of vulnerability become more complex at their intersection with other identities and social positions, and they have examined the particular mechanisms of coping and resilience regarding this vulnerability (Lucero Vargas, 2018; Silva Hernández, 2015; Torre Cantalapiedra, 2021; Velasco Ortiz, 2015; Willers, 2016; Winton, 2018).

A population group that has gained visibility thanks to growing attention by civil society organizations, the media and academic research are migrants who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans or transsexual (LGBT+[2]). In both migration and sexual and gender diversity studies, investigations focus on the vulnerability experienced by mi-

[1] This article is the result of the master's thesis research titled *Vulnerabilidad y resiliencia de migrantes centroamericanos LGBTQ en movilidad por México* (Vulnerability and resilience of Central American LGBTQ migrants in mobility through Mexico) and was presented in August 2020 to earn a Master's Degree in Population Studies of El Colegio de la Frontera Norte.

[2] The acronym LGBT is used to talk about lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans people. The + sign is to recognize that these acronyms are insufficient to group the diversity of non-normative sexualities and gender identities (Winton, 2017).

grants and LGBT+ people, respectively (Armijo Canto & Benítez Manaut, 2017; Battle & Ashley, 2008; Castillo & Nájera Aguirre, 2016; Kelleher, 2009). In the last decade, the resilience approach has been used and developed to examine the defense or recovery mechanisms that these groups develop in situations of vulnerability (Barba Camacho, 2012; Bartos & Langdridge, 2019; Harvey, 2012; Lucero Vargas, 2018).

This paper examines the situations of vulnerability and the development of resilience in a group of people who, in addition to being migrants in transit through Mexico, who come from Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador in their attempt to reach the United States, self-identified as trans[3] women and gay men. These people left their countries of origin as a result of situations of violence and persecution by their own family, criminal organizations, authorities and society in general, situations frequently motivated by the rejection of their sexual orientation and gender identity. In their journey through the Mexican territory, their experiences were marked not only by the vulnerability faced by migrants in transit but also by situations of vulnerability associated with their sexual orientation and gender identity. The research was based on semistructured interviews conducted in a shelter located in the city of Tijuana that receives migrants from the LGBT+ community.

The first section of this work addresses the social context of the vulnerability of Central American LGBT+ migrants. The second section postulates the conceptual relationship established between vulnerability and resilience. In the third section, specific situations of vulnerability and the development of resilience are documented through stories of the group of migrants interviewed and the analysis of their social interactions with various people in their transit through Mexico.

## Central American LGBT+ migrants in transit through Mexico

At the end of 2018 and the beginning of 2019, the massive displacement of Central American migrants, originally from Honduras, joined by people from Guatemala and El Salvador, whose destination was declared to be the United States, received attention worldwide, and their mobility was made visible through traveling in large groups comprising people of different ages, including families. These groups were called *caravans*. At that time, the rejection and verbal aggression expressed by a small group of neighbors in the presence of a group of Central American migrants from the LGBT+ community in a residential space in Tijuana was also news (Torres, 2018). Those signs of rejection had connotations of xenophobia, classism, racism, homophobia and transphobia.

Considering that the city of Tijuana is a settlement comprising migrants from multiple places in Mexico and abroad, the reaction of the aforementioned group of residents drew wide attention, as their hostility was exhibited in contrast to the hospitality and solidarity shown by Tijuana society to the presence of Haitian migrants a couple of years ago.

[3] The word *trans* is used to temporarily represent the entire variety of people who do not identify with the biological sex of birth and who transit the gender system in different ways throughout their lives and between different categories (Gutiérrez Martínez, 2022; Platero, 2017).

This event made visible the situations of hostility that various groups of migrants face on a daily basis, associated with their nationality, sex, physical appearance or social class, and involved acts of rejection and discrimination related to social inequalities established through sexual orientation, gender identity or ethnic group membership. Various studies have shown that the vulnerability of migrants becomes more complex when there is an intersection of various social inequalities, particularly those stigmatized (Mata, 2020; Ramírez López, 2017; Zarco Ortiz & Chacón Reynosa, 2020). For example, gender violence is intertwined with xenophobia and racism in the experiences of migrant women in transit through Mexico (Cortés, 2018; Willers, 2016).

LGBT+ people are attacked because they transgress the heteronormative regime that imposes heterosexuality as a binary model of gender and sexuality associated with reproduction (López Sáez, 2017; Serrato Guzmán & Balbuena Bello, 2015). Those who defy this regime are stigmatized and very often punished by society. Stigma and punishment are expressed not only in acts of discrimination and physical, family, psychological and sexual violence but also in threats that sometimes lead to acts of torture and murder (Winton, 2017, 2019).

At the global level, State homophobia prevails (Hernández & Aguilera, 2007; Mendos et al., 2020; Rubio Llona, 2017) because there are still 67 member countries of the United Nations (UN) in which consensual sexual acts between adults of the same sex are considered illegal; nine of these countries are in Latin America and the Caribbean. Only 11 countries in the world have established constitutional protection against discrimination based on sexual orientation, among which are not Guatemala, El Salvador, or Honduras. Only in 28 countries is same-sex marriage recognized, and among those 28, only seven are found in Latin America, and none are found in Central America (Mendos et al., 2020).

The rejection and stigmatization around sexual and gender diversity translates into situations of precariousness, segregation, discrimination and violence for LGBT+ people and into a set of vulnerabilities that threaten their well-being and physical, human and social integrity. Various research and specialized reports carried out in various parts of the world indicate that the constant discrimination and consequent marginalization suffered by this population impacts their quality of life, affecting their physical health, their access to health care services and their educational and employment insertion (Foglia & Fredriksen-Goldsen, 2014; Kelleher, 2009; McDermott et al., 2008).

In Central America, in addition to the current context of political instability, economic precariousness, social inequality and violence that affect the population in general, living conditions are aggravated for LGBT+ people due to their sexual orientation and gender identity. On the one hand, there is violence perpetrated by gangs and other criminal groups. LGBT+ people, especially trans women, are subjected to forced recruitment by these criminal organizations, which force them to sell drugs, keep weapons or collect extortion money and sexually exploit them. Civil society organizations and local activists have denounced that these criminal groups often require initiation processes from their new recruits, consisting of a series of attacks against LGBT+ people (Winton, 2017, 2019). On the other hand, the corruption and complicity of the authorities with criminal gangs, which afflict the Central American population in general, also affect LGBT+ people. Police officers commit acts of violence and discrimination, including sexual violence and extortion. Impunity increases when the prejudices and discrimination of State agents dismiss or ignore the follow-up of their complaints (Lucero Rojas, 2019; Winton, 2019).

Rejection and violence toward these people does not only occur in the streets; it very often begins in the family nucleus when LGBT+ people are rejected and are forced to leave home at a very early age, commonly during adolescence. This stigma also persecutes them in school and work environments, where discrimination and widespread harassment force them to leave these spaces, limiting their opportunities for personal development. For this reason, the Central American LGBT+ population moves in search of safe spaces. Frequently, the journey begins with running away from the family home and dropping out of school; however, displacements transcend local, regional and international movements (Winton, 2018). They flee violence and poverty like other Central American populations in search of spaces that are less hostile toward their sexual orientation and gender identity.

In recent years, civil society organizations have documented the migratory itineraries of this population. According to the 2017 Report of the Documentation Network of Migrant Defense Organizations, 85.7% of trans people in transit through Mexico were originally from Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras (Red de Documentación de las Organizaciones Defensoras de Migrantes [Redodem], 2017). Other exploratory studies show that discrimination and structural violence against the Central American LGBT+ population are the most frequent reasons cited by these individuals for leaving their place of origin. These are situations that remain throughout the displacement, leading them to isolate themselves from the rest of the migrants and to group with like-minded people to continue their journey (Cooperación española, 2018; Redodem, 2017).

Within the Central American caravans that gained media notoriety in 2018, the LGBT+ group attracted particular attention due to its grouping and organization and due to the segregation, rejection and discrimination to which it was subjected, even within the caravans themselves. In a study carried out by El Colegio de la Frontera Norte, testimonies of discrimination and harassment by other migrants were documented (El Colef, 2019), and verbal accusations and attacks were a constant throughout their trip (Lucero Rojas, 2019).

In sum, LGBT+ migrants in transit through Mexico face specific experiences of vulnerability due to their migratory status and their sexual orientation and gender identity. However, they use mechanisms that allow them to develop resilience to move forward with their life and their migration project.

## Vulnerability and resilience in migrant trans women and gay men

In the social sciences, the concept of vulnerability allows us to examine the consequences of inequalities and asymmetry of power between social groups. In migration studies, some authors have analyzed vulnerability as an imposed structural or contextual condition, that is, it is not an intrinsic characteristic of the subject but a social construction (Anguiano Téllez, 2016; Bustamante, 1972, 2002, 2018; Silva Quiroz, 2014). For this conception of vulnerability, subjects are inserted into normative systems based on categorizations such as sex, gender, social class, and sexual orientation, which establish differences and inequalities between them.

Vulnerability is what happens when two people interact and are placed in different positions of power within these social systems. According to Bustamante (2018), vulnerability is an asymmetric social relationship in which one of the subjects has an advan-

tage over the other; that is, there is an asymmetry of power in their social interaction. This disadvantage is defined as a situation of vulnerability. The central element of this definition is that this vulnerability is not a characteristic of the attacked individual; it is the asymmetric relationship that gives rise to the situation of vulnerability.

Normative systems are not only a way of structuring society based on certain categories. To the extent that these systems are learned and reproduced through social interaction, they establish a framework for the interpretation of reality and establish the structural conditions that keep certain sectors of the population in a vulnerable situation. This is produced and reproduced in social interactions when these systems serve as a framework of interpretation to stigmatize the other and when that stigmatization is translated into actions that reaffirm that framework (Bustamante, 2018). Proof of this is, for example, discriminatory actions. The fact that a person can be discriminated against for a certain characteristic shows that there is a stigmatization of that characteristic or the way in which that characteristic is socially categorized. Bustamante (2018) calls this cultural vulnerability. Structural vulnerability, i.e., when a person is a victim of human rights violations and other acts without consequences for the perpetrator, with a whole social structure that supports and allows those acts to be committed and people are systematically victims of this type of action, highlights an asymmetric power relationship (Bustamante, 2018).

The systems that regulate the actions of people based on certain characteristics do not operate in isolation but together configure and reconfigure the experiences of those who are under their influence. No individual is defined only by one social category because we all live immersed in various categorizations and normative systems (Hill Collins, 2015; Viveros Vigoya, 2016). This means recognizing that a migrant is not only a migrant but also a person with a specific age, nationality and level of education, is located in some social stratum, has a sexual orientation and gender identity and is identified by several categories with social loads that mark their life experiences simultaneously. The experiences of each person vary depending on the combination of these categorizations because they do not operate in isolation but simultaneously define people's lives. The aforementioned categories respond to systems of regulation and organization of power relations, in which some are vulnerable compared to others. For migrant trans women and gay men, vulnerability is largely determined by the intersection of the Nation-State border system and heteronormativity.

Across geopolitical borders and migration policies, the Nation State classifies the population and regulates who are allowed to enter and remain in a certain territory and under what conditions (Estévez, 2018; Mármora 2002). The borders establish a whole system of surveillance and control that is materialized in the administrative body that regulates human migrations and in the social imaginary. In the case of undocumented migration, the condition of vulnerability is imposed on a subject due to their status as an unauthorized migrant. Their status as someone who violates the Nation State will be indicated in their interaction with different actors representing the State, organized crime or society in general (Bustamante, 2018).

In addition to this border system, transgender women and gay men transgress the heteronormative system. Human sexuality as the axis of a normative system has a great scope. Through historical processes, certain erotic-affective behaviors are called normal, and others are stigmatized. In modern history, this system has been dominated by an ideology that:

> Approves and prescribes heterosexuality, making it pass through a "natural" assignment determined by a supposed biological complementarity of the external genitalia. Thus, heterosexuality is imposed as a central part not only […] of the achievement of pleasure but also of the provision of affections. (Granados Cosme, 2006, p. 310)

The categories of "heterosexuality" and "homosexuality" on which the heteronormative system is based are modern inventions (Foucault, 1977; Katz, 2007). Heteronormativity is a culturally constructed system, a human product, similar to musical or food tastes. However, it arises from the false notion of a natural force that precedes the social (Katz, 2007; Rubin, 1989; Wittig, 1992).

For Katz (2007), the heteronormative system is based on the idea that there are two sexes, female and male, biologically differentiated, that complement each other and are the basis of the modern social structure. It is a supposed attraction between opposites, which is also conceived as the only normal, legitimate and universal way of experiencing sexuality.

Rubin (1989) states that in modern Western societies, sexual acts are evaluated according to a hierarchical system where at the top the following can be found:

> […] married reproductive heterosexuals. Just below are the unmarried monogamous heterosexuals grouped in couples, followed by most of the other heterosexuals […] Stable lesbian and gay couples are on the edge of respectability, but promiscuous homosexuals and lesbians hover just above the groups located at the very bottom of the pyramid. The most despised sexual castes normally include transsexuals, transvestites, fetishists, sadomasochists, sex workers [...]. (Rubin, 1989, p. 136)

The heteronormative system is accompanied by a hierarchical gender order that separates people based on bodily differences and based on sexuality only as a form of human reproduction (Gutiérrez Martínez, 2022). This system assigns identities to each of "the two sexes" that are based on psychological characteristics that define the masculine and feminine from social roles, work activities and power relations of men over women (Katz, 2007).

In this sense, this system rejects the fact that gender is a performative and a repetitive social practice (Butler, 2007). Trans people show gender as something that is not immovable or static but rather a transition in which gender identities are configured and reconfigured thanks to different social resources, contexts and historical moments (Gutiérrez Martínez, 2022; Lamas 2009). However, transgressing and demonstrating the heteronormative system implies punishments of a social nature in different areas, such as institutional, medical, physical or economic (Rubin, 1989).

In this way, the experiences of trans women and gay men from Central America in transit through Mexico are crossed by an intersection that places them in a situation of vulnerability related to their migratory status and their sexual orientation and gender identity. According to the context, the social categories that determine their lives are different (Hill Collins, 2015; Viveros Vigoya, 2016). In the case of migrant trans women and gay men, their passage through Mexico places them in a situation of transition and a violation of the gender binary of the heteronormative system and the borders of the Nation State.

However, these people are not inert victims of vulnerability; in contrast, they have the capacity to develop resilience. The concept of resilience comes from physics; it refers to the "property of some materials to regain their original shape after being deformed by an external force" (Bustamante, 2018). In the case of the social sciences, its definition and application have been more complex and have occurred mainly in social psychology. Its main empirical reference has been the case of children, adolescents and young people who overcome contexts of precariousness and marginalization. The debate around what causes resilience or how it can be identified is wide; there are those who attribute it to the psychosocial characteristics of people, while others focus on contextual factors (García-Vesga & Domínguez-de la Ossa, 2013; Goldstein & Brooks, 2013).

Resilience includes protective and recovery factors. The former involve the presence of elements that provide protection against the dangers faced. That is, they are those factors that help the individual to reduce or even, through experience, knowledge and learning, to prevent the effects of the difficulties faced. Recovery or adaptability factors are those that allow one to overcome obstacles and move on. Resilience capacity is developed from the negotiation between these factors and the obstacles and adversities that arise (Barba Camacho, 2012; García-Vesga & Domínguez-de la Ossa, 2013; Goldstein & Brooks, 2013; Harvey, 2012; Lucero Vargas, 2018).

Resilience is a skill acquired through social experience to reduce vulnerability, a product of a subject's own awareness of their situation. This awareness occurs from social interactions. Thus, a capacity is developed to face dangers, obstacles or adversities and to overcome them positively. Experience, knowledge, and learning create adaptability that in turn allows for resilience. In this way and according to Bustamante (2018), vulnerability and resilience act dialectically as the former derives from an act of power, but through learning developed from experiences, the latter becomes a defense mechanism against these acts.

In migration studies, resilience has been analyzed in different areas of the migration journey, with a particular focus on each one. In the cases of arrival at the place of destination or of return, the processes of adaptation to new environments by families, women or infants have been investigated. In the case of migration in transit, strategies and resources have been focused on overcoming various obstacles to give continuity to migration projects (Barba Camacho, 2012; Lucero Vargas, 2018; Silva Hernández, 2015). The study of resilience in LGBT+ people has focused on contextual and psychosocial aspects, where it has been observed that these people establish specific social networks of support and emulate family dynamics based on what is called *chosen families*. According to existing research, these dynamics have been key for young LGBT+ people, immersed in hostile contexts toward their sexual orientation or gender identity, to succeed and recover from structural obstacles (Bartos & Langdridge, 2019; Battle & Ashley, 2008; Bockting et al., 2013; Harvey, 2012).

Being resilient in social terms implies developing the ability to face and positively recover from situations of vulnerability. Although all human beings have the ability to develop resilience in the face of adverse situations, not all achieve it because it is triggered by certain social and psychosocial factors. Based on these factors, the subject manages to "negotiate" his or her vulnerability.

## Stories and analysis of the experiences of migrant trans women and gay men

The methodological strategy of the research responded to the theoretical and contextual postulates previously described. Therefore, vulnerability was analyzed as the imposition of power in an asymmetric social relationship that occurs as a consequence of a labeling of a certain group with less power compared to another (Bustamante, 2018), and resilience was considered a counterpart of vulnerability that is developed from psychosocial factors, resources and strategies based on social experience (Bustamante, 2018; Harvey, 2012; García-Vesga & Domínguez de la Ossa, 2013). This conceptual perspective implies that to empirically capture vulnerability and resilience, attention must be focused on the social interactions of migrant trans women and gay men with various actors.

To access the social interactions of migrants during their journey through Mexico, their experiences were documented in retrospect. Because the interest involved both the experiences of vulnerability and the development of resilience, a point was established in the migratory journey where both would have occurred. In the semistructured interviews, people were asked to recount their journey. These interviews were conducted in a shelter for LGBT+ migrants located in Tijuana, Baja California. From the set of interviews conducted, eight individual stories were selected (see Table 1). The youngest person interviewed was a 20-year-old trans woman, and the oldest was a 33-year-old gay man. Regarding the country of origin, people from Guatemala and El Salvador predominated. Half of the people traveled with company, at least in some part of their journey, and the other half traveled completely alone. All the people interviewed entered Mexico without a valid immigration document, but once in the national territory, the majority acquired some type of immigration document, with the Visitor Card for Humanitarian Reasons[4] being the most common.

For the analysis of the information, the experiences of migrants at four moments of the migratory journey were investigated: *1*) departure from the place of origin, *2*) arrival and stay at the southern border of Mexico, *3*) journey north through Mexico or the stay in an intermediate city in the country, and *4*) arrival and stay at the city of Tijuana, Baja California. In each of these spaces and moments, the interactions of these migrants with actors who represent the State, i.e., *a*) government bodies and *b*) authorities and officials, and those who represented different social groups such as *a*) criminal organizations, *b*) other migrants, *c*) other LGBT+ people and *d*) support organizations, were analyzed.

[4] The Visitor Card for Humanitarian Reasons is a document granted by the National Institute of Migration to any foreigner who is in any of the following situations: *a*) application process for refugee status, political asylum or complementary protection; *b*) unaccompanied child or adolescent; and *c*) victim or witness of a crime in Mexico. This document allows the holder to work and reside in the country for one year (Gobierno de México, n. d.; Torre Cantalapiedra, 2021).

**Table 1. Sociodemographic information of the people interviewed**

| Pseudonym | Age | Country of origin | Sexual orientation and/or gender identity | Accompanied or alone on the trip through Mexico | Year of last entry into Mexico | Immigration status |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Alejandro | 28 | El Salvador | Gay man | Accompanied | 2019 | Refugee in Mexico |
| César | 24 | Guatemala | Gay man | Alone | 2017 | Visitor Card for Humanitarian Reasons |
| Amador | 33 | El Salvador | Gay man | Accompanied | 2019 | Refugee in Mexico |
| Katya | 28 | Honduras | Trans woman | Accompanied/ alone[a] | 2018 | Complementary protection |
| Karen | 25 | Guatemala | Trans woman | Accompanied/ alone[a] | 2018 | No documents |
| Mónica | 20 | El Salvador | Trans woman | Alone | 2018 | Complementary protection |
| Juan | 31 | Guatemala | Gay man | Alone | 2017 | Visitor Card for Humanitarian Reasons |
| Natalia | 27 | Guatemala | Trans woman | Alone | 2019 | Visitor Card for Humanitarian Reasons |

[a] Katya and Karen were accompanied during some parts of their trip.
Source: own elaboration from the records in a fieldwork diary, Tijuana, Baja California, 2019-2020

## *Vulnerability experiences*

The daily interactions that Central American migrant trans women and gay men established in different spaces and with various subjects made it possible to document the experiences of vulnerability that they face in their displacements and allowed us to analyze the intersection among migratory situation, sexual orientation and gender identity in a context of asymmetric power relations that promote acts of discrimination and violence by relatives, criminal organizations, immigration authorities and other migrants.

### *Family rejection*

From an early age, the people interviewed experienced situations of rejection and physical and verbal violence in the family nucleus and even assassination attempts by close relatives. César,[5] originally from Guatemala, recounts that he fled his home at the age of 17 because his family discovered that he was gay:

> My stepfather gave me a good beating because they checked my messages on my cell phone […] he hit me in the face, he hit me all over the place […] he tried to kill me, he wanted to hang me. […] I no longer wanted to leave my room. I felt insecure, and what I did was I left the house one morning at one in the morning with some pants and T-shirts, only with that. (César, gay man, Guatemalan, interviewed in February 2020; hereinafter César)

Katya is a Honduran trans woman recounting a similar situation; her brother tried to murder her on several occasions, in one of which he managed to hit her and leave her injured; therefore, she decided to flee the city:

> My brother tried to kill me with a knife […] he could not stand me dressing up as a woman […] he even told my grandmother to lend him a machete to kill me. Then, my grandmother did not agree; hence, he hit me and told me "I am ashamed that you are my brother" [...] I said, "I cannot stand it anymore". I left, still with my immobilizer and a shoulder sling on my arm because I had two cracks on the clavicle. (Katya, trans woman, Honduran, interviewed in December 2019; hereinafter Katya)

In the stories, attacks and violence are narrated as triggers for running away from the family to save their lives, in search of another neighborhood, another city or another country to reside. It is evident that the reaction to the breaking of the heteronorm is highly violent and permeates even the most immediate social nucleus.

### *Organized crime*

The attacks and violence that lead to the abandonment of the family home of origin of trans women and gay men extend to other spaces. The stories of the migrants interviewed give accounts of persecution by gangs and other sectors of organized crime.

For example, Amador and Alejandro are a Salvadoran couple who suffered constant harassment, extortion and sexual abuse when a group from the Mara Salvatrucha discovered that they were a couple and that they lived together. Amador recounts:

> They realized that I was homosexual, and the threats began, […] until they reached a point where I was paying for my life. They wanted me to have relationships with them, and if I did not have them, they were going to kill me. I went and told them: "If you want, I will pay you money, but I do not want to sleep with you anymore"; then they said: "no, you are going to be a little woman" [...] they insisted on calling me a woman because I liked men and

[5] In all cases, pseudonyms are used to identify the persons interviewed.

> that I had to go to bed with them […] then they would say: "three of us are going to have our way with you"; they urinated on me. They wanted to sexually fulfill and satisfy their things; they told me: "we are going to do this and that to you". Crying, I would tell them that, please, I did not want to have anything to do with them anymore, that I would rather have them kill me than to have them continue abusing me or my partner. (Amador, gay man, Salvadoran, interviewed in November 2019; hereinafter Amador)

The gang members also sexually assaulted Alejandro: "They sexually abused me among several and left me half dead, with my clothes full of blood" (Alejandro, gay man, Salvadoran, interviewed in November 2019; hereinafter Alejandro). It was then that they both decided to flee their country. A few months later, Alejandro discovered that in this sexual assault, he had been infected with HIV.

Faced with the aggression of the gangs, the escape escalates up to crossing the border of the country of origin. "I tried to change house and neighborhood and always and always, I do not know how they found me. Until I decided to come to Mexico" (Natalia, trans woman, Guatemalan, February 2020; hereinafter Natalia).

Crossing international borders complicates the lives of trans women and gay men, as they are also at a disadvantage due to their immigration status. When Amador and Alejandro arrived in Tapachula, they met a woman who offered to shelter them. They later discovered that she was involved in human trafficking and wanted to force Amador to have sex with other men in exchange for money. Although they both managed to flee, they were threatened with death and eventually encountered this same criminal organization again:

> We went out to buy bread, and three men and a truck stopped in front of us; they beat my partner. Before I knew it, I was already in the truck. I still have some scrapes from the street, since they threw me. I only remember that they said, "this is a message from the relative"; "you are not going to escape". (Alejandro)

Several migrants interviewed reported that they encountered people who supposedly would help them in their movements through Mexico; however, they ended up trying to extort or exploit them sexually. Insecurity and risks do not cease once crossing the border into Mexico: "We went to Monterrey. We wanted to leave, to cross (to the United States), because we no longer wanted to continue to be in danger; we no longer felt safe here either" (Alejandro).

Although these people emigrate in the face of situations of vulnerability experienced in their countries of origin, their vulnerability is compounded by their migrant status in transit countries.

### *Mexican authorities*

Going to government officials in Mexico, including immigration authorities, is a complex situation for migrants. In the case of trans women and gay men, it is even more so because of the intolerance, discrimination and xenophobia with which these officials act: "We went to file a complaint. They did not treat us well […]; they did not believe

us because we were migrants. They told us they were lies […] that we just wanted to get money from the Mexican government" (Amador).

Katya had problems with the authorities because the documents they provided her (complementary protection[6]) did not acknowledge her gender identity and only indicated her sex assigned at birth. This omission caused discomfort and embarrassment:

> I asked for complementary protection. However, they did not give me my woman's name; I appear with a man's name and a woman's photo […] There in migration and in Comar, I was very discriminated against. In Comar, they did not call me by my social name but by my legal name. I felt very strange, seeing my appearance as a woman; I felt like a weirdo with so many people, when they mentioned my name. So, I spoke to the boy, I said, "Why do you discriminate against me like that? You should show respect toward us". "Here, you are in another country, you are not in your country" they told me […] A security guard who is checking there, at the Migration Institute, wanted to check me; I did not consent, I said no, "I am not going to accept that you check me, have a woman check me" I said. Because the abusive man wanted to touch me, my breasts, my parts […]. (Katya)

In their interactions with the Mexican authorities, these migrants suffer from unworthy treatment and situations of marginalization by the personnel who work in various Mexican institutions, such as the Mexican Commission for Aid to Refugees (Comisión Mexicana de Ayuda a los Refugiados, Comar) or the National Institute of Migration (INM). It is evident in the stories that these people suffer from a complex lack of protection from the State and because of the heteronorm.

### *Discrimination by other migrants*

When traveling and sharing spaces with other migrants, the people interviewed also said they had suffered harassment or discrimination. In the contexts of the caravans, some trans women had the opportunity to identify other people who share both their migrant status and a gender identity and come together to create synergy and mutual protection:

> […] the other migrants […] yelled at us: "fucking *jotos*, fags" and started throwing stones […] What I did, I separated myself from them, and I adapted with the LGBT group, and now, we already all united more; the group got bigger and bigger, and that was what motivated me the most. (Karen, trans woman, Guatemalan, October 2018; hereinafter Karen)

Even in daily interactions with those who share the same immigration status, the asymmetry of power associated with gender identity is manifested. This situation shows intersectionality in the experiences of vulnerability of these migrants but also

[6] According to the Mexican *Ley sobre refugiados, protección complementaria y asilo político* (2011) (Law on Refugees, Complementary Protection and Political Asylum), it is granted to foreigners who have not managed to obtain recognition as a refugee according to the requirements of Mexican law and consists of not returning them to their country of origin because their lives would be in danger.

in the mechanisms used to deal with them: grouping, solidarity and accompaniment between people who are traversed by different categories simultaneously in the same context.

## *Development of resilience*

The protection and recovery mechanisms that migrants develop to counteract their experiences of vulnerability are considered resilience development mechanisms. For migrant trans women and gay men, the practices of concealment of sexual orientation and gender identity, the social networks of the LGBT+ community and the support spaces that lead to reconfiguration, acceptance and new forms of inhabiting the world based on sexuality and gender were considered.

### *Covering up gender identity and sexual orientation*

One skill learned by the interviewed migrants who move unaccompanied or without family is to hide their sexual orientation and gender identity as a preventive measure. In this regard, Juan recounts:

> Well, as I told you, after all your life suffering, dealing with it, you learn to get ahead [...] I had been in other shelters, and because of everything that has already happened to you, you are afraid that they will see that you are gay; so, you try to act more discreet, you know, so that they do not realize. (Juan, gay man, Guatemalan, interviewed in October 2019; hereinafter Juan)

In addition to the concealment of sexual orientation, the story shared by Juan reaffirms the idea that resilience arises, in part, as a product of the subject's self-awareness and social learning (Bustamante, 2018) because the persecution experienced in the country of origin taught him or emotionally prepared him to face the difficulties experienced in his displacement through Mexico. Self-awareness is shown as a fundamental element in the development of resilience and as an exercise that shows how the experience of sexuality and gender are reconfigured from the encounter of the contextual with the subjective.

### *Social networks with other LGBT+ people*

The migrants interviewed reported having left their countries and moving through Mexican territory with the guidance and advice provided by other LGBT+ people who migrated before.

Mónica left El Salvador with the advice of some trans women who had managed to reach the United States months before. These people gave her financial support and guided her on what means of transportation to use and where to stay in Tapachula:

> They told me, "We are going to deposit money for you, we are going to give you the address so that you know where to stay, we were there and nothing will happen to you, you just tell her that we sent you, the lady is very kind and she will support as much as possible, she supports the community (LGBT+)". (Mónica, trans woman, Salvadoran, December 2019; hereinafter Mónica)

The sisters of the community—what Mónica call her trans friends—from the experience that they had when they traveled through Mexico, also pointed out spaces that are tolerant or friendly toward the LGBT+ community.

For his part, César arrived at the shelter for LGBT+ migrants in Tijuana thanks to Katya. They met in Tapachula through a mutual friend from the LGBT+ community and maintained contact through Facebook:

> I told Katya that I was going to travel to Tijuana, and she told me about here (the shelter) and everything. She gave me the information and told me that she was waiting for me here. I arrived. I went calmly to ask for my number for the United States, and right now, I am waiting for that. (César)

The analysis of the stories allows us to appreciate that for the development of resilience, solidarity networks that are woven transnationally between LGBT+ migrants and allies are very important. These networks provide information and support for other people in similar situations and the creation of safe spaces where they are offered shelter.

### *Chosen families*

Most of the migrants interviewed lacked family support from a very early age. For them, reaching a shelter for LGBT+ migrants meant meeting people with similar experiences who have moved through similar contexts and under similar categories of attacks. This has been key to forming ties of support. The people interviewed claim to have found in other LGBT+ people a family dynamic of unconditional support. Other authors use the term *chosen families*, which involves the formation of bonds to provide support that is culturally attributed to the family (Bartos & Langdridge, 2019; Battle & Ashley, 2008; Bockting et al., 2013; Harvey, 2012).

The topic of the *chosen family* was constantly alluded to by the migrants interviewed, in daily coexistence and in informal conversations. This company and the exchange of experiences function as recovery mechanisms.

> We are united by pain; we have all suffered a lot, and we see it in our eyes. That is why we understand each other. We continue to bear the rejection of our families. Here, we have met; we give each other the affection that our family did not give us […] When I left my country, my hair was short, I used a little makeup, and I wore intermediate clothes, neither for women nor for men. In those days, my transition was beginning. However, already here, I started to get hormones, and my body changed. However, they (her sisters) always motivate and support me; that is my drive. (Mónica)

The synergy that arises from sharing experiences between people who suffer from the same situations of vulnerability due to their migrant status, sexual orientation and gender identity emerges as a form of emotional recovery that adds to the development of resilience. The transgression of the heteronorm and the borders of the Nation State place them in a specific intersection that makes them vulnerable in their displacement. However, that same intersection enables them to weave networks of solidarity, affection and accompaniment. Migration enables context change and new social interactions. This mobility allows new reconfigurations and ways of inhabiting the world, of living sexuality and gender.

## Conclusions

In this work, the experiences of vulnerability of migrant trans women and gay men from Central America and in transit through Mexico were reconstructed based on their social interactions with various actors throughout their migratory journey. The mechanisms that enable them to develop resilience to face and recover from their experiences of vulnerability and to move forward with their migration project were also examined.

In the interactions of migrants throughout their journey, the intersection of the heteronormative system and the borders of the Nation State materialized in disadvantageous situations for these individuals compared to other subjects. They experienced discriminatory treatment characterized by homophobia, transphobia and xenophobia by Mexican authorities and officials and other migrants in transit. In interactions with criminal organizations, both in Central America and in Mexico, they were victims of abuse, violence and/or sexual exploitation. Violence against trans women and gay men is characterized by a strong sexual component and a search for punishment for breaking the heteronorm. The first experiences of vulnerability occur in the immediate family circle and show the power of the heteronorm as a normative system. However, it is just a symptom of a structural vulnerability that they suffer daily. Homophobia and transphobia translate not only into acts of discrimination and violence but also into a precarious life for these people in various settings (Lucero Rojas, 2019; Winton, 2018).

The development of resilience was triggered by the construction of solidarity networks with other LGBT+ migrants. These networks were built from contact with people from the same place of origin who emigrated before, other people they met on the migratory journey or people with whom they met in support spaces geared toward LGBT+ migrants in Mexico. The networks allowed the sharing of financial resources, information and emotional support. Other strategies were also identified, such as grouping together to travel in the company of other LGBT+ migrants and, for those who did not have this possibility, concealing their own gender identity and sexual orientation to avoid possible acts of homophobia and transphobia. This last strategy has been learned progressively due to the accumulation of experiences of discrimination throughout life.

Bustamante (2018) postulated that vulnerability and resilience act dialectically, as the former derives from an act of power, but the latter constitutes a defense mechanism. Trans women and gay men are socially labeled and punished for breaking the

heteronormative system, a fact that places them in a position of vulnerability. Crossing international borders exposes them to new situations of vulnerability, i.e., those imposed by the Nation State, but they develop resilience by creating synergy, community and family in their own spaces.

The dialectical relationship between vulnerability and resilience postulated by Bustamante is observed in the fact that the conditions of vulnerability enable resilience mechanisms. In a globalized society in which borders of all types are paradoxically accentuated, the structuring of inequalities and the intersection of labels in a person, such as those interviewed here, also leave windows of opportunity. For these people who are rejected, violated or persecuted from an early age, resilience is expressed in the fact of being able to challenge attacks and develop and use learned strategies to negotiate and counteract vulnerability during their migration journey until they find safe spaces. This aspect of resilience is made possible by social learning. Through experience, the person becomes aware of their own situation and, through interactions, learns that there is the possibility of challenging it, i.e., it is possible to live without this vulnerability, and it is not intrinsic to it but rather an imposed condition; therefore, it can be counteracted. In the case of the people interviewed here, this self-awareness is the product of interactions with social actors who attack them but also with those who support them (Valenzuela Barreras, 2020; Valenzuela Barreras & Anguiano Téllez, 2021).

In all cases, the process is similar: in their countries of origin, they lived in an environment that was extremely hostile toward their sexual orientation or gender identity. Initially, they moved in search of a place to live with less violence, but progressively, they aspire to find an environment in which to exist and be freer: a safe environment of respect, acceptance and support (Valenzuela Barreras, 2020; Valenzuela Barreras & Anguiano Téllez, 2021).

The migration that led to new forms of vulnerability also made it possible to find safe spaces and to find other people from the *community* or the LGBT+ *siblinghood* with similar experiences. Thanks to this, the people interviewed had the possibility of reconfiguring and embracing their own identity and the freedom to express themselves and to be. Finding and embracing new possibilities to express themselves also gave them a feeling of healing with respect to what they had experienced thus far. The *chosen families* formed in safe spaces in shelters of civil society organizations (in this case in Tijuana) made possible both recovery and prevention strategies. Mobility shows the contextual nature of intersectionality, norms and ways of living gender and sexuality.

The findings offer clues to deepen future research on aspects related to transformations, reiterations and reconfigurations in the way of living sexual orientation and gender identity in a context of mobility or in other adverse situations and their impact on the development of resilience.

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