

# Gender-responsive migration governance? The gendering of migration and border control on an international scale

## ¿Gobernanza migratoria con perspectiva de género? *La generización* del control migratorio y fronterizo en la escala internacional

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### Abstract

This paper aims to analyze the institutionalization of gender issues in the political field of migration and borders in order to account for the gendering of migration and border control at the international level. It reconstructs the production of an institutional framework, categories of intervention, and processes of subjectivation of refugee and migrant women. It shows that the gender governance and migration governance have been intertwined, giving rise to the novel form of control over populations in movement that consists of the metabolization and instrumentalization of the “gender perspective” in migration and border control policies and practices. The methodological framework is based on the documentary analysis of a set of reports, guides and memoirs produced in the context of events or institutions that played a leading role in the deployment of global governance, between the 1980s and 1990s.

Keywords: gender perspective, migration governance, gendering of migration and border control.

### Resumen

El objetivo del artículo es analizar la institucionalización de cuestiones de género en el campo político de las migraciones y las fronteras, para dar cuenta de la *generización* del control migratorio y fronterizo en la escala internacional. Se reconstruye la producción de un entramado institucional, categorías de intervención y procesos de subjetivación de la mujer refugiada y migrante. Se muestra que de manera imbricada se han gestado la gobernanza del género y la gobernanza de las migraciones, dando lugar a una novedosa forma de control de las poblaciones en movimiento, que consiste en la metabolización e instrumentalización de la “perspectiva de género” en las políticas y prácticas de control migratorio y

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fronterizo. El encuadre metodológico está basado en el análisis documental de un conjunto de informes, guías y memorias producidos en el marco de eventos o instituciones protagonistas del despliegue de la gobernanza global, entre las décadas de 1980 y 1990.

Palabras clave: perspectiva de género, gobernanza de las migraciones, *generización* del control migratorio y fronterizo.

## Introduction

Migration and border control policies and practices have historically been intersected by gender dynamics (Schrover et al. 2008, Schrover & Moloney, 2013; Schrover & Yeo, 2010). Although the differential regulation of masculinity and femininity—and the production of binary thinking—through mobility control has been a historical constant, whether through direct intervention or omission, the logic behind it has changed based on specific temporal and spatial configurations. In the last decade, the production of masculinity and femininity has been transformed within the framework of the South American migration and border regime, with the emergence of an institutional narrative focused on the “gender perspective”. Examples of this were the initiatives of the R4V Platform on “gender-based violence”, the creation of a humanitarian visa for reasons of gender-based or domestic violence in Chile and the formation of a network for the “development of migration policies with a gender focus” at the South American Conference on Migration, among other institutional initiatives.

This study is part of a broader research project that seeks to understand the process of genderization of the South American migration and border regime. With this in mind, the aim is to reconstruct the conditions of possibility and historical transformations that gave rise to the production of the “gender perspective” as a hegemonic narrative within the South American regime.

This paper analyzes the institutionalization of gender issues in the political field of migration and borders to account for the genderization of migration and border control at the international level between the 1980s and 1990s. Specifically, it seeks to reconstruct the emergence of the network of institutions, categories of intervention, and processes of subjectivation that generated transformations in the genderization of migration and border control, through narratives and practices grounded in women’s rights and in the production of refugee and migrant women as explicit subjects of intervention. The main argument is that, since the 1980s, a novel form of control over mobile populations has emerged, consisting of the metabolization and instrumentalization of gender issues—expressed in institutional categories such as “women’s issues”, “gender approach/equality” and “gender perspective”—in migration and border control policies and practices.

This process has involved the intertwined development of gender and migration governance through the creation of an international network of participants, consultative forums, conferences and international commitments, primarily promoted by international organizations such as the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the International Organization for Migration (IOM), and the United Nations Development Fund for Women (Unifem). This new configuration in the genderization of control began with the subjectification of the “refugee

woman” and “migrant woman”. It was structured around the production of notions of protection and violence as technologies of government targeting impoverished and racialized populations on the move. Consequently, far from dismantling patriarchal structures, it became entrenched in traditional regulations and representations of gender and sexuality, which are linked to racist practices of mobility control (Trabalón, 2021, 2024). Within this framework, it is understood that the representations that initially structured the genderization of control (re)produce a binary, heteronormative and gynocentric discourse, where gender equals woman and woman equals a victim of violence and an object of protection.

As part of the argument, it is maintained that the transformations in the genderization of control are both the cause and effect of the acts of reparation (Sciortino, 2004) of the institutions involved in migration and border control, in their quest to regulate untamed human mobility in a context of perceived feminization of migration dynamics. Far from being a unidirectional process driven by centers of power in the “Global North”, Central America was a constitutive region in the global reconfiguration of genderization in migration and border control. Without disregarding the importance of other regions, it is stated that Central America was a pioneer in innovating forms of intervention based on the “gender perspective”, while also serving as a region where migration governance in Latin America was developed. Although this process is established in a specific context as a new form of global control of movement, it coexists, interacts with, and competes with other forms of control grounded in gender dynamics that have little to do with this narrative and whose analysis exceeds the scope of this article.

This article contributes to the discussion of works that have problematized how migration and border governance schemes intervene in and through gender articulations within the framework of migration regimes (Hess, 2013; Hess, et al., 2022; Rosas & Gil Araujo, 2022), humanitarian interventions (Saleh, 2020a, 2020b; Ticktin, 2008, 2011a, 2011b), deportation practices and border rejections (Gil Araujo et al., 2023; Golash-Boza & Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2013; Luibhéid, 2002, 2008a, 2008b, 2020), processes of categorization and classification of populations in movement (Clavijo & Sabogal, 2013; Schrover et al., 2008; Schrover & Moloney, 2013), migration governance (Magliano & Domenech, 2009; Magliano & Romano, 2009) and human trafficking as a control mechanism based on gender representations (Basok et al., 2013; Corazza Padovani, 2020; Dias, 2017; Dufraix Tapia & Ramos Rodríguez, 2022; Maldonado Macedo, 2022; Magliano & Clavijo, 2011, 2012, 2013; Piscitelli & Lowenkron, 2015; Piscitelli, 2015; Ruiz Muriel & Álvarez Velasco, 2019).

The text is divided into three sections. The first section explains the conceptual developments on which the article is based, primarily the notion of the genderization of migration and border control, gender governmentality and the governance of gender and migration. The analytical body of the article is organized around the development of, on the one hand, the figure of the “refugee woman” and protection and, on the other, the figure of the “migrant woman” and violence as categories that structure the genderization of control. Initially, the focus is on protection to show the beginnings of the reconfiguration, based on an analysis that captures the subjectivation of refugee women. It also analyzes how institutions involved in mobility governance dispute and redefine the limits of the category of protection, producing it as a technology for governing feminized populations on the move. Subsequently, it focuses on violence as a narrative that has been re-instrumentalized for the purposes of migration

control. To this end, it shows that the subjectivation of migrant and refugee women is produced through an intertwining of violence and sexuality as an inseparable and constitutive unit of their mobility.

The figures of the “refugee woman” and the “migrant woman” are analyzed as relatively independent processes, as they occur at different times and involve different actors. However, as will be seen throughout the text, both figures share deep connections over two issues. First, the United Nations (UN) served as an arena for disputes, hegemony and the expansion of “women’s issues”. In the case of refugee women, this occurred earlier due to the influence of the UNHCR, a UN agency. In the case of migrant women, it occurred later, given the influence of the IOM, which at that time was outside the UN system. Nevertheless, for both figures, the world conferences on women were founding milestones. The second issue concerns displacement from Central America and its political intervention in migration and refugee matters. “Central American refugee women” and “Central American migrant women” are not distinct populations but rather different categories of intervention in the same mobility process. Finally, the reference to the political field of migration and borders is made with the understanding that multiple categories of mobility do not refer strictly to migration but also include other ways of naming and managing populations in movement, such as the notion of refuge and migration.

## Gender, governance and migration: theoretical and methodological approaches

The genderization of migration and border control refers to the process by which the regulatory and disciplinary regime of gender (Butler, 2006, 2007) operates and transforms itself in the political field of migration and borders through the deployment of practices, discourses and institutions that give rise to the production and normalization of masculinities, femininities and diversities that are migrant, illegalized and racialized. It also involves how the gender norm, in its binary and heterosexist logic, is subverted or negotiated in the processes of mobility and in the strategies of struggle, resistance and migrant activism.

To understand the contemporary configuration of gendered migration and border control, the basis lies in the notion of gender governmentality, inspired by the work of critical feminists (Feminismo Autónomo Latinoamericano, 1997; Halley et al., 2018). It consists of the emergence of gender as a specific device of population governance, which aims to guide behaviors linked to masculinity and femininity (and the production of the binary being, heterosexuality and cisgender). This occurs within the framework of the formation of a network of institutions, discourses, events, laws and conventions that gradually establish a truth, defining the legitimate forms of masculinity and femininity and the problematic forms that must be intervened in, regulated and redirected as part of a normalization process. In this way, far from operating through a universal construction of male/female, specific management technologies are produced based on racial and Eurocentric divisions of the population.

Within this framework, the population is produced as a gendered entity, which is governed through interventions that primarily target the management of reproductive practices, mainly among racialized and impoverished women. On the other

hand, this process brings with it the deployment of security technologies that convert demands for justice into penal intervention, specifically through concepts such as human trafficking or gender violence. As a result, there is an expansion of the repressive power of the state over racialized masculinities and the regulation and surveillance of femininities, especially through the control of freedom of movement.

The analytical lens of governmentality is privileged for understanding the production of gender and migration within the framework of neoliberal governance schemes. As Brown has proposed, governance constitutes “the primary administrative form of neoliberalism” (Brown, 2015, p. 118) that disseminates an epistemology, an ontology and a set of depoliticizing practices by relocating the political to the managerial/administrative field, transforming the exercise of government from a unified and hierarchically organized command to a dispersed, networked, integrated and cooperative one. Along these lines, Walters (2004) states that governance constitutes a particular art of government that, far from antagonizing other forces, seeks to assimilate, integrate and metabolize them. In other words, the logic lies in leveraging the different inputs from antagonistic forces and involving them as “partners” in a problem-solving process through harmonious cooperation.

From this perspective, and as part of governmentality, gender governance takes place, that is, the administrative form through which feminist principles and ideals (Halley et al., 2018)—assembled with traditional, patriarchal and Western representations of the masculinity-femininity binary—are integrated into neoliberal schemes of government through the formation of networks and the diversification of institutions that, under the logic of cooperation, structure programs and projects of intervention on gender-related behavior. Gender governance operates through the proliferation of constantly changing categories of intervention, which produce contingent groups of intervention such as migrant women, unemployed women, homeless women, indigenous women, rural women, refugee women, Muslim women, women who abuse substances, illiterate women and so on. The emergence of gender governance is not the result of a linear and harmonious process. Conversely, even though the logic of governance lies in neutralizing conflict by incorporating antagonistic forces, its history is riddled with conflicts, struggles and disputes.

It is necessary to understand the transformations that occurred in the context of the emergence and spread of the technocratic model of global migration governance, which posited the importance of inter-state or international cooperation for regulating movements through the guiding principle of “orderly migration” (Domenech, 2013, 2017). In this context, a process of expansion and “globalization of migration control” (Düvell, 2003) took place, promoted by a group of supranational and transnational actors who, through mechanisms of policy regionalization, promoted the formation of intergovernmental consultative spaces on migration. Far from being a mere recipient of government policies produced in the “Global North”, these contributions reconstruct how, since the 1950s, Latin America has been crucial in the development of “migration management”, both through the implementation of experimental projects on new ways of managing mobility and through bilateral agreements aimed at selecting, directing and channeling “migration flows” (Domenech, 2013, 2017; Estupiñán Serrano, 2013; Geiger & Pécout, 2010; Santi, 2020).

This paper focuses on the international scale, adopting Xiang’s (2013) simple definition that scales are the scope of practice. The author’s approach moves away from rigid, predefined considerations of scales toward an understanding of the spatial complexity of social practices. This study focuses on the international scale, examining the

effects of the practices and discourses of actors who act on behalf of the international, as well as those of the local or regional. In other words, events that took place strictly on that scale, but also within a regional context, are considered, for example, to analyze the institutionalization of gender in the field of migration and borders and to consider the formation of the international.

Central America plays a key role in this article because it is a pivotal region for considering the formation of a global narrative on femininities in motion and for understanding the genderization of migration and border control. This does not mean that the article focuses on “the Central American case”. Conversely, the scope of movement management practices in Central America had an impact on multiple scales, both local and global. Thus, the article indirectly reflects on how international narratives are produced multidirectionally based on the extraction of knowledge from agents in the field.

The methodology used is qualitative and focuses on document analysis. The empirical corpus includes 38 documents, including: resolutions, reports, addenda to reports, institutional notes, guidelines, committee conclusions, statements, event and seminar reports, action plans, communiqués, institutional policy documents and implementation evaluations. This documentary corpus focuses on the official discourse of institutions involved in global governance to achieve the stated aim. This does not imply that these institutions have had total and monopolistic power over the lives of women in movement and the organizations dedicated to them. Thus, the existence of organized and surreptitious struggles, both individual and collective, that have been rendered invisible in official history is not ignored; nonetheless, this dimension exceeds the scope of this article.

The documents cover the period from 1979 to 2010, though most focus on the 1980s and 1990s. They can be grouped into three main categories: 1) documents produced within the United Nations system; 2) documents produced by international agencies and non-governmental organizations; and, 3) documents produced by intergovernmental and multilateral conferences. The first group includes publications by UNHCR, the United Nations General Assembly, the UN itself, UN Women, and the United Nations International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (INSTRAW). Commissions promoted or supported by the United Nations system, such as the Global Commission on Migration and the Commission on Global Governance, are also included here.

The second group consists mainly of the IOM, which is currently part of the UN system but acted independently during the period under review, and the NGO Women’s Commission for Refugee Women and Children. The third group includes documents produced in the context of regional conferences, such as the International Conference on Central American Refugees and the Regional Conference on Migration (CRM). The documents analyzed are not binding; that is, they do not impose legal obligations on governments. Conversely, their value lies in capturing the consensus reached in the international political arena. Specifically, they represent a crystallization of meanings in the processes of institutionalizing gender and subjectivizing refugee and migrant women. Although they do not have direct legal effects, actions taken in these spaces, particularly during conferences, have had a significant impact on the public policies implemented by nation-states.



## “Refugee women” and protection in the genderization of migration and border control

The 1980s saw a political reconfiguration of the international arena. As Mazower (2012) explains, this decade marked a transition that culminated with the end of the Cold War and was characterized, among other things, by an unprecedented expansion of the United Nations’ responsibilities and powers, especially in the humanitarian sphere. In this regard, the author states that, as part of these transformations, the “human rights revolution” of the 1970s was taken up by the UN, which turned it into an instrument of a new civilizing mission, legitimized by the language of international law and universal moral values. During this decade, as part of the reconfiguration of the international arena and the expansion of the UN’s powers, a process of governmentalization of gender began, leading to the establishment of the United Nations Decade for Women and the women’s conferences. Specifically, UN agencies developed ways of understanding and intervening in their target populations based on the figure of women and, subsequently, gender.

At the same time, as part of the effects of the Cold War and colonial violence, there were multiple displacements of people that destabilized border orders. This led to the spread of a narrative that characterized these movements as a “global refugee crisis” (Domenech, in press). In this context, the UNHCR established itself as a pioneering organization in the reconfiguration of genderization in migration and border control, based on the subjectification<sup>1</sup> of the “refugee woman” and the establishment of specific technologies for intervention in this population.

This section aims to reconstruct the emergence of a new narrative based on protection as a technology of government for populations on the move and, with it, the subjectification of the “refugee woman”. The section is divided into two parts: the first addresses the development of this narrative; the second shows the relevance of the intervention on Central American refugees in the genderization of migration and border control.

The women’s conferences were a founding milestone in the creation of the figure of the “refugee woman” (Spencer-Nimmons, 1994). Until the 1980s, the UNHCR organized its practice according to the principle of “neutrality”, which implied providing supposedly indiscriminate assistance to men and women. Nonetheless, this stance would be gradually and intermittently overturned, leading to the creation of the “refugee woman” as a specific subject of intervention. The UN General Assembly decided to include “refugee women” in the provisional agenda of the event (Resolution 34/161, Asamblea General, 1979), in the context of preparations for the World Conference on Women in Copenhagen (1980) and on the eve of the adoption of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.

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<sup>1</sup> The notion of subjectivation is based on the contributions of Michel Foucault. The use in this paper refers to the “broad mode” of understanding the category, as Castro explains, that is, the “ways in which the subject appears as the object of a particular relationship of knowledge and power” (Castro, 2019, p. 377). Specifically, within this broad sense, the basis is what Foucault (1988) proposes as

[...] modes of objectification that I would call “divisive practices”. The subject is divided both internally and from others. This process objectifies them. Examples include the mad and the sane, the sick and the healthy, criminals and good guys. (p. 3)

The Assembly commissioned UNHCR to prepare a report on the situation of refugee women worldwide. The document presented by UNHCR in Copenhagen a year later justified its importance because “women constitute the majority of the adult refugee population” and highlighted that “in some countries, the number of refugee women and children reaches 90%” (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 1980). In this context, the document argued for the need to systematically study refugee women and stop assisting them as part of a larger group, and to develop a “specific approach” to address their needs. The production of knowledge would be one of the key elements in the emergence of this new subject of intervention, as a necessary condition for the objectification of the subject “refugee woman”. Institutional attention to refugee women by the UN in general<sup>2</sup> and UNHCR in particular would be present, albeit intermittently, throughout the decade.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> It is striking that Instraw is absent from the documents analyzed. During this initial period, UN guidelines, reports, resolutions and other documents mention it only briefly. The work of Erin Baines (2016), who interned at UNHCR as part of her research, also reflects this absence. Notably, the text *The legacy of Instraw in promoting the rights of women: a historical record of the institute between 1976 and 2010* (United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, 2016), which systematizes the institution's work, does not mention the work on refugee issues. Furthermore, UNHCR is not mentioned anywhere in the text. This document does contain an interesting clarification regarding work on migration issues: “The subject of migration became an important work topic after 2003” (p. 65). It mentions collaborations with IOM, UNDP (United Nations Development Programme), UNFPA (United Nations Population Fund) and UN-Habitat (United Nations Human Settlements Program). It would be relevant to conduct more in-depth research to understand the link between Instraw and UNHCR in the 1980s and 1990s.

<sup>3</sup> In December 1980, the UN General Assembly issued a resolution on the situation of “refugee and displaced women” (Asamblea General, 1980). In that document, it recognized them as “a majority” and characterized them as a vulnerable group. It urged member states and donors to develop and finance policies that paid particular attention to this group. It also urged UNHCR and associated non-governmental organizations to conduct research and produce data on the needs of refugee and displaced women.

A series of reports and addenda from the UNHCR, addressed to the General Assembly, highlight the growing presence of refugee women. They describe the practices implemented to address the situation of refugee women, such as fundraising campaigns, the production of public information and multimedia material, the creation of a special issue of the institutional magazine and the screening of films (General Assembly, 1981a, 1981b). Likewise, the creation of focus groups in the territory, the development of a guide (General Assembly, 1982), the deployment of 400 social workers focused on vulnerable groups, the training of refugee women in nutrition, health and income-generating skills, the involvement of refugee women in camp management, the development of specialized services for sexual violence in Asia and Latin America and the formation of an intersectoral committee at UNHCR headquarters (General Assembly, 1983).

Over the years, efforts were directed toward participation in the next Conference on Women held in Nairobi (General Assembly, 1984). Following the conference and the 1985 round table, the General Assembly report (General Assembly, 1986) showed the willingness of members to continue and deepen the actions taken to address the needs of refugee women. Nonetheless, the following year, the report (Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme, 1987) revealed members' concern about the dissolution of the working group on refugee women and demanded its reconstitution and the development of research to raise awareness on the issue. That year, a note on international protection presented by the General Assembly (General Assembly, 1988) emphasized the security problems faced by women in protection contexts and the lack of specific programs targeting this population.

Between 1988 and 1989, demonstrations expressing concern for refugee women continued, and actions focused on this group were intensified, with activities such as the creation of a specific resettlement program for *women at risk*; the creation of a specific advisory position on refugee women; training courses for UNHCR staff; involvement in the International Consultation on Refugee Women (Gender Equality Unit, 2014; Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme, 1988); collaboration with the International Working Group on Refugee Women, promoted by non-governmental organizations, among other actions. As Baines (2016) shows, states began to develop policies in this area as part of international cooperation funding policies.



In 1985, UNHCR organized a roundtable discussion on refugee women, where participants from different parts of the world concluded that it was important to “collect statistical data on refugee women to enable a systematic analysis of their special needs and vulnerabilities as women” (Executive Committee of the High Commissioner’s Programme, 1985). The production of knowledge was not an isolated element, but was considered a “basic prerequisite” for the development of action programs for the international protection of refugee women.

One of the most significant developments in the production of refugee women, which would later function as a broader logic in the political field of migration and refuge, was based on their hierarchization according to the stratification of suffering and the reification of this new femininity as vulnerability. Paradoxically, this idea operated both as a principle and as a conclusion. In this respect, the first document presented stated that “refugee women tend to suffer most from the loss of their roots and the radical change in their way of life” (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 1980). It held that “social justice requires that women and children have first access to limited resources” since “the social and physical vulnerability of women makes them more likely to bear the brunt of deprivation, discrimination and abuse in situations of hardship” (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 1980, p. 3).

Similarly, Clavijo and Sabogal (2013) have analyzed the figure of the “refugee woman” and UNHCR policy, showing that they construct an idea of vulnerability and minoritization of individuals whom protection policies may protect—a perspective that, paradoxically, is combined with the security discourses involved in the management and governance of the movement. In this regard, these early UNHCR documents capture the construction of what Hess et al. (2022) have termed the “vulnerability mechanism”. Although this mechanism has recently been consolidated as a result of the mass movements of the 21st century, these discourses show how the biography of political persecution of asylum seekers is gradually losing relevance and being replaced by characteristics considered “natural” (gender, sexuality, age, disability), where the mutilated and suffering body, quantifiable and hierarchizable, becomes the cornerstone of control practices based on gender constructions (Hess et al., 2022).

In the 1990s, against a backdrop of urgent migration governance issues, a guide was produced that summarized a decade of UNHCR advocacy on gender issues: *Guidelines on the Protection of Refugee Women* (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 1991). The development of this document was not the result of a sustained institutional commitment over time. On the contrary, the years before and after were marked by intermittent efforts and disputes among those working with and for refugee women (Baines, 2000; Berthiaume, 1995). In other words, the incorporation of gender was prompted by specific situations, such as women’s conferences, and subsequently the attention ceased. Likewise, funding for specific gender specialist positions was inconsistent.

Based on this, the involvement of non-governmental organizations and activists working on issues related to refugee women was central to the crystallization and materialization of this type of narrative and document. The guide in question contained an extensive and detailed description of the problems faced by refugee women and the

organization's institutional strategy for protection. These guidelines were designed for both the organization and its partners to assist in implementing programs and in identifying "the specific protection issues, problems and risks faced by refugee women" (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 1991, p. 4).

In line with the guide's title, the notion of protection guided the implementation of policies for women. The institution also explained that "the international protection of refugee women must be understood in its broadest sense" because it "goes beyond adherence to legal principles". Protection expanded and became, under this narrative, a feminized category: "the intrinsic correlation between protection and assistance is particularly evident in relation to women, adolescents, and refugee children". Consequently, the significance of this document lies in its condensation of a narrative about refugee women that would shape humanitarian intervention going forward. In other words, rather than a simple guide, this document would capture the process of subjectivation of "refugee women" by establishing the core narrative around their displacement, which would extend to contemporary discourses and interventions. Therefore, the figure of refugee women would catalyze the expansion of the notion of protection as a category that organizes the genderization of control.

The category of protection has been unraveled, problematized and historicized by authors in the field of critical migration and border studies, as well as in security studies (Aradau, 2010; Bigo, 2006; Clavijo, in press; Huysmans, 2006; Nyers et al., 2021). In reconstructing the etymology of the notion of protection, Bigo (2006) shows the existence of two meanings, *presidere* and *tutore*, where the protector establishes a relationship of guardianship and obedience with the protected, and generates mechanisms to hide the asymmetry by showing commitment to act, while the subject of protection indulges in the safeguard or seeks to resist the victim status attributed to them in this relationship. Along these lines, Clavijo (in press) shows how South American refugee protection policies are based on a "linkage, a coupling in which protection and control function as a unit". The capacity of the category of protection to act as a catalyst for the process of genderization also lies in the place it has occupied in the structuring of Western, white/whitened, and urban gender relations. At the intersection of sexuality, migration and borders, and through a complex analysis of erotic and sexual markets across borders, Ruiz M. (2022) has shown the production of an intricate network where security, control and protection do not function as antagonists but rather feed into each other in the governance of abject populations.

The impact of this notion on the genderization of migration and border control is also part of a broader process of disputes over categorizing and dividing migration and refuge. This artificial distinction was introduced after World War II, and among its effects was the attachment of the category of protection to the field of refuge and its conversion into the mandate of the UNHCR. As will be seen below, the IOM itself acknowledged years later that its intervention in gender issues was hampered by a greater focus on refugee women based on the "urgency of their protection" (OIM, 2002).

Nevertheless, the UNHCR's monopoly over protection in the field of asylum began to break down in the 1990s (Karatani, 2005), at the same time as gender as an instrument of government expanded globally. Disputes between institutions linked

to asylum and migration over their protection responsibilities intensified at the beginning of the 21st century, when protection became a broader technology for controlling population movements aimed at managing irregular migration (Clavijo, in press). The IOM contested the field of protection to incorporate it within its remit, seeking to expand its meaning to enable it to intervene under this category: “today, a broader meaning is attributed to the concept of protection (...) protection and assistance are inextricably linked” (IOM, 2002). In other words, institutional interventions around the notion of protection initially restricted the deployment of gender to the field of refuge. After its dispute, with relative autonomy from the process of governmentalization of gender, protection consolidated its feminized meaning and enabled a generalized expansion of the narrative on the “gender perspective” to migration and border control as a whole.

### *The “refugee crisis” in Central America as a turning point in the genderization of migration and border control*

The production of the subject “refugee woman” based on the framework of categories of vulnerability, protection and suffering is by no means the result of a rational plan orchestrated at the headquarters of the United Nations. On the contrary, the process of subjectivation that occurs in this configuration of the genderization of migration and border control is part of actions promoted from different parts of the Global South that have been reinterpreted, synthesized and incorporated into global control frameworks. In 2002, the Women’s Commission for Refugee Women and Children released a document that sought to evaluate UNHCR policy ten years after the publication of the Guidelines on the Protection of Refugee Women (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 1991; document analyzed in the previous section).

As part of the analysis, they included an appendix on the case study of “UNHCR’s gender approach in Central America”, where they pointed out that “since the 1980s, the Central American region has witnessed pioneering innovations in protection and programming for women”. Particularly, these actions had taken place prior to the publication of the UNHCR Protection Guide, leading them to state that “the Central American experience allowed UNHCR to break new ground in gender issues” and “laid the foundation for staff to work on integrating gender equality into other UNHCR national and regional operations”.

While the Women’s Commission for Refugee Women and Children placed UNHCR at the center of innovation, it acknowledged in passing that “the driving force seems to have been the women themselves”. This brief statement highlights the central role

of grassroots organizations and refugee women, whose work is reduced to a mere acknowledgment, loosely stated in this document and invisible in other materials. To this end, UNHCR capitalizes on knowledge and resources by extracting knowledge and experience embodied and produced by subaltern women.

Mass displacement in Central America began in the late 1970s, triggered by extreme violence in Guatemala, Nicaragua, and El Salvador (O'Hara, 2024). As Torres-Rivas (1994) has reconstructed, these conflicts were an expression of the struggle against deep structural inequality (especially in land distribution), racial violence, ethnic exclusion, state repression, and, fundamentally, an international context marked by the Cold War.<sup>4</sup> The emergence of revolutionary movements such as the Sandinista National Liberation Front in Nicaragua, the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front in El Salvador and the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity was met with a violent counteroffensive backed by the United States, which played a key role in prolonging and intensifying these conflicts.

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<sup>4</sup> The history of revolutions, conflicts and violence in Central America is so complex that it cannot be covered in this paper. Nevertheless, it is worth briefly introducing a series of analytical clarifications and historical details that readers can explore further in specialized literature (Ansaldi & Giordano, 2012; Rojas, 2021; Rostica, 2015, 2017, 2023; Torres-Rivas, 1994, 2006).

Firstly, it is necessary to revisit the analytical clarification made by Torres-Rivas (1994) when discussing Central America as a region. Referring to the Central American region is possible for heuristic purposes. Nonetheless, a deep understanding of the conflicts that have occurred requires an analysis of their national configurations, as the genealogies of the struggles are inscribed in particular contexts that cannot be erased in the regionalization of analyses.

Secondly, according to the analysis of Rojas (2021), the events analyzed in this paper are preceded and framed by the expansion of the revolutionary ideal in Latin America, which took place between the Cuban revolution of 1959 and its decline, the Sandinista victory in the overthrow of Anastasio Somoza's dictatorship in Nicaragua. Despite the subversive force in the region, these events (especially in the case of Guatemala and El Salvador) were described as "revolutions without revolutionary changes".

Thirdly, these events are linked to the international context of the Cold War; nonetheless, as Torres-Rivas (1994) explains, the contemporaneity of the insurrectionary struggles in Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua is a "diachronic coincidence", which does not imply ignoring that there was "a decidedly influential international dimension in Central America". As Ansaldi and Giordano (2012) propose, the social upheaval that took place between the 1960s and 1970s constituted a "crisis of hegemony" for the economically dominant political forces, resulting from their inability to respond to long-standing demands—unrelated to the Cold War—such as the democratization of political life, the demand for social justice and the claim for land.

In fourth place, the outbreak of these demands and the formation of revolutionary forces is connected to three dimensions strongly linked to the international context: the capitalist modernization of export agriculture, which resulted in the dispossession of peasant land; the influence of the Cuban Revolution; and the exacerbation of state violence, with the support of the United States. It is important to note that, although U.S. violence was the product of "anti-communist fanaticism" (Rostica, 2017), the Central American revolutions had strong Cuban support, but not from the USSR (Torres-Rivas, 2006).

Finally, as Rostica (2015, 2023) points out, it is important to introduce racism as a constitutive dimension of conflicts, especially in the Guatemalan context. As the author shows, racism is not merely an ideological "context", but rather a total social phenomenon, without which it is impossible to understand the perpetuation of a genocide that marked Central American history and the displacement of thousands of people that would lead to the configuration of new modes of government of the movement.

In Nicaragua, following the triumph of the Sandinista revolution in 1979, the Ronald Reagan administration financed the Contras from bases located in Honduras, a country that became a strategic enclave for regional destabilization. In El Salvador, the government received massive economic and military support from Washington to curb the “insurgent advance”, while in Guatemala, U.S. backing for military dictatorships facilitated one of the most brutal “counterinsurgency campaigns” on the continent, perpetuating genocide (Rostica, 2017, 2023). The defeat of Sandinismo and the U.S. intervention in Panama would be the culmination of the bloody decade of the 1980s.

These events had disruptive effects in the political arena of asylum. Mass displacement broke the traditional association of asylum with the figure of the man persecuted for his distinguished political activism—an exceptional guarantee—and facilitated the incorporation of other mechanisms such as *prima facie* recognition (Clavijo, in press). Mainly since the 1980s, mass displacements to Honduras led to the creation of makeshift camps in the border area, which were later taken over, expanded and relocated by UNHCR and international non-governmental organizations (Médecins Sans Frontières, Caritas, World Vision, etcetera) to form refugee camps such as those in La Virtud, Colomoncagua, Mesa Grande, Danli and Mosquitia (Binet, 2013).

The significance of the figure of the “refugee woman” in this context, which served as the basis for the international development of the genderization of control, lies in two dimensions. On the one hand, there are the strategic uses of racialized representations of gender by humanitarian actors; on the other, there is the feminization of refugee camps. Concerning the first dimension, De la Cruz (2017) has shown that U.S. activists constructed refugees from El Salvador as feminized civilian victims. This contradicted institutional records showing that Salvadoran refugees in the United States were mainly male, and that single men were the main victims of murder, kidnapping, and torture in El Salvador. The author explains that the feminization and infantilization of the representation of victims of the conflict appealed to the paternalistic sensibilities of the white American middle class and sought to distance itself from the representation of the “single” Latino migrant as dangerous, linked to crime, prostitution, alcoholism and miscegenation. In this context, solidarity campaigns with the victims of the Salvadoran conflict resulted in the proliferation of stories and images focused on the suffering of women and children, which were fundamental in the construction of the “refugee woman” narrative.

The feminization of the camps, the second dimension, occurred in tandem with the persecution of Salvadoran men. As De la Cruz (2017) reconstructs, institutional reports from Honduras and the United States suggested that men and boys over the age of 12 living in refugee camps were susceptible to being recruited by the Honduran or Salvadoran armed forces. If they were not recruited, the government and the army accused them of being rebel militants.

As a result of the systematic violence that targeted not only men but also their families, many men tended to flee northward, while women, children and the elderly were

the ones who remained in the camps to a greater extent. In the book *Refugio y retorno: historias de una comunidad reasentada* (Wiltberger & Baltazar Flores, 2022), Emeteria Rivera, a Salvadoran woman who lived in the Mesa Grande shelter, recalls her work as a leader in the shelter's clothing cooperative:

I coordinated 24 women, and the rest were men, but there were fewer men. (...) And the women also coordinated the groups. They would ask one of us, "Hey, it's your turn today, bring six women to make their clothes". (2022)

In this context, refugee camps became spaces led and sustained by women who promoted transformative actions that would be extracted, reinterpreted and rendered invisible in the major documents published by the upper echelons. Thus, far from operating under a top-down logic in which international practices are imposed on regional contexts, the genderization of control occurred through a process of mutual interrelation among the various levels.

Refugee camps, as spaces generated by the instrumentalization of gender in representations of conflicts and women's daily practices of sustaining life, gave rise not only to the expansion of policies that placed women at the center of intervention but also, fundamentally, to the "gender approach" as a privileged banner for their implementation. The production of the narrative of the gender approach as an argument for intervention among displaced populations occurred within the framework of the International Conference on Central American Refugees. It was defined as an intergovernmental space created between 1989 and 1994, "co-sponsored" by the UNHCR and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and made up of Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Mexico and Belize, to create a regional framework "for the creation of partnerships between donors, UN agencies, governments, NGOs, and refugees themselves". In a context of transformations in the logic of power on a global scale, an institutional structure for managing mobility began to emerge in the region that, from the present perspective, could be defined as an incipient form of humanitarian governance.

From the outset, the Principles and Criteria for the Protection of and Assistance to Central American Refugees, Returnees and Displaced Persons in Latin America (Gros Espiell et al., 1989) and the Conference Action Plan (Conferencia Internacional sobre Refugiados Centroamericanos, 1989) upheld "the priority attention that should be given to the specific needs of uprooted women in the region", which would be celebrated years later by the General Assembly (RES. 46/107 1991). This new concern led to the creation in 1992 of the First Regional Forum on Gender Approaches in Working with Refugee, Repatriated and Displaced Women (Forefem), which was sponsored by UNHCR and UNDP and aimed to "incorporate a gender perspective into the policies, strategies and projects of both agencies, and into all the work being done in the region by governments, bilateral and multilateral cooperation agencies, non-governmental organizations and academic institutions" (ACNUR, 1992, p. 2).



The projects developed within the framework of the International Conference on Central American Refugees and Forefam capture the complexity inherent in the subjectification of “refugee women”, as they portray them as victims, vulnerable and suffering, yet at the same time as resilient and entrepreneurial. From the outset, the UNHCR document emphasized that “the strength and resilience shown by refugee women in the most desperate situations are characteristics that should not be overlooked or minimized” (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 1980, p. 4).

The process of subjectivation, as inscribed in the logic of governmentality, is far from denying the agency and autonomy of populations classified as vulnerable. Conversely, free subjects are a necessary condition for the establishment of power relations (Foucault, 1988). In the words of Mezzadra and Neilson, “neoliberal political reason is obliged to take into consideration subjects who are identified by governance strategies as autonomous actors” (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2017, p. 211). This logic created the conditions for implementing a particular mode of intervention for feminized populations classified as vulnerable, grounded in the figure of entrepreneurship.

In this case, Central America became a region where innovative strategies to assist refugee women were developed. By 1992, a multitude of projects had been developed in Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Mexico and Guatemala that focused heavily on the “productive development” of women through “loans” and “microprojects”, under the logic of jump-starting (Conferencia Internacional sobre Refugiados Centroamericanos, 1992). As Silvia Federici et al. (2021) explain, women are seen as natural entrepreneurs and responsible debtors who can and should be “included” in the financial system. In this respect, “victim” and “businesswoman” (Cavallero & Gago, 2019, p. 37) are two sides of the same coin in the regimes of representation of underdeveloped women and constituted a cornerstone in the deployment of the genderization of control.

### Under the eyes of migration governance: violence as a category organizing the genderization of migration and border control

The reconfiguration of the genderization of migration and border control occurred as a result of the intertwined development of gender governance and migration governance. This intertwining was made possible by the structuring of specific categories of intervention, such as the notion of protection analyzed in the previous section. This section analyzes how violence is instituted as a category that articulates the reconfiguration of the genderization of migration and border control. To this end, the first section reviews the hierarchization of the figure of the “migrant woman” as a subject of intervention and control, grounded in the narrative of the feminization of migration. It also shows how violence is gradually established as the constitutive and defining experience of the subjectivation of feminized migrants. In a second section, it reconstructs the production of migrant women and sexual violence as a ubiquitous threat, within the framework of the regionalization of control, centered on the Regional Conference on Migration.

Violence against women, gender violence and sexual violence are an essential part of feminist vocabulary. Nevertheless, the expansion of violence against women as a feminist political category can be traced back to 1974, when a group of mainly European feminists organized the International Feminist Camp on the island of Femø, Denmark, as an act of protest against the First Women's Conference held in Mexico (Joachim, 2007). As a result of the meeting, the possibility arose of creating the first International Tribunal on Crimes Against Women in Brussels, attended by 2 000 women from 40 countries who spoke out against domestic violence, abuse, rape, prostitution, female genital mutilation, the murder of women and the persecution of lesbians (Keck & Sikkink, 1999).

Paradoxically, while the tribunal was established as an exercise in autonomist self-affirmation by various feminist movements, it also catalyzed those activists seeking institutional support from organizations such as the UN. The effect of this advance crystallized at the Nairobi Conference, where violence against women gained unprecedented prominence, leading to the creation of the Expert Group Meetings on Domestic Violence in 1986 (Naciones Unidas, 1989). Among their conclusions, 29 people from the field of social sciences from around the world (Joachim, 2007) posited that “the key to a country's response to violence against women is the police response. The police are the only body that offers women a combination of the coercive power of the state and accessibility. By placing the criminal justice system at the center and reaffirming the state's monopoly on the legitimate use of violence, feminist ideals were incorporated into a process of securitization that, far from dismantling gender-based violence, shifted it toward a constitutively masculinist and racist framework embodied in the state.

The production of the “migrant woman” as a specific object of governance for populations on the move occurred out of step with developments in institutions linked to refugee affairs. Unlike UNHCR, IOM began systematically developing a narrative around the “gender perspective” after the 1995 Beijing Conference, which led to the global policy of “gender mainstreaming”.<sup>5</sup> The resolution from this conference catalyzed the incorporation of this narrative into the field of migration. As a result, following the event, the IOM published the document, *Staff and Program Policy on Gender Issues* (OIM, 1995). This was the result of the creation of the Working Group on Gender Issues, whose task was to “ensure that gender issues are an integral part of IOM planning and actions”. This document stated that “refugee women have been the

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<sup>5</sup> Gender mainstreaming is defined as follows:

gender mainstreaming is the process of assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action, including legislation, policies, or programs, in all areas and at all levels. (A/52/3/Rev.1, Asamblea General, 1997)

Gender mainstreaming is one of the fundamental technologies of government that makes it possible to regulate the production of femininity and masculinity within the framework of neoliberal rationality. Ultimately, this mechanism allows gender to explode as a specific area of government over women in order to transform all intervention policies and practices into instruments of gender regulation.

focus of attention earlier than migrant women in general, as a result of urgent protection issues". From this perspective, they sustained the importance of focusing on migrant women "beyond protection". In this way, it would be the notion of violence, rather than protection, that would initially pave the way for a process of subjectivation of migrant women.

The reconfiguration of genderization in migration and border control occurred within the framework of the emergence and implementation of migration governance. As Domenech (2013) has shown, in the 1970s, the notion of governance emerged in the political field of migration, at the same time that "illegal immigration" became a concern of international politics and was incorporated into the agendas of international and intergovernmental organizations. Even so, the crystallization and consolidation of migration governance took place throughout the 1990s. This form of governance is characterized by treating migration as a manageable phenomenon that must be "ordered" by combating illegal migration—which produces distinctions between (un)desirable populations—with the aim of "maximizing benefits" and obtaining profits (Domenech, 2023). As Domenech (2017) states, three spaces crystallized new modes of migration regulation: global commissions, the Cairo Conference and Regional Consultative Processes.

The Commission on Global Governance (1992) and the Global Commission on International Migration (2005) are among the events that transformed the frameworks for regulating migration. Regarding the reconfiguration of genderization of control, they stand out for having contributed to transforming the migration of feminized migrants from a novel event into a regular one. The report of the Global Commission on Migration, *Our global neighborhood* (1995), identified a restructuring of the social order linked to "extraordinary productivity growth" with "profound social consequences", including "migration and urbanization, which in turn have disrupted traditional household structures and gender roles".

On the other hand, the report by the Global Commission on Migration (2005) explained that, by 2000, women constituted almost half of the migrant population, that they had an increasingly significant presence in the labor market, especially in industrialized countries that demanded labor in sectors traditionally associated with women, and that they were increasingly traveling alone. In this context, they pointed out that women were a significant part of irregular migration. In response, the document emphasized that migration could be "an empowering experience" and also have "negative consequences". In this regard, they identified human trafficking as a problem mainly affecting women and children, and therefore pointed out the importance of training officials, the judiciary and security forces to provide "adequate protection" from an age- and gender-sensitive approach.

Concerning women in particular, they explained that a large number of women were at risk of violence from their partners, especially in poor and marginalized communities. Likewise, women who migrated for marriage, domestic work or work in the

entertainment and sex industries were particularly vulnerable to exploitation and social isolation, as were those who were trafficked. In response to this, the Commission stressed the need for migration policies and programs to “consider gender issues, pay special attention to the social situation and inclusion of migrant women, and ensure that the migration experience empowers women”.

The identification of female migration as a novel phenomenon is part of the broader, diffuse narrative of the feminization of migration. As Schrover and Moloney (2013) explain, this “phenomenon” is based on ambiguous data and on insufficient, biased or nonexistent statistics. Thus, presenting women’s migration as new is not necessarily tied to quantitative increases or qualitative transformations in their roles, but rather to greater attention to this phenomenon. This attention is particularly evident, on the one hand, in the expansion of mechanisms to control irregular migration linked to the coordination of migration governance, which seeks, through the prescription of orderly and channeled migration, “to take advantage of the positive aspects of female migration and mitigate the ‘vulnerability’ of migrant women” (Magliano & Domenech, 2009, p. 57). On the other hand, its visibility refers to what constitutes gender governance, insofar as advancing policies based on the “gender perspective” requires prioritizing feminized populations as objects of government.

In this context, the narrative of violence as a ubiquitous threat to women on the move was one of the main vehicles for prioritizing them as a population requiring intervention through protection practices and border and migration security measures. Along these lines, Schrover and Moloney (2013) assert that the “juggling of numbers and percentages” on women’s migration has served to justify restrictions and controls. Ticktin (2008) shows the same by describing the construction of violence against women as part of the language of migration and border control. These narratives can therefore be interpreted as one of the practices of reparation by migration control regimes, which seek to expand their intervention on feminized populations and innovate in the mechanisms of control of masculinized migrants.

The intertwining of gender and migration governance crystallized at two of the most significant UN conferences, the Cairo Conference on Population and Development (Naciones Unidas, 1995) and the Beijing Conference on Women (United Nations, 1995). These spaces reflect a process of classification of feminized populations that occurred within the framework of the hierarchization of migrant women as governable subjects distinct from the already stabilized refugee women. Within the framework of the Cairo Conference, migrant women were constructed differently based on various migration statuses: documented migrants, undocumented migrants, and refugees. About the former, they pointed out the need to eliminate all discriminatory practices against migrants with documentation, “especially women, children, and the elderly.” In this regard, they stated that “women and children who migrate as family members should be protected” against abuse and denigration of their human rights. Undocumented female migrants, meanwhile, were linked to the phenomenon of international migrant trafficking, “especially for prostitution.”

Thus, “host countries” and “countries of origin” were urged to adopt effective sanctions against those who organize undocumented migration, “specifically those engaged in any form of international trafficking involving women, young people, and children.” Concerning refuge, it called for consideration to be given to “the particular situation of women,” ensuring “protection and assistance (...) paying particular attention to the needs and physical safety of refugee women and children (...) most notably against exploitation, abuse, and all forms of violence.” In this regard, the production of femininity consists in the social classification of being a woman and in the differentiated distribution of problems across subgroups, a process that has been developing with the subjectification of refugee women. In this way, discrimination was assigned to documented migrants; the triangle of trafficking-human trafficking-prostitution for undocumented migrants; and protection for refugees.

Under this compartmentalization of the figure, violence is established as a cross-cutting category of the subjectivation of feminized populations in motion. Migrant and refugee women were among the concerns addressed at the Beijing Conference (United Nations, 1995). The global framework stated that mass migration and refugee movements were part of global trends that had profound consequences for gender inequalities and that, in many cases, led to the sexual exploitation of women. From this perspective, concerns regarding migrant and refugee women were incorporated into the section “Violence against women,” which mentioned that they, among other categories of women, “are particularly vulnerable to violence.” The language of violence began to take root as a cross-cutting dimension in the processes of subjectivation of feminized populations on the move.

### *Violence as a narrative of the regionalization of migration and border control*

Gender as an instrument of migration governance was consolidated and expanded within the framework of regional consultative processes, which constitute the implementation of migration governance (Domenech, 2017). While in the first of these, the Budapest Process (1993), gender and women were not part of the policies, those carried out immediately after the publication of the Staff and Program Policy on Gender Issues did incorporate them. Such is the case of the Puebla Process (1996) and the Manila Process (1996). As part of the latter, the International Symposium on Migration: Towards Regional Cooperation on Irregular/Undocumented Migration was held in 1999, resulting in the publication of the Bangkok Declaration (OIM, 1999). In it, they pointed out that irregular migration had become “a major economic, social, humanitarian, political and security concern” in the region. Of particular concern was organized crime, which “profits from smuggling and trafficking in human beings, especially women and children, without regard for the dangerous and inhumane conditions”.

This narrative was constitutive of the IOM's intervention in the processes of subjectivation based on the production of the threat of irregularity on feminized bodies, especially anchored in its "fight against human trafficking" (Magliano & Domenech, 2009).

In 1996, the Regional Conference on Migration, also known as the "Puebla Process", was formed with the participation of Belize, Canada, Costa Rica, El Salvador, the United States, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama and the Technical Secretariat of the IOM. As various authors have shown, the IOM's interference in Central American migration policy was part of the creation and expansion of neo-liberal control schemes based on migration management (Domenech, 2017; Kron, 2011). In this context, Kron (2011, 2013) points out that the fight against trafficking was one of the central features in the crystallization of this new mode of governance in Central America, orchestrated to defend U.S. interests. It occurred within the context of a transformation in the containment of Central American migration. Whereas, until the early 1990s, this mobility was classified under the category of "refugees", the Regional Conference on Migration established a new way of politically intervening in this population under the notion of "migration". The subjectification of femininities in motion shifted from Central American "refugee" women to Central American "migrant" women.

Migrant women were incorporated into the conference early on. The first joint communiqué of the Regional Conference on Migration stated that they would pay "particular attention to the special needs of women and children, including their protection where appropriate" (Conferencia Regional sobre Migraciones, 1996). This sentence illustrates how the reconfiguration of *gendered* control was made possible by the transformation in the political use of the notion of protection, whereby the field of refuge gradually lost its monopoly. Beyond the early inclusion of "women" in the discussions of the Regional Conference on Migration, it was in 1999 that gender took on greater prominence. Specifically, in the declaration of the "Non-Governmental Network for Migration" (Reuniones Regionales, 1999), a specific section was included to work "on gender, women and migration", which proposed the development of assessments, the implementation of "prevention and protection programs for migrant women to ensure their safety", and the integration of "elements that take into account the particular situation of migrant women" in migration policies.

The emergence of migrant women as a subject of governance in the regional sphere took place at the Regional Conference on Migration, primarily as a result of the First Seminar on Migrant Women and Children (2000). This was organized jointly by the governments of Canada and El Salvador and the IOM, with the participation of government representatives, cooperation agencies (such as UNICEF and UNIFEM), non-governmental organizations, scholars and civil society. The seminar proposed the "effective incorporation of a gender perspective in all activities carried out by the Conference" (Conferencia Regional sobre Migraciones, 2000).



The objectives of the event revolved around the production of diagnostic studies, statistical data on “these vulnerable groups”, planning of medium- and short-term actions, and raising awareness among officials regarding the reality of “migrant women and minors, with special emphasis on Central America”. From this perspective, the aim was to render the mobility of feminized migrants as a calculable event, produced as a population and therefore governable.

They also made a series of recommendations, among which the following are particularly relevant: “improve conditions in women’s detention centers, as well as deportation conditions”, “increase the number of female staff in the centers and raise awareness and provide training on gender issues for male staff”. In other words, they recommended deportation with a gender perspective. They also recommended the development of strict legislation to criminalize trafficking in women for sexual exploitation and the development of projects for the social reintegration of returned or deported women. The Seminar on Women and Migration held its second edition in 2007<sup>6</sup> (Conferencia Regional sobre Migraciones, 2007), where it concluded, among other issues, that “it is perhaps at this moment of migration that the greatest difficulties arise, especially when migrant women travel in an irregular situation”. Therefore, “there are dangers during the journey; migrating as a woman increases the risks of abuse, rape and sexual extortion, as well as unwanted pregnancies, forced prostitution and sexually transmitted diseases”.

The rearticulation of the genderization of migration and border control through the metabolization of the “gender perspective” is based on the representation of sexual violence as a constitutive event in the subjectivation of migrant and refugee women, whether through experience or the ubiquitous threat of suffering it. This is linked to the extensively studied construction of masculinity as a threat (Hess et al., 2022; Schrover et al., 2008). In this regard, a connection is made between female corporeality and national borders based on the “fear of penetration” (Kulick, 2003; Ruiz, 2017; Ruiz M., 2022), a threat embodied by third world men, primarily those

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<sup>6</sup> In mid-2000, a significant event took place in terms of the genderization of migration and border control, which did not strictly fall within the theme of violence. In 2003, as reconstructed by the institution itself (United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, 2016), INSTRAW reconfigured its policy and focused, among other issues, on the topic of “Gender, remittances, and migration”. This had a significant impact in Latin America, on the one hand, because Mexico was one of the main states involved in the design of the policy. On the other hand, because INSTRAW saw an increase in its funds, which were concentrated in Latin America and the Caribbean. Within this framework, a series of events and reports were produced that marked a trend in the thematization of migrant women as “subjects of development”.

The analyses focused on Colombia (Instituto Internacional de Investigaciones y Capacitación de las Naciones Unidas para la Promoción de la Mujer & Organización Internacional para las Migraciones, 2006), Guatemala (Instituto Internacional de Investigaciones y Capacitación de las Naciones Unidas para la Promoción de la Mujer, 2006a) and, fundamentally, the Dominican Republic (Instraw, 2006). These developments were also carried out jointly with the IOM (Instituto Internacional de Investigaciones y Capacitación de las Naciones Unidas para la Promoción de la Mujer, 2006b). As analyzed by Magliano and Domenech (2009) and Magliano and Romano (2009), this type of institutional intervention is part of Sayada’s notion of an “accounting balance” used to distinguish between desirable and undesirable migration, while concealing the processes of exploitation and capitalist expropriation, veiled in the name of empowerment.

identified as “traffickers”, but also the corrupt security forces of “developing” countries or other uncivilized migrants/refugees.

As Miriam Ticktin (2011a) proposes, the care regimes involved in the humanitarian governance of migration, under the imperative of rescue and relief from suffering, drive forms of control and surveillance that subject “victims” to the imminent possibility of becoming dangerous or committing crimes. These narratives enable actors involved in migration governance to claim the importance of their interventions in migrant women’s privacy and mobility practices, thereby proclaiming their legitimacy and capacity to protect them. This precisely conceals their responsibility for the reproduction of violence: by positioning themselves as saviors, they ignore their role in the production of migratory illegality and the social deterioration they generate in the “third world” in order to sustain the systems of extraction and exploitation on which the neoliberal system is based.

The ubiquitous threat of sexual violence is also embodied in attempts to regulate and criminalize sex work, especially under the guise of prosecuting crimes of human trafficking for sexual exploitation. Hence, racialized forms of discipline are deployed, ranging from the punishment of migrants with “dangerous sexualities” to the protection of “victims of sex trafficking” through the political use of fear in the context of migration governance, which manifests itself in persecution, police violence, detentions and deportations (Maldonado Macedo, 2022; Ruiz, 2017).

Therefore, as numerous studies have shown, human trafficking increased the incarceration of women involved in sex work, while also becoming a tool to justify and implement deportation policies (Andrijasevich, 2010; Daich & Varela, 2020; Piscitelli & Lowenkron, 2015). As Aradau points out, human trafficking was produced as a category of intervention and social problem in which women victims of trafficking emerged as a specific category that made it possible to render this issue and various subjects governable through the generation and representation of “illegal migration, organized crime, and prostitution as security problems” (Aradau, 2008, p. 37).

## Conclusions

This paper sought to investigate the institutionalization of gender issues in the political field of migration and borders, accounting for the genderization of migration and border control at the international level between the 1980s and 1990s. Through a review of documents produced by institutions involved in migration and refugee governance, it revealed the emergence of a narrative that metabolizes and instrumentalizes “women’s issues” and gender equality/equity/perspective in the management of the movement of impoverished and racialized populations. This process initially developed in the field of refugee protection, led by the UNHCR and influenced by UN action at global conferences on women.

Through the dissemination of studies on “refugee women”, the creation of guides, and meetings, expert knowledge was generated that reified this population as archetypal victims in need of institutional protection. The formation of knowledge and intervention technologies based on protection occurred through the extraction of knowledge and work from women who faced and experienced forced displacement, as in the case of the “refugee crisis” in Central America.

The emergence of migrant women as subjects of governance developed later, influenced by the World Conference on Women in Beijing and through the emergence of migration governance. The IOM’s reappropriation of the category of protection made it possible to prioritize migrant women as subjects of governance and to deploy a narrative and interpretation that focuses on violence—especially the ubiquitous threat of sexual violence, “prostitution”, and human trafficking—as a totalizing experience of their mobility.

### *Final thoughts: only paradoxes to offer*

I began drafting this paper in 2022. Three years later, the Western world has taken a drastic turn, and the conclusions of this work seem to run counter to the political situation that is causing pain to women, diverse groups, migrants and refugees and feminism. When I began to develop this article, humanitarianism was emerging as one of the main forms of mobility control in the South American migration and border regime. At the same time, the “gender perspective” had an extraordinary presence in the multiple migration and border control agencies. The R4V Platform promoted actions in the field, training spaces, seminars and guides that placed gender at the center of so-called “good practices” in migration governance. In 2021, gender issues featured prominently at the South American Conference on Migration, and in 2022, Chile mainstreamed a gender approach within the National Migration Service.

Driven by the unprecedented presence of this narrative, I began to reconstruct the history that connected migration governance with gender. Contradictions soon emerged. My quest for critical inquiry came into tension with a deeply rooted political position: how could I criticize the “gender perspective” and the political translation of feminist ideals when I personally held them so dear?

The literature of great feminist thinkers, far from obstructing criticism, guided me along the way. It was not the first time I had raised these questions in the field of migration (as I explained in the introduction to this article). The critical force of decolonial, anti-racist and autonomous feminists gave me the impetus to question the “gender perspective” and analyze its intertwining with surreptitious forms of mobility control that reproduce patterns of colonial domination. Nonetheless, the hegemony

I set out to analyze—the joint production of humanitarianism and the institutionalization of gender in state and international agencies—appears to be crumbling today. The expansion of new right-wing movements and their rise to power in many countries in the Americas and around the world have greatly weakened the structures that I spent years studying. The contradictions I experienced at the beginning of this research are now returning with greater force. Is this the worst possible moment to publish this critique?

I wish these final reflections could offer a definitive answer, but that is not the case. As Joan Scott said, “I only have paradoxes to offer”. Even so, in this sea of uncertainty, besieged by the horror of the destructive power of the new right, I will venture a possible answer. Contrary to my initial impulse, I wonder: far from being the worst moment for this critique, might it not be precisely the most necessary? I think, for example, of the celebratory discourse that recently circulated about USAID (US Agency for International Development) following its dismantling. Faced with a brutal and punitive migration policy promoted by the Trump administration, progressive sectors now seem to be embracing an institution that—in the name of protection and development—has historically been an instrument of U.S. imperial power in the Global South. By hiding or softening criticism, is the right wing not gaining even more ground? Isn't it defending those institutions that, for years, have been shown to reproduce—explicitly or surreptitiously—colonial and racist power in our territories? If it is known that international cooperation has been an integral part of the externalization of borders by imperial states, is it now being defended because an even more destructive model is on the horizon?

This is not the first time that feminists have faced this dilemma. For example, I think of the work of Amy Higer (1999), who, in analyzing the feminist movement for sexual and reproductive rights in the USA, showed how the fear that “too much criticism” would favor conservatism ended up strengthening population control policies in the South. Perhaps critical knowledge can serve as our compass, preserving feminism's transformative and radical power. It will therefore be necessary to revisit our own history, learn from our ancestors, read, reconstruct and analyze the many experiences of struggle that have been erased from official history. Perhaps then, when the new right collapses—because it will, sooner rather than later—we will not channel our energy into defending or rebuilding structures of power that have subjugated us. Instead, we will be able to exploit our political imagination to create new worlds that reject racial, colonial, patriarchal and nationalist domination from the core.

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