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Article

## Negotiating Survival: Central American Refugee Women in Mexico and the Politics of Deservingness

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### Abstract

This article aims to analyse the difficulties Central American refugee women face when applying for refugee protection in Mexico and how they negotiate survival during this process. Claiming refugee protection is an important legal mechanism to ensure survival, but managing this process successfully is difficult, not only because of the bureaucratic complexities but also because of structural and political constraints. Research has addressed the difficulties migrant women face while in transit and in the United States, but there is less analysis on the limitations in accessing refugee protection in transit countries such as Mexico. Therefore, this article examines the main barriers women face by considering the social and spatial specifics of two different reception sites, the southern Mexican city of Tapachula and Mexico City, in the centre of the country. Drawing on ethnographic field research and interviews with refugees and practitioners, this research seeks to understand women's agency in dealing with adversity in reception contexts. Analysis showed that women need to engage in micro-level negotiations with gatekeepers in host communities to gain access to humanitarian assistance and social rights. In addition, it has showed that access to scarce resources depends on personal performance in terms of vulnerability and "deservingness." This demonstrates the complexities refugee women encounter in the local context, but also the role of institutional constraints to humanitarian attention in contrast to an integral understanding of rights. Furthermore, the obstacles faced by refugees and the generation of uncertainty and waiting must be analysed as a political strategy to prevent effective access to asylum in Mexico.

### Keywords

deservingness; gender; Mexico; refugee protection; social navigation; social rights; waiting

### Issue

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### 1. Introduction

The last decade has seen an increasing number of refugees fleeing widespread social violence in Central American countries and seeking asylum, mainly in the United States. As a result of US immigration and border control measures, Mexico has become another important asylum destination for people from all over the world, but especially for Central Americans fleeing violence in their countries. Yet, women and their families seeking refugee protection face many obstacles. These

challenges are related to existing limitations in access to basic social rights such as housing, healthcare, and work, as well as to weak institutional frameworks. Socially constructed differences such as race, class, gender, and sexual orientation, but also age and (dis)ability, play an important role. While a general discriminatory context against Central Americans prevails, women are particularly affected by gender-based and sexualised violence, but also symbolic violence that constructs them as racialised and sexualised others (e.g., Fernández-Casanueva, 2017; Frank-Vitale & Nuñez-Chaim, 2020).

While research has been conducted on asylum seekers at the United States border and in transit through Mexico, less attention has been paid to the complex process of reception within Mexico. This article attempts to understand the problems refugee women face when applying for refugee protection in Mexico and to analyse how they negotiate their rights and survival in these circumstances. The application process places refugees in a period of liminality without full rights, which can last more than a year. Therefore, the application for refugee protection in Mexico must be analysed as a twofold process by (a) making a legal claim to protection status before the Comisión Mexicana de Atención a Refugiados (COMAR) and (b) claiming humanitarian aid before international and domestic NGOs and institutions to be able to succeed with the legal claim. Humanitarian help is provided temporarily and at the discretion of national and international NGOs in cooperation with the UNHCR, yet it does not cover basic needs during the entire process. Field research was conducted in 2018 and 2019 in the southern Mexican town of Tapachula and the Mexico City area. As the analysis of the micro-level dynamics of claim-making showed, refugees need to negotiate their deservingness in complex interactions with gatekeepers at NGOs or other institutions. Additionally, opportunities for women to demand rights varied in the regional contexts of reception which makes it important to further analyse them. The analysis is grouped around three central aspects of the claim-making process: First, it examines women's access to information concerning the legal application process and the uncertainty about its outcomes; second, it analyses the negotiation of humanitarian aid at NGOs and shelters; third, it looks at the process of finding housing and work in host contexts. The research is based on a grounded theory approach as it examines the process of access to refugee rights and women's agency in coping with violence and exclusion over time. It considers the underlying institutional context as well as practices, interactions, and consequences from the perspective of the refugee women interviewed. The analysis shows that obtaining refugee protection can be viewed as a highly competitive process that pushes refugee women into impossible places, yet women negotiate their access to rights through their own agency. Furthermore, the production of uncertainty in the refugee application process is part of the actual border regime as it restricts effective access to asylum.

## 2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

The analysis of refugee women's experiences in reception contexts is based on an interdisciplinary framework that draws on various bodies of literature, such as forced migration and refugee research, feminist geography and critical migration research. Concerning gender and migration regimes, time and space are important variables that frame the reception context of

refugee women (Hyndman & Giles, 2011; Mountz, 2011). Feminist geography in forced migration and displacement has pointed to the importance of social space in analysing refugee contexts and embodied experiences. Sarah Mahler and Patricia Pessar have proposed an analysis of the "gendered geographies of power" (Mahler & Pessar, 2001). Their approach considers three dimensions of analysis to understand gendered agency. The first dimension refers to geographic scales, the second to social locations, and the third to geometries of power, a concept that draws on Massey's (1994/2001) notion to understand how gender operates simultaneously at multiple spatial and social levels (see Mahler & Pessar, 2001, pp. 445–446). While analysing mobility contexts, this also entails considering the social production of "otherness" from an intersectional perspective along the lines of inequalities such as race/ethnicity, gender, and class (Vigoya Viveros, 2016) and at different spatial levels (global, national, regional, and local, as well as interpersonal), which traverse women's embodied experiences (Lutz, 2015; Mahler & Pessar, 2001). Therefore, the analysis of the micropolitics of how women gain access to refugee protection through the negotiation of deservingness seeks to reflect on the particular social space where these negotiations take place.

From a legal point of view, the recognition of refugees is based on institutionalised procedures by which signatory states of the 1951 Geneva Refugee Convention determine who should receive protection and gain access to rights. According to the definition of the Convention, a refugee is already a refugee before this determination procedure and their official assignment to this legal category; therefore, they should have access to humanitarian help. This must be considered in the analysis since it examines the situation of people who have not yet received official recognition and therefore go through a stage of liminality which jeopardises their access to rights and survival. To analyse these processes of liminality—in Turner's sense, a state in between two social categories—I draw on concepts such as "deservingness" (van Oorschot, 2000; Willen, 2012), "legal non-existence," and "uncertainty" (Coutin, 2000), linked to the discretionary aspects of accessing rights.

As I describe the social process of accessing rights by people in mobility, I use the terms "refugee" and "migrant" interchangeably in this article. Also, studies on forced migration processes have been critical of the distinctive use of the terms "migrant" or "refugee," as those categories refer to different (not contradictory) aspects; persons fleeing violence can be migrants and refugees at the same time (Crawley & Skleparis, 2018; Hyndman & Giles, 2011). More than an existing difference, these categories often describe the social phenomena of inclusion and exclusion of outsiders in receiving societies (FitzGerald & Arar, 2018). Furthermore, the creation of distinctions and new categories has been discussed as a tool to limit access to social rights in receiving societies (Zetter, 2007).

In recent years, there has been a larger body of literature devoted to aspects of deservingness in everyday interactions between asylum claimants and staff at institutions providing access to rights—the so-called “street-level bureaucrats”—primarily in the context of welfare states (Ataç, 2019; Chauvin & Garcés-Mascreñas, 2014; Ratzmann & Sahraoui, 2021; Willen, 2012). I argue that these analyses should be extended to consider the situation of refugees in countries of transit in the Global South, which receive increasingly high numbers of refugees due to the externalisation of borders from the Global North to the Global South and where, as in the case of Mexico, access to benefits and rights is discretionary and contested, mediated mostly by NGOs and international organisations. Staff at these institutions facilitates access to basic rights and humanitarian help in interpersonal relations and can be seen as gatekeepers, like those “street-level bureaucrats” described by Lipsky (2010), who evaluate their needs and their “deservingness.” Negotiations at the interpersonal level are influenced by existing preconceptions of social differences such as gender, race, class, and sexual orientation, imbricated in power relations (Fassin, 2011; Foucault, 1994) and the social construction of a categorical distinction between “deserving” refugees and “undeserving” migrants. Furthermore, a helpful concept to understand the agency of people experiencing conditions of liminality and uncertainty is that of “social navigation” (Vigh, 2010), which aims to describe how people interact with highly dynamic or “moving environments.” Aside from posing a metaphor, this concept intends to connect the experience of mobility in circumstances of uncertainty and insecurity with the coping strategies of forced migrants. It also bears considering the complex social interactions that take place as migrants and refugees engage in “social negotiations” with others and massage their relations with stakeholders in the field to access help (Schapendonk, 2018, p. 666). Drawing on these research bodies, this study aims to look at the underlying logic of the social exclusion of refugees in Mexico, but also at the agency of refugee women when confronting these processes.

### 3. Context: Recent Changes to the Migration Regime and Receiving Contexts

The present analysis is framed by a context of ongoing securitisation of migration along the Southern US border and in Mexico. This process is characterised by the externalisation of borders and migration management strategies to Mexico and Central America, which deters migrants and refugees from reaching safe countries of asylum. While Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala are among the top ten nations with the most asylum applications worldwide (UNHCR, 2018), most refugees from these countries seek asylum in the United States. The reasons behind their flight are manifold. Overall crime and social violence cause most asylum requests,

while women with children additionally escape forms of gender-based violence in their countries of origin (Carcedo, 2010; Medrano, 2016). Yet, migration securitisation itself contributes to escalating gender-based and sexual violence against women and children in transit countries such as Mexico (Comisión Interamericana de Derechos Humanos, 2013; REDODEM, 2018).

Mexico is a signatory of the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol, of the Cartagena Protocol (1984) as well as Plan Mexico (2004) and Plan Brazil (2010), and has incorporated the latest standards on refugee protection in its legislation, such as the 2014 Refugee Act and Regulations (*Ley Sobre Refugiados, Protección Complementaria y Asilo Político* and the *Reglamento*; see Barichello, 2016; Kneebone, 2016). Yet, as has been reported by NGOs and human rights groups, refugees are often not granted rights by government institutions and law enforcement is very arbitrary (Amnesty International, 2018; Brewer et al., 2022; Sin Fronteras, 2016). Furthermore, Mexico, a middle-income country marked by high levels of social inequality, does not have a social policy directed toward asylum seekers. Instead, the Mexican government has cooperated with the UNHCR and with different national and international NGOs to attend to the rising inflow of refugees over the last several years. However, as analyses of local arrangements proved, there are obstacles to inter-institutional coordination for humanitarian aid.

Until 2020, Tapachula and Mexico City were two of four places where refugees could file asylum applications before the COMAR—the governmental institution that processes refugee applications. Tapachula is a southern town of 350,000 inhabitants about 60 km from the Guatemalan border, while Mexico City has about 25 million inhabitants in its metropolitan area. Both are shaped by the presence of numerous stakeholders associated with migration and refugee administration: government institutions like the COMAR and the Mexican Institute for Migration (INM), as well as local, international, and transnational NGOs. Tapachula is the first urban space most refugees and migrants traverse on their routes. Its labour market draws heavily on migrant labour, yet it is strongly segmented and segregated by gender and ethnicity. Most Central American women only find highly stigmatised jobs, such as sex work under exploitative conditions (Fernández-Casanueva, 2009, 2017). Many refugees fleeing violence do not feel safe in Tapachula due to the proximity to Central America and the presence of transnationally operating criminal groups. Compared to Tapachula, Mexico City boasts a bigger infrastructure and a much larger labour market, but transportation and housing are expensive. Affordable housing is only available in the extremely dangerous outskirts of the urban area. Often, people who file asylum claims in Mexico City have already faced clandestine transit along dangerous routes through the Southern Mexican territory. Many of them take the risk, hoping that waiting time and living conditions will be better than in Tapachula, where most

asylum applications are filed resulting in an even bigger backlog. Still, each space poses its own challenges for refugee women, who endure long administrative procedures in very hostile environments.

#### 4. Methods

The study draws on an ethnographic approach and 21 in-depth interviews with refugee women at migrant/refugee shelters in Tapachula and Mexico City. Of these interviewees, ten came from Honduras, nine from El Salvador, and two from Nicaragua. I was also able to conduct follow-up interviews and conversations with refugees, which helped me to grasp the development of the process over time. Refugees were approached at shelters and NGOs, where they received accommodation, food, and advice. Interviewees were provided with information about the study and asked for their informed consent to participate. Additionally, the study draws on six interviews with experts from non-governmental and international organisations who became a second source of information. Other sources were reports by NGOs and other materials on the current context of migration routes and asylum. The study focussed on refugees who presented their applications voluntarily and not after being detained by immigration authorities (the INM). The constant and quick changes migrants and refugees are subject to in Mexico influence their individual circumstances, but also make looking for refugee protection a very fragmented experience, with variations based on place, time, and specific situations. During fieldwork, great variability was observed in terms of the conditions people face. For example, some people interviewed in Tapachula in August 2018, who decided to abandon their asylum process in Mexico, crossed the border into the United States and still managed to apply for refugee protection; those who entered the country in early March 2019 may already have been affected by the Migrant Protection Protocols, also known as the “Remain in Mexico” policy, a policy introduced by the US government in 2019 that requires asylum seekers to wait for their asylum process to be complete on Mexican territory (Gandini, 2020). Unpredictable and changing border enforcement practices contributed to uncertainty and the constant worsening of reception conditions. Therefore, this study cannot speak of the situation in general but highlights two realities at different sites in the period between 2018 and 2019.

#### 5. Women’s Experiences Accessing Refugee Protection in Mexico

Women on the run, most of whom are mothers with children, must negotiate survival in a complex series of interactions to find help and a new safe space to live. Seeking refugee protection and accessing rights through a formal application is a process that evolves over time and depends on the circumstances in the reception contexts.

As Landolt and Goldring (2019, p. 853) argue, the decision to claim rights depends on the conditions migrants face, but also on social interactions and social learning. As the interviews with women showed, their decisions on claim-making depend on the stage of their flight and the knowledge of rules, laws, and local conditions they had gathered during their journey and from previous migration events. Taking into account the peculiarities of the Mexican context, claiming refugee protection can be analysed as a dual process: (a) as a legal entitlement before state institutions and (b) as social entitlement, that is, claiming social rights while still awaiting recognition as a refugee. The focus here is on the second aspect of how women learn about rights and negotiate help to be able to succeed with their legal claims, once they have applied for refugee protection in Mexico. The term “negotiation” is used to show how access to rights and humanitarian aid is not granted but must be achieved by convincing others of their deservingness in a context where humanitarian resources are scarce and subject to discretion.

##### 5.1. Access to Information, Waiting, and Uncertainty

In the early 2000s, Mexico was primarily a transit country for refugees and migrants; a situation which has started to change only in the last decade. The preference to reach the United States was also evident during fieldwork, as most of the women interviewed had not planned to remain in Mexico. Their goal was to get to the United States, where they would use their transnational ties with acquaintances and family members to find jobs and housing. However, to reach the US border on clandestine routes, financial aid is necessary, but also scarce. Some respondents decided to apply for refugee protection after learning that their relatives could not send the resources they needed to traverse Mexico. But also, violence against undocumented migrants on migration routes is notorious (Amnesty International, 2018; Comisión Interamericana de Derechos Humanos, 2013). Most interviewees were not aware of their right to refugee protection in Mexico before fleeing. J., a Salvadoran mother of nine, explained:

I wanted to get to the border and turn myself into immigration in the United States, so they would help me when they saw R’s (her son) situation. I know they help disabled children a lot, but here...? I have also received support here. They [the human rights centre] told me it would be better to get my papers in order. They started to tell me about UNHCR, COMAR, and how UNHCR helped women. So, I thought: “Ok, I’ll get my papers because, if I leave just like that, I would be risking my and my son’s life.” (J., Tapachula, 2018)

J. received advice from a human rights organisation where she looked for help to support herself and her

son. As her child had special needs, she was looking for a way to assure his survival by securing food and the necessary medical attention. When entering Mexican territory, most women bound for the United States are caught between the threat of deportation by authorities and the multiple dangers encountered on clandestine migration routes. Travelling with children increases their visibility and makes them ready targets for kidnappers or criminal groups. Therefore, most of them go through a social learning process about the dangers and alternatives of their transit, such as the right to seek refugee protection in Mexico. Some hear about it from other migrants at migrant shelters, some receive legal counselling from NGOs. Others have previously been deported by the INM and have learnt from the experience. Information and knowledge about rights and procedures are key factors in accessing refugee protection, but they are not readily available and no one can prepare women for the uncertainty that the process creates.

During the application process, women experience significant stress due to the unpredictable waiting time and outcome of their application. To keep up with their daily needs, they must develop strategies to negotiate with various actors and institutions that will help them cover their expenses in order to survive. In 2019, the waiting period for refugee status had increased to one year due to the high number of cases, although by law, the decision was supposed to be made in 45 business days. The number of asylum applications has increased steadily in recent years, but the budget and capacity of the authorities have not (Secretaría de Gobernación [SEGOB] & COMAR, 2019; Ureste, 2019). Due to the lack of humanitarian aid and the difficult conditions, women were worried about their future. As one interviewee put it:

So, they explained to me that refuge, the resolution to the refuge application is granted after fourteen months, which I do not intend to endure, it is very hard. So, I thought: "I'm going to Mexico City; I will get my papers more quickly"—it was worse! But I don't know whether the COMAR authorities say that to test our limits, to see how much we will put up with....Their duty is also to tell us the truth, what the process is like, what is done, how much....Step by step because...you know full well a day is time you lose, which you never get back to do better things. But they don't understand this. They just tell you: "Wait there." How are we supposed to wait? Our situation is not regular. How are we going to work? Where are we going to live? The shelter only takes you in for one or two months, so what about the rest of the year? (A., Mexico City, 2019)

This excerpt summarises the troubling impact of this uncertainty and waiting on applicants. After all, asserting rights for people who have fled their home countries is a matter of survival, and basic needs such as shelter and food must be met to comply with administra-

tive procedures. At the same time, refugees have limited access to work, as they are only granted a formal work permit when their application has been approved. However, they are advised by the UNHCR to look for work. Additionally, applying for refugee protection is a time-consuming process, as applicants had to show up at the COMAR office every week and sign their petition, a form of follow-up that not only limits refugees' physical mobility but also their time allocation. In this sense, queuing and waiting is a way of passing the cost of social (and legal) services onto clients and assuming they have nothing better to do with their time (Lipsky, 2010, p. 95).

### *5.2. Deservingness: Negotiating Access to Food, Shelter, and Healthcare*

During the application process, most women rely on help from humanitarian institutions and financial aid from the UNHCR refugee program to support them while they wait. Help is provided step by step. Women receive first attention in shelters, where they obtain basic services, such as legal counselling, advice on finding work, psychological and medical attention, training, etc. Later, monetary help is available for families for one to three months and provided directly by the UNHCR (in the case of Tapachula) or by the local cooperating NGO in charge (in the case of Mexico City). While women stay in shelters, many services are provided optionally, and women are evaluated by the shelter staff in terms of their adherence to rules, participation in daily routines, and social engagement. Collaborating in everyday chores in the shelter contributes to showing that one is not in a state of need because of laziness, but because of "bad luck" (e.g., van Oorschot, 2000). These informal negotiations impact, for instance, the time refugee women can stay at the shelter. In some places, the length of the stay is limited to several days or weeks, while in others it may be extended to up to three months. Since most women lack the financial resources to pay rent, they try to negotiate extensions and adapt their strategies to navigate these circumstances and the social norms imposed by the context. As an interviewee in Tapachula explained:

On the eleventh of this month, they told me that I had to leave the shelter because they cannot keep people for long. In my case, they are giving me preferential consideration because of the baby. Because R. [her son] is a special case and...they cannot just throw me out into the street.

Interviewer: Can't you go back to the shelter afterwards? Is that not a possibility?

Well, yes, but the director is always reminding me that I have so many days left and that I can't stay here long and there are other people who need it more than me, so....Yes, the truth is that it hurts sometimes. (J., Tapachula, 2018)

Another woman in Mexico City stated:

My father always helps them [the shelter] in the gardens. They didn't pay him, but he went to help them every day. So, the engineer [a volunteer at the shelter] had maybe already talked to my father and asked me...whether I wanted to help him work...so we went and started helping him with that. (M., Mexico City, 2019)

Women rely on contributing to the shelter's chores and accepting imposed rules to obtain housing. But they are also aware they need to rely on others to get by and build new networks. This shows how they engage in "active waiting" (Brun & Fábos, 2015) as a process of social navigation to access other possibilities for help. Even though women who find shelter feel lucky since there is high demand and very little space available, some shelter rules put women under additional pressure. One example is a lack of privacy and a space to rest during the day. Yet, rules in this regard were tough, and the staff was trained to enforce them. As a shelter employee explained:

In general, at ten-thirty in the morning, we close the rooms, all the bedrooms, to prevent people from staying there and to prevent things from getting lost, right? So, rooms are not open until after dinner, which is at eight-thirty or nine in the evening....Rooms are not open unless there is something very, very exceptional going on. (Attendant at a shelter, Mexico City 2019)

These rules affect women and their children who already suffer from the effects of the violence they experienced before and during their flight. Some women had been harassed by gang members, enduring excruciating physical and sexual violence and receiving threats on their and their children's lives. They all showed negative physical and psychological sequelae, which worsens in shelters due to the tense and restrictive environment imposed on residents. The space is controlled through closed-circuit cameras, doors are closed, and people had to sign in when entering and leaving (in Mexico City) or were registered by guards. While shelters provide a temporary place to rest and essential services, this space is still uncertain and contested. Complaints are seen critically, and women fear seeming disobedient or ungrateful. The staff members I spoke to argued that these rules were enforced to avoid problems with care receivers and to keep them busy to prevent them from getting depressed or affected by the difficulties they experience during application proceedings. As the same attendant explained:

There are cases when they say: "They will give me the resettlement." Then they go to their appointment and come back all disheartened. "What happened?"

"No, they say I'm missing this or that." So, then they do "this or that," a health check or something like that, supposedly the last thing they had to do, and say: "Yes, I did it." [But then it is:] "No, now you have to do other things." This means their experience with the application takes a very, very long time. There is high demand and little institutional capacity, so it is difficult to give a positive answer to all these cases, right? This is why the whole model is important, it is important to prevent these results from causing depression or a delicate condition, and instead, we have to look for alternatives.

This shows how staff at shelters and NGOs get involved in the worries of their "care receivers," yet they need to see progress for their effort and decide who gets some of the few resources available. My analysis found that "docility" (shown through respect for rules and collaboration), gratitude, and perceived neediness are three important criteria for these decisions (e.g., van Oorschot, 2000). This is also similar to Lipsky's finding that "compliant clients are treated more generously than demanding clients" (Lipsky, 2010, p. 36). While I cannot offer an exhaustive analysis of these interactions here, it is important to show that these relationships are complex and influenced by awareness of the scarcity of resources and the absence of effective access to social rights for everybody. Also, it illustrates how the violence of selective inclusion and exclusion processes by NGOs and other institutions is normalised. How staff at shelters and NGOs deal with these structural limitations also depends on the institutional development and their preparation and motivation, which varies widely from place to place. Some of the shelters have begun working with state authorities to accommodate vulnerable groups while they wait to be sent back to their home country by state authorities as an alternative to detention. While the shelter in Mexico City had professionally trained personnel and more resources compared to others, the financial situation in most of these places is delicate, as many depend on donations. This also impacts their capacity to provide integral social services and their responses to people in need, as these micro-level negotiations in interactions are also marked by unequal power relations, symbolic violence and abuse. In Tapachula, for example, an interviewee who was travelling with her young child reported being sexually harassed by the shelter's caretaker. A situation that additionally endangered her and her son's lives as they escaped pursuit by organised crime groups (Willers, 2020).

But also outside of shelters, women had to negotiate access to rights such as healthcare and medical attention. Even though Mexican asylum law foresees access to social rights like education and emergency healthcare, these are mostly ineffective (see Vera Espinoza et al., 2021, p. 17). Refugees depend on non-governmental organisations as gatekeepers to gain access to public services, which then again implies queuing and waiting.

As an interviewee recounted:

I am tired of telling them over and over, of filling out forms...and they not helping me. They say they will call, but they never do. (M. R., Mexico City, 2019)

M., who urgently needed surgery due to an infection in her leg, was advised by the hospital to first go to her embassy to get a passport, as an official form of identification was needed before she could receive care. Women interviewed also reported that a common argument made to them for example when looking for medical attention at hospitals was that not even Mexicans would get institutional attention when needed—a phrase I also heard repeatedly during my fieldwork by service providers and NGO members. This shows that refugees who look for access to public services are perceived to compete with the local population for scarce resources. Such a reflection further summarises caregivers' resignation to barriers to accessing rights and hierarchies to access. These rationales of exclusion, forcing and imposing rules on refugees, are manifestations of the micropolitics through which the actors on the ground take part in the *governmentality* of migration, as it is part of the internal bordering that affects people after entering the territory (Ratzmann & Sahraoui, 2021). The idea that refugees must reciprocate, return, or exchange aid for work as dependents in shelters is consistent with the ideology of humanitarianism described by Ticktin (2006), which aims to relieve the pain of the suffering and is not based on rights that allow making claims, but on mercy. A strategy based on moral imperatives, that “fills in for the failure of political rights discourses and practices” and can have brutal exclusionary effects (Ticktin, 2006, p. 2).

### 5.3. Access to Labour and Housing

When their time in the shelter is up, women are told to look for a job and a place to rent. They then receive financial assistance under UNHCR's cash transfer program, but only for one to three months. Yet, for refugee women, mostly single parents with children, the combination of achieving gainful employment, childcare and bureaucratic asylum procedures results in a problem that is almost impossible to solve. Furthermore, in reception contexts where they cannot rely on their social networks and their surroundings are not safe, women are very concerned about their prospects in Mexico:

After three months, the help ends...and I think [about] what I'm going to do if I can't find work. Then, the first thing they ask for is documents, that is, the documents they request, and if I don't have them and look for an informal job, the first thing they do is discriminate against you and it's not the same payment. (E., Mexico City, 2019)

Another interviewee conveyed:

So yes, and they [the UNHCR] gave me that money and since it's very dangerous here and with everything that happened, the children couldn't go to school. The truth is I'm scared to leave the girl in school because they kidnap so many children. I would have to keep an eye on her, I would have to be there to drop her off and pick her up but if you work you can't do that. (M., Mexico City, 2019)

Their situation in Mexico is complicated by the lack of reliable contacts and job opportunities that would help them settle and access housing and an income that would ensure their survival. All interviewees reported that they faced great difficulty in finding a job that would cover their expenses. Women reported being asked for papers even for the lowest-paying jobs, like cleaning. In Tapachula, a labour market strongly segregated by gender, ethnicity and nationality, the only work offered to Central American women was work in bars combined with sex services. Many employers refuse to give them jobs even after they have been granted refugee status, they do not recognise their documents, or argue that they will be fined if they employ people without work permits. Even though Central American women speak the same language and Mexico has a vast informal labour market, social prejudices, and the social dynamics of othering limit refugees' rights and place them in asymmetric relationships in the host society. The social construction of Central American women as racialised and sexualised others, or of men as violent and dangerous troublemakers, contributes to their exclusion in Mexico (e.g., Fernández-Casanueva, 2017; Frank-Vitale & Nuñez-Chaim, 2020). They experience a constant need to prove something, to show documents where others would not have to, and a requirement to fulfil impossible tasks. While building networks with the local community is a crucial survival strategy in Latin America (e.g., Lomnitz, 1975), it takes time and is not achieved within three months. The complexity of the refugee application and the hostile environment negatively affect women's sense of security and their hope for a new life in Mexico. These aspects become a strong reason for women to move on and try their luck in the United States, resulting in numerous dropped applications throughout 2018 and 2019 (SEGOB & COMAR, 2019).

## 6. Discussion: Deservingness, Uncertainty, Waiting

The analysis looked at the difficulties faced by women who claim asylum in Mexico to understand the structural and political limitations to effective claim-making at the micro-level of interactions, and to highlight women's agency in this process. However, it also aimed to understand these processes in the context of ongoing securitisation and border enforcement in the North American Migration Corridor, as the conditions faced by refugees



are part of internal bordering practices. The findings of this study suggest three aspects that negatively impact women seeking refugee protection in Mexico. First, the assertion of legal claims for refugee protection involves long waiting times and uncertainty about the outcome. Second, the basic needs of refugee women and their families during this period were not adequately addressed by institutional actors to endure the wait and uncertainty and ensure survival. Third, negotiations of deservingness are complex and intertwined with unequal power relations at the micro-level of interactions, which opens the door to further victimisation.

As a strategy to counteract impediments and pursue their legal claims, women engage in complex interactions to negotiate their deservingness with staff at NGOs, migrant shelters, and hospitals who serve as “street-level bureaucrats” and resource gatekeepers. This is problematic as the need to negotiate social rights rather than be able to count on reliable resources creates the potential for further victimisation of women and their families. Yet, in these contexts, women have few choices. On the one hand, they need to prove their deservingness through enacting a compliant, grateful, and passive victimhood, while on the other they need to be active and resist if they want to survive. This so-called “frame discrepancy” (see Chauvin & Garcés-Mascareñas, 2014; Ratzmann & Sahraoui, 2021) of reception contexts puts refugees in an impossible place, having to perform their victimhood versus enacting their survival strategies, such as being mobile and moving on to better places. Additionally, by being mobile, people risk becoming suspicious because of their excessive agency in the eye of nation-states (see Ticktin, 2006). As people are required to stay put, their mobility could be made a reason for barring them from asylum not only in Mexico but also in the United States (Chishti & Bolter, 2020).

A look at local application conditions showed that neither Tapachula nor Mexico City provided adequate services and safe spaces for refugee women and families to meet their basic needs. Structural and political violence also became tangible through the consequences of waiting on women’s health and hope. Still, as the analysis of women’s coping with difficulties showed, it is important to consider the numerous aspects of multiple conditionalities in local contexts, as those may vary significantly (Landolt & Goldring, 2019). Migrant shelters, which offer the first place of recovery, have evolved from short-stay shelters for transit migrants to shelters for people forced to stay put and claim their rights in Mexico. This poses new challenges to these institutions and the services offered to their target population as they face limitations in funding and human resources. Even though conditions have been improving since 2013, when I first did research in the region, the supply of aid has not kept pace with the demand. In 2018 and 2019, families and single mothers were not able to find the help they needed. Instead, people in need had to compete for the little help available. While the nation-state is evading its respon-

sibility to create policies that allow for the social inclusion of refugees in reception contexts, NGOs and shelters are left with the responsibility of providing humanitarian help. Yet, without disregarding the crucial role of NGOs and shelters in Mexico in the provision of basic aid to migrants and refugees, a closer look at the complex constellations of stakeholders in the current migration regime is necessary. This also means giving space to “register the many little lines of force that run in multiple directions, constituting the border regime as a complex and dynamic multiplicity” (Walters, 2015, p. 7). It implies addressing its actors critically, those who take part in the everyday interactions of the social field of immigration and refugee regimes, and disentangling the complex and often contradictory ways in which humanitarianism and migration control are linked in the experiences of migrants and refugees.

While mobility is a form of agency to confront violence (Willers, 2020), waiting has been discussed as a form of enforced immobility and governmentality of “hope” or “uncertainty” (Biehl, 2015, p. 69). In this sense, keeping people waiting in uncertainty has been examined as an important bordering practice, but the lack of access to social rights has received less attention and has been problematised mostly in the context of European welfare states (Ratzmann & Sahraoui, 2021). Yet not only the waiting, but also associated circumstances have negative effects on refugees, and severely restrict access to rights in Mexico. Reception contexts reinforce the dynamics of re-victimisation and social exclusion, putting women and their children at serious risk of enduring violence and exploitation and becoming a target of organised crime. The generation of unease as a form of “politics of discomfort” is a crucial tool for coercing and disciplining refugees (Darling, 2011). The obstacles faced by refugees are part of it and should receive more attention as a form of internal bordering in the context of externalisation of the US borders to countries of transit.

The highly dynamic field of migration policies and enforcement observed in Mexico over the last few years was also tangible during the empirical research work conducted for this article. While data was being analysed for this article, the Covid-19 crisis exacerbated underlying aspects. Pandemic control measures taken in 2020 led to the temporary closing of borders and the suspension of services, including the shutdown of asylum receptions at the US border under Title 42 of the US Code. In Mexico, migrant and refugee shelters were temporarily closed, refugee applications paused, and working opportunities disappeared (see Gandini, 2020; Vera Espinoza et al., 2021). While it is not possible to include the full array of implications into the analysis at this point, previous fieldwork showed the main lines of exclusion and problematic processes of re-victimisation encountered by refugee women and their families in the current migration regime.

## 7. Conclusion

The present analysis has shown that, under the current circumstances, refugees in Mexico cannot meet their basic needs while awaiting their refugee application. In the context of ongoing migration enforcement and externalisation of borders in the North American migration regime, structural violence, discrimination, and exclusion in receiving contexts constitute barriers which prevent refugees from effectively accessing protection. Refugee women encounter a multitude of symbolic, institutional, and political forms of violence which make it almost impossible to succeed with their asylum claims in Mexico. The findings show the social context was extremely impactful for people being able to claim rights. The formal right to protection alone is not sufficient to make rights substantive and raises questions about the reliability of these populations to social rights. Moreover, it shows that not only the Mexican south, with its extremely unequal labour markets and poor job opportunities but also Mexico City offer few sustainable possibilities for women. When women arrive with their families, they engage in a process of “active waiting” (Bruns & Fábos, 2015), to look to re-establish their “normal lives” despite the difficulties they encounter. They try to rebuild their social ties and engage in relations with others that can provide them with helpful information. Yet, it is the unpredictability of the outcome that makes seeking asylum in Mexico a risky and expensive endeavour, affordable only to those who have the means or have nothing to lose. Under the current circumstances, refugee protection in Mexico does not offer an “enduring solution” for most of the women interviewed. This raises questions about the role of the nation-state and the intentionality of putting in practice seemingly contradictory policies, such as setting up legal frameworks without providing effective protection systems for refugees or while producing uncertainty and waiting that hinder effective access to asylum (Biehl, 2015; Hyndman & Giles, 2011). It is, therefore, important to understand the findings in the overall context of ongoing changes in migration and refugee regimes which systematically try to prevent people from accessing effective asylum (e.g., Chisthi & Bolter, 2020).

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## Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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