

Beyond the border: diplomacy, cooperation and human rights in child migration

Más allá de la frontera: diplomacia, cooperación y derechos humanos en la migración infantil

María José Villegas Sánchez^{a*}  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3183-2876>
Nuria Cordero Ramos^a  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9875-1042>

^a Universidad Pablo de Olavide, Seville, Spain, e-mail: mjvsanchez@outlook.com, ncorram@upo.es

Abstract

This article analyzes the situation of unaccompanied children in migration at the United States-Mexico border between 2019 and 2025 through the lenses of humanitarian diplomacy, international cooperation and human rights. Using a qualitative critical-interpretative methodology, it examines bilateral diplomatic frameworks, institutional actors and migration governance mechanisms affecting child protection. The analysis draws on international legal instruments, public policies and reports issued by governmental and non-governmental organizations. The findings reveal persistent tensions between humanitarian discourse and migration control practices, showing how border security priorities frequently override the best interests of the child. Structural protection gaps derived from institutional fragmentation and limited coordination are identified. The article contributes a critical framework for rethinking migration governance from a rights-based perspective centered on dignity, justice and child participation. The study is limited by its reliance on secondary sources.

Keywords: child migration, human rights, humanitarian diplomacy, international cooperation, United States-Mexico.

Resumen

Este artículo analiza la situación de los menores no acompañados en contextos de migración en la frontera entre Estados Unidos y México durante el periodo 2019-2025, a partir de la diplomacia humanitaria, la cooperación internacional y los derechos humanos. Mediante una metodología cualitativa de enfoque crítico-interpretativo, se examinan marcos diplomáticos bilaterales, actores institucionales y mecanismos de gobernanza migratoria. El análisis se sustenta en instrumentos jurídicos internacionales, políticas públicas y reportes de organismos gubernamentales y organizaciones especializadas. Los resultados evidencian tensiones persistentes entre los discursos humanitarios y las prácticas de control migratorio, así como brechas estructurales de protección derivadas de

Received on August 17, 2025.

Accepted on February 9, 2026.

Published on February 26, 2026.

* Corresponding author: María José Villegas Sánchez. E-mail: mjvsanchez@outlook.com



This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Atribución 4.0 Internacional.

CITATION: Villegas Sánchez, M. J. & Cordero Ramos, N. (2026). Beyond the border: diplomacy, cooperation and human rights in child migration. *Estudios Fronterizos*, 27, Article e180. <https://doi.org/10.21670/ref.2602180>

la fragmentación institucional. El artículo aporta un marco crítico para repensar la gobernanza migratoria desde una perspectiva centrada en la dignidad, la justicia y la participación infantil. La principal limitación radica en el uso de fuentes secundarias.

Palabras clave: migración infantil, derechos humanos, diplomacia humanitaria, cooperación internacional, Estados Unidos-México.

Introduction

The migration of unaccompanied children and adolescents is currently one of the most urgent, complex and persistent challenges in the border region shared by Mexico and the United States. This phenomenon, far from being an isolated or sporadic episode, directly reflects the convergence of deep-rooted structural factors, including persistent poverty, widespread socio-political violence, accumulated regional inequality and the lack of real opportunities in countries of origin, particularly in the “Triángulo Norte de Centroamérica” (Northern Triangle of Central America). In this context, the shared border has become a highly conflictive and politicized space where bilateral diplomatic agendas, increasingly restrictive national security strategies and growing demands for humanitarian protection intersect. This situation calls for innovative, inclusive and human-centered policy approaches at both national and regional levels.

Within this complex regional scenario, children in context of migration constitute a particularly vulnerable population. Their migratory trajectories are marked by cumulative risks, including immigration detention, forced family separation, exposure to trafficking networks, prolonged educational exclusion and institutionalized violence. Such practices generate a condition of structural precariousness that calls into question the international human rights commitments assumed by both States.

According to U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) data, more than 152 000 encounters with unaccompanied children were recorded at the U.S. southern border in fiscal year 2022, primarily involving children from Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador (CBP, 2023). In parallel, Mexican border cities such as Tijuana have experienced a sustained increase in the arrival of unaccompanied minors, many of whom remain without effective access to protection mechanisms, reflecting the systemic insufficiency of existing institutional responses.

This article departs from the premise that unaccompanied child migration cannot be understood solely through a humanitarian or welfare-based lens. It adopts a critical by its own methodology:

This article aims to adopt a qualitative, critical-interpretative approach, based on the analysis of legal instruments, public policies and references to specialized academic literature. This approach allows for a systematic examination of the relationship between humanitarian discourse and current, concrete practices in child migration management during the period 2019-2025.

Additionally, the article engages with recent institutional evaluations (2021-2025) specializing in migrant children, child protection and migration governance in Mexico and the United States. This corpus includes critical analyses of non-detention policies, the restitution of rights, and border externalization, as well as references to reports by national and international organizations documenting the differentiated impact of these policies on unaccompanied girls, boys and adolescents. This engagement

allows the analysis to go beyond an exclusively normative approach and anchor it in contemporary, realistic debates on the effective implementation of the best interests of the child principle in contexts of forced mobility (Migration Policy Institute, n. d.; Sistema Nacional de Protección Integral de Niñas, Niños y Adolescentes [Sipinna], 2023; Unicef, 2023).

From this perspective, the article puts forward as its central hypothesis that humanitarian diplomacy and international cooperation mechanisms between Mexico and the United States, although discursively framed within a human rights approach, operate in practice as administrative containment devices for unaccompanied migrant children, subordinating the best interests of the child to priorities of migration control and border security. This hypothesis is treated as a testable analytical proposition rather than a purely normative claim.

From this analytical standpoint, the article argues that state and interstate responses continue to be structured around logics of containment, fragmentation and guardianship, rather than comprehensive and sustained protection. This tension reveals not only an institutional crisis in existing response mechanisms, but also a deeper ethical challenge that calls for a structural rethinking of migration governance based on the dignity, agency and rights of migrant children.

Consequently, the article is organized into three analytical sections. The first examines humanitarian diplomacy within United States-Mexico bilateral relations; the second analyzes international cooperation mechanisms and institutional actors involved in child migration governance; and the third explores the contributions of critical human rights theory to the construction of a child-centered migration policy grounded in social justice. Together, these sections empirically assess whether humanitarian and cooperative frameworks function as effective protection mechanisms or whether they reproduce administrative logics of migration containment.

Humanitarian diplomacy and bilateral relations regarding unaccompanied migrant children

In the current context of interdependent globalization, humanitarian crises transcend national borders and require political responses that prioritize respect for human rights. This situation forces us to rethink the role of diplomatic relations, especially in complex scenarios such as unaccompanied child migration at the United States-Mexico border.

From Rabotnikof's (1993) perspective, this type of problem reveals the need to revitalize the public sphere as a space for deliberation, collective articulation and co-responsibility between state and non-state actors. In this sense, diplomatic relations cease to be merely instrumental and become fundamental channels for the defense of rights and the building of consensus around shared values.

Humanitarian diplomacy, understood as the use of dialogue and negotiation to persuade political actors to respect international humanitarian law (Minear & Smith, 2007), acquires a central role in this scenario. Particularly in the case of unaccompanied minors, diplomacy must respond not only to state imperatives but also to ethical and normative obligations that transcend borders. This vision is in line with the proposal of Rabotnikof (1993), who conceives the public sphere as a sphere of political dispute

where senses of justice, community and belonging are constructed. The defense of these minors implies not only protecting them physically but also making them visible as subjects of rights within a diplomatic narrative that has traditionally prioritized sovereign interests over universal principles.

The bilateral relationship between Mexico and the United States has been marked by a constant tension between cooperation and asymmetry (Mena Iturralde, 2017). While there are frameworks for dialogue and engagement, in practice a logic of “shared responsibility” has prevailed, which in many cases places Mexico as a “buffer country” in the face of pressures from the United States to contain migration (Massey et al., 2016). This situation generates ethical dilemmas for Mexican diplomacy, which must reconcile the principles of human rights protection with the geopolitical demands of the neighboring country.

Beyond the discursive differences between administrations, U.S. migration policy has maintained a structural orientation toward border control and deterrence, which conditions the scope of humanitarian protection for unaccompanied minors.

During Donald Trump’s administration (2017-2021, and resumed in 2025), U.S. migration policy was characterized by a coercive, security- and containment-based approach. The implementation of measures such as the systematic separation of families, the prolonged detention of minors and the tightening of conditions to access asylum reflects a vision that conceives migration as a threat to state sovereignty (Grados Córdova, 2025). The reactivation of these policies in his second term reinforces a logic of deterrence that leaves little room for humanitarian considerations.

In contrast, the Joe Biden administration (2021-2024) introduced a human rights-focused narrative, reversing some of the most regressive policies. It strengthened family reunification programs, expanded the use of humanitarian parole and sought to improve reception conditions for unaccompanied minors. However, these measures also faced structural limitations and operational restrictions, such as rules suspending the right to asylum in the face of increased migratory flows (Gamboa, 2025).

In Mexico, the institutional framework for the protection of unaccompanied migrant children is characterized by a structural division between care and decision-making. While child protection bodies provide temporary assistance, the authorities with competence over migration, asylum and return operate primarily under administrative and control logics. This institutional fragmentation generates a persistent gap between formal rights recognition and their effective implementation, subordinating the best interests of the child to migration management priorities (Cámara de Diputados del H. Congreso de la Unión, 2024; Sipinna, 2023).

In parallel, the Mexican State has introduced regulatory and institutional adjustments aimed at strengthening child protection in migration contexts. However, these formal advances have not translated into consistent and effective rights restitution for unaccompanied migrant minors, due to persistent interinstitutional fragmentation and the subordination of protection mechanisms to migration management priorities (Human Rights Watch, 2024; Sipinna, 2023).

An example of this is the conditions observed in border cities such as Tijuana, where thousands of migrants, including a growing number of unaccompanied minors, live in precarious, improvised and highly vulnerable settlements, waiting to cross the border into the United States or after having been deported in massive operations. Tijuana, a city bordering San Diego, is today a contradictory symbol: on the one hand,

it is a space of transit, hope and resistance; on the other, a territory marked by abandonment, violence and structural inequality. The border fence, which extends to the sea at the so-called “Tijuana Beach”, has become a powerful image of contemporary migration control: a steel structure that not only separates geographies, but also families, destinies and possible futures.

Near this beach, a space that should symbolize freedom and encounter, one breathes a tense air, charged with uncertainty. There, among graffiti that cry out for justice, crosses that remember those who died trying to cross, and intertwined flags, the migrant community gathers daily: some to share food, others to wait for appointments or assistance, once promised by the now-vanished CBP One system, and many simply to find solace in the company of those who share the same journey. Sanitary conditions are, in many cases, deplorable; the makeshift tents can barely withstand the weather; and the presence of trafficking networks and organized violence accentuates the feeling of generalized unprotectedness.

Although there are institutional efforts, international agencies and civil society organizations that attempt to provide shelter, legal orientation and medical assistance, these initiatives are profoundly insufficient in the face of the magnitude of the phenomenon and the absence of a truly comprehensive, coordinated and sustained binational diplomatic strategy. The constant pressure on local resources, the fragmentation of competencies and the inadequacy of sustained political will aggravate the humanitarian crisis experienced daily at this border point.

In this context marked by geopolitical tensions and ethical contradictions, two predominant approaches contrast: on the one hand, an approach based on security and containment, focused exclusively on border control, migratory deterrence and the externalization of responsibilities through opaque bilateral agreements; and on the other hand, an approach that appeals to the principles of humanitarian diplomacy, proposing an articulated regional co-responsibility, focused on the protection of rights and the recognition of migrant children as a priority subject of attention, care and restitution. While the former has been characteristic of the Trump administration and other restrictive positions, the latter has gained presence in the discourse of Joe Biden’s administration, as well as in the statements of some Mexican state actors and human rights organizations. However, the gap between the institutional discourse and its real, concrete and effective implementation persists as one of the main barriers to progress towards a lasting and just solution.

In this regard, the United States has recently intensified a trajectory toward a markedly punitive migration agenda, characterized by the expansion of accelerated removal mechanisms and restrictions on access to asylum at the southern border. By declaring the border an “invasion” and enacting Executive Order 14159, the President has legitimized measures such as deportations without judicial hearings and criminal and civil penalties for undocumented immigrants, profoundly altering due process standards established under U.S. immigration law (The White House, 2025).

This hardening includes the suspension of regular pathways for asylum seekers, such as the disruption of the original functionality of the CBP One application for scheduling asylum appointments and the elimination of programs like orderly refugee relocation, effectively closing safe avenues for those fleeing persecution and transforming humanitarian protections into practical barriers to international protection

(Frelick, 2025). Moreover, the new annual fee for asylum applications imposes an additional financial burden on those seeking protection, potentially discouraging access to the asylum system even in genuine cases of persecution (*La Nación*, 2025).

These policies, among many other disorganized practices, are accompanied by legislative and administrative changes that reinforce detention as a central tool of migration control. For example, the 2025 *Laken Riley Act* mandates the detention of immigrants accused of certain offenses, thereby expanding the categories of detention under the *Immigration and Nationality Act*, increasing the population in custody, and turning detention into a routine enforcement tool rather than an exceptional measure (*La Nación*, 2025). Coupled with a historic increase in budgetary capacity dedicated to immigrant detention and deportation (with figures doubling previous levels), these practices contribute to a border control apparatus of unprecedented scale (Chishti & Lacarte, 2025).

The most acute impact of this punitive agenda is observed in the rights of asylum seekers, particularly children and families. The withdrawal of legal assistance programs for unaccompanied minors removes critical support networks, leaving these groups without adequate representation in complex and adversarial legal systems (*El País* reports the end of public funding for legal assistance to minors). The criminalization and family separation resulting from intensified “zero-tolerance” policies exacerbate these rights violations, creating environments of trauma and chronic stress with documented psychological effects among affected migrants.

U.S. policy also exerts influence across Latin America and globally. Human rights organizations have reported that executive measures aimed at externalizing migration control, including the reimplementation of protocols such as “*Quédate en México*”, pressure neighboring states to participate in containment regimes that undermine national sovereignty and international refugee protection obligations (Amnesty International, 2025). The suspension of asylum processing for numerous countries and the imposition of arbitrary restrictions reflects a securitized (rather than humanitarian) vision of migration policy, blurring States’ obligations under internationally recognized human rights standards.

In this context, the protection of the rights of migrant children and asylum seekers is being systematically subordinated to internal security and border control considerations. The promise of refuge for those fleeing violence and persecution is becoming increasingly distant, demanding an urgent rethinking of humanitarian diplomacy and bilateral cooperation strategies that place human dignity and human rights at the center of migration responses.

Recent diplomatic initiatives, such as bilateral family reunification roundtables or the strengthening of consular protection, are important steps, but face structural obstacles: bureaucracy, limited resources and a shortage of coherent regulatory frameworks between the two countries. Moreover, as Walker et al. (2010) warn, many diplomatic decisions lack robust empirical support, which weakens their effectiveness and legitimacy. This is compounded by the scarcity of specialized personnel on children and migration in consulates and embassies, which limits the capacity to respond from abroad and hinders the effective defense of the rights of migrant minors.

At this point, the reflections of Adamson and Tsourapas (2019) on the role of consular diplomacy in migration governance are particularly relevant. For the authors, consulates should not limit themselves to protocol or assistance functions but

should become active actors in the defense of the human rights of their nationals, especially in contexts where the institutional frameworks of the receiving country do not offer adequate guarantees. In the case of unaccompanied migrant children, this implies that consular representations should assume a strategic role, not only provide direct assistance, but also influence the formulation of public policies, monitoring detention practices and articulate support networks with civil organizations and multilateral agencies.

Adamson and Tsourapas (2019) also stress that for years, countries such as Mexico have developed valuable experience in proactive consular diplomacy, such as legal attention to migrants in the United States, the provision of documentation and defense against labor rights violations. However, they warn that these practices are still uneven and often depend on the local impulse of certain consulates. For this reason, it proposes strengthening consular diplomacy as a structural pillar of migration policy, with trained personnel, sufficient resources and clear regulatory frameworks that define its competencies around humanitarian protection.

From a critical point of view, it is necessary to redefine the meaning of diplomacy in the field of migration. Beyond sovereign interests, it should be assumed as an exercise of transnational justice, in which migrant children are not only objects of assistance but also subjects of rights. Since history, in line with Rabotnikof (1993), this implies reclaiming the public as a space for political deliberation guided by ethical principles, empirical evidence and a shared vision of the common good.

This resignification of diplomacy can also be analyzed from the contributions of Hannah Arendt. In her work *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt (1951) explores the phenomenon of statelessness as one of the most radical forms of political unprotectedness. Stateless people, and in an extended sense migrants without regular status, embody a condition in which not only civil rights are lost, but the right to have rights. This idea, applied to unaccompanied migrant children, allows us to understand that their defenseless situation is not only the result of legal or administrative exclusion, but of a deeper shortage: the lack of belonging to a political community that recognizes them and guarantees their dignity.

Assuming this perspective obliges national diplomacy to transcend a technocratic view of migration and assume its existential and political dimension. In this sense, humanitarian diplomacy cannot be limited to reactive measures but must involve an active commitment to the creation of institutional conditions for migrant children and adolescents to be recognized as subjects entitled to rights, both within and outside the nation-state. This is the only way to move towards a more just, sustainable and truly humane migration policy.

International cooperation and actors involved in the protection of unaccompanied migrant minors

At this point, it is worth questioning the extent to which international cooperation on migrant children effectively operates as a mechanism of shared responsibility aimed at protecting rights, or whether, conversely, it functions primarily as a strategy for the administrative redistribution of responsibilities between States.

From this perspective, international cooperation constitutes a structural axis for addressing the contemporary migration crisis, particularly concerning the protection of unaccompanied minors. As discussed in the previous section, humanitarian diplomacy and the construction of a transnational public sphere of shared responsibility require substantive coordination between state and non-state actors. Beyond the bilateral dimension, these mechanisms gain relevance insofar as they allow for the harmonization of standards, the delineation of responsibilities and the translation of formal commitments into effective migration policies, making the design of monitoring systems essential to ensure coherence between agreed-upon commitments and their practical implementation.

However, in the case of cooperation between Mexico and the United States, these objectives are conditioned by a geopolitical context marked by the progressive hardening of migration policies, the primacy of security considerations and the externalization of responsibilities. These dynamics increase the exposure of migrant children to irregularity, violence and absence of protection. Furthermore, an analysis of the institutional architecture in both countries shows that the fragmentation of competencies across care, migration control and asylum agencies creates protection gaps. In Mexico, the role of the National System for the Integral Development of the Family (DIF, Spanish acronym for Sistema Nacional para el Desarrollo Integral de la Familia) clearly illustrates these limitations: while it plays a central role in the immediate care and temporary protection of unaccompanied migrant minors, it lacks decision-making authority in migration, asylum and family reunification matters. This mismatch between the assistance provided and the effective guarantee of rights (exacerbated by slow procedures and weak interinstitutional coordination) exposes minors to prolonged periods of legal uncertainty and vulnerability, limiting the realization of the best interests of the child principle.

Taken together, these practices demonstrate that international cooperation, far from consolidating as a comprehensive protection mechanism, tends to reproduce patterns of institutional fragmentation and externalization of obligations, compromising the effective application of the best interests of the child principle and weakening the legal and ethical coherence of contemporary migration governance.

While the relationship between Mexico and the United States represents a key axis, the approach must be expanded to a more comprehensive logic, consistent with the global structural processes that generate and perpetuate human mobility (Castles, 2003). From a rights-based perspective, the principles of the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (1989) should guide public policies and cooperation mechanisms, prioritizing effective protection, non-arbitrary detention and family reunification. As Zolberg et al. (1989) note, addressing forced displacement requires transnational structures that place human rights at the center of collective action. It is also relevant to integrate into these schemes differential approaches that consider the characteristics of age,

gender, ethnicity and legal status, recognizing that not all migrant minors face the same risks or require the same forms of care.

To achieve these objectives, the coordinated intervention of multiple actors is essential: multilateral organizations such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the United Nations Children's Fund (Unicef) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM); state cooperation agencies; local authorities in transit regions; and civil society organizations operating in the field. This migration governance architecture, as suggested by Betts (2011), should combine interstate coordination with the effective participation of non-state actors with direct response capabilities. Along these lines, Risse (2013) argues that, even in contexts of "limited sovereignty", where the State does not fully exercise its authority—as is the case in many border or migrant transit zones—it is possible to build effective governance schemes through cooperation among multiple actors that provide public goods, regulate behaviors and protect rights. A key element in this configuration is the strengthening of local capacities, which makes it possible to generate more sustainable responses in the long term and reduces dependence on centralized solutions.

In the specific case of Mexico and the United States, cooperation has been marked by a mixture of technical collaboration and structural tensions. As highlighted by De Vega et al. (2011), Mexican foreign policy has oscillated between a defensive position in the face of external pressures and a pragmatic search for multilateral understandings. This is reflected in joint initiatives to deal with children and adolescents, such as binational protocols, dialogue roundtables and technical assistance actions. However, these initiatives coexist with border externalization practices and containment policies that transfer responsibilities to Mexico without sufficient guarantees or proportional resources, as evidenced by the Migrant Protection Protocols (U.S. Department of Homeland Security [DHS], 2019). Therefore, one of the current challenges lies in balancing operational cooperation with an equity approach that recognizes the capabilities and limitations of each country.

To better understand the cooperation frameworks in place, as well as the way in which the different actions aimed at the care and protection of unaccompanied migrant minors are articulated, it is particularly useful to review in detail the most relevant institutions that actively participate in this area in each country. This review makes it possible to identify not only the main actors, but also their attributions, fields of action, levels of responsibility and operational capacities within the institutional framework. In this regard, Table 1 systematically presents the main actors involved in Mexico's international cooperation on migrant children, to offer a clear and structured vision of their role in the design and implementation of public policies related to this population.

Table 1. Key actors in Mexico’s international cooperation for the protection of children and adolescents

Government actors	Description
Comisión Nacional de los Derechos Humanos (CNDH)	The CNDH is an autonomous body responsible for the promotion and defense of human rights in Mexico, including the protection of migrants’ rights. Its role is crucial in denouncing abuses against migrants and in the supervision of migration policies
Instituto Nacional de Migración (INM)	The INM regulates migration policies in Mexico, supervising the entry, exit and stay of migrants in the country. It coordinates migration stations and offers assistance services to migrants in vulnerable situations
Comisión Mexicana de Ayuda a Refugiados (Comar)	Comar handles asylum applications in Mexico, protecting people fleeing violence and persecution in their countries of origin. It complies with Mexico’s international human rights and refugee commitments
Commission on Population, Borders and Migratory Affairs	Coordinates public policies related to migration, guaranteeing the safety and rights of migrants and promoting policies for the development and welfare of communities of origin
Sistema Nacional para el Desarrollo Integral de la Familia (DIF)	Protects unaccompanied migrant minors, providing them with legal, psychological and social assistance while their immigration status is being resolved
Sistema Nacional de Protección Integral de Niñas, Niños y Adolescentes (Sipinna)	Guarantees the rights of children and adolescents in Mexico, ensuring adequate protection of migrant minors during their transit or stay
Federal Procurator’s Offices for Protection	They watch over the rights of migrants, especially unaccompanied minors, ensuring respect for their human rights at migration stations
Non-governmental/independent actors	Description
Centro de Atención a Menores Fronterizos (Camef)	Camef offers direct attention to unaccompanied migrant minors, providing them with shelter, psychological and legal support. Its mission is to ensure that the rights of migrant children are respected during their transit through Mexico
Colectivo Migraciones para las Américas (COMPA)	COMPA is a collective of organizations that defends the human rights of migrants in Latin America, promoting the social integration and labor rights of migrants in Mexico
Migratory Stations in Mexico	Migration stations in various Mexican states, such as Tamaulipas, Sonora, Tijuana and Chiapas, receive migrants detained during their transit. Although they perform migration control functions, they are critical due to the conditions in which they are located
Migrant “Houses” and Shelters	These houses and shelters provide migrants with refuge, food, and basic care, especially those in vulnerable situations. They are mainly managed by non-governmental and religious organizations
YMCA Foundation	The YMCA Foundation in Mexico offers integration and support programs for migrants, providing psychosocial assistance and educational opportunities to facilitate their adaptation.
Casa Alianza México	Casa Alianza México focuses on the protection of migrant children and adolescents in vulnerable situations, offering shelter, education, and comprehensive care to support their development.

Source: own elaboration

The institutional fragmentation and tensions between care and the guarantee of rights observed in the Mexican case are not unique to this context; in fact, similar models of interinstitutional coordination with multiple and sometimes conflicting objectives can be found in other countries.

For example, in the specific case of the United States, the various actors that make up the international cooperation network are also organized around a set of strategic objectives that simultaneously (and at times contradictorily) combine priorities related to national security, migration control and the provision of humanitarian assistance to people on the move. This triple dimension reflects the complexity of the U.S. approach to migration, particularly regarding unaccompanied minors, and reveals an intervention logic that oscillates between containment and protection.

To illustrate this institutional configuration, Table 2 shows the main actors involved, their specific functions and the role they play within the country's migration system.

These institutional structures, although diverse, share common challenges: the need to improve inter-institutional coordination, strengthen operational capacities and adopt an evidence-based approach. Often, government institutions operate in silos, without effective communication mechanisms or shared protocols that allow for comprehensive and continuous attention to migrant minors.

This disconnection generates gaps in protection and fragmentation of care, which is aggravated in border contexts where the speed of migratory flows exceeds the system's response capacity. As highlighted by Walker et al. (2010), the scarcity of reliable data on children and adolescents limits the effectiveness of responses. The lack of uniform registries, interoperable databases and longitudinal tracking systems impedes the traceability of cases and hinders informed decision-making by authorities. The incorporation of rigorous data not only improves transparency but also reinforces the public and collective nature of decisions affecting this vulnerable population, making strategic planning with greater impact possible.

In this regard, a transformation is also required in the governance frameworks of international cooperation. It is therefore necessary to move towards more equitable and sustained cooperation frameworks that overcome the logic of subordination (in which certain States assume peripheral or merely executing roles) and strengthen local capacities with a focus on autonomy.

This implies recognizing the value of situated knowledge, the accumulated experience of community organizations and the central role of cross-border solidarity networks. Effective cooperation cannot depend exclusively on agreements between central governments, but must actively involve local governments, border municipalities, human rights ombudsmen, shelters and grassroots organizations that work directly with migrant children; a multilevel and multi-actor diplomacy, centered on reciprocity, equity and effectiveness.

As proposed by Rabotnikof (1993), the public sphere should be understood as a space of collective negotiation in which senses of justice and community are constructed and contested, at the international level. This approach allows us to rethink cooperation as a process of political deliberation and not as a simple transfer of resources or implementation of unilateral guidelines.

Table 2. Key players in United States international cooperation

Government actors	Description
Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR)	ORR aids to refugees in the United States, facilitating their resettlement, as well as support to migrants seeking asylum in the country. It offers social, health and educational services for their integration
Department of Homeland Security (DHS)	DHS is primarily responsible for homeland security in the United States, including migration regulation and border policies. Within this department there are several agencies, such as CBP, which play a crucial role in managing the flow of migration to the south border
Customs and Border Protection (CBP)	CBP is responsible for protecting U.S. borders and managing the entry of migrants, including unaccompanied minors, in accordance with current immigration laws and humanitarian protection standards
Department of Health and Human Services (HHS)	HHS is key to protecting the health of migrants, including children. It provides support in the management of medical and social welfare services for migrants, particularly those who are minors
Non-governmental/independent actors	Description
Immigrant Child Advocacy Network (ICAN)	Works to ensure that migrant children have access to adequate legal representation and protect their rights during the U.S. immigration process
Young Center for Immigrant Children's Rights (YCICR)	It is dedicated to representing the rights of migrant minors, providing legal support and promoting policies that protect them before immigration authorities
Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)	Provides food assistance to low-income people in the United States, including migrants, to ensure access to adequate food
National Immigrant Justice Center (NIJC)	Provides free legal advice to migrants, including human rights advocacy and access to justice for migrants in U.S. detention
American Immigration Council	Advocates for comprehensive immigration reform and promotes an inclusive vision of migration in the United States through awareness campaigns and public policies
National Immigration Forum	Promotes just and humane immigration policy in the United States through advocacy and public education
Southwest Key Programs	Provides shelter and support services to unaccompanied migrant children, offering a safe and humane solution while their cases are being resolved

Source: own elaboration

The incorporation of Risse's (2013) approach complements this vision by emphasizing that international cooperation must be able to operate effectively even in fragile institutional contexts, through partnerships between state and non-state actors acting with legitimacy, effectiveness and ethical guidance. This view is especially relevant for border areas where the presence of the State is weak or non-existent, and where civil society often assumes key protection, documentation and humanitarian assistance functions.

It should also be emphasized that this cooperation should not be limited to emergency responses; it requires long-term policies aimed at institutional strengthening, professionalization of the personnel who care for children and adolescents, continuous evaluation of existing programs and the generation of shared learning. It also implies the design of binational or regional evaluation and accountability mechanisms that allow for monitoring not only the fulfillment of international commitments, but also the real effects that public policies have on the lives of migrant children and adolescents.

In short, international cooperation on children and adolescents should be understood as a tool for political and ethical transformation, not only as an operational or financial mechanism. Its effectiveness will depend on the ability to articulate human rights principles, evidence-based practices and inclusive institutional frameworks that respond to the complex realities of child mobility in the region. This requires sustained political will, adequate resources, effective coordination mechanisms and, above all, a shared ethic that places migrant children at the center as subjects of rights and not as objects of assistance or control.

The centrality of human rights in the protection of unaccompanied migrant minors

In the context of diplomatic relations and international cooperation between Mexico and the United States, human rights must occupy a structuring place. As has been explained, this population is in a situation of special vulnerability, not only because of their migratory status, but also because they are developing people, lacking family or institutional networks to guarantee their immediate protection. Even though both States have ratified international instruments such as the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (1989) and have developed national regulatory frameworks aimed at their protection, institutional practices continue to be mediated by security, control and containment logics that prioritize border protection over the guarantee of their fundamental rights.

This tension between protection and control in child migration regimes has been extensively analyzed in critical legal scholarship. In the Mexican context, Elisa Ortega Velázquez has shown how normative frameworks designed to protect unaccompanied migrant children often function simultaneously as mechanisms of migration control, producing a paradoxical configuration in which rights-based discourse coexists with practices of surveillance, detention and administrative management (Ortega Velázquez, 2015, 2017). Her work demonstrates that the recognition of children as subjects of rights does not necessarily translate into effective protection but may instead legitimize new forms of institutional intervention that subordinate the best interests of the child to migration governance imperatives.

Drawing on this critical line of inquiry, the present article advances the debate by examining how this protection/control paradox is reproduced and reframed at the transnational level through humanitarian diplomacy and international cooperation between Mexico and the United States, highlighting the role of bilateral governance mechanisms in shaping contemporary child migration policies (Meyer, 2021).

Jacqueline Bhabha (2014) has argued that one of the major gaps in global governance is the absence of effective recognition of migrant children as full subjects of rights. In her analysis, migration legislation tends to classify them as appendages of adults or as threats to national security, instead of assuming them as social actors with specific needs and rights. This omission not only perpetuates their invisibility but also legitimizes policies of exclusion that systematically violate principles such as the best interests of the child. Bhabha proposes a transnational human rights approach to overcome rigid state frameworks and move towards comprehensive protection based on equity, child agency and global justice. His proposal calls for a holistic vision that transcends conventional normative frameworks and prioritizes an ethic of care on an international scale.

In the United States, the migration policies implemented have represented a clear and alarming setback in terms of human rights, particularly regarding the specific and priority protection of migrant children. Several comprehensive reports have documented the worrying reactivation of practices such as the forced separation of families, the sustained increase in prolonged detention in highly precarious conditions and the numerous bureaucratic obstacles that significantly delay, hinder and make it difficult to reunify minors with their parents or designated legal guardians (Caro, 2025; Human Rights Watch, 2024).

These measures have considerably intensified extreme vulnerability and exposure to multiple systematic violations of their most fundamental rights, in an international context marked by passivity, silence and lack of effective action by the international community in the face of the evident regression in the humanitarian commitments previously assumed by the United States (Cely, 2025).

Faced with this complex reality, a firm, coherent and articulated response is urgently required, based on the recognition of the inherent dignity of children's rights, accompanied by concrete actions that guarantee real and sustainable adequate material conditions, specialized psychosocial care and full access to education as fundamental pillars for the protection and effective restitution of violated rights.

In the case of Mexico, although significant normative advances have been made—such as, for example, the legal prohibition of the immigration detention of children and adolescents—the concrete and effective implementation of these measures continues to face serious structural and operational limitations.

The persistent institutional weakness, the constant fragmentation of competencies among different levels of government and the chronic shortage of human, technical and financial resources seriously compromise the real capacity of the Mexican State to provide comprehensive, dignified and sustained attention to this highly vulnerable child and adolescent population (Jacobo Suárez, 2022). As the author rightly warns, returning migrant children, particularly those minors born in the United States or repatriated after having built their entire lives in profoundly different cultural contexts, require differentiated public policies that recognize the complexity of their migratory trajectories, their hybrid identities and their specific integration needs.

In this sense, it becomes not only necessary, but urgent, to articulate social policies with a genuine human rights approach and an intersectional perspective, which simultaneously address not only the immediate material conditions of reception, but also the multiple challenges associated with linguistic, educational, emotional and community integration.

However, the state response has so far been fragmented, insufficient and mostly reactive: in many documented cases, children and adolescents are channeled to makeshift shelters, without minimum guarantees of effective protection, being exposed to dynamics of social exclusion, persistent structural violence and high risk of being recruited by human trafficking networks or other serious forms of child exploitation.

From the perspective of the Critical Theory of Human Rights, authors such as Pastor Seller and Cano Soriano (2016) warn that rights cannot be understood exclusively as legal formulations, but as results of social practices sustained by public policies with an intersectoral approach. Pastor and Cano insist that access to the rights of migrant children is not limited to the enactment of laws but depends on the existence of institutions capable of generating material and symbolic conditions for the effective exercise of these rights. This perspective coincides with Bhabha (2014), who stresses that child protection cannot rest on isolated administrative mechanisms, but on comprehensive systems of care, education, health and justice accessible to all minors, regardless of their migratory status. In addition, it becomes crucial to consider the role of local governments and receiving communities, who often assume responsibilities without sufficient support from the State.

This approach is complemented by the ideas of the philosopher Enrique Dussel, who, from his ethics of liberation, proposes that all politics must start from the active listening of the “denied other”, that is, of those subjects historically marginalized by the systems of power. For Dussel (Mills, 2018), human rights should not operate as instruments of state regulation subordinated to market or sovereignty interests, but as ethical demands coming from excluded peoples and subjects. In the case of unaccompanied children, this requires an epistemological and political shift that recognizes them as active subjects of dignity and not as passive objects of control or compassion. This change implies a redefinition of the links between citizenship, belonging and recognition, elements that have been historically denied to children in mobility.

Dussel’s critique converges with the reflections of Rosillo Martínez (2013), who proposes to think of human rights not as abstract norms but as tools for social transformation from a Latin American perspective. In his view, forced child migration represents a structural fracture of the rule of law (Ley de Migración, 2011), and evidence how law, when not built from the concrete experiences of the affected communities, can become a device of exclusion. Thus, legal protection of migrant children should not be limited to formal recognition but should be accompanied by real conditions of access to justice, education, identity and community roots. This also requires constant monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to make visible the real impact of public policies on this population.

From another critical perspective, De la Torre Rengel (2007) has insisted that human rights should not be seen as “rhetorical consensus”, but as spaces of dispute for the recognition and inclusion of historically excluded sectors. This political view of law makes it possible to understand the institutional treatment of unaccompanied

migrant minors as an ethical test for States. Failure to guarantee their protection empties the human rights discourse of its content and reproduces an institutional logic that hierarchizes human dignity according to geopolitical, administrative or identity-based criteria.

Against this backdrop, Bhabha's (2014) proposal is particularly valuable: it is urgent to build a new migration governance architecture that goes beyond the notion of the border as the exclusive limit of responsibilities and recognizes migrant children as a global priority. This implies transforming international cooperation between Mexico and the United States into a shared policy of ethical, not just functional, co-responsibility. It is not enough to manage flows or externalize borders; it is essential to establish common protection standards, articulate binational care systems and guarantee the necessary resources to comply with legal and moral commitments. The implementation of these systems must be based on criteria of social justice and redistribution, recognizing that the protection of migrant children is a shared moral duty.

Furthermore, as Pastor Sellar and Cano Soriano (2016) warn, it is necessary for these actions to transcend immediate assistance and aim at the restitution of rights, which requires an institutional design that listens to the voices of the children themselves, promotes their participation and generates conditions for real inclusion in both transit and destination countries. From Dussel's ethics, protecting migrant children implies decentralizing institutional power and refocusing political action on the concrete face of the vulnerable other. As Rosillo Martínez (2013) summarizes, human rights can no longer be just discourse; they must become a transformative practice in concrete contexts of exclusion.

From a critical perspective, the analysis developed throughout this work highlights the persistent gap between normative frameworks, institutional discourses and concrete practices regarding rights. Through the examination of theories, legal norms and public policies, the structural limitations of current approaches become evident, in which rights-based language does not always translate into transformative practices aimed at the comprehensive restitution of rights, but rather coexists with administrative, securitized and mobility management logics (Human Rights Watch, 2024; Migration Policy Institute, n. d.).

Conclusions

Findings

The analysis conducted confirms the central hypothesis of this article: that, despite being framed in human rights language, humanitarian diplomacy and cooperation mechanisms between Mexico and the United States have primarily operated as administrative containment devices for unaccompanied migrant children. However, rather than reflecting a mere implementation deficit, the findings show that this logic stems from a structural configuration of migration governance, in which border control continues to subordinate the best interests of the child principle.

Based on the examination of bilateral frameworks, institutional arrangements and implementation practices, a structural gap was identified between international normative commitments and the state responses observed. Although both states have assumed

formal obligations regarding child protection, public policies continue to reproduce logics of surveillance, externalization of responsibilities and flow management, placing migrant children in a persistent condition of structural vulnerability.

This article also demonstrates that humanitarian diplomacy, when not accompanied by legally binding mechanisms, independent monitoring bodies and sustained political will, tends to operate as a discursive framework legitimizing control practices rather than as an effective instrument for rights restitution. Similarly, international cooperation (whether bilateral, multilateral or inter-institutional) proves necessary but is insufficient when it is not articulated with institutional transformation processes that ensure comprehensive rights protection at the local, national and transnational levels.

Moreover, the analysis of institutional architectures in both countries shows that the fragmentation of competencies across care, migration control and asylum agencies generates protection gaps.

From the perspective of the critical human rights theory adopted in this study, the findings confirm that children in migration continue to be approached through categories of vulnerability and guardianship, rather than being recognized as rights-holders with individual and collective agencies. This perpetuates adult-centric, punitive and securitized approaches within contemporary migration governance.

Study limitations

The limitations of this study do not stem from deficiencies in the research design, but from the structural characteristics of the field of analysis itself and the conditions under which information about unaccompanied migrant children is produced and circulated. First, the study relies on official data, institutional reports and secondary sources, which, in highly politicized contexts such as migration governance, may themselves present limitations or significant variations between agencies. This situation does not invalidate the analysis but requires interpreting the figures as approximations of broader structural dynamics rather than as exhaustive representations of empirical reality.

Second, the research faces the inherent limitations of the available knowledge regarding the everyday operation of migration policies. Administrative procedures, informal practices and the margins of institutional discretion that characterize the daily management of migrant children often fall outside formal normative frameworks and public documents. Consequently, the analysis focuses on institutional designs, official discourses and legal instruments, while recognizing that a significant portion of minors' actual experiences occurs in spaces of informality, improvisation and uneven application of norms.

Finally, the study is situated in a context where norms and protection standards, although formally recognized, are implemented heterogeneously and sometimes inconsistently with local realities. This gap between regulation and practice is not a limitation of the adopted approach, but a structural feature of the field that this article seeks to highlight. In this sense, the limitations noted here do not restrict the validity of the central argument; rather, they allow it to be situated precisely: the study analyzes

how, along the Mexico-United States corridor during 2019-2025, normative production, cooperation frameworks, and rights discourses coexist with informal practices and operational dynamics that decisively condition the effective protection of unaccompanied migrant children.

Future agenda

Based on the findings, a priority emerges to advance toward a model of child migration governance that ceases to conceive humanitarian diplomacy and international cooperation solely as instruments for flow management and reorients them toward effective mechanisms for rights restitution. This shift must be carried out in accordance with the standards of the *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, particularly the best interests of the child principle, the right to non-detention for migration-related reasons, international protection and family reunification. For this transformation to be viable and sustainable, it is essential to recognize and strengthen the role of local actors as central (not subsidiary) components of the protection architecture (*United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child*, 1989).

The future agenda should focus on three interrelated strategic lines. First, the strengthening of independent monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, through verifiable indicators, institutional transparency and binational accountability schemes that allow for assessing the real impact of policies on the lives of migrant girls, boys and adolescents. These mechanisms should incorporate information produced at the local level—shelters, ombuds offices, municipal governments, community organizations—which maintain direct and continuous contact with migrant children and can provide situated diagnostics on existing protection gaps.

Second, the overcoming of institutional fragmentation through legal and operational coordination frameworks between child protection agencies, migration authorities and asylum systems, both in Mexico and the United States. This coordination cannot be limited to the federal or binational level; it must structurally integrate local governments, state and municipal protection systems and civil society organizations operating in transit, destination and return territories. The systematic exclusion of these actors has contributed to the reproduction of protection gaps and the uneven implementation of rights standards.

Third, the institutionalization of spaces for child participation effectively incorporates the voices, experiences and perspectives of migrant children in decision-making processes that directly affect them. These spaces should be articulated with community and local initiatives already working with migrant children, recognizing their capacity to generate environments of trust, listening and support that centralized or bureaucratic structures can hardly replicate.

Additionally, it is essential to professionalize and continuously train personnel who interact with this population—including border agents, consular staff, shelter personnel, local authorities and legal operators—(Bain, 2017) under human rights, trauma-informed and intercultural approaches. In this process, local actors should be considered not only as recipients of training but also as producers of practical knowledge, accumulated through their everyday experience in contexts of forced mobility.

Finally, any structural transformation requires an informed and committed social base, in which education, media and community spaces contribute to dismantling criminalization narratives and consolidating a rights-based culture centered on dignity, justice and the comprehensive protection of children on the move.

In summary, the results of this study show that the protection of migrant girls, boys and adolescents cannot rely solely on humanitarian discursive frameworks or administrative cooperative arrangements. It requires a profound reconfiguration of migration governance, grounded in the legal and ethical centrality of the best interests of the child, the justiciability of rights and transnational shared responsibility that recognizes the irreplaceable role of local actors in the effective implementation of protection.

Ultimately, this study has shown that the protection of children on the move cannot be addressed in a fragmented manner nor exclusively at the state or international level. The analysis of humanitarian diplomacy has highlighted its limitations when subordinated to geopolitical and control priorities; the examination of international cooperation has revealed how institutional mechanisms, even framed in discourses of shared responsibility, reproduce administrative logics of mobility management; and the human rights perspective has exposed the persistent gap between normative recognition and effective guarantee.

The articulation of these three axes allows us to conclude that only a simultaneous transformation of diplomatic frameworks, cooperative arrangements and legal mechanisms (with active and structural participation of local actors) can reorient migration governance toward comprehensive rights restitution.

Reconfiguring these domains from the legal and ethical centrality of the best interests of the child is therefore not only a normative requirement but an indispensable condition for ensuring that children in migration cease to be treated as objects of control and are fully recognized as rights-holders in the contemporary global order.

References

- Adamson, F.B. & Tsourapas, G. (2019). Migration diplomacy in world politics. *International Studies Perspectives*, 20(2), 113-128. <https://doi.org/10.1093/isp/eky015>
- Arendt, H. (1951). *The origins of totalitarianism*. Harcourt Brace.
- Bain, K. (2017, September 5). *Book Review: "Refuge – Transforming a Broken Refugee System"*, Alexander Betts and Paul Collier. Refugee Research Online. <https://refugeeresearchonline.org/book-review-refuge-transforming-a-broken-refugee-system-alexander-betts-and-paul-collier/>
- Betts, A. (Ed.). (2011). *Global migration governance*. Oxford University Press.
- Bhabha, J. (2014). *Child migration and human rights in a global age*. Princeton University Press.
- Cámara de Diputados del H. Congreso de la Unión. (2024). *Ley general de los derechos de niñas, niños y adolescentes* (última reforma publicada DOF 27 mayo 2024). <https://www.gob.mx/sipinna/documentos/ley-general-de-los-derechos-de-ninas-ninos-y-adolescentes-reformada-20-junio-2018>
- Caro, P. (2025, February 19). Trump extiende su cruzada antiinmigrante hasta niños: el gobierno retira ayuda legal para menores no acompañados. *El País*.

- <https://elpais.com/us/migracion/2025-02-20/trump-extiende-su-cruzada-antimigrante-a-los-ninos-el-gobierno-retira-la-representacion-legal-a-los-menores-no-acompanados.html>
- Castles, S. (2003). Towards a sociology of forced migration and social transformation. *Sociology*, 37(1), 13-34. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038503037001384>
- Cely, J. C. (2025, June 4). *Administración Trump se empeña en tener menores bajo su cuidado y dificultar la entrega a sus padres*. La FM. <https://www.lafm.com.co/internacional/politica-de-trump-frena-entrega-de-menores-a-padres-370594>
- Chishti, M. & Lacarte, V. (2025, October 29). U.S. immigrant detention grows to record heights under Trump administration. *Migration Information Source*. <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/trump-immigrant-detention>
- De la Torre Rengel, J. A. (2007). *Derechos humanos y teoría crítica del derecho*. Anthropos.
- De Vega, M. (Coord.), Palacios, G. & Covarrubias, A. (2011). *Historia de las relaciones internacionales de México, 1821-2010*. Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores. https://portales.sre.gob.mx/acervo/images/libros/RI/vol_4_america_%20del_%20sur.pdf
- Frelick, B. (2025). *Estados Unidos cierra sus puertas a refugiados, solicitantes de asilo y migrantes*. Human Rights Watch. <https://www.hrw.org/es/news/2025/01/24/estados-unidos-cierra-sus-puertas-refugiados-solicitantes-de-asilo-y-migrantes>
- Gamboa, S. (2025, April 30). *El congreso considera poner fin a ayuda legal para niños migrantes luego de que jueza le ordenara al gobierno reanudarla*. Noticias Telemundo. <https://www.telemundo.com/noticias/noticias-telemundo/inmigracion/el-congreso-considera-poner-fin-a-ayuda-legal-para-ninos-migrantes-lue-rcna203962>
- Grados Córdova, M. (2025, March 15). *¿Qué pasa con los niños migrantes en EEUU? Las nuevas políticas que los dejan al borde de la deportación*. Infobae. <https://www.infobae.com/estados-unidos/2025/03/15/que-pasa-con-los-ninos-migrantes-en-eeuu-las-nuevas-politicas-que-los-dejan-al-borde-de-la-deportacion>
- Human Rights Watch. (2024). *Migrant and refugee children*. <https://www.hrw.org/topic/childrens-rights/migrant-and-refugee-children>
- Jacobo Suárez, M. L. (2022). La niñez y juventud migrante de retorno en México: Hallazgos, avances y pendientes (2015-2022). *Norteamérica, Revista Académica del CISAN-UNAM*, 17(2). <https://www.revistanorteamerica.unam.mx/index.php/nam/article/view/587>
- La Nación*. (2025, October 29). Últimas actualizaciones sobre las leyes de asilo para migrantes en EE.UU. y el nuevo pago de Uscis. <https://www.lanacion.com.ar/estados-unidos/migraciones/ultimas-actualizaciones-sobre-las-leyes-de-asilo-para-inmigrantes-en-eeuu-y-el-nuevo-pago-del-uscis-nid29102025/>
- Ley de Migración, *Diario Oficial de la Federación*, pp. 2-33, 25 de mayo de 2011 (México). https://www.diputados.gob.mx/LeyesBiblio/ref/lmigra/LMigra_orig_25may11.pdf
- Massey, D. S., Durand, J. & Pren, K. A. (2016). Why border enforcement backfired. *American Journal of Sociology*, 121(5), 1557-1600. <https://doi.org/10.1086/684200>
- Mena Iturralde, L. (2017, January-June). Historia mínima de la migración México-Estados Unidos, Jorge Durand. *Migraciones Internacionales*, 9(32), 283-287. <https://doi.org/10.17428/rmi.v9i32.898>

- Meyer, M. (2021, November 23). *A new framework for cooperation between the United States and Mexico to respond to the region's new migratory reality*. Washington Office in Latin America. <https://www.wola.org/analysis/new-framework-between-us-mexico/>
- Migration Policy Institute. (n. d.). *Rising child migration to the United States*. https://www.migrationpolicy.org/programs/us-immigration-policy-program/rising-child-migration-united-states?utm_source=chatgpt.com
- Mills, F. B. (2018). Enrique Dussel's *Ethics of liberation. An introduction*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Minear, L. & Smith, H. (Eds.). (2007). *Humanitarian diplomacy: practitioners and their craft*. United Nations University Press. <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/602125?ln=es&v=pdf>
- Ortega Velázquez, E. (2015, January-April). Los niños migrantes irregulares y sus derechos humanos en la práctica europea y americana: entre el control y la protección. *Boletín Mexicano de Derecho Comparado*, 48(142), 185-221. <https://doi.org/10.22201/ij.24484873e.2015.142.4919>
- Ortega Velázquez, E. (2017). *Niñas, niños y adolescentes migrantes no acompañados: Entre la protección internacional y el control migratorio*. UNAM.
- Pastor Seller, E. & Cano Soriano, L. (coords.) (2016). *Políticas e intervenciones ante los procesos de vulnerabilidad y exclusión de personas y territorios. Análisis comparado México-España*. Dykinson. <https://dialnet.unirioja.es/servlet/libro?codigo=653678>
- Rabotnikof, N. (1993). Lo público y sus problemas: notas para una reconsideración. *Revista Internacional de Filosofía Política*, (2), 75-98. <https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14468/28692>
- Risse, T. (Ed.). (2013). *Governance without a state? Policies and politics in areas of limited statehood*. Columbia University Press.
- Rosillo Martínez, A. (2013). *Fundamentación de derechos humanos desde América Latina*. Editorial Itaca.
- Sistema Nacional de Protección Integral de Niñas, Niños y Adolescentes (Sipinna). (2023). *Ruta de protección integral de derechos de niñas, niños y adolescentes en situación de migración*. Secretaría de Gobernación (México). https://www.gob.mx/cms/uploads/attachment/file/851964/Ruta_de_Proteccion_Integral_de_los_Derechos_de_NNA_en_Situacion_de_Migracion_nuevos_actores.pdf
- The White House. (2025, January 20). *Protecting the American people against invasion* (Executive order). <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/protecting-the-american-people-against-invasion/>
- United Nations Children's Fund (Unicef). (2023, January 1-December 31). *Mexico and Central America: children on the move and other crises* (Humanitarian situation report No. 1). https://www.unicef.org/media/155921/file/LACRO_Humanitarian_Situation_Report_No._1_Mexico_and_Central_America_Children_on_the_Move_and_other_Crises_reporting_period_01_January_2023.pdf
- United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child*. November 20, 1989. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child>

- U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP). (2023). *CBP enforcement statistics fiscal year 2022*. U.S. Department of Homeland Security. <https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/stats/cbp-enforcement-statistics-fy22>
- U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS). (2019, January 24). *Migrant Protection Protocols*. <https://www.dhs.gov/news/2019/01/24/migrant-protection-protocols>
- Walker, P., Hein, K., Russ, C., Bertleff, G. & Caspersz, D. (2010). A blueprint for professionalizing humanitarian assistance. *Health Affairs*, 29(12), 2223-2230. <https://doi.org/10.1377/hlthaff.2010.1023>
- Zolberg, A. R., Suhrke, A. & Aguayo, S. (1989). *Escape from violence: Conflict and the refugee crisis in the developing world*. Oxford University Press. <https://archive.org/details/escapefromviolen0000zolb/mode/2up>

María José Villegas Sánchez

Mexican-Spanish. Master's degree in diplomacy and international relations from the Escuela Diplomática de España and a Master's degree in human rights, interculturality, and development from the Universidad Pablo de Olavide. She is currently a PhD candidate in legal and political sciences at Universidad Pablo de Olavide. Research lines: human rights, international cooperation, humanitarian diplomacy, migration, international protection of minors and the welfare state.

Nuria Cordero Ramos

Spanish. PhD in human rights and development from Universidad Pablo de Olavide, where she is a Tenured Professor in the Department of Social Work and Social Services. Research lines: human trafficking, migration, gender, applied theatre and human rights-based approaches to social intervention. Recent publication: Cordero Ramos, N., Flores Sánchez, M., Álvarez Pérez, R. & Muñoz Bellerín, M. (2024). Acquiring ethical competences for the resolution of moral dilemmas in social work. *Social Work Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2024.2435531>