Articles

Uncertainty and masculinized violence: women displaced by organized crime on the Mexico-United States border

Incertidumbre y violencia masculina: mujeres desplazadas por el crimen organizado en la frontera México-Estados Unidos

Eugenia Morales Viana[a*] https://orcid.org/0009-0001-8817-7622
Laura Velasco Ortiz[b] https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5754-6395

[a] Universidad Iberoamericana, Ciudad de México, Mexico, e-mail: euge.morales.v@gmail.com
[b] El Colegio de la Frontera Norte, Tijuana, Mexico, lvelasco@colef.mx

Abstract

In Mexico, forced internal displacement by violence has left hundreds of thousands of people facing the uncertainty of rebuilding their lives. This qualitative study carried out during the period 2020-2022 builds on the life stories of eight women from Michoacán who, with their children, were displaced from their hometowns. Criminal violence and the lack of institutions and protection mechanisms led them to seek refuge in shelters in Tijuana and international asylum. The article proposes uncertainty as a subjective and experiential process that constitutes gender, the experience of violence, escape, emotional management, modes of reflexivity, asylum expectations, in conjunction with the absence of protection. The findings reveal a nuance of experiences and subjectivities, constrained by structural factors, in turn revealing the particularities of gender and masculinized violence involving criminal groups.

Keywords: internal displacement, uncertainty, subjectivity, masculinized violence, Michoacán, organized crime, United States-Mexico border.

Resumen

En México, el desplazamiento forzado interno por violencia ha dejado a cientos de miles de personas enfrentando la incertidumbre de rehacer sus proyectos de vida. Este estudio realizado con métodos cualitativos en el periodo 2020-2022 construye sobre los relatos de vida de ocho mujeres de Michoacán que, con sus hijos, fueron desplazadas de sus hogares. La violencia criminal y la falta de instituciones y mecanismos de protección, las condujeron al refugio en albergues en Tijuana y a la búsqueda de asilo internacional. El artículo propone la subjetividad de la incertidumbre como un proceso vivencial que constituye el género, la experiencia de violencia, la huida, la gestión emocional, modos de reflexividad, expectativas

de asilo, en conjunto con la ausencia de protección. Los hallazgos revelan un matiz de experiencias y subjetividades constreñidas por factores estructurales, a la vez que las particularidades del género y la violencia masculinizada que atañe a grupos criminales.

Palabras clave: desplazamiento interno, subjetividad de la incertidumbre, violencia masculinizada, Michoacán, crimen organizado, frontera México-Estados Unidos.

Introduction

Forced displacement within Mexico is due to various causes: religious factors, natural resource extraction, political violence and organized crime. Displacements due to organized crime violence conflicts have gained notoriety because of their magnitude and the lack of protection for citizens. Like thousands of people of different nationalities crossing Mexico's southern border, Mexicans flee their homes to the northern border of Mexico to seek asylum in the United States or simply to save their own lives and those of their families.

According to the National Institute of Statistics and Geography (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía, 2019), 1.5 million people changed their residence due to violence in Mexico in 2019. Of the displacements due to violence, 95% were associated with organized crime and mainly affected the states of Michoacán, Guerrero and Chiapas (Internal Displacement Monitoring Center, 2022).

Research on forced displacement within Mexico has attracted less attention (Cantor, 2014; Durin, 2012; Macleod, 2021) than the mobility of foreigners in transit through the country. The scarcity of studies stands out even more when it comes to analyzing the subjectivities produced by this phenomenon from a gender perspective (Ávila Lara, 2014; De Marinis, 2013; Muro Aréchiga & Rodríguez Chávez, 2022). Even though statistics show two thirds of the population displaced by violence are women (Coalición Pro Defensa del Migrante A. C. & American Friends Service Committee-LAC, 2016).

This study aims to contribute to the analysis of the experience of displacement through the biographical outlines of women displaced by violence. The research objective is to trace the events, transitions and cognitive-emotional states that constitute their experiences of uncertainty. The guiding question of this article is how is their subjectivity of uncertainty constituted, as a result of the experience of violence, by displaced women from Michoacán living in shelters in Tijuana?

Below is a brief conceptual approach, the methodology of the study, the study context that includes Michoacán and Tijuana, and finally, the data around the analytical axes of the subjectivity of uncertainty: *1*) the experience and emotional management of violence; *2*) the modes of reflexivity about violence and displacement; and, *3*) the future expectations about asylum in the United States. Each of these axes is intersected by the effect and production of gender in displacement due to organized crime violence and the lack of protection by the State.

Conceptual approach

The United Nations Commission on Human Rights (Representante del secretario general, Sr. Francis M. Deng, 1998, p. 5) defines internally displaced persons (IDPs) as

> persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or man-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized State border.

Concerning the above definition, there are two comments to be made. First, this article focuses on forced internal displacement as an experiential process that occurs in multi-scale structural frameworks. Second, this displacement process is limited to that which occurs due to violence perpetrated by organized crime.

Cantor's (2014, pp. 44-47) distinction between the types of displacement reflects, in turn, the types of violence exercised by the cartels: every day and eventual violence associated with confrontations between cartels. In the daily violence, there are routine activities such as extortion, land appropriation, insecurity, threats and demands for cooperation and loyalty. The eventual violence includes the risk of death as a result of armed confrontations.

This paper analyzes the experiential process not only for scientific reasons but also due to the urgency of addressing the institutional vacuum in this regard. Such experience is constituted by multiple structural and agential forces that intertwine people's diverse positions in precariousness and social inequality contexts. It is interesting to observe the effect of gender in the subjectivization of the experience of displacement of women.

Feminist theory proposes to observe the weight of the ideology of domesticity in the workload for women (Benería & Sen, 1982) because in their displacement, they will have to face more frequently the responsibility of caring for parents, siblings and children and at the same time the sexual violence of the patriarchal order (Segato, 2014). Two sociodemographic aspects should be considered: the chronological age of women and their position within the domestic unit or household.

The conceptualization of organized criminal violence assumes it to be structured based on gender relations and that it dominates all spheres of social life. Segato (2014), from a biopolitical approach, proposes the concept of *interstitial space* created by the armed state—with its double physical and symbolic dimension—to understand gender violence. In this interstitial space, both state and non-state armed forces converge around the control of life and bodies using physical violence (Segato, 2014).

The ultimate space of confrontation between the armed forces of the State and those of different organizations is for the control of bodies, constituted as the territory in dispute. The State inscribes its power over the citizenized bodies and claims the power to control them. In this case, violence is a means of control over these bodies in dispute with organized crime.

This troubled founding basis of the State leads Segato (2014, p. 33) to assert that "bodies give the territory of the State". The biopolitical logic of the State and the criminal armed forces show the use of young bodies as soldiers and forcibly recruited to commit crimes. The control of the population through physical force and the production of fear as the center of subjectivities in the face of the power of the State turns bodies into a canvas to mark and identify their national belonging.

Women's bodies, in addition to being nationalized, are sexualized in the exercise of violence, which is why rape is a normalized means of male violence. At the same time, the violence of organized crime is often accompanied by the lack of protection by the State itself through impunity, due to the inefficiency and corruption of its legal and police institutions. Both forms of violence, state and criminal, frame forced displacement.

Studies on forced displacement and transit migration point to two constant experiential aspects: uncertainty and spatial-temporal instability (Arriola, 2012; Basok et al., 2015; Cantor, 2014; Macleod, 2021) experienced by people in mobility and even upon arrival.

It is necessary to define the concept of uncertainty, which is this article supports its analysis. As proposed by Elster (1979, p. 373), human beings can hardly control the outcome of their actions in ordinarily unstable contexts with total likelihood. This is even less possible if such decisions are made in contexts of risk and lack of knowledge about the information, objectives and options available to them in the face of their displacement.

This means that in daily life, people live with certain degrees of uncertainty to act. Nonetheless, when risk dominates under conditions of violence, uncertainty reaches levels that threaten life itself, activating regulatory mechanisms of survival and basic emotions such as fear, which is nested in the cognitive-emotional configurations surrounding displacement. In this case, uncertainty emerges with an emotional force linked to the spatial-temporal change that occurs in the biographical trajectory, in the spaces of residence and work, and in the rupture and discontinuity of personal relationships such as family and emotional attachments (Velasco Ortiz & Contreras, 2011, p. 187).

Once the temporal and spatial stability of people's homes has been lost, it is a matter of saving their personal lives or the lives of those close to them. Unforeseen displacement entails family ruptures, loss of possessions and suspension of daily life, but above all, it is accompanied by fear of losing a family member or losing one's life. Velázquez Moreno (2017) distinguishes two types of displacement that Muro Aréchiga and Rodríguez Chávez (2022) take up in the case of women from Aguililla, Michoacán: reactive and preventive. In a climate of daily violence, displacement is either a preventive measure of an undesired event or a reaction to such an event.

To explore and understand the forms that uncertainty takes under forced displacement, the analysis takes up Margaret Archer's (2007) conceptual contribution on *reflexivity*. Archer's theoretical approach allows the analysis of emotional states as

drivers and shapers of action. Internal dialogue, with or without interlocutors, is a tool for designing strategies and courses of action to navigate different sociopolitical contexts. Ultimately, these courses of action are the basis for the reconstruction of life projects.

Uncertainty is a cognitive-emotional state formed with the gradual or sudden accumulation of experiences of violence that break the ontological security associated with spatial stability and daily routines. This state can be mitigated, increased or fixed depending on multiple factors. Forced displacement is an act of agency to protect themselves and their families. Still, at the same time, it causes family separations that undermine personal networks and the loss of sources of income, which generates social and labor instability. These factors, together with the systematic lack of protection by the State and the wait at the northern border of Mexico to apply for asylum in the United States, increase uncertainty. To mitigate this state, women depend on their reflexivity process and courses of action or strategies. These are permeated by gender ideology.

Archer (2007) describes two types of reflexivity: communicative reflexivity, from which fractured reflexivity derives, and autonomous reflexivity. The difference between communicative and autonomous reflexivity is that the former relies on the opinions of the interlocutors to make decisions before taking action. In contrast, the more autonomous one guides decisions and acts according to self-sufficient internal dialogues. Following Damasio, it is proposed that this reflexivity is marked by social emotions where primary emotions such as the fear of death reside (Damasio, 2019, p. 57). The women's testimonies make it possible to interpret the different processes of reflexivity they undertake and how emotions drive this process to navigate between social inhibitors and coercers that seek to mitigate their experiences of uncertainty.

Methodology

To understand how the women experience uncertainty in the process of displacement and waiting, the research resorted to the combined methods of ethnographic recording and in-depth interviews. For participant observation, the lead author served as a volunteer at the Pro Amore Tijuana shelter for three months in 2022 and conducted interviews from June to August 2022 at the following shelters: Salvation Army, Centro Integral de Atención a Migrantes and the Filtro Hotel.

Twenty-three in-depth interviews were conducted with men and women from Guerrero, Michoacán and Jalisco in the shelters. The names of the persons interviewed are pseudonyms to protect their identity. In a complementary manner, information was obtained from the statistics generated by the Survey of people staying in shelters in Tijuana in 2021 (Coubès et al., 2021).[1]

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[1] The survey was conducted among 293 adults staying in nine shelters in Tijuana—58.7% men and 41% women—as part of the project "Between waiting and settlement: employment and residential integration of immigrants and displaced persons in border cities in northern Mexico: the cases of Tijuana and Ciudad Juárez" by a team of researchers from El Colegio de la Frontera Norte, with funding from the Labor Center of the University of California at Los Angeles (see Coubès et al., 2021).

Of the 23 people, 18 were women and 5 were men. Most traveled in family groups (21), and 17 women traveled with their children. The interviewees' ages ranged from 19 to 64 years, with an average of 34 years. Their occupations are varied: merchants with small businesses, farmers or day laborers on plots of land (lime), housekeeping and housework. Most of them have a basic primary school education. Only a few have a middle school, high school and university education.

Finally, 15 people came from rural areas, while eight came from cities (Morelia, Guadalajara, San Luis Potosí and Cuernavaca). In some cases, they moved in stages to intermediate towns before heading to this border, which coincides with data from the shelter survey that indicated that 35% of the IDPs by violence[2] had lived in another city before arriving in Tijuana (Coubès et al., 2021).

The reasons behind the departures include daily violence and episodes of confrontation, as a result of the widespread control of organized crime in different economic and social spheres and disputes between cartels for territorial control. For example, one family had already lost a baby because they could not get to the doctor in time. They reported that doctors have abandoned the town and must travel long distances to receive medical attention, with the aggravating factor that criminal groups set up checkpoints.

A man working at a mine left with his son, because his boss gave quotas of his salary to a criminal group and because of the disappearance of a neighbor. Others fled in fear because they witnessed homicides and kidnappings. Some left Guerrero because of the threat of being recruited by criminal gangs. In some cases, mothers fled with their children with fear that their sons would be subjected to forced recruitment and their daughters taken away to be sexually abused.

This analysis focuses on the experience of eight women from Michoacán between the ages of 19 and 41 to achieve a more consistent approach in contextual terms. The decision to focus on these eight cases is because they present a context of organized crime violence operating at the community level, which extends to virtually all areas of people's lives.

This violence has invaded different spheres, such as work, recreation, commerce, public mobility and political life, and has been internalized as a state of uncertainty and fear. The cases present differences in displacement and social and economic capital conditions but have a dominant conjugal condition of women who had or have a partner and, except for one, have children (see Table 1).

To explore the complexities of displacement, a biographical methodological approach was used to reconstruct, in the voice of the women, their multi-spatial-temporal experience, as well as the structural factors surrounding their biographical trajectories (Velasco & Gianturco, 2012).

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[2] The survey found that of the total number of IDPs 54.7% did so for reasons of violence, 27.7% for lack of employment or livelihood, 2% due to domestic violence and 4% for reasons of family reunification (Coubès et al., 2021).

**Table 1. Sociodemographic profiles and triggers for the departure
of the interviewed women from Michoacán (2022)**

Pseudonym	Age	Marital status	Number of children	Children's ages (years)	Educational level	Employment	Departure triggers
1. Ema	19	Separated	0	—	Senior high school	Informal employment	Sexual violence
2. Diana	25	Married (spouse in USA)	1	3	University	Tire repair shop owner	Threats for protection money and attempted kidnapping of son
3. Tomasa	31	Married (spouse in USA)	3	10, 7, 3	Elementary school	Care and maintenance of lime plot	Threats for protection money and deprivation of freedom to work
4. Viviana	32	Single	3	15, 14, 8	Senior high school	Employee in a tequila company	Kidnapping of eldest daughter
5. Yess	32	Separated	4	15, 8, 5, 5 months	Junior high-school	Informal trade	Threat of forced recruitment and homicide of brother
6. Rocío	33	Married (spouse in USA)	6	7, 10, 12, 15, 17, 19	No schooling	Livestock care and harvest work	Sexual violence against her daughter
7. Clara	36	Separated	4	20, 18, 16, 10	Junior high-school	Waitress	Domestic violence by ex-partner with ties to Familia Michoacana cartel
8. Elba	41	Married (husband missing)	3 1 grandchild	18, 14, 3 1 year	No schooling	Housework and sale of desserts	Disappearance of husband, threats and sexual violence against daughter

Source: created by the authors based on in-depth interviews

The Mexican Commission for the Defense and Promotion of Human Rights (Comisión Mexicana de Defensa y Promoción de los Derechos Humanos, 2022) proposed the concept of episode to analyze the specific contexts of violence and departure from the places of origin and distinguish the form that violence takes. These episodes are related to biographical events that lead to departure.

As shown in Table 1, the specific triggering episodes of displacement are extortion, kidnapping of family members, employment in organized crime networks and sexual violence as an instrument of terror. As seen below, these episodes do not occur in isolation but as part of a web of violence interwoven around the episodes that trigger displacement.

From Michoacán to Tijuana

Statistics in Mexico show that women outnumber men in relocations due to criminal, community and family violence (Consejo Nacional de Población, 2019). The data on displaced women in Tamaulipas, Chihuahua, Michoacán, Chiapas and Oaxaca (Ávila Lara, 2014; De Marinis, 2019) are consistent with those that point to sexual abuse as an instrument of violence. Studies on Mexico's northern border also coincide with this gender-differentiated displacement pattern.

In 2016, Michoacán was the second place of origin—after Guerrero—of displaced women who stayed in a major women's shelter in Tijuana (Coalición Pro Defensa del Migrante A. C. & American Friends Service Committee-LAC, 2016). The same report reveals that 79% of IDPs in Tijuana are women, and 94% are mothers. Meanwhile, Coubès et al. (2021) point out that Mexican IDPs occupy the second place, proportionally, in migrant centers in Tijuana. Nearly half of these displaced persons reported violence as a reason for their displacement, with a higher proportion of women.

Among the places of origin of the IDPs, Michoacán is in the first place (23%), followed by Guerrero (15%) (Coubès et al., 2021). In 2021, 46.6% of the total number of displaced persons came from Michoacán at the national level, and there were displacements in at least a quarter of the state's municipalities (Comisión Mexicana de Defensa y Promoción de los Derechos Humanos, 2022).

The crisis in Mexican agriculture in the 1980s triggered migration to the United States. In Michoacán, in particular, a state with a tradition of migration since the Bracero program (1942-1964), remittances have been an essential source of foreign income, which promoted a sense of autonomy from the state. According to Maldonado Aranda (2012), during that decade Michoacán rose in importance in the drug business. This is due to its coastal location and its established networks in the United States, due to migration in combination with a period of weakening of the Colombian cartels due to international intervention.

International pressure and anti-drug policies did not stop in Colombia. Mexican governments from the 1980s on, succumbed to U.S. pressure and increased anti-drug policies within the country. The high point came during the presidential term of Felipe Calderón, when the security strategy devised in conjunction with the United States was implemented. In 2006, Operation Michoacan kicked off what would become known nationally as *the war on drugs* (Maldonado Aranda, 2012). The consequences of these confrontations between cartels and, in turn, with the Mexican army produced massive displacements, which put the phenomenon on the international radar.

According to García Tinoco (2016), the homicide rate in Michoacan practically doubled between 2006 and 2012. Faced with the lack of resolution from the State, groups emerged from the communities themselves, known as self-defense groups. These groups called into question the relationship between the cartels and the government, revealing the corruption and politicization behind the war. In addition to

this crisis, extractive mining activity forced thousands of people to abandon their land, further complicating the webs of violence and increasing distrust of the government (Unidad de Política Migratoria, Registro e Identidad de Personas, 2020).

For years, in the shelters of border cities such as Tijuana, spokespersons have mentioned the increasing arrival of Mexican nationals fleeing violence. Confused with the labor migrants that for decades have characterized the migration flows that cross these cities, the IDPs have become invisible in the face of the political prominence of other flows, such as the caravans of Central Americans in the last decade of the 20th century, and the indifference of the Mexican State.

In the last decade, shelters have doubled in number in the city of Tijuana (Coubès et al., 2021) due not only to the increase of foreigners but also to displaced Mexicans seeking asylum in the United States. The category of internally displaced persons harbors a diversity of conditions and reasons for departure. Nearly half of the Mexican IDPs surveyed in 2020 in the city's shelters had done so for reasons of violence, particularly women. Nearly two-thirds traveled accompanied by family or friends. While two-thirds had arrived in the city in the last year of the interview (2020), a significant third had been in the city for more than a year, which may be associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, which lengthened waiting times in shelters, given the closure of the border (Coubès et al., 2021).

The shelters are the main providers of security and shelter for this population, with food, lodging, legal advice and very few with psychological counseling. The fieldwork documented the enormous demand for psychological services due to the emotional condition, especially fear and confusion, in which displaced persons arrive. It was also recorded that the lack of daycare centers for infants mainly affects women in their role as caregivers, which limits their employment possibilities.

The presence of the government and international agencies is very recent, dating back to 2019, through the establishment of Integral Centers for Migrants in cities such as Tijuana, then Ciudad Juárez and, in 2023, Matamoros. Self-managed camps adjacent to the borderline were another alternative for IDPs (Muro Aréchiga & Rodríguez Chávez, 2022).

In 2020, the Chamber of Deputies approved the draft of the *General Law to Prevent, Address and Comprehensively Repair Forced Internal Displacement.* Nevertheless, to date, it has not been approved by the Chamber of Senators, so there is no protocol for the care and legal protection of victims of forced displacement in Mexico.

Upon arrival in the city, almost half of the IDPs staying in shelters had a clear idea of applying for asylum in the United States. One-fifth only wanted to cross, and almost one-third had the objective of staying in Tijuana (Coubès et al., 2021). Nonetheless, they were all experiencing the effects of migration policies of externalizing border

control through programs such as Stay in Mexico[3] or Title 42[4] deportation measures that defined the conditions of waiting in shelters.

The number of asylum applications to the United States from Mexicans increased with the violence and forced internal displacement, while the percentage of accepted applications has only decreased. Between 2003 and 2009, 22% of applications were accepted, while between 2010 and 2020, only 15% were accepted or granted some form of international protection (Rodríguez Chávez, 2022). The low probability of success in the international protection process increased the sense of uncertainty.

Subjectivity of uncertainty due to forced displacement

The following is an analysis of the mechanisms through which the uncertainty associated with violence and the decision to leave the place of origin is constructed. The variability in the construction depends on age, marital status and caregiving status, but also on cognitive-emotional components such as: *1*) the experience and emotional management of violence; *2*) modes of reflexivity about violence and displacement; and, *3*) future expectations about the possibility of obtaining asylum in the United States. These elements constitute a subjective matrix of uncertainty and displacement, together with the absence of national and international protection.

The experience and emotional management of violence

This dimension of the subjectivity of uncertainty accounts for the experience of violence that is associated with the reasons for leaving and the forms that male violence takes, as well as the filter exerted by their relation to male authority and gender mandates, especially around motherhood, in the construction of their vulnerability.

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[3] The official name is Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP). It was initiated by the Donald Trump administration in January 2019 and was terminated in June 2021 by President Joseph Biden and his administration; however, in December 2021 it was reinstated by the same (Paris Pombo, 2022). "The program consists of sending foreign nationals with open immigration and asylum proceedings in some U.S. court to Mexico" (p. 1). They must wait during their entire process on the Mexican side and only present themselves at some of the ports of entry when they have an appointment for a hearing before a judge.

[4] Title 42 establishes the regulations to implement quarantines on the entry into the country of any person. In the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, this was "in the service of migration control" (Del Monte Madrigal, 2023, p. 1). On March 20, 2020, following a sanitary order (of which scientists later pointed out that there is no basis to support that such a measure contributes to any kind of sanitary containment), the right of entry of any undocumented or non-national person through the land borders was suspended, and any applicants for international protection without the right to asylum were expelled.

Exit triggers and contexts of male violence

Biographical analysis made it possible to understand episodes of violence as biographical events that take on meaning in specific local and family contexts. As can be seen below, although there are specific violent triggers for leaving, these are given in contexts of accumulated violence over months or years. Thus, what can be called an untimely decision is only the tip of the iceberg in the gestation of a chain of decisions amid the uncertainty of fear and a sense of generalized lack of protection.

Extortion or protection rackets. Protection rackets is a common strategy of organized crime in Mexico and Latin America that is based on extortion (Cantor, 2014). It takes the form of demanding payment for the population's economic activity, either as a micro-business or as a worker. According to Cantor (2014), what crime offers, euphemistically, is protection. Moncada (2019) reports that in Michoacán, what originally functioned as acts of extortion have been instituted as protection rackets where the population is forced to pay a *tribute* in exchange for the *protection* of the same criminal groups. It has become a method of extracting value from the population to finance the costs of confrontations against state forces or other criminal groups. This has built a new relationship of authority with the population based on fear and the exploitation of fear, rather than on the idea of protection.

Tomasa is a 31-year-old married woman with three young daughters. Her family grows and harvest lime. For some time now, she and her husband have been forced to sell their crops to narcos at unsustainable prices until they were both evicted from their plots of land. The first to leave was Tomasa's husband, who managed to get to the United States to work and try to make up for the financial losses that the narcos caused them. Almost a year after his departure, Tomasa and her sister-in-law decided to join him after a shooting destroyed part of their house.

Diana, 25, started a tire repair business with her husband. One day, her husband unexpectedly closed the business and told her he was leaving for the United States. He was being extorted and threatened but did not share this with Diana so as not to frighten her. Months later, she reopened the business with the help of her parents and brother:

> A few days after I opened the tire repair shop, men showed up and demanded a fee, a very high fee that we couldn't pay. Besides, even if it was 2 or 3 in the morning, we had to get up to fix their trucks without any payment. (Diana, August 6, 2021)

These same people later followed her and attempted to kidnap her 3-year-old son. Diana's parents supported and encouraged her to leave and join her husband.

The most significant reflection in both cases concerns protection rackets and the extortion of family income sources. This ends up undermining and fragmenting their ability to sustain themselves. In each case, the last episode is added as the trigger for leaving.

Kidnapping. In the first half of 2022, Michoacán ranked second in the number of abductions nationally, after the State of Mexico (Tenorio Colón, 2022). The forms of kidnapping present in the life stories are for extortion, to obtain information, or for forced recruitment by organized crime. Some of the people interviewed mentioned that when children reach a certain age, they begin to be kidnapped either for forced recruitment or sexual abuse, in the case of girls and teenagers.

Viviana, 32, is a single mother with two daughters and a son. In 2012, her brother was kidnapped and left for dead. In her perception, since 2018, the violence has worsened, and she felt increasingly unsafe, so she moved to Jalisco. "When it started happening that they were killing and hanging people on bridges, I grabbed my children and came to Jalisco" (Viviana, August 3, 2021). In Jalisco, she worked in the tequila industry, and it was during this period that her daughter was kidnapped and tortured. She managed to rescue her but was threatened with homicide if she reported her kidnapping. This led her to leave again, but this time for Tijuana.

In both protection racket and kidnapping, appropriation and dispossession of resources and bodies are inflicted by organized crime groups. Therefore, in the stories there is not only fear but also a sense of legal and social defenselessness in the face of the State's lack of protection.

Forced recruitment and employment in organized crime. According to Prieto-Curiel et al. (2023), the illegal drug trade is the fifth largest employer in Mexico, with the capacity to recruit 350 people weekly. According to the authors, one of the most active cartels in Michoacán, with the most significant recruitment capacity, is the Jalisco Nueva Generación cartel (together with the Sinaloa cartel, they recruit 17% of the workforce). So, it is not surprising that among the cases presented here are people who have experienced displacement as a result of the dynamics of narco-employment, whose main instrument is violence, whether it is exercised on civilians or the gunmen of other cartels.

Yess is a 32-year-old single mother with four daughters (one of whom is a baby). Her brother worked for the Familia Michoacana and was killed in a confrontation with the Jalisco Nueva Generación cartel. Given Yess' close relationship with her brother, the cartel tried to recruit her, threatening to torture her if she did not accept. She fled with her baby to Sinaloa, leaving her mother behind in the care of her older daughters. Nevertheless, in Sinaloa, she received threats again from the same cartel, so her mother advised her to go to Tijuana and apply for asylum in the United States.

Ema, a 19-year-old woman, says she had just moved to her boyfriend's family's house in another town. She had been there no more than five days when a cartel arrived and attacked the family because her boyfriend's brother had a marijuana distribution agreement but had fled without paying. The attackers tortured the family to reveal the brother's whereabouts. The father was brutally beaten, and the mother was harassed. She and her boyfriend were blindfolded and taken to soccer fields, where the group had their barracks. Ema was sexually abused and raped by different men, and her boyfriend suffered multiple machete stabs. They were released the following morning. As a result of this experience, Ema left her boyfriend and returned to her mother, who fled with her and her siblings to Tijuana.

Direct employment or employment of a family member in drug trafficking networks affects the entire family, as can be seen in the above cases. The consequences of narco-employment are not individual but familial. Commitments and punishments are extended to family members, with the means being distinguished according to gender: sexual violence will most often be for women.

Sexual violence. In the episodes and stories described above, gender violence is present in one form or another, including sexual violence. As Segato (2014) points out, male violence includes the bodily subordination of women, either as a collateral effect or as the object of sexual violence.

Elba, 41, decided to leave Michoacán with her three daughters and grandson after a series of violent events. First, men beat and abused her daughter in the street. Second, her husband disappeared after warning a neighboring family that the cartel was going to attack them. A month later, she began receiving threatening messages asking her to hand over her fourteen-year-old daughter. Finally, one day, while she was selling cakes, a man attacked her with a knife. She went to the police, and a patrol car protected her house for three days until the officer advised her to leave because they could no longer protect her.

Clara, 36 years old, is a single mother. Two older daughters live in Jalisco, a son in the United States, and another 10-year-old daughter lives with her. Clara worked as a domestic worker in the home of a man with whom she had a relationship but decided to end it when she discovered that her partner was involved with the Viagra cartel. She moved to another municipality in Michoacán. Nevertheless, her ex-partner would not stop harassing and threatening her so that she would not leave him. Clara started another relationship, and this person violently assaulted both. She decided to flee to save her life and that of her last partner.

Sense of vulnerability and male authority

The findings of this research point to the sense of vulnerability that arises from the dependence of women on male authority and the control exerted over them. The displacement of the eight women is associated with the violence of organized crime and, in turn, with the type of relationship they maintain with male authority, which ambiguously subjugates and protects.

Diana found out the real reason why her husband left was a result of first-hand experience of cartel violence:

> When he told me what had happened to him, he told me that the same thing had happened to him for a long time, so he decided to close the tire repair shop. He didn't want to tell me anything so as not to worry me. But he never imagined that I was going to reopen and that those people would come back. [...] I feel he is a very strong man. And I told the psychologist that sometimes I wanted to be like him. Because I have talked to him, sometimes I talk to him, and he says to me, "Don't feel like that; everything will be fine, don't worry". (Diana, August 6, 2021)

This reveals Diana's reflexivity and dialogue with her husband, whom she perceives to be stronger than she is: her husband's strategy was to hide his own experience to

protect her and not to worry her. The man, designated as provider and protector, did not give the real reasons for his departure; this caused an effect. Nevertheless, in the memory dialogue, she assigns him the role of the strong one of both of them and as part of his masculinity. Although both are victims of the masculinized violence of organized crime, the responses are different as gender roles affect them.

In the cases of Yess, Ema and Clara, displacement emerged as an escape from the consequences of direct or indirect involvement with male figures associated with organized crime. As noted above, the female body serves as a messenger vehicle or as a direct object of violence. This implies that those feminized bodies are used to exert mediated violence on another male figure, a man. The violent dispute between men takes place in the female body. Thus, the woman's body belongs to the one with whom she relates. This may confirm a greater risk of suffering violence by other criminal groups if the woman is identified with a man categorized as *an enemy.*

In Yess' case, when the Jalisco Nueva Generación cartel took territorial control over the Familia Michoacana cartel, her brother was executed under the losing cartel. The new bosses saw her as part of the defeated and tried to bring her under the orders of the new cartel. She is seen as a tribute from the other defeated men:

> they started telling me that they wanted me to work with them, that I was a sewer rat, and that wherever I hid, they would find me. It could be here; otherwise, like my brother, it would be worse for me. (Yess, July 29, 2021)

Meanwhile, Ema suffered for being a female body integrated into the family of the insubordinate soldier. Her brother-in-law had fled for some misdemeanor and was being sought by his bosses; and although the criminal group recognized that she had only been part of the family for a short time, they usurped her body and transfigured it into an object of revenge through sexual violence. As Ema recounted,

> they said right now wait for us here... one of them kept pointing a gun at us, and then he said to me, "You just got together, didn't you? I said, "Yes". Well, one of you is going to be the one to pay for everything, and I said, "My God, we're in your hands, you'll know" [before being raped by several men]. (Ema, August 6, 2021)

In Clara's case, having established a romantic relationship with a cartel member condemned her to lose her decision-making capacity and autonomy. The man did not even recognize or accept the decision to break the relationship. Clara suspects that the fact that her new partner is a woman increased the intensity of the violence with which they were attacked.

Criminal groups submit to and reproduce exorbitant violence as part of their training, a process of *extreme desensitization*, as Segato (2014) names it, where they deliberately get rid of all human empathy. This exorbitant violence that concerns masculinity is exercised as an extension, in a hypermasculinized way, which punishes disobedience and claims women as property.

Meanwhile, Elba, Viviana and Tomasa did not have close relationships with any cartel members but experienced violence from a male individual. These three women spoke of criminal groups, cartels, made up of male individuals. These attacked the population, kidnapped Viviana's daughter and extorted money from Tomasa and her family. They also attacked Elba and her daughter in the street. Their testimonies of violence speak of militarized male individuals.

Rita Segato's conceptualization of expressive violence in informal conflict states that mafia pacts and cruelty "obey and replicate the masculine pact" (Segato, 2014, p. 59). This is because masculinity has been primarily constructed and characterized as involving violent traits. However, in addition, mafia pacts maintain political, economic and social interests that lead to a masculinized hierarchical order. Therefore, the violence in this study is characterized as *masculinized violence*.

Emotional management of gender mandates: motherhood and guilt

Even when subject to violence in its cruelest forms of expression, gender mandates on caregiving continue to operate. Women manage their emotions through their idea of motherhood with its ethic of existing for others. One explicit fear expressed by Diana is how the whole situation may be affecting her son. She even worries that she may be transmitting her own distress and sadness.

Emotions about their sons and daughters emerge in all the testimonies. In their narratives, the women identify their children as the main driving force, motivation and reason for leaving and for whom they seek asylum in the United States. Their children are the source of their strength, and at the same time, in an emotional contradiction, they cause paralyzing emotions such as anguish, worry and anxiety.

Guilt in the narratives revolves around not having done enough, or not have given their children a good life. The displacement of Clara and Yess involved the separation of their older daughters, which is seen as a source of worry and guilt for both. Ema, the oldest of her siblings, took on the responsibility of caring for them and blames herself for "putting" them in this situation. A relative told Rocío that she "should look out for her daughter", alluding to her *duty* as a mother. Viviana says, "I do blame myself because I worked a lot; I didn't look out for them, to give them a better life, and what happened to her would not have happened" (Viviana, August 3, 2021). Yess feels guilty for exposing her newborn: "My baby who is starting life, who did not ask to come into the world, and I brought her to suffer and be left alone. My 15-year-old daughters, my 8-year-old daughter and my 5-year-old daughter also need me" (Yess, July 29, 2021).

Guilt can become a natural state for a mother, as if feeling it were part of her role. The literature shows that guilt arises from the discomfort experienced by the inconsistency between the normative expectations of motherhood and the possibilities of fulfilling them (Ariza, 2021). It can be noted that it is particularly strong in cases of exposure to violence because the concept of *mother* assumes the duty to protect. This has been constructed and reinforced (socially and legally). If something happens to a child or adolescent, the mother is held more responsible than the father. In addition, motherhood is linked to a state of unconditional commitment to the child. This takes away space for other emotions perceived as negative. "Exercising motherhood based on this logic rescinds feminine autonomy and magnifies guilt in the face of the infringement of

her functions" (Flores Hernández, 2021, p. 70). Such is the case of the fear experienced by Diana and Clara, who avoid crying in front of their children.

Modes of reflexivity on displacement due to violence

According to Mooney (2005), immediacy is characteristic of forced displacement. Nonetheless, this led to the question, what does such immediacy mean in the experience of the women under study? How much of the displacement was slowly anticipated or abruptly decided? For example, Tomasa states that over the years, it had become increasingly difficult to work, public shootings had increased, and her husband had left a year earlier, denoting an inevitability in her displacement. Despite this, Yess states: "They started killing people, but we never thought they were going to take our family" (Yess, July 29, 2021).

The degree of unpredictability of violence undermines the sense of control and, therefore, generates greater uncertainty. However, once the IDPs have left, at a geographical distance, a process of reflexivity is unleashed through which the women rearrange what has happened, the course and actions to come and, in some way, the meaning of life.

Modes of reflexivity are constructed through an internal dialogue that is the basis of their capacity for agency and that does not escape the subject's position in the social structure. The options for action are structurally limited by material and financial resources and their views on life. Nevertheless, displacements disrupt positions at micro level, which produces a *contextual discontinuity*.

Forced displacement implies an abrupt change in the subject's daily life following a significant event, such as the separation from loved ones and the disruption of their daily life. Such events have two effects: firstly, a rupture of social exchanges with interlocutors (family and friends) leading to a fragmented reflexivity. Secondly and at the same time, subjects are forced to draw on their internal resources and give greater weight to internal dialogue (Archer, 2007) or open up to new interlocutors, leading to autonomous reflexivity. Such forms of reflexivity are not divergent but can occur simultaneously or sequentially.

The analysis of the displacement trajectories showed that the women chose Tijuana over other border cities after deliberation with interlocutors and internal dialogue to assimilate this decision.

Fractured communicative reflexivity

Fractured reflexivity occurs through the intensification of internal dialogue, due to distress and disorientation, without the subject being able to design or apply a propositional strategy for action. This derivative of communicative reflexivity happens when subjects with tendencies towards performing communicative reflexivity lose contact with the interlocutors that help them make decisions, thus a fracture occurs. The separation of women from the people of their place of origin, breaks their internal subjective world. One must leave one's parents, siblings or children. The certainties provided by the context and their daily social interactions no longer function as referents for decision-making in the new place.

This is the case of Diana, who left to join her husband but whose main support in recent years were her parents. At the time of the interview, separation from them and her home seemed to outweigh the comfort of reuniting with her husband. She left because her parents insisted, arguing that they could visit her. Diana recounts that the psychologist at the center, to help her get into a protection program, took general data from her, but she was so overwhelmed that she did not remember any of the explanations of the program. The anguish of separation prevented her from developing a strategy and an integrated reflexivity.

Physical separation from daily interlocutors makes it difficult to devise strategies or make decisions. This triggers the fractured reflexivity that increases the state of uncertainty.

As Elster (1979) points out, the quantity and quality of information influence decisions and affect uncertainty. Reflexivity is anchored in women's information about routes and places of arrival to make a strategic choice. As narrated by Tomasa

> (...) we knew it was worse in Ciudad Juarez because of the crime, and also in Tamaulipas. So we decided to come here. We saw reports that many migrants were arriving, and we arrived in Chaparral, and from there, they brought us here. (Tomasa, August 9, 2021)

The violent episodes experienced in the place of origin have generated a state of direct and vicarious fear for saving their lives and those of their family. This fear generated in their places of origin underlies the new fears that have arisen during the transfer, the arrival and the wait to cross the border. The uncertainty of gaining asylum is based on vague ideas with information based on what the media and other migrants say. Nevertheless, their capacity for reflexivity continues, as illustrated by the cases of Tomasa, Clara and Viviana, who recognize the slim possibility of obtaining asylum and have begun to devise alternative plans.

Clara and Viviana, for example, had already experienced displacement before. It can be deduced that due to previous experience, they recognize their own ability to find a solution. On the other hand, Tomasa is with a sister-in-law; therefore, she has more support than the rest of the women who travel alone with their children. Traveling in adult couples functions as an important emotional support to alleviate the fear and anxiety produced by uncertainty, as well as shared decision-making and ideation of group strategies.

Fear and fractured reflexivity do not end with the arrival in the destination city. For example, Elba, three months after arriving in Tijuana, maintains that she cannot go *shopping*. Elba has a paralyzing fear of meeting *the people* she fled from in Michoacán. She does not know who they are, however. Perhaps because she does not know who to expect a threat from, Elba maintains a prolonged state of alert. Moreover, she said her grandson was very sick, but she did not dare take him to the doctor. Instead, she demanded that he be given medical attention inside the shelter. This is an example of a strategy in response to certain inhibitors, such as fear and distress about leaving the shelter and facilitators, such as her sense of right to medical care.

First impressions of Tijuana are accompanied by the weight of the new reality they must face: the possibility of asylum, sharing space with strangers, seeking support and stability and dealing with the difficulty of returning to Michoacán. The sense of loss and rupture becomes even more tangible, albeit uncertain.

Autonomous reflexivity

As stated at the beginning of this section, contextual discontinuity can also lead the subject to resort to more autonomous modes of reflexivity. This is due to the extent that distance and family separation challenge the subject's agency to reduce uncertainty, as well as sadness, distance and fear for those who stayed behind. The distance from the threat can also diminish fear by introducing new relationships and daily itineraries.

The women said that their relatives did not know where they were. This is a protective measure for themselves and their families. For some, only two members of their nuclear family knew of their departure, and they have not given details of their current whereabouts nor an explanation: "No, no, he (her brother) does not know where I am either" (Elba, August 9, 2021). "The only ones who know are my sisters, not even my daughters" (Clara, August 3, 2021). There is a tangible fragmentation of the space between daughters, parents, siblings, friends and thus of communication. Since seeking support, advice and opinions from these interlocutors is limited or dangerous, it forces the person to resort to autonomous reflexivity.

As autonomous modes emerge, the loss is perceived.

> Material things come and go, but I think about the family's life. My dad is there too, but he's already old and doesn't go out. He says that if they get him there, well, there he is. He doesn't go out. But what hurts me the most is my daughters; that's what hurts me the most about having left there. (Clara, August 3, 2021)

Archer (2012) points out that the emergence of new interlocutors functions as an emotionally reparative means of contextual continuity that allows for autonomous reflexivity. In the case of displaced women, new interlocutors can be other people in the shelter: residents, staff, legal advisors, psychologists or care specialists. This is the case of Elba, who is grateful to have other residents who listen to her: "I like it, or I have liked it, that every time I feel sad, they come and talk to me. It is a relief" (Elba, August 9, 2021). This resource contributes to diminishing fractured states of reflexivity.

Nevertheless, this strategy is not for everyone. Yess prefers to stay away from new interlocutors:

> Here I have been asked, "Why did you come to the centro?" and I just say, "Ah, because I have to... because of the danger" [...] I don't say my name, and I don't say where I come from. Or they ask me, "Where are you from?" I'm from such and such a place; you can see I'm not from there [...] and you shouldn't trust anyone. No one. Because you don't know who you might be talking to outside. (Yess, July 29, 2021)

Fear in this case works as an inhibitor of autonomous reflexivity based on new interlocutors. Yess is afraid to speak, given that her brother worked for the cartel, partly out of fear of being among residents of the shelter affected by the cartel in which her brother worked, but also as a protective measure from the cartel she is fleeing.

Looking ahead: uncertainty about asylum in the United States

Once away from the places where the experience of violence that triggered their departure occurred, the displaced persons are faced with what to do in the new place of arrival in Tijuana. The eight women were waiting to be granted asylum. With Title 42 in place, a local organization, Al Otro Lado, drew up a waiting list and offered to provide legal advice. Five of them were waiting on the list for legal advice. The other two had been in Tijuana for less than two weeks and did not know how to go about the asylum process.

For Clara, it was the second time she had tried to obtain asylum. She and her siblings moved to California following the kidnapping of one of her brothers 10 years earlier. Despite attending her court appointments, she was not granted asylum.

> They told me I had a court appointment, something like that, I don't know, the court. And I was attending everything, all my courts and everything. But this one... in May... I lasted what...? 3 years... 2 or 3 years. Then they told me that they did not approve my asylum application. (Clara, August 3, 2021)

Clara's experience is an example among thousands of Mexican asylum seekers applying for asylum in the United States. There are usually long waits and many rejections due to lack of evidence or legal representation, inaccessible to most, or failure to comply with complex and bureaucratic processes to which they must submit.

Clara's case also exemplifies the cross-border circular displacement, comings and goings, which are rarely documented in literature on the subject. Clara had to return and rebuild her life in Michoacán only to flee again 10 years later. Viviana, for her part, also moved twice in 9 years (from Michoacán to Jalisco and from Jalisco to Tijuana). Mooney (2005) raises the question of when or where does the condition of "displaced" end? Indeed, these cases reveal that displacement is a recurring condition throughout their lives, even when it is designed as a temporary solution. There are populations at risk of prolonging or repeating this condition due to the constant violence that seems proportional to the structural precariousness they face.

> Well, what I have in mind, if I don't cross, [is that] I'm going to stay here. Yes, I talked to my daughters... I told them that, in case I don't cross or something... I'm going to look for a little room to rent, but where I can see what the story is then. I don't know, let's see what I can do. And I mean to rent a room and stay here for a long time or just live here, just be here. (Clara, August 3, 2021)

Clara was the only one who stated that staying in Tijuana was a second option. When the other women were asked about other possibilities in case, they did not obtain asylum, the majority responded that asylum was the only option since returning to their place of origin was impossible. Clara's consideration of the possibility of staying in Tijuana is an understudied path among the displaced and points to transitory or longer-term settlement in border cities.

Conclusions

This study has analyzed the subjectivity of uncertainty produced by violence as an experiential state structured in three components: the experience and emotional management of violence, the modes of reflexivity about displacement by violence and the future expectations about the possibility of obtaining asylum in the United States. Throughout the article, it has been posited that these three subjective dimensions are affected by male violence, where women's bodies are a vehicle for disputes between criminals and the government's military and police forces.

Regarding the experience and emotional management of violence, the research showed that the departure of women and their relatives, although sudden, is due to an accumulation of experiences of violence affected by their gender, men and women, adults, teenagers and infants. It is a generalized form of violence but gender-specific.

The triggers for the exits are: extortion and protection racket, in the euphemistic guise of protection by and against organized crime itself; kidnapping as a means of extracting value from the population; forced recruitment and retaliation for employment in organized crime, especially for men, although there are more and more experiences of women; and sexual violence specifically through the rape of women as a means of punishment and settling of scores between cartels.

In these different dimensions, people's bodies, particularly those of women, are the object of appropriation and revenge; fear is a means to submit and control the population. Women's vulnerability is associated with the principle of male authority, whether as a source of protection or violence. Male authority with the right to exercise violence is exercised by men and internalized by the women in the study. The role of mothers, under gender mandates, is still in force. Even in conditions of extreme violence and displacement, women live with guilt in front of their sons and daughters for the generalized violence to which they have been subjected. However, as objects of love, sons and daughters are simultaneously a source of anguish and strength.

The reconstruction of the experience of the conditions that led the women studied to flee has been approached through their reflexive capacity that encompasses agency or their strategies for survival. The study found the deployment of a fragmented but also autonomous communicative reflexivity.

Although analyzed separately, these two forms of reflexivity operate dynamically allowing these women to reconstruct their capacity for internal dialogue. This is done through mourning their separation from loved ones who serve as their partners in decision-making and the emergence of new interlocutors who strengthen their capacity for autonomous internal dialogue. This, in turn, allows them to glimpse new possibilities for action not considered at the time of their departure.

The third analytical component of the subjectivity of uncertainty is the development of future expectations once displaced in a border city such as Tijuana. From this border city, the perception of lack of protection from the State concerning the violence experienced and the impossibility of return emerges. There is an awareness

of the lack of protection by government authorities, making return the last option. Their internal dialogues fed by new interlocutors lead them to view the asylum request as the desirable option, although distant. As a final resort, the option is to remain precariously in Tijuana.

Finally, a methodological reflection reveals that the biographical approach allowed analysis and interpretation of the experience and multiple forms of violence experienced by women in the context of family and community social relations. This perspective provides access to criminal violence as a social phenomenon experienced by neighbors, family members and friends due to the weakness of State security institutions. An important finding is that by considering gender when constructing the social experiences of violence, it was possible to understand the dominance of masculinized violence and the vulnerability of women when they are regarded as instruments and objects of criminal violence.

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Eugenia Morales Viana

Mexican. Master in cultural studies by El Colegio de la Frontera Norte in Tijuana (2022). Senior Researcher for the Human Rights Programme of the Universidad Iberomericana. Research lines: migration, violence and forced internal displacement. Recent publication: Morales Viana, E. (2024, May 1). *Desplazados por violencia: voces desde Tijuana.* Nexos. https://www.nexos.com.mx/?p=79116

Laura Velasco Ortiz

Mexican. PhD in social sciences with specialization in sociology by El Colegio de Mexico. Researcher and teacher at the Department of Cultural Studies at El Colegio de la Frontera Norte. Research lines: migrations, borders and identities; mobilities, diasporas and processes of ethnicization and identification. Recent publication: Contreras Delgado, C., París Pombo, M. D. & Velasco Ortiz, L. (Coords.). (2021). *Caravanas migrantes y desplazamientos colectivos en la frontera México-Estados Unidos.* El Colef.