

**Central American Migrant Women Communicative Agency
in their Transit through Mexican Territory**
**Agencia comunicativa de mujeres migrantes centroamericanas
en su tránsito por territorio mexicano**

Juan Antonio Doncel de la Colina¹ & Eloísa Román-Fajardo²

ABSTRACT

From a qualitative approach, the ways in which migrant women from the northernmost countries of Central America exercise their communicative agency during their journey through Mexican territory are characterized. Using in-depth interviews and observations in migrant shelters, it is documented how the communicative action of the migrant women possess an effective resistance to a hostile structural framework, highlighting their capacity to endure their systematic vulnerabilities, moving from subjection to agency. The special attention paid to the key role that communicative action plays during the migration process, and with the problematization posed by the novel concept of “communicative agency,” enriches the field of study focused on female migration, the sense, and meanings that these women give to their experience. The findings invite comparison with similar realities in different contexts.

Keywords: 1. communicative agency, 2. female migrant subject, 3. social networks, 4. Central America, 5. Mexico.

RESUMEN

Desde una aproximación cualitativa, se caracterizan las formas en que mujeres migrantes originarias de los países más al norte de Centroamérica ejercen su agencia comunicativa durante su trayecto por el territorio mexicano. A partir de entrevistas en profundidad y observaciones en casas de migrantes, se documenta cómo la acción comunicativa de dichas mujeres plantea una resistencia efectiva a un entramado estructural hostil, lo que subraya su capacidad para resistir su sistemática vulneración, al transitar de la sujeción a la agencia. Se presta atención especial al papel clave que juega la acción comunicativa durante el proceso migratorio y a la problematización que plantea el novedoso concepto de “agencia comunicativa”, lo que enriquece el campo de estudio centrado en la migración femenina y el sentido y significado que estas mujeres dan a su experiencia. Los hallazgos invitan a ser contrastados con realidades similares en diferentes contextos.

Palabras clave: 1. agencia comunicativa, 2. sujeta migrante, 3. redes sociales, 4. Centroamérica, 5. México.

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¹ Centro de Estudios Interculturales del Noreste - Universidad Regiomontana, Mexico, jdoncel@yahoo.es, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7779-027X>

² ITESM Monterrey Campus, Mexico, eloisaroman@hotmail.com, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8630-4317>



INTRODUCTION³

The growing migratory pressure that the main receiving and transit countries must manage is increasingly occupying an unprecedented centrality, to an overwhelming extent, in the political agendas of their respective governments. In this sense, the North American region is gaining special relevance, as evidenced by the hegemonic narratives of border control and of the “securitization” of migration policy (Treviño, 2016) posed by the two current candidates for the presidency of the United States (Jiménez, 2024), or the recent decision of the Canadian government to require a visa for Mexican citizens who intend to enter national territory (Isai, 2024).

Among the bilateral decisions of the U.S. and Mexican governments that impose a migration reality, the agreement signed in 2021 for the promotion of economic development in southern Mexico and northern Central America stands out, since its most evident effect was the notable increase in agents on the southern border of Mexico destined to contain migration flows, as well as what Delgadillo et al. have termed the “militarization of migration policies” (Delgadillo et al., 2022, p. 29, as cited in the Red de Documentación de las Organizaciones Defensoras de Migrantes [REDODEM], 2023, p. 30). Other examples along this line include Title 42, which set forth the expelling of those who entered the United States, and the Migrant Protection Protocol (MPP), by which the Mexican government guarantees the necessary conditions for migrants to wait in its territory for the opportunity to cross the border with U.S. judicial authorization.

The current migrant overflow and humanitarian crisis was anticipated by the main actors in migration governance in Mexican territory (Doncel et al., 2021) during the “exception to the exception” that the COVID-19 pandemic represented (Irazuzta & Ibarra, 2021). Thus, while REDODEM observed how the usual 30 000 or 35 000 migrants registered annually dropped in 2020—in the midst of the pandemic—to less than 10 000 (Doncel, 2021, p. 67), to then in just the first half of 2022 (approximate period of the present fieldwork) having 44 989 migrants registered in transit through Mexico. The study universe was extracted from this group: migrant women (15.4% of the total) in transit through Mexico and originating from one of the four northernmost Spanish-speaking countries in Central America (86.7% of these women come from Honduras, Guatemala, Nicaragua, or El Salvador) (REDODEM, 2023).

Female migration from the northernmost countries of Central America passing through Mexican territory must be analyzed in its own specificity, since it cannot be explained without taking into account the ways in which it conforms to a set of gender norms that influence multiple situations of oppression, violence, discrimination, and inequality, nor without taking into account the fact that the insecurity and violence to which women are exposed are different from those of men in quality, quantity, and intensity.

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Based on this premise, the worsening conditions for migration that the current geopolitical situation has led to have to be accounted for, understanding that the increase in the danger of the routes is not limited to border areas, but is rather spread over vast territories in which, beyond the “exacerbation of immigration controls and the excessive increase in militarization” (REDODEM, 2023, p. 27), kidnappings, acts of corruption by law enforcement agents, and the actions of organized crime are recurrent. Consequently, this study is based on the fact that Central American migrant women move through geographic and geopolitical spaces under greater vulnerability and risk, which leads them to have a greater need to go unnoticed, and to seek safer spaces and situations during their migratory transit, thereby extending the time of their journey (Cortés, 2018).

This growing interest in the reality of an oppressed minority in its double condition as a woman and as a migrant derives from what was posed decades ago by the feminist theory of intersectionality, which was originally understood as the expression of a complex system of multiple and simultaneous oppression structures (Crenshaw, as cited in Cubillos, 2015). Thus, if the relations of domination of men over women are the result of a power system that is articulated with others—Cubillos (2015) refers to “race” and “social class,”—it is natural that social science should expand its area of interest to more specific minorities—who are also more specifically vulnerable. By analyzing these new intersections, this study contributes to unraveling in greater depth a matrix of domination that, organizing power at a global level, has an infinite number of local manifestations (Hill Collins, as cited in Cubillos, 2015).

Based on the above, the objective is to characterize the ways in which Central American migrant women exercise their agency—particularly their communicative agency—during their journey, understanding this agency as an autonomous or coordinated response to powers that, although of a different nature, converge, and impose an oppressive over-government on them (Irazuzta & Ibarra, 2021).

METHODOLOGY

The qualitative methodological approach is pertinent due to the difficulty of accessing the subjects of the study, due to their clandestine situation—migrant women in an irregular administrative situation and in transit—, which makes a convenience sample necessary. Likewise, this approach is consistent with the need, by reason of the proposed objective, to access narratives about personal life experiences—often extremely intimate—and the meanings that the subject elaborates. Here, the methodological tools that ethnography favors have been used: the in-depth interview and participant observation. The choice of these tools and that of methodological approach is consistent with the epistemological approach of Giddens (Doncel, 2012), who finds in social action and intersubjectivity the double object of study of the social sciences (Giddens, 1993).

The fieldwork, carried out between November 2021 and June 2022, began with the co-author of the article’s volunteer work in a shelter for migrant women in the downtown of Monterrey (capital of the northern Mexican border state of Nuevo León). This volunteer work was extended to a second shelter—with capacity for 200 users compared to the 25 places of the previous one—, which was

opened due to the increase in migratory traffic in Mexican territory brought about by the reactivation of the MPP.

Visits to the shelters were carried out weekly, implementing participant observation and carrying out recreational activities with a large group of shelter users; this allowed for close contact with them and the development of emotional ties with the researcher. It is known that the development of these emotional ties can be a double-edged sword, since excessive awareness inevitably leads to a personal commitment to the group studied and, consequently, to the development of possible biases, both in the process of implementing the ethnomethodological tools and in the subsequent processing and analysis of the information obtained.

Notwithstanding the above, the authors consider that the high degree of trust achieved was essential to reach the objectives, which involved observing and recording interaction dynamics marked by intragroup complicity and by distrust of strangers derived from the migrant women's clandestine situation. Likewise, it was necessary for the informants to openly express their own narratives, understood as an instrument of agency, even when these sometimes implied the explicit recognition of the use of lies.

The memory of the visits was meticulously recorded in the field diary, in which personal observations, contextual elements, the content of informal conversations, spontaneous interactions, etc. were noted. To do so, Doncel's (2022) recommendation was followed to distinguish the researcher's reflections—including those necessary to become aware of the effect that the projected own image can cause—from the recording of more objective data, such as descriptions of the subjects and their group interactions, or infrastructural elements, interventions by other actors, expressions of non-verbal communication, etc. In this way, with the recording of descriptive data and the analysis and interpretation of what was observed, the elements of intersubjectivity—obtained later through in-depth interviews—were complemented with information that accounted for the social action of the subjects, without it being mediated by the narratives “offered” to the researcher.

The weekly meetings in which the researcher participated generated the ideal conditions to select the members of the sample, taking into account the suitability of their profile and a favorable attitude and disposition to be interviewed. Thus, during June 2022, three of these women were interviewed, who authorized to be recorded in audio under conditions of strict confidentiality and anonymity. Therefore, the names with which they are identified from now on are fictitious.

After analyzing these interviews and the field work recorded in the diary, and after making pertinent adjustments to the interview script in order to delve deeper into the emerging themes deemed of interest, three more interviews were carried out during September 2022 (also in the shelter, recorded with authorization, and under the same conditions of confidentiality and anonymity). All the interviews, those of both stages, were meticulously transcribed and subsequently coded and classified into emerging thematic axes, following the recommendations of Doncel (2022).

As for the sample, the criteria accounted for to obtain multiple perspectives that would allow a polyhedral and polyphonic understanding of the phenomenon were those in Table 1.

Table 1. Participant Sample

Name	Origin	Age	Maternity status	Reason to emigrate	Aff, to the MPP*	Route of entry to Mexico	Managed to establish herself in the United States before the repeal of the MPP
Miriam	Nicaragua	22	No children	Paying family debts	Yes	Air	Yes
Anaí	Nicaragua	30	1 daughter	Building a house and supporting her daughter	Yes	Sea	Yes
Rita	Honduras	50	1 son, guardian of 1 underage nephew	Family reunification and supporting her nephew	No	Sea	Yes
Karina	Guatemala	20	1 son	Fleeing from violence and supporting her son	Yes	Land	Yes
Diana	Nicaragua	45	2 daughters	Building a house	Yes	Land	No
Mayra	Nicaragua	30	1 son	Building a house and supporting her son	Yes	Land	No

*Affiliated to the Migrant Protection Protocol (MPP) program.

Source: Own elaboration.

AGENCY OF THE MIGRANT WOMAN, COMMUNICATIVE AGENCY, AND SOCIAL NETWORKS

The structures consolidated by the actions of various agents of migration governance, and supported by other more or less formal actors and institutions (mass media, managers of migration from illegality, the same networks of migrants “ahead” of a project that it must be read as a collective...), constitute a straitjacket that conditions the decisions and the future of a female subject crossed by four—or more—dimensions of identity marked by her vulnerability (at least, gender, migratory status, administrative irregularity, and national origin); but the subjection to these forces outside of herself is not absolute; rather, spaces open up in her journey that enable her to make decisions and thus exercise her agency.

The availability of resources to face and survive a hostile environment during displacement through that territory, even in the most precarious situations, has been accounted for from the sociology of migration to define the term agency as “the practices with which they face an unfavorable situation and contribute to improving their subjective well-being” (Willers, 2016,

p. 165); that is, agency is understood as the capacity for action in conditions of subordination under oppressive power structures.

The decisions made by migrant women in conditions of extreme vulnerability are not univocal reactions to given conditions; rather, these women also develop tactics that include the management of the information available to them. This way, they resist the objectifying effect of overwhelming normative structures, such that:

agency [...] is owned by the subject [...] it is not the possession of just any given subject, but of the normatized subject [...]. It is rational, intentional, voluntary, strategic action that sets in motion the modern subject, the full human [...] (Martínez, 2019, pp. 2-3).

Since this approach identifies the available communicative act as a key dimension in the exercise of agency during the migration process, the term “communicative agency” is proposed here, understood as all those practices that allow migrant subjects to make tactical use of the information they have available to keep in motion in the best possible conditions. This management takes place both at a collective level—among peers and among potentially “allied” agents—and at an individual level—issuing or omitting information as required by the occasion, and making decisions based on the knowledge acquired along the way.

In this way, communicative agency in migration is exercised in close dialectical tension between agency and communicative practices, the latter being understood as “those that are part of the real practices of people, which involve the production, circulation, and reception (appropriation and uses) of meanings within the framework of a mediated society, and which express elements of shared sensibilities” (Cabello, as cited in Ramírez, 2014, p. 112).

Special attention must be paid to framing and characterizing the exercise of communicative agency within the prominent role played by social networks in migration, since they allow circular flows of information, while developing and reproducing narratives and knowledge that enable people to continue migrating. In order to operationalize this concept, the definition that Rivera and Valdéz (2016) in turn pick up from Portes it is referred, for whom these networks are a “set of recurring associations between groups of people linked by occupational, family, cultural, or emotional ties. They become so important, to the extent that they are means for the acquisition of resources as scarce as capital and information” (Portes, 1999, as cited in Rivera & Valdéz, 2016, p. 12).

Beyond the ambivalence of this function—since they provide, but also hide or distort information—, it is undeniable that social networks provide a valuable resource to those who migrate, making it possible for migrants to develop their migratory tactics and, consequently, their capacity for agency.

Social networks both provide relevant information for tactical and strategic decision-making, and are nourished by the female subject who contributes with the knowledge acquired from their own experience; thus, these networks concentrate the maximum expression of the migrant’s communicative agency, understood as both a collective and an individual and autonomous subject,

who concentrates, transmits, and enables the exchange of knowledge and contacts to learn how to migrate, to “know how to migrate,” and to develop self-care practices for the migrants themselves and their loved ones. In short, the communicative agency exercised by migrant women acts as a weaver of networks that allow them to reduce their vulnerability by means of obtaining and managing information that enables them to anticipate some of the multiple dangers that threaten them, thereby also reducing uncertainty, and developing a sense that to some extent they are recovering the power that is stolen from them by power structures.

INFORMATION, COMMUNICATION, AND KNOWLEDGE IN THE EXERCISE OF AGENCY IN MIGRATION

The particular vulnerability of women in their migration journey forces them to take extreme precautionary and self-care measures, and this involves obtaining adequate information that is functional to the decisions they must make in order to overcome the structural obstacles that mark their journey. Their social capital, and the networks in which this capital is materialized and used, constitute the main source of information for decision-making. In this sense, it is agreed with Echeverría when he stated that communication plays a preponderant role in ensuring that migration prevails, since messages “become key resources in the decision to migrate” (Echeverría, 2014, p. 68). This work evidences how the information flows and social networks of the migrants who constitute the universe of this study support their communicative agency, understood as a basic instrument for their safety.

Regarding migrants’ decisions based on the knowledge acquired during their migration journey, Shaffer et al. (2018) argue, referring to Somali migration in South Africa and the United States, that the precariousness of the journey and the lack of safety of the routes alter their mobility plans. Shaffer et al. documented how aspirations, memories, and experiences—fueled by the migrant’s immediate environment and social networks—condition decision-making, transcending structural conditions beyond the individual, such as the current normative and legal situation. They also expose the way in which migrants make use of formal and informal means to acquire useful knowledge for their journey.

For their part, Candiz and Bélanger (2018) affirm that “all migrants develop different strategies that will shape their trajectories” (p. 281), also modifying their migration project. In this journey, migrant houses represent spaces of wait, yet not of immobility but rather of resistance. There, migrants can assimilate the information they have received and then reconfigure their project, while contributing to the strengthening of their social network and that of their fellow travelers. This does not mean that these houses constitute spaces for meeting peers free of mistrust, since there, too, a dominant attitude of caution and the strategic use of silence are necessary, which allows them to protect themselves, for example, from infiltrated agents or false migrants. Yet it does highlight how these shelters concentrate pertinent information for moving forward, information coming both from fleeting contacts and from fellow travelers, so that “information circulates like migrants, feeding the ‘migrant know-how’” (Candiz & Bélanger, 2018, p. 287).

Introducing the gender variable, Lyberaki et al. (2008) affirm that this largely explains the strategic use that migrants give to information, which determines how they access or interact with immigration laws and regulations. Regarding the management of their social interaction during migratory transit, Brigden (2018) refers to the tactical use of what it is understood as another way of exercising communicative agency: the modification of their own personal image to adapt it to certain contact situations. Thus, as it will be seen later when addressing the ways in which migrants make use of the projection of their personal image, “the transnational route becomes a space where gender is reinterpreted” (Brigden, 2018, p. 112).

Derived from this intersectionality of woman/migrant and linked to social networks, there are also studies focused on care work that, in addition to mental and physical effort, involves nurturing relationships (Tronto, 2013); because “affection and care have meaning when they arise and materialize in human relationships” (Posada & Castro, 2008, p. 27). For her part, Raghuram (2016) explains how migrant women develop reciprocal care relationships that, when exercised in non-intimate spaces, “hold the potential to implement the ethics of care, to respond in non-normative ways to the challenges posed by the place of care” (p. 515).

Along these lines, Velasco and Varela (2022) state that women tend to travel in groups, families, or spontaneous “families” [quotation marks are from the authors] that form along the way, becoming what they call “care communities in motion”. In this way, “while in transit, women continue to play a leading role in the social organization of the care and sustainability of the lives of migrant groups” (Velasco & Varela, 2022, p. 27), deploying networks of physical and emotional care among themselves, in which they share knowledge, food, water, and even expenses.

In these care communities, policies of silence and strategies of concealment are established based on what these migrant women decide to say or not, taking into account their own care and that of their loved ones (those who accompany them, those who wait for them, or those who stayed in their place of origin). Thus, “women measure out the information they tell their relatives and family members about the violence on the road in order to take care of them,” to which they add that “committed listening to the experiences of violence that other women experience is another form of care on the road” (Velasco & Varela, 2022, p. 30).

Delving into the problem of information circulation, Lyberaki et al. emphasize how “social and kinship ties, rather than State agents and institutions, are a predominant source of information on immigration processes” (Lyberaki et al., 2008, p. 482), and assert that the strategic use of information prevails over the content of immigration laws and regulations, since the patterns and strategies of those who migrate are based primarily on their expectations and on the rumors received from their social networks.

In line with this, Ramos observed that the spaces of migrant interaction favor their relationships, motivating them to accompany and help each other. In this context, “conversational networks” are woven that “offer knowledge about how to travel, with whom to travel, and what to do at certain key moments” (Ramos, 2017, p. 52). Here, the role of women is noted in the transformation of the

interaction dynamics, since the violence to which they are mostly exposed forces the group to modify its mechanisms of care (Ramos, 2017).

Ozkul and Jarrous (2021), focusing on refugees during their reception and resettlement processes, write about rumors, understanding them “as a collective process through which those facing an ambiguous situation negotiate verified and unverified information, perceptions, and assumptions, through different means, including word of mouth and social networks, to interpret such situations” (p. 2248).

In this way, the subject appears not only as a passive recipient of information, but actively participates in its construction process, questioning and granting or not validity to the data received.

The breeding ground for the generation of these rumors is fostered by long waits, by the unpredictability of the processes, and by the ambiguity of the decisions made by immigration authorities. Faced with the systematic uncertainty to which they are subject, the generation and dissemination of rumors helps migrants try to understand and explain the unexplained (or poorly explained), and allows them to make decisions appropriate to their circumstances, which represents an act of resistance against the denial of access to truthful and unequivocal information.

Likewise, emphasizing the idea of useful learning during transit, these authors understand the rumor as a product of the migratory experience itself: “rumors can arise after someone has heard or observed a specific incident involving other refugees and, therefore, can be seen as a lesson learned” (Ozkul & Jarrous, 2021, p. 2261). From positions closer to that of this work, Gandarias explains how “in certain situations, the silence of [migrant] women can constitute a form of agency” (Gandarias, 2019, p. 15), this being understood as part of a survival strategy.

Although this project has not addressed the role played by what can be called “virtual social networks”—that is, networks that are woven vicariously through the use of information technologies—their importance in the migration process is also undeniable. Several authors have paid attention to the relevance of this form of virtual communication for decision-making in migration (Ramírez, 2014; Rivera & Valdéz, 2016; Olvera, 2014), and have mostly described how the use of these contemporary technologies has streamlined, reduced the costs and made communications between those who migrate, their families, and their communities of origin more efficient.

For their part, Rivera and Valdéz (2016) underline the role of these networks in the reproduction of successful experiences, by channeling information and minimizing risks. In this same sense, both Olvera (2014) and Oroza and Puente (2017) agree that these networks represent a valuable capital that allows migrants to choose their destination and their paths of insertion in the receiving societies. Finally, Ramírez (2014) brings into the discussion the concept of communicative practices understood as a resource for migrants to maintain contact with their families in the place of origin, thus minimizing the impact of their absences by giving them the opportunity to keep up with emotional ties.

AGENTS AND ACTORS WHO SHAPE STRUCTURES
OF COERCION ON MIGRANT SUBJECTS

Although the general objective of this research is to understand how the communicative agency of migrant women is exercised, the results of the field work also include the identification and significance of the main agents, whether formal or informal, who constitute with their actions the structural network that conditions and oppresses the trajectories of those women. The following are the most relevant actors and agents identified by them, as well as the significance that some of them can convey.

Regarding the role of mass media in decision-making during migratory transit, it was found that when passing through Monterrey, migrant women habitually read local news, consumption that is the consequence of a constant state of alert and an urgent need to obtain the maximum possible knowledge about what is happening in a hostile environment. This knowledge is not only about information on current migration policies, but also includes events in daily life in the places through which they pass. With this practice, they can anticipate future situations of risk. For example, certain acts of violence, especially in the media, intensify the feeling of fear, which affects their behavior in the urban space while they wait to take the next step.

Paradoxically, the social networks that are established in and continue to exert their influence from the destination society contribute to the circulation of narratives that contain and transmit a certain distortion of the migratory reality. For example, those compatriots and relatives “who are ahead” often sugarcoat the reality they faced, both the dangers of the journey and the bureaucratic-administrative obstacles (Lyberaki et al., 2008; Roberts, 2021).

For example, given the CA-4 agreement (Central American Agreement on Free Mobility), by which El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua allow free transit to their citizens, the southern border of Mexico represents the first major administrative obstacle that migrants from these countries must face; however, all the interviewees began their journey with the mistaken idea that this was a relatively easy step, an idea they obtained from relatives, friends, or acquaintances who had already migrated. False ideas like this, transmitted from abroad, sometimes serve to inadvertently plan movements or decisions that will lead to failure in the migratory adventure.

But here, too, the communicative agency of the migrant who received these “immigration lies” appears, an agency now with a pernicious effect, since she herself will contribute to reproducing falsified information that projects a self-image of personal success. In this way, the interviewees also strive to omit or hide information about their hardships from their relatives and friends in order to avoid worrying them. This need for concealment means that, transcending the agency of the isolated subject, temporary alliances are established between migrants to maintain a complicit silence; thus, some migrants narrate how, upon meeting fellow countrymen and women in the shelters, they negotiated to keep their situation a secret from each other. Likewise, other migrants prefer to ignore their neighbors and avoid greeting them in order to hide their true situation (Field diary, April 25, 2022).

The most obvious agent of control is that constituted by the representatives of the immigration authority. The current conditions of the international political arena dynamize legislation and regulations on immigration, both in Mexican and U.S. territory. The constant modification of immigration policies and, consequently, of the “rules of the game”, makes it difficult for the information that migrants receive and transmit to conform to the real terms, which then results in confusion and limits their options to regularize their situation—if not making them impossible—. This worsens when the same representatives of the authority transmit erroneous information or, alternatively, falsify, manipulate, or omit information as it suits them, which re-victimizes the migrant.

On the other hand, based on erroneous information, many migrants move forward with the idea of turning themselves in and being detained, because they trust that they will be promptly released in U.S. territory, with their administrative situation regularized. Although they imagine that those days of detention will be the price to pay for regularizing their administrative situation and ceasing to be persecuted, the reality is that those days are usually only the prelude to their deportation. Furthermore, once detained, the vulnerability of migrant women takes on new nuances, such as the inaccessibility of information about their situation, their rights, and the procedures to which they are irremediably subject. This is how information isolation underlines their non-citizen status, aggravating the violation of their human and political rights. The same idea is put in reverse: they are deprived of access to information that would allow them to exercise their agency within a framework of equality.

The denial of access to information about their rights, the deprivation of identification documents, or the concealment of information regarding environmental conditions are acts that accompany administrative migration processes, as well as the denial of the migrants’ own voice and the annulment of their decision-making power. Likewise, the interrogations to which they are subjected, understood as discursive forms that “instigate and support the process of torture” (Butler, 2009, p. 23), constitute a tool of control that systematically calls into question their credibility. The effect of this control device is oriented towards the annulment or, at least, the minimization of the person, reducing them to a position of total defenselessness and submission to the will of the one judging them.

Migrant shelters, understood as spaces for the concentration and management of information, constitute an agent of ambivalent migration. On the one hand, they offer refuge and constitute an important communication node, both due to the information provided by the staff (Lara, 2021; Ríos & Gabarrot, 2021), and due to the information generated by the migrants themselves from the networks of solidarity and support that they weave in these meeting spaces (Candiz & Bélanger, 2018). But the staff of these shelters, in addition to guiding their users, also use the information they control at their own convenience, specifically to regulate the conduct of the users in accordance with the order established for the regular operation of the shelter (Doncel & Lara, 2021).

Due to their collaboration networks with national government bodies and international organizations that deal with migration, the staff of these shelters has exclusive access to information relevant to the migrants' plans, but their field of action is subject to the dictates of migration policies over which they have no control. Consequently, in the same way that the future of migrants is conditioned by the information they obtain in these migrant houses, although they also have individual and collective agency, migrant houses manage information from a position that oscillates between the exercise of their effective power and subjection to the power exercised over them by the different governmental bodies ultimately responsible for managing migration.

The decision-making field of the numerous and diverse migrant houses in Mexico is dotted with equally varied forms and meanings of using information and power. Therefore, although the majority makes a laudable effort to accompany and guide migrants, there are also cases in which the exercise of power is directed towards personal benefit, not differing much from the usual practices among the so-called coyotes.

Below is an example of this practice, reported by one of the informants, a story that also shows the consequences that this type of action has on the possible channels for the circulation of migration flows:

[The staff of certain shelters] now took all the people to Piedras Negras and want to charge them 500 dollars [to help them cross]. It's not fair, now they are going to burn that border and make the people who are there lose their chance there; because, just as they ruined the crossing through Nuevo Laredo, now they are going to ruin it there (Karina, personal communication, October 7, 2022).

More common and systemic than specific dishonest practices, such as the one mentioned, is the hanging around migrant houses by *coyotes*, opportunists who turn the need and urgency of thousands of migrants into a lucrative means of subsistence. Thus, during their stay in the shelters, which are a point of rest and reflection on the next steps, migrants are forced to deal with these people, who are key pieces in the flow of information they receive. Although there is no trust in them, circumstances and the absence of alternatives leave them no other option than to make this journey relying on those who still inspire uncertainty and/or fear in them.

Beyond the degree of trustworthiness of each coyote—among whom there are notable differences—they are the ones who best know the routes, the dangers, and the conditions of the trip. In this sort of professionalization, there are cases that transcend recurring moral judgment, formed through numerous accounts of how coyotes deceive and/or constitute an essential element of danger for the migrant; some positive experiences can also be found (although it is not known how exceptional they are):

very good coyote, we were not attacked... nor they left us stranded there, abandoned. We did not even get on a trailer, it was all buses (Mayra, personal communication, October 15, 2022)

[The coyotes] told us to grab the other guide and swim hanging from him; they told us to grab on to him and put our foot on a branch, but we did not even get wet. And from there we

walked in the direction of the instructions they gave us (Miriam, personal communication, June 8, 2022)

A third case is that Coyotes provide very useful information in times of extreme vulnerability, even key to survival: “I was wrapped in a bag, that protected us quite a bit from the cold. [The coyotes] had already told us [that] the others [on the boat] suffered from the cold” (Anaí, personal communication, June 16, 2022).

Returning to the dangerous aspect of the coyote and *coyotaje*, they also manipulate at will the information they possess, according to their own interest. This is how this power over the migrant can lead to situations of extreme danger, if not outright tragedy (kidnappings or mass killings, some documented by the press). On the other hand, even when the coyote does not control relevant information, he may still make mistakes that expose the people he guides to greater risks: “the guides [coyotes] were so drunk, stoned, that they did not even know where they had to take us through [...] I feel like we started walking in circles” (Anaí, personal communication, June 16, 2022).

THE FEMALE MIGRANT SUBJECT-ACTOR AS INFORMATION MANAGER AND DECISION-MAKER: FROM SUBJECTION TO AGENCY

The decisions made by migrant women are not univocal reactions to given conditions, but these women also develop tactics that include the management of the information they have. This management happens both at a collective level—among peers—and at an individual level—issuing or omitting information as the occasion requires, and making decisions based on the knowledge acquired along the way—.

Generation and Circulation of Information Among Peers: A Source of Fear and Motivation

A valuable source of information comes from peers, especially in migrant homes. Here the information obtained can encourage them, motivate them, and help them make timely decisions, but also frighten them and discourage them from moving forward. In this last sense, other migrants serve as a sounding board for the dramatic news broadcast by the mass media. In this way, on a substratum of clandestinity and xenophobia, narratives are propagated in which migrants like them are victims of violent crimes, with the fear of kidnappings being recurrently propagated.

Facing a hostile context in which the need to trust is as great as the impossibility of doing so, it is in the fellow adventurers that they can support each other with the greatest probability of obtaining a positive response. The greatest potential for trust derives from the possible complicity between those who are living a similar experience, both in expectations and objectives, as well as in conditions and dangers. Thus, camaraderie and intra-group solidarity become their main weapon of self-defense to collectively face countless dangers and difficulties. An example of this is gregariousness, the congregation of bodies and wills as a means of self-protection: “when they

[other migrants] said it was a dangerous place, we passed in huge groups, they were not going to do anything to us if we were many” (Karina, personal communication, October 7, 2022).

Based on this trust, migrant women decide in one direction or another; for example, to argue or present their case to the corresponding immigration authorities—“since [the U.S. immigration police] put us in that program [the MPP] they [their fellow] told us: ‘say this and this so they let you in’” (Miriam, personal communication, June 8, 2022)—, or to find ways to cross borders previously opened by other migrant companions. Likewise, they recommend to each other the coyotes they consider most reliable, so they go to those from whom they obtain the best references through “word of mouth” (Field diary, June 16, 2022).

But this greater degree of trust among them does not mean that the information obtained is reliable—although, if it is erroneous, it will probably be due to a mistaken perception and not due to a dark personal interest of the person who issues it—. Hence, expectations and hopes are often generated in migrant homes based on misinformation or unfounded rumors. In this same sense, it was possible to record how several migrants expressed their concern because a companion had told them that they only had the right to three hearings in the immigration court and that, if they did not obtain asylum in these hearings, they would remain detained in the icebox,⁴ and also be prohibited from entering Mexico (Field diary, May 9, 2022).

Given the lack of information to which they are subjected, together with the anxiety to obtain any potentially useful information in a situation of permanent uncertainty and vulnerability, any rumor that sounds minimally plausible is unquestioned and assumed to be true. After uncertain rumors have fueled their migratory expectations, successive clashes with reality are responsible for disproving them, leading then to greater confusion.

Nonetheless, the information obtained through this means represents an important aid and guide for making appropriate decisions, from the most everyday to the most strategic—since it helps them to wade through the tests imposed by the immigration authorities and policies of both countries—:

I had a friend who told me: “if you want to leave and immigration stops you, they will ask you about the national anthem or who was the president of such and such year”. And so... I learned the minimum things so that they [Mexican immigration authorities] believe that you are from here [Mexico] (Karina, personal communication, October 7, 2022).

Individual Information Management: Tactics, Tricks, Strategies, and Decision-Making

Just as various information-emitting agents instrumentalize and manipulate it to satisfy their own interests, these women, thanks to the agency acquired through their learning along the way, see the ways and opportunities to use what they know to transmit information about themselves that

⁴ This is the popular name migrants give to the detention centers to which they are transferred when immigration authorities catch them.

favors the achievement of their objectives. It is about strategically playing with truth and lies based on the information obtained along the way. The appropriate management of information will include its tactical use, but also its concealment, exaggeration, opacity, distortion of context, denial of true facts, invention of unreal facts, etc.

A recurring lie refers to sexual orientation, as rumors point to the idea that it is easier for lesbian women to initiate a process of reception and regularization of their migrant status. To do so, migrants registered with the MPP had to convince U.S. authorities that, because of their sexual orientation, being in Mexico represented a threat to their lives, or that they were victims of violence. The measure of pretending to be lesbians is perceived to be so effective that, to make the simulation more credible, they go beyond the personal statement and agree to present themselves as the romantic partner of another migrant: “the girls said they were lesbians, they pretended to be a couple. Some Cubans were allowed in [...] there were about eight of them and four Nicaraguans, all lesbians [laughs]” (Miriam, personal communication, June 8, 2022).

But declaring oneself a lesbian will not suffice. Proving in one way or another the veracity of such intimate information is extremely difficult, as it also requires interaction with another for it to acquire consistency and, ultimately, validation. In the face of the pretense (or not) of a certain sexual orientation, the administration’s strategies to filter out the smallest number of cases are opposed, strategies such as demonstrative questioning of this personal condition. This questioning includes questions to measure the degree of knowledge of the social reality of a minority, and the personal involvement in this collective cause, but they also abruptly delve into the intimacy of the person being questioned.

Faced with the pressure exerted, the migrant woman learns to reverse in her favor the coercive exercise of authority to which she is subjected: “Doña Tata [administrator of a shelter] says that one of those who likes other women was kicked out of the shelter, and that earned her the right to stay there [in the United States]” (Karina, personal communication, October 7, 2022). Likewise, the notification of a suicide attempt can be reversed into an opportunity to achieve the goal, then being understood, paradoxically, as a tactic for survival.

She has no one to help her with the paperwork and they say, I don’t know to what extent this is true, that they kicked her out [of the shelter]. They told her to leave, they threw her out on the street and when they came back she was cutting her wrists. There was a bloody mess in the room, in the showers and on the floor, it was sad (Miriam, personal communication, June 8, 2022).

The staging of this act—performative due to its public and conspicuous nature in the eyes of colleagues and authorities at the shelter—constituted (apparently) an opportunity to evade an adverse situation: “but they say... that a lawyer seems to have helped her and [she has already] crossed [the border]” (Anaí, personal communication, June 16, 2022).

The exaggeration of suffering before the judging authorities is a widely used resource, handling, calibrating, devising, omitting, or issuing in a timely manner the enormous amount of information obtained from the migratory experience itself.

Interviewer: And what did you say about Mexico? The truth?

Miriam (personal communication, June 8, 2022): No way. In that case, nothing about a plane or anything, adding that in Mexico we were delayed... I don't even remember the dates I gave them, but that I had delayed in Mexico. [I didn't say] anything about a plane [that I arrived by plane], or anything like that.

In certain moments of tension, expressing distress and exalting gender performativity is advisable, taking advantage of customary gender norms that support a discourse that assigns to women attributes of vulnerability, naivety, and unprotectedness: “when I’m on the call [to appear before the immigration court] [and] they’re asking me [why I’m requesting asylum in the United States], my friends tell me: ‘Cry so they believe you’” (Miriam, personal communication, June 8, 2022).

These migrant women deploy survival tactics that are the result of “the invisible wisdom of mobility,” referring to “knowledge about transit routes, shelters, border-crossing strategies, and more” (Papadopoulos, as cited in Angulo-Pasel, 2018, p. 897). This acquired knowledge is used to adapt the hegemonic gender norms to their interests, “feminizing” their behavior, or masculinizing it by representing attributes culturally attributed to the male gender. This is what Karina did (personal communication, October 7, 2022), publicly displaying—as a form of resistance—a brave and dominant attitude: “I came as if I was in the know, I came right in front of that big group.”

The cultural relevance of acquired knowledge or behavior transcends those behaviors governed by dominant gender norms, so they learn to decipher other cultural codes. For example, in order to go unnoticed they learn to pronounce different accents and dialectal variants of Spanish, which is not a minor issue if one takes into account that “the subject who speaks is constituted by the language he speaks, and so language is the condition of possibility of the speaking subject and not simply an instrument of expression” (Butler, 2009, p. 54).

I had to say that I was Mexican. When it was time to cross through Arriaga, it was as if they wanted to get the truth out of me [that she is a migrant and a foreigner]. They asked me: “What’s the word for this?”; I say: “well, that’s a *cinturón* [belt]”⁵...I already more or less knew what they were going to ask me... In the end they let me go (Karina, personal communication, October 7, 2022).

At times, the skills developed to achieve a kind of cultural camouflage are combined with the social capital acquired along the way. Thus, those who stand out for their social skills have an

⁵ The word for belt in Nicaragua and Honduras is *faja*, so calling it that instead of *cinturón* would imply revealing oneself as a foreigner.

advantage that will allow them to socialize more fluently with the local population and, in this way, learn more quickly and effectively those cultural codes that help them glimpse where the cracks are opening up through which they can continue to advance in conditions of greater security.

[To travel from Monterrey to Piedras Negras] I had the contact of this guy who sells tickets outside [the bus station]. They picked me up outside the station and so on... and then, since it was September 15,⁶ there were no checkpoints at all (Karina, personal communication, October 7, 2022).

These tricks are implemented in the presentation of the person themselves, by learning how to “disappear,” pretending to be asleep while traveling on buses—to go unnoticed and not be questioned by the immigration authorities who check them—, or when their life is in danger—during a kidnapping they witnessed, Rita’s nephew asked her “what do I do?”, to which his aunt replied “pretend to be asleep”—; but also by learning how to re-present themselves, like when they dress in a certain way to try to evade the stigma of poverty—“wear the best clothes, in Ciudad del Carmen we got ready to look for good clothes; our hair all done, everything, as best as possible” (Miriam, personal communication, June 8, 2022).

This last trick, the ornamentation of the body to simulate a status that allows them to enter spaces otherwise forbidden to them, supposes another performative act with which they expand their capacity for action. Thus, the appearance of belonging to a certain social class results from an interpretation of certain codes aimed at evading situations of vulnerability. If it is understood this way of presenting oneself to the world as a discursive form, non-verbal yet very effective in communicative terms, it is seen that its performative character derives from the “power that discourse has to make real what it names” (Butler, 2002, p. 316).

If the performative act is understood as “forms of speech that authorize” (Butler, 2002, p. 18) a speech act that “says, or says in a different way, what it intends to say” (Butler, 2009, p. 29), it is seen that migrants are fully aware of the performative capacity of speech, both of the possibility of manipulating tone, terms, accents, sayings, etc.—“you get to know someone by hearing” (Rita, personal communication, June 14, 2022)—, and of managing silence when this is convenient—“you have to try not to talk” (Miriam, personal communication, June 8, 2022)—. In this case, when they learn to keep quiet to avoid danger, as well as when they pretend to be asleep in the face of the threat of a checkpoint and possible identification, these migrants seek a way to achieve disappearance; they make themselves invisible in order to materialize their dream and, finally, become citizens in fact and by law, subjects with full agency over their lives.

⁶ National holiday in Mexico; Independence Day is celebrated on this date.

CONCLUSION

The migrant woman, despite being enormously exposed, uses the information she receives (or does not receive) from different agents to exercise her communicative agency; it has been seen how migrants are capable of circumventing the designs that the structural framework they must navigate tries to impose on them. This way the idea is established that the migrant woman has sufficient communicative agency to present effective resistance, since this agency is what enables her to achieve her most immediate vital objectives.

The female subject can reverse the coercive use of information she has to endure, into a useful tool for her purposes, instrumentalizing rules, legal requirements (such as prioritizing sexual minorities to obtain political refuge), or customary norms (such as those pertaining to gender roles). The range of tactical decisions they make based on what they have learned along the way (Shaffer et al., 2018; Ozkul & Jarrous, 2021) is broad and diverse, focusing here on those that require a communicative act, both verbal and non-verbal. These are communicative practices that involve exaggeration, dissimulation, simulation, and lying. The latter has manifested itself as a recurring resource and exercise of their agency, since circumstances push them to reproduce the same lies that led them to their current situation, thus generating a circular flow of information far removed from the reality they must face.

Another striking tactic is the management of silence and words, which is read as moments of disappearance and reappearance under certain conditions when circumstances so require. The voluntary, momentary, circumstantial, and self-interested “disappearance” contrasts markedly with the forced and systematic disappearance of which they are victims by the authorities, especially when they are locked up, interrogated, deprived of their documents, and isolated from the outside world, which affects them severely and impacts on their own idea of themselves, since this string of acts repeatedly deny their personal identity.

The structural agents observed range from those most immune to the agency of the female migrant subject to those most influenced by it. Mass media are the most alien to their communicative agency, followed by the immigration authorities, although in the face of the latter, migrant women have demonstrated to possess resources for resistance. In the coyotes the authors have observed a professionalized and necessary figure in the face of the voids left by the State; and that, beyond the widely-spread negative stereotype—precisely by the media and immigration authorities—, they are more flexible and permeable to the agency of the migrant women they serve.

On the other hand, migrant houses constitute liminal spaces of encounter, between the pressure of the authorities and the collective communicative agency exercised by the migrant women who meet there—reaffirming what was observed by Candiz and Bélanger (2018)—. In this way, the generation of rumors, the exchange of information, and the formation of collaboration networks between peers constitutes a communicative node resulting from the interaction of female migrant subjects and strongly opposed to the structures that try to control the flow of their wills.

Summarizing: in a situation of constant uncertainty, it is essential to obtain reliable information and, consequently, to be able to trust the agents who issue it. This trust is woven through personal interactions, mostly with those who are closer and more familiar with each other, and even more so if they share objectives and/or interests. Communicative practices—whether they transmit true, false, or inaccurate information—lead to the development of social links that encourage to think about self-care practices from an essentially relational dimension (Raghuram, 2016).

Translation: Fernando Llanas.

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