

Migration as a source of violation of children's rights

La migración como fuente de vulneración de los derechos humanos de la niñez

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Abstract

The problems derived from the phenomenon of migration in route to the United States have exceeded the responses, both from the countries of origin and transit, impacting children who migrate and who live exposed to the risk of suffering violations of their human rights. To contribute to research sensitive to their needs, we recovered the voices of 34 girls and 42 boys—from Mexico and the North of Central America—from January to July 2021 to explore the conditions of vulnerability and their experiences during transit through Mexico. Through their testimonies, they became aware of the experiences and emotional repercussions derived from conditions such as insecurity, violence, and poverty, which they experience along their route and undermine their right to an optimal life.

Keywords: migration, children, vulnerability, children's rights, psychosocial perspective.

Resumen

Las problemáticas derivadas del fenómeno de la migración en la ruta a Estados Unidos han rebasado las respuestas, tanto de los países de origen como de tránsito, lo que impacta a la niñez que migra y que vive expuesta al riesgo de sufrir violaciones a sus derechos humanos. Con el fin de contribuir a una investigación que sea sensible de sus necesidades es que el presente estudio recuperó las voces de 34 niñas y 42 niños —originarios de México y el norte de Centroamérica—de enero a julio de 2021 con el propósito de explorar sus condiciones de vulnerabilidad y lo experimentado durante el tránsito por México. A través de sus testimonios se dio cuenta de las experiencias y

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repercusiones emocionales derivadas de condiciones como inseguridad, violencia y pobreza que viven a lo largo de su ruta y que merman su derecho a una vida óptima.

Palabras clave: migración, niñez, vulnerabilidad, derechos de la niñez, perspectiva psicosocial.

Introduction

The violation of human rights experienced by Mexican children and those of the countries of the northern region of Central America—Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador—in the context of migration is evident and is continually reflected in the media of the world as being one of the most critical problems of our time. Inequality, poverty, violence, insecurity and corruption in these countries have been the conditions driving the emigration of entire families. The underlying factor has been the deterioration of public safety and the ineffective application of international treaties to protect children in their countries of origin (Hernández Hernández, 2019; Lusk & Sanchez Garcia, 2021; National Immigration Forum, 2019; United Nations Children’s Fund [Unicef], 2018). Exposure to danger and the lack of guaranteed human rights continue during their transit through the Mexican territory and upon reaching the border between Mexico and the United States (Kandel, 2021; Lusk et al., 2019; Thompson, 2019), leading children who migrate to suffer traumatic experiences that are especially harmful to their development and to experience cognitive, emotional and social impacts (Chavez-Baray et al., 2022; Van der Kolk, 2015).

In addition to the above, initiatives and public policies aimed at the protection of the rights of children have been constructed under a predominantly adult-centered discourse that does not consider their specific conditions or needs. As such, in order to contribute to research on migration, public health and children, the present study, using the psychosocial interview technique, recounted and summarized the voices of 34 girls and 42 boys—originally from Mexico and northern Central America—to explore the conditions of vulnerability and their experiences during transit through Mexico.

The argumentative construction of this article is based on a psychosocial theoretical framework (Lara Espinosa, 2015) from which conditions such as insecurity, violence and poverty are analyzed because they emotionally impact (Sainz, 2003) and violate the human rights of children who migrate (Convención sobre los derechos del niño, 1989). Figures are subsequently presented that reflect the reality of the conditions under which the child population who migrates, both in their own countries of origin and during their transit to the northern border, lives.

In this way, context is given to the results obtained in this research, built from a qualitative phenomenological approach explained in the method section, which also contains a description of the participating girls and boys, the characteristics of the analysis of the information and the ethical guidelines considered.

The testimonies of the girls and boys who experience the phenomenon of migration showed the importance of listening to them and understanding them to direct actions sensitive to their experiences traveling through Mexico, to the meanings they give them, to the attributions of security and to the emotional repercussions derived from the conditions of vulnerability that undermine their human rights.

Psychosocial framework

Human rights and conditions of vulnerability

Children who migrate, regardless of their social status or nationality, are protected in the statutes contained in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (Convención sobre los derechos del niño, 1989). The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (CIDH) states that it is the obligation of States to ensure that the authorities within the scope of their respective competencies adopt, implement and apply their migration policies by *mainstreaming* the perspective of human rights. Violations of the rights of children in migration fall directly on the States, which have the duty to adopt special measures of protection and assistance (Alto Comisionado de las Naciones Unidas para los Refugiados [ACNUR] & Consejo de la Judicatura Federal, 2017).

However, laws, policies and programs lack specific provisions on children in a migrant situation, as they are usually considered within the family unit, with needs expressed by adults. Similarly, public policies aimed at protecting the rights of children, in general, do not consider their specific condition, needs and voice.

Consequently, children who migrate are not recognized as persons with rights, placing barriers to accessing public resources administered by the countries of transit and destination, such as shelter, health, security, education services and even identification of their existence because many migrate undocumented, which leads to a greater risk of suffering human rights violations (Chavez-Baray et al., 2022; CIDH, 2015). Children who experience migration are at risk and therefore are under a situation where they confront vulnerability related, above all, to conditions such as insecurity, violence and poverty.

Insecurity

The right to social security is fundamental to guarantee all people their human dignity when they face circumstances that deprive them of their ability to fully exercise their human rights. Social security contributes to personal and social well-being and includes a set of public services, whose fundamental responsibility lies with the State (ACNUDH, 2022).

However, high levels of violence have made Mexico and the countries of northern Central America one of the most dangerous regions in the world, so much so that the social security of these countries has not managed to reduce the high rates of impunity and there is an increase in the defenselessness of people. As a result, vulnerability has become the dominant social trait of these regions.

Violence

Violence is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon that involves the intentional use of physical or psychological force and that negatively impacts people, a group or a community by causing trauma, psychological harm, developmental problems or death in many cases (Krug et al., 2003).

Decades of civil war and political instability sowed the seeds of the complex criminal ecosystem that currently plagues Mexico and the countries of northern Central America, for example, drug cartels and kidnapping, as well as transnational gangs such as Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and Barrio 18 (M-18). The decrease in public safety and the ineffective application of justice to protect families and children have been the main drivers of forced migration and a determining factor that contributes to child migration (Hernández Hernández, 2019; Lusk & Sanchez Garcia, 2021; National Immigration Forum, 2019; Thompson, 2019; Unicef, 2018).

The state of vulnerability continues during land transit through Mexico to reach the border with the United States and is characterized by its intensity and the potential exposure to different forms of violence, such as xenophobia, abuse by security forces or becoming easy prey for criminals (Kandel, 2021). Children not only witness violence but also suffer direct or indirect experiences, ranging from threats of various kinds to witnessing homicides (Manzi, 2020).

Poverty

The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (Oficina del Alto Comisionado para los Derechos Humanos, 2014, p. 2) has defined poverty through the intersection between the capabilities approach and the human rights approach and has declared that it is “a human condition of deprivation of resources, capabilities, choices, security and power necessary for the enjoyment of an adequate standard of living and other civil, cultural, economic, political and social rights”. No social phenomenon has as much impact on human rights as the poverty that confines children who suffer it to serious conditions of vulnerability and that puts their integrity and lives at risk.

Therefore, poverty is a form of structural violence and takes a transgenerational form, which makes it difficult to fight and thus triggers the emigration of people, families and even entire communities in conditions of vulnerability (Hernández Hernández, 2019). For families, different situations of violence, insecurity and social disadvantage are intertwined to constitute a deep threat to their lives in the face of which displacement is the only hope for survival.

In the case of children in a migrant situation, various conditions are combined that complicate the possibility of combating the aspects that subject them to their situation of vulnerability, such as reduced access to health and security. Limited material resources are consumed for their migratory purpose, and extreme poverty becomes an aggravating factor of the same vulnerability.

Emotional impact

Children who migrate, in many cases, are impacted by the experience of a significantly adverse situation, and their ability to counteract such an impact is a function of previous experiences and living conditions that have affected them. If these experiences and previous conditions are poverty, insecurity and violence, the emotional impact and its degree of affectation can exceed their resources for adaptation and resilience (Ungar, 2012; Beristain, 2008).

Emotional impact is defined as an influx of excessive emotions from an event characterized by its intensity that threatens the psychological integrity of the person (Giacomantone & Mejía, 1997). Sainz (2003) describes emotional impact as an intense affective state of brief development, where a significant situation is that which triggers this emotion and involves biopsychosocial factors that have manifestations at the cognitive, subjective, neurophysiological and interactional levels.

In childhood, exposure to traumatic events is especially harmful because it interrupts aspects of development in the cognitive, emotional and social domains (Chavez-Baray et al., 2022; Van der Kolk, 2015). For example, some girls or boys may lose recently achieved milestones, such as bladder control and even language. Similarly, in some cases, exposure to traumatic events will lead to adverse long-term mental health outcomes related to learning and memory, social relationships, emotional functioning, revictimization and psychiatric disorders (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2014).

Background

According to figures from Unicef (n. d.-b), in Mexico, 51% of children live in a context of poverty; of this percentage, 20% live in extreme poverty (approximately four million of the child population). In El Salvador, the poverty rate exceeds 40%, affecting more than two million children (Rogers, 2020). In Guatemala, 52.4% of the population lives in poverty (Banco Mundial, 2021), and the child malnutrition rate is 80% (Unicef, n. d.-a).

Poverty in Honduras increased 70% in 2020 due to the path of hurricanes Eta and Iota, which destroyed much of the country's infrastructure; coupled with the economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, 33% of the population was left with food insecurity, directly affecting children's health, growth, education and security (Canahuati Duron, 2021).

Children in the aforementioned countries are 10 times more likely to be murdered than children in the United States (Acuna Garcia, 2018). In El Salvador and Honduras, a boy or a girl is a victim of homicide every day; in Guatemala, the number of violent childhood deaths per day triples (Unicef, 2018). In Mexico, from January to September 2019, every day, four girls or boys died as a result of violence, and 30 000 children were kidnapped and forced to actively work in organized crime (Comisión Nacional de los Derechos Humanos [CNDH], 2020; López, 2019). Girls frequently face additional violence, abuse and discrimination related to the deeply rooted historical oppression of their gender (CNDH, 2020).

From the gender perspective, girls are often exposed to different dangers than boys. While 72% of the victims of sexual abuse are girls, 65% of the detected cases of

trafficking for forced labor in agricultural fields and recruitment to organized crime involve boys (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2018). To aggravate this situation, due to confinement during the COVID-19 pandemic, gangs were able to more easily identify children in a vulnerable condition (Dreifuss, 2021).

Such situations of vulnerability coexist simultaneously and are exacerbated in such a way that it is unsustainable for many families, causing them to leave their country (International Organization for Migration, 2019; Hernández Hernández, 2019). In 2019, Mexican immigration authorities identified more than 52 000 children in a situation of migration (Convención sobre los derechos del niño, 1989), and in 2021, under the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, it increased nine-fold (Fondo de las Naciones Unidas para la Infancia [Unicef Mexico], 2021). Stressful events of such magnitude and chronicity at this stage of the life cycle can have irreversible effects. For example, it is impossible to reverse many of the effects of malnutrition and deprivation that reduce growth and development during childhood.

Faced with the pressing problem of childhoods lived in the context of migration, the present study was developed from a psychosocial framework (Lara Espinosa, 2015) based on the human rights (Convención sobre los derechos del niño, 1989) during middle childhood (Osher et al., 2020) and from a gender perspective. It is of special interest to retrieve the voices of girls and boys who experience migration, seeking their right to be heard and understood (Chacón C., 2015) because the study of migration and the issues concerning childhood are typically dominated by an approach based on the interpretations and interests of adults (ACNUR & Consejo de la Judicatura Federal, 2017). Therefore, it was essential for the research team to refer to those who participated in the interviews as “girls and boys” to recognize gender positions and the visibility of childhood.

This research highlights the right of children to form their judgment freely and to be heard. This right is regulated in the Convention on the Rights of the Child in Article 12, which states that State parties must guarantee the right of girls and boys to express their opinions freely in all matters that affect them (Convención sobre los derechos del niño, 1989).

The significance in the context of migration is that in addition to being regulated by the convention, each girl or boy has the right to be heard directly, without intermediaries, so that the relevant authority can act in accordance with his or her best interests, without the will of the parents or guardians replacing that of the girl's or boy's. This situation can be crucial in cases of non-refoulement to the country of origin (ACNUR & Consejo de la Judicatura Federal, 2017).

Due to the above and to contribute to research on migration, public health and childhood, the present study aimed to explore the conditions of vulnerability and experiences of transit through the narrative expressions of 34 girls and 42 boys between 8 and 12 years of age from Mexico and the northern region of Central America who were migrating in the company of a mother, father or legal guardian and staying overnight in a shelter for migrants in Chiapas or in Chihuahua en route to the United States.

Method

Design

The present study was conducted from a qualitative phenomenological approach that allowed us to explore the conceptual world of the participating girls and boys to understand the meaning they construct around their migratory experience. To achieve this, psychosocial interviews were used to evoke genuine, meaningful and culturally relevant responses to open-ended questions. In addition, we obtained demographic information and explored the experiences, emotions and interpretations during their migration journey.

Participants

For selecting participants, convenience sampling was used, following a strategy of critical case sampling (Patton, 1990, pp. 169-186), which allowed obtaining the greatest amount of information and evidence relevant to children experiencing migration. Thirty-four girls and 42 boys between 8 and 12 years of age who spoke Spanish and who traveled accompanied by their mother, father or legal guardian were invited to participate voluntarily through informed assent and parental/guardian permission. The interviews were conducted in person, from January to July 2021, in shelters on the southern border and the northern border of Mexico intended only for people in a migrant situation. In general, the shelters that receive people who travel the migration route give priority to those families in transit with girls and boys.

Girls and boys from Mexico and the northern region of Central America converge in Tapachula, Chiapas (southern border of Mexico), because this city has an immigration station that grants transit visas through Mexico. Mexicans who arrive from neighboring regions also gather here to request information on less risky routes and resources such as clothing and food, which the shelter usually provide. Ciudad Juárez is the second most important port of entry to the United States (Owuor, 2019).

Information analysis

The interpretative framework was phenomenology, and inductive coding and thematic analysis of the narratives were performed. Initially, the interviews were transcribed, and subsequently, through a series of rereadings, open and focused coding was carried out through the use of MAXQDA 2020, which allowed the identification of emerging themes and their connections and patterns. This information was systematized in a table of themes based on the identification of the conditions of vulnerability, the experiences in transit through Mexico and the emerging theme that transcended the objective of the research and was assigned the name *security attributions* (see Table 1). Finally, the results were written.

Table 1. Superordinate and subordinate themes

Superordinate themes	Subordinate themes
Conditions of vulnerability	Poverty
	Violence
	Insecurity
Experiences in transit through Mexico	The most difficult situations
	Emotional repercussions
Security attributions (emerging theme)	Family
	Faith
	Play

Source: analysis of the psychosocial interview (2021)

Ethical considerations

The study was conducted following the guidelines for research with vulnerable groups of the ethics committee of the University of Texas at El Paso. According to the Institutional Review Board (IRB), girls and boys are people who have not reached the legal age to consent to the procedures involved in academic research. Therefore, parental permission was needed. Therefore, those who migrated without being accompanied by their mother, father or legal guardian were not included.

The mother, father or guardian was asked for their permission, via informed consent, for their daughter or son to participate in the study. Similarly, girls and boys were invited to participate by reading an informed assent form. The documents were presented to them both in writing and verbally, explaining the benefits of participating in the study, the confidentiality and management of the information, the voluntary nature of their participation, and the contribution that their participation would have for the purposes of the study, science and society in general. Finally, the researcher allowed enough time for the child to think about their participation before accepting.

Throughout the interactions with the participants, we tried to use a language that was sensitive to their age so as to establish a communication channel in which they could understand the questions that were asked; similarly, we sought to create a dynamic, throughout the interview, that made the boys and girls feel free to express their ideas and ask as many questions as they felt necessary.

Results

Although the COVID-19 pandemic situation at that time presented a new wave of increase in cases and vaccines were not yet available, the team decided to document the historical moment of migrant children and interviewed in person, during the months of January to July 2021, 34 girls and 42 boys who ranged in ages from 8 to 12 years old; 38 were interviewed at the shelter on the southern border, and 38 were interviewed at the shelter on the northern border of Mexico. Both shelters are intended only for people who migrate.

The average age was 9.9 years. Of the total participants, 44.7% were girls, and 55.3% were boys, originally from Mexico (34.2%), Honduras (23.7%), El Salvador (22.4%) and Guatemala (19.7%). Overall, the girls and boys who participated in the study traveled in the company of at least one adult relative. In 55.2% of cases, it was the mother who migrated with the participant, whether accompanied by more children or only the participant; in contrast, only 2.6% of boys and girls migrated only with their father.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and emigration, all participants attended formal school. The highest percentage (27.6%) attended the fourth grade of primary school. Considering that the average age was 10 years, in general, the girls and boys attended the school grade corresponding to the regulations of the schools of the countries of Central America and Mexico.

Throughout the interview, the participants made practical use of language to communicate and included conversation skills. Their attitude toward the interview was one of openness, trust and willingness, which allowed us to observe through their answers some nuances that differentiated the moments through which they traveled within the stage of middle childhood (Osher et al., 2020; Mah & Ford-Jones, 2012).

Girls and boys of 8 and 9 years old gave explanations of the facts in a polarized way, for example, when referring to good and evil: "I would tell another girl not to do bad things because God will punish you" (girl from Honduras, 8 years old). Girls and boys from 10 to 12 years old, in general, gave explanations considering the intentions behind the events; for example, a 10-year-old boy from Guatemala explained it this way: "Here in the shelter there is not much to eat, but they do everything possible so that we all eat at least rice and beans".

From a psychosocial perspective and under the framework of human rights, the following is an analysis of the results derived from the themes that emerged in the narratives of the girls and boys about the conditions of vulnerability and experiences in transit through Mexico and in the security attributions they used to move forward.

Conditions of vulnerability

The conditions of vulnerability reflect the violation of the fundamental rights of access to health, education and security that should be sought for children. The narratives of the participants refer to stories of inequality, poverty, disease, "covid" (as they refer to COVID-19), hunger, school dropout, abuse, violence, extortion, corruption and criminals (see Table 2).

Among the perceptions expressed by girls and boys of what it means to live in poverty is being hungry, having lost their education due to lack of technology during the pandemic, not having a home, not having toys, and the inability to access health and safety services, among other services.

Their narratives invariably contained some sign of violence directed toward them and toward their families. In turn, it was identified that violence occurred in different ways based on the region of origin. Those who came from El Salvador and Honduras tended to be victims of gang aggression, unlike those who came from Guatemala and the indigenous regions of Mexico, who more frequently reported having been victims of both the dispossession of their lands and witnessing murders by criminal groups. Finally, another group from Mexico shared having suffered extortion by criminals or by their own community, who sought them mainly for the purpose of recruitment for self-defense groups (see Table 2). These situations were the main reasons for them to emigrate.

Finally, another of the themes that emerged within the conditions of vulnerability is that concerning insecurity, according to the testimonies that the girls and boys shared about their experiences with authority figures, such as immigration agents and federal police, they refer to reflecting on the role that these figures play in the face of the phenomenon of migration. The above is summarized in Table 2, after their narratives in which they shared the experiences of violence, corruption, murder, loss of their home and protection of criminals.

Similarly, they expressed having experienced both anger and indignation after having been victims of actions promoted by such authority figures, in addition to describing them as liars, extortionists, violent, corrupt, colluding with criminals and fearsome.

Experiences in transit through Mexico

As can be observed in the previous section, children who experience migration have faced situations of extreme difficulty in their countries of origin, derived from the complexity of the risks to which they are exposed. Thus, it was identified that the understanding of the meaning of the events is presented both at the time of leaving their homes, which they describe as sudden, and during migration, faced with situations that put their life and the lives of relatives accompanying them at risk (see Table 3).

Among the situations that girls and boys shared as the “most difficult” they have experienced during their transit through Mexico is a great diversity of stories related to the conditions in which they have traveled either by bus, vans or cars that do not have adequate conditions for transporting large numbers of people nor to cope with the climatic characteristics of the areas through which they transit. Other stories are related to long walks under conditions of extreme heat, hunger and thirst and to having run out of money at some point along the route and the risks to which both the participants and their families have been exposed (see Table 3).

Table 2. Themes of conditions of vulnerability with their respective narratives

Themes	Narratives
Poverty	<p>I saw people killed by the virus. My uncle was infected with “covid” and died. He was dead for four days in the house. I am afraid that my mother will fall dead in the street because of the virus. In my country, there have been many deaths from the “covid”. I am afraid that I will get the “covid” disease. I do not want to be alone in heaven without my mom and dad and without my sister (boy from El Salvador, 8 years old).</p> <p>Hurricane Eta passed through, and we had to go to a shelter. When we returned, my little house was destroyed. Everything was covered in water. I saw my mom and people cry. I hugged my doll and cried and asked God to help us. On the way, we did not have anything to eat, and I was also very thirsty. We carried some things, but they were very heavy, and we had to throw them away, and I did not realize it but my doll was also thrown away. That was what hurt me the most (girl from Honduras, 10 years old).</p> <p>Here in Juárez, we do not get to the other side. They told us that immigration was closed, and they returned us to Mexico. I have been here for four months. I was sad; I wanted to cross, but no. I wanted to return, but in Guatemala, it is the same. I felt sad, my mom too. I am bored; there are no classes; I do not have a ball to play with (boy from Guatemala, 11 years old).</p>
Violence	<p>We had a stand for selling chewing gum, churros, soft drinks. The Maras threatened us with death. They were all tattooed all over: roses, skulls, their mother’s names. It’s bad, because they tattoo the names of their mothers and then do bad things like killing, threatening, smoking. I told my mom “let’s go upstairs because here they are going to kill us”. We took 10 000 lempiras, and we left and spent everything at the checkpoints (boy from Honduras, 9 years old).</p> <p>There [Ario de Rosales, Michoacán], they wanted to take my little brother to the barricade. The men who put them in do not feel anything because they are not from their family (girl from Mexico, 8 years old).</p> <p>In Lima, some “guirros” were bothering me; they were from gang 18. They wanted me to be one of their girlfriends. Since I did not want to, they threw things at me, they threw sticks at me. So that they would not hit me, I rode my bicycle and ran fast with the bicycle, but my mother was very scared, and we left (Honduras girl, 11 years old).</p> <p>They threatened me; they told me that if I did not join [the gang], they would kill my mother, my brothers and my entire family. Crying, I told them that I could not do bad things, I could go to jail or die. I resent it when they tell me to do something against my values (boy from Honduras, 12 years old).</p>
Insecurity	<p>I was playing with my little brother outside my house when I heard screams and saw that my grandfather was shot. I grabbed my little brother, and we hid among some maize bushes (...) he had already told us that if something like this happened, we should go straight to the priest; so, I did, and the whole family arrived later. With them, we went hidden in two trucks, and from there, we walked all night to here (boy from Guatemala, 11 years old).</p> <p>The police are bought by them [criminals]. That is why the people have to defend themselves. The men of the community are already calling on children older than 10 years (boy from Mexico, 12 years old).</p> <p>My grandfather was working in the fields. Some policemen arrived, shot him and killed him. Some people from the ranch approached my father and told him that the best thing for us was to flee. We walked a lot, and my grandmother could not walk anymore. There I stayed with her. There, the two of us sitting on the side of the road cried together. My grandmother told me, “<i>mi-jita</i>, they won. They took our land but not our will” (girl from Guatemala, 9 years old).</p> <p>In Mexico, a federal police officer took 200 dollars from us. Since they were going to send them all back to the border with Guatemala, there were Nicaraguans and one Cuban. We were extorted by a federal policeman, his name was César, and he took 200 dollars from us, but he knew very well that if we were children, they would not deport us. We passed the money through a door where there is a fence. He was going to help us, but it was not true; it was a lie. They kept us waiting all day (girl from El Salvador, 11 years old).</p>

Source: analysis of the psychosocial interview (2021)

The departure from their homes and realizing the loss of their significant others, as well as being exposed to risks during transit through Mexico, being separated from the relatives with whom they travel, and experiencing aggression by people with whom they interact along the migration route and violence of which they have been victims directly or indirectly has led to emotional repercussions (see Table 3). In this regard, the majority of girls and boys refer to the experiences lived in emigration as painful, worrisome, distressing, shocking, and terrifying, leading them to experience sadness, helplessness, insecurity, anger and fear.

Table 3. Themes of experience during transit through Mexico with their respective narratives

Themes	Narratives
The most difficult situations	<p>They put us in a van (...) many hours went by, it was going to be night, the truck stopped, they opened the door, and there were some men with guns who told some güirros to get out. They did not want to get off, but the truck driver came and told them to get out. My grandfather hugged me and put my head under his arms, so that they would not see me... What I did was keep quiet and obey my mother and my grandparents (boy from Honduras, 11 years old).</p> <p>On the way and here in the shelter, people tell us that if we are from El Salvador, then we are Maras. That is very unfair. I only ask God that later in Mexico and there in the United States, they do not treat us like that (boy from El Salvador, 10 years old).</p> <p>The most difficult thing for me is asking for help. There are times when we do not have money due to lack of work, and we ask for a ride to take us (Mexican girl, 12 years old).</p> <p>My mother rented a hotel, and in the morning, she would go out to look for work. She told me that maybe we would stay and live in Mexico. On the third day, my mother did not return all night. I was very scared and only slept occasionally. The next day, my mother arrived really beaten up. She could not walk. Blood was running from between her legs. My mother told me that we should continue to the [United States] and that there surely they knew how to treat women better (girl from Honduras, 9 years old).</p> <p>(...) a lot of walking, I asked my daddy to rest, but we continued a little longer. He told me that when we got a little closer to where we were going to get, we would rest, but my feet hurt from so much walking (girl from Honduras, 8 years old).</p>
Emotional repercussions	<p>I no longer feel sad because I already forgot. I forget by myself. You forget sadness over time (girl from Mexico, 9 years old).</p> <p>Well, I miss my cat and my dog. The cat is really pretty; his name is Jocudo, and the little dog is Chispas. I left them croquettes, and I told my friend to take care of him (boy from Mexico, 8 years old).</p> <p>I was terrified. What happened to me was very horrible because I felt that there were thieves at the place I passed by. I was very scared. It scares me because here they say that it is very dangerous, and I come alone with my mother (girl from El Salvador, 11 years old).</p> <p>The Maras entered my house and began to attack my mother. I grabbed my little sister and went crying to my neighbor's house. When we returned, my mom was crying and all scratched. We went in a minibus, and then, we walked through the jungle; from there, we went alone. I was very afraid (girl from El Salvador, 8 years old).</p> <p>We left because there, someone gave "covid" to a cousin, and she died. In addition, my brother died of fever. The fever lasted three days, and it affected him a lot, and he vomited blood, and they took him to the hospital, and when they took him to the hospital, he was already dead. He was six years old. We come walking like this, asking for a ride. Sometimes they gave us one, sometimes not, enduring the sun and water. Very sad. I only walked holding my mother, and that's it (child from Honduras, 10 years old).</p>

Source: analysis of the psychosocial interview (2021)

Security attributions

To learn about the ways in which girls and boys faced the different situations discussed in the previous section, they were asked questions regarding the strategies they implemented to “move forward” and the attributions of security.

Most of their responses identified their families as the main source of support and strength. The figure of the mother stands out as the one who provided them with greatest security to continue their journey through unknown territories (see Table 4).

Similarly, they expressed that they felt that God accompanied them in the situations they experienced as more difficult, referring to *Diosito* as a child like them, who liked to sing praises and pray to him, especially in moments of greatest despair. This representation of the figure of God as a child was not shared by those girls and boys with indigenous origins who also manifested their belief in God but referred to him as *my father God* (see Table 4), and they talked about the existence of natural divinities that listen, see, and feel from the height of the mountains.

However, it was striking that some girls and boys on the northern border of Mexico who had migrated long distances did not speak of God. When noticing this absence in the conversations, they were asked about it directly, and there were those who did not respond and those who responded that “no one had been able to see Him”, that “God is no longer there” or that “He exists, but He did not remember them”.

Finally, the girls and boys expressed the need to find times and places to play with their peers, especially activities involving running, when space allowed, or through symbolic and verbal games with small toys and dolls, when they were in small places or inside a truck. In turn, they shared that these moments of play made them *feel free* and led them to perceive *being better* (see Table 4).

Conclusions

The present study was developed with the purpose of revealing the conditions and repercussions of the phenomenon of migration, from the very voices of the girls and boys who experience it, so that the results obtained can raise awareness in those who are interested in the issues raised throughout this article and those who, as part of their activities, can foray into multisectoral initiatives or public policies aimed at migration, health and children.

Both the countries of origin and those of transit have been overwhelmed by the problems derived from the phenomenon of migration and have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. This is reflected in the narratives of the girls and boys who participated in the present study and who gave an account of the conditions of vulnerability in which they live and that do not allow the development of their right to an optimal life.

Table 4. Issues of security attributions with their respective narratives

Themes	Narratives
Family	When I need support, I look for my mother, God, and those who are close to me, like my uncles, my brothers, my grandmother, my grandfather, my friends but above all to my mother and God. What keeps me going are the people who support us. When we are walking and they realize that we are migrants, they bring us a plate of food, something to drink, the community (child from Honduras, 12 years old).
Faith	<p>Along the way, Diosito took care of me, my mother, my stepfather and my sister. Jesus always goes with you. Wherever you go, he will accompany you. Jesus loves you (child from El Salvador, 8 years old).</p> <p>Well, Diosito is good, he takes care of you, saves you from illness, takes care of you a lot. The Virgin is also good; saves you. He appeared to a cousin at this border. It appeared to him when he was praying to <i>Diosito</i>. He was praying that nothing bad would happen to him because the “Coyote” had left him. My cousin [...] was praying, and Guadeloupe appeared to him. She was dark, very tall, had a very pretty smile, with very white teeth. Then, he fell asleep for about two hours, and the next day he appeared there on the other side of the highway in Texas (boy from Mexico, 12 years old).</p> <p>I have no idea. No one has been able to see it; we only have the photos, but the photos do not prove anything (girl from El Salvador, 12 years old).</p> <p>I don't know. God isn't here anymore (boy from Guatemala, 8 years old).</p> <p>Well, I think he does exist, but he does not remember us (boy from Honduras, 10 years old).</p>
Play	<p>To feel better, I watch cartoons, play with another girl and share our Barbies... (girl from Mexico, 9 years old).</p> <p>I thank God because we got here [shelter] and we have a place to sleep, where we children can play (boy from Honduras, 12 years old).</p> <p>I like to meet other children so that I can play “<i>perseguidas</i> (tag)”. I like that game because when I run I can feel the air hitting my face; I feel fresh, I close my eyes and I forget the sadness (Guatemalan girl, 10 years old).</p>

Source: analysis of the psychosocial interview (2021)

According to the Convention on the Rights of the Child in articles 6 and 24, children have the right to an adequate level of health and a standard of living that guarantees their mental, physical, moral and social development (Convención sobre los derechos del niño, 1989). However, the girls and boys reported suffering from hunger, not having a stable place to sleep, feeling afraid and feeling sick.

Conditions such as loss of family heritage, school dropout, insecurity, exposure to violence and barriers to access to health care, especially during the pandemic, confirm the conditions of vulnerability that result from individuals leaving their countries of origin. These also include those conditions encountered in transit through the migratory route, all of which are further exacerbated when arriving at the destination country.

The girls and boys spoke of feeling unsafe in their country of origin and of the overwhelming power and control of the criminal forces that operate in collaboration with the authorities. As for the migration route, they complained of “rude” treatment, as they called it, by the immigration authorities and the locals of different places, causing them to feel alien to those places and, above all, feel insecure.

The government of these countries contributes to the exercise of violence, either by conspiracy, by inefficiency to contain it, or by the high levels of impunity and lack of access to justice of the population in a condition of vulnerability. As a result, criminal groups exercise overwhelming power in a growing number of communities, and victims not only have no incentive to report violence but also fear reprisals if they do so (CIDH, 2015; CNDH, 2018).

Faced with such a panorama of the unpunished violation of human rights, the experience of migration is signified by girls and boys as a series of painful, distressing, shocking, terrifying and unjust events that affect them during transit and that they try to cope with by resorting to play, faith, social support or those figures that convey security. It is inferred that these interactions are not only protective factors but also vehicles to recover their balance (Porges, 2022).

However, they expressed a general feeling of discomfort, that something was terribly wrong and that they could not do anything to change it. They even mentioned that it was a great injustice, not because of the hurricane or drought but because of the will of other people. These emotional repercussions, if not addressed in a timely manner, will have an impact on the different areas of their lives, diminishing their future and optimal growth. Hence, there is great importance in listening to and understanding children in a condition of migration to direct actions that are sensitive to their experiences, the meanings they give them and the consequences they suffer.

The central importance of this work lies in having recovered their voices to raise awareness about the conditions, experiences and repercussions of migration on the children who live it. However, little or nothing can be done, even with international instruments on human rights, if the societies of transit countries do not recognize, first, the condition of these boys and girls as children and, second, not only listen to them but also understand them and consider them as subjects of the right to their expression, security and human dignity, regardless of the territory or nation in which they are, as established by the Convention on the Rights of the Child (Convención sobre los derechos del niño, 1989).

The societies of the countries involved have debts to settle with the migrating children subjected to degrading treatment whose dimension has not yet been sufficiently analyzed. It is necessary to put an end to authoritarian approaches to immigration law enforcement. In the case of migratory movements en route to the United States, the significant steps would be, on the one hand, for the United States to ratify the Convention on the Rights of the Child because it is the only nation in the world that has not yet done so (Oppier, 2021) and, on the other hand, for the countries that have ratified it, including Mexico and the nations of northern Central America, to guarantee its implementation.

Understanding the capacities and international frameworks and current policies on the rights of children and on the rights of children in migration as well as hearing their voices and directing actions sensitive to their experiences are important starting points to build regional cooperation in the long term that it is sensitive and recognizes children who migrate as subjects of protection with full rights of expression and social status regardless of the territory or country (Convención sobre los derechos del niño, 1989).

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