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"Here I Can Be Myself": LGBT+ Migrant Adolescents and Their Gender Transition Processes in Mexico

"Aquí puedo ser yo": adolescencia migrante LGBT+ y sus procesos de transición en México

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how unaccompanied LGBT+ migrant children in the context of mobility live their processes of gender transition and/or discovery of their sexual orientation. Based on in-depth interviews with four young people who migrated to Mexico as adolescents, their experiences are reconstructed, evidencing the violence and discrimination suffered in their countries of origin as a result of their sexogenic dissidence. This forces them to migrate in order to live their sexual expressions and orientations, where migration becomes a survival strategy in the face of hostile contexts towards sexual and gender diversity. This text explores LGBT+ child migration, a facet little studied in Mexico, making visible that it is not homogeneous but rather composed of a diverse population, highlighting the need to recognize the specific realities of children in their migration processes.

Keywords: 1. adolescent migration, 2. sexual diversity, 3. trans identities, 4. gender transition, 5. forced migration.

RESUMEN

Este trabajo explora cómo la niñez migrante LGBT+ no acompañada en contexto de movilidad vive sus procesos de transición de género y/o descubrimiento de su orientación sexual. A partir de entrevistas a profundidad con cuatro jóvenes que migraron a México siendo adolescentes, se reconstruyen sus experiencias, que evidencian la violencia y discriminación sufridas en sus países de origen, derivado de sus disidencias sexogenéricas. Lo anterior los obliga a migrar para vivir sus expresiones y orientaciones sexuales, de modo que la migración se convierte en una estrategia de supervivencia ante contextos hostiles hacia la diversidad sexual y de género. El texto explora una faceta poco estudiada en México: la migración infantil LGBT+, visibilizando que esta no es homogénea sino que está compuesta por una población diversa, y destaca la necesidad de reconocer sus realidades específicas dentro de sus procesos migratorios.

Palabras clave: 1. adolescencia migrante, 2. diversidad sexual, 3. identidades trans, 4. transición de género, 5. migración forzada.

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INTRODUCTION

In late 2017, Camila Díaz Córdoba, a transgender woman, was deported from the United States to El Salvador, her country of origin. She initially emigrated due to violence and discrimination stemming from her gender identity, only to return and be detained in January 2019 by police officers who beat her and threw her body from a moving vehicle (González Cabrera, 2020). According to the autopsy, she died days later from the severe injuries caused by the beating (BBC News Mundo, 2020).

The above is not an isolated incident; LGBT+[3] people frequently face discrimination, human rights violations, and acts of persecution, especially in contexts where their sexual orientations, identities, gender expressions, or physical features do not conform to dominant cultural norms (Regional Group on Risks, Emergencies, and Disasters for Latin America and the Caribbean [REDLAC, acronym in Spanish for *Grupo Regional sobre Riesgos, Emergencias y Desastres para América Latina y el Caribe*], 2019). In Latin American countries such as Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala, Venezuela, Paraguay, the Bahamas, and in Guyana in South America, belonging to the LGBT+ community means facing unique challenges in a spiral of widespread violence every day (Berenzon-Gorn et al., 2024).

As such, it is no coincidence that countries like Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador have some of the highest homicide rates of LGBT+ people in Latin America, especially when it comes to trans women and gay men,[4] whose bodies have often been found with signs of torture and sexual violence (Barrueto Wittig, 2022). Trans women, are particularly subject to forced recruitment by organized crime, which pushes them into drug trafficking, weapons storage, and collection of extortion, also making them victims of sexual exploitation (Valenzuela Barreras & Anguiano Téllez, 2022). If they refuse to participate in these activities, death is the usual fate for this population, while the authorities do nothing to clarify these hate crimes (Gómez Arévalo, 2017; Mercado Mondragón & Bollo Sánchez, 2023).

In the face of this violent state of things, some people find displacement to be the only mechanism for self-protection, for a better life, and for living without fear of being themselves. In particular, they may believe that another country can provide them with better legal and social protection (Pérez-Brumer et al., 2023). In the case of LGBT+ migrants, they often emigrate due to discrimination and violence related to their sexual expression, sexual orientation, and gender

[3] The acronym LGBT+ refers to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people; the plus sign (+) represents all identities that do not fit within these categories. While this work will focus solely on transgender and gay people, all sexual and gender diversity is encompassed by the term LGBT+, and we will speak of LGBT+ individuals or the LGBT+ population in the general. When necessary, we will specify whether we are referring to transgender or gay people.

[4] Here, "trans people" is used as an umbrella term to include those who self-identify as transsexual, transgender, or transvestite (Fernández et al., 2022), as opposed to a cisgender perspective; the term "gay" refers to a sexual orientation aligned with cisgender.

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identity (Canal Laiton, 2024), which makes migration an option for experiencing their sexuality and gender freely (Careaga Pérez, 2015) and a means of survival.

It is because of this state of things that this migration has come to be considered *forced migration* in search of safer and more dignified living conditions (Gottvall et al., 2024; Hermaszewska et al., 2022), including that of unaccompanied migrant adolescents.[5] For this specific population, disclosing their sexual orientation or gender identity results in physical or verbal abuse (Chinga Aspiazu, 2023; Winton, 2019) that originates in the family and community from an early age and is continued by State agents who perpetuate this violence through attacks, abuses of power, and arbitrary detentions (Gómez Arévalo, 2017).

However, there is a gap in the data regarding the age and gender of unaccompanied migrant adolescents, given that in in many case they travel secretly with other families or groups, identify as adults, travel through routes where there are no immigration controls, are victims of trafficking (United Nations Children's Fund [UNICEF], 2021), or simply choose to hide their sexual orientation to avoid isolation or exclusion, as well as to protect themselves against violence, harassment, and sexual violence intended to punish them for their sexual orientation or to attempt to change it. Thus, they may avoid contact with authorities or established institutions, which can expose them to a greater risk of exploitation and abuse (UNICEF, 2024).

The violence and marginalization to which unaccompanied migrant adolescents are exposed, coupled with discrimination and invisibility in official statistics related to their sexual orientation and/or gender identity—as they are still accounted for in binary terms, that is to say, as male or female—increases their vulnerability throughout their migration journey, resulting in multiple vulnerabilities: first, as minors; second, because they travel unaccompanied; and third, because they are in a country without the corresponding documents (Platform for International Cooperation on Undocumented Migrants [PICUM], 2010). If we add to this the fact that these migrations are diverse, this vulnerability quadruples when talking about LGBT+ migrant adolescents.

Under this premise, we share the view of Mercado Mondragón and Bollo Sánchez (2023) that it is important to document the processes experienced by LGBT+ migrants during their migration journey. These processes have remained invisible due to the homogenization of migrants, who are seen as an amorphous and homogeneous mass, whose specificity and particularity are not taken into consideration, especially when discussing migrant adolescents. In this sense, this work seeks to:

[5] According to Mexican legislation, the Law for the Protection of the Rights of Girls, Boys, and Adolescents (Ley para la Protección de los Derechos de Niñas, Niños y Adolescentes), in its second article, distinguishes between girls, boys, and adolescents, stating that "children are persons up to and including 12 years of age, and adolescents are those between 12 and 18 years of age" (2000, p. 1). On the other hand, the Migration Law (Ley Migratoria), in its article 3, section XVIII, states that "unaccompanied girl, boy, or adolescent" refers to any national or foreign migrant, girl, boy, or adolescent under eighteen years of age, who is in national territory and is not accompanied by a blood relative or legal guardian (2011, p. 4).

a. Make visible that unaccompanied migrant adolescents are a diverse population forced to leave their places of origin, among other reasons, due to violence perpetrated on them because of their sexual orientation and/or gender identity. These young people come from a social and cultural context where heterosexuality is the norm, leading to discriminatory attitudes, rejection, or exclusion towards those who do not identify as cisgender men or women[6] (UNICEF, 2021).

b. Understanding how this population experiences their migratory journeys, and how they discover or experience—in each particular case—their transition processes as unaccompanied LGBT+ migrant adolescents and their desire to freely live their sexual orientations or gender identities, in a journey that, in the words of Winton (2018), does not signify a simple relocation from oppression to liberation, but rather a restructuring of inequalities and opportunities by means of migration.

METHODOLOGICAL STRATEGY

The input for this article stems from research on the factors associated with building resilience during the migratory journey of groups belonging to the LGBT+ community. Throughout this work, a qualitative methodology was applied by employing the ethnographic technique of in-depth interviews, focused on narratives about the life experiences and migratory trajectories of people belonging to the LGBT+ community (adolescents and adults). These in-depth interviews focused primarily on understanding how their migration process evolves and on the conditions of their journey, emphasizing the resources and assets they possessed and the strategies they developed along the way.

The interviews took place in various non-profit shelters in four Mexican cities—located in the south, center, and north of the country—between 2021 and 2023: Tapachula, Chiapas; Mexico City; Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua; and Tijuana, Baja California. Analyzing the interviews revealed four cases that stood out due to a common denominator: all four interviewees migrated as children because of rejection by their families, who did not accept their sexual orientation or gender identity. Once in Mexico, three of these individuals began their gender transition, reaching adulthood within Mexican territory. Three of these interviews were conducted at the Casa Paola Buenrostro shelter (*Casa de las Muñecas Tiresias*) in Mexico City, and one at the Jesús del Buen Pastor shelter in Tapachula, Chiapas. These experiences were chosen so as to make visible the diversity of unaccompanied migrant children and their desire to live in accordance with their sexual orientation, identity, and/or gender identity.

Regarding the participants' ages, three of those interviewed in Mexico City were already adults at the time of the interview, and so only their informed consent was required. In the case of the minor in Tapachula, Chiapas, the interviewee was informed about the interview's purpose, asked

[6] As per Aultman (2014), the term cisgender refers to individuals whose gender identity aligns with their sex assigned at birth.

if they wished to participate, and made clear that they had every right to end the conversation if they wished. In this particular case, and because it involved a minor, it is important to mention that aside from the child's consent, the interview was conducted with the consent of the person who had custody of the child at the shelter where they were staying, who also was present throughout the interview.

Once completed, the interviews were analyzed using the ATLAS.ti program.[7] Following this, the data was integrated and coded. The data obtained during the analysis of these interviews, along with information gathered from documentary sources, provided insight into the interviewees' reasons for leaving the country, as well as the challenges faced during their journey as unaccompanied LGBT+ migrant adolescents, and how those who transitioned to the gender with which they identify experienced their processes related to gender identity. Thus, their stories were compiled (see Table 1).

Table 1. Characteristics of the Interviewees

Name	Nationality	Age at the time and location of the interview	Identifies as	Reasons for leaving
Karla	Honduran	37 years old. Mexico City. Paola Buenrostro shelter	Trans woman	Decided to leave her home because her family rejected and beat her for dressing as a woman. At 16, she made the decision to migrate.
Adrián	Salvadoran	16 years old. Tapachula. Jesús del Buen Pastor shelter	Gay	His family kicked him out of his home because of his sexual orientation. Once out, he got a job at a street market but began to have problems with the local gangs (*maras*), who wanted to recruit him. For this reason, he made the decision to migrate at the age of 16.
Elvira	Venezuelan	29 years old. Mexico City. Paola Buenrostro shelter	Trans woman	Her family kicked her out because of her gender identity, as she identifies as a woman. She was 14 years old when she decided to migrate, bound to Mexico.
Christian	Honduran	21 years old. Mexico City. Paola Buenrostro shelter	Trans boy	At 14 years old, he left home due to his mother's abuse. He started working in an internet café, where he met an older man with whom he began a romantic relationship. This man subjected him to physical and psychological violence. At 16, with the help of a friend, he decided to migrate to the United States to escape this violence but stayed in Mexico. Once in Mexico, he discovered that he wanted to be a "trans boy."[8]

Source: Own elaboration.

[7] The ATLAS.ti program is a software for content analysis of qualitative data based on the Grounded Theory on critical discourse analysis by Glaser and Strauss (1967).

[8] The United Nations has established the importance of respecting a person's choice of terms, names, and pronouns to refer to themselves. This includes LGBT+ people and those who use other terms for their sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, and/or sex characteristics (UNICEF, 2024).

These interviews—although few in number—were included given how uncommon it is to find unaccompanied migrant children who are diverse in terms of sex and gender. It is very likely that there are more LGBT+ migrant children traveling both by themselves and with company; however, as already mentioned, due to the stigma and discrimination faced by this particular population group, many of these children choose not to disclose their sexual orientation or gender identity.

As such, this study sought to capture, through their own voices, their migration journeys as members of the LGBT+ community and, for those interviewed who decided to transition to the gender with which they identify, the transition processes and the challenges they faced in Mexico as migrants. While these findings cannot be generalized, they can still provide insight into the processes faced by unaccompanied LGBT+ migrant adolescents when leaving their countries of origin to develop their personalities and, in this case, in relation to their sexual and gender orientation.

SEXUAL AND GENDER DIVERSITY IN GAY AND TRANS PEOPLE

By referring to international organizations—as well as to the scientific literature specializing in the subject—the concepts of sex and gender will be addressed, in turn leading to the concepts of sexual orientation and gender identity, key terms for understanding the processes of violence from which the interviewees position themselves.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), the term *sex* refers to the biological and physiological aspects of the human body, such as the sex organs, chromosomal composition, and hormones (World Health Organization [WHO], 2022). In this sense, and according to Adiego Burgos et al. (2010), sex—in biological terms—begins to develop during the prenatal stage, specifically from week 14, when the fetus' sex organs show significant differences, and it is therefore considered that it possesses male or female reproductive organs. It is from this basis that society assigns a gender, either male or female, thus defining certain gender roles for men and women, linking masculine behaviors to men and feminine behaviors to women, according to their sex. Nonetheless, there are people who do not identify with the socially constructed gender associated with the sex they were assigned at birth.

Precisely in regards to *gender*, Butler (1990) points out that it is constructed through repeated acts, regulated by social norms, and not determined by biological sex; that is, for Butler, gender is a social construct resulting from social norms, expectations, and practices that assign meanings to what is considered "masculine" or "feminine." Thus, gender refers to the socially constructed characteristics of women, men, girls, and boys—including societal norms, behaviors, and roles associated with being a woman, man, girl, or boy, as well as the relationships between them—and can also be a non-binary category that can change over time (WHO, 2022). In this sense, with the multiple frameworks and critiques for reworking gender, in addition to feminist, queer, and trans analyses, it has been proposed that both sex and gender are social constructs, and that what remains is to understand them from specific cultural contexts, from individual experiences of the performativity of being (Butler, 2006).

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Although the study of the sex/gender system focuses primarily on the position of women and men in relation to the social contract, its study should not stop there. It is imperative to analyze the different dimensions of their affective and sexual lives, as well as their orientations and choices; that is, everything that leads them to form their identity (Salazar Benítez, 2015) and which gives rise to the concepts of *sexual orientation* and *gender identity*, respectively.

The most widely employed definitions related to these two concepts are found in the Yogyakarta Principles, which define the former—sexual orientation—as "the capacity of each person to feel erotic and affective attraction to people of a different gender, of the same gender, or to people of more than one gender or gender identity, as well as the capacity to maintain intimate and sexual relationships with these people"; while the second—gender identity—is defined as "the internal and individual experience of gender, as each person feels it, which may or may not correspond to their sex assigned at birth, also including other expressions of gender such as clothing, manner of speaking, and manners" (International Commission of Jurists [ICJ], 2017, p. 6).

According to the above, sexual orientation refers to the emotional, affective, or sexual attraction a person feels toward another, that is to say, who they are attracted to. On the other hand, gender identity is the internal and personal experience of the gender with which a person identifies, which may or may not be the same as the sex assigned to them at birth.

It is from the grounds of gender identity that the concept of transsexuality arises, defined as a feeling of discomfort with the sex assigned at birth and a continuous and persistent identification with the opposite sex, such that the person wishes to be accepted as what they feel they are (López Moratalla, 2012). For Chinga Aspiazu (2023), it is the modification of physical characteristics that defines or influences a person's sexual identity, the purpose of which is to align the sex assigned at birth with their brain identity.

Sexual orientation and gender identity are not choices, but a natural part of human diversity, which begins developing at an early age. According to Fernández et al. (2025), it is from age 3 or early childhood (López Moratalla, 2012) that gender awareness is manifest, which may or may not correspond to the sex assigned at birth (Brill & Pepper, 2008). Solorio Pérez (2022) documented that, when interviewing transgender adults, they recalled that between the ages of 3 and 7 they realized not feeling like other children in relation to their bodies and the sex they were assigned at birth. Instead of feeling comfortable with that sex (as is the case with cisgender people), they began to identify with the opposite sex, or to feel that their bodies did not match who they truly were inside (Parra Abaúnza, 2023).

During adolescence, many people begin to further question themselves on who they are physically or sexually attracted to (Solorio Pérez, 2022). For example, if someone was born male and is attracted to men, one might say they are gay. However, that does not always explain everything a person feels. It is possible for someone to be born male, be attracted to men, yet not identify as a man, but rather as a woman. In that case, it is not just about sexual orientation, but

also about gender identity. In the first example, it would be a cisgender gay man; in the second, a heterosexual trans woman. In both instances, these people do not fit the traditional idea that everyone should be cisgender (that is, identify with the sex assigned at birth) and heterosexual.

Traditional ways of thinking, still common in many conservative societies, often reject or attack those who deviate from the norm and express other ways of living their sexuality or gender identity. These are the people who often decide to leave their places of origin to fully live out their sexual expressions and orientations, making migration a survival strategy in the face of contexts hostile to sexual and gender diversity.

Experiences and Narratives of Unaccompanied Migrant Adolescents and their Processes Regarding their Sexual Orientations and Gender Identity in Mexico

As has been noted, the contexts in which migrant adolescents from diverse sexual orientations leave their communities stem, to a large extent, from the violence, harassment, and discrimination they endure in their communities of origin, not only from civil society but also from their own families (Boivin Renaud, 2014). This fosters an environment in which it is difficult for this population to express their sexual orientations and live fully in accordance with the gender with which they identify.

This is the situation experienced by Adrián[9] regarding sexual orientation; he is a gay Salvadoran man who migrated for the first time at age 16 because of his family's rejection of his sexual orientation. He stated: "I was working [in El Salvador] but things went badly for me because of my family, because of who I am, and well, they kicked me out of the house. They discriminate against me, that's why they kicked me out of the house" (Adrián, personal communication, March 28, 2022).

Sexist culture and a series of traditional norms and values that still prevail in the societies of some Central and South American countries reject diverse sexual orientations and gender expressions and identities that break with what they consider traditional mechanisms of social reproduction. This leads to stigma and discrimination within the family against anything that does not conform to the heteronormativity[10] they deem "normal." This forces sexual minorities to live their emotional and sexual lives in secrecy (Boivin Renaud, 2014), and to have no escape other than leaving their family home, not only because of their sexual orientation but also because of their gender identity, as they are perceived as outside of existing social norms (UNICEF, 2021). This is precisely the case of Elvira, a trans woman who migrated from Venezuela to Mexico at the age of 14 due to her gender identity:

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[9] All names have been changed to protect the identity of the interviewees.

[10] Warner (1991) defines "heteronormativity" as the social system that assumes heterosexuality is the norm or standard, and that binary (male/female) gender relationships and roles are the only valid and desirable ones.

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> I had to leave home because my family found out about my sexual preference, my different preferences, and they didn't accept it […] I didn't know what I was doing; I simply fled from the shame that my mother and my family made me feel, me being just a fourteen-year-old boy, I didn't know what I was doing; I simply wanted to be myself. That's all I thought, and now, the shock, or disbelief; that is, it's reality. I didn't cry, I just walked and walked and walked… and then I decided to leave, I walked without knowing what I was going to do (Elvira, personal communication, January 30, 2023).

The violent situations that LGBT+ people face daily can push them to leave their places of origin as a response to such everyday situations that limit their access to a free and dignified life. It is then that the act of migrating can be understood as forced migration resulting from contexts of inequality and violence, the latter being understood as the displacement that occurs when people and communities are forced and compelled to flee or abandon their homes or places of habitual residence as a result of, or to avoid the effects of, events or situations such as armed conflict, generalized violence, human rights violations, and natural or man-made disasters, or caused those by development projects (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2024). When this migration occurs due to reasons stemming from different sexual orientations and/or gender identities, the term *sexile* has been used. This term was coined by Manuel Guzmán (1997), who defines it as "the exile of those who have had to leave their countries of origin because of their sexual orientation" (p. 227).

This laid the groundwork for various definitions (Cruz-Malavé & Manalansan, 2002; La Fountaine-Stokes, 2009; Martínez-San Miguel, 2011), all sharing a common denominator: leaving a place where one is persecuted, oppressed, or subjected to violence because of gender expression or identity, relocating in search of a safer place where one can break free from a given social contract in which cis-heteronormativity is the rule and where one can thrive without fear, remaining true to own identity. Thus, sexile has become a constant experience for the LGBT+ population in migration contexts.

As an example of the above, the case of Karla, a trans woman who left home at age 13 and emigrated to Guatemala before entering Mexican territory, is presented. This displacement was due to the violence and discrimination perpetrated by her father, who did not accept her gender identity:

> I left home because my dad didn't accept me for dressing as a woman. He would hit me, taking off my [women's] clothes, and he would hit my mom and scold her, telling her that it was her fault I was like this […] I wrote a letter where I said goodbye to my dad and mom, that I was leaving for that reason… I left home, grabbed my backpack, and left in the early morning. I left with my friend, and she was the one who took me to Guatemala (Karla, personal communication, February 9, 2023).

Trans women are more susceptible to various forms of violence, discrimination, and criminalization, including verbal abuse, being treated as men, expelled from various spaces, both

public and private, and experiencing rejection from their families and communities (Barbosa et al., 2021). These situations often lead them, usually at a young age, to decide to leave their places of origin; their journey is not easy. The same violence they are fleeing from is still perpetuated during their migration; that is the case especially for women, for whom sexual violence is manifest throughout their entire journey. An example of this is Christian, a trans boy who emigrated from Honduras at age 16 accompanied by a friend:[11]

> I arrived in Mexico on foot, but first we got a ride with a truck driver. This guy friend of mine told me, 'Since you're a girl, you ride up front with him so you can rest, and I'll ride in the back', and I said 'okay.' Then this driver man offered me 400 quetzales—around 1,000 Mexican pesos—so I would get laid with him and I could get here to Mexico, fast. That really upset me, and I was like, 'no way!' I mean, I was fleeing from issues back home, and I was like, 'what the hell?' I felt bad and said 'no,' and when this man told me, 'It's okay, girl, even your brother, the boy who is with you, your brother told me to give you 500 [quetzales] and you were going to agree.' That upset me even more and I said 'no', got out of the trailer, and told my friend, 'Hey, you know what? You go your way, I'm going back' (Christian, personal communication, January 30, 2023).

In addition to the dangers inherent to the journey, there are various challenges, such as finding a way to earn income, either to build up capital and continue the journey or as a way to survive in the destinations. In this sense, most LGBT+ migrants face precarious situations even when it comes to formal jobs, a situation that weighs disproportionately on trans women, forcing them to work on the streets as sex workers even if they are professionals or have other skills, as Karla explains:

> When I arrived in Guatemala, I went to ask for a job at a hair salon because I can cut hair, and they tested me by saying, 'I'll pay you weekly, depending on the work you do, that's what you'll get'. Yeah, whatever, it helps, because I didn't have enough to pay for my hotel, or food or clothes. At night, I would go and prostitute myself with my friend on 9th Avenue in Guatemala City. That's how I saved up money to continue my journey here to Mexico City […] Once in Mexico City, I bought clothes, makeup, and everything I needed to dress up, to go out at night to work, to look for clients on the streets of Insurgentes, because my Salvadoran friend had told me that she already knew Mexico and that prostitution was hot for gay girls on Insurgentes (Karla, personal communication, February 9, 2023).

Regarding trans women and men, they often experience discrimination in their work environment—mainly in the formal market—, this segregating them into informal, precarious, and unregulated jobs, especially so among trans women, placing them in risky situations such as working on the streets or engaging in sex work as a means of survival to obtain money for their

[11] It should be noted that Christian still identified as a girl when he began his migration process, and therefore his clothing was consistent with the sex assigned to him at birth (female). Once in Mexico, he began to identify as a "trans boy."

gender reassignment (Mercado Mondragón & Bollo Sánchez, 2023; Monteros Obelar & Diz Casal, 2017), as Elvira relates:

> We crossed the border from Chiapas crawling through the hills. We left Chiapas and got a ride that took us to Mexico City, and we stayed there for a few days. Then she decided to go up to Guadalajara and left me there. I was only fourteen. I fell asleep, and when I woke up, I tried to find her, but I couldn't find her anywhere […] I was so afraid that I cried and went out to look for her with some girls she knew. 'Oh, don't cry,' they'd say, 'we're going to show you how to behave here, don't worry, you'll be with us.' And me, well, scared and all, I had to do it. I was still just a boy, and it turned out I had to go out to work, out on the streets at night, and I was terrified of being out on the street, working as a prostitute. And well, what could I do? With all the tears and disgust and everything, I had no other choice, until eventually I got the hang of it. Things started going well for me, I was making a lot of money, and that eased my fears and insecurities. I started to take care of myself, to invest in myself, to see that change in me, and that's what helped motivate me. I started with the breast implants when I was 16. I started with my body; I got my legs, hips, buttocks, knees, calves—everything done. Then, lastly, I did my face: my nose, forehead, and cheekbones. I was about 19 when I finished everything (Elvira, personal communication, January 30, 2023).

Elvira transitioned on her own by means of cosmetic surgery; however, many people choose to transition through hormone replacement therapy. Nevertheless, accessing this type of therapy for free in Mexico is complex, especially for migrant adolescents.[12] The Mexican Social Security Institute (IMSS, acronym in Spanish for Instituto Mexicano del Seguro Social) has a Protocol for Non-Discriminatory Access to Medical Care for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transexual, Transvestite, Transgender, and Intersex People, along with specific care guidelines. This protocol includes a section for the care of children and adolescents, which addresses access to hormone therapy.

To access this program, the child's or adolescent's parents or guardians must be present prior to psychiatric consultations (Secretaría de Salud, 2020). However, these tests can be indefinitely prolonged at the discretion of the treating physician as a way to discourage the person from starting treatment. These obstacles often lead people who wish to transition gender identity to seek hormone replacement therapy on their own, risking falling into the hands of unqualified personnel who could cause irreparable harm to their health.

On top of the above, the experiences of trans women and men in health systems are frequently negative due to health professionals who are uninformed, biased, and even offensive to their patients, addressing them by the sex assigned at birth and not by the sex with which they identify.

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[12] Regarding Mexican law, a bill to create the General Law on Comprehensive Access to the Rights of Transgender People (*Ley General de Acceso Integral a los Derechos de las personas Trans*) is currently before Congress. This bill includes, among other things, access to health services related to surgical interventions and comprehensive hormonal treatments, or hormone replacement therapies, consistent with self-perceived gender identity, for adults; for individuals under 18, access to treatment with puberty blockers, suppressants, or inhibitors would be permitted (Badillo, 2024). This law is yet to be approved.

This situation has led them to experience a high degree of discrimination, intolerance, and direct violence by the violation of their basic human rights, such as the right to health (Hammarberg, 2009).

In this regard, and in relation to migration matters, Monteros Obelar and Diz Casal (2017) point out that undocumented migrants are often excluded from healthcare systems, a situation that can particularly affect transgender women who, lacking established medical services, resort to self-medication or unregistered or clandestine medical centers for various cosmetic procedures. As such, for many trans people self-medication becomes the only option to modify their bodies and carry out their transition, due to the lack of public resources and specialized services, as well as to their own limited financial resources. Mistrust and fear of misunderstanding and rejection also play a role (Boivin Renaud, 2014), as does the potential prejudice and stigma of medical personnel (Merritt & Contreras, 2025).

Starting therapy to transition to the gender one perceives as and not the one assigned at birth is not easy. Many shelters in Mexico, even those catering to LGBT+ people, do not directly offer hormone replacement therapy due to the high costs involved, especially in shelters located on Mexico's southern border. In fact, it has generally been easier to access these services in Mexico City—where the three interviewees decided to transition to the gender with which they identified—where the city's Ministry of Health currently operates the Comprehensive Health Unit for Trans People (USIPT, for its acronym in Spanish). This unit offers various services, including psychological support, assistance with the transition process, support in the process of self-recognition and self-identification, and hormone replacement therapy, among other.

In addition to the services provided by the Ministry of Health, the Condesa Specialized Clinic, established in the 1990s to prevent, detect, and provide care to people living with HIV, now also offers hormone therapy support to trans men and women. Regarding this, Christian notes:

> I had a friend who had once stayed at the La 72 shelter, and I told her, 'Hey, I'm kind of embarrassed, but I need to get hormones so I can grow a beard and be a boy.' And she said, 'Look, Christian, I'm in contact with a girl from Condesa, so we'll do what we can for you, okay?' (Christian, personal communication, January 30, 2023).

Christian had a support network that helped him reach the right people who could provide him with hormone replacement therapy to begin his transition to male. This is not surprising; children and adolescents in general make use of various survival strategies to successfully navigate their migratory journeys (Lucero-Vargas, 2018), particularly so LGBT+ migrant adolescents, who along their migration route find support and camaraderie networks that help them survive and continue pursuing their migration process (UNICEF, 2021).

Authors such as Llanes-Díaz et al. (2023), as well as Valenzuela and Anguiano (2022), have stated that LGBT+ migrants, lacking family support from an early age, tend to encounter people along the way who have similar experiences of displacement and vulnerability, which unites them and leads them to form support networks or bonds. These bonds create what are known as *chosen*

families,[13] which are an important self-protection mechanism in migration, wherein LGBT+ individuals and families open their doors to displaced people to shelter them and prevent them from having to spend time in facilities or shelters that lack safe spaces for this particular population (Redlac, 2019).

Being able to fully realize themselves in accordance with their gender identity is an important part of life for the LGBT+ migrant population, who, once in Mexico, seek aesthetic, clinical, and psychological alternatives to construct themselves in accordance with how they think and feel about themselves.

Mexico as a Receiving Country for LGBT+ Migrant Adolescents in the Context of Mobility

Throughout this discussion, it has been shown that Mexico represents a place where unaccompanied LGBT+ migrant adolescents can freely live out their sexual expressions and orientations, as well as their gender identities; as Christian relates:

> At home, in my country, since I was little I was always playing with boys' toys. I was always hanging out with the boys, I fought with the boys, I didn't want to hang out with the girls, all of that. Just like that, when my mom went somewhere to do laundry, I would hog the underwear of the other boys there, and then in the bathroom, without telling my mom, I would get dressed and say, 'I'm a boy,' and I would fix my hair with soap and all that and say, 'I'm a boy.' But I couldn't stand it there because of the way I reacted or played with boys' things, they called me a tomboy, and my mom told me no, that being a tomboy wasn't right. When I arrived in Mexico, I felt at home, I don't mean in the shelter but in Mexico. I felt at home and I said, 'Here I can be myself,' and I started wearing boys' shirts, shorts, Bermuda shorts you know, and I even shaved my head on my birthday, saying, 'Well, a tomboy girl, right?' Until I realized I had a lot of boys' clothes, and I started calling myself Christian, and I said, 'Wait a minute, I think I'm sure what I want to be,' and I got excited (Christian, personal communication, January 30, 2023).

Since this self-discovery occurs at such a young age, De Toro (2015) has pointed out that people tend to think it is a phase, a choice, or even an illness, and states that the fact that, for these girls and boys, their gender identity does not correspond to the sex assigned at birth is not a phase or a rational choice, but an expression of human diversity. As such, for migrant adolescents, migration represents not only leaving behind the violence experienced in their countries of origin stemming

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[13] The term "chosen families" is attributed to Kath Weston, who first described it in her book: Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship (1991). Originating within the LGBTQ+ community, particularly that of the United States during the 1980s and 1990s, this term refers to alternative kinship networks that function as families in emotional, practical, and symbolic ways. That is, they are support and care families that people belonging to the LGBT+ community form outside of their families of origin, often in response to rejection, marginalization, or estrangement due to their sexual orientation or gender identity.

from their sexual orientation and/or gender identity, but also a chance to be themselves and live their sexuality freely and fully, in accordance with the gender with which they identify; as Adrián points out:

> I feel protected here, because, well, I feel that they respect the people in the group, nobody discriminates against them, they don't discriminate. In my time here [in Mexico], nobody has discriminated against me, nobody has singled me out for being gay; on the contrary, they become good friends (Adrián, personal communication, March 28, 2022).

Leaving their country of origin represents a liberation, allowing them to be themselves. Despite all the dangers of migrating at such a young age, they would do it again simply to escape the violence inflicted in their hometowns not only by their families and the society that rejects and discriminates against them, but also by the State through acts of omission, by failing to protect people of diverse sexuality, and by not respecting their sexual orientation and/or gender identity.

> Yes, I truly don't regret it. Despite everything, I don't call those things setbacks; I call them lessons, because today I am who I am, today I know what I want, today I know how to take other people's opinions, and today I decide whether to take them seriously or send them to hell. Today I am free, today I am happy, today I am who I want to be, and I never imagined being transexual, because being a cross-dresser is one thing, being transexual is another, being gay is another, and I never imagined I would look the way I do… maybe it's true, I don't see myself the way they see me, but they make me feel good, and I am regaining faith in myself, believing in myself, that I can do things and much more. I feel strong, I feel free, I feel confident in myself (Elvira, personal communication, January 30, 2023).

It should be noted that the lack of documentation, ignorance of their rights, and being aware that they were minors were their greatest fears when they began their journey of leaving their place of origin and initiating migration. As Christian himself states, facing those fears was worth it in order to feel free:

> We deserve to be in a place where we are accepted, where we receive the love that we don't get back in our country, where we receive that caring attention that we don't get back in our country, so, to the fullest, this is my home (Christian, personal communication, January 30, 2023)

From the above can be seen that for unaccompanied LGBT+ migrant adolescents, migration represents the possibility of finally finding themselves and being accepted regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity, a possibility that translates into being able to be themselves.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

The difficulties faced by unaccompanied LGBT+ migrant adolescents highlight the need to understand their gender identity processes and the need for their self-perception to match the perceptions of others. As for the personal processes of transgender people, the available scientific literature, supported by their own testimonies, has reported that they remembered that in their

childhood the body they were born with was not the one with which they psychologically identified, that is, in their thoughts and feelings (Gill-Peterson, 2018; Sadjadi, 2019; Turban et al., 2023).

Unlike gay men who leave their places of origin, for trans women migration represents not only the search for new opportunities or an escape from the violence that prevails in their original locations, but rather finding a place in the world where they can live freely, moving away from patterns that limit gender expression and identity (Cano-Collado & Priego-Álvarez, 2020), where the struggle materializes through their bodies; on the one hand as resistance, and on the other as an empowerment that reinforces the way they think and feel, as well as relating to otherness (Martínez-Eraso & Pulido-Varón, 2022; Puerto, 2024).

Focusing on Mexico, while legislation recognizes children and adolescents in vulnerable situations due to specific circumstances such as those related to gender and sexual orientation (Law for the Protection of the Rights of Girls, Boys, and Adolescents [Ley para la Protección de los Derechos de Niñas, Niños y Adolescentes] 2000), in practice, when discussing unaccompanied migrant adolescents, the outlook is not so encouraging. If these adolescents travel alone and are not "rescued"[14] by immigration authorities, they have a greater chance (as evidenced in this work) of finding *chosen families* who provide them with protection and support, not only during their migration process but also in their gender reassignment process.

Conversely, if these children are *rescued* by agents of the National Migration Institute (INM, acronym in Spanish for *Instituto Nacional de Migración*), they are generally sent to shelters within the system of the Integral Family Development (DIF, acronym in Spanish for *Desarrollo Integral de la Familia*), spaces that lack staff trained in the care of the LGBT+ migrant population, and wherein often they are not even aware that these adolescents may belong to sexual and gender diversity, since they themselves, for fear of being stigmatized and discriminated against, prefer to hide their sexual orientation and/or gender identity. This makes it difficult to design and provision adequate services that respond to their particular needs from a gender perspective, including the right to health.

There are protocols in Mexico that guarantee the right to gender identity; even so, there is a lack of properly trained personnel in health centers who understand the needs of LGBT+ people, especially those who wish to begin hormone replacement therapy as well as undergo sex reassignment surgeries, and who are able ensure the correct application of the protocols that guarantee, in practice and without any discrimination, access to these procedures.

Something that cannot be overlooked in relation to the above is the issue of mental health, especially when discussing unaccompanied LGBT+ migrant adolescents. While mental health is not the subject per se of our study, considering children in the context of migration, as narrated in

[14] In Mexico, when it comes to migrant children or adolescents, the term "rescued" is used as a euphemism for detention.

the accounts presented here, puts into perspective the need to address the emotional and psychological distress of transgender people (Guzmán-González et al., 2020; López Leavy & Berenstein, 2022; Solorio Pérez, 2022).

Furthermore, an equally relevant aspect that must be taken into account in future lines of research and intervention regarding the treatment of transgender children is the issue of adult-centrism, since "society perceives them within the context of their sexual orientation, and not that of their identity as people" (Solorio Pérez, 2022, p. 185). The above begins within the family, as evidenced by the limited willingness shown to learn about trans issues, setting aside prejudices permeated by moral and sexual values. In this sense, for trans people, children included, these moral values cease to hold weight, and they begin to rather prioritize their true identity, seeking to be acknowledged as women or men according to their gender identity and the consequent perception and treatment they receive from broader society (Solorio Pérez, 2022).

In closing, it is important to point out that people belonging to the sexual diversity community, as a specific human group that includes LGBT+ migrant adolescents, require specialized conceptual frameworks so as to understand their problems, difficulties, and needs throughout their migration journeys (Gómez Arévalo, 2017), but also as people whose human rights have been systematically denied simply for transgressing heteronormativity in the pursuit of being themselves.

Translation: Fernando Llanas.

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