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MIGRANTS, VIOLENCE AND VULNERABILITY: HUMAN RIGHTS RISKS
FOR WOMEN IN TRANSIT THROUGH MEXICO

RESEARCH PROJECT FOR THE COURSE OF UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH
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Abstract:

This study examines how insecure migration status affects migrant women's vulnerability to gender-based violence (GBV) in Mexico. It explores how legal precarity shapes exposure to abuse during transit and how institutional responses influence women's ability to seek help. The main objective is to analyze the link between insecure migration status and the forms of violence women face, and to assess whether non-state actors provide more consistent protection than state institutions.

The research uses a qualitative empirical approach based on NGO reports, policy documents, and field evidence from organizations working with migrant populations, complemented by an exploratory online survey of twenty Mexican university women. These participants offer insight into public awareness of violence against migrant women and perceptions of institutional protection.

Findings from documentary sources show that women with insecure status face higher levels of sexual assault, coercion, exploitation, and psychological violence (Amnesty International, 2014). Many avoid reporting or seeking care because they fear detention, deportation, or retaliation, and instead rely on informal networks and NGO-operated services (International Organization for Migration, 2024). Survey responses mirror these patterns: most participants believed undocumented migrant women are not sufficiently protected and expressed greater trust in NGOs than in government institutions. The study concludes that legal insecurity is a key driver of vulnerability and argues that improving access to protection mechanisms, separating victim support from migration control, and strengthening gender-sensitive policies are essential to reduce GBV in this context.

Keywords: migration status, gender-based violence, Mexico, migrant women, vulnerability, protection mechanisms.

Resumen:

Esta investigación analiza cómo la inseguridad en la situación migratoria influye en la vulnerabilidad de las mujeres migrantes a la violencia de género (VG) en México. Examina de qué manera la precariedad jurídica aumenta la exposición a la violencia durante el tránsito y cómo las respuestas institucionales afectan la capacidad de las mujeres para pedir ayuda. El objetivo principal es estudiar el vínculo entre la inseguridad migratoria y las formas de violencia que enfrentan las mujeres, así como evaluar si los actores no estatales ofrecen una protección más constante que las instituciones estatales.

La investigación emplea un enfoque cualitativo basado en informes de ONG, documentos de política pública y evidencia de campo de organizaciones que trabajan con poblaciones migrantes, complementado por una encuesta exploratoria en línea aplicada a veinte mujeres universitarias mexicanas. Las participantes aportan información sobre el nivel de conciencia social respecto a la violencia contra mujeres migrantes y sobre las percepciones de protección institucional.

Los resultados documentales muestran que las mujeres con situación migratoria irregular enfrentan mayores niveles de agresión sexual, coerción, explotación y violencia psicológica (Amnesty International, 2014). Muchas evitan denunciar o buscar atención por temor a la detención, la deportación o las represalias, y dependen de redes informales y de servicios ofrecidos por ONG (International Organization for Migration, 2024). Las respuestas de la encuesta reflejan estos patrones: la mayoría consideró que las mujeres migrantes indocumentadas no están suficientemente protegidas y expresó mayor confianza en las ONG que en las

instituciones gubernamentales. El estudio concluye que la inseguridad jurídica es un factor central de vulnerabilidad y que fortalecer el acceso a mecanismos de protección, separar el apoyo a víctimas del control migratorio y reforzar políticas sensibles al género son pasos clave para reducir la VG en este contexto.

Palabras clave: situación migratoria, violencia de género, México, mujeres migrantes, vulnerabilidad, mecanismos de protección.

Introduction:

Gender-based violence against migrant women in transit through Mexico has become a critical human rights concern in the Americas. As Mexico continues to serve as a main corridor for women traveling from Central America toward the United States, criminal control over routes, restrictive migration policies, and limited institutional protection combine to heighten women's exposure to abuse. Sexual assault, coercion, trafficking, and extortion are repeatedly documented by humanitarian organizations, revealing a pattern in which legal status and access to protection are closely tied to safety (Amnesty International, 2014). For International Relations (IR) and human rights, this issue highlights how regional agreements, migration regimes, and gendered power structures shape migrants' lived experiences across borders.

The central research question guiding this study is whether insecure migration status increases migrant women's vulnerability to gender-based violence in Mexico by restricting access to legal protection, healthcare, and safe reporting mechanisms. Legal insecurity is not merely a bureaucratic condition; it can determine whether women seek help, the likelihood of being targeted, and the quality of institutional responses they receive (Menjívar & Abrego, 2012). In other words, migration status becomes a structural variable that organizes risk and protection.

Current research shows that insecure migration status often intensifies exposure to violence during transit and reduces trust in authorities. Studies also highlight the growing involvement of international and non-state actors in filling protection gaps, particularly when states prioritize enforcement over rights (International Organization for Migration, 2024). Yet relevant gaps remain. Many analyses treat gender-based violence, legal status, and access to services as separate topics rather than interconnected elements of a single system of exclusion. There is also limited work that integrates public perceptions in the transit country, even though such perceptions can influence political will and policy design.

This study applies a feminist and intersectional lens to address these gaps. In this perspective, insecure migration status is understood as a condition of irregular or precarious legality that restricts access to rights, institutions, and basic services, while gender-based violence is seen as violence rooted in gendered power asymmetries that may be physical, sexual, psychological, or economic (UNHCR, 2019). Feminist IR scholarship insists that security must be assessed from the standpoint of individuals and communities, not only from that of the state. It therefore emphasizes how gender, class, race, and status intersect to position certain groups of women as less worthy of protection and more exposed to violence (Menjívar & Abrego, 2012).

Within this framework, Mexico's role as a transit country is particularly relevant. Regional migration governance often relies on Mexico to contain or deter onward movement, which has translated into increased securitization of borders and internal checkpoints. Humanitarian actors have documented how these policies push women toward irregular routes and greater dependence on smugglers, which in turn amplifies exposure to sexual violence, exploitation, and coercion (Médecins Sans Frontières, 2024). At the same time, international and local NGOs provide legal

advice, shelter, and medical care that, in practice, substitute for state protection. This division of labor raises questions about responsibility and accountability for migrant women's safety.

The general objective of this research is to examine how legal insecurity shapes vulnerability to gender-based violence among migrant women in Mexico. The specific objectives are (1) to identify the main forms of violence linked to insecure migration status, (2) to analyze how access to protection mechanisms varies between state and non-state institutions, and (3) to incorporate public perceptions through an exploratory survey of Mexican university women.

The study contributes to IR and human rights debates by offering an integrated analysis that brings together empirical evidence from human rights reports, a feminist IR perspective, and survey-based perceptions from women living in Mexico. It illuminates how migration governance can generate both security and insecurity and shows where current protection strategies fall short of international human rights standards. The paper is structured as follows: Section 3 reviews the existing literature, Section 4 outlines the research design and methodology, Section 5 presents the main results, Section 6 discusses and interprets these findings, and Section 7 offers the conclusions and policy implications.

Literature Review:

Understanding the intersection between insecure migration status and gender-based violence is crucial for analyzing the structural risks faced by migrant women in transit through Mexico. In this study, insecure migration status is approached as a condition of irregular or precarious legality that restricts access to rights, institutions, and basic services, while GBV is defined as violence rooted in gendered power asymmetries that may be physical, sexual, psychological, or economic (UNHCR,

2019). Current scholarship and statistical evidence indicate that migrant women's exposure to violence is shaped not only by criminal actors, but also by the legal and institutional environments through which they move.

Globally, women constitute almost half of all international migrants. The International Organization for Migration (2024) estimates that hundreds of millions of people live outside their country of origin, with women and girls accounting for roughly 48 percent of this total (International Organization for Migration, 2024). In Latin America and the Caribbean, the number of migrants, both regular and irregular, has increased notably in recent years, reflecting overlapping crises of displacement, economic precarity, and insecurity (Gender and Migration | ONU Migración Americas, 2025). Studies on forced displacement and mixed migration flows consistently find high levels of sexual and gender-based violence against women on the move. UNHCR reviews state that between one-quarter and up to four-fifths of displaced women experience some form of sexual violence during their journeys (UNHCR, 2019). Freedman (2016) argues that such violence is not incidental, but embedded in migration systems that rely on smugglers, militarized borders, and restrictive asylum regimes, which together create "spaces of impunity" where abuse thrives (Freedman, 2016).

Within this broader context, Mexico has become a key corridor for women traveling from Central America toward the United States. Empirical work focusing on Mexico confirms that migrants in transit are exposed to extreme levels of violence. Amnesty International has described the route through Mexico as "the most dangerous journey in the world," noting that more than half of women and girls are estimated to suffer sexual violence along the way (Amnesty International, 2014). Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) reports that a large majority of migrants in Central

America and Mexico experience violence, including sexual assault, extortion, and kidnapping, and links this directly to discriminatory migration policies and enforcement practices (Médecins Sans Frontières, 2024). Recent studies by Fernández-Ortega et al. (2023) on migrants using shelters in Mexico found that around one-third of respondents had suffered direct aggression, with women disproportionately affected by sexual violence and with very low levels of formal health-service use (Fernández-Ortega et al., 2023). Similar assessments by regional humanitarian organizations report that a high proportion of people on the move in the country have suffered incidents of violence, again with particular vulnerability among women and girls (Médecins Sans Frontières, 2024).

This empirical pattern resonates with broader conceptual debates on “legal violence.” Menjívar and Abrego (2012) describe how immigration regimes produce harm not only through direct repression, but also by fostering fear, silence, and social exclusion among those with uncertain status. Innes et al. (2024) extend this insight through a qualitative evidence synthesis showing that insecure migration status functions as a risk multiplier: women who lack valid documents or stable status face higher rates of rape, trafficking, and forced labor and are significantly less likely to report abuse or seek care because of deportation fears (Innes et al., 2024). Their findings support the idea that legal status is not a neutral descriptor but a mechanism that structures exposure to GBV and access to remedies.

Access to legal protection, healthcare, and reporting mechanisms appears repeatedly as a central theme in this literature. The International Organization for Migration notes that undocumented women often do not know their rights and avoid official services altogether, especially in enforcement-heavy environments (International Organization for Migration, 2024). Along the Mexican migration

corridor, MSF and other humanitarian actors report that many survivors of sexual violence do not receive care within the recommended 72-hour window for emergency treatment, largely because they fear interacting with authorities or lack information on available services (Médecins Sans Frontières, 2024). Doctors Without Borders has documented thousands of survivors of moderate to extreme violence in Mexico in recent years, highlighting both the scale of the problem and the dependence on non-state providers for basic health protection (Médecins Sans Frontières, 2024). Qualitative work with Central American women traveling through Mexico highlights the everyday strategies they use to navigate threats of rape, sexual assault, and trafficking, including forming protection networks and negotiating with smugglers in deeply unequal conditions (Fernández-Ortega et al., 2023).

Cultural norms and psychological factors further shape migrant women's vulnerability. Gonzalez and Johnson (2024) show that among Mexican American women, intimate partner violence is closely linked to cultural values such as familism and the normalization of women's suffering, which can inhibit disclosure and help-seeking (Gonzalez & Johnson, 2024). Although their study focuses on a different population, similar norms are present among women in transit and intersect with legal precarity to create a double constraint: silence is encouraged both by cultural expectations and by fear of immigration enforcement.

From a theoretical standpoint, feminist IR and intersectionality provide key tools for interpreting these patterns. Feminist scholars argue that migration governance cannot be understood without analyzing how gender, class, race, and legal status intersect to position some bodies as expendable or less worthy of protection (Menjívar & Abrego, 2012). Recent work on gender-based and intersectional violence in migration emphasizes a feminist, collaborative, and contextual approach, arguing

that GBV in transit is embedded in broader systems of border control, economic inequality, and patriarchal norms (Freedman, 2016). The role of non-governmental organizations and international agencies emerges as another central theme. IOM, UNHCR, MSF, and numerous local shelters act as de facto protection providers, offering legal aid, medical care, psychosocial support, and safe accommodation to migrant women in transit (International Organization for Migration, 2024). Some feminist analysts caution that heavy reliance on NGOs may depoliticize structural causes of violence by shifting attention toward individual resilience and humanitarian management, while states evade their international human rights obligations (Freedman, 2016). This concern is especially relevant in Mexico, where human rights reports document persistent impunity for abuses committed by security forces and criminal groups against migrants and women more broadly (Amnesty International, 2014).

Despite substantial research, important gaps remain. Many studies address GBV, legal status, or healthcare access in isolation rather than conceptualizing them as interconnected components of a single exclusionary system. Fewer works focus specifically on transit migration through Mexico using a feminist IR lens that foregrounds legal insecurity as a central explanatory variable. Public perceptions in the transit society, which can influence policy choices and support or resistance to protective measures, are often absent from the analysis. This study aims to narrow part of this gap by integrating legal status, GBV, and access to protection mechanisms into a common analytical framework grounded in feminist IR and intersectionality, and by incorporating new survey data from Mexican university women.

Methodology:

This research adopts a qualitative, exploratory approach grounded in feminist International Relations theory. The central aim is to understand how insecure migration status increases migrant women's vulnerability to gender-based violence in Mexico by limiting access to legal protection, healthcare, and reporting mechanisms. Instead of testing causal relationships, the study seeks to identify structural, institutional, and sociocultural dynamics that shape these vulnerabilities and to reveal patterns of exclusion often overlooked in traditional state-centric IR (Lamont, 2015).

The study follows a descriptive, non-experimental design. This design is appropriate because it observes existing conditions and perceptions without manipulating variables. Descriptive designs are especially compatible with feminist research agendas, which prioritize context, lived experience, and the voices of marginalized groups over control or prediction (Lamont, 2015). In this case, the design allows the research to connect legal status, gender norms, and institutional trust to describe how these factors interact within the Mexican migration corridor.

Two main data sources inform the analysis. The first is a documentary analysis of secondary materials, including human rights reports, legal frameworks, NGO publications, and official statements from international and regional organizations such as UN Women, Amnesty International, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), and the International Organization for Migration (Amnesty International, 2014; International Organization for Migration, 2024; Médecins Sans Frontières, 2024). These documents provide empirical evidence on patterns of abuse, institutional responses, and structural barriers affecting migrant women in transit. The second data source is an original online survey designed to capture the perceptions of Mexican university women regarding the protection and rights of migrant women in situations of legal insecurity.

The survey component uses a non-experimental, cross-sectional design and was conducted entirely online. A five-question questionnaire in Spanish was distributed digitally to a non-random sample of Mexican university women. In total, 20 questionnaires were distributed and all 20 were completed and returned, resulting in a response rate of 100 percent. Participants were required to be women over the age of 18 and enrolled in a Mexican university, ensuring a basic level of educational background and potential familiarity with public debates about migration and GBV. Sampling followed a purposive and snowball strategy: an initial group of participants was contacted based on accessibility and willingness to participate, and they were then encouraged to share the survey link with other eligible women. This approach was chosen to reach a small but engaged group of respondents who could reflect on the topic with some degree of awareness and interest, while acknowledging that the sample is not statistically representative.

The questionnaire combined Likert-type and multiple-choice items. The first item functioned as an informed consent statement, asking participants to confirm that they understood the anonymous and academic nature of the study and voluntarily agreed to participate. Subsequent items asked respondents whether they believed undocumented migrant women in Mexico are sufficiently protected against GBV; what barriers they considered most significant in limiting access to medical or legal help; which institutions (government or NGOs) they perceived as providing more support; which measures they viewed as most effective to protect migrant women; and whether they felt represented in public policies related to migration and GBV. These questions guided participants through key dimensions of the research problem: perceived institutional protection, barriers to access, comparative trust in state versus non-state actors, and perceptions of policy responsiveness.

The survey was self-administered through an online form, allowing participants to answer at their own pace and reducing pressure that might arise in face-to-face settings. The study followed basic ethical principles of social research, including informed consent, anonymity, and the minimization of risk. These principles align with the ethical guidelines discussed in Lamont's work on research methods in IR, particularly regarding confidentiality and respect for human subjects (Lamont, 2015).

Data analysis combined thematic and descriptive strategies. Survey responses were first reviewed manually to identify recurring patterns and ideas. Although the questions were closed-ended, the distribution of responses across fixed options allowed the researcher to infer dominant perceptions and areas of concern. Responses were grouped into analytical categories such as perceived institutional barriers, trust in state actors, confidence in NGOs, preferred protective measures, and perceived representation in public policy.

In parallel, a comparative documentary analysis was conducted. Human rights reports and legal documents were examined to identify how institutions formally define protection, what obligations states have accepted, and what patterns of violence have been documented along the Mexican migration route (Amnesty International, 2014; Médecins Sans Frontières, 2024; UNHCR, 2019). These documentary findings were then compared with the survey-based perceptions to assess areas of convergence or divergence between public perceptions and institutional practice. This interpretive and comparative procedure is consistent with a feminist IR and intersectional lens, which seeks to connect lived or perceived realities with structural and policy frameworks (Lamont, 2015).

Some methodological limitations are recognized. The survey sample is small ($n = 20$) and obtained through non-probability sampling, which limits the generalizability of the findings. The online format excludes individuals without stable internet access or digital literacy, which may bias the sample toward certain socioeconomic profiles. The survey captures perceptions rather than direct experiences of migration or GBV, meaning that responses may be influenced by media narratives or partial information. Despite these limitations, the methodology is coherent with the qualitative and exploratory aims of the research and allows for a multi-layered understanding of how legal status, institutional behavior, and social awareness intersect to shape migrant women's vulnerability to GBV in Mexico.

Results:

The results present the empirical findings obtained from the documentary analysis and the online survey administered to 20 Mexican university women. They are organized according to three analytical dimensions identified in the methodology: (1) exposure to gender-based violence, (2) access to healthcare, and (3) reporting mechanisms and institutional support.

This research sources provide numerical evidence on the prevalence of violence affecting migrants in transit through Mexico. According to Amnesty International, more than half of women and girls from Central America experience some form of sexual violence during their migration journey through Mexico (Amnesty International, 2014). Médecins Sans Frontières reports that 58 percent of migrants treated by the organization in Mexico have been victims of violence, including physical assault, extortion, kidnapping, or sexual abuse (Médecins Sans Frontières, 2024). Additional survey-based data collected by international research teams in shelters along the route show that roughly one-third of migrants in transit

report at least one instance of violence, with women more frequently experiencing sexual violence than men (Fernández-Ortega et al., 2023).

These sources consistently document higher exposure to violence among migrants who travel without regular migration status. Reports indicate that individuals lacking documentation or legal permits face greater risks when crossing irregular routes or interacting with authorities (Innes et al., 2024). In all datasets reviewed, no documentary source identified regular-status migrants as the primary targets of gender-based or migration-related violence.

The online survey did not measure direct experiences of violence but instead focused on perceptions among university women. For this reason, no numerical survey data correspond directly to the prevalence dimension. However, the perception that undocumented women face particularly high risks of violence was present in responses to other questions and will be discussed below.

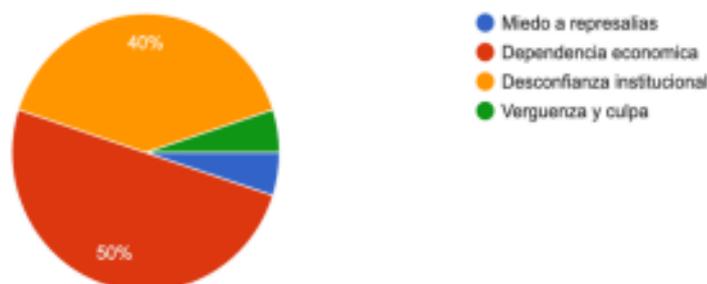
Regarding access to healthcare, documentary evidence shows that migrant women with insecure migration status experience important barriers when seeking medical services in Mexico. Humanitarian agencies report limitations such as lack of documentation, administrative restrictions, language barriers, and fear of contact with state authorities (International Organization for Migration, 2024; Médecins Sans Frontières, 2024). Field data from MSF indicate that many survivors of violence do not access public health institutions and instead rely on NGO-operated clinics or shelters for physical and psychological care (Médecins Sans Frontières, 2024).

The second question of the online survey asked participants to identify what they perceived as the main barriers undocumented migrant women encounter when trying to access medical or legal assistance following incidents of violence. A total of 20 responses were recorded. The distribution of selected barriers was: economic

dependence (10 responses), institutional distrust (8 responses), fear of reprisals (1 response), and shame and guilt (1 response). These perceptions align with the documentary findings that highlight both structural and psychosocial obstacles to care (UNHCR, 2019).

2. ¿Qué barreras crees que enfrentan estas mujeres para acceder a ayuda médica o legal en caso de sufrir violencia?

20 responses

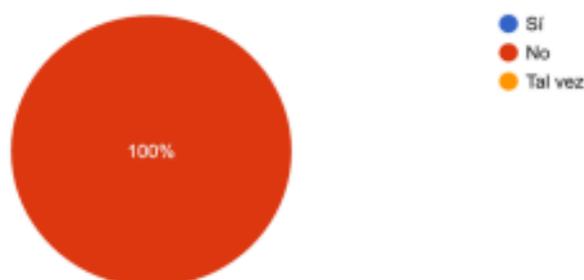


In relation to reporting mechanisms and institutional support, documentary analysis shows that formal reporting of gender-based violence by migrants with irregular migration status remains low across multiple organizations' datasets. Reports highlight that only a small percentage of survivors file official complaints, although exact percentages vary by year and region (UNHCR, 2019). Barriers recorded in documentary sources include lack of identification, absence of stable residence, fear of detention or deportation, and limited availability of specialized services (International Organization for Migration, 2024).

Survey data correspond more directly to this dimension. The first question asked respondents whether undocumented migrant women in Mexico are sufficiently protected against gender-based violence. All 20 participants selected "No," indicating that none of the respondents believed that current protection is adequate.

1. ¿Crees que las mujeres migrantes sin documentos en México están suficientemente protegidas contra la violencia de género?

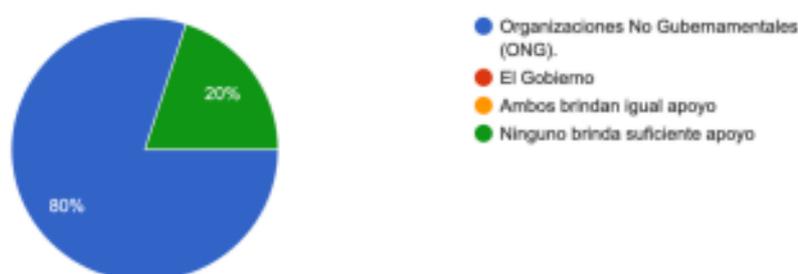
20 responses



The third question asked which type of institution participants believed provides more support to migrant women in vulnerable situations. The survey recorded 16 responses for non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and 4 responses for “none provide sufficient support,” while no respondent chose “government” or “both provide equal support.” This pattern echoes the documentary evidence that identifies NGOs and shelters as central actors in providing assistance to migrant women (UNHCR, 2019).

3. Basado en tu criterio, ¿qué instituciones brindan más apoyo a mujeres migrantes en situación vulnerable: el gobierno o las organizaciones no gubernamentales (ONG)?

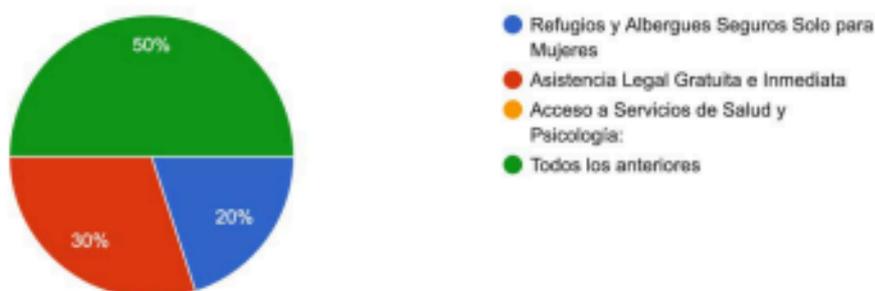
20 responses



The fourth question asked participants to identify which protective measures they considered most effective to improve safety for migrant women in Mexico. The 20 responses were distributed as follows: safe shelters exclusively for women (4

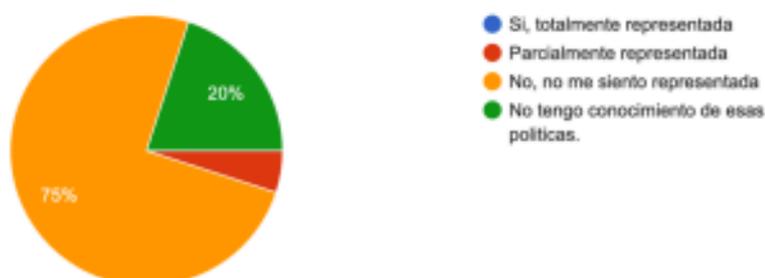
responses), immediate and free legal assistance (6 responses), access to health and psychological services (0 responses), and “all of the above” (10 responses).

4. ¿Qué medidas te parecerían efectivas para proteger mejor a las mujeres migrantes en México?
20 responses



The fifth question asked participants whether, as women, they felt represented in public policies related to migration and GBV. Of the 20 respondents, 1 selected “Yes, represented,” 15 selected “No, I do not feel represented,” and 4 selected “I am not aware of those policies.” These responses suggest a perception that existing policies are distant from women’s lived realities and that multiple, combined measures are needed to offer meaningful protection.

5. Como mujer, ¿te sientes representada en las políticas públicas relacionadas con migración y violencia de género?
20 responses



Discussion:

The focus of this research was to determine whether insecure migration status increases migrant women’s vulnerability to gender-based violence (GBV) in Mexico

by restricting their access to legal protection, healthcare, and reporting mechanisms. The findings show a clear pattern: legal precarity is not only an administrative condition but a structural factor that shapes exposure to violence. Documentary evidence reveals consistently high levels of physical, sexual, and psychological harm experienced by migrant women in transit. At the same time, the survey responses from Mexican university women reflect a strong perception that state institutions provide insufficient protection to those traveling without authorization.

A central theme emerging from the results is that irregular migration status functions both as a predictor and a facilitator of GBV. This mirrors the conclusions of Innes et al. (2024), who argue that insecure status produces multiple layers of vulnerability by limiting access to state institutions and deepening dependence on informal networks. The documentary materials used in this study reinforce that point: women lacking documents face higher exposure to rape, extortion, kidnapping, and other forms of abuse (Amnesty International, 2014). Although the survey captured perceptions rather than direct experiences, every participant agreed that undocumented migrant women are not adequately protected in Mexico. Such unanimity indicates a broad social awareness that legal insecurity directly increases risk, supporting Menjivar and Abrego's (2012) concept of legal status as a "risk multiplier."

Access to healthcare represents another domain where legal status shapes vulnerability. Reports show that undocumented women commonly encounter administrative barriers, language obstacles, and fear of interacting with medical authorities (International Organization for Migration, 2024). Many survivors of violence avoid hospitals altogether out of concern that their information may be shared with immigration authorities. This reality is reflected in the survey results,

where respondents identified institutional distrust and economic dependence as key barriers to seeking medical or legal assistance. These findings match humanitarian reports showing that fear of detention and deportation often prevents women from seeking timely care for injuries or sexual assault (Amnesty International, 2014). Taken together, these results indicate that unequal access to healthcare is not an isolated problem but a structural pattern consistently recognized across different data sources.

In the area of reporting mechanisms, the findings suggest that irregular migration status significantly discourages survivors from contacting police or prosecutors. Documentary evidence discusses low reporting rates, citing fear of reprisals, the absence of safe reporting channels, and lack of documentation as major obstacles (International Organization for Migration, 2024). The survey participants reinforced this pattern: none selected government institutions as the primary providers of protection, and most identified NGOs as the main actors offering support. This perception aligns with evidence that shelters and humanitarian organizations often provide legal accompaniment, psychosocial services, and emergency housing in places where state institutions fail to respond consistently (Médecins Sans Frontières, 2024). Feminist scholars such as Freedman (2016) warn that an excessive reliance on NGOs can depoliticize structural forms of violence by shifting responsibility away from states and into humanitarian management. The survey's strong preference for NGOs is therefore both a sign of trust in these organizations and an indication of the perceived inadequacy of state protection.

The perceived effectiveness of different protective measures also reveals important insights. Many survey respondents selected combined interventions safe shelters, legal assistance, and healthcare as the most effective strategy to improve

safety for migrant women. This preference suggests an understanding that protection is multidimensional, requiring more than isolated reforms. It also aligns with feminist International Relations perspectives that advocate for integrated and rights-based responses to GBV in migration contexts (Freedman, 2016). From this perspective, protection includes secure legal status, reliable access to information about rights, and safe, non-punitive access to health, legal, and social services.

Cultural norms also play a role in shaping vulnerability and help-seeking behaviors. Gonzalez and Johnson (2024) show that expectations of silence and endurance influence Mexican American women's decisions to disclose intimate partner violence, and similar patterns appear in reports on migrant women, who often cite shame, fear, and economic dependence as reasons for not reporting abuse (UNHCR, 2019). Although the survey did not explicitly measure cultural attitudes, the identification of institutional distrust and economic constraints as barriers suggests an awareness that both structural and cultural pressures shape survivors' decisions.

The study also recognizes several limitations. The survey sample of twenty university women is small and non-random, which limits generalizability to the broader population. Participants' educational background may make them more aware of gender and migration issues than other sectors of society. Similarly, the survey measures perceptions rather than direct experiences, meaning responses may be shaped by media narratives or second-hand information. Documentary sources also reflect the priorities and framing of the organizations producing them, which may emphasize certain regions or kinds of violence. Still, triangulating these sources reveals consistent and significant patterns that support the study's conclusions.

Mostly, the evidence suggests that Mexico's current migration control system contributes to environments where legal insecurity undermines access to protection.

When undocumented women fear detention or deportation, they often avoid police, hospitals, and legal authorities, making formal reporting channels ineffective in practice (Menjívar & Abrego, 2012). This challenges traditional IR assumptions that states reliably provide security and aligns with feminist critiques showing how states can simultaneously create protection and harm.

Finally, while NGOs play an essential role, their work cannot replace the responsibilities of the state. Without stronger, rights-based institutional responses, migrant women remain dependent on organizations that lack enforcement power and permanent funding (Freedman, 2016). This study therefore underscores the need for migration policies that integrate gender and legal status, establish confidential and accessible reporting channels, and clearly separate victim protection from migration enforcement.

Conclusion:

This study set out to examine whether insecure migration status significantly increases migrant women's vulnerability to gender-based violence in Mexico by limiting access to legal protection, healthcare, and mechanisms for reporting abuse. The combined evidence from documentary sources and the survey of Mexican university women indicates that the answer is yes. Women who lack regular status face greater exposure to violence along their journey, confront serious barriers when they seek help, and encounter institutions they often do not trust or feel safe approaching (Médecins Sans Frontières, 2024).

The research question can therefore be answered clearly: insecure migration status does increase migrant women's vulnerability to gender-based violence in Mexico. It does so not only by placing women in more dangerous spaces and relationships, but also by restricting their access to protection. Legal guarantees exist

on paper, but fear of detention, deportation, or mistreatment discourages many women from using the very systems that should protect them (UNHCR, 2019). The survey results reinforce this picture. Respondents overwhelmingly perceived undocumented migrant women as insufficiently protected, identified multiple obstacles to accessing assistance, and expressed greater confidence in NGOs than in government institutions.

The study makes several contributions. Theoretically, it strengthens feminist and intersectional approaches in International Relations by showing that security cannot be reduced to border control or formal rights. Legal status, gender, and institutional power operate together to determine who is protected and who is left exposed (Lamont, 2015). Methodologically, the combination of documentary analysis and a small perception survey offers a layered understanding of both documented patterns of violence and the ways these patterns are perceived by educated women in Mexican society.

In practical terms, the findings highlight a gap between Mexico's legal commitments and everyday realities. Good laws and formal commitments to women's rights are not sufficient when migrant women believe that contact with the state will make them less safe. Strengthening protection requires a clear separation between victim assistance and migration control, the creation of confidential and accessible reporting channels, and sustained training for police, healthcare providers, and justice officials on GBV and migrants' rights. NGOs and shelters should continue to receive support, but their efforts should complement, not substitute for, an active and accountable state.

Ultimately, reducing gender-based violence against migrant women in Mexico depends on transforming legal status from a source of fear into a pathway to protection. Future research that centers migrant women's own voices and tracks

policy changes over time can help advance that goal and contribute to a more just and humane approach to migration governance in the region.

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