

The Border: A Space of Life for Migrants and Refugees⁹¹

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In 2017 the Scalabrinian Centre for Migration Studies⁹² (CSEM) started a comprehensive programme of research entitled 'Rebuilding Life in the Border: Assistance and Protection to Migrants and Refugees'. Thus far, the research has been conducted on the borders between Angola and the Democratic Republic of Congo, South Africa and Mozambique, and Mexico and the United States of America. In all these locations the research has sought to analyse how migrants and refugees live and endure situations of danger and uncertainty in border regions and how socio-pastoral actions are conducted in these locations in response to migration challenges. SCMS relies on what is referred to as *Core Guideline*, which specifies key goals in promotion and defence human dignity and life of individuals in situation of mobility, their capacity of resilience and resistance, and possibilities to influence their own lives and events situated in a historical context and in interactions with other actors at the micro- and macro-structural levels.

With regards to research conducted in Tijuana, on the United States of America-Mexico border, it is necessary to highlight that this region is considered the most important migration corridor in the world due to the number of migrants who are displaced in the region.⁹³ Apart from this quantitative dimension, the region of Tijuana deserves the attention of politicians, civil society actors, and scholars because of the degrading conditions and the vulnerability in which the migration occurs, and especially in the light of contemporary migrants from Central American countries, such as Guatemala, Nicaragua, Honduras, and El Salvador, who are either heading towards the United States of America or remain in Mexico⁹⁴ in the border areas.

The condition of Mexico as a transit country also sets new challenges for how to respond to migration movements, especially with regard to unaccompanied children. In addition, this is a region scarred by the dangers and degrading conditions of crossing,

91 We draw on the research report 'Rebuilding Life in the Border. Assistance and Support to Migrants in the Northern Border of Mexico' (Botega, Dutra, Vince, Cunha 2018).

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92 CSEM is an international institution based in Brasília, Brazil, <https://www.csem.org.br/>.

93 According to UN data from 2017, 12.7 million people in transit were registered.

94 Mexico has become an increasingly attractive destination for migrants from Latin America who seek to avoid the risks imposed by US migration policy, which shuts down any possibility of admission to the poor and racially defined groups.



where middlemen and people-smugglers are commonplace. The construction of a wall separating Mexico from the United States of America forces a large percentage of migrants to try to cross the border by increasingly precarious and hazardous means, making them even more vulnerable to violations during the crossing, which is even more dangerous for women and minors.

In a context where most of these migrants cannot rely on family support networks and find themselves in a situation of being vulnerable to deportation, they are unprotected, susceptible to the actions of assailants and the border police, and subject to the indifference of society at large. Various civil society organisations work in this region, among them the Madre Assunta Institute in Tijuana, with which we conducted our research in this border region.

The Madre Assunta Institute (MAI) was founded in 1994 by the Scalabrinian Sisters to accommodate female and children migrants. It is estimated that 20,000 women migrants have been sheltered in the institute since its foundation. The institute aims to support the people who seek refuge there in rebuilding their lives. It provides not only food and shelter but also *integral attention* to the process of recovery, which takes into consideration the feelings of humiliation and frustration that they people experience while awaiting a response to their request for political asylum or after having been deported. More and more women migrants end up deciding to settle down in Mexico for some period, either in Tijuana or other Mexican border cities, after they are confronted with the impossibility of crossing the border as they had initially planned.

Thus, aside from providing social assistance, the MAI seeks to offer more than a place for migrants to sleep and nurture themselves. There, migrants receive medical attention, psychological assistance, legal counselling, access to communication devices to get in touch with their family members, and they are introduced to job centres run by government agencies in the city.

Data from the institute from the year 2017 indicate that it has accommodated 1,275 women migrants and 12 unaccompanied teenagers (between the ages of 15 and 17), a phenomenon likely to increase according to current records. Among them there were 254 mothers with young children. We highlight these data because they can help us make the experience of migration more tangible, especially given the very stereotyped portraits of migration the international media offer, with almost no in-depth analysis.

Following this line of thought, the research in Tijuana aimed to: (1) broadly analyse the activities performed by other shelters in the border region with regard to migrants, (2) understand the specific features of the SCMS Sisters' socio-pastoral work, (3) highlight the best practices of this work, and (4) explore how such work with women migrants can contribute to the development of autonomy, ownership, or dependency relations.

The research was conducted in two phases that facilitated permanent interaction between the theoretical foundation and the empirical reality. In the first exploratory phase we contacted the SCMS Sisters,⁹⁵ who in previous years had organised events in the MAI in Tijuana. The second ethnographic or deeper phase involved conducting ethnographic research in the city of Tijuana and in the Madre Assunta Institute.

The exploratory phase gathered information and data from interviews, on the basis of which we defined three main dimensions that were used as the foundation for developing the initial methodical layout⁹⁶ of the second, ethnographic phase:

- 1) *rebuilding life*, which refers to two instances:
 - 1.1) *the women migrants*, their migration project, which is based on the dream of making it to the United States of America and involves a migration trajectory that is marked by difficulties and violations, and this leads them to seek a haven where they can 'rebuild' their lives (in shelters); how they interact with the other Sisters in such spaces is also examined;
 - 1.2) *the Sisters*, who use their faith as a tool to promote the 'rebuilding of lives' among these women migrants and interpret the attention they give to these female and children migrants through the concept of *sheltering*, emphasising the 'duty of listening' in a perspective of integral attention.
- 2) *the migration industry*, which refers to the collection of non-state actors who provide services that restrict, facilitate, or promote international migration, the structural and symbolic context of the borders, which involves traffickers, government, other NGOs, and the Shelter Home itself;
- 3) *gender*, which refers to gender-based violence, the experiences of women who suffer sexual assaults, including in mixed-gender shelter homes. These cases justify the establishment of shelters for women that provide women with assistance in order to support them in making decisions about their migration route; fostering women's autonomy with respect to their family relations.

The ethnographic research was conducted in the Madre Assunta Institute and in the City of Tijuana. Our goal was to include a diverse array of actors, religious and state institutions, and other civil society organisations concerned with migration issues.

In conclusion, we want to highlight that the research makes it possible to identify the *best practices* developed by the SCMS Sisters in their engagement with migrants

95 Nuns from the Congregation of Missionary Sisters of San Carlos Borromeo – Scalabrinians, the founders of the Madre Assunta Shelter; they are present in 27 countries to serve people in mobility.

96 The initial ethnographic layout was continuously adjusted during the process of investigation in Tijuana, as required by the ethnography's daily routine.

in the MAI and in Tijuana, and to formulate *recommendations* based on our field research and analysis. We suggest the key is to keep the focus on the defined profile of the migrant women whom the MAI seeks to assist. This is important if the assistance is intended to be long term; thus, the evaluation can review the strategies used and adjust the work to correct inconsistencies. Furthermore, it is important to strengthen cooperation networks among different institutions (public and civil society) working with migrants. In this way, it would be possible to establish the MAI's position as an institution that can legitimately direct specific demands to public institutions and civil society organisations not only in Tijuana but also at the international level.

References

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Care Work Migration from and to East-Central Europe

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Due to demographic changes in Europe there is an increasing number of dependent elderly people in need of care. This has serious effects on the labour market and migration in the EU as well. European governments face difficulties in maintaining welfare services for their elderly population; therefore, they seek cheaper migrant labour. In line with the global commodity chain the reproductive labour of women is also governed by market relations, which is manifested in global care chains (Parreñas 2001). Eastern-Central-European (ECE) countries are on the one hand receiving countries, as women from third countries provide care services there. On the other hand, they are sending countries, as a large number of ECE women perform care work in Western Europe.

What social background do migrant carers have and what motivates them to leave their homes? Under what conditions do they work abroad? Who defines these conditions and what would fair care work look like? What are the structural causes behind carers' migration and what consequences does this migration have for their home countries? The Gender Equality Programme of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation Budapest organised a workshop on care migration from/to ECE, which aimed to initiate a discussion among experts on care work migration from within the region. The main