



Strengths and resilience of migrant women in transit  
An analysis of the narratives of Central American women in  
irregular transit through Mexico towards the United States.

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Erasmus Mundus Master's Programme in Social Work with Families and Children

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University of Gothenburg, June 2018



# Acronyms

CNDH	Mexican Commission for Human Rights
COMAR	Mexican Commission for Refugee Assistance
CURP	Unique Population Registry Code (Mexico's version of Social Security number)
DIF	Mexican institution of Integral Family Development
IFE	Mexican ID card issued by the Federal Electoral Institute
INM	Mexico's National Institute for Migration
IOM	International Organization for Migration
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

# Abstract

Title: Strengths and resilience of migrant women in transit: An analysis of the narratives of Central American women in irregular transit through Mexico towards the United States.

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Keywords: transit migration, female migration, resilience, strengths perspective.

Abstract: This study departed from the idea that all people, including those hardest hit by adversity, have strengths and resiliencies. It posed the question on how a particularly vulnerable group, Central American migrant women in irregular transit through Mexico, used their strengths and resilience to reach the border with the United States. Past research has failed to address the issue of strengths and resilience in Central American migrant women; instead, much attention has been placed on the risks and vulnerabilities of this group. This research started from the strengths perspective and resilience theories to address the issue of skills and abilities of migrant women in transit through Mexico. Specifically, it was about discovering the women's strengths, knowing how they used them to face and overcome the adversities of the journey and how they made sense of them. For this purpose, 10 narrative interviews were conducted in the Mexican border city of Tijuana, and micro ethnographic work was done with these women. The results of this research indicated that these migrant women are possessors of internal and external strengths, the firsts are related to their religious beliefs, courage, endurance and goal setting; and the seconds with the support received from people, institutions and their families. It was concluded that thanks to the combination of all these strengths, these women were able to successfully reach the border with the United States.

# Acknowledgements

Mamita, Isma and César, for having taught me that true love goes beyond any limit invented by ourselves. For having made me notice that the extent to which you miss someone you love cannot be calculated with all the stars of the galaxy. For having always believed in me and for supporting without hesitation all of my dreams.

*Mamita, Isma y César, por haberme enseñado que el verdadero amor traspasa cualquier límite inventado por nosotros mismos. Por haberme hecho notar que la medida en que se extraña a alguien amado no se puede calcular ni con todas las estrellas de la galaxia. Por haber creído siempre en mí y por apoyar sin vacilación cada uno de mis sueños.*

Abuelita and abuelito, for being my greatest blessing since the day I was born.

*Abuelita y abuelito, por ser mi más grande bendición desde el día en que nací.*

Dad and family, for being with me in the distance.

*Papá y familia, por estar conmigo en la distancia.*

Ivan, for being in this adventure with me.

Ursula, Maria and Rojika for having shared with me a piece of their wonderful existence.

Maria Das Dores Guerreiro, who cannot imagine how many lives she has changed due to the simple fact of doing what she does best.

My supervisor Helena Johansson, for helping me in the elaboration of this dissertation and for her dozens of patient and helpful comments.

Gabriel and Emiko, for reading and helping me to give coherence to this dissertation.

Mary Galván and Mother Adelia, for opening the doors of their house and of their hearts. I am infinitely grateful.

To the Central American and Mexican women I met in Tijuana, for sharing with me not only experiences of migration, but life lessons.

*A las mujeres centroamericanas y mexicanas que conocí en Tijuana, por compartir conmigo no sólo experiencias de migración, sino lecciones de vida.*

# Dedication

To all Central American migrant women, brave heroes of the current horror story in the context of undocumented migration to the United States. With your perseverance, courage and effort you show that migrants are more than a burden for the countries of destination. I hope that this work will help those who do not see virtues in you to open their eyes to your admirable skills and abilities.

I sincerely hope all of you achieve your dreams.

*A todas las mujeres migrantes centroamericanas, valientes heroínas de la historia de terror actual en el contexto de la migración indocumentada a los Estados Unidos. Con su perseverancia, valentía y esfuerzo, demuestran que los migrantes son más que una carga para los países de destino. Espero que este trabajo ayude a que aquellos que no ven virtudes en ustedes a darse cuenta de sus admirables habilidades y capacidades.*

*Espero sinceramente que todas ustedes alcancen sus sueños.*

To all the migrant's shelters around Mexico which continue fighting for Central American migrants' human rights despite all the adversities,. This dissertation is specially dedicated to Centro Madre Assunta, which plants beautiful seeds of hope in the women it hosts in the shelter.

*A todos los albergues para migrantes alrededor de México que continúan luchando por los derechos humanos de los migrantes centroamericanos a pesar de todas las adversidades. Esta tesis está especialmente dedicada al Centro Madre Assunta, que planta hermosas semillas de esperanza en las mujeres que acoge en el albergue.*

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# 1. Introduction

Nowadays, Central American migration to the United States is the protagonist of different political and social debates. In April 2018 there was a wave of discussions about a caravan of about 1,000 Central American migrants traveling through Mexico in order to seek asylum in the United States (Schrack, 2018). Adding to this, in January of the same year the United States decided to remove the protection status to 200,000 Salvadoran refugees, forcing them to regularize their status or leave the country in a period of only 18 months (Torbaty, 2018).

The issue of Central American migration to the global north becomes more noticeable because the United States has reiterated dozens of times its anti-immigration position against non-European migrants since the 1990s (Jaret, 1999). In order to stop migration from Central and South America, the United States has taken different measures. A clear example is the construction and strengthening throughout the years of a physical wall in their southern border with Mexico. As well as the financing of protectionist border measures in the limits of Mexico with Central America. As a consequence, Central Americans who decide to cross through Mexico to achieve their "American dream", face extremely complex and dangerous situations as in many parts of their journey they come across with physical and social barriers.

Despite having all the odds against them, there are Central American people who manage to cross through Mexico and reach the border with the United States. How is this possible? This research is interested in those individuals, specifically women, who succeeded in reaching the Mexican bordering city of Tijuana. Following the precepts of the strengths perspective and resilience theories, it is grounded on the idea that these people are possessors of skills and abilities that help them to solve and face complex situations.

The aim of this study is to explore the strengths and resilience of central American migrant women in irregular transit through Mexico and how they used them in order to succeed in getting to the border with the United States.

In this study, it is argued that Central American migrant women have internal and external strengths that help them to face the challenges they find in the transit country. It describes how

their courage or endurance help them to get ahead when they are alone in situations of danger or stress. It also discusses how their external strengths, such as their family or institutions, provide them with help and resources during their journey. In the end it can be seen how the combination of all these strengths helps them to stay relatively safe during their journey through Mexico and to reach the border with the United States.

## 1.2 Background

In addition of being the country of origin of thousands of people who migrate to the United States, Mexico is also a country of transit for all people from Central and South America who seek to reach the United States or Canada by land. Due to its geographical location, the Mexican border with the United States is the busiest one in the world. Every year 3, 201 million people cross it legally, while 400 thousand do so illegally (Solís-Pérez & Alonso-Meneses, 2009).

Crossing through Mexico is not as easy as it sounds. Guatemalans, Hondurans and Salvadorans must hold a Mexican visa to enter the country. This visa is so difficult to obtain (Expansion, 2012) that many central Americans decide to enter Mexico illegally crossing through unauthorized zones. Barrón et al. (2014) explain that this promotes crime, impunity and illegality in the crossing area, affecting directly undocumented migrants' safety.

Nevertheless, crossing illegally from Central America to Mexico is not the only danger faced by those seeking to reach the United States. A study conducted by Barrón et al. (2014) exposed that migrants are easy prey for gangs, officials, and the general population, who profit from their disadvantaged legal status to extort them or steal their belongings. Furthermore, a survey conducted to Central American children deported from Mexico, found that a striking 29% had experienced abuse while in transit (Barrón et al., 2014). Also, according to González (2013), most of the migrants do not report the abuses, and those who report them do not receive the adequate assistance. As result, the offenders remain unpunished and the migrants who decide to continue the journey have to keep going despite the trauma or physical damage experienced.

Beyond doubt, the list of risks for undocumented migrants in transit through Mexico is long. Whoever decides to cross this country illegally faces the imminent risk of suffering an accident, being trafficked or killed (Verduzco & de Lozano, 2011). And this is not something new, the

International Organization for Migration has documented violations of the human rights of migrants since the decade of the nineties (Pombo París, Cervantes Ley, & Muñoz Peña, 2016).

### 1.2.1 Central American women in transit through Mexico

Research about in-transit migration of Central American women through Mexico can be classified depending on the topic it explores. For this investigation, it will be classified into three clusters.

First, we have research that explores the characteristics of women in transit; examples of these are the works of Monreal-Gimeno, Terrón-Caro and Cárdenas-Rodríguez (2013) and Díaz Prieto and Kuhner (2007). In them we can find sociodemographic profiles of migrant women as well as historical data that has impacted the characteristics of the central American female migratory flows towards the United States.

Second, we have research about the dangers and risks that Central American women in transit face. The works of Angulo Pasel (2017), Pickering and Cochrane (2013) and Morales (2014), analyze the dangers that migrant women are exposed to from gender perspective and take into account both the consequences of institutional and social practices in systematic violence against migrant women, especially those who are in transit through Mexico.

Finally, there is research that explains the motivations and migratory strategies of Central American women. As example of these we have the work of diverse researchers such as Montaner (2006), who puts up a brief characterization of women in irregular transit through Mexico and explains how poverty and violence push hundreds of Central Americans to try their luck away from their countries of origin. Terrón-Caro and Monreal-Gimeno (2015) inquire about the reasons that lead these women to migrate, as well as their educational expectations ahead of the possibility of crossing to the United States. The analysis of Cueva Luna et al. (2014) with deported women in transit, explores the reasons that push them to attempt to cross again the border despite having failed in their first try. Finally, Willers (2017), explains how women arrange the care of their children while they migrate and exposes the impact of migration in transit in mothering practices of Central American women.

### 1.2.2 Gap in literature

Several authors point out that despite the phenomenon of migration has been extensively studied, migration in transit has not yet received the proper attention (Barrón et al., 2014; Kimball, 2007; Papadopolou, 2008; Verduzco & de Lozano, 2011). Until now, the most outstanding studies on international migration have focused on the origin and destination of migrants and have left aside the processes of displacement of people (Barrón et al., 2014). One possible explanation is that the temporary and clandestine nature of transit migration makes it difficult to study it.

During the literature review process, it was verified that there are few gender-focused studies about in-transit migration through Mexico to the United States, as exposed before, those that exist deal with the characteristics of women in transit, the risks they face, their motivations to migrate and their migratory plans. None of them focuses on the strengths or resilience of migrant women in transit which is a more passive view of said women and does not account for their skills and abilities.

This led me to think about the positive and constructive part of migration in transit. The interest to analyze the strengths and resilience of the Central American women arose, first, because there is no research, neither in English nor Spanish, that focuses on the skills and abilities that women used during their trip to go so far, that is, to the border with the United States. And, second, this interest was fueled by the fact that, according to the statistics, women make their way through Mexico in complex situations (Barrón et al., 2014), but despite that, they can succeed to reach the crossing point with their destination country.

## 1.3 Purpose

Analyze via the narrative of Central American migrant women in irregular transit through Mexico, how their strengths and resilience helped them succeed in getting to the border with the United States.

### 1.3.1 Specific research questions

Which are the strengths and resiliencies of Central American migrant women in irregular transit through Mexico?

How do they use their strengths and resiliencies?

How do they make sense of their strengths and resilience?

## 1.4 Definition of in transit migration

The definition of migrant in transit will be presented so the reader better understands the present study. In the early nineties, different conferences and documents began to refer to the issue of migration in transit. Despite the importance of the phenomenon and that more than twenty years have passed since the world began to think about migration in transit, there is still no agreed definition (Düvell, 2012; UNHCR, 2016).

In the absence of a consensus in its definition, this research will stick to the one provided by the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCR), which says that migration in transit refers to "the temporary stay of migrants in one or more countries, with the objective of reaching a further and final destination". Very often, people migrate due to work, family reunification, migratory tradition or because in their country of origin they suffer persecution, poverty, violence, war, insecurity or discrimination. Most of the time these motives do not stand by itself, but are intertwined with each other (Barrón et al., 2014; UNHCR, 2016).

## 2. Understanding in transit migration: Previous research

This research used the following databases to conduct the previous research exploration: Scopus, ScienceDirect, SAGE journals online, ProQuest Social Sciences, Google scholar and the SuperSök search engine from the Library of the University of Gothenburg. However, this search generated few results and only two were relevant to the topic. Since the research question is linked to the Latin American and Spanish-speaking context, a second search was conducted in Latin-American databases such as: Latindex, Redalyc and SciELO; these catalogues found about twenty studies linked to the topic of interest of this investigation. The following terms were used, both in Spanish and English: in transit migration, central American women, resilience in migration, migration strategies, in transit migration, Central American migration, strengths perspective in migration, vulnerability in migration.

### 2.1 Grasping Central America migration, numbers and reasons

Before proceeding with the present research it is necessary that the reader understands the reasons behind the decision to migrate of Central American people. Emphasis is placed on three Central American countries, Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador, as these are the countries of origin of the women who contributed with their testimonies to the fulfillment of this research.

Migration of Central Americans to the United States is a complex phenomenon that requires analysis from different perspectives such as social, economic, environmental and political (López-Recinos, n.d.). Different studies have focused on diverse aspects of Central American migration (Cerrutti & Massey, 2001; Paris, Ley, & Peña, 2016; Willers, 2017), however research focused on the resilience and strengths of migrants is almost inexistent. For this reason, this research will focus on the strengths of Central American women migrants and how they used them to accomplish their goal of reaching the Mexican border with the United States.

The current displacement of Central Americans coming from Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador is a complex phenomenon. In the present social context lived in these countries,

migration is not only related to individual and voluntary purposes, it is more a compulsive and forced action due to the lack of economic, political and social stability (López-Recinos, n.d.).

This section will explore the current social situation in Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador and how it affects its citizens' decision to migrate to the United States.

### 2.1.1 Guatemala

To understand the current migratory situation in Guatemala it is necessary to consider historical aspects such as the Spanish colonization. At this period the activity that generated wealth was the extraction of natural resources facilitated by a high availability of indigenous labor that moved from their places of origin to the extraction sites. Because this model was reproduced for several decades it is now impregnated in the mental structure of Guatemalans and it has become a tradition in the country (Bornschein, 2017).

According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the current Guatemala's high rate of emigration is due to three reasons (Bornschein, 2017). The first goes back to the 50's when the country underwent modernization due to investments made by the United States. The second was in 1976 when an earthquake hit Guatemala and the third in 1980, when the country increased its levels of violence due to an internal armed conflict. During these periods, Guatemalan migration to the United States increased.

Nowadays, the main push factors that lead Guatemalans to migrate are social exclusion and poverty. In fact, there are areas in Guatemala where these reasons have pushed 65% of the population to migrate to the United States in order to seek for a job and social security. As a result 97% of the total migrant Guatemalan population lives in the United States (Bornschein, 2017).

### 2.1.2 Honduras

Honduran migration has existed for several decades, however in the 80's and 90's it suffered a drastic increase due to the fact that poverty levels rose in the country as well as insecurity which threatened well-being and life of its inhabitants (López-Recinos, n.d.; Soriano-Ortiz, 2016). As a



result nowadays Honduran migration is one of the most intense at the global level (López-Recinos, n.d.). The preferred destination country for Honduran migrants is the United States; in fact, 80% of them are located in that country and the rest in neighboring countries such as Nicaragua and El Salvador (Venancio-Carranza & Chang, 2002).

In chart 1 we can see the main causes why Hondurans have left their country in recent years. Among the most popular are low wages, poverty and unemployment.

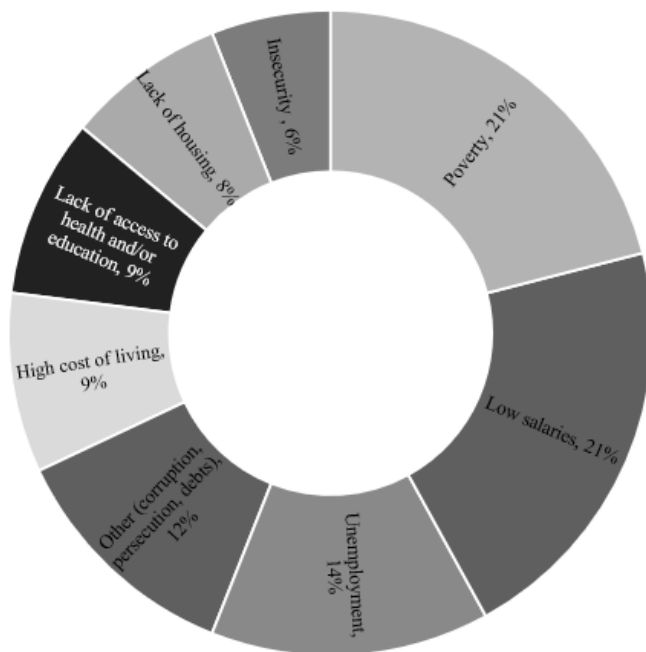


Chart 1. Reasons why Hondurans migrate. Author's elaboration from the data of Venancio-Carranza and Chang (2002).

As it can be seen, the reasons to migrate are a combination of shortage of sufficient resources to live with the "minimum" and the lack of security in the country. The latter is quite relevant considering that today Honduras has one of the highest homicide rates in the world (Human Rights Watch, 2017) as a result of the operation of diverse gangs and the failed administration of the government that allows that these assassinate, rob and extort with total impunity.

That is not all, this context of violence and corruption has also reached the younger ones. Criminal groups force children to join gangs and train them to steal, rape, murder and traffic weapons and drugs (Soriano-Ortiz, 2016). This situation has also pushed them to migrate - with or without the

company of their relatives - to other countries, especially the United States, to protect their lives (Meléndez, 2014).

### 2.1.3 El Salvador

In El Salvador, as in Guatemala and Honduras, the migratory situation is similar. 90% of the total migrant population resides in the United States and the reasons for migrating are also related to poverty and violence.

Today, approximately 150 Salvadorans leave the country every day in search of the American dream, that is, every year around 5 thousand people try to reach the United States. However, most of them do it without the required documentation to enter the country legally and as a result about 26,000 Salvadorans have been deported during the past decade (Teodora-Ramos, Campos-Moran, et al., 2013).

It is important to review the two causes that push Salvadorans to migrate, poverty and violence. In the last five years poverty remains high despite it has been decreasing in a very modest way. As a result, the country has seen low levels of growth that continue to make people want to leave the country to seek better employment and economic opportunities (The World Bank, 2018). Regarding violence, this continues to be a strong problem in the country, the gangs negatively affect the quality of life of the people and endanger the social and economic development of El Salvador. In fact, in 2015 the crime rate reached a historic level with 102 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants. This drives away both citizens and companies that want to progress economically in the country (The World Bank, 2018).

## 2.2 Studies about central American women in transit

As already mentioned in the background section, the literature review process resulted in three types of research that had been done on Central American migrant women in transit. These studies are about i) their sociodemographic characteristics ii) the dangers and risks they face and iii) their motivations and migratory strategies. This section will present the results of these investigations.

The sociodemographic characteristics of Central American women in transit have been explored in two different jobs, one of these is the one of Monreal-Gimeno, Terrón-Caro and Cárdenas-Rodríguez (2013); here they interviewed 26 Central American and Mexican migrant women in their undocumented transit through three Mexican north bordering cities, Matamoros, Reynosa and Nuevo Laredo. They found that the predominant age range of these women was 15-29 years, which coincides with the work-productive stage of life. The data also showed that women have a higher level of education than male migrants in transit and that their motivations for crossing to the United States lie in the idea of looking for a better future for their offspring. In second place we have the work of Díaz Prieto and Kuhner (2007) which is interested in the characteristics of Latin American migrant women, including of course Central American women. This study, which is a quantitative analysis of data obtained through Mexico's National Institute of Migration (INM), showed that for Central American women the preferred destination country to migrate without the necessary legal documentation is the United States. They also found that the Central American women who most transit through Mexico to reach the United States are Guatemalans followed by Hondurans and Salvadorans. Finally, they also discovered that today more and more women mothers of small children join the migratory flow to the United States.

Next, we have the works that analyze the dangers and risks that Central American women in transit face. In the first place, the work of Angulo Pasel (2017) examined the effects that reinforcing security and border control in the south of Mexico had in Central American migrant women in transit. She found that despite there is more control over the number of migrants entering illegally into Mexico, this affects vulnerable populations such as migrant women who have to travel in more clandestine ways and whose human rights violations tend to suffer invisibilization. Secondly, there is the research done by Pickering and Cochrane (2013) which explains why, where and how migrant women in transit die. This is a quantitative analysis of data belonging to databases on border related deaths. These researchers found that from the total number of migrants in transit who died at the border between Mexico and the United States, 21% were women. They also found that the main causes of death of these women was exposure, starvation, thirst or suffocation. Finally there is the work of Morales (2014) which is a document analysis. She found that migrant women in transit are more likely than men to certain types of violence such as sexual harassment and trafficking. She also found that most of the women suffer some type of sexual violence on their way through Mexico. The work concludes by pointing out that irregular transit makes

migrants more vulnerable in comparison to regular migrants; this is because these migrants pass through clandestine routes where they are easy prey for criminals and abuses by the authorities.

Finally, we have the works that talk about the motivations and migratory strategies of Central American women. In the first place, there is the work of Willers (2017) which concludes that women from Central America migrate to the United States to survive and offer safety and wellbeing to their families. In this paper it is pointed out that when women or their children are emotionally or economically unstable, they stop their transit and settle themselves temporarily in a place in the transit country while they find a solution to solve their problems. Secondly, the work of Montaner (2006) stresses that to leave their country, Central American women require the support of family and friends in their country of origin. She notes that the main motivation for these women to migrate to the United States is the possibility of entering the labor market and obtaining a well-paid job that allows them to support their family back in their country of origin. Montaner (2006) makes an important annotation, she says that Central American women who manage to reach the United States build a strong self-esteem and decision capacity because the journey and their experiences in the United States make them stronger than they were before they got to said country. Finally, in their work about the reasons why women in transit decide to continue with their trip despite having been detained by border patrol agents Cueva Luna et al. (2014) come to two important conclusions. The first is that due to the network that migrant women already have in the United States, it is difficult for them to surrender and return to their countries; the fact that people so close to them (their relatives and acquaintances) have already been able to cross into the United States and being so close to arriving in that country motivates them to keep trying; the second is that women who had contact with their smugglers from their country of origin feel more confident about being able to cross into the United States and therefore want to keep trying to get there.

## 2.3 Resilience and strengths of migrants in transit

### 2.3.1 The current example: Central Americans in Mexico

In the literature review process, two works were found that are directly related to the resilience and strengths of Central American migrant women in their transit through Mexico.

The first is a research done by Servan-Mori, Leyva-Flores, Xibille, Torres-Pereda and Garcia-Cerde (2014), in which they applied a questionnaire to 2,714 Central American migrants, women and men, in order to know the factors that promoted their willingness to continue their transit through Mexico despite having suffered some type of violence in the journey. They found that migrants, including women, decided to continue because of two factors, the first was related to conditions in their country such as structural violence, poverty and domestic violence; the second was related to the future, examples of which are the proximity of the United States and the possibility of offering a better future to their children, if they had at least one.

Researchers came to the conclusion that it is important to comprehend the conditions that pushed migrants out of their country of origin to understand how violence is assimilated by them as the price to pay for migrating. That is, it is important to bear in mind that they come from countries where violence is normalized and in Mexico they will only prove that to reach their goals it is necessary to pay a price, that is, to be abused. Finally they also reached the conclusion that migrant shelters are a place where migrants can protect themselves from violence and recover from the consequences of it. However, they emphasize that migrant shelters should not be thought of as the solution to the violence suffered by migrants on their way through Mexico, but that the true protection of their rights and promotion of their safety must be caused by changes in the legislation of the transit country.

The second research done by Barral-Arellano (2009) talks about resilience in Central American migrants, including women. She conducted 42 interviews, of which 19 were made to migrant women. The results were not divided in relation to the gender of the person, so they will be discussed in a general way.

This research revealed that most of the migrants decided to leave their country due to poverty and they were trying to reach the United States to amend this situation. They expected, by getting a job, to be able to help their relatives or acquire a property in their country of origin. She also found that migrants are able to continue with the journey due to factors that promote their resilience, such as social support (migrant's shelters or family support), spirituality and willpower. The researcher realized that these three elements played an important role in motivating migrants to continue their journey despite encountering adverse situations; she stressed that the migrant's religious beliefs are one of the most important sources of resilience since most of the interviewees mentioned at

some point that God was the one who helped them to continue with the trip and they expected it to continue helping them when they crossed into the United States.

### 2.3.2 This also happens in other parts of the world: Iraqis and Iranians in Turkey

During the literature review process, papers were found describing how migrants relied on social support networks while in transit. That is, how certain groups help migrants in transit survive, stay strong and continue their journey. Since this research sees social support as an external strength of the migrants, two studies about Iraqis and Iranians' social networks will be associated to the work done with the global studies of the strengths of migrants in transit.

To give a more comprehensive perspective to this work, this section will include works on the external strengths of migrants in different parts of the world. Mexico is not the only country in the world that serves as a transit country for all those migrants seeking to reach a first world country. Turkey, located in Asia and Europe at the same time is a country that also receives hundreds of migrants each day that plan to stay temporarily in that country while waiting to travel to their final destination (Siciliano, 2015).

#### 2.3.2.1 Iraqi migrants in transit

The first work that was found linked to the external strengths of migrants in Turkey is that of Danis (2006). This paper talks about the role that the church plays in Iraqi female and male Christian migration and how it helps them overcome the adversities they find in the transit country.

This researcher found that religious and family networks play an important role in the phenomenon of Iraqi Christian migration and, more importantly, these networks are key to the survival of this group during its transit. He points out that they recur to church assistance due to the fact that Turkey has very weak reception associations for migrants and refugees, who fail to cover the basic needs of these groups.

He also explains that religion is a protective factor in times of adversity for this group. He adds that religion is the most fundamental element in their organization and self-identification and that

this is what gives them the strength to connect with the outside world and thus meet their needs and achieve their goals.

The author ends by pointing out that the social networks of migrants in transit are key to keeping them strong and surviving in situations of adversity. He says that this type of support is vital to maintain them in transit and with the strength to move forward towards their goal.

### 2.3.2.2 Iranian migrants in transit

The study of Koser Akcapar (2010) focused on exploring how the social networks of Iranians in Turkey acted as a source of strength for them while in transit. The researcher interviewed 42 Iranian women and men in different cities of Turkey such as Ankara, Istanbul, Kayseri and Van.

In the first place, she realized that the motivation of Iranian migrants to have a better life in a country in Europe or North America is one of the reasons why they travel to Turkey and are willing to face different difficulties. Second, he noticed that social networks such as friends or relatives who have already been in Turkey act as support networks to help them make the decision to migrate. More importantly, she realized that these social networks are vital for the survival of Iranian migrants in transit because they were the ones who provided them with money or assistance in times of difficulty.

Like the study of Iraqis in Turkey, this study also concluded that religion was a protective factor in situations of adversity or stress for the Iranians. The author explained that the churches play a key role in the migrants' transit since in them they found their basic needs met. She realized that some Iranians, who were formerly Muslims, converted to Christianity after receiving help from the church as a way to face adversity and due to the lack of help from the mosques. She ended by describing how in the church the Iranian migrants in transit managed to find peace, gain self-esteem, make new friends and this helped them to raise their hopes and dreams about the future.

### 3. Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework functions as a structure that helps the researcher guide the research relying on a theory or formal theories (Eisenhart, 1991). These theories are constructed using a coherent and established explanation of certain phenomena and relationships. At last, the theoretical framework works as the connector between the understanding of the subject of study, the research plan and, the concepts and definitions of the theories relevant to unscramble the research question (Grant & Osanloo, 2014).

This research's theoretical framework is rooted in the strengths perspective and in resilience theories. This is because the purposes of it are linked to the analysis and identification of the strengths and resilience capacity of Central American migrant women, as well as how they explain and make sense of how they used these elements to succeed in getting to the Mexico-US border.

#### 3.1 Resilience

Resilience has been defined by Masten, as "the phenomena characterized by good outcomes in spite of serious threats to adaptation or development" (2001, p.228); and by Rutter, as "the reduced vulnerability to environmental risk experiences, the overcoming of to stress or adversity, or to a relatively good outcome despite risk experiences " (2012, p.336).

Although those definitions are quite accurate, during the literature review process I came across a definition proposed by Pooley and Cohen. They consider resilience as "The potential to exhibit resourcefulness by using available internal and external recourses in response to different contextual and developmental challenges" (2010, p.34). This last definition seems more appropriate and comprehensive than the previous ones since it takes into account both the internal and external resources of people, that is, it does not see resilience as an intrinsic phenomenon, but also extrinsic. In addition, it not only reflects about developmental challenges, but highlights challenges related to context, such the ones that often appear during an irregular migratory journey.



Some of the most salient features of the concept of resilience are: 1) it does not require superior functioning, but it can arise from ordinary processes in people (Masten, 2001); 2) it is a dynamic process between the individual and that around him, therefore, not part from an individualistic perspective (Pooley & Cohen, 2010), 3) for a person or community to be considered resilient, they must have experienced some kind of risk or adversity and overcame it (Rutter, 2012).

### 3.1.1 Risk and adversity

As previously explained, for a person to be considered resilient, he or she must have been exposed to risks and have overcome them with internal or external resources. Risk is defined by Welbourne (2012) as the probability that a negative event occurs, combined with the seriousness of the consequences if it occurs; therefore, the more serious the potential consequences of the event, the higher the level of risk. On the other hand, Fraser, Galinsky and Richman (1999) warn that the term has blurry boundaries; for them risk denotes the fact that a group of people with similar characteristics is more prone than others in the population to face a problem.

Some authors (Fraser et al., 1999; Masten, 2014; Rutter, 2012) consider that successful adaptation despite having experienced adversity is also a display of resilience. This research considers an adverse situation, the lack of positive circumstances or opportunities, which may be brought by physical, mental or social losses, or by experiencing deprivation or distress (Hildon et al., 2008). These adversities are framed in the context of in transit migration.

### 3.1.2 The seven resiliencies

Wolin (2003), fascinated by resilience in the face of adversity, proposes a conceptual frame that reveals the kind of resiliency developed by those who face hardships. This is a construct resulting from scientific studies with adolescents and adults. Evidence showed that these seven resiliencies - which she considers as subcategories of strengths - are the most common methods that people use to safeguard their own development in front of severe threats (Wolin, 2003).

Table 1 shows the seven resiliencies proposed by Wolin, as well as the behaviors that reveal them and the function each one of them holds to fight developmental and contextual challenges. These are used as a reference to detect and analyze the resilience capacity of the participants in the study.

Resiliency	Behavior	Function
Insight	Asking tough questions and giving honest answers about yourself and the difficult situations in which you find yourself.	Dispels denial and confusion, generates clarity, and serves as a springboard for taking the necessary action to solve problems.
Independence	Distancing emotionally and physically from trouble.	Provides physical and emotional safety.
Relationships	Connecting with people who matter.	Provides friendship, understanding, material and emotional support and sometimes, love.
Initiative	Meeting challenges by taking charge of problems and looking for solutions.	Solves problems, generates a sense of competence and mastery.
Creativity	Using imagination.	Helps express difficult feelings in a positive, satisfying way.
Humor	Laughing at yourself, finding what's funny, even in sadness or pain.	Introduces liveliness and light heartedness in somber situations.
Morality	Doing the right thing, using your conscience, thinking of others as well as yourself.	Generates a sense of being a good person even when surrounded by badness.

Table 1 – The Seven Resiliencies. Retrieved from Sybil Wolin (2003) What is a strength?

## 3.2 The strengths perspective

The strengths perspective was developed challenging the conventional practices of Social Work (Juárez, 2012). This profession has been characterized by focusing on the problems of people and considering the opinion of the professional as the only and unquestionable truth (Saleebey, 2006). Contrary to this, in the strengths perspective, the professional works in collaboration with people and communities, who are considered experts in by their own right. In an empathic and open-minded way, the worker allows the user to explain and theorize their situation in order to discover the resources and strengths they possess.

This approach invites the social worker, whether practitioner or researcher, to notice the innate wisdom of the human spirit, as well as the capacity for transformation and progress of even the people who have gone through the most adverse situations (Saleebey, 2006). However, it warns that people's abilities and strengths may be well hidden under years of abuse or guilt, that is why the social worker should use different techniques, such as the strengths-based interview and the solution-approach, in other words, be focused to capture any narrative that shows glimpses of hope and competence.

This perspective is used in this research because it is a useful tool to explain how Central American women who traveled irregularly through Mexico, succeeded in reaching the end of their transit. As explained in the literature review, irregular transit through Mexico entails different difficulties and adversities, in addition, the odds that something goes wrong are high. Taking a different perspective on female central-American migration, this research focuses on the capabilities, motivations, resources and hopes of Central American women and how these helped them find ways to accomplish getting to the end point of their transit.

### 3.2.1 Principles

Saleebey (2006) proposes six basic principles for this perspective. This research will work considering four of them.

- Every individual, group, family, and community has strengths.

Since this perspective assumes that each person has strengths, the duty of the practitioner or researcher is to discover those. To achieve this, we must be genuinely interested in people's accounts as well as the interpretations they make about their experiences. How people make sense of their experiences and their strengths through narratives, can be used as the theory that explains why they are still standing despite the misfortunes and difficulties they have faced (Juárez, 2012).

- Trauma and abuse, illness and struggle may be injurious, but they may also be sources of challenge and opportunity.

With this principle Saleebey (2006) explains that people are not just passive recipients of adversity. They are active agents during and after adversities, in this way they develop and learn skills that help them face future challenges. With this principle in hand, this research explains how the challenges and difficulties of the migratory journey pushed women to be active agents of their own experience and to discover and use their skills and strengths to achieve their goal.

- Assume that you do not know that upper limits of the capacity to grow and take individual group and community aspirations seriously.

Most of the time people and communities do not realize how many obstacles they have overcome until they recount their experiences. In the same way, social workers often do not appreciate the capabilities of a person until they open up to the idea that whoever is in front of them can be someone resourceful and skilled (Saleebey, 2006). This process requires that the worker listens with respect and interest to the person and that is not in the search of diagnoses, but of capacities, which can be unimaginable (Young, McKenzie, et al., 2014).

- Every environment is full of resources

This perspective affirms that, in every environment, even in the most hazardous, there are resources. These can take the form of objects, people, associations, groups or institutions that can give another time, help, knowledge and more (Saleebey, 2006). This research, uncovers how women sought and obtained the necessary resources to continue even though they were in difficult places and situations.

### 3.2.2 How to recognize a person's strengths?

The perspective suggests that the practitioner stimulates the narration of experiences on behalf of the user. The social worker must be alert to any hint of skill or hope; narratives, which are often rich in accounts and examples, are ideal for this. Since the discovery of strengths goes hand in hand with narrations, this research uses the method of narrative analysis and narrative interview.

## 3.3 Resilience and strengths perspective

Now that we have reviewed the conceptual aspects of resilience and the strengths perspective, we can better understand how they relate to each other.

Resilience provides a conceptual field to discover the strengths of people (Saleebey, 2006). Several authors (Barnard, 1994; Brownlee et al., 2013; Zimmerman, 2013) have used the theoretical bases of resilience and the strengths perspective in research that seek to reveal how people face adversity. Both invite the researcher to consider the resources of the people and depart from an optimistic and hopeful point of view.

### 3.3.1 Resilience: Protective factors as strengths

While reviewing the literature about resilience a term came across used by Rutter (1985): protective factors. These are those situations, contexts or personality characteristics that decrease the likelihood of risk in the face of an adverse situation (Rutter, 1985). The outbreak of these factors is not always a pleasant process, quite the reverse, it can be uncomfortable for the person, as they arise in stressful situations. However, it is key that the person goes through tense situations to develop or show these factors. For example, the immunization of a person to a virus is not due to the person's good health, on the contrary, it is due to the exposure to the virus and the successful coping against the damaging agent (Rutter, 1987). Generally, protective factors are not positive assets persons naturally possess from birth, but these are usually created through the confrontation of a person to adversity.

Protective factors are similar to the strengths because these are not traits that a person naturally has, but they are created from different experiences, which can sometimes be difficult or uncomfortable. This research will take the concept of protective factors as strengths. That is, the strengths will be those protective factors that people created in adverse situations to face future risk situations.

In addition, it will follow this concept because the protective factors capture well the idea that even in the most adverse situations, people are able to generate assets and face misfortune. It also captures well that the acquisition of a strength can be a process that is not pleasant, but is necessary for coping with adverse life situations.

### 3.3.2 The umbrella of resilience

After having read dozens of articles related to resilience and the strengths perspective, I realized that both work as an umbrella against adversity. Image number 1 explains more in detail what I mean.

Resilience is the action of opening an umbrella (protective factor, strength) when it rains (adversity). Every drop on the umbrella is an experience or factor that can harm us; by opening the umbrella (using our strengths) we cannot change the rain (the adverse situation), however we can protect ourselves from the raindrops (factors that could harm or endanger us).

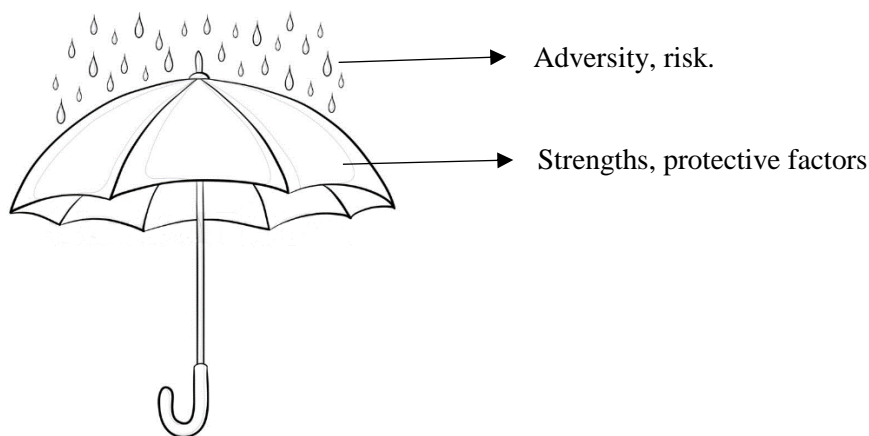


Image 1. The umbrella of resilience. Author's elaboration.

To sum up, for this research takes adversity and risk as the factors that affect migrant women; and their strengths and protective factors as the shield that they use against them. The mere fact of employing their strengths to face adversity and continue their journey is be considered as an act of resilience.

### 3.3. 3 Logic reasoning

Taking into account that this study departs from the existing theories and perspectives that were explained above, this research follows a deductive type of reasoning. That is to say, it goes from general statements to particular ones. Specifically, I selected theories that explain what is already known in a particular domain and using these theories I tried to explain particular phenomena (Bryman, 2012a), in this case, the strengths and resilience of Central American women in transit.

In this research it can be clearly seen that the deductive method was followed because first ii) theories were selected to explain the strengths and resilience of Central American women in transit, ii) the hypotheses were proposed, iii) afterwards, the data collection methods were designed, iv) the findings of the data collection were interpreted in connection with the aforementioned theories, v) the hypotheses proposed were accepted or rejected in the analysis and vi) in the conclusions, the initial theory was revised.

In the next sections called methods and analysis, the type of logical reasoning explained in these paragraphs is better illustrated.

## 4. Methods

### 4.1 Research design

This research is both descriptive and exploratory. Descriptive research is one that is used to describe the characteristics of a population or a phenomenon. This type of research is concerned with answering questions related to "what or which" (Shields & Rangarajan, 2013). In this research, for example, I seek to answer the question "Which are the strengths and resiliencies of Central American women in irregular transit through Mexico?". In addition, the design of the first part of the interview guide is aimed at knowing the sociodemographic characteristics of the participants such as their countries of origin, educational level or marital status, for example.

On the other hand, this research is also exploratory, this type of research is concerned with answering questions such as "how" (Shields & Rangarajan, 2013). In the case of this study, we seek to answer the questions of i) how their strengths and resilience of Central American women in irregular transit through Mexico helped them succeed in getting to the border with the United States, ii) how do they use their strengths and resiliencies and iii) how do they make sense of their strengths and resilience. For these purposes, semi-structured interviews were developed, these seek to reveal, through the stories of women, how they make sense of their achievements and strengths. Likewise, participation observant was used (which will be explained later in this research) in order to discover more of their strengths as a group and how they used them to achieve their goals.

This type of research design was used because despite the fact that this study departed from certain theories and perspectives, there was very little research about the strengths and resilience of migrant women in transit, for which the type of exploratory research is appropriate.

### 4.2 Sampling

I decided to use purposive sampling for this research. This type of sampling puts the research question at the center of the sampling considerations as it provides guidelines about the categories of participants that should be the focus of attention and therefore, sampled (Bryman, 2012a).



Since the research question was related to Central American migrant women in transit through Mexico the participants had to comply with those characteristics. Additionally, they also had to have achieved to reach a Mexican city bordering the United States with the intention of entering said country.

But where do women with these characteristics are found? This response has to do with contextual considerations of sampling (Bryman, 2012b). To find out where these migrant women were, it was investigated where migrant women stayed once they reached the Mexican border with the United States. The data showed that shelters run by the church and civil society are a resource used by hundreds of migrant women in transit because, unlike hotels or public spaces, the Mexican migration law prohibits the detention of any migrant in irregular status while he or she is staying in a shelter (Carrasco-González, 2013; Carreño Nigenda et al., 2014; Verduzco & de Lozano, 2011).

### 4.3 Study site: Centro Madre Assunta

Since Tijuana is the Mexican city with the most Central Americans seeking to cross into the United States (Loza, 2016) and given that shelters are the resource they use the most while they wait to cross, I chose the Centro Madre Assunta shelter (located in Tijuana), to collect the testimonies of Central American migrant women. Getting to know Central American women staying there meant that they had already reached the last point of their journey through Mexico and were waiting to cross into the United States.

The shelter is run by the Scalabrinian missionaries, a religious congregation which belongs to the Catholic Church. Its mission is to help migrants and refugees around the world regardless their religious affiliation (Galvan, 2017). These missionaries arrived 32 years ago in Tijuana to help female and male migrants who wanted to move to the United States. In 1994, they launched the Centro Madre Assunta shelter, which exclusively serves migrant women and children (Hernández García, 2014). The shelter receives resources from the church and the civil society. It is located less than ten kilometers away from the Mexican border with the United States and provides women with free emergency accommodation and protection for 15 days, clean clothes and toiletries, three

hot meals a day, medical consultations and medicines, communication with relatives, legal advice, job bank, psychological support and workshops for children about their rights.

Due to the way it is built, the shelter resembles a house rather than an institution; it has 3 large bedrooms with 16 beds each, a room is specifically suitable to accommodate mothers with children or people with a physical disability. The house has a large kitchen, dining room, laundry area, a small chapel, one multiple-purpose room, lockers, playground, green areas and a large lounge for women to relax during the day. The shelter is decorated with flowers, ceramics, paintings and candles, its appearance in the interior resembles that of a cozy house more than that of an emergency shelter.

The days in the shelter pass stress-free. Most women start their day taking a shower and doing the house chores and preparing breakfast. When it is 8:00 a.m., the food is served and when everyone is finished they begin to clean the tables, the floor, the dishes and the kitchen. This routine is repeated at lunch and at dinner time. At 9:00 p.m. the house is quiet and by 10:00 p.m. the lights are turned off and the administrator, a 70 something year old nun, turns on the security alarms around the house so no unauthorized person can access it.

While some women leave early to work, others stay and read, call their relatives, socialize among them, go to for a walk downtown or go out to do banking transactions. In addition to the daily routine there are days when civil associations or private schools come to the shelter voluntarily to provide free services such as art workshops, massages, acupuncture or yoga, for example. These activities play an important role in the daily life of women because they help to diminish their thoughts of anguish.

## 4.4 Study Population

### 4.4.1 Sample size

For several years methodologists have tried to reach a consensus on what is the suitable size sample for qualitative studies, however, the discussions have not concluded in a clear, straight and universal answer (Bryman, 2012a). Quite the contrary, these discussions have generated different acceptable ways to see the sample size. Nevertheless, something that has been agreed on is that

the sample size should not be so small, that comparable data cannot be obtained from each other, nor so large, that it is difficult to carry out deep analysis (Bryman, 2012a).

#### 4.4.2 Sampling

The next paragraphs will refer to the sample size, how and why it was decided that this number of participants was the right one and the challenges faced.

The shelter gave me unlimited access to the testimonies of the women as long as they wanted to share them with me. However, they only authorized me 15 days of stay. For this reason it was considered that the maximum number of interviews would be 15, bearing in mind the time it took to create rapport with the participants and my other responsibilities at the shelter such as cleaning and cooking.

On the first day of my stay in the shelter I realized that 15 interviews were not going to be possible. Central American women were difficult to approach because most worked or only stayed a few hours in the shelter. Those who were approachable were reluctant to talk about their situation in Mexico, since all entered Mexico illegally or with deception. Only after a while did they trust me and talk a little more.

In spite of everything, 12 interviews were carried out, these varied in time and depth; since rapport was created with all the women, most of the interviews are rich in details and meaning, which fixes in a certain way the problem of number of interviews. Bryman (2012) states that small samples, unlike large ones, have the advantage of generating more proximity with the participants and thus generate fine data with relevance to the subject of study.

Finally, it is important that the reader considers the data collection was not limited to interviews, but also through participant observation. Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) emphasize that there are data impossible to achieve through interviews and are more sensitive to participant observation, examples of this are behaviors in a specific context and time. Through participant observation I had the opportunity to sample data in relation to their natural reactions to certain news or their attitudes to unexpected events.

Additionally, the reader should consider that it was decided to include 10 interviews and no more, nor less because the theoretical saturation was reached after the seventh interview. This means that during the interviews the content of these as well as the responses of the women began to generate the bases of the creation of different categories, which will be exposed in the results section.

#### 4.4.3. The participants

The people who contributed to this study were 12 Central American women, specifically, from Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador. Although all answered the questions asked, 2 decided to decline the use of their testimony in this study at the end of the interview. Therefore, the testimonies used will be those of 10 women. All the interviews were carried out inside the shelter, in the multipurpose room. Most of the time they and I were alone during the interview, however on 3 occasions their children were also present.

In table 2 we can see that all the interviewees are of legal age, the youngest is 23 and the oldest is 49. Likewise, the Honduran women make up half of the women interviewed. More than half have a partner. As for the number of children, all have at least one regardless of their marital status, the only exception is Karen who is single and without children.

The occupation of the majority was housewife, then worker and there is only one student. The average number of years studied is 8, the woman with the most studies is Karla, who was about to finish her nursing career in Honduras. Martha, Cecilia and Monica are those who studied the less years, reaching the third grade of primary school.

Name*	Age	Country of origin	Civil status	Number of children	Years of formal education	Occupation at country of origin
Karla	27	Honduras	Common law marriage	2	15	Nurse
Laura	37	Honduras	Common law marriage	3	7	Cook

Patricia	30	El Salvador	Single	1	12	Maquila worker
Monica	35	Guatemala	In an open relationship	3	3	Housewife
Elena	49	Honduras	Single	5	9	Housewife
Fany	24	Guatemala	Common law marriage	3	6	Housewife
Cecilia	39	Honduras	Common law marriage	2	3	Tortilla vendor
Karen	23	Honduras	Single	0	13	Student
Martha	37	El Salvador	Divorced	2	3	Housewife
Lupe	36	El Salvador	Common law marriage	4	9	Private sector employee

Table 2 – Participants' sociodemographic profile

\*The names of all participants were changed to protect their privacy.

In table 3 we can see data related to the woman's crossing attempts, their legal status when entering Mexican territory, if they traveled accompanied and the cause of migration. Of the 10 women interviewed, 7 entered illegally into Mexico; Martha and Lupe did not disclose information about this. The only one who entered Mexico with valid documents was Monica, however those did not belong to her, she supplanted a Mexican woman's identity. It is important to mention that this woman willingly lent Monica her identifications so that she could cross from Guatemala to Mexico without problems.

Most of the women expressed that this was the first time they would try to cross legally or illegally to the United States, only two expressed that this was their second attempt to enter. No woman made the journey alone, all did it in the company of someone; most were accompanied by their partners. Patricia and Karen expressed that they made the entire trip with a friend, however at the time of entering the shelter, their friends were no longer with them.

The causes of migration for these women are related to violence, threats, lack of job, family separation and limited opportunities in their countries of origin. As we can see, the causes do not stand alone and some are intertwined among them, as is the case of Cecilia, who experienced violence in her country by the gangs, was threatened and also could not get a job in Honduras.

Name*	Did you enter Mexico legally? <sup>1</sup>	Is this the first time you try crossing to the United States?	By whom are you accompanied?	Cause of migration <sup>2</sup>
Karla	No	Yes	Husband and son	Violence and threats
Laura	No	Yes	Husband's aunt	Lack of job
Patricia	No	Yes	Friend	Violence and lack of job
Monica	Yes	No, this is the second time.	Partner	Family separation
Elena	No	Yes	Nephew's partner	Limited opportunities
Fany	No	No, this is the second time.	Husband and children	No data
Cecilia	No	Yes	Husband and daughter	Violence, threats and lack of job
Karen	No	Yes	Friend	Violence and threats
Martha	No data	Yes	Children	Violence and threats
Lupe	No data	Yes	Husband and children	Limited opportunities

Table 3 – Cause of migration, crossing attempts, accompaniment during the trip and data about the women's legal status while entering Mexico.

\*The names of all participants were changed to protect their privacy.

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<sup>1,2</sup> This data is an interpretation result of what women said during the interviews.

## 4.5 Data collection methods

### 4.5.1 Interviews

This study used the semi-structured interview for the data collection. According to Bryman (2012a) it refers to the context in which the researcher has a set of general questions about a specific topic for the interviewee to answer. The benefit of this is that the interviewee has the freedom to give his answers in a flexible way but without deviating from the main topic.

The semi-structured interview method was chosen because there are answers that can only be obtained by means of questions and not observations. Bryman (2012a) is correct in stating that there are issues that cannot be analyzed through observation, such as the reconstruction of a specific event. Because the interested was in the strengths and experiences of resilience in the face of adversity, the most viable thing was to elaborate questions aimed at touching this topic so that women could reflect on their own abilities and resources and how they used them.

To ensure that the participants' responses were flexible and focused on exploring their strengths and resilience in their journey through Mexico, I made an interview guide (Bryman, 2012b). This guide helped to have control over the general topics to be discussed, however the questions were not always asked exactly as outlined in the initial guide. These happened for two reasons, the first, because some women addressed in depth all the topics of interest when answering the first question. Secondly, because some women were more reluctant to tell their experiences so I had to include support questions that were not in the interview guide to encourage them to talk about their experiences of adversity and resilience.

The interview guide was created by taking into account examples of strengths-based interviews which follows the connection with this study's theoretical framework. These are designed to encourage the interviewee to talk about his or her abilities and capacity for resilience, and invites them to theorize about how they achieved their accomplishments (Saleebey, 2006). However, it is necessary to indicate that these interviews were adapted to the context in which they were conducted and that they were tailored so that women could respond in a narrative manner.

12 semi-structured interviews were applied to women during my stay at the shelter. I carried them out in the multipurpose room and the duration of these varied from 14 to 60 minutes. Before

starting, I gave them or read them the informed consent form so that they would know everything would be audio-recorded. During the interview they told me their stories and sometimes broke into tears when remembering some event, when this happened I would say a few words of encouragement, touched their hands, let them finish crying and then continue with the interview. At the end of the interview it was discussed if they wanted to sign the consent so that their testimony could be used in the study, 10 participants agreed and 2 refused.

#### 4.5.2 Participant observation

Even though my expectation was not to do ethnography, I ended up doing micro-ethnography. Bryman (2005) defines it as the immersion of the researcher in a group for a short period of time in order to collect data. The experience of micro ethnography began when the head social worker, interested by my research, offered me a bed in the shelter, which I accepted with pleasure. This meant that for 15 days I lived as a migrant woman.

My role was the one of participant observer; this meant despite doing the same activities as the woman in the shelter and followed the same rules, they knew I was a researcher doing volunteer work while looking to interview some women. In a very short period of time I created ties with some women who made me part of their lives; they showed me photos of their relatives, asked me for help to send documents, to make purchases and even to go with them to meet the smuggler who would cross them to the United States because they felt safe in my company.

Due to these kind of relationships, some women became my key informants. Specifically, two women who sought to help me, investigated which of the women who entered the shelter met the characteristics to be interviewed and then told me to proceed with the interview. In addition, they made casual conversations with them and told them about the importance of my study and how significant it was for them to participate. This earned me the trust of two participants who were reluctant to be interviewed.



## 4.6 Data Processing

This section will describe how the data obtained through the interviews were processed and analyzed.

Bryman (2012) states that data analysis is the process by which the researcher manages and interprets the data. The first thing done for this investigation, once the interviews were carried out, was to transcribe them. Transcription allows the researcher to translate what was said during the interview into a computer program (Bryman, 2012a). This allows the data to become more manageable than it would be if the researcher had to listen and listen to the transcripts over and over again.

For this investigation all the interviews were transcribed verbatim in their original language, Spanish. This type of transcription means writing down each of the words spoken by the interviewee and the interviewer (Halcomb & Davidson, 2006). It was done like this because it was sought to make a narrative analysis and not only a thematic one. After this, all the interviews were translated into the English language and exported to the NVivo coding program and the thematic analysis was carried out. To achieve this, each transcription was codified, that is, the data were divided into different groups and those groups were given certain names or labels. This grouping was possible thanks to the search of conceptual recurrences and links in the interviews of the migrant women. Later on, these codes served to form themes which gave a structure to the analysis in this investigation.

After generating the themes with their codes in the NVivo coding program, these were transferred to the Microsoft Word computer program and there they were analyzed individually and in clusters, which were arranged manually.

## 4.7 Ontological and epistemological approach

Ontology is the study of the being and raises questions about the nature of reality and of the human being in the world (Denzin & Lincoln, 2004). Whether reality exists independently of human consciousness and experience or within our consciousness and experience is a continuous ontological discussion; these positions refer to objectivism and constructionism, respectively (Bryman, 2012a).

This research has a constructionist approach, this is because it is based on the assumptions that the meaning of the phenomena is created by the interaction between the interpreter and the interpreted; that the observations and interpretations of the researcher about the object of study are shaped by societal influences; that the findings of social research are the construct derived from the interaction between the researcher and the researched and that knowledge of the observed is constructed rather than discovered (Levers, 2013).

Epistemology, or the study of knowledge is a way of understanding and explaining how I know what I know (Crotty, 1998). However, defining what is knowledge and what is not, is not an easy task; in fact, a common epistemological problem is the question of what is acceptable knowledge in a discipline (Bryman, 2012a). Doctrines such as positivism or interpretivism have their own ways, opposed to each other, of defining what is knowledge within the social sciences.

According to Weber (1978), the purpose of social sciences is to interpret the meaning of social action and give a causal explanation of the way in which action precedes the effect it produces. However, this meaning does not seek to be correct or true; and this is the particularity of the empirical sciences of action (Weber & Matthews, 1978) as is social work. In the same way, interpretivism assumes that access to reality, given or socially constructed, is framed by social constructions such as language or ideas (Bryman, 2012b) therefore, there is no universal reality that is correct and true, but there are several, since its construction depends on the interpretative understanding of the researcher.

The present study is guided by the interpretive epistemological approach for the reason that 1) it tries to understand, together with its participants, the construction of their reality, 2) it is not relevant for this study to find the unique truth about of the phenomenon of study, 3) the researcher is aware that both her ideas and language, as well the participants', directly influence the interpretation of the reality and therefore the reality she interprets is not the only truth in her discipline.

## 4.8 Ethical considerations

Hammersley and Atkinson (2007), state that although the goal of research is the production of knowledge, it should not be achieved at all costs. To ensure that researchers reflect about the

implications of knowledge generation (or that they will not harm their informants through their research), different disciplines created ethical codes.

Since this research belongs to the discipline of Social Work, it was conducted considering the Statement of Ethical Principles developed by the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW, 2012). To ensure that informants were not harmed, I committed myself to respect the human rights and human dignity of the people involved in the study, specifically in identifying their strengths; I am also trying to use the results of the research to promote social justice, specifically, by giving it a gender focus, trying to show women as active agents of in transit migration; and I did not use my knowledge or skills to harm informants or to obtain any type of personal benefit.

Additionally, I considered ethical aspects of social research methodology proposed by Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) and Bryman (2012). I achieved this by providing, in simple language written or verbal informed consent to the participants. In addition, respected and protected the informants' privacy by recording and transcribing the interviews myself, as well as by replacing the informants' real names with fictitious ones; on top of that, informants decided during or after the interview whether or not they wanted their testimony to be used. Finally, there was not any kind of deception, since I was sincere about my role in the shelter and about the purpose of the investigation.

Finally, it is imperative to mention that I did not provide any kind of material compensation to the respondents. Despite the women's participation in the study was completely voluntary, I considered that it was possible that given their vulnerable situation, they might have felt obliged to participate and disclose information they would not normally share in order to obtain some material help.

#### 4.8.1 Ethical challenges

In this research I faced 3 major ethical challenges. The first had to do with the rapport, the second with the other women who stayed in the shelter, specifically the deported Mexican women and the third with the information shared during the interview versus the one shared during casual

interactions. In the following paragraphs each one will be explained and what decisions made at the end.

Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) recommend to create rapport with the respondents, especially if the researcher is going to touch sensitive issues that could cause them stress. My decision to create rapport with women confronted me with two difficulties. Before interviewing my potential respondents, I tried to meet them in my role as a volunteer and spend time with them for at least one full day. This required time and some women only stayed in the shelter for a few hours and then left; because of this I did not have time to create rapport with all of them and I lost several opportunities to get more testimonials. However, I decided it was more important to wait to meet them a bit before interviewing them so that they would feel more comfortable and less stressed, I thought this was better than getting more interviews at the expense of the respondents' well-being.

The second difficulty that faced was because I wanted to create rapport, so I put myself in risky situations. Some of the women required help to make payments, file documentation or meet their smugglers. After meeting me and knowing that I was Mexican and knew how things worked, they asked me to accompany them to do all those things because they felt insecure when they were alone in Tijuana. Even though I knew that sometimes it was unsafe because they went very late, the place they had to go was dangerous or because the person they were going to see was engaged in illegal business, I accompanied them. I chose to do it because I also wanted to help them and especially because I was worried of what could happen if I denied them my help, maybe something bad would have happened to them while they were alone in the street.

My second challenge was to face the jealousy of deported Mexican women. As mentioned earlier, the shelter mostly receives Central American women in transit and deported Mexican women. Because I stayed all day in the shelter, I established friendships with several women, Central Americans and Mexicans. They all knew about which group I was doing my research. At some point, my Mexican deported friends told me they felt sad because I did not think they were important for my study as the central Americans were. I had to explain to them that before I met them, I did not know how difficult it was for them to be deported. Had this been the case, I would have considered doing research on that. I told them that although their stories were important, I could no longer change my subject of study because I had to go through the probation of my

adviser in Sweden and that required time, which I did not have, since my stay in Mexico was limited. They understood it very well and asked me to consider them for my next research.

Finally I also had to choose between using the data obtained outside the interview (through participant observation) or not. In the interviews the women used to tell me one thing but in the daily interactions they would tell me something different. For example, in the interview they would tell me they were not going to cross into the United States but in the daily interaction would tell me about their plans when arriving to said county. Why deciding what to use was a dilemma for me? In the informed consent, the women agreed her audio-recorded testimony to be used, however they did not have the opportunity to decide what information, as result of our interactions, I could use in the research. In the end I decided to also use the information obtained through participant observation, however I only included the most relevant for the study. This information is also anonymized and there is no way for anyone to know which person told me what.

## 4.9 Validity and reliability

Qualitative research is carried out for different reasons, for example to find new approaches to very familiar problems, to understand how participants perceive their roles within a group and to build new theories, hypotheses or generalizations (Merriam, 1995). Therefore the question of validity and reliability, that is, how much a study does what it is designed to do, becomes key.

To assess the validity and reliability aspects in our studies we must take into account the perspective of the ontological paradigm with which this has been carried out. For this we have to ask questions like What am I trying to do with this investigation? Test my hypothesis or understand a phenomenon? Understand the perspectives of my participants? (Merriam, 1995) Depending on what I want to achieve with my research, I will have to ask different types of questions regarding the validity of my study. The validity of the studies has to do with the notions of reality. Is it that reality is fixed or constructed? If it is constructed as the present study proposes, what reality is the one that is being measured? The researcher's about the participant or the participant's? On the other hand, reliability refers to the degree to which the results of the study can be found again if some other social scientist wants to replicate it. If we start with the idea, as the present study does, that reality is not static but dynamic and that one reality will never be the same as another then we are in serious problems with the traditional guidelines of reliability as well as validity.

The problems mentioned had already been discussed by Guba and Lincoln (1994), they said that the validity and reliability of qualitative research should be evaluated differently from the quantitative one. They proposed the terms trustworthiness and authenticity. This approach will be taken for this research.

Trustworthiness is composed of four criteria, credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability . The credibility is related to ensuring that the research has been carried out according to the canons of good practice and that the results have been submitted to the study participants who were studied to verify that the researcher has correctly understood what they wanted to say (Bryman, 2012a). This research was carried out following the qualitative methodological precepts found in different literature such as Bryman (2012a) and Hammersley & Atkinson (2007) however, due to the shifting character of the participants, it was impossible to give them the results of this investigation to corroborate that I had interpreted what they had meant in the correct way. To correct this, different types of data collection were used, such as narrative interviews and ethnography, as well as a literature review of works similar to this one to verify that what the participants wanted to convey was being understood.

In order for the study to comply with the transferability requirement, that is, for others to judge if it is possible to reproduce it in another milieu, I wrote detailed and extensive descriptions of the study site, the participants as well as their social environment. However, it is important again to emphasize the characteristics of the population studied: it is a dynamic population, in transit and depending on the political, natural and social conditions of the country of origin, transit and destination, this population changes with these conditions. Anyway, this kind of rich and detailed descriptions were made so that the reader can judge to what extent this study can be re-done and get more or less the same results.

To comply with the dependability requirement, that is, if the results can be applied at other times, I kept complete detailed electronic and physical records, when applicable, in each of the phases of my investigation.

Finally, for this study to respect the requirement of confirmability, I showed I had chosen only the theories that best adapted to what the population of this study tried to communicate through their narratives, and not theories that I wanted to fit in what my respondents said. For the study to be more confirmable a narrative approach was used, where the Central American women were the

ones who created the content of the interview and who were free to express in an emancipated way their cosmovision and constructions about themselves. After having transcribed the interviews, I dedicated myself to interpreting what they communicated through corresponding theories. In addition, to make sure that my personal values had not interfered with what I interpreted in the women's narratives, I gave my manuscript to my advisor and two other colleagues to evaluate the confirmability of the study from the outside.

In the case of authenticity, I made sure to answer the questions related to

- i) fairness, that is, does my research fairly represent the different points of view of the members of my study? The answer is yes, for this 12 interviews were made to women who only had to fulfill the requirement to be Central Americans in transit through the city of Tijuana. Of these 12 interviews, 10 were analyzed and all were given the same level of importance in the present study
- ii) ontological authenticity, that is, does this study help the study participants to better understand their environment ?, the answer is yes, through the interpretations I made of their reality and the theories that were used to analyze them, the participants of the study, if they read it, would understand their reality better. Although this study was written in an easy and understandable language for everyone who reads it, social worker or not; it was only written in English, so the participants, unless they know English, will not be able to access the knowledge generated thanks to their testimonies
- iii) educational authenticity, that is, does this research helps members to better appreciate the perspective of other members of society? the answer is also yes , this study helps the participants of the study as well as any social scientist and member of society to comprehend the perspectives and cosmovision of Central American women in transit as it makes a detailed description and analysis of their interpretations of their experiences.

In conclusion, this research meets the requirements of trustworthiness and authenticity established for qualitative research.

## 4.10 Limitations of the study

There are some limitations in this work that are important to consider. The first has to do with time. Because the women only stayed a few days in the shelter, I was only able to interview them and be with them for a limited time. Even though I sometimes managed to establish rapport with some and they were willing to help me, I could not ask them to stay longer so that they would respond to more of my enquiries.

As for what was said during the interview, there were two limitations; the first, some of them arrived in Tijuana fleeing the violence of their country; second, others had engaged in illegal activities such as falsifying documents. For these two reasons it is possible that women have not had enough trust in me to expand on the answers to the questions I asked them; they had to be cautious with what they disclosed during the interview, even if it meant giving me less information than they would have given me if they had known me for a long time and trusted me. It was recognized from the beginning of the investigation this limitation and that is why I let the women only disclosed what they felt comfortable expressing.



## 5. Findings and analysis

This section describes and analyzes the findings of the data collection process. The chapter is organized as follows. In the first place, it is illustrated, through the example of Patricia's journey, the path that the women of this study usually take to travel Mexico by land from south to north. Then it is dived-in the women's narratives of adversity in their transit through Mexico.

The following section describes and analyzes the strengths of the women who contributed to this study. Their strengths are divided in two, internal and external. The reader will realize that internal strengths are analyzed first; the components of this type of strengths are spirituality and religion, endurance, courage and goal setting. Next, the external strengths, also called social support and social capital, are analyzed; the components of these strengths are people, institutions and family.

In conclusion, this chapter is devoted to the analysis and exploration of the adversities, resilience and strengths of Central American migrant women in transit through Mexico.

### 5.1 Patricia's journey

Before continuing with this section it is important that the reader understands what a typical journey is like from Central America to Tijuana by land. This is with the ends of understanding the dimensions of the effort and skill required to reach the border with the United States.

Map 1 represents the journey that many of the women in this study made from their country to Tijuana. Specifically, this is the journey of one of the respondents, Patricia from El Salvador. She had to cross two borders, the one of her country with Guatemala and the one of Guatemala with Mexico.

The route from the capital of El Salvador to Tijuana consists of 4,897 kilometers by the main highways, however we must be remember that Central American migrants commonly travel through less traveled roads, which usually have more kilometers because they surround mountains and rivers. Even though Patricia made most of her trip by bus, we must remember that there were parts of the road she traveled on foot, making the journey even longer.

Below the map we can see the order of her journey, we can observe that the trip from Tuxtla Gutiérrez, to Villahermosa was not direct as it should have been. In Tuxtla Gutierrez she suffered a robbery so she had to go to Tenosique before going to Villahermosa. However, from Villahermosa to Tijuana the trip was more direct, this could be due to the fact that in Tenosique she obtained the Mexican humanitarian visa, which allows any migrant to transit through Mexico legally, more safely and without suffering the constant harassment from the Mexican National Institute of Migration.

This map is only an approach to the journey that some Central American migrant women make to reach the border with the United States. The reader should consider that the transit from south to north through Mexico by land comprises many difficulties such as different types of weather and topography, violence and insecurity. These factors represent a challenge for the hundreds of migrants seeking to reach Tijuana.



Country: El Salvador

1.- San Salvador

Country: Guatemala

2.- Guatemala City

3.- Mexico-Guatemala border

Country: Mexico

4.- Tuxtla Gutiérrez

5.- Tenosique

6.- Villahermosa

7.- Veracruz

8.- Mexico City

9.- Guadalajara

10.- Sonorita

11.- Tijuana

Map 1- Patricia's journey through Mexico. Author's elaboration

## 5.2 Narrations about adversity

This first section of the analysis will be about the adversities that the women of this study faced during their journey through Mexico. Although the adversities are not the focus of study of this research, they are key to the same. The interest in them is because adversity is part of a resilient person's history and is behind some of their strengths. Rutter (2012) states that a person can only be considered resilient if he or she faced some type of risk or adversity. Additionally, protective factors arise mainly in moments of stress or discomfort. Regarding the strengths, Saleebey (2006) affirms that everyone has them, even those hit by misfortune and difficulties. For these reasons it is important to review the complications women faced in their journey, in order to set a base for analyzing their strengths and capacity for resilience later on.

When I asked the first question to the women who participated in this study - which consisted in telling me how was their trip through Mexico - they brought out very specific stories about the difficulties they faced. In general, they all talked about adversities related to i) their irregular status in Mexico, ii) abuses by the authorities and society, and iii) lack of support to face adversity. In the following paragraphs each of one of these will be discussed in detail.

### 5.2.1 Adversities to which they were exposed due to their irregular status in Mexico

There are adversities to which women were exposed simply because they were migrants crossing illegally through Mexico. Here are some of their testimonies.

*“... we surrounded (the state of) Oaxaca through puddles that reached our waist and my husband brought the suitcases and was carrying my little girl. I had to carry my son, the puddle sometimes covered him completely.”* (Fany)

*“Then I realized how dangerous it can be because I remember we were in the boat (crossing the border between Guatemala and México), those boats that are not so high and do not work well [...] The journey through that river is horrible. I was playing with the water and suddenly someone*

*tells me "Do not do that" and I say "Why?" And he says "There are crocodiles here" and I was shocked."* (Patricia)

In the testimonies of women we can realize that the simple fact of traveling through Mexico without the required documentation put them in danger. Some had to use risky methods to go through Mexico so the authorities would not notice them. Fany had to walk through puddles together with her children and Patricia had to cross a river in a broken and dangerous boat.

Barrón, Fernández De Castro and Rivera (2014) mention that the transit through Mexico is dangerous and difficult, even more if one is a migrant in an irregular status. This is due to the fact that those who do not have a Mexican visa are forced to use more difficult methods and to travel through more dangerous places so they are not detained by migration officers (Carrasco-González, 2013). All these women entered Mexico without a visa, therefore they had to adopt clandestine ways to go through it. For this end, they crossed through rivers or puddles, putting at risk their lives and those of the ones who accompanied them.

Going through Mexico legally is in itself complicated, doing it in an irregular way is even more so. Some countries have already issued warnings to their inhabitants who have plans to visit Mexico due to the situation of violence that plagues the country (UNODC, 2014). Entering and traveling illegally through Mexico is even more risky, and the people who do it face different challenges such as difficult topography, abuses by the authorities and society or even death (Servan-Mori et al., 2014). Adding to this, most of the times the victims are not able to denounce the abuses that are committed against them and cannot ask for help if they need it.

### 5.2.2 Abuses by the authorities and society

Several authors have documented that the Mexican authorities and society represent the greatest challenges for those central American migrants whose final destination is to reach the United States (Barrón et al., 2014; Bustamante, 2011; Pombo París et al., 2016). As we will see throughout the investigation, they play an essential role in the experience of the migrants.

In the following paragraphs I will explore the abuses migrant women suffered from society and from those who should have watched over their integrity and well-being, first, lest review their testimonies.

*“We were assaulted in Oaxaca, three men came out and they started hitting my husband and they threw me on the train track and also the children. After, one of them began to touch me so my husband came and told them “no, do not do anything to her” and when he told them that, they hit him, they also brought a machete and they were going to hurt him . When they were about to hurt him I got very nervous and screamed.”* (Fany)

*“... 7 men appeared [...] and said “this is a robbery”. When the man said that, he started shooting everywhere and everyone ran and split from the group [...] the criminal took off my shirt, my bra and began to touch my breasts horribly, he touched my private parts too [...] I was angry, instead of being in shock, I was angry. I thought, “I would like to be able to defend myself... I would like... ” Maybe one as a woman wants to be a man to be able to defend herself.”* (Patricia)

In the testimonies of Patricia and Fany we can see how their transit through Mexico involved being assaulted and that their lives were at risk. For Fany this implied that they touched her and that they hurt her little children and her husband, for which she risked and shouted so that they would not hurt him anymore. Patricia was not only robbed, but also sexually assaulted. This for her was a horrible experience, where she felt a lot of anger.

These two women faced the sad reality faced by hundreds of migrant women in transit around the world. The UNHCR (2016) points out that within all migrants, women (and children) are in a more vulnerable position due to the simple fact that they are women. For this reason they are more likely to be victims of gender violence, such as sexual abuse and human trafficking. Adding to the aforementioned, the degree of vulnerability of migrants becomes more acute because they pass through more dangerous places and there is a whole criminal network dedicated to taking advantage of them (Zavaleta, 2013).

Patricia makes noteworthy comment, she says that while they were touching her, she was wishing to be a man to be able to defend herself. And it seems that this is true in a country where machismo (the belief that the man is by nature superior to woman) is still the institution that governs relations between its inhabitants. This has heartbreaking consequences, such as high rates of physical, sexual, psychological and economic violence against women in Mexico (Fregoso & Bejarano, 2009).

In Mexico there are still no appropriate guidelines to ensure that violence against women is eradicated (Fregoso & Bejarano, 2009). In this sense, migrant women are even more vulnerable to violence, especially because they do not know the laws of the country and lack a support network to assist them.

As mentioned earlier, women were also victims of abuse and maltreatment by Mexican institutions, especially from Mexico's National Institute of Migration (INM) and its officers. Here is their version of what they suffered

*“When we were locked in the buildings of the migration institute the earthquake happened, the one of September 7<sup>th</sup> (2017), the epicenter was in Juchitán, which is near where we were [...] I had my two children sleeping on a mat on the floor when the earthquake started [...] then the earthquake became stronger and it lasted about 2 minutes. The migration agents locked the door of our cell on the outside and they went out into the street, they left us locked up during the earthquake.” (Fany)*

*“When we were on our way to Tijuana migration officers extorted us, they made us go out the bus and told us "Your papers are not legal ", then I said "I have the (humanitarian) visa and I can go through all Mexico and enter and leave as many times as I want" [...] So the officer says "Go for your things, let's go to an office" [...] I got on the bus and when I came out he says, "It's ok, we found a solution, your friend and I found a solution" and I asked him "what solution?" Then they took 1000 pesos from each one, I did not want to give the money because I was angry, after all one is not a criminal and I did not obtain my visa illegally.” (Karen)*

In the testimonies of these women we can see how their rights were violated by migration officials. Fany explains the indifference of the officers in a situation of risk and Karen tells how they abused their power to extort her.

The above is outrageous because the mission of Mexico's National Institute of Migration (INM) is to "Strengthen the protection of the rights and safety of national and foreign migrants, recognizing them as subjects of law, through efficient migration management, based on the legal framework and with full respect for human dignity" (INM, 2018). However, despite the INM mission of protecting the rights of the migrants, these migrant women were treated in an inhumane manner by them, also their rights as migrants were violated.

Fany recalled how she and her children went through a risky situation due to the migration officials' indifference, as they left her locked up in a cell while an earthquake of 8.2 on the Richter scale hit the country. This earthquake killed 58 people and left more than 200 wounded (Chavira, 2017), among which could have been Fany and her children, this is because the epicenter was very close to the detention where she was.

Similarly, Karen remembered with anger how the immigration officers humiliated her first and then extorted her. They sought to take advantage of their migrant status to obtain illicit money. It is curious that they blamed her unlawfully for obtaining her visa illegally when their goal was precisely to enrich themselves illegally. Extortions and degrading treatment suffered by Central American migrants in the hands of the migration authorities have been documented several times (Barrón et al., 2014; Pombo París et al., 2016). So this is not something new, however it is not something that should continue happening, especially because the INM's mission is to make sure of strengthening the safety of foreign migrants and to respect their human rights.

### 5.2.3 Lack of support to face adversity

For this study, indifference will be considered as a lack of interest in helping migrants improve their situation. In Mexico, the indifference towards migrants is not something out of the ordinary, in fact Barrón et al., (2014) has documented it and he mentions that this is due to a tradition of discrimination and exploitation of the Central American migrant.



In the following paragraphs it will be explored how the lack of support for migrant women also confronted them with adversities they would not have had to face if they had been given a little help.

*"They do not give me a job because I do not have papers, I have arrived here but I had to suffer and I had to beg in the street. I have slept in the streets."* (Cecilia)

*"Well, arriving in Querétaro, the child was very sick... we arrived at the public hospital and they did not want to assist us because we lacked documentation. There was also a shelter but they did not let us sleep there so we had to sleep outdoors in some cardboard boxes. Close by, there were some homeless people watching us and I imagined they could harm us, they were waiting for us to fall asleep and they were like 3."* (Karla)

In the testimonies of these women we can see how in some parts of their journey they had to face the adversities of the road without the support of any institution or person. Thanks to this they were forced to *"walk on the road with the children until we reached a shelter or a safe place."* (Fany) or to *"beg in the street"* (Cecilia). This increased their level of vulnerability as it aggravated the difficult situations they were going through.

Since there is not enough support in the country for migrant women, they had to sleep in public spaces such as the street, bus stations or parks. This involved a great risk for them. This is because Mexico is a dangerous country, today it is the third country with the most deaths in the world and its homicide rate is of 20.5 murders per 100,000 residents (UNODC, 2014). That is to say, to transit through it is risky and even more to sleep in its streets. Because of all this, the lack of support to spend the night entailed a great hazard to the life and well-being of the migrant women.

In addition, women reported not having received help to overcome their unemployment situation. This is the case of Cecilia who was forced to beg and sleep in the streets since no one wanted to give her work because her status was illegal in Mexico. However, it is imperative to question ourselves if her terrible situation was due to the fact that she did not have documentation that allowed her to travel freely through Mexico or due to a problem of discrimination against Central

Americans. Barrón et al., (2014) mention that in several parts of Mexico there is a tradition of discrimination against those who come from countries such as Honduras or Guatemala. It is also important to consider that it is usual that not many employers ask their employees that their documentation is in order to work (Miguel, 2018). Therefore, denying help to women to work goes beyond wanting to comply with the law and it is more related to discriminatory issues.

Karla talks about how she found herself without the support of the public hospital to treat her son for an illness. She says that she was denied access to urgent medical care for her son and even worse, having the option of helping with accommodation for one night, they refused to give it to her. Due to all this she had to stay to sleep in the street, along with her husband and her sick little son, exposing herself to the dangers of the night in Querétaro.

Although it is true that the majority of Mexican health institutions only serve its members, it is important to ask ourselves what ethical limits were exceeded when they denied urgent attention to a minor child of a Central American family without a home. Karla's case is just one example of the indifference faced by hundreds of Central Americans who pass through Mexico. The Municipal Commission on Migration Affairs on the state of Querétaro, where Karla's incident took place, reports that once a week they receive at least one complaint related to the violation of the human rights of migrants, specifically, the denial of access to health (Hernández, 2017). It is outrageous that this continues to happen, especially in a country with a long tradition of in transit migration, by now rules for protecting the welfare and rights of migrants should have been implemented and enforced.

With the above, we can see all the adversities that women in this study faced. Despite all the social and institutional obstacles they found on their way, they managed to reach the end point of their transit, Tijuana.

But why choose to go through so much to get to another country?. Some readers may find their decision to cross irregularly through Mexico too risky, however we must remember that many of the women of this study ran away from their country due to threats or violence, therefore returning is not an option and sleeping on the streets seems like a better idea than to return to the place where they experienced robberies, assaults or were witness of a murder.

We have already talked about the adversities these women faced, which were many and quite complex, however, from now on this study will focus on discovering what are the strengths these women have and how they used them to solve these adversities .

## 5.3 Strengths and resiliencies

### 5.3.1 Internal strengths and resiliencies

Strengths can take the form of anything, depending on the context. The personal qualities or beliefs of a person can be strengths when used to solve problems and face adversity (Saleebey, 2006). In this part, the analysis will focus on internal strengths of migrant women. The term internal strength refers in this research to all those personal qualities, talents, knowledge and beliefs that women possess and that are somehow located within them, that is, that they possess regardless of the place where they are. To be more specific, they refer to what women bring with them despite having left everything behind; it is what no one can take away from them because it is inherent to them that characterizes them and that promotes their inner strength and motivation to undertake and continue their projects.

#### 5.3.1.1 Spirituality and religion

Religion is a system of beliefs and practices carried out by a community, these beliefs are accompanied by rituals that worship, recognize or try to communicate with the sacred or with God. (Koenig, 2008 in Oxhandler, Parrish, et al., 2015). On the other hand, spirituality is the personal quest to find the answers about life and its meaning, it is the relationship with the sacred and which can culminate in the development of religious rituals (Koenig, 2008 in Oxhandler, Parrish, et al., 2015). Both spirituality and religion include feelings, thoughts and behaviors that arise due to the search or approach to the sacred.

When asked why they thought they were able to reach Tijuana despite the adversities of the road, most of the women in this study used God to explain why they had been able to reach the border and other people could not. Here are some of their testimonies

*“I do not know, the truth is that from Queretaro onwards, God was there. I feel that it was like that, that God placed good people in our journey.” (Karla)*

*“When one goes out with a purpose and with faith, God is at one's side.” (Elena)*

*“... it has cost me but here we are and thank God that one day I took the initiative to say "we are leaving" and "we will endure whatever comes" and thanks to that, and thank God that he has never left us we are here.” (Fany)*

*“... but I think that if you leave your country and if you are trusting in God, the Bible says that those who trust in God... all things will go well for them. In a certain way God does not leave you.” (Patricia)*

In the testimonies of these women we can see how they believe that God was at their side during their journey. They explain that thanks to the presence of God's spirit they managed to reach the northern Mexican border. They also add that this supernatural being was not only with them at certain times, but that it never left them alone.

Karla adds that in addition to being by her side, God sent people to help her, that is, because it could not help her in person, it used a local person to help her. On the other hand, Martha prayed to God to be on her path and with her children, she explains that in this type of journey, so dangerous, the only thing one can rely on is God's will and in the plans it has for people.

Fany and Patricia mention that although they went through difficult times God supported them and in the end they managed to overcome the adversities. Patricia explains that it is important to believe in God despite the circumstances, she adds that she trusts in what is written in the bible, which says that it is enough to believe and trust God to achieve the goals that one has.

The study carried out by Pargament et al. (1990) proved that the use of spirituality and religion to face life stressing events is common among believers of some religion. Believing in a benevolent God, who supports them in difficult times and practicing religious rituals such as prayer is related to more positive outcomes in face of life threatening situations.

Another study done by Mc Rae (1984) where he interviewed a sample of 255 people from a community, found that most people said they used religion as a coping mechanism. These people also reported using prayer as the method to ask God for help in dealing with stressful situations.

What leads people to believe in a God has been explained by different authors (Banerjee & Bloom, 2013; Bloom, 2005). Some think that for there to be social control is necessary that people believe in an entity that forces them to be more moral and that morality meets also the function of making people more desirable as social partners (Johnson & Bering, 2006). Others think that religion promotes social cohesion, that is, those communities that believe in something common are more united than those that do not (Wilson, 2002 in Banerjee & Bloom, 2013). In any case, it seems that for women the belief in God, rooted through their culture or through their belonging to a certain social group, is the way in which they explain how it was possible for them to successfully reach the Mexican border with the United States despite having faced different difficulties.

These results invite us to reflect on the use of religion and spirituality in stressful situations. In the case of central American migrant women it is important to ask ourselves why they explain their success in relation to God and not only in relation to their physical and intellectual abilities. For this ends it is important to remember that all the women interviewed come from a country in Central America, a region where most people are raised following a certain religion (PEW, 2013). In Central America the dominant religion is Catholic (PEW, 2014), which promotes that its believers communicate with God when they need something. In addition, it explains different phenomena through the existence of a God, who cares for and protects his believers. It is not surprising that these women explain their success through the presence and help of God. In fact, an analysis done by Banerjee and Bloom (2013), mentions that exposure to the ideas of society about God is what leads people to mold their thinking and explain different phenomena through a God or several Gods.

If we give a second look at the testimonies of the women then we can give an account of the role that God fulfills in their lives. This is the one of unconditional companion. Elena says "*God is at one's side*", Fany "*God that has never left us*" and Patricia "*God does not leave you*". They see this spiritual deity as that which does not leave them alone. It is possible that due to the constant stress of the journey and all the inconveniences of it they have to cling to the idea that something or someone goes together with them, even if it's only metaphysically and not tangibly. To feel

accompanied and supported in stressful situations boosts the security of the people as well as their hope in the future (Thygesen, Pedersen, Kragstrup et al., 2011). In situations where the social network of the person is absent, feeling accompanied by someone reduces the feeling of loneliness and empowers them to make decisions about the future (Thygesen et al., 2011). The idea of God, in this sense, is a dynamic idea that has direct effects on how women react to adverse situations and the decisions they make. Because they are always accompanied and protected by God, they dare to take risks and to go ahead with their goals.

With what was explained in the previous paragraph, we can give an account of how the idea of God is linked to the strengths and resilience of migrant women. God is then what gives them strength to continue and is also that supportive agent who offers its protection in times of stress and adversity. It is also what helps them recover from difficult situations. In this sense, the idea of God, inculcated socially from their countries of origin, becomes a protective factor in situations of risk. In these situations the belief in a God uncovers all its benefits and helps women to overcome those inclemencies of life.

It is also important to ask ourselves what role shelters play in maintaining and strengthening the idea that God is on the road with migrants. As mentioned above, a large part of the shelters in Mexico for migrants are created and administered by the Catholic Church; furthermore, many of them are named after saints or virgins (Muedano, 2017). In addition, most times the administrators of the shelters are priests or nuns; as clear example of this is the shelter where the interviews were conducted for the present study, since its administrator was nun and the staff was affiliated, in its majority, to the catholic church. In this sense, the shelters become a space where migrants, in addition to finding physical relief, can also connect spiritually with the God in whom they believe. This behavior is reinforced by those around them, who are usually Catholic volunteers and nuns who advise migrants to pray and to ask God to take them safe to the United States safely.

It is notable how the women in this study see God as an omnipresent being and that is with them even in the most difficult times, Fany for example says “*God that he has never left us*” referring to her and her children, and Patricia expresses “*God does not leave you*”. For them, who have reached their goal and are about to cross into the United States, God is benevolent and has helped them. However, when thinking about the idea of God as a migrant’s strength, we must ask ourselves: Is God like this with all migrants? Or just with some? Probably those who have not

reached Tijuana and who had to return to their countries have a different opinion on whether God is ever present or not. In the case of these women they build an image of God as a protective being, that despite the adversity it always goes by their side preventing unfortunate things from happening to them.

Finally, as it has been discussed different research has affirmed that spirituality and religion are aspects that help people to face adverse situations in a successful way (Lietz & Hodge, 2011; Oxhandler et al., 2015). For this reason it is important that in the practice of social disciplines, such as social work, practitioners take seriously the religious affiliation and spirituality of the people if they consider it an important aspect in their lives and in how they solve their problems.

### 5.3.1.2 Endurance

For this research, endurance will be considered as the ability of women to undergo unpleasant or inconvenient situations in order to continue with their plans. In the interview, the women explained that it is necessary to go through unpleasant situations in order to reach Tijuana, that is, it is necessary to endure stressful situations with fortitude to reach the goals that they have, here are their testimonies.

*“We endured hunger, whole days without eating, without sleep, especially in the cold of the night, although it is quite hot there (in Chiapas), at night it is cold.” (Karen)*

*“... you leave everything you have, everything you are used to and well you have to adapt here, and you have to have courage and be willing to endure everything because if it is very difficult to get here, you come with stress.” (Lupe)*

*“... and do not think that because you see us like this ... but we have been suffering along the way, because it is scary, because we do not know how things are in Mexico.” (Martha)*

The women had to endure different unpleasant situations, such as going through hunger or sleeping outdoors. Karen says she had to sleep on the streets of Mexico, without any protection and exposed

to different dangers. She faced such situations in order to continue one more day on the road and be able to fulfill their goal.

Lupe says that to get to Tijuana it is necessary to leave everything one has and be willing and ready to put up with anything. It is this willingness to go through any situation that makes these women capable of achieving their goals no matter how difficult the path may be.

Similar to the testimonies of these women, a study conducted by Bernstein (2007) showed how Korean migrants faced the stressful aspects of migrant life through endurance. Endurance seems to be a method by which migrants -who do not have easy access to psychological counseling or who are far away from their relatives and acquaintances to be able to use ask for their advice and support- successfully face the stresses that migration entails.

But why are the central American migrant women of this study able to endure? The answer may be tied precisely to the difficulties they have experienced throughout their lives. The study by Kademian (2017) about Armenian survivors of Ottoman Turkish genocide showed that traumatic experiences not only result in PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) and other mental illnesses, but also boost the psychological growth and capacity of enduring of people exposed to life threatening situations. In this sense, the adversities to which they were exposed on their journey through Mexico, or even before starting their journey, gave them the strength to reinvent themselves and be able to withstand the following adversities.

It is possible that the ability to endure is also related to other internal strengths, such as goal setting, which will be discussed later. Since they settled themselves a goal and were prepared to achieve it, they were also willing to endure the different situations of danger during their journey. Setting a goal also means being prepared for the challenges that come with it and try to overcome them with all possible resources. In this sense, the strengths of women cannot be analyzed alone, but they need to be understood together to comprehend them better.

When these women say that they have endured difficulties, they construct themselves as people with the ability to resist and overcome the most adverse situations. It is possible that they begin the journey by being one and that their journey is not reduced only to transit Mexico from south to north of Mexico, but that the journey is also one of interior knowledge.



Enduring seems to be the price to pay to reach a goal. The women express that they have arrived in Tijuana, however, they have had to suffer along the way. Martha expresses “*because you see us like this ... but we have been suffering along the way*”. What they transmit through their narratives is the sacrifice they have made to reach the northern border of Mexico; that is to say what they have left or what they have endured to be in the place where they are. And they only reproduce the truth of what happens to many migrants who have to endure. As it has been documented in several works (Black, 2018; Cueva-Luna & Terrón-Caro, 2014; Pombo París et al., 2016) that Central American person who wishes to cross the Mexican territory must be prepared to withstand the various difficulties, from those related to nature as those related to society.

Likewise, enduring is something for which one has to be prepared for. For example, Lupe mentions that “*you have to adapt here, and you have to have courage and be willing to endure everything*”. That is, to migrate one has to be ready to leave and to take; to leave what one is used to and to take risks and be willing to face them. Enduring is not something that comes naturally, but it is something that also requires courage, courage to face the difficult and fight against it in order to reach a final goal.

Now it is opportune to ask ourselves if the ability to endure is some kind of special ability that only some people have or is something rather linked to the circumstances. To answer this question in a precise way it would be necessary to make another study, however taking into account resilience theories (Masten, 2001) and the precepts of the strengths perspective (Saleebey, 2012), it is possible that it is the product of an “ordinary magic”, which is capable of arising in any person and not only in some.

The most important thing about women's endurance narratives is that they show resilience capabilities. According to Masten (2001), resilience refers to the class of phenomena characterized by good outcomes despite serious threats to the well-being of the person. In the case of women, good outcome is having been able to reach Tijuana despite having gone through hunger, stress or homelessness. This author mentions that resilience does not come from special qualities, but from everyday magic. These women did not have special training to get to Tijuana, but their own resources in their minds and bodies helped them achieve their goal. This is important for the practice of social work in the context of migration since as practitioners we can learn to recognize the clients' skills to adapt and to have good outcomes.

There is also a relationship between the strengths perspective and endurance. Saleebey (2012) mentions that endurance is a strength and that is the way in which people show heroism to save themselves. Enduring is strengths which people use to continue to fight with what life demands of them. For these women, to endure meant not giving up in the face of negative circumstances and choosing to continue despite having been able to decide to return to their country or stay to live in southern Mexico.

It is important to mention that during the micro ethnography process it was noticed that these women acted normally while in the shelter, that is, they made friends with others, respected their partners and valued what they were given in the shelter. Despite everything they had to put up with, they showed a positive attitude on a daily basis and still had the expectation of reaching their final destination, the United States.

However there are some migrants who cannot endure, what happens with them? Today in the world more than 6,000 people in transit die (Millman & Black, 2018); some are victims of crimes such as homicides and others are drowned or suffocated by the harsh conditions of the transit country (Pickering & Cochrane, 2013b). For some migrants, the shock of being victims of a crime or an accident is a lot to handle and they decide to return to their countries of origin. Could we then say that these migrants are not able to endure or maybe the conditions for them were more complicated? Maybe it is a difficult question to answer since each case is different, however it is important to ask ourselves this question when we refer to those migrants who have managed to reach their destination country and those who have not.

For all the above reasons it is important that social work promotes the ability of endurance of people to the extent that is pertinent. On one hand, we must trust that people have the capability to endure certain situations in order to achieve their goals and support them in every step of the process. On the other hand, it is also vital to remember that not because people have the capacity to endure it is necessary to expose them to stressful or life threatening situations that could be avoided. We must find a balance to promote the healthy resilience and strengths of people.

### 5.3.1.3 Courage

Courage is to act intentionally in the face of risks, threats or obstacles in order to reach a goal (Goud, 2005 in Koerner, 2014). This investigation considers courage as those acts where the person chooses to be brave. In the testimonies of women we can see how the acts of courage during their journey are extraordinary, that is, very remarkable, rather than ordinary acts. Here are their testimonies.

*“To come here... I feel it's about taking the courage because sometimes it sounds easy to say "well I'm here" [...] but people does not know how much it costs to get here [...] If you have to go up, go up and if you have to beg, you beg, even if you are shy to beg. Life is not easy, everything requires a sacrifice.”* (Fany)

*“... one has to be quite brave, one has to forget all that one has, because back in Honduras I worked and I studied, although I did not have anyone, I did not give myself a bad life, but when you come, everything is left behind, all the luxuries, everything stays there.”* (Karen)

Karen and Fany talk about what has to be done to get to Tijuana, specifically, one has to go through discomfort or scarceness along the way and have to be prepared for whatever comes. They also talk about leaving aside their shyness or abandoning the comforts in their lives back in their country in order to achieve their goals. Fany is aware that life in general is not easy. She talks about sacrifices, that is, some kind of pain or action that people put on themselves to get something they want; she was aware that in order to reach the northern border of Mexico it was necessary to suffer and go through inconvenient situations to reach her goal.

Now we have the testimony of Laura, which talks about displaying one's courage.

*“My nephew started begging in the other side of the road, he was standing there when the cops got there and they grabbed him and pushed him to the ground and they started poking him around [...] I asked them why they did that, that they had no right to do that to us, because in the first*

*place we were not stealing, we were not disrespecting them. We were not doing anything bad [...] and I told them that I was going to call the human rights commission.” (Laura)*

A courageous act does not only refer to what people do to achieve their own goals, but it also refers about what people do to protect others against injustices (Koerner, 2014). Laura showed courage in challenging the authority in a country that was not hers, she did it because she believed that what the cops were doing to her nephew was not right. In addition, she tried to educate them by telling them that what they did was not correct. In the end she warned them that she would call the human rights commission, an institution with more power than them, to judge them.

Laura put her well-being at risk in order to demand her nephew's rights to be respected. She knew that what the cops did was wrong and that they could do it to her too. She risked all she had achieved in order to demand her nephew to be treated with dignity. It is remarkable that during the journey Laura not only showed courage to achieve her own goals, but she also showed it when trying to defend her nephew.

Now we have Monica's testimony, who explains how her courage has taken her so far.

*“I've always arrived everywhere like this, without papers, but I've arrived. I've arrived here because I have courage and faith. When you say "I will arrive and I will arrive and I will arrive" you arrive.” (Monica)*

Monica's testimony shows that having reached the border is the result of her courage and faith. She suggests that it is not necessary to have certain documentation in order to achieve the goals that one has, but that the most important thing is to have the courage to do things. In this sense, Monica is a peculiar case since she was the only one of the participants who entered Mexico with documents that allowed her to travel freely, she entered Mexico with false identifications and confronted the authority in a self-confident way so that they would not doubt about the authenticity of her documents. Monica faced situations of risk with courage in order to get to Tijuana.

The works of (Koser, 2000; Morales Hernández, 2014; UNHCR, 2016) mention all the difficulties that undocumented migrants face when trying to migrate to another country, as well as the challenge of leaving what one knows in order to settle in another nation. It is a fact that those who decide to migrate in an irregular manner have to face different threats and risks during their journey, so the decision to migrate requires courage to face the situations to come.

Ommundsen et al., (2010) study about Bulgarian migrants without documentation showed that the illegal migrant is perceived as courageous because it is seen as someone who has the nerve to change his life and look for better opportunities. In the case of the women in this study, they expressed (as it will be analyzed later in external strengths) that they left their countries i) in search of better opportunities for themselves and for their children and to ii) leave behind the situation of poverty and violence that is lived in their countries of origin. In this sense the women who participated in this study are not different from the ones in the study by Ommundsen et al., (2010), they made a courageous decision in order to change the life they previously had.

The undocumented migrant is also perceived as brave because he or she is willing to face different risk situations in order to achieve his purpose of settling in a country other than his own (Ommundsen et al., 2010). In this way we can also see how courage is closely related to the goal-setting process (which will be discussed later). It is possible that women take the courage to face adverse situations because they have an objective in mind, and for this purpose they are willing to face all those situations that decrease their chances of achieving it.

It is likely that the courage of women is closely linked to the risk situations they have faced. Hannah, et al., (2007) mention that courage is the experience for which a person acts in the face of a risky situation. These women, when interrupted by the risks were forced to activate their brave or courageous side.

It should be noted that the vision of what an act of courage means differs from woman to woman. For example, Fanny relates bravery with overcoming shyness in order to get what you want. On the other hand, Laura demonstrated her courage in defending her nephew in an unfair situation. The meaning of acts of courage is not something objective, but something rather subjective that is rooted in the individual worldview of each of the women.

Seeing themselves as brave builds a positive self-image for them. Hannah et al. (2007) mention that those with openness to new experiences and with a certain level of self-esteem tend to be actors of acts of bravery. In this sense, women construct themselves as agents who can face the adversities of their lives in a courageous way.

This is important because this idea challenges the general idea that migrant women in transit are vulnerable receptors of risks and abuses. This new idea of the migrant woman as brave makes us reconsider their role in migration, maybe we can start seeing them as people who possess important internal skills and strengths. More importantly, for social work, seeing migrant women as courageous invites us to think about their resources and how we can help them boost them so they can give them the best possible use.

In this context, courage is a strength that arises in women at the time when they need it most. It is also that which helps them face the adversities of the journey in a brave way. We can see that although not all women expressed openly that they were valiant, through their narratives about how they coped with stressful situations we realized that all in their own way were holders of great courage.

Finally, it is essential to ask ourselves if all migrants in illegal transit are courageous or not. This will depend on what is considered a courageous act. If we consider that the simple fact of making the decision to leave the country of origin to seek better opportunities or more security in a new country as an act of courage, then yes, all migrants in illegal transit or not, are brave. This is because they are prepared to experience new situations outside their comfort zone and are willing to endure stressful situations and to solve them bravely. This is important for the practice of social work with migrants because the practitioners know in advance that they can rely in their clients' strengths – i.e., the courage, which migrants inherently possess by the simple fact of having left their country of origin to settle in another.

#### 5.3.1.4 Goal setting

The goal setting theory explained by Locke (1996) is important since it tries to explain people's motivation; it explains that it is an action caused by a purpose, which is established by the person and has various degrees of complexity. The goals have both internal and external aspects.

Internally they are ideas or the desired end, externally refer to the object or condition to be achieved. The idea serves to direct the action to attain the object.

Why is it important to review the theory of goal setting in this study? Because in the testimonies of the women of this study we can find their goals as well as the reason why they act as they act before them. Next, they explain how goals work in their lives:

*“when you bring a goal and you become one with the idea that "I'm going to do what I'm going to do" Nobody takes out of you that goal.”* (Karen)

*“Some get discouraged and leave, but there are some that despite the long days... they arrive here, because when you bring that goal set in your mind you get here.”* (Martha)

*“If you said that you will arrive it is because you will arrive. Just like right now, I have to cross to the United States, I have to get there, at any cost, even if it's going to take a little longer [...] The thing is that when I have a goal, no one can stop me.”* (Monica)

Women say they set their goals when they left their country of origin and explain that it is precisely that goal what led them to successfully reach Tijuana. Their idea is to reach the United States and they seek to establish themselves in that country to have a better future. Karen mentions how important it is to have a goal. She explains that when that goal is well placed in yourself it is difficult for other people or circumstances to discourage you and to drop off what you want. Martha mentions that goals serve not to back down in stressful situations and that it is important to have them to face adversities. Finally, Monica explains that when she has a goal, nobody can stop her. In this way we can see that for Central American migrant women it is of vital importance to have a well-defined goal so that when they encounter adverse situations they can overcome them.

Corcoran's (2002) study with Irish migrants states that goal-setting is a process; she also mentions that this process serves to self-construct an image of the person that is clear and purposeful to himself or herself. In addition, she points out that goal setting involves making sacrifices for the aspirations set. With women we can see all this reflected in their narratives when Karen says *"with the idea that" I'm going to do what I'm going to do "Nobody takes out of that goal"* and Martha

*"despite the long days. .. they arrive here, because when you bring that goal set in your mind you get here ";* they are displaying that their goals are clear and thanks to this, they are rooted in them and therefore they are able to make sacrifices to fulfill them.

Another work done by Hagelskamp, Suárez-Orozco and Hughes (2010) highlights that it is common that when people who migrate set themselves a goal they realize that it has more derivations than initially expected. In the case of migrant women this is reflected very clearly in their narratives, for example Karla said that in her country *"kids as young as of 8 or 10 years of age are being recruited by gangs who want them to work for them. So that's what I do not want for my children [...] I want something better for them, that they have a good education."* She left her country to protect her children from violence, which would be the main goal; however, going to the United States also means giving better educational opportunities to her children, that is, the goal of migrating has multiple benefits.

But why does the goal setting process happen in these women? The answer is probably linked to their need to improve the conditions in which they lived in their countries of origin. Setting oneself certain goals means having the hope of achieving something, in this case, they think they will have something better, such as safety or work. This idea of having the possibility of attaining something is what leads them to continue traveling despite the difficulties they encounter.

The goal setting theory has important findings that relate to the situation of the women interviewed. This theory dictates that an accomplishment is greater when the goal is more difficult to achieve (Locke, 1996). As we could see in the narratives in relation to adversity and the risks they faced in their journey, women faced tough conditions to reach their goal, which makes their achievement much more important.

Additionally, this theory mentions that commitment to goals is more critical when the person is convinced that the goal is important (Locke, 1996). As we will see later on in the part of external strengths, these women believe that arriving in the United States is important because they will give their children a better life and they will get something better than what they had in their countries of origin. This may be a possible explanation on why women are so attached to their goal and in the end they manage to achieve it.



The establishment of goals is important for women who migrate from Central America to the United States as these help them to face the difficulties and stressful situations that may be encountered along the way, to not lose sight of their dream and to remember for what they left their countries of origin.

It is of vital transcendence to recognize the determination and the capacity of goal setting of the women because in this way we can see them as active agents in the decision making of their lives and in the migratory context. Traditionally, the literature about migration is based on studies about male migration and the feminine (McEvoy, 2008) is given a secondary role. With the narratives of women we can see that they have their own goals, detached from the idea of family reunification; they are the ones, and not their partners, who make the decision to change the conditions of life for themselves and for their children.

In addition, when they talk about their goals and let see that they are clear and that for reaching them they are able to endure everything, they build themselves as strong and resilient women. Likewise, when talking about their accomplished goals, they reflect on their successes and are able to realize that they can fulfill what they propose and this encourages them to set more goals for the future.

With the above we can clearly see the relationship between the strengths perspective and the goal setting. The goal setting in this case acts as that which gives them strength to continue thanks to the hope that they can achieve what they set out to do. Remembering their goals in the most difficult times motivates them to overcome stressful phases and to focus on the benefit after the anguish. All in all, goal setting is an internal resource for women that stimulates them to continue with determination.

Finally, when social work practitioners work with migrant women, it will be vital to explore their goals, since through the narratives of the women who participated in this study we have realized that they play a key role in the decision making process and coping mechanisms in women's life when they face adversities.

### 5.3.2 External strengths and resiliencies

In this section, the analysis will focus on the external strengths that helped women reach the northern border of Mexico. By external strength this analysis refers to all those reliefs or supports that came from an exterior source to women; unlike internal strengths, they do depend on the place where women are as well as the interactions and social networks they have.

Women said they felt the social support from the Mexican society, from the government institutions, from migrant's shelters and from their family. In the following paragraphs we will analyze how important these factors were to help migrant women achieve their goal of reaching the Mexican border with the United States.

#### 5.3.2.1 Social support and social capital

The most important external strength for women in transit is linked to social support and social capital. In the first place, social support is the degree to which a person's basic social needs are met through interaction with others. Basic social needs include affection, approval or security. These needs can be covered by socio-emotional help, such as understanding, esteem or acceptance, or instrumental help, such as information or financial aid. (Kaplan, 1977 in Thoits, 1986). The types of help intertwine between them, that is, the instrumental help can also be a demonstration of affection, that is, a socio-emotional help.

In the second place, the concept of social capital, developed by Bourdieu (1986) comes from the general concept of capital. He mentions that there are three types of capital, economic, cultural and social.

The social capital is "all current or potential resources that are related to the possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and inter-recognition, or, in other words, membership of a group, as a set of agents that not only have common properties ... but are also united by permanent and useful links" (Bourdieu, 1980, p.2)

An example of social capital is the social relationships of people. Social capital becomes relevant when people face struggles and can confront them by using said capital (Siisiäinen, 2000).

In this study we look at social support and social capital as those external strengths - that is, dependent on the support and will of other people - that helped women to reach the northern border of Mexico. They received social support and resorted to social capital from three groups, people, institutions and family. In the following paragraphs, each one is described and analyzed in detail.

#### 5.3.2.1.1 Persons

By support of people I refer to all the support that was provided by individuals from Mexican civil society. Specifically to all those with whom women had no kinship and who individually helped migrant women.

*“...but there were also good people who gave us food, others offered us work”. (Cecilia)*

*“The way we solved the problems was asking people for help and thank God the people in this country (Mexico)... we cannot complain, because they always helped us, since we came here people have been very kind to us. We have even met people who have let us sleep somewhere, they have given us money for transportation.” (Fany)*

*“So the next morning after leaving Queretaro a man picked us up in his truck in Guanajuato and he offered us a house and he saw my son very sick and he took us with a doctor so he would check him.” (Karla)*

Cecilia and Fany tell how people offered them help to cover their basic needs such accommodation and food. For Karla the help went further, she was offered transport, home and they helped her take her son to a doctor. All this happened near the place where a few days before she had been rejected in a public hospital and left to sleep outdoors. With this example we can see that Mexico is a country of great contrasts with respect to its treatment of migrants, just as its citizens can be indifferent, they can also be solidary with those who need the most help.

In the analysis of the adversities and risks that the women went through, Mexican people were criticized because they were indifferent or abusive towards the migrant women, however, there

were also kind people who helped the women on their journey by giving them instrumental support such as work, money or transportation. A possible explanation of why Mexican civil society tends to reject Central American migrants is due to the fact that there are laws that establish sanctions against all those who provide aid, shelter or transportation to foreigners in an irregular situation through national territory (Carrasco-González, 2013). With the above in mind we must recognize the courage and solidarity of the people who decided to help these migrant women, since not all do, not because they are indifferent, but because they want to avoid problems with the law.

The support to migrants by ordinary people in countries of destination or transit is not something that is only seen in the context of Latin America, it has also been seen in cases in Europe. Specifically in the case of Syrian refugees seeking asylum in Europe. After the upsurge of images of Syrian asylum seekers dying in the sea to go to Europe in 2015, many people in said continent offered their help to support the cause of these migrants (Siciliano, 2015). Some people used social media to show their support and others volunteered to prepare and serve food. This resulted in increased well-being of the refugees in Europe as people cared for them and donated clothes, food and even let them stay in their homes for a while. The migrants in this case felt supported by the country of destination. In the case of the women in this study, they felt welcomed in the country of transit because the people in Mexico helped them solve their problems.

Social support has proven to have different benefits, the most important is the reduction of the social and psychological impact in the face of stressful events (Kaplan, Cassel, & Gore, 1977). In the case of women, having had the support of certain people helped reduce their chances of going hungry or sickness. This type of aid is crucial for migrant women who are in transit since not eating or falling ill can cost them their stay in Mexico or even their life.

The women in this study built a social capital in the transit country. Later in this section we will see in depth other types of social networks that supported them to overcome the difficulties of the road. When people associate with one another to achieve an end, a sense of solidarity is created (Siisiäinen, 2000) especially in difficult situations such as that the ones migrant women of this study were in.

When creating these narratives, where women recognize that the people of Mexican society supported them selflessly, they realize they also had support during their journey. This makes them see the people of that country as kind and good; this may perhaps help reduce a little the feeling

of distrust towards Mexican society, which as we saw in the section on narratives about adversity, was obvious due to the mistreatment they received from different individuals.

The support of people plays an important role in the external strengths of women. In this case, they provided the women with basic things such as safety, food or help to access health services; all this was key for women to recharge or gain strength to continue their journey and to achieve their goals. In addition, the support of the persons also meant that the women were able to face the difficulties better and with less negative consequences for them.

With the above results we can reach to the conclusion that it is important for Mexican society to know how significant it is to help migrants and how their indifference or abuse affects them so that more practices are promoted for the welfare of migrant women. It is necessary for Mexicans to know how much they can help reduce the effects of exposure to stressful situations on migrant women by offering them a plate of food or simply not interfering with the migrants' plans. It is more complicated to change the way institutions or government treat migrants since there are many other actors involved, than it is to change the way people perceive migrants and how they can help them.

#### 5.3.2.1.2 Institutions

By institutions this research refers to all those organizations formed to cover a social need. In this research we specifically refer to the shelters for migrants that constitute a fundamental support for its users.

Here we have women's testimonios about institutional support.

*"Thanks God, here (in Mexico) the migrants' shelters are like a home for one, because you find some relief [...] if these places would not exist it would be harder the situation for the migrant."*  
(Patricia)

*"I had no more money from what my brother sent me so we went to the migrant's shelter (in Tijuana), my partner stayed there with the men and me here, with the women."* (Monica)

*“Because for us something that helps us is all the aid for the migrant. Here there is a lot of help for the migrant. Imagine, you get in a shelter and you get to eat, sleep, have clothes, shoes ... everything. It’s wonderful.” (Laura)*

*“...then we arrived at the other shelter, in Mexico City. That shelter had excellent persons, there were two managers and a girl who only went once a week, I just chat with her twice. I had a good time there, we ate well...” (Karen)*

The support offered by migrant shelters is crucial for migrant women to cross safely through Mexico from south to north. The majority of migrant shelters offer basic help such as accommodation and food; according to the testimony of some women during the ethnographic fieldwork, the shelters that are in the north of Mexico offer more than that because they have more resources. Women said that in some they were given clothing, medicines and personal hygiene products; in the study site where the interviews were conducted, women were offered all the thing mentioned before plus internet service, psychological help, medical assistance and legal advice, which they used very often.

In the same way, it is important to mention that they were also offered spiritual guidance; once a week a mass was celebrated in the shelter to ask God to protect them in their journey to the United States and every day they could go to the church, which was next to the shelter, to pray. This is relevant because, as we have seen in the internal strengths part, spirituality and religion form a fundamental part in the strategies used by migrant women to face adversity.

These women emphasize that the help they received from the shelters was of the utmost importance. Patricia said *“here (in Mexico) the migrants’ shelters are like a home for one, because you find some relief”*. The shelters are a resource widely used by Central American migrants with few resources or who have been victims of assaults along the way (Barrón et al., 2014). For the participants, shelters exclusively for women are a safe place, where they stay away from the risks of the street and where they avoid exposing themselves to abuse. For example, Patricia mentions that a shelter becomes the home of migrants when they are away from home, she emphasizes that without these institutions it would be much more difficult to pass through Mexico; she is aware that without a shelter she would have had to endure more adversities than the ones she faced.

The women employed the shelters at critical moments of their trip. Some used them at all times and others like Monica in crucial situations, such as when she ran out of money. These played an essential role in keeping them safe during their journey.

When women talk about shelters they say good things, they express themselves with gratitude. For example, Karen says “*we arrived at the other shelter, in Mexico City. That shelter had excellent persons*” and Laura “*Imagine, you get in a shelter and you get to eat, sleep, have clothes, shoes ... everything. It’s wonderful*”. They highlight that among all the bad situations, the good things were the shelters, where they found their needs. This creates in them a feeling of gratitude and they can remember pleasant passages of their stay in Mexico in spite of the other so many difficulties that they faced.

It is important to remember that women embarked in their journey with the idea of enduring what was necessary to reach their goal, however, they were smart enough to seek accommodation and institutional protection when it was available. That is, women were willing to endure difficulties as long as this was necessary and not just because. In this sense the shelters helped them cope with the difficulties and even strengthen their determination to achieve their goals.

The shelters helped promote and reinforce the strengths of women. While strengths can arise in complex situations, they can also arise in situations where people have the time and peace of mind to think about and embrace their resources and abilities (Saleebey, 2012). In addition, it is not necessary to endure or show courage all the time to demonstrate one's strength, but it is also demonstrated by knowing how to make the correct and most appropriate choices regarding one's needs.

It is important to know how transcendental are the shelters in the transit of migrant women in order to allocate the necessary resources to these institutions, which are mostly run by civil society or by the church. In addition, it is necessary to provide more support to shelters in terms of security and not just material resources. This is because the shelters have been victims of the organized crime and have suffered harassment by people who despise Central American migrants. For example, a shelter in southern Mexico was raided by members of a criminal organization so the employees would give back 15 migrants who had escaped a kidnapping from them (CDHDF, 2011). Additionally, one of the directors of another shelter in northern Mexico received threats from neighbors who wanted him to close the shelter (CDHDF, 2011). This type of events

jeopardize the well-being of migrants and re-victimize them, since the only places where their human rights are not violated are attacked.

These type of institutions are also a point where women can meet other women and thus can exchange information or form groups to cross into the United States together. On several occasions, I witnessed how Central American women disclosed their crossing strategies with each other, as well as shared contacts from people who could help them. On one occasion, a large group of about 10 people was formed in the shelter, it was organized to jointly request asylum in the United States and to put more pressure on the authorities so they would pay attention to them. These events were facilitated by the fact that several migrants were in the same shelter and it would have been difficult for this to happen outside of this site.

As social workers in in-transit migration contexts, it is important to give relevance to this type of shelters that most of the time lack the sufficient resources to help all the people who need it. Our work must be linked to strive to allocate sufficient human and material resources so that these types of institutions continue to give aid to the most vulnerable groups of the population. It is also possible to contribute by helping to give them prominence in the phenomenon of migration through more research about them.

#### 5.3.2.1.3 Family

There are different understandings about the meaning of family in the field of social work, however this research will understand the concept of family as that unit of two or more people who assume obligations and responsibilities to lead a family life, this definition also takes into account the diversity of families including single parents, adoptive parents, kinship caregivers and LGBTQ families (NASW, 2007 in Briar-Lawson & Naccarato, 2008). Its function is to provide its members with resources, support and services.

The link between family and resilience has been widely studied in the field of social work and psychology (Hawley & DeHaan, 1996). Different studies have been interested in the relation between family and good outcomes in its members. Research like the one of McDonald et al. (2011)



shows that those with a strong family bond have healthier coping mechanisms than those who have weak or problematic ties with their caregivers.

The family is considered a protective factor as well as a risk factor (Hawley & DeHaan, 1996). However, this research will focus on the family as a protective factor since the women interviewed mentioned that the mere fact of thinking about their family helped them to reach the Mexican border with the United States.

#### 5.3.2.1.3.1 Children

To begin, this study will review the importance that the women's children have for them on the journey.

*“For example, kids as young as of 8 or 10 years of age are being recruited by gangs who want them to work for them. So that's what I do not want for my children. I mean, I want something better for them, that they have a good education and that they do not grow up with ... seeing things like that, because that's what you see there (in Honduras) [...] That it is what motivates me and I ask my God to protect my children, so they do not have a life like that.”* (Karla)

*“For your children you risk coming here because it is for their well-being.”* (Lupe)

*“And I tell you ... getting out of there (El Salvador) is not easy but for your children you do everything”* (Martha)

For women, the source of their motivation to continue is their children. They took risks and went through complicated situations so that their children could have a better future than the one their country of origin offers them. Somehow they made a sacrifice, which if we remember was also mentioned by Fany in the part of internal strengths. However, in this context it is a little different, this is a parental sacrifice which happens when the parents renounce personal needs for their children's well-being (Leung & Shek, 2015). In their narratives we can see how Lupe gave up not

being at risk so that their children had better opportunities, the same happens with Martha who had to sacrifice, i.e. go through difficult situations in order to leave El Salvador.

Karla explains that the situation in her country, Honduras, is dangerous for children since in there they are recruited by the gangs and are taught on how to use weapons. She only communicates the harsh reality that is lived there; according to various media, everyday gangs recruit dozens of children and teenagers to engage in organized crime (Fisher, 2016; Hylton & Salvadore, 2016). Due to this situation, parents like Karla and her husband decide to leave the country to give them a safer future in the United States. This woman also adds that she wants her children to have a better education than the one given in Honduras; if we consider that this country has the third highest rate of illiteracy in Latin America and the future situation does not seem to have significant improvements (SITEAL, 2010) we can understand the rationale behind her decision to cross into the United States. Finally she mentions that she asks God that her children do not grow up among so much violence, that is, it seems that she is working in partnership with God so that they have a good future.

#### 5.3.2.1.3.2 Relatives

In second place, this study will look at the importance of their relatives' support. Here are the words of the women.

*"... my family, they are the foundation the my strength [...] So yes, you have moments of weakness, sadness, loneliness, where you cry, where you miss your family, where you cry with them but at the same time is in those moments when you take the strength to continue."* (Patricia)

*"... right now I was talking to my cousin, I have a cousin here in Mexico, but he is in Mexico City, he is there and right now he told me in the morning "calm down a bit, I'm going to get you someone there (in the United States)" and I'm waiting for his response because I do not want to be here."* (Karen)

Family resilience are those characteristics that help the family to be resistant to disruption in crisis situations (Hawley & DeHaan, 1996); it can be observed when one the members of family goes through stressful situations but he or she can face them using the resources and support of his family. In the case of these women we can realize that their families fulfill the necessary properties to be considered a resilient family.

Women of this study recurred to members of their family, either in the form of a thought or by telephone, to obtain some kind of support to cope with the adverse situation they were going through. Patricia mentions that what drives her to keep going despite facing difficult times is her family and that it is enough for her to think about it in order to recover from her discomforts. Karen is more specific and she mentions that she turned to her cousin in Mexico City to help her resolve the situation she was in, which was that she did not have the sponsor or relative required by the United States to begin the process of asylum seeking in that country.

One of the characteristics of family resilience is its capacity to cultivate strengths so that its members can successfully face the challenges of life (Hawley & DeHaan, 1996). As we can see these women and their families show characteristics of being resilient due to the way in which they resort to each other to obtain different types of support.

Women's family also acts as part of their social capital. That is, the ties created with this group are used to solve the problems that are presented to them during the trip. In turn, the family responds with a different type of support as emotional or with human resources in the destination country. It is important to note that this social capital is maintained even in spite of the distance and difficulty of the situations. It is possible that the family of migrant women is one of the most important groups during their migratory journey to the United States.

#### 5.3.2.1.3.3 Partner

Finally, this study will review the importance of their partners' support. The following are the women's words regarding the help they got from them.

*“... we relied a little on what my husband knew, he already knew a little bit about the way because he was there in the United States. Yes, he was already in the United States and that was what helped us.” (Cecilia)*

*“Because we were more unprotected, I am pregnant ... well, and we brought suitcases and on top of that we had to look after the kid, I felt that no, it was not going work... but my husband was taking care of me and the child.” (Karla)*

*“When they detained my brother, my partner had to take me out of the shelter, he had to take me for distraction for a walk downtown.” (Monica)*

Finally there is the support of their partners during the journey. The women expressed that it was necessary to work together with their partners to get to Tijuana. Cecilia mentions that they used the previous knowledge of her husband had to be able to transit through Mexico since he had crossed over to the United States before. Karla adds that her husband took care of her, while she was pregnant and of her young son during the trip. Meanwhile, Monica tells how her partner monitored her mood and helped her cheer up after police arrested her brother in the United States, the person who was going to provide for them once they were there.

#### 5.3.2.1.3.4 Discussion about family support

Going back a bit to the topic of family resilience, it is important to mention that family resilience is not something that is included within the characteristics of certain families by nature, but is something that is built through adverse experiences and the ability of their families to cope with them (Hawley & DeHaan, 1996; Rutter, 1985). It seems that the trip through Mexico of these women with their partners and children led to the right circumstances for family resilience to be built or become stronger.

According to (Hawley & DeHaan, 1996), families with high levels of bonding are resilient families, therefore these women and their families are resilient; despite the distance and the difficulties, they manage to stay together and use the resources they possess, be it knowledge, skills, money or contacts to face the adversities and crises.

For some women the strength they gained from their families was tangible and for others it was ethereal. For example, when women refer to their children, they mention that they gained strength to go forward just by thinking about them and the future they could offer them if they were able to reach the border, that is, they gained strength from a thought rather than from material help. On the other hand, women like Karla mention that her relative gave them physical support on the way, carrying the suitcases and protecting her and her son from the dangers.

The families of the women, although not in a face-to-face way, supported them during their transit. This makes them transnational families in transit, which perform critical functions to keep women on the move at difficult times. In this type of situation, support from the family is important for women, since it may mean making the decision to continue with the journey of returning back to their countries of origin. In stressful situations, such as the ones migrant women went through, the support that the family can give is put to the test and both parties have to coordinate to give and receive support.

When women talk about their family they remember that they have a support network that assists them in the most complicated moments. Furthermore, feeling supported by the family is of vital importance to maintain optimal mental health in situations of stress. In fact, the relevance of support networks for migrants evident in this study has also been highlighted in others such as the one of Schweitzer, Melville, Steel and Lacherez (2006) with Sudanese refugees in Australia proved that family support is essential to face the consequences of post-traumatic stress, they added that family support has the most positive effects on the psychological well-being of refugees.

With women's narratives about support from their families we can see pieces of the family resilience. That is, we can appreciate how not only are they resilient but also the family to which they belong, which becomes stronger with each adversity they face.

In the practice of social work with migrant women it is important to remember that family can also be a strength. It is possible that some members can give immediate material support, while others can give it at a distance. As social workers we must remember that the family of people is also a protective factor in adverse situations, for this reason we must learn to help people and their families to mobilize and use their resources and their potential for resilience.

## 6. Concluding discussion

This study was carried out with the purpose of analyzing, through the narratives of the Central American migrant women, how their strengths and resilience helped them succeed in getting to the border between Mexico and the United States. For this purpose, 10 interviews were conducted with Central American migrant women staying in a shelter for migrants in the border city of Tijuana, Mexico.

The results indicate that these women possess both internal and external strengths. For internal strengths this work considered all those skills, qualities or beliefs that were inherent to them, to be more specific, everything that they had even in the context of migration in transit despite having left everything behind in their country of origin. I considered as external strengths all human, institutional or material resources that women had depending on the place and context in which they were, and which helped them in reaching the border with United States.

The internal strengths that women possess are many, however it was found that four were the most mentioned by women: religion and spirituality, endurance, courage and goal setting.

I will begin by explaining religion and spirituality. The women expressed they believed in a God who accompanied them at all times of the journey, they said that thanks to it they had been able to reach the border of Mexico with the United States safe and sound. They also added that in moments of weakness God was the one who gave them strength to continue the journey; not only that, those women who made their transit with their children also declared that God protected them. In this sense, the results of this research are linked to those of Barral-Arellano (2009) and (Servan-Mori et al., 2014) with Central American migrants in transit through Mexico, and with those studies of Koser Akcapar (2010) and Danis (2006) with Iraqi and Iranian migrants in transit through Turkey. In these the participants explained the success in their transit through spirituality. They added that God did not only provided human and material resources to meet their needs, but also gave them peace in stressful situations and was the one who supported them when they had no one. That is, it seems that believing in a protective God is a key strength in migrants in transit in different regions of the world; it is not only something that is unique to Central American migrants. It is possible that this is explained because these people have a socially rooted idea of the existence of a God who protects them at all times, and when they are alone in situations of stress or adversity

they recur to this supernatural deity through prayers or going to church to solve the problems that afflict them.

Then the internal strength called endurance was examined. By endurance this research referred to the ability of women to undergo unpleasant or inconvenient situations in order to continue with their plans. Here this study gave an account of women's resistance narratives and their readiness to face complex situations. When the women spoke of enduring, they also spoke of sacrifice, such as sacrificing comfort or the lifestyle they had before arriving in Mexico. They indicated that they sacrificed to obtain something, to reach a goal; which in this case was to reach the Mexican border with the United States.

In the third place, courage was analyzed as an internal strength. Here the women expressed that to migrate it is necessary to have the courage to face the difficulties of the road in order to reach a goal. In this section women described themselves as brave and narrated acts of bravery of which they were active agents during their journey through Mexico. They expressed that the most important thing to migrate is to have the courage to make the decision and to assume the consequences of it; however, courage was only something that was activated when they had a goal in mind, either to reach the United States or to fight versus acts of injustice committed against them or against people around them. Finally, it was reflected on the courage that migrants possess, and it was noted that it is possible that these women are only an example of the courage that all migrants who, by making the decision to migrate, are brave since they are willing to leave their comfort zone and experience the challenges of a new country.

To conclude with the internal strengths section, the one named goal setting was analyzed. Here it was explained, through the goal setting theory (Locke, 1996), how women were able to achieve their objectives. It was explained that factors such as i) the importance that the migrant gives to their goal, as well as ii) the difficulty of it, play a key role in the motivation that women have to accomplish it. The value of recognizing women as shapers of their own goals was also highlighted in order to see them in migration contexts as active agents with their own ambitions, creators and possessors of resources to be able to achieve what they have in mind. The results of this research are closely linked to those of (Barral-Arellano, 2009); she found that Central American migrants were able to reach shelters in border cities in Mexico because they had well-established goals and they trusted that what they wanted was important.

After analyzing the internal strengths, external strengths were examined. In this study these are called social support and social capital; which turned out to be three, people, institutions and family. We started by re-examining the support they received from people. Here the women acknowledged that despite some persons treated them badly and made their journey more complex, there were also individuals who offered them help and support so that they could continue their journey. The women realized that although they had lacked the resources to which they were accustomed in their countries of origin, during their journey, people who had no relationship with them helped them to cover basic needs by providing them with food, accommodation or health. In this section, the importance of civil society in transit countries in the experience of migrants in transit was highlighted.

Subsequently, the importance of institutions -specifically migrants' shelters- in the social capital of Central American migrants was scrutinized. Here, the women expressed that these shelters had played a fundamental role in their transit and that they had seen all their needs met there. They indicated that these places worked to keep them safe and that they provided them with the necessary help, both material and immaterial, to continue their journey. There was also a reflection on the role that shelters play in maintaining the idea that God is the one who accompanies them and protects them during their journey. Because most of the shelters are run by the Catholic Church (Muedano, 2017), they often celebrate Masses to pray, along with the migrants, to ask God to help them reach their destination; this activities reinforce the idea of protective and benevolent God. These findings are related to the study of Koser Akcapar (2010); the researcher in this investigation discovered that migrants in transit are rooted in the idea of God when they are helped by clerical institutions; she realized that these institutions play a key role in maintaining the idea that God protects migrants.

Finally, I analyzed the role of the family in the construction of the strength of these women to continue their journey despite the difficulties. Here it was realized that the mere idea that they are going to give a better future to their children (in the United States) is enough for women to take strength to continue with the trip. In addition, it was found that the family plays an essential role in keeping migrants in transit moving and safe since they are the ones who give them emotional and economic support in moments of weakness and difficulty. These results are linked very closely to the study of Danis (2006) with Iraqi migrants, since the author realized they are able to stay in



the transit country, in this case Turkey, thanks to the social network and the family they have, which helps them, like the Central American migrants, to solve their problems in complicated moments. Therefore, this external strength is not unique to the migrants of this study, but more migrants in transit around the world find strength and support in their families, which protect their cause and help them to continue forward. Finally, the concept of family resilience was also reviewed and how it is linked to the case of women. Here it was concluded that the women owned or built resilient families, because despite the difficulties of the road they had been able to move forward successfully and had been able to achieve the goal they had set for themselves.

Now it is necessary to remember the research questions to assess how the research purpose was achieved. The research questions and its answers were, firstly, which are the strengths and resiliencies of Central American migrant women in irregular transit through Mexico? This research question was answered since throughout this research I uncovered, through the women's narratives, their strengths and resiliencies, these have already been listed and explained in detail. Secondly, how did they use their strengths and resiliencies? This was discussed during the analyzing process of their narratives as they offered examples of use they gave to their strengths, for instance, how they occupied God's help or the migrants shelters' assistance to be able to continue their transit despite the difficulties. Thirdly, how do they make sense of their strengths and resilience? For this part it was clearly illustrated how they made sense of their strengths and resilience, that is, how they understood their strengths and how this influenced the way in which they constructed themselves behind themselves and behind the others. With all the previous elements, it was possible reach the purpose of this study, which was to understand how their strengths and resilience helped Central American migrant women in irregular succeed in getting to the border with the United States.

With all these results it is central to ask ourselves how this research modifies or reinforces the idea that we have about resilience and strengths. This research emphasizes both the individual and the social aspects of resilience and strengths. Especially that of resilience, since resilience is commonly seen as something that emerges from the individual and not from what is around him or her (Rutter & Zigler, 2000). With this study we can see how contextual factors such as social support boost the resilience capacity of people in situations of risk or stress. The social support and social capital that people possess are determinants in the outcomes they have; it is not the same

to try to recover successfully from an adverse situation by oneself than with the help and resources that others can offer; it is easier when you have the support of a formal or informal network of people who are willing to help.

In the case of strengths, they have also been given an individual perspective, however with this work we can highlight that they can also be of a social nature (Dakin, Parker, et al., 2015). Recognizing this is of vital importance since, as social workers, when we want to explore in the strengths of people we will also know how to look not only inside of them, but also in what surrounds them.

This study is relevant for the social work since it invites us to think about the role of women in migration. This study shows that women are agents of the decisions they make for their lives, even those complex such as migrating. In this way, one can begin to see Central American women as protagonists of migration contexts and not only in a secondary role, such as migrating for family reunification purposes. As we saw with these women, many of them traveled with their children or with a friend and none expressed that they went to the United States to meet with their husband. In any case, those who went with their partners went together with them to seek to reside in the United States, so migrating seemed more like a joint family decision. It is important that women are seen as active participants of migration, since in this way they can carry out more in-depth studies about their motivations, prospects and strengths; we can learn more about them and understand their worldview and the role they play in migratory contexts. It is also important to have a better understanding of how they can survive in adverse situations and how they can continue their journey despite having all the odds against them. In conclusion, this study contributes to the understanding of the strengths and resilience of Central American women in transit through Mexico.

In the practice of social work, this research is relevant because it invites practitioners to see women migrants in transit, who face highly adverse situations, as people with resources and not only as recipients of abuses and its consequences. Yes, it is true that Central American migrant women in transit through Mexico face highly complex situations, but it is also true, as has been proven with this research, that some of them have the capacity to face them and not only that, but also achieve the goals that they have no matter how difficult they are. In this way, social work can forget to

label all migrant woman solely as a victims of many abuses, but also as a persons with the ability to change their situation and get the most out of it.

By knowing the strengths and resilient capacities of Central American women in transit, social work can provide support plans that fit the motivations of this population. Knowing that, for example, they are possessed of great courage and endurance capacity is important since they can be given support to reinforce these strengths. In this way, not only the basic needs of women in transit are covered, but they are given something more and valuable, they are helped to reinforce what they already have so that they continue on their way in a successful way and staying safe.

In the context of social work with families and children, this research contributes to the understanding of the important role that families of women in transit have in keeping women positive, strong and with resources to continue the journey. In the analysis of external strengths, it was possible to realize that the family is a protective factor when women find themselves in adverse situations. Bearing this in mind, social workers who work in migration contexts can realize that they must begin to consider the families of migrant women as a resource to which they can turn in difficult times. Likewise, social worker must realize that they must also assist the families of the women (when possible) because through them the women receive the most important support to continue their journey.

Likewise, in this study it was possible to realize the importance of the well-being of the children for the participating women. It was possible to see how women are able to endure and take courage as long as their children have a better future and to get them out of precarious situations. In this way, social work can understand more the motivations of women to go to the United States as well as what they are willing to do for their offsprings.

Beyond doubt, it is also important that practices at the social level are implemented to foster the strengths and resilience of migrant women. In this way different actors and social institutions can realize what is the best way to support this population. For example, more resources can be given to migrant shelters, which are an essential support for migrant women in transit or awareness campaigns can be created so that civil society realizes how important is the help they give to them.

It is true that we are now aware of the strengths and resilience of this population. However, it is important to remember that they are a population that is crossing Mexico without the required

documentation, that is, they are doing an illegal act. Thus, helping them through our profession becomes complex because as social workers we practice within a legal framework, following the precepts of public policies and the law. However, we have to remember that social work is also emancipatory and does not always fight for what is legal, but for what is fair. These people are forced to commit illegal acts because they are fleeing the injustices that live in their countries. Our role as social workers will not always be easy, sometimes it will not be enough to follow the law because it is can sometimes be unfair and oppressive. There will be times that we will have to ask ourselves why and how the law is criminalizing people, like the women who participated in this study, who are pushed to take illegal actions to survive and to look for a better future for themselves. By being critical of the legal framework in which we practice social work, we will be able to find ways, together with our clients, to fight and face oppressive and abusive policies.

Finally, bearing the results of this study in mind, future research should focus on how Central American migrant women use the strengths used during their transit once they are installed in the United States. Another type of research could also focus on the effects of the strengths and resilience of migrant women on their children, in this way it will be possible to explore the importance of the skills and abilities of women in their families.

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## 8. Appendixes

### 8.1 Informed consent in English

The following is a presentation of how I will use what you tell me in this interview.

For my school to ensure that the projects meet the ethical requirements for a good research, I must comply with the following principles:

- You, the interviewee, will receive information about the purpose of the project.
- You have the right to decide if you are going to participate in the project or not, even after the interview is over.
- The interview will be handled confidentially, and I will store it in my personal computer only, additionally, it will be protected by a password I will only know. In this way I will make sure no unauthorized person can access it.

I will audio-record the interview, as it is easier for me to document what is said, and it also helps me in the ongoing work with the project. For this reason, interviews that are not recorded cannot be included in the study.

For your protection, any data that makes your identification possible will be anonymized replacing them with fictitious names or eliminated; examples of these are locations, names of places and names of people. After my final examination in mid-June 2018, I will delete all the interviews.

What you tell me will only be used in this project. You have the right to refuse to answer any question, or to end the interview without giving me an explanation. It is important that you know that this will not affect your stay in the shelter.

You can contact me, my supervisor or the head of the center in case you have any questions.

<b>Student's name and email</b>	<b>Supervisor's name and email</b>	<b>Head of the center's name and email</b>
Mayra Carolina Lemus Way mclwem@gmail.com	Helena Johansson helena.johansson@socwork.gu.se	María Torres* mariatorres@mail.com

\* The name and e-mail of the person in charge of the center were modified in this document (but not in the original informed consent that was given to the women interviewed) in order to protect her privacy.

I have witnessed the exact reading of this document. I have had the opportunity to express my doubts and the researcher has answered my questions satisfactorily.

I agree to participate in this study and to be audio-recorded. I understand that I have the right to withdraw from the interview at any time and this will not affect my stay in the shelter in any way.

Participant's Name \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Signature or fingerprint \_\_\_\_\_

## 8.2 Informed consent in Spanish

### Consentimiento informado

La siguiente es una presentación de cómo usaré lo que usted me diga en esta entrevista.

Para que mi escuela se asegure que los proyectos cumplan con los requisitos éticos para una buena investigación, debo de cumplir con las siguientes reglas:

- Usted, la entrevistada, recibirá información sobre el propósito del proyecto.
- Tiene el derecho de decidir si va o no a participar en el proyecto, incluso después de que la entrevista haya terminado.
- La entrevista se manejará de forma confidencial y la guardaré en mi computadora personal, además la protegeré con una contraseña que sólo yo sabré. De esta manera me aseguraré de que ninguna persona no autorizada pueda verlas o acceder a ellas.

Solamente grabaré el audio de la entrevista ya que así es más fácil para mi documentar lo que se dice durante ésta y también me ayuda en el trabajo continuo con el proyecto. Por esta razón, las entrevistas que no sean audio-grabadas no podrán ser parte de esta investigación.

Para su protección, anonimizaré o eliminaré cualquier dato que haga posible su identificación; ejemplos de estos son ubicaciones y lugares, y nombres de personas. Después de mi examen final a mediados de junio del presente año, eliminaré todas las entrevistas.

Lo que usted me diga sólo lo usaré en este proyecto. Usted tiene el derecho de negarse a contestar cualquier pregunta, o a terminar la entrevista sin darme una explicación. Es importante que sepa que esto no va a tener ninguna repercusión en su estadía en el centro.

Puede ponerse en contacto conmigo, con mi supervisora o con la encargada del centro en caso de tener alguna pregunta.

<b>Nombre y correo electrónico del estudiante</b> Mayra Carolina Lemus Way mclwem@gmail.com	<b>Nombre y correo electrónico del supervisor</b> Helena Johansson helena.johansson@socwork.gu.se	<b>Nombre y correo electrónico de encargada del centro</b> María Torres * mariatorres@mail.com
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\*El nombre y mail de la encargada del centro fueron modificados en este documento (más no en el consentimiento informado original que se les dio a las mujeres entrevistadas) para proteger su privacidad.

He sido testigo de la lectura exacta del documento de consentimiento informado. He tenido la oportunidad de expresar mis dudas y se me han respondido satisfactoriamente.

Estoy de acuerdo en participar en este estudio y en que mi entrevista sea audio-grabada. Entiendo que tengo el derecho de retirarme de la entrevista en cualquier momento sin que afecte de ninguna forma mi estadía en el centro.

Nombre del Participante\_\_\_\_\_

Fecha \_\_\_\_\_

Huella o firma\_\_\_\_\_



## 8.3 Interview guide in English

### **Purpose of the study**

Good afternoon, my name is Carolina Lemus and I am a volunteer here in Centro Madre Assunta, I am also a researcher and I am interested in knowing about your strengths and survival experiences throughout your journey from your country to Tijuana. Before asking the questions of the interview I need some basic information about you.

### **Sociodemographic Data**

Country of origin

Age

Civil status

Number of children

Are you traveling alone or accompanied? ¿By whom?

Education level

Occupation (in country of origin)

Is this the 1<sup>st</sup> time that you try to cross? How many times have you tried to cross before?

### **Interview**

1.- Could you describe how was your trip from your country to Tijuana?

2.- Could you tell me about the problems, if any, you faced during your transit through Mexico and how did you solve them?

3.- (As you mentioned ... / According to different research, it is a fact that ...) The journey through Mexico is complicated and that is why not all the women who come from Central America achieve to get where you are now, to Tijuana. Why could you do it and other women could not? What do you think you have that they do not?

4.- Is there anything else you want to tell me about your trip?

## **Closure**

Thank you for your time, I know it is difficult to tell personal experiences to someone you just met. Everything you have told me is very valuable to me, with that I will be able to know how people can get ahead despite going through difficult situations.

## 8.4 Interview guide in Spanish

### **Propósito del estudio**

Buen día, mi nombre es Carolina Lemus y soy voluntaria aquí en Centro Madre Assunta, también soy investigadora y estoy interesada en saber acerca de sus fortalezas y experiencias de supervivencia en su trayecto desde su país hasta Tijuana. Antes de hacerle las preguntas de la entrevista necesito unos datos básicos sobre usted.

### **Datos sociodemográficos**

País de origen

Edad

Estado civil

Número de hijos

¿Viaja sola o acompañada? ¿Por quién?

Nivel educativo

Ocupación (En país de origen)

¿Es esta la primera vez que trata de cruzar? ¿Cuántas veces ha intentado cruzar antes?

### **Entrevista**

1.- ¿Me podría describir cómo fue su viaje desde su país hasta Tijuana?

2.- ¿Me podría hablar de los problemas, si hubo, que se encontró en el viaje y cómo los resolvió?

3.- (Como usted ha mencionado... / De acuerdo a diferentes investigaciones es un hecho que...)

El trayecto por México es complicado y por eso no todas las mujeres que vienen de Centroamérica logran llegar hasta donde llegó usted. ¿Por qué usted si pudo?, ¿Qué cree que usted sí tiene que ellas no?

4.- ¿Hay algo más que me quiera decir acerca de su viaje?

## **Cierre**

Gracias por su tiempo, sé que es difícil contar experiencias personales a una persona que acaba de conocer. Es muy valioso para mí todo lo que usted me ha dicho ya que así podré saber cómo las personas pueden salir adelante a pesar de pasar por situaciones difíciles.