



# Strengths and Resilience of Migrant Women in Transit: an Analysis of the Narratives of Central American Women in Irregular Transit Through Mexico Towards the USA

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## 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 USA. 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 microethnographic work was done with these women. The results of this research indicated that these migrant women are possessors of internal and external strengths; the first is related to their religious beliefs, courage, endurance and goal setting and the second 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 USA.

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## Background

Central American migration to the United States of America (USA) has constantly been at the center of different political and social debates. In April 2018, there was a wave of discussions about a caravan of about 1000 Central American migrants traveling through Mexico in order to seek asylum in the USA (Schrank 2018). Adding to this, in January of the same year, the USA 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 (Torbatí 2018).

The issue of Central American migration to the global north becomes more noticeable because the USA 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 USA has taken different measures such as the creation and strengthening throughout the years of a 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 irregularly through Mexico to get to the USA face complex and dangerous situations.

Despite having all the odds against them, some Central Americans succeed in crossing through Mexico and reach the border with the USA. This research was 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 was grounded on the idea that these women had skills and abilities that helped them to solve and face complex circumstances.

## Literature Review—Central American Women in Transit Through Mexico

Research about in-transit migration of Central American women through Mexico can be classified into three clusters. First, there is research that explores the characteristics of women in transit. Monreal-Gimeno et al. (2013) and Díaz Prieto and Kuhner (2007) provide sociodemographic profiles of migrant women as well as historical data that has influenced the characteristics of the central American female migratory flows towards the USA.

Second, the works of Angulo Pasel (2017), Pickering and Cochrane (2013), and Morales Hernández (2014) analyze the dangers that migrant women are exposed to from a 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, Montaner (2006) puts up a brief characterization of women in irregular transit through Mexico and explains how poverty and violence push hundreds of Central Americans to flee. 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 USA. 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 failing in their first attempt. Lastly, 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.

### Gap in Literature

Several authors point out that despite the phenomenon of migration that has been extensively studied, migration in transit has not yet received the proper attention (Barrón et al. 2014; Kimball 2007; Verduzco and 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 for this is that the temporary and clandestine nature of transit migration complicates its study. During the literature review process, it was verified that there are few gender-focused studies about in-transit migration through Mexico to the USA, as stated 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.

### Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to analyze how the strengths and resiliencies of Central American migrant women in irregular transit through Mexico were narrated by them, specifically the ones that helped them succeed in reaching the Mexican border with the USA. The research questions were (1) which are their strengths and resiliencies? (2) how do they use them? and (3) how do they make sense of them?

### Previous Research on Resilience and Strengths of Migrants in Transit

There are two central studies that discuss the strengths and resilience of Central American migrant women in irregular transit. The first is a study conducted by Servan-Mori et al. (2014) in which they applied a questionnaire to 2714 Central American migrants (both men and women) in order to explore the factors that promoted their willingness to continue their transit through Mexico towards the USA despite having suffered violence in the journey. The researchers found that migrants decided to continue because of two factors, the first was related to conditions in their home country such as structural violence, poverty, and domestic violence and the second was related to the future, such as the possibility of offering a better future to their children (Servan-Mori et al. 2014).

The second is a study by Barral-Arellano (2009). In it, she discusses resilience in Central American migrants, including women. Forty-two interviews were conducted of

which 19 were with migrant women. Her results indicated that migrants were able to continue with the journey due to factors that promoted their resilience, such as social support, spirituality, and willpower. The researcher concluded that these elements played an important role in motivating migrants to continue their journey despite encountering adverse situations. She also stressed that the migrant's religious beliefs are one of the most important sources of resilience; most of the interviewees mentioned that God was the one who helped them to continue with the journey.

## Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study was rooted in the strengths perspective and in resilience theories as the purpose of it was linked to the analysis and identification of the strengths and resiliencies of Central American migrant women, as well as how they explained and made sense of how they used these elements to succeed in getting to the Mexico-US border.

### Resilience

Ungar states that resilience is “the capacity of individuals to navigate their way to the psychological, social, cultural, and physical resources that sustain their wellbeing, and their capacity individually and collectively to negotiate for these resources to be provided in culturally meaningful ways” (2014, p.14). The author also sees resilience as a process where the person's strengths and abilities interact with the environment. Similarly, Pooley and Cohen state that that resilience is “the potential to exhibit resourcefulness by using available internal and external resources in response to different contextual and developmental challenges” Pooley and Cohen 2010, p.34). Both definitions capture the importance of interpersonal and social resources and challenges. This is of utmost importance since women who migrate without proper documentation face both internal and contextual challenges; in the same way, they can draw upon inner and environmental resources.

For a person to be considered resilient, he or she must have been exposed to adversities and must have overcome them with internal or external resources (Rutter 1985; Ungar 2014). This research considers an adverse situation as 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).

### The Strength Perspective

Strengths are defined here as a person's traits, skills, abilities, talents, or resources used to face adversities as well as familial, individual, and community aspirations.

Saleebey (2006) proposes six basic principles for this perspective. This research will work considering four of them (1) every individual, group, family, and community has strengths; (2) trauma and abuse, illness, and struggle may be injurious, but they may also be sources of challenge and opportunity; (3) assume that you do not know that upper limits of the capacity to grow and take individual group and community aspirations seriously; and (4) every environment is full of resources.

## **Resilience: Protective Factors as Strengths**

Protective factors 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, and quite the reverse, it can be uncomfortable for the person, as they arise in stressful situations.

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.

## **Methodology**

### **Study Site: Centro Madre Assunta**

The Centro Madre Assunta shelter, located in Tijuana, was chosen as a study site to collect the testimonies of Central American migrant women. Tijuana is the Mexican city with the most Central Americans seeking to cross into the USA (Loza 2016). When the field researcher met and interviewed Central American women staying in the shelter there, she verified that they had already reached the last point of their journey through Mexico and were awaiting to cross into the USA.

### **Study Population**

The shelter gave the field researcher unlimited access to the testimonies of the women as long as they wanted to share them. However, they only authorized 15 days of stay. For this reason, it was considered that the maximum number of interviews possible would be 15, bearing in mind the time it took to create rapport with the participants.

### **Data Collection**

Twelve interviews were carried out, and these varied in time and depth; since rapport was created with all the participants, most of the interviews are rich in details and meaning. 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 to consider that data collection was not limited to interviews and participant observation was also employed. Through it, the field researcher had the opportunity to sample data in relation to the women's natural reactions to certain news or their attitudes to unexpected events (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007).

### **Interviews and Participant Observations**

This study used the semi-structured interviews and participant observation. All these data collection methods were carried out in order to unveil the resilience capacities and

strengths of the participants as well as to know how they had used them in their journey through Mexico and how they made sense of them.

### **The Interview Process**

Participants were recruited inside the shelter. The field researcher interacted first with them in the common areas, she casually asked them their nationality, and if they indicated they came from a country in Central America, the field researcher invited them for an interview to talk about their skills and abilities. Some of them rejected the invitation. If they accepted, then a time and place to carry out the interview was settled.

To ensure that the interview had a coherent structure, an interview guide was formulated. Before asking any questions, the field researcher introduced herself again and gave an explanation of the purpose of the interview. After that, participants read the information, and if they still wished to participate, the interview was carried out after giving the informed consent.

The first questions were related to their sociodemographic characteristics such as their age, country of origin, number of children, etc. The other type of questions was related to their journey and their skills. The specific questions were (1) Could you describe your journey from your country to Tijuana? (2) Could you tell me about the problems, if any, you faced during your transit through Mexico and how you solved them? (3) 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. Why could you do it and other women could not? What do you think you have that they do not? and (4) Is there anything else you want to tell me about your journey?

At the end of the interview, some of them proceeded to sign the informed consent and the field researcher thanked their participation in the interview.

### **Data Processing and Method**

After carrying out and recording the interviews, these were transcribed verbatim in its original language in a text processing software by the field researcher. The researchers chose the verbatim method because it was sought to make a narrative analysis and not only a thematic one.

The interviews were translated into English and exported to the NVivo coding program, and a thematic and a narrative analysis were carried out. To achieve this, each transcription was coded. Then an interpretation of the data was made, this was taking into account previous theories and perspectives of resilience and strengths.

### **The Participants**

The 12 women who contributed to this study were from Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. Although all answered the questions asked, two decided to decline the use of their testimony at the end of the interview. Therefore, the testimonies used will be of ten participants. All the interviews were carried out inside the shelter, in the multipurpose room.

In Table 1, it can be appreciated that all participants were 18+, and the youngest was 23 and the oldest 49. The Honduran women made up half of the women interviewed.

**Table 1** Participants' sociodemographic profile

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-shop worker
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

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

More than half had a partner. As for the number of children, almost all of them had at least one, and the only exception was Karen who was single and without children.

Table 2 shows data related to the women's crossing attempts, their legal status when entering Mexican territory, if they traveled accompanied, and the cause of migration. Most of the interviewees expressed that this was the first time they would try to cross to the USA, only two expressed that this was their second attempt. No woman made the journey alone, and all did it in the company of someone. Most of them were accompanied by their partners. Patricia and Karen expressed that they made the entire journey

**Table 2** Cause of migration, crossing attempts, accompaniment during the journey, and data about the women's legal status while entering Mexico

Name*	Did you enter Mexico legally? <sup>a</sup>	Is this the first time you try crossing to the USA?	By whom are you accompanied?	Cause of migration <sup>b</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

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

<sup>a, b</sup> This data is an interpretation result of what women said during the interviews

with a friend; however, at the time of checking in the shelter, their friends were no longer with them.

## **Ethical Considerations**

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, the researchers are committed to respect the human rights and human dignity of the people involved in the study. The researchers also aimed to use the results of the study to promote social justice, specifically, by giving it a gender focus, trying to show women as active agents in transit migration, and did not use their knowledge or skills to harm informants or to obtain any type of personal benefit.

Additionally, ethical aspects of social research methodology proposed by Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) and Bryman (2012) were considered and achieved by providing, in simple language, a written information letter to the participants. In addition, the informants' privacy was respected and protected by recording and transcribing the interviews by one person, the field researcher, as well as by replacing the informants' real names with fictitious ones. Finally, there was no deception, since the researcher was sincere about her role in the shelter and about the purpose of the study.

No money or gifts were given to the participants in change for their participation in the interviews. Participation in the study was completely voluntary.

## **Limitations of the Study**

Since the participants only stayed a maximum of 15 days in the shelter, it was only possible to interview them and be with them for a limited time. Even though the field researcher managed to establish rapport with them and they were willing to help, it was not possible to ask them to stay longer so that they would answer more questions.

## **Results and Discussion**

Results will be arranged as follows: first, there will be a focus on women's narratives of adversity and then on women's strengths and resiliencies. These will be divided in internal which are (1) spirituality and religion, (2) courage, (3) endurance, and (4) goal setting and external which are (1) persons, (2) institutions, and (3) family support.

### **Narrations about Adversity**

Adversities are not the focus of study of this research; however, they are fundamental to the analysis since they are part of a resilient persons' history and are behind some of their strengths (Rutter 2012). When the first question was asked to the women who participated in this study, they brought out very specific stories about the difficulties they faced. In the following paragraphs some of the abuses migrant women suffered

from society and from those who should have watched over their integrity and well-being will be explored.

...Seven 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 testimony of Patricia, it is seen how their transit through Mexico involved being sexually assaulted and that her life was at risk. She felt helpless because of her condition of a migrant woman.

She 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 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 undocumented 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).

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. (Karla)

Although it is true that the majority of Mexican health institutions only provide services to its members, it is important to question which 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 (Angulo Pasel 2017; Pickering and Cochrane 2013). 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).

Some of the adversities the participants faced were reviewed. From now on, this study will focus on uncovering what are the strengths these women have and how they used them to solve these adversities.

### **Internal Strengths and Resiliencies**

Strengths can take any form, 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 the internal strengths of migrant women.

## Spirituality and Religion

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 their success.

...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”. Thanks to that, and thank God that he has never left us we are here. (Fany)

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)

In the testimonies of the interviewees, it can be seen how they believed that God was at their side during their journey. They explained that thanks to the presence of God’s spirit, they succeeded in reaching the northern Mexican border. They also added that they felt it never left them alone. Fany mentions that although she went through difficult times, God supported her and, in the end, she managed to overcome the adversities.

Similarly, a study carried out by Pargament et al. (1990) demonstrated that the use of spirituality and religion to face life-stressing events is common among believers. Believing in a benevolent God, who supports them in difficult times, and practicing religious rituals such as prayer are related to more positive outcomes in face of life-threatening situations. Furthermore, the study by Barral-Arellano (2009) cited above explores the influence of the belief in God in the willingness of migrants to continue with the journey despite the difficulties of it. In this sense, the present study corroborates that in fact, the belief in God can be a protective factor in contexts of adversity for migrants.

In a study by McRae (1984), he analyzed the interviews of a sample of 255 people from a community of high school and college graduates and 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.

It is also relevant to take into consideration migrant shelters in the strengthening of the idea that God is on the road with migrants. As mentioned above, a large part of the shelters in Mexico for migrants are run by the Catholic Church (Muedano 2017). 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 encourage migrants to pray and to ask God to take them safely to the USA.

## Endurance

In this research, endurance will be considered as the ability of women to undergo unpleasant or inconvenient situations in order to continue with their plans.

...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. (Lupe)

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)

The women had to endure different unpleasant situations, such as going through hunger or sleeping outdoors. Lupe says that to get to Tijuana, it was necessary to leave everything she had and be willing and ready to put up with anything. The willingness to go through any situation makes the participants 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.

The answer on why Central American migrant women of this study are able to endure 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 post-traumatic stress disorder, but also increase 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.

Likewise, they mentioned they had to be prepared to endure. For example, Lupe mentioned that “you have to adapt here, and you have to have courage and be willing to endure everything”. That is, to migrate, she had to be ready to leave what she was 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 to face the difficult and fight against it in order to reach a final goal.

The most important thing about women’s endurance narratives is that they show resilience capacities. 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 the women in this study, a good outcome is having been able to reach Tijuana despite having gone through hunger, stress, or homelessness. The author mentions that resilience does not come from special qualities, but from everyday successes. These women did not have special training to get to Tijuana, but their own resources in their minds and bodies which helped them achieve their goal.

## 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 research considers courage as those acts where the person chooses to be brave. In the testimonies of the respondents, it can be seen how the acts of courage during their journey are extraordinary.

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)

To come here ... I feel it's about taking the courage because sometimes it sounds easy to say "well I'm here" [ ... ] but people do 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)

Monica and Fany's testimonies show that having reached the border is the result of their courage and faith. Monica said that it was not necessary for her to have a visa or passport to achieve her goals, but that the most important thing was to have the courage to do things.

Ommundsen et al. (2010) studied the perception on Bulgarian migrants without documentation. The study showed that undocumented migrants are perceived as courageous because they are seen as people who had the nerve to change their life and look for better opportunities. In the case of the women in the present study, they expressed that they left their countries (1) in search of better opportunities for themselves and for their children and to (2) 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), and they made a courageous decision in order to change the life they previously had.

Seeing themselves as courageous 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, through their narrations, the women construct themselves as agents who can face the adversities of their lives in a courageous way.

This idea challenges the general idea that migrant women in transit are just vulnerable receptors of risks and abuses. The idea of the migrant woman as courageous makes us reconsider their role in migration and society and policymakers can start seeing them as people who possess important internal skills and strengths. Seeing migrant women as courageous in the discipline of Social Work invites practitioners to think about their resources and what measures can be taken so that they give them the best possible use.

## Goal Setting

The goal setting theory explained by Locke (1996) 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. 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.

Two women explained the role of goals in their migratory path:

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)

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)

The women said they set their goals when they left their country of origin and explained that it is precisely that goal what led them to successfully reach Tijuana.

Their idea was to reach the USA and they wanted to live in that country hoping to have a better future. Martha mentioned that goals serve the function of not backing down in stressful situations and that it is important to have them to face adversities. Karen stated that one's goals become an inner part of one selves and when that happens, they stick with the person and give them motivation.

It is of utmost importance to recognize the determination and the capability of goal setting of the women because in this way, society 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 female is given a secondary role (McEvoy 2008). With the narratives of the interviewed women, it can be seen that they have their own goals detached from the mere idea of family reunification. They are the ones who make the decision to change the conditions of life for themselves and for their children.

### **External Strengths and Resiliencies: Social Support**

In this section, the analysis will focus on the external strengths that helped women reach the northern border of Mexico. 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 et al. 1977 in Thoits 1986). The types of help intertwine between them, that is, the instrumental help can also be a demonstration of affection.

This study looks at social support as those external strengths dependent on the support and will of other people that helped women to reach the northern border of Mexico. They mentioned they received social support from three groups, persons not related to them, institutions, and family. In the following paragraphs, each one is described and analyzed in detail.

#### **Persons**

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

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)

The women narrate how people offered them help to cover some of their needs such accommodation, transportation, health, and food. In this example, it can be seen that Mexico is a country of great contrasts with respect to its treatment of migrants, and just as its citizens can be indifferent, they can also be solidary with those who need the most help.

Social support has proven to have different benefits, and the most important is the reduction of the social and psychological impact in the face of stressful events (Kaplan et al. 1977). In the case of women, having had the support of certain people helped reduce their risks of hunger 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 journey through Mexico or even their life.

When creating narratives of social support, the participants recognize that the people of Mexican society supported them selflessly. This makes them see the people of that country as kind and good; this may perhaps help reduce the feeling of distrust towards Mexicans, which as it was described in the section of narratives about adversity, was obvious due to the mistreatment they received from different persons.

## **Institutions**

Institutions refer to all those organizations formed to cover a social need. This research points out a specific type of institution, migrants' shelters, which constitute a fundamental support for them.

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)

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. However, according to the testimony of some women during the fieldwork, the closer the shelters are to the US border, the more resources they have.

These respondents emphasized 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, 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). 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.

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 was not necessary for women to endure or show courage all the time to demonstrate their strength, but they also demonstrated it by knowing how to make the correct and most appropriate choices regarding their needs.

## **Family: Children, Relatives, and Partner**

The link between family and resilience has been widely studied in the fields of social work and psychology (Hawley and DeHaan 1996). Different studies have been interested in the relation between family and good outcomes in its members. McDonald et al. (2011) show that those with a strong family bond have healthier coping mechanisms than those who have weak or problematic ties with their families.

The family is considered a protective factor as well as a risk factor (Hawley and DeHaan 1996). However, this research's focus on the family is as a protective factor.

## Children

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 the women interviewed, the source of their motivation to continue was 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. They made a sacrifice which was also mentioned by one of the participants in the section of internal strengths. However, in this context, it is different; this is a parental sacrifice which happens when the parents renounce personal needs for their children's well-being (Leung and Shek 2015).

## Relatives

...my family, they are the foundation... they are 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)

...I was talking to my cousin [ ... ] 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)

The interviewees in 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 mentioned that what drove her to keep going despite facing difficult times was her family and that it was enough for her to think about it in order to recover from her discomforts.

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 and DeHaan 1996). These women and their families show characteristics of being resilient due to the way in which they cooperate with each other to obtain different types of support.

## Partner

...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)

Family resilience is not something that is within the characteristics of certain families by nature but is something that is built through adverse experiences and the ability of the families to cope with them (Hawley and DeHaan 1996; Michael. Rutter 1985). It seems that the journey through Mexico of these women with their partners and children led to the right circumstances for family resilience to be built or become stronger.

The families of the participants, 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 (Grassi and Ferreira 2016). In this type of situation, support from the family was important for the informants, since it meant making the decision to continue with the journey.

When the women talked about their families, they remembered that they had a support network that assisted them in the most complicated moments. Furthermore, feeling supported by the family is of 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 et al. (2006). Their participants were Sudanese refugees in Australia, and the study results proved that family support is essential to face the consequences of post-traumatic stress; they also added that family support has the most positive effects on the psychological well-being of refugees.

The women's narratives about their families and how they encouraged them to keep going show clear characteristics of family resilience. That is, it can be appreciated how not only them as an individual are resilient but also the family to which they belong.

## Summary

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

The results indicate that the participants 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. It was 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 the USA.

The internal strengths that the participants of this study possessed were many; however, it was found that four were the most mentioned: religion and spirituality, endurance, courage, and goal setting. They expressed they believed in a God who accompanied them at all times of the journey, and they said that thanks to it, they had been able to reach the border of Mexico with the USA. When they spoke of enduring, they also spoke of sacrifice, such as sacrificing comfort or the lifestyle they had before arriving in Mexico. Furthermore, the women expressed that to migrate, it was necessary to have the courage to face the difficulties of the road in order to reach a goal. Finally, women talked about how they were able to achieve their objectives.

The external strengths were examined, and the women acknowledged that despite some persons treated them badly and made their journey more complex, there were also institutions and people such as their family and the general Mexican population who offered them help and support so that they could continue their journey.

## Conclusion

This study's results invite social workers to question how this research modifies or reinforces the current idea that exists about resilience and strengths. This research emphasizes both the individual and the social aspects of them, especially that of resilience, since it is commonly seen as something that emerges from the individual and not from what is around him or her (Michael Rutter and Zigler 2000). With this study, it can be seen how contextual factors such as social support promotes the resilience capacity of people in situations of risk or stress. The social support that people possess is determinant in the outcomes they have.

This study is relevant for social work since it invites the academics, policymakers, and the general population to think about the role of women in migration. This study depicts them as agents of life-changing decisions, such as migrating. In this way, society 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 it was seen with the participants of this study, many of them traveled with their children or with a friend and none expressed that they went to the USA to reunite with their husbands. In any case, those who went with their partners went together with them to seek to reside in the USA, so migrating seemed more like a joint family decision and not a decision made by a man.

In the practice of social work, this research is relevant because it invites practitioners to see migrant women in transit, who face highly adverse situations, as people with resources and not only as recipients of abuses and its consequences. 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 appear. In this way, social work can shift its way of perceiving migrant women solely as a victim of abuse, but as a person with the ability to change their situation.

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