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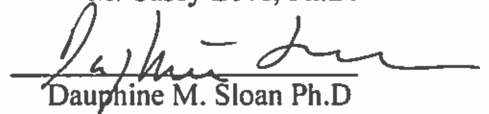

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

AMLO: Andrés Manuel López Obrador

CIDE: Centro de Investigación y Docencia Económicas

COMAR: Mexican Committee of Refugee Assistance

CONAPRED: National Council to Prevent Discrimination

CRC: Committee on the Rights of the Child

DHS: Department of Homeland Security

DIF: National System for Integral Family Development

ENADIS: National Survey on Discrimination

INM: National Institute of Migration

IOM: International Organization for Migration

MPP: Migrant Protection Protocols

UNHCR: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

USMEX: UC San Diego Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies

CHAPTER I:

INTRODUCTION

Help, Refuge, or Dismissal

When Vice President Kamala Harris visited Guatemala in June 2021, she emphasized to would-be migrants in Central America, “Do not come. Do not come” (Naylor and Keith 2021). Her comments came in response to a recent influx of migrants and asylum-seekers fleeing from the Northern Triangle of Central America. In September 2021, Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) stated that he does not want Mexico to become a "migrant camp,” arguing it is more important to address the causes of migration to prevent people from leaving in the first place (Monroy 2021). These responses reflect that, in recent years, the countries comprising the Northern Triangle—Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador are the primary origins of unauthorized migration and government concerns. Migrants and asylum-seekers make their way to the U.S.-Mexico border fleeing their homes for a multitude of reasons such as violence and economic hardship (O’Connor, Batalova, and Bolter 2019).

According to sources from U.S. Customs and Border Protection, in FY 2019, 608,000 unauthorized migrants from Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador were apprehended at the U.S.-Mexico border, including increasing numbers of families and unaccompanied minors (Meyer 2021). Thereby, Mexico has strengthened its position as a transit and destination country for migrants and asylum-seekers. According to the UN, a migrant is someone who changes his or her country of usual residence (United Nations 20

22). To make a distinction, "[r]efugees are not migrants: they have not chosen to leave their homes. Their homes have become unsafe" (Betts and Collier 2017). According to the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and the 1967 Protocol, which acknowledges specific protection norms and rights of refugees, the term "refugee" applies to any individual that is outside his or her country of nationality and has a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons such as race, religion, nationality, membership of a certain social group, or political opinion and is unable or unwilling to return (UNHCR 2011).

Migrants leave for reasons that are not specifically related to persecution, such as seeking better economic opportunities. On the other hand, an asylum seeker is a person that claims to be a refugee and is seeking official protection in another country. However, asylum-seekers do not have refugee status and must wait for a decision on their asylum claim by the authorities of the host country (Amnesty International 2021). Hence, Central American migration is of much importance not only to the U.S. but also to the Mexican government since Mexico acts as the "first line of defense" by deciding who stays or leaves. This is evident with the number of Central American asylum applications received in Mexico, which have increased tenfold between 2014-2017 (Meili 2019).

The Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP) or "Remain in Mexico" policy was established during the Trump Administration and expected Mexico to provide the appropriate humanitarian protections such as jobs, healthcare, and education to individuals wishing to enter the U.S. (Department of State 2019). Asylum-seekers and people without documentation were expected to wait in Mexico during their immigration proceedings—while their asylum claims were being adjudicated (Department of

Homeland Security 2019). From the implementation of the program in January 2019 to December 2020, about 70,000 people were returned to Mexico (Gambardella 2021). It was reported that as of March 2021, there were approximately 25,000 migrants and asylum-seekers on the border between Matamoros and Tijuana, many waiting to hear back from their asylum cases being processed in the U.S. (Burnett 2021). While this program was terminated when President Biden took office, it was reinstated on December 6, 2021, with compliance from the Mexican government. President Biden, who earlier denounced the "Remain in Mexico" policy, has resumed returns. Asylum-seekers from the Western Hemisphere, regardless of nationality, must wait in Mexico again for their immigration court hearings (NPR 2021).

With the media's coverage of the "border crisis" and immigration politicization, U.S. policy has claimed the spotlight—most media attention has been focused on U.S. approaches to border enforcement. Nevertheless, the Mexican government's role in the deportation process, along with the rise of xenophobic attitudes that have emerged against Central American migrants and asylum seekers, receive less attention. For many Central American migrants, Mexico is the main corridor for migratory movements to the U.S. I argue that because Mexico serves as both a transit and destination country for migrants and asylum seekers, xenophobic attitudes among the Mexican population and restrictionist immigration policies towards Central Americans—influenced by actions and pressure from the U.S. government—have increased. There are multiple factors contributing to the change of welcomeness from Mexicans and the growth of xenophobia. Such factors include the migrant caravans, a saturated system of asylum applications, the COVID-19 pandemic, the pressure and involvement of the U.S., the omnipresence of

sensational media reports, and the levels of discrimination and violence that are recurrent in Mexico. I do not claim to capture every voice. This thesis aims to fill the gap in scholarship and awareness of the increasing xenophobic attitudes among Mexicans, as literature on discrimination against Central American migrants and refugees in Mexico is limited or only covers specific locations such as Tijuana or Chiapas. Overall, I will not be focusing on the root causes of Central American migration. Instead, I will analyze how Mexico–both state and civil society–have responded during the Peña Nieto and López Obrador Administrations to the policies implemented, while considering U.S. pressure under the Trump and Biden Administrations to secure the border. I consider that Mexico's xenophobic attitudes are complying with U.S. demands.

Organization and Methodology

Utilizing an interdisciplinary approach and scholarship that draws from the fields of political science, public policy, history, sociology, anthropology, in addition to employing an analysis that draws heavily from media studies, I unpack Mexico's xenophobic attitudes and compliance with U.S. demands. The following chapter delves into Mexico's trajectory on migration issues and dilemmas that may be contributing to changes in public opinion regarding migration. Not only is Mexico receiving migrant caravans from Central America, but there are other factors at play including the COVID-19 pandemic, and an environment of rising xenophobic nationalism and exclusion fueled by its neighboring country to the north. I describe the phenomenon of Mexican frustration and apathy towards migrants and asylum seekers from Central America as the Migrant-Gatekeeper Syndrome, as Mexicans largely oppose U.S. mistreatment but do not want to help people from the Northern Triangle.

Chapter III analyzes U.S. policy involvement in Mexico with Central American migrants and asylum seekers, from pressure affecting the implementation of Mexican refugee policy, to border militarization and security. I also explore how the U.S. is forcing Mexico to take responsibility for the influx of migrants and refugees from Central America, making them do the immigration enforcement. Subsequently, Chapter IV examines the normalization of violence and discrimination against Central Americans in Mexico. I consider the role of local sensational media reports and their negative outlook towards migrants and asylum seekers. In addition, I examine some of the threats that Mexican citizens envision, along with the problems faced by people in transit, such as brutality and crime. Lastly, I end this thesis with a glimpse of hope, by highlighting some pro-migrant organizations in areas where the presence of Central American migrants and refugees is frequent in Mexico, signaling that not all Mexicans are xenophobic, and that solidarity is possible.

My positionality in the research should also not be ignored since I am Mexican American and from the U.S.-Mexico border. I have witnessed the situation of stranded asylum seekers and manifestations of xenophobia that disproportionately target people from the Northern Triangle. I have also noticed in-person how implementations of border and immigration restrictions affect binational communities. Besides my background, I have NGO experience working with migrants and asylum seekers in Texas and Louisiana helping with translation for asylum claims and migrant outreach. Considering my personal life history, location, and migration advocacy experience, my position as a researcher sympathizes with asylum seekers. However, my positionality also allows me to understand complex circumstances such as the challenges that are created in Mexico

and along borders due to the presence of migrants and asylum seekers, while also considering the policies that are being adopted by local, state, and federal governments. My positionality allows me to identify several layers that contribute to Mexican xenophobia, as multiple factors are at play simultaneously.

There were several limitations presented when doing this research. The main challenge was that I did not carry out interviews to gain first-hand sources. This decision was primarily because of time constraints and the COVID-19 pandemic. However, missing interviews did not impede my argument, it would have enhanced it. I also acknowledge that my topic covers many contemporary issues, in which there is a lack of empirical evidence. While I do include data, polls, and migration trends, my argument about Mexican xenophobia relies heavily on anecdotal evidence. Another limitation was analyzing the effect of the pandemic and new policies because there is insufficient information about the Mexican government's implementation of the law per state. Organizations have limited on-site monitoring capacity due to COVID-19 restrictions, and for that reason, I could not comment on the entire country. I focused more on the southern and northern borders of Mexico where there is more coverage.

Recent Migration Patterns

In order to understand Mexican xenophobia, it is first necessary to examine recent migratory patterns to the U.S., as in recent years there have been major changes. According to the Pew Research Center, in 2017, the number of unauthorized Mexican immigrants in the United States declined so sharply that Mexicans no longer were the largest group of unauthorized immigrants (Passel and Cohn 2019). During the 2000s and most of the 2010s, Mexican unauthorized immigrants outnumbered other nationalities

(Gonzalez-Barrera 2021). While COVID-19 has dramatically affected border movements and national economies worldwide, before the pandemic, unauthorized Mexican immigrants declined as more people left the United States in 2017 than in any year since 2001. This means that there was less necessity to migrate from Mexicans. In contrast, unauthorized immigrants from Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala increased (Passel and Cohn 2019).

Moreover, the year 2021 experienced the highest record of migrant encounters, which includes expulsions and apprehensions at the U.S.-Mexico border. Even though a quarter of the migrant encounters were repeat crossers (people that attempted to cross the border multiple times) and the record may not consider that in the past many people did not get caught, Mexico became once again the highest nationality group detained. Mexican nationals accounted for 37% of the total and the rest of the nationalities reached a total of encounters not seen by U.S. Customs and Border Protection records since 2000. Most of the non-Mexican encounters included people from the Northern Triangle with Hondurans representing 19% of all encounters, Guatemala 17%, and El Salvador 6%. Family units and unaccompanied children also increased in 2021, but single adults remained the highest category of encounters. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, most migrant encounters resulted in expulsions, and there were fewer apprehensions (Gramlich and Scheller 2021). Apprehensions result in detainment, so this means that fewer people were taken into custody and more people were immediately expelled.

These higher levels of asylum seekers are due to masses of people fleeing the Northern Triangle because of numerous reasons including insecurity, violence, and economic necessity (O’Connor, Batalova, and Bolter 2019). An important unique feature

is that many Central Americans turn themselves in to the Border Patrol to request asylum. In contrast, Mexicans have tried to evade contact with U.S. authorities (Nowrasteh 2019). This is because in Central America there are higher levels of political violence but there was also the realization that asylum seekers by law could not be deported and were allowed to stay. Considering that more than half of the approximately 3.5 million Central American immigrants residing in the U.S. in 2017 came before 2000 and through multiple channels, the increasing petitions for asylum suggest that Central American migrants and asylum seekers are in a vulnerable position that leads them to make the dangerous journey to the U.S., even if that involves waiting in Mexico indefinitely (O'Connor, Batalova, and Bolter 2019). Petitioning for asylum has significantly increased since 2018, and the nationalities that apply the most are from the Northern Triangle (TRAC 2020). These migratory movements are not only being absorbed by the U.S., but they are also influencing the Mexican mindset as they travel and wait in Mexico.

Another unique feature of Central American migratory flows are the numbers of unaccompanied minors and migrant caravans, which demonstrate the gravity of the Central American situation. According to the Annual Flow Report from the Office of Immigration Statistics from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, unaccompanied children from the Northern Triangle accounted for 92% of all unaccompanied child asylum applications in 2019 (Baugh 2020). Additionally, migrant caravans are becoming more common. Migrant caravans are groups of people that travel together and are largely made up of individuals from the Northern Triangle who wish to reach the United States. Each caravan has had different fates on arrival in Mexico, as some have been allowed

transit, while most recent ones have been denied access to continue their journey in Mexico (Cantalapiedra 2020). Even though migrant caravans are not new, they are currently a definite response to migration and refugee policies enacted by the U.S. and Mexican governments; and, since 2017, they have become more prevalent as a method for traveling and applying for asylum (Wurtz 2020). These migration trends impact Mexico and shape xenophobic attitudes within the Mexican public since the country largely functions as a corridor of migration flows with the responsibility of helping foreigners.

Historical Context

In the past few years, the United States and Mexico have experienced large migratory waves while simultaneously increasing their deportation mechanisms. Yet, Central American migration to the United States and Mexico is not new. By 1987, about 88% of people fleeing Central America were established in the U.S. and Mexico. Before the 1970s, migration was very normal *within* Central America and Mexico. It was usual for migrants to move across borders to work in different industries. For example, Salvadorans migrated to Honduras and Guatemalans moved to Southern Mexico because of higher wages working in the fields, while migration to the U.S. was less common (García 2006). This changed when political conflict erupted in Central America due to major civil wars. Central American migrants that lived in the United States persuaded people from their home countries to relocate during the civil wars. As a result, the 1980s U.S. Census reflected that migration to the U.S. escalated when millions were displaced by war. Half of the 94,447 Salvadorans and 63,073 Guatemalans living in the U.S. had moved in just five years. As a result, more apprehensions occurred at the southern border

of the United States. This was evident when 5,000 Guatemalans and 7,000 Salvadorans were detained in 1977 at the U.S.-Mexico border, while few individuals were granted asylum by the state. The region ultimately faced a long and persistent out-migration crisis from 1974 to 1996 (García 2006).

The Central American refugee crisis during this period forced Mexico to question its own immigration policy, as Mexico had previously paid attention primarily to its northern border. Guatemalans, Salvadorans, Nicaraguans, and Hondurans were historically recent groups to emigrate to Mexico. Because of geographical proximity, Guatemalans shared migratory links with Mexico. Guatemala provided Mexico with seasonal low-skilled and cheap labor. In this way, illegal immigration was not a concern for Mexican authorities, as economic interests played a role in migration accessibility. Mexico's southern border was a territory of fluid exchange. On top of that, migrants from Guatemala shared cultural similarities with Mexicans, and crossing the Guatemalan-Mexican border was not complicated as there was a lack of resources to control the area (García 2006).

Yet, by the 1990s, when an expanded population of Central American refugees entered Mexico, such non-restrictiveness ceased to exist. In comparison to previous immigrant groups, Central Americans were much larger. For example, by the 1990s, it was estimated that half a million Salvadorans and 200,000 Guatemalans were staying in Mexico. This was not an easy task for the Mexican government to manage. As masses entered Mexico, the country was forced to deal with the refugees (García 2006). For instance, an estimated 150,000 Maya escaped to Mexico for safe haven during the Guatemalan genocide, a result from counter-insurgency operations by the Guatemalan

government between 1960-1996 during the civil war. Approximately 45,000 became refugees under the UN program in Mexico (Brett 2016). In 1987, there were 60,000 unregistered, asylum-seeking Guatemalans in Mexico. Most of them settled in Chiapas, Mexico's poorest state. In addition, reaching the official refugee camps was difficult. At times the journey involved walking through the jungle. People traveled without the appropriate resources such as food and water and the Mexican government did not consider everyone fleeing Guatemala as refugees, but rather as economic migrants (Rich 1987).

Mexico faced a dilemma: it simultaneously sought to help the refugees and asylum seekers while also trying to fix the internal problems brought during the 1980s debt and oil crisis. Between 1980 to mid-1983, repatriation was the objective of the state. In 1981, 3,000 Guatemalans were deported, a rate of 50 people per day. While some people were allowed to stay, deportation was problematic since the fate of the people sent back to Central America was uncertain. In 1983, Mexico halted deportations, giving priority to dialogue with Guatemalan officials in the hope of creating a repatriation program that would secure the destiny of the people returned with voluntary returns. Yet, the agreement failed because the safety of the returnees could not be guaranteed (Rich 1987). When the deportation of refugees stopped, refugee visas did not allow for work or movement. Visas identified refugees as aliens subject to deportation if they were found outside the refugee camps (Montejo 1999).

Furthermore, keeping the refugees was a difficult task for Mexico, which created disputes between government officials. Many Mexican authorities believed that letting Central American refugees into Mexico would create political and economic instability.

Allegedly, refugees lowered wages even though they were not allowed to work as they took over scarce jobs and led to record levels of unemployment during the economic crisis of the 1980s. Mexican authorities assumed that refugees would create higher levels of political instability because their exile could make them highly engaged political actors. The Mexican government feared politicized population and unrest. For example, one major concern was that because most refugees were in Chiapas, they would support socialism (Rich 1987). This was because of the revitalization of indigenous movements during the 1970s and 1980s consisting of agrarian, labor, and political activism in Chiapas and throughout Mexico (Benjamin 2000).

While the Mexican government was providing aid towards refugees, some agencies such as the Secretaría de Gobernación and Servicios Migratorios (Ministry of the Interior and Immigration Services) and the Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores (Ministry of Foreign Affairs) took a stance against Central American refugees. Officials from the Ministry of the Interior and Immigration Services established that people fleeing from Central America were seeking economic opportunities, and they used the press to spread the idea that they were taking economic opportunities from Mexicans. Specifically, the director of the agency, Diana Torres Arciniega, argued that social issues such as poverty, violence, lawlessness, and other problems were created by the refugees. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs prioritized internal responsibilities instead of engaging in foreign policy. Such dilemmas led to the expulsion of thousands of refugees (García 2006).

In summary, the phenomenon of people fleeing Central America and seeking protection in Mexico is not something new, xenophobic attitudes today mirror those of

prior migration eras. In 1980, the Mexican Committee of Refugee Assistance (COMAR) was specifically created to deal with the influx of Central American refugees (García 2006). This same agency remains in charge of overseeing the influx of Central American asylum seekers today. Since the agency's creation, Mexico has experienced a history of disputes in the management of Central American refugees and their effect in the country. Chapter III explores COMAR's duties and Mexico's domestic and international responsibilities with refugees. Yet, the same problem remains—what to do with the masses coming from Central America.

Literature Review

The literature that supports this research is diverse and unfolds from different academic backgrounds. While there is substantial literature on migration from Central America, border enforcement, and human rights violations against migrants and refugees, I will not summarize such literature and instead provide an overview related to xenophobia, as it is the main focus of my research. The word xenophobia has Greek roots. The first part of the word, *xeno*, means stranger, foreigner, or a person outside the community. The second part, *phobos* refers to fear. Hence, the definition of xenophobia is not equivalent to racism but may overlap; it is the fear of strangers or foreigners. Such fear leads to exclusion or hate (Rodríguez et al. 2020). Xenophobia portrays migrants and asylum seekers as a threat to nationals.

Yankelevich noted that from 1910 to 1950, Mexico utilized the idea of mestizaje as the foundation for xenophobia and the creation of restrictive immigration policies. After the Mexican Revolution (1910–20), mestizaje shaped the identity of the country, favoring its Spanish heritage, while recognizing but subordinating its indigenous roots,

and dismissing its African origins. Such national identity directly impacted migration policy, actions, and norms, as the presence of some foreigners, represented a threat to the national project of mestizaje. For the most part, xenophobia applied to certain groups such as Asians, Africans, and eventually people from the Middle East. In contrast, Mexicans demonstrated solidarity with other groups such as Spanish Republicans. Hence, Yankelevich discerned Mexico's multiple-sided face in immigration policy—a phenomenon that remains today as Mexico claims respect for its migrant population in the U.S. while disregarding foreign migrants in its own territory (Yankelevich 2017). Yet, considering this interrelation of mestizaje and immigration policy, an aspect that remains unanswered in Yankelevich's analysis is the prevalence of xenophobia against Central American migrants and asylum seekers in Mexico, due to cultural and racial commonalities between the countries.

Additionally, fear of strangers, migrants, and foreigners may lead to discrimination, which is the main concept for this thesis. For legal scholars, discrimination requires precise definitions to determine if specific cases constitute discriminatory practices. In contrast, social scientists may focus more on the patterns of disadvantage, the effects, and the forms of exclusion (Fibbi, Simon, and Midtbøen 2021) I do not dismiss the legal component that reflects discrimination simply because Mexico is required to take specific legal measures when dealing with migrants and refugees and change in policy approach reflects discrimination. Simultaneously, analyzing the behaviors from a portion of Mexican society that demonstrate how groups are negatively affected, simply because they are members of such groups, is just as important for this research. There is also a multitude of theories about discrimination and intragroup

dynamics in psychology, from cognition and motivation to the mind's adaptation from an evolutionary perspective (Fiske 2000). While I acknowledge the role of psychological factors shaping xenophobia in Mexico against Central American migrants and asylum seekers, I will not be using nor promoting a psychological framework to shape my analysis. My thesis falls on the manifestation of xenophobia through Mexican migration policy, human rights violations, and manifestations of rejection.

Another important concept is the notion of "the other." Rodriguez claims that even if a foreigner satisfies all legal requirements to migrate, cultural barriers exist for integration. Hence, the requirements for migrating are not only established by the government but also by society. History, sociocultural relations, economics, and politics play a role in determining what country is deemed as strange or even threatening (Rodríguez et al. 2020). When thinking about the relationship between Mexico and the countries from the Northern Triangle, there exists geographical proximity, an overall regional economic relationship, and similar histories when comparing them with other parts of the world. According to that logic, migrants and asylum seekers from Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador should not experience as much xenophobia. Yet, Rodriguez makes another observation that includes three specific factors that determine rejection: physical appearance, social class, and migratory status (Rodríguez et al. 2020). While the latter is the main focus of my thesis, I do not ignore the other two factors as contributors to xenophobia in Mexico because they are just as important.

Consequently, the construction of "the other," is problematic because it signals incompatibility and promotes discrimination, violence, and exclusion, which then impacts access to rights and opportunities (Rodríguez et al. 2020). Similarly, Sanchez-Mazas

notes that the fear of “the other” is because, historically, foreigners have been associated with risks including unclean foods, contagion, and unusual hygienic customs (Sanchez-Mazas and Licata 2015). While xenophobia takes many forms, such historical concerns cannot be ignored at a time of a global pandemic and economic crisis. It is important to consider that asylum applications are breaking records in Mexico during the COVID-19 pandemic and there are concerns by the Mexican population.

Furthermore, Rodriguez acknowledges that xenophobia in Mexico has been historically prevalent, and now such xenophobia affects Central American migrants. She describes the emergence of the migrant caravan in 2018, as evidence for the manifestation of global xenophobia that impacts politics, discourse, and actions (Rodríguez et al. 2020). Yet, her research lacks evidence of what constitutes contemporary xenophobic actions other than the increase of restrictive immigration policies or violence due to the lack of protection from the authorities. I fill the gap by examining current factors that contribute to xenophobic actions by Mexican society *and* the state. I also indicate examples of such xenophobic acts.

Another scholar that has specifically written about xenophobia in Mexico is Martínez Mariñelarena. He argues that xenophobia is problematic in Mexico and an awareness campaign is needed to educate the population. Martínez Mariñelarena contends that it was not the migration flows that caused Mexicans to become xenophobic, but that it only evidenced pre-existing intolerance. A contributor to xenophobia against Central American migrants and asylum seekers is distorted misinformation because it distances people from reality and creates false social constructs that influence perspectives. Likewise, he makes the case that Mexico privileges only specific types of

migration, based on qualifications and race, while irregular migrants are considered criminals. By using a façade of national security, Mexico hides ethnic and racial prejudices and increases xenophobic nationalism (Martinez Mariñelarena 2019). Such remarks are important in my analysis, especially considering the effect of the Trump administration. On top of that, I will expand Martínez Mariñelarena's analysis by looking at the media and their sensational reports about the presence of Central American migrants and asylum seekers in Mexico. In sum, this thesis opens new avenues to explore Mexican xenophobia towards Central American migrants and asylum seekers.

CHAPTER II:

MEXICO: PLACE OF TRANSIT AND DESTINATION

Mexican Public Opinion on Migration

This chapter reveals how Mexicans perceive migrants and asylum seekers and the circumstances that contribute to changes of opinion towards people from the Northern Triangle. Mexico differentiates from other countries in that international migration studies based on national population surveys have primarily focused on themes related to emigration (people that leave Mexico) and the relationship with the immigrants abroad, which are mostly located in the U.S. This is due to historical migration links between both countries. Recently, more attention has been given to *transit* migration in Mexico, which is the temporary stay with the objective of reaching the United States. This is due to the rise of migrant unaccompanied minors in 2012 and 2015, the first massive migrant caravan in 2018, and the change of migratory control in the border to the National Guard in 2019 (G. Maldonado 2020). This brings into question the perceived attitudes of Mexican society towards migrants, and more specifically, the migrant caravans. Discussed in greater detail below, Mexican public opinion on migration is unwelcoming towards migrants and asylum seekers from the Northern Triangle, but not necessarily towards other nationalities, which is evidence for xenophobia.

Considering that Mexican immigrants have been the generators of one of the most important mass migrations of the modern world, with more than 16 million individuals

migrating to the U.S. between 1965 to 2015 and surpassing any other country, migrating is the norm in Mexico (Gonzalez-Barrera 2021). While not necessarily wanting to leave Mexico, there is the belief that migrating to the U.S. is a solution to economic problems even if it is temporary (Moreno Perez 2008). For many U.S. citizens, this exodus represents a problem, but Mexicans highly support this practice. Most Mexican citizens perceive emigrants as contributing to the Mexican economy and object against inadequate treatment received in the United States. In addition, Mexicans perceive restrictionist immigration policies at the U.S.-Mexico border as aggressive and inhumane (Moreno Perez 2008). However, as noted by the Mexican journalist, Sergio Sarmiento, “If Mexico had an avalanche of foreigners so large in a period so short, the resistance would, without a doubt, have been greater. When we have had much smaller flows of foreigners — Argentines, Chileans, Central Americans — the reaction of Mexicans has been very negative” (Kammer 2018). Resistance to migrants is now prevalent among the Mexican population as crowds of foreigners use Mexico as a transit space with indefinite stays.

Recent surveys from *The Washington Post* and the Mexican newspaper *Reforma* revealed Mexican discontent with migration from Central America. The poll was conducted in July 2019 among a random sample of 1,200 adults residing throughout Mexico. The survey concluded that more than half of interviewees were aware of U.S.-Mexico agreements to limit migration flows from Central America. Further, 41% were in favor of such measures, 33% were against and 26% had no opinion. Furthermore, when asked if they believed that the negotiation on the control of the migratory movements by Central Americans was a mutual agreement or imposed by the United States on Mexico,

55% responded that it was the U.S. that pressured the Mexican government to act.

However, when asked about their opinion on using the Mexican National Guard, created in 2019, to combat undocumented Central American migration, the majority responded in favor of deportation of these individuals (The Washington Post 2019). In response to the question, “what should Mexico do with the migrants from Central America that cross through the country trying to reach the United States?” the majority of respondents (55%) favored deportation over giving them temporary residency (33%) or permanent residency (7%). Respondents perceived migrants as a burden (64%) because they took away jobs and received benefits that they believed belonged to Mexicans and that they did not contribute to society. When asked if migrants committed more crimes than Mexicans, 39% said they believed migrants committed more crimes, while 31% said they committed about the same amount, and only 21% voted for less (The Washington Post 2019).

Based on the answers of the poll, it can be concluded that the majority of respondents have a negative outlook towards migrants and asylum seekers coming from Central America This anti-immigrant sentiment was further emphasized as the majority of the people preferred to deport Central American migrants and asylum seekers rather than to help them. Overall, the results suggest that there are similarities with the political feelings expressed by crowds of Trump supporters in the United States who are anti-immigrant. Yet, a paradox emerges. Most respondents of that same poll (81%) answered that Trump treated Mexico without respect and that the relationship between the two countries was not on good terms. Trump was predominantly seen through a negative light as 77% of the people had an unpleasant outlook towards the former U.S. president (The

Washington Post 2019). While Mexico has a tradition of sending migrants to the United States and seeking respect for these migrants, Mexicans do not sympathize with people fleeing from the Northern Triangle (Sieff and Clement 2019). In sum, this poll reflected the rejection of undocumented Central American migrants who pass through Mexico and mirrored frustration with the U.S. Overall, there is a migrant paradox in Mexico–what I coin as the Migrant-Gatekeeper Syndrome–as Mexicans largely oppose U.S. mistreatment but are apathetic towards helping migrants and asylum seekers from the Northern Triangle. The question then is, why is this rejection happening?

There is some data available to help answer this dilemma. Back in 2010, a survey on foreign policy and international relations from the Centro de Investigación y Docencia Económicas (CIDE), a Mexican center of research and higher education, revealed that 46% of the population believed that foreign people who live in Mexico weakened national customs and traditions. Similarly, the 2010 National Survey on Discrimination (ENADIS), determined that approximately 40% of Mexican nationals believed that migrants' rights were not respected in Mexico (Martinez Mariñelarena 2019). When looking at the most recent ENADIS survey from 2017, the results had a slight increase as 42% of respondents believed that migrant's rights were not respected. In addition, values and attitudes reflected rejection as 56.6% of respondents shared, they did not approve of people practicing non-Mexican traditions and customs. On top of that, 39% of men and women reported they would not rent their homes to a foreigner, and 25% of men and 22% of women answered that when there is unemployment, foreigners should be denied jobs. The 2017 ENADIS survey also determined that the center and southern part of Mexico approved less of migrants and refugees compared to the rest of the country,

which may be attributed to the heavy influx of migrants and asylum seekers, and because of their high poverty rates (INEGI 2017). Overall, it is important to consider the different migration dynamics that are occurring throughout the country, as some states face more challenges than others.

In 2020, a different public opinion survey by CIDE, reflected public support for refugees and asylum seekers as 6% of respondents said their opinion was "good", 50% "very good", 28% "bad", 9% "very bad", and 7% "indifferent" (G. Maldonado 2020). Such findings are incompatible with the survey conducted by *The Washington Post* and *Reforma*. I contend this is not because Mexicans overwhelmingly support asylum seekers from the Northern Triangle, but because Mexicans vary in support depending on the foreigner group that is living in Mexico. For example, while the support levels fluctuated from 2010-2018 for all the following nationalities of migrants: Spanish, Americans, Chinese, Cubans, Argentinians, and Guatemalans, the neighbor citizens–Guatemalans–received the worst opinion by Mexicans every year.

Likewise, in 2020, CIDE noted that when considering the opinion of foreigners living in Mexico, Hondurans and Guatemalans received the worst judgments by Mexican society, preferring other migrants from other countries characterized by high levels of poverty, such as Venezuelans and Haitians. Both Hondurans and Guatemalans received a combination of "bad" and "very bad" opinions (G. Maldonado 2020). For that reason, when looking at foreigners in Mexico one cannot simply see migrants or asylum seekers as a homogenous block. For instance, when a person was asked about their opinion on foreigners, one has to consider what specific country they are thinking about. Rich states do not get the same prejudice as poor states, and even within poor states there is a

preference. To study xenophobia in Mexico, it is of utmost importance to differentiate between nationalities, ethnicity, and socio-economic status. For that reason, I argue such xenophobia is not of high prevalence towards all immigrants, but more likely towards people from the Northern Triangle.

Furthermore, when it comes to undocumented migration in Mexico, there have been changes in public policy preferences with a stronger preference for restrictionist enforcement policies. From 2012 to 2018, more Mexicans supported the idea of border control, deportations, and not allowing people into the country. However, when it came to the support of building walls, Mexicans overwhelmingly opposed such measures (G. Maldonado 2020). This idea appears contradictory, as in the U.S. a wall represents a form of border control, but in Mexico, this is not equivalent. This finding may be influenced by the campaign rhetoric "build the wall" and "make Mexico pay for it" used by the former president of the United States–Donald Trump. The wall exemplified U.S. xenophobia towards its southern neighbor and was not a remedy to include in their own migration policy. Nevertheless, based on the results of the aforementioned polls, the nationalities that are less welcomed in Mexico are those that resemble the Mexican population the most, while U.S. and European citizens are preferred.

Hence, the Migrant-Gatekeeper Syndrome demonstrates that Mexican society, despite being a country of emigrants, is unwelcoming towards certain nationalities. Overall, Mexicans do not want the government to grant Central Americans asylum, even if the masses are in-transit. There is now more backlash towards the people coming from the Northern Triangle but the unwelcomeness is not something new, as there is evidence

of historical antipathy towards Central America. Regardless, the unwelcomeness has been exacerbated.

Central American Migrant Caravans in Mexico

One reason for the change of public opinion in Mexico are the migrant caravans. In October 2018, the first massive migrant caravan from Central America emerged. The caravan was formed in northern Honduras, passed through Guatemala, and entered Mexico towards the United States. It passed through borders with approximately 7,000 people (Iannacone 2021). This phenomenon gained media attention when Trump referred to them as an "invasion", a statement that rippled throughout Mexico, as caravans were presented as a threat. Yet, it is important to emphasize that because traveling north is a risk, migrant caravans attract people that normally would not make the trip due to safety concerns. It is not uncommon for migrants and refugees to experience abuse in Mexico and other countries. Therefore, multiple migrant caravans have continued to form with the same purpose–northward migration. Traveling as a big group offers protection from human rights violations, not only from organized crime but also from Mexican authorities (Wurtz 2020). There is also no need of hiring a *coyote* or *pollero*, the smuggler that crosses undocumented individuals into "American soil". To join the caravan is to save money and to potentially travel with friends or family. As noted by Irma, a caravan member traveling with her siblings and children: "We came in January, we were encouraged because my oldest daughter who traveled with the October caravan is already in Tennessee, they went with her baby and her husband before Christmas, if not, how? Imagine, there are nine of us, how much they would have charged us just for trying" (Varela Huerta and McLean 2019).

The caravans changed the paradigm of frontier crossings. Something that was done out of sight was suddenly a public affair, especially since the media reported the caravan's journey. "Caravans turned border crossing into the refusal of official nation-state sovereignty" (Franz 2020). By crossing from Guatemala to Mexico, the exodus defied border control. However, while traveling in numbers provided strength and security, for segments of the Mexican population, the Central American caravan was seen as a crisis and threat. In Mexico, humanitarian aid and orderly migration were considered products of compliance and legal procedures; individuals that did not observe the established protocols lacked legitimacy in their stay (Iannacone 2021). Additionally, members of the caravans that made their way to the U.S. became trapped at the border with minimal possibilities of entrance due to slow and complex asylum procedures (Madrigal 2020). Once on the border, the caravans transitioned to a situation of migrant stagnation (Madrigal 2020). As a result, migrant caravans became synonymous with a major crisis that had serious cultural and financial implications for Mexican society.

Entrance to Mexico is mainly through the state of Chiapas, a highly impoverished region that has historically received migrants from Central America on their way to the north. However, due to the caravans, there has been a change in the Mexican population's welcomeness. In the small town of Mapastepec, Chiapas, the caravans turned around the societal response as citizens reported discontent with the presence of large foreign multitudes. The *chiapanecos* perceived the migrant caravans as taking the resources from the government that belonged to the locals. For example, Joaquin Ramirez was eager to have AMLO as Mexico's new president. Yet, his vision of the president changed because the caravans stayed in his small and poor city. He stated, "for trying to do good, he has

done a lot of damage" and "he seems to be more concerned about them than his own people" (Villegas and Semple 2019). This is not an isolated case but a small illustration of feelings that are spreading like wildfire. In parallel, the citizens of Huixtla, Chiapas, attempted to deny the crossing of 2,000 migrants. Local officials declared a state of emergency and instructed the people to stay home and not open their businesses (Villegas and Semple 2019).

Prior to the prevalence of caravans in Mexican territory, many towns and people showed solidarity with the migrants that would pass by, and this was the case with the first massive caravan. Initially, Mapastepec, like many other cities throughout Mexico, offered support and resources. For instance, officials from Mapastepec organized 300 people to feed and shelter the multitudes of migrants and asylum seekers traveling in the caravan. However, as more groups were formed, the patience of hosting faded away, as the presence of foreigners became the standard and not just a short-term phenomenon. Inhabitants of the area were furious with the government for letting the masses pass and settle in their communities, as they complained of crime, violence, and of changing their local environment. One citizen from Huixtla complained, "I just don't understand why they keep letting so many people in, just like that" (Villegas and Semple 2019). After the first massive migrant caravan, from December 2018 to June 2019, the media, international organizations, and governments in the region reported more than a dozen caravans. The caravans did not have an identifiable main leader, but the people organized themselves (Varela Huerta and McLean 2019). As Trump promoted ideas about the migrant caravan with negative connotations, the discourse about migrants in Chiapas and

other parts of Mexico also alluded to fear and resentment (Hernández López and Porraz Gómez 2020).

Initially, other states in Mexico acknowledged that the presence of the migrant caravans would be temporary and offered humanitarian support and services. For example, Mexico City acted as a sanctuary city protecting undocumented migrants and asylum seekers. Similarly, the government of the state of Jalisco prepared to receive the masses. The amiable attitude quickly changed when the caravan members arrived in Guadalajara and, instead, the government wanted them to leave. The unwelcomeness was because the caravan was portrayed in a negative light as reports by the Mexican media suggested that the members were involved with drugs and theft. Chapter IV will cover the media's role in spreading xenophobia. Such reports fueled to confrontations with locals, which led the mayor to close the shelter designated to help the members of the caravan. The state government of Jalisco pushed the caravan out by promising to offer transportation to the border with its northern neighbor Nayarit. Not only did the government fail in doing so by leaving the people 38 miles from the Nayarit border, but civil society had to step in and help with transportation (Fernández de Castro, Arvey, and Yrizar Barbosa 2019).

In the northern Mexican state of Baja California, residents expected the arrival of the migrant caravans as they made their way through Mexico. The governor made plans to prepare and create a task force along with the federal government of Enrique Peña Nieto to control the caravan. However, when the caravan arrived, the state government did not do anything to help. Instead, the municipal government and civil society were given the responsibility to provide support. In Tijuana, there was a concern due to the

deficiency of resources and help from the state and the federal government. As a result, members from the caravan had to stay in public spaces which created conflicts with the residents of the area, especially because the caravan demanded all members to stay together. Xenophobia became more prevalent when the Tijuana mayor expressed that the caravan members were a threat to the city, which consequently generated a small but visible protest against the caravan (Fernández de Castro, Arvey, and Yrizar Barbosa 2019). The mayor, Juan Manuel Gastélum, made clear his stance against the caravan by wearing a "Make Tijuana great again" cap (Kinosian 2018).

Similarly, a few Tijuana residents showed their open rejection as they organized xenophobic demonstrations, which even led to the stoning of Honduran families in shelters and improvised camps established by local authorities (Varela Huerta and McLean 2019). The residents of the neighborhood Playas de Tijuana were also concerned about the migrant caravans and contingents because they were uncertain of what to do with what they considered an "invasion" of foreigners with bad habits and unknown intentions. One neighborly meeting concluded that the migrants could not enter their communities and opted to install security fences, while also demanding surveillance and even the army's presence to control the caravan. Not only were they not welcomed, but even prior to COVID-19, the caravan members were considered a public threat because residents considered them dirty and a source of disease. It is also important to note that a principal reason these foreigners were seen as undeserving of rights is because they entered the country by force (Hernández López and Porraz Gómez 2020).

This rejection was not only in Tijuana but also in other cities as many Mexicans engaged in hate comments towards the caravans, especially through social media (Varela

Huerta and McLean 2019). "Imaginaries based on class, nationality, and social context arguments served to label caravan members as aggressive, violent, and abusive, as reasons to avoid their presence in certain parts of the city" (Hernández López and Porraz Gómez 2020). Mexican people demonstrated resentment with the government for investing resources in support of the caravan instead of helping Mexican residents (Hernández López and Porraz Gómez 2020). For instance, a protester in Tijuana carried a sign that stated, "state government, not one more peso to migrants, better to pay teachers and interns" (Milenio 2018). Therefore, conflicts between the Mexican population and the caravans, plus the lack of support mechanisms by the Mexican authorities, were some of the reasons for not welcoming migrants and asylum seekers from Central America.

The Journey to the North with COVID-19

In addition to higher levels of migration due to Central American caravans, the COVID-19 pandemic also impacted Mexican opinion and xenophobia. The pandemic brought substantial changes to travel, border restrictions, and health requirements around the world. Health protocols have become tools of migratory control as countries like the U.S. have implemented migratory restrictions such as closing its land border for non-essential traveling and more recently, requesting vaccination status. Tourists are not the only ones affected by such policies. Title 42, which prioritizes U.S. health law due to COVID-19 also prevents asylum seekers from entering U.S. territory. This policy directly impacts migrant caravans and other people that seek haven. Asylum seekers have been deported to Mexico or their home countries without the opportunity to engage in the U.S. asylum process. In other words, while U.S. ports of entry are open to specific individuals, others, including asylum seekers, may be denied entry. Additionally, Mexico is forced to

deal with the expelled, most of whom are from the Northern Triangle (Friedman 2021). The state of emergency of the pandemic has led to higher levels of xenophobia among Mexicans towards migrants and asylum seekers.

COVID-19 has created vast challenges for the entire world, and Mexico is no exception. However, Mexico simultaneously faces two challenges—a health crisis and what many consider an immigration crisis. Mexico has had difficulties in the management and control of the pandemic as it is one of the countries with the most cases and deaths in the region due to a lack of unified federal response. While it has implemented some policies to reduce the spread of COVID-19, it has lacked a response targeted towards migrants and those seeking international protection. Contagion is expected in migrant detention centers and conditions prevent social distancing, adequate hygiene, and other preventive practices including medical care. International organizations demand better treatment by the authorities and environments for these foreign masses (Mendez and Moncada 2020). Yet, the Mexican government has not done an effective job at curbing the spread of COVID-19 even with its own citizens, so the effects of the pandemic on the migrant population are not necessarily an isolated case, but just an additional layer of an insufficient strategy. Still, for the frustrated Mexican public, migrants and asylum seekers do not mix well with a global pandemic and weak coordination by the authorities.

As mentioned earlier, before the COVID-19 pandemic was declared, asylum seekers under the "Remain in Mexico" policy were returned to Mexico. Yet, with the emergence of the virus and the implementation of Title 42 in March 2020, asylum seekers became eligible for expulsion from U.S. territory without opportunity to

participate in the asylum process and interviews. In the first four months of this mandate, the U.S. expelled 105,000 people. From the beginning of the pandemic to May 2020, only two people were approved for asylum interviews (Mendez and Moncada 2020). Mexico took responsibility during the pandemic for the people expelled by the U.S. government. However, shelters in Mexico do not have the necessary resources nor sufficient spaces for the quarantine of migrants and asylum seekers. There is a scarcity of masks, gloves, and cleaning products as the state does not provide them, which makes the shelters dependent on donations (Mendez and Moncada 2020).

It can be argued that the U.S. implements immigration restrictions by using the pandemic as an excuse to limit accessibility, but a direct consequence of such measures involves sending asylum seekers infected with COVID-19 back to Mexico. Many people expelled by the U.S., including non-Mexicans, do not get tested for COVID-19 by U.S. authorities before being sent to Mexico, even with outbreaks in detention centers (WOLA 2020). As seen in Ciudad Juarez which shares the border with El Paso, Texas, asylum seekers have been returned despite their tests being positive for COVID-19. Due to a large number of migrants and asylum seekers, shelters are overcrowded, and there is limited space for people infected or exposed. From May to July 2021, the number of migrants and asylum seekers increased from 1,471 to 2,582, many of them returned under Title 42. As a result, in Ciudad Juarez, infected individuals have been put into hotels and even public gyms to quarantine, but even then, there is saturation. Simultaneously, as people make their way into Ciudad Juarez from multiple cities and countries, people are expelled from the U.S. to the Mexican side of the border. There is a concern involving public health and the spread of the virus that is shared by many including the people that

manage the migrant shelters (Martinez 2021). The lack of protocols, control, and guidance by the authorities, have left migrant shelters vulnerable.

Furthermore, COVID-19 has exacerbated xenophobia, hate, and exclusion irrespective of identification with caravans nor restricted to Central Americans (WOLA 2020). Tapachula, Chiapas is the city that registers the most asylum applications in Mexico due to its proximity to the Guatemalan border. It is a city filled with migrants and asylum seekers not only from the Northern Triangle but from many other countries. According to the Mexican government, the city is at its limit as there are three migrants for every ten inhabitants of the town (Instituto Nacional de Migracion 2021). The local media portrays the foreigners in "denial" of following the instructions of public health authorities. Migrants and asylum seekers are identified as health criminals, reflecting the notion of “the other”, which reproduces the stigma that migrants are sources of infection and spread the virus (Zarco Ortiz 2020). A combination of pandemic fear and lack of control from the authorities promotes discrimination not only in Tapachula, Chiapas but in other cities.

In Ciudad Juarez, people complained that the presence of migrants and asylum seekers would prolong COVID-19 restrictions (“El Diario de Juarez Facebook” 2021). This means that migrants are not only seen as carriers of COVID-19 but as worsening the health and economic situation. Even non-border states have demonstrated xenophobia against migrants and asylum seekers. Mayor Carmina Martínez Santiago from Chahuites, Oaxaca, expressed that a caravan that would pass by with mostly people from Central America, had illnesses and attempted to persuade the citizens to close their businesses with their arrival (Chaca, Lopez, and Peters 2021). Hence, hostility towards migrants and

asylum seekers, particularly if they come from the caravan, is an obstacle to social inclusion. Chapter IV explores the role of the media in detail.

Overall, the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted the asylum process and created additional challenges in the journey to the north. According to the International Organization for Migration, physical and verbal discrimination, the denial of goods and services, different quarantine restrictions and policies, anti-migrant political rhetoric and social media discourse have been an effect of the pandemic. As a result, xenophobia is tangible, neglecting the conditions of migrants and asylum seekers, regardless of their ties to migrant caravans and by not including them in the response to battle COVID-19. Such treatment makes people hide that they are ill. However, people especially consider migrant caravans a COVID-19 threat because they travel in big numbers, where the possibility of the spread of infection is higher. Since the pandemic started in March 2020, migrant advocacy organizations stated that from Chiapas all the way to Tijuana, Ciudad Juarez, and Matamoros, 6,245 xenophobic attacks were reported. The number is probably much higher as many cases of violence and discrimination go unreported. (Gonzalez 2022). As a result, xenophobia leads to vulnerability and suffering.

Mexican Xenophobic Nationalism and Exclusion

Another increasing trend in Mexico is xenophobic nationalism. In 2015 there were approximately 36.9 million people of Mexican origin in the U.S, mostly descendants of Mexicans. Approximately12 million of them were born in Mexico, and 5.8 million of them are undocumented. It is no secret that discrimination is prevalent towards Mexicans, especially those without documentation (CONAPRED 2022). Mexicans are largely opposed to the mistreatment and discrimination that their *paisanos*

face across the Rio Grande (Moreno Perez 2008). However, despite millions of Mexican immigrants and returnees, the pervasiveness of discrimination against Mexicans in the U.S. does not necessarily create empathy towards Central American migrants and asylum seekers facing the same plight in Mexico. What many Mexicans consider as a differentiator between them and Central Americans is that Mexicans that go to the U.S. do not enter the country by force or expect help from the authorities to survive. Rather, Mexican migration to the U.S. is usually done in a clandestine fashion, and Mexican migrants seek to avoid contact with U.S. authorities. By contrast, the presence of migrant caravans, are seen as forced entry, as some migrants and asylum seekers challenge migration authorities and as some groups demand financial assistance from the Mexican government (“Anonymous Azteca Facebook” 2018).

Examples of xenophobic nationalism include, “Tijuana first!”, “Tijuana needs respect!”, “Long live Mexico!”, “Migrants yes, invaders no!”, “Get out, get out!”, “Us first!” (Camhaji 2018). “We as Juarenses are dissatisfied with them in the city, leave Juárez!”, “They want the government to maintain them”, “As if we didn't have enough problems with our people, they need to go back to their country”, “There are Mexicans that are not supported (by the government), but they receive everything” (“El Diario de Juarez Facebook” 2021). These are just a few comments made by Mexicans that protest against the presence of migrants and asylum seekers from Central America. Migrants and asylum seekers are seen as competing with the local population and generating additional expenses for social services and infrastructure, leading to an increase of xenophobia and “otherness”.

An analysis by the UC San Diego Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies (USMEX) suggested that humanitarian aid and support to migrants and refugees became criminalized in Mexico. Anti-immigrant and xenophobic groups in Mexico increased, promoting Donald Trump's ideas of the wall and with aid being confiscated by authorities and civil groups (Daria 2019). Even with organizations working with migrants and refugees, "messages of racism, hate, and fear" surfaced from Mexican society (Daria 2019). For example, historically, Tijuana has been one of the most transited borders in the world and a city that has supported migrants and refugees. For decades there have been various migrant shelters and religious organizations assisting those looking to cross the border. Yet, due to mass deportation practices by U.S. agencies, Tijuana now receives thousands of migrants with insufficient capacity and infrastructure. As a result, humanitarian organizations are overwhelmed, and the crisis has created negative reactions by a segment of the population that previously supported migrants and asylum seekers (Daria 2019).

Furthermore, the Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP) policy left many people stranded in border cities for prolonged periods of time. Cities such as Mexicali, Ciudad Juárez, and Nuevo Laredo saw the emergence of migrant camps (Lin 2019). Anthropologist Darío Valles observed that in Tijuana, Central American migrants were thought to be unworthy of refuge or resettlement, in comparison to Haitians who were perceived to incorporate more into society (Valles 2020). While "Haitiano" has become a term used to describe any black migrant in Tijuana including those from Africa, this section sheds light upon the xenophobic attitudes against Central American migrants and refugees. This is not to say that Haitian migrants and asylum seekers do not experience

xenophobia. However, prior to COVID-19, Valles found that Mexican elites and the working class presented “Haitianos” as immigrant models in comparison to people from the Northern Triangle. His findings concluded that Central Americans are linked to processes of “relative valorization” and “civic ostracism” as Haitians or black migrants are seen with more positive attributes such as being hardworking and grateful. On the other hand, the media demonstrated Central Americans, especially members of the migrant caravans, as “dependent, demanding aid, and linked to crime” (Valles 2020).

Hence, the social construct that has been created in this Mexican city about Haitian immigrants is that migrants must be passive actors subject to the state, while Central Americans are perceived as a threat because of their association with the caravans. Valles also argues that in Tijuana, there is a lack of empathy towards Central Americans, as they are publicly associated with the very structural inequalities that caused them to flee, such as gangs, violence, and historical instability. Even the mayor from Tijuana made distinctions between Haitians, addressing them as deserving human rights assistance because of their fulfilled paperwork, vis-à-vis Central Americans who arrived as “a horde” (Valles 2020). Therefore, Central American migrants and refugees have been identified as undeserving of protection by the state which promotes xenophobia. However, it is important to note that after such anthropological observations and with the emergence of COVID-19, the preference of nationalities may have drastically changed, especially because the number of Haitians has increased in Mexico, distinctly in Chiapas. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the Mexican Commission for Refugee Assistance (COMAR) noted that in 2021 when

processing 116,500 asylum requests from 106 different nationalities–triple the number of 2019–52,000 petitions were from Haitians (Instituto Nacional de Migracion 2021).

In conclusion, Mexico is a country that in just a few years has experienced substantial socio-cultural, economic, political, and public health transformations. While historically Mexico has been characterized for migration to the U.S., and since 2020 Mexicans have outnumbered other nationalities in U.S. border apprehensions, it is a country that is reflecting resistance to becoming a place of transit and destination for people from the Northern Triangle and beyond (Gonzalez-Barrera 2021). Recent polls suggest rejection towards migrants and asylum seekers, but more specifically towards the caravans. Such a scenario portrays the migrant paradox or Migrant-Gatekeeper Syndrome, as Mexicans largely oppose U.S. mistreatment but have become unwelcoming towards masses that are seen as an invasion from the Northern Triangle. This rejection transitions to xenophobia from the Mexican public, from its southern border to the northern border. The presence of caravans, record numbers of asylum applications, and people requesting assistance, along with the threats of COVID-19, have affected the way Mexicans welcome migrants and asylum seekers. In a way, pandemic fears intensified the already existing xenophobic attitudes.

CHAPTER III:

U.S. IMPOSING THE GATEKEEPER MINDSET

Under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights Article 14, every person has the right to seek asylum in another country (UNHCR Mexico Office 2021). Mexico has signed multiple treaties stating its adherence to the safeguard of refugees. Mexican law on paper is humanitarian, inclusive, and does not encourage xenophobia. It can be argued that Mexico provides the perception of humanitarian policy, but with a different reality, that of deportation and abandonment. This poses the question of Mexico's role in the handling of Central American asylum-seekers who are pursuing security and a better life. This section analyzes Mexico's international and domestic responsibilities with refugees and asylum-seekers. U.S. interference is forcing Mexico to decrease its numerous human rights commitments and worsen the implementation of refugee policies. Consequently, U.S. interference is giving license and space for the flourishing of xenophobia in Mexico. Not only is xenophobia coming from Mexican society, but also from the state. Limited compliance with human rights indicates some of the challenges faced by asylum-seekers from Central America and beyond.

Mexico's Refugee Policy

Historically, Mexico incorporated a tradition of granting asylum, but this status primarily applied to middle-class intellectuals from Europe or South America. This pattern changed with the influx of Central Americans in the 1980s, when many peasants

and indigenous populations—mainly from Guatemala and El Salvador—sought refuge in Mexico because of civil wars (Hartigan 1992). As mentioned earlier in the introduction, such events occurred at a time of economic crisis in Mexico, and refugees were entering through Chiapas, Mexico's most impoverished state. Despite U.S. involvement in Central American conflicts, the U.S. did not recognize people from Guatemala and El Salvador as refugees because of geopolitical interests during the Cold War. The lack of recognition also discouraged Mexico from doing so, because Central Americans deported from the U.S. would then qualify for protection in Mexican territory. Initially, Mexico deported rather than protected Central Americans (Hartigan 1992).

However, eventually, Mexico protected refugees. By the late 1980s, Mexico was hosting over 50,000 Guatemalans and helping them with permanent resettlement. Nevertheless, the change in response was not because of geopolitical interests, nor ratifications of legal instruments. Initially, Mexico did not incorporate refugee principles into its law and did not become a party to the UN Refugee Convention or protocols, which acknowledged specific protection norms and rights of refugees (United Nations Treaty Collection 2021). Rather, humanitarian aid was a result of the intervention of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). The UNHCR provided a model and financing for refugee protection. Accordingly, Mexican officials incorporated refugee protection policies as a result of UNHCR's intervention and guidance (Hartigan 1992).

The 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and the 1967 Protocol was ratified by Mexico on June 7, 2000 (United Nations Treaty Collection 2021). Per the Refugee Convention and its Protocol, the term "refugee" applies to any individual that is

outside his or her country of nationality and has a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons such as race, religion, nationality, membership of a certain social group, or political opinion and is unable or unwilling to return. The 1967 Protocol removed geographical restrictions and time limits for refugees (UNHCR 2011). As a result, international human rights law provides a framework for the protection of refugees, asylum-seekers, and displaced individuals.

One important area of refugee protection includes the principle of *non-refoulement*. Article 33 in the 1951 Convention on the Status of Refugees established provisions for non-refoulement, which prohibits states from expelling or returning individuals to territories where they might face danger such as execution or torture. Furthermore, not only is the act of returning a person outlawed, but states cannot prevent refugees and asylum-seekers from pursuing protection once they have come under the state's jurisdiction, even if they do not have the necessary documentation or if their presence is "illegal". It is expected that all states regardless of whether they party to the Refugee Convention comply with non-refoulement because it is a binding customary law or universal rules. Similar references to non-refoulement are found in other regional instruments such as the 1984 Cartagena Declaration, a non-binding agreement that expands refugee protection in Latin America (Coen 2018).

While international refugee law is often violated, participating in processes that acknowledge the needs of refugees and asylum-seekers carries normative significance. As stated by scholar Beth Simmons, "ratification patterns may be explained not by the calculating logic of rewards, but the normative logic of appropriateness" (Simmons

2009). Adopting such humanitarian measures makes states feel as if they are in good standing with the international community (Simmons 2009).

As mentioned before, Mexico is a party to the Refugee Convention, but it was not until 2011 that it fully incorporated the rights and obligations to its domestic law through the Law on Refugees and Complementary Protection (Meili 2019). Mexico broadened the scope of the Refugee Convention by recognizing that "general violence, foreign aggression, internal conflicts, large-scale human rights violations, or other circumstances that have severely disturbed the public order" are valid reasons for protection in domestic law. These protections are not unique, since they reflect other regional instruments—namely the 1984 Cartagena Declaration in which Mexico was an original signatory (Meili 2019). Apart from expanding the refugee concept of the 1951 Convention and the 1967 Protocol, the Cartagena Declaration was a response to the refugee crisis that was emerging in Central America in the 1980s (UNHCR Mexico Office 2021). Other subsequent regional conferences in which Mexico has participated include the 1994 San José Declaration on Refugees and Displaced Persons, which focused on internal displacement, and the 2004 Mexico Declaration and Plan of Action to Strengthen the International Protection of Refugees in Latin America. On the 30th anniversary of the Cartagena Declaration, the 2014 Brazil Declaration emerged as an additional framework for cooperation and regional solidarity to protect refugees, displaced, and stateless individuals (UNHCR USA 2021).

In 2011, Mexico also amended article 11 of its constitution by including the right to political asylum. Originally, this measure was less protective than the Refugee Convention or the Cartagena Declaration because it did not include people fleeing from

situations such as armed conflict or extreme human rights violations. Nevertheless, amendments were put in place in 2016 that required Mexico to grant asylum based on international standards (Meili 2019). Similarly, the 2011 Law on Refugees and Complementary Protection of Mexico established procedures for individuals to request refugee status and listed certain rights and guarantees. These included the right to counsel, written decision for the application in forty-five days or less, access to files, and receipt of a claim for protection. Furthermore, it set responsibilities for government officials as it was required that if a government official knew of an individual wanting to apply for asylum, it was indispensable to notify the proper agency in less than seventy-two hours (Meili 2019).

New articles were added in 2014, and the law's name was changed to the Law on Refugees, Complementary Protection, and Political Asylum. The new eighteen articles revolved around asylum granting and procedures. For example, the law established that the authorities needed to take the necessary measures to prevent discrimination towards asylum-seekers. Another important measure included that any person in danger and without protection from their country of origin could apply for asylum along with their family members (Secretaría de Servicios Parlamentarios 2014). The procedures contributed to transparent legal actions for the asylum seeker.

Overall, it would appear that Mexico is committed to the principle of non-refoulement, and procedures do reflect international standards on paper as there are responsibilities in place to help asylum seekers. While Mexican law allows for the deportation of economic migrants, many people, including minors, may apply and qualify for asylum and international protection (UNHCR Mexico Office 2021). Mexican law

establishes that the officers from the National Institute of Migration (INM) who receive an asylum request, verbal or written, need to forward the application to the Mexican Commission for Refugee Assistance (COMAR) to adjudicate protection. In the case of undocumented children, Mexico is also supposed to care for them and transfer them to shelters for minors designating specific officers and ensuring they are under the supervision of the National System for Integral Family Development (DIF) (Garcia Bochenek 2016). Mexico has signed and revisited its own laws to make sure asylum seekers receive adequate support, but as the next sections will reveal, the migration crisis fueled by the caravans, U.S. policy, and record levels of asylum applications, portrays a different reality for domestic and international human rights.

U.S. Pressure and Binational Border Enforcement

It is important to note that conditions may change from when governments make ratifications (Simmons 2009). For example, in the mid-90s, refugee camps in Mexico closed, coinciding with a decrease in asylum applications (UNHCR 2006). Yet, in recent years Mexico's asylum requests have skyrocketed, especially from the Northern Triangle (Luna 2018). While Mexico has been granting protection, a leading issue is that COMAR has experienced a backlog because of the soaring numbers of applications (Luna 2018). As noted by Gillian Triggs, the Assistant High Commissioner for Protection for UNCHR, Mexico faces unprecedented pressure as the number of people seeking international protection increases at a time when access to asylum and territory is being limited through border restrictions. Approximately one million people have left their homes in the countries of Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala for Mexico due to violence, death threats, effects of climate change, and economic difficulties. Human rights advocates are

concerned that stricter border restrictions limit access to asylum. As noted by Triggs, people are being deported to Guatemala without due process (UNHCR 2021). This is the main difference to 2011 when UNCHR praised Mexico for reflecting best practices in the region for helping refugees (Meili 2019).

However, Mexico has been implementing harsher border restrictions gradually in collaboration with the United States. An example of an earlier program adopted by the Mexican government to bring order to Central American migration was the Plan Frontera Sur (Southern Border Plan). This program was established in 2014 during a moment of historically low Mexican migrants' apprehensions in the U.S.-Mexican border. Such a plan required binational cooperation between the U.S. and Mexico by continuing the objectives of the 2007 Merida Initiative, which attempted to tackle the porosity of the Mexico-Guatemala border with aid from the U.S. government. Yet, even with the increase of border enforcement funding, the flows of Central Americans into Mexico tripled in 2014 (Martínez Flores 2020).

As a response, the U.S.-backed Southern Border Plan was passed by the former Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto to stop the transit of undocumented Central Americans. He became the continent's "deporter-in-chief" (Luiselli 2017). Such programs mirrored U.S. enforcement tactics, incorporating supplemental roadblocks, checkpoints, and new infrastructure. Raids were not only done by members of the National Institute of Migration (INM), but also through joint efforts by the military, navy, federal, state, and local police (Arriola Vega 2017). A criticism of the program was the lack of humanitarian concern, as there were serious human rights violations towards in-transit migrants and insufficient support for asylum-seekers. The surveillance by the

Southern Border Plan made human rights violations by the Mexican police more frequent as members of the state police would extort migrants and refugees. It was stated by Central Americans that instead of providing protection, the Mexican police would ask for money or would threaten them with turning them in to the INM authorities for deportation (Porraz Gómez 2017). In other words, more supervision generated abuse.

Another consequence of the program was that it led Central Americans to choose more clandestine and dangerous routes, as they hoped to prevent apprehensions, which ultimately put them in a more vulnerable position because of the dangers of the journey (Arriola Vega 2017). It was noted that no comparable expansion of resources was made to improve the process for asylum claims and to integrate refugees. With only a small budget increase of less than 5% in 2015, the director of COMAR stated they did not get financing from the United States to help asylum seekers (Garcia Bochenek 2016).

Additional restrictions were put in place when Mexico and the United States signed the U.S.-Mexico Joint Declaration in June 2019, addressing shared challenges of irregular migration. The agreement was a direct response to the continuing increase of migrants and asylum seekers moving from Central America through Mexico. It established that Mexico had to take unprecedented steps to increase enforcement with the goal of curbing irregular migration, in addition to utilizing the Mexican National Guard throughout the country, especially on the southern border with Guatemala (Department of State 2019). The influx of migrants and asylum seekers has put Mexico in a position of responsibility and enforcement, either by issuing asylum to those that require it or by deporting individuals. For instance, between 2014 and 2017, Mexican authorities deported about 176,000 more Northern Triangle citizens than in the United States (Meili

2019). Besides, the Trump Administration also threatened in 2019 to close the border and to impose a 5% tariff on imports, potentially increasing to 25% if Mexico did not do a sufficient job in reducing the number of undocumented people trying to reach the U.S.-Mexico border. Mexico was given 45 days to react, which temporarily caused the reduction of migrants and asylum seekers to the United States as Mexican authorities stopped them (Lin 2019). In essence, the U.S. outsourced enforcement controls to Mexico, which makes Mexican authorities less likely to respond according to their domestic and international responsibilities that require helping asylum-seekers.

With the Biden Administration, restrictionist immigration measures continue to impact and pressure Mexico. While the Mexican government emphasizes rhetoric of its commitments to the protection of human rights as previously noted, it is not doing so. For instance, 228,115 people, mostly from Central America, were apprehended in Mexico as of October 2021, a record number in the past twenty years (Barragan 2021). In general, Mexico is deporting more people than the U.S. for a multitude of reasons including U.S. pressure to prevent the entry of migrant caravans, budget cuts to COMAR and the creation of the Mexican National Guard, which is acting like the Mexican version of the Border Patrol. Even though President AMLO earlier in his presidency defended the migrants' right to free transit and wanting to pursue an open-door policy for refugees, this has not been possible.

<u>The Failure of Mexico's Refugee Policy</u>

The Mexican government, which initially acknowledged unwillingness to contribute to anti-immigration policies, has pursued an agenda that detains and deports migrants and asylum-seekers. Overall, the responses that have been given to asylum-

seekers are at odds with what is determined in international conventions and protocols, regional declarations, pacts, and domestic law on the protection of refugees and forcibly displaced people. Few people get the humanitarian protection that they deserve by law (de la Rosa Rodriguez and Antony Maia 2020). Critics note that if the guiding principles of the Mexican government were to protect human rights, as it has been stated, immigration policy would have a different focus (Henao Castrillón and Alexánder 2019).

As aforementioned, Mexico has implemented new programs to tackle irregular immigration. While the government has created new laws to address asylum-seekers, the oppressive approach of immigration control has created a difficult situation contributing to human rights violations. This is because the government has interpreted Mexico's refugee and protection laws to detain, not to protect asylum-seekers. A Mexican lawyer in 2018 emphasized that in Mexico the problem was not the law but the operation of the institutions. For example, the INM has specific immigration laws, but INM employees do not understand the difference between a migrant and an asylum seeker. Another issue is that there are few employees working at COMAR to analyze the cases and grant protection. Furthermore, mistakes by authorities are common, and it is not unusual that people forget to issue decisions. Many Mexican judges are also unfamiliar with human rights law with respect to asylum-seekers, leading to lawyers educating judges (Meili 2019).

Hence, immigration enforcement does not reflect domestic and international refugee promises. Such inefficiencies can also be reflected by events such as the 2017 Mexico City earthquake, which damaged the COMAR office and resulted in more apprehensions of Central Americans and less protection for refugees. Over 7,000

applications were unresolved (Meili 2019). In addition, 90% of the migrants interviewed for a survey in Guadalajara, Mexico reported they had been victims of a crime; 41.5% of the crimes had been committed by government authorities including the federal, municipal, and state police. Crimes included abuse of authority, theft, and injury (Arreola Díaz, Hernández González, and Corona Flores 2018).

Mexico's response to the influx of Central Americans has not been approached according to its international obligations. There are long delays in responses, obstacles to access the asylum process, due process failures, detentions, lack of lawyers, and insufficient information available about the rights of migrants and refugees (Meili 2019). Furthermore, Mexico is failing to respond adequately to the arrival of Central American children. In contrast to the U.S., Mexico ratified the Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in 1991, acknowledging the right of children to be free from detention. It also ratified the Convention on the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families in 1999 (Lee 2020). The Inter-American Court of Human Rights declared that the detention of children based on their migration status is not necessary and is contrary to the best interest of the children and incompatible with regional human rights treaties (Garcia Bochenek 2016).

Until January 2021, Mexican immigration law authorized the detention of migrant children under exceptional circumstances since it was not in the best interest of the child to be detained. However, INM authorities frequently took advantage of this special case, transforming the exception into something common (Lee 2020). For example, between 2016 and 2017, almost 60,000 children were held in detention centers requiring them to stay for weeks or months (UNICEF 2018). Because of U.S. pressure through funding and

diplomatic relations, Mexico prioritizes preventing Central Americans from reaching the United States. That being so, even if the reform to the Law on Refugees, Complementary Protection and Political Asylum prohibits the detention of unaccompanied and accompanied children, the implementation has been uneven and generated confusion among officials. For instance, when the INM refers children to the National System for Integral Family Development (DIF) services, there is insufficient capacity, indicating deportation (Imumi 2021). Hence, Mexico seems to pursue humanitarian efforts without adequate infrastructure. This is reflected as in 2017, approximately 18,300 minors from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras were detained in Mexico and an additional 9,995 in 2018 (UNICEF 2018). As reported by Human Rights Watch, an international NGO, Mexico's higher levels of enforcement do not match with the necessary efforts needed to screen children and adults for protection (Garcia Bochenek 2016).

As previously described, barriers to asylum access are due to major discrepancies with the implementation of the law. As observed by a UNHCR officer from the Regional Office of Mexico, Central America, and Cuba, access to the asylum procedure is the main problem. While INM child protection officers are in charge of interviewing children who are seeking legal protection, the children interviewed by Human Rights Watch stated never having contact with a child protection officer; only one child out of 61 said he was notified of the right to seek asylum. Another similar problem is that even if children verbally request refugee protection, INM agents do not always honor the procedure they are required to follow by law (Garcia Bochenek 2016). INM agents tell prospective refugee applicants that they will be unsuccessful in the process or that they will be in detention longer, which may be true since it is the norm for apprehended individuals to be

detained until their cases are resolved. Regardless, the INM is not the responsible agency for determining who deserves refugee protection. They are not in a position to discourage or convince people from applying for protection. With U.S. pressure to deter migrants, and by mostly focusing on immigration enforcement, Mexico is not putting the necessary resources into its refugee agency—COMAR (Garcia Bochenek 2016).

Another important issue to consider is that asylum-seekers that are returned to Mexico from the U.S. have no means to survive. For example, one week after the implementation of the Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP) program, Ciudad Juárez received 100 returnees per day (Long and Sawyer 2019). In the U.S. there is a limit of who can apply for asylum. Therefore, the number of people waiting in Mexican border towns grows and because shelters are overcrowded, asylum-seekers and their families are forced to sleep on the street without protection (Long and Sawyer 2019). Considering the high levels of violence that cities such as Ciudad Juarez have, Central American asylum-seekers are put in vulnerable positions. Violent attacks, sexual assault, kidnappings, and even killings are not uncommon for returned Central Americans under the MPP program (Long and Sawyer 2019). Mexican officials interviewed by Human Rights Watch recognized that Ciudad Juarez is not a safe city, especially for asylum-seekers (Long and Sawyer 2019). Despite its commitment to helping asylum-seekers, Mexico fails to provide the necessary measures for individuals subject to MPP, which gets even more complex when considering the COVID-19 pandemic. Overall, because of the lack of resources and the instability in border towns, many asylum-seekers abandon their cases (Gambardella 2021).

Andrés Manuel López Obrador and Migration

With the reimplementation of the MPP program under the Biden Administration, the Mexican government responded on December 3, 2021, saying they will not return asylum-seekers to their countries of origin due to humanitarian reasons as they wait in Mexico. According to a press statement, Central Americans will receive refugee status in Mexico because human rights are a priority. Allegedly, AMLO agreed to proceed with the program under the conditions that the U.S. government will offer a more humanitarian perspective, implementing the changes that are needed by Mexico. These include additional financing for shelters along the border, aid for COVID-19 prevention such as vaccinations, an expedited process, and priority protection for specific vulnerable groups. For the most part, Mexico seeks to establish a humanitarian approach and solidarity with those seeking help. Yet, it was made clear this was to be done gradually, under the limits of the INM, and with an emphasis on capacity and security. Such statements were made with the goal of having an organized migratory process and reducing the need to migrate in the first place through cooperation programs targeting development. The Head of the Mexican Ministry of Foreign Relations' North American Unit also clarified it is not expected that under this program more migrants will travel to the U.S.-Mexico border (Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores 2021).

While Mexico expects more support to host the asylum-seekers not welcomed in the U.S., it appears that the same problem of the past remains. Mexico has adequate refugee laws in place but with limits regarding capacity and implementation. Furthermore, there is no reason for the Head of the Mexican Ministry of Foreign Relations' North American Unit to predict that fewer migrants and asylum seekers will make their way to Mexico when the numbers show the opposite trend. 2021 was a record

year of apprehensions in Mexico. Caravans with more than 1,000 members keep organizing and making the trip from Central America to Mexico (Isacson 2021). If Mexico does not have sufficient capacity for Central American refugees, there will be a delayed process of asylum claims as it has occurred in the past; and there will be deportations, not honoring international and domestic human rights law and increasing human rights violations. By once again emphasizing the government's limits, Mexico is mirroring past initiatives that have put migrants at the forefront, but with struggles in the implementation of the law. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that stricter border policies do not deter irregular migrants from making the trip, it just creates more dangerous conditions and suffering (UNICEF 2018).

Another noticeable failure is that AMLO presented himself as an advocate of Central American migrants and human rights. In response to the caravans, AMLO promised a job program for migrants through work visas. As stated in a speech during his presidential tour in Chiapas, "I offer work visas to poor Central Americans who leave their country because they have no options. Why do I offer that for Central Americans? Because there is going to be work for Mexicans and work for Central Americans in our country", he also stressed not wanting Central Americans to encounter the same treatment that Mexicans receive across the northern border (Morena 2021). However, a year later Trump congratulated AMLO through Twitter by stating "after many years (decades), Mexico is apprehending large numbers of people at their Southern Border, mostly from Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. They have ALL been taking U.S. money for years, and doing ABSOLUTELY NOTHING for us, just like the Democrats in Congress!" (La Opinión 2019).

At first, AMLO's humanitarian efforts reflected pro-migrant policy but U.S. pressure and large numbers of migrants and asylum seekers have changed his stance on migration issues. No employment program for migrants in Mexico was created. Only the program Sembrando Oportunidades (Planting Opportunities) was generated in collaboration with the U.S., targeting young people in the Northern Triangle, but this agricultural job initiative takes place in the origin countries to curb migration (Guillén 2021). Furthermore, under his administration, COMAR suffered the largest budget cuts in seven years (Lin 2019). It is evident that Mexico implements a restrictionist immigration and refugee policy and is using border control justifying that is a way to protect migrants and asylum seekers. There is once again a migration paradox as Mexico turned against the caravans. Such actions in combination with hostility from the Mexican population exacerbate xenophobia because migration is criminalized through deportation.

How is Mexico not fulfilling its legal obligations related to xenophobia against people fleeing from the Northern Triangle? If the Mexican government has laws in place to protect migrants and asylum seekers but policies are constantly ignored, in an indirect way, it permits Mexican society to keep being xenophobic. As previously mentioned, Mexican society lacks awareness on xenophobia and is unwelcoming due to a variety of factors. If the government does not protect and instead participates in deportation and illegal practices, it encourages Mexican citizens to be complicit in normalizing the criminalization of migration, which is centered on hostility and judging foreigners based on physical appearance, socio-economic, and migratory status. Likewise, restrictionist practices from the U.S. that leave Mexico as responsible for managing the influx of migrants and asylum seekers, exacerbate pre-existing intolerance which delegitimizes the

pleas for protection of asylum seekers. In other words, if the U.S. is not helping the people coming from Central America, Mexicans feel they should not be held responsible either. Because of xenophobia, restrictionist practices are preferred by society.

While it can be argued that Mexico is simply unprepared and unable to care for asylum seekers, xenophobia plays a role because the asylum and refugee budgets are going towards border enforcement and not humanitarian aid. It can also be contended that even if the Mexican government aims to help asylum seekers, the underlying xenophobia among authorities prevents the adequate implementation of the law, regardless of resources. This problem will be explored in the following chapter. As a result, institutional failures, and lack of enforcement from Mexican authorities interconnect with the response from society.

In conclusion, this chapter seeks to address how contemporary Central American migration is putting Mexico's refugee commitments to the test. As a country that is receiving thousands of people fleeing from violence, persecution, poverty, and more, Mexico has a duty to fulfill its international and domestic refugee responsibilities. Yet, Mexico's position as a buffer state between the U.S. and Central America contributes to Mexican authorities enacting harsher immigration policies that negatively impact asylum-seekers and their rights. For that reason, while Mexico has good laws on paper, the implementation of granting refugee status lacks the necessary resources, since the priority has been to assist the U.S. with immigration control. The role of migration enforcement in combination with Mexico's willingness to abide by international treaties should not be ignored (Hathaway 2004). Overall, I do not seek to criticize the efficiency of the institutionalization of human rights, but rather to analyze the approach of economic and

political power that is driving Mexico to become an extensive border wall for migrants and asylum-seekers and contributor to xenophobia among the Mexican population.

CHAPTER IV:

MANUFACTURING VIOLENCE AND XENOPHOBIA

Sensational Media Reports

The media has played a fundamental role in sharing with the world the journey of the migrant caravans and of the multitudes returned to Mexico by U.S. authorities. Therefore, the media is a key element in the analysis of xenophobia in Mexico. Elaborating on Martínez Mariñelarena's observation that distorted misinformation distances people from reality and creates false social constructs, this chapter looks at different examples of media reports that narrate the presence of Central American migrants and asylum seekers in Mexico. From the southern to the northern border of Mexico, media coverage of the caravan and the migration crisis has been frequent and well documented. While many media sources report on the challenges experienced by the migrants themselves, others antagonize and stereotype migrants and asylum seekers.

Thus, the media has been a major contributor to the increase of xenophobic attitudes towards Central Americans as they share negative aspects of the migrants, asylum seekers, and caravans. One of the major news events that fueled anti-immigrant sentiments in Mexico occurred when a video went viral of a Honduran woman who was a member of the first migrant caravan in 2018. She was interviewed and expressed dissatisfaction with the food she was receiving at a migrant shelter in Tijuana. In the video, Miriam Celaya showed a plate of beans with tortillas. She then proceeded to tell

the reporter that the food she was receiving was unpleasant, describing it as food for pigs. While she later apologized for the comments and explained the context of the situation as she traveled with her daughters and wanted better options for them, the video went viral as it was shared throughout social media. She was referred to as *Lady Frijoles*. Such a statement had a negative effect on Mexican opinion of the migrant caravans staying in the country because they were perceived as ungrateful. As stated by a Mexican citizen in response to the video, “Without an invitation, Mexico is NOT obliged to solve the needs of hostile people who have invaded national territory, violating our sovereignty. If you want humanitarian aid, go to International Organizations that promote and finance migration without borders” (Pérez Díaz et al. 2021). Miriam’s interview unleashed the anger of the entire country as she received countless cyber-attacks.

This occurrence and the attempt of a migrant caravan to enter the U.S. from Tijuana led to more resentment among Mexicans, especially in border towns. For instance, the Tijuana-San Diego border was temporarily shut down, and considering that many people of binational communities depend on crossings that involve work, schooling, exports, imports, and so on, groups of people publicly demonstrated their hostility towards the caravans (Acevedo and Ramos 2018). Comparably, in Ciudad Juarez, it was reported by the media that migrants tried to run through the international bridge resulting in its temporary closure. Therefore, additional border enforcement to prevent the forced entrance of caravans materialized throughout the border, making the border crossings of goods and people slower and more difficult due to the implementation of extra barriers and revisions. The supplemental measures fueled discontent because they affected the traditional way of life of border communities. “A la

gente de las fronteras se les cambia su ritmo de vida" (Tiempo La Noticia Digital 2019). Hence, numerous Mexicans viewed migrants and asylum seekers from Central America as unappreciative and damaging to their communities.

Moreover, in towns where migrants and asylum seekers traveled or were stranded as a consequence of the MPP, Mexicans complained about the trash left behind by the masses. As stated by one migrant from the caravan who volunteered to clean, "We leave a trail of mess wherever we go. People will never be on our side if we carry on like this" (Weiss 2020). This complaint increased because of sensational media reports. For example, one media report from a small newspaper in Ciudad Juarez shared that migrants and asylum seekers waiting for their case in Mexico lived in unsanitary conditions around feces and garbage. This source claimed that three months after their arrival, the migrants accumulated a large amount of garbage where they stayed. Migrants and asylum seekers were also portrayed in a negative light as they were called "violent and aggressive" because they did not allow media sources to take pictures of their conditions (Tovar 2019). Such was the hostility that another newspaper source reported that the migrants and asylum seekers living in the Chamizal Federal Public Park in Ciudad Juarez received threats from locals of burning their camps (Gamboa 2019).

As major newspapers such as the *New York Times* established that migrants from the caravan were not criminals but instead were fleeing from them, many Mexican news sources portrayed the opposite angle (Sanford 2018). In Mexico, alarmist journalism covering the arrival of the caravans has been frequent from small newspapers known for their sensational media reports, however, established sources have also participated in coverage that paints a picture of danger associated with the migrants as well. The effects

of such reports create negative feelings, which increase xenophobia as they connect Central American migrants with crime and gangs (Hernández López and Porraz Gómez 2020). For example, *Excelsior*, the second oldest newspaper in Mexico City wrote an article emphasizing that the Mexican government recognized that there were criminals inside migrant caravans. While the point of the article was to explain that the government would take action to detect cases of crimes and violence, indirectly, a headline capturing "criminals inside caravans" implies that the caravans participate in felonies, which leads Mexicans to disapprove of their presence and the government, for allowing their transit (Excelsior Facebook 2019).

Furthermore, as many people utilize social networks such as Facebook and WhatsApp as official methods of communication, headlines, posts, and messages become powerful tools that inform the population. Considering that many sources may be unverified or fail to capture an entire story, social media can be dangerous for migrants and asylum seekers because of the prevalence of misinformation and because people are more inclined to react to stories that capture the negative. This is especially problematic considering that from ten individuals that read a headline, only two will read the entire piece (Barron 2019). Similarly, 55% of readers spend reading a blog post for 15 seconds or less (Read 2016). Another main issue includes false information and because access to social media is widespread, fake news is hard to monitor and contest. An analysis from the International Organization for Migration (IOM) found that of almost one million tweets about the U.S.-Mexico border and the migration crisis, decontextualized images were the most common type of disinformation (McAuliffe and Triandafyllidou 2021).

Hence, sensational media tactics that involve dramatic headlines are problematic because even if a person does not read or watch an entire story, by just taking a peek at a headline, they make interpretations. The media has always reported on migratory phenomena but sensational media sources, also known as the *prensa amarillista*, often exaggerate or write incomplete stories. For instance, the source, *Corporativo Núcleo Radio Televisión,* from the state of Coahuila, has several news articles associating migrants with crime. "Construction worker cries after being assaulted in Saltillo; migrants stole the profit of the day" states one headline. The event is narrated in a tone that makes the readers feel sorry for the worker as his hard-earned money was snatched from him by three Honduran migrants, leaving him hurt and bleeding in the middle of the street. "Pablo clung to his life and struggled to get to the nearest store or house to ask for help" continues the story (L. Maldonado 2021). However, at the very end, the author of the article states that the authorities verified that the construction worker was not in any physical danger, and paramedics were not even called. If the construction worker was fine, one must question why the article previously mentioned that the man fought for his survival after being robbed of 100 pesos or about $5.00 USD (L. Maldonado 2021). Such reporting creates distrust and paranoia. It makes people think that they are unsafe due to the presence of migrants and asylum seekers.

Diario del Sur from Tapachula, one of the most read newspapers in Mexico's southern border, published an article that portrayed looting events as a result of the *maras*, the Central American gangs. The gang members stole valuable items and hid them in an abandoned house in addition to burning department stores (Salazar 2017). Yet, the story failed to mention that mostly Mexican citizens participated in the looting and

the crimes (Quadratin Chiapas 2017). Likewise, in Nuevo Laredo, *El Mañana* reported, “Migrant woman who robbed a minor in Saltillo is arrested.” The story shared that a Salvadoran woman and her children were provided shelter as they sought to enter the U.S., but she had later kidnapped the kid of the family that helped her (Diaz 2020). When doing additional research on this story, I found different versions of this incident, and none reflected this specific story. In particular, I found that the newspaper *Vanguardia* stated that a child had been missing for 15 days and was later found in the city of Torreon. The mom had issued a statement where she claimed it was likely that a woman of Honduran descent had taken the child, but the kidnapper’s identity was unknown (Gatica 2020). Thus, sensational media sources distort the truth and reality, giving a negative image that influences its readers and stigmatizes the migrant population.

Another common tactic of sensational media reports among small, local newspapers in Mexico that worsen xenophobic attitudes includes publishing negative stories of migrants that are not even in their city or country. An example is a story published by the newspaper *Zocalo* from Piedras Negras with the headline “migrants steal and abandon pick-up truck”, which in reality took place in Eagle Pass, Texas, and was a result of undocumented migrants of unknown nationality seeking to move further into the interior of the U.S. but then crashing while attempting to do so (Ibarra 2021). When such articles are shared with the Mexican public and they read the headlines, unless the people actually take the time to read them entirely, they do not know that such occurrences happened outside their communities. While one can argue that people should not make assumptions on just reading a headline, it is a problem that causes them to be alarmed by the presence of foreigners. On the other hand, even if a person does read the

entire article and discovers that a crime committed by a migrant happened somewhere else, I maintain that the impact still leads to refusal and xenophobia because it makes people think that crime and violence can happen in their community too, especially if they are receiving large numbers of people from the caravans or as a result of MPP.

Returning to Sanchez-Mazas' analysis of "the other," which considers foreigners and their association with public health risks, such as unclean foods, contagion, and unusual hygienic customs, I identify the role that the media plays in exacerbating those fears (Sanchez-Mazas and Licata 2015). Mexican media highlights migrants and asylum seekers as sources of disease. For instance, newspapers such as *El Sol De Tampico* reported that there was a chickenpox outbreak among children in a migrant camp in Reynosa, affecting over 20 of them because it is contagious. It was emphasized that the outbreak happened at an overcrowded migrant camp hosting over 2,000 migrants and asylum seekers, but migration authorities were unaware of such incidents, which increased the likelihood of contagion (Jimenez 2022). While such reporting does not specifically state that migrants are a public threat to the local citizens, it implies that there are too many of them, to the extent that the government cannot even keep up with health control and preventative measures, leading to the rapid spread of disease.

Similar stories have been shared involving the connection between migrants and the spread of COVID-19. For example, the newspaper *Diario del Sur* from Tapachula published an article where businessmen declared that the migrant concentration represented a health risk due to the pandemic. It was stated that the migrants did not respect health protocols nor participated in social distancing, which increased infections and the overall risk for the population (Bautista 2021). Another report underlined that

COVID-19 infections increased among migrant caravans, in addition to many of the members carrying false negative antigen tests from Guatemala (Gonzalez 2021). News calling attention to migrants testing positive for COVID-19 became common. Still, the media also unraveled the difficulties that the pandemic created for thousands of migrants and asylum seekers.

While there have been reports that cover a wide range of positions regarding the migrant and asylum seeker experience in Mexico, sensational media reports lead to widespread xenophobia and collective hysteria because they portray a picture of migrants and asylum seekers from Central America that is undesirable, criminal, and problematic. Rejection has the power to manipulate opinion and normalize xenophobia. On top of that, this is not something new. A hemerographic analysis of 2008 to 2009 of *Diario del Sur*, found that on average every month, the newspaper had 25 to 40 articles published about migrants, mostly in sections related to security, where migrants were linked to robberies, assaults, rapes, and murders. As stated by the editor-in-chief of the newspaper, this topic sells, and as a business, it is in their best interest to publish such type of news (Alvarez Velasco 2016). While the specific impact of sensational media on xenophobia is difficult to measure, a poll from *El Universal*, established that seven out of ten Mexicans had a negative outlook towards the migrant caravans, and more than half of the people surveyed preferred tougher measures by the Mexican government to manage the influx of people (El Universal 2018). In short, expressions of discrimination and xenophobia in Mexican media cannot be dismissed as contributors to the problem of xenophobic attitudes among the Mexican public.

Discrimination Against Migrants and Asylum Seekers

Overall, Mexico is a country with high levels of discrimination, not only towards migrants but also among Mexicans, which may further explain why xenophobia is so widespread towards people from the Northern Triangle. The National Council to Prevent Discrimination (CONAPRED) is a government agency that captures discrimination levels, which it defines as “any distinction, exclusion or restriction that, by action or omission, has the purpose or result of obstructing, restricting or impairing the recognition or enjoyment of human rights and freedoms” (INEGI 2017). Within Mexican society, approximately 20% of the adult population acknowledged being discriminated against, with the highest frequent reason being physical appearance. People who tend to be the most discriminated against are people from the LGBTQ+ community and indigenous populations (INEGI 2017). Migrants are the third group most discriminated against (Coria and Zamudio 2018). Yet, with foreigners, an additional problem is the greater reluctance to coexist with them. As mentioned in chapter II, approximately 56% of the population declared that they do not approve of people who practice traditions or customs different from the Mexican ones (INEGI 2017). Such discrimination is problematic because it may lead to rejection and even violence.

Discrimination is evident with the abuse that migrants and refugees face in the journey to the north, which takes about two months (Duvillier and Nuñez 2021). Yet, just like xenophobia, discrimination is not only from particular segments of society and criminal groups but also from the authorities that are supposed to protect the migrants and asylum seekers, such as the Mexican National Migration Institute (INM). INM agents engage in discriminatory practices, as they make interpretations based on physical features, language, accent, clothing, and even smell, as declared by an official. As a

result, discrimination not only affects migrants but also targets indigenous Mexicans and Afro-Mexicans, as they are frequently detained and even deported or disappeared because of their race and class (Orem 2020). This behavior is especially problematic as many Mexicans and IMN officials claim that there are no black people in Mexico (Orem 2020). Because Mexico is a country founded on the myth of mestizaje, such statements prove that the welcomeness towards foreigners is not only based on their country of origin but also physical appearance (Yankelevich 2017). An INM agent will not treat a rich and white Honduran the same as an undocumented Garifuna, which is an Afro-Honduran ethnic group. Besides, while the law allows for INM officers to request documentation from migrants, how can someone truly distinguish migrants from Mexican citizens? Unless people are seen traveling with the migrant caravan or speaking a different language, determining who is a foreigner is no easy task. As a deduction, INM agents engage in discriminatory practices that consist of racial profiling and of promoting a "Mexican phenotype", which excludes segments of the population (Orem 2020).

Moreover, discrimination prevails because there is insufficient transparency in the INM. There is discretion between the employees and their role is based on personal style and interpretation rather than by what the law dictates. Such behavior is normalized because repercussions are minimal (Orem 2020). As stated by an acquaintance who worked at the INM, officers liked to "play around" with the detained Central American migrants. They were chased and beaten, and if someone spoke up or reported such acts to the superior, they were told to mind their own business and not to meddle with the officer's criteria.

Violence Against Migrants and Asylum Seekers

Discrimination comes hand in hand with violence. As observed by UNICEF teams from Ciudad Juarez and Tijuana, migrant and asylum seekers' testimonies indicate numerous human rights abuses in Mexico including extortion, sexual abuse, kidnapping, and human trafficking (Duvillier and Nuñez 2021). Correspondingly, a Human Rights First report noted that as of August 23, 2021, and since Biden took office in January 2021, the organization had tracked 6,356 kidnappings and attacks, such as rape, human trafficking, and violent armed assaults, against migrants and asylum seekers expelled by the U.S. or barred at the U.S.-Mexico border. Correlating to the pervasiveness of discrimination in Mexican society, the intersection of being an LGBTQ+ and/or black migrant or asylum seeker, makes individuals more likely to suffer from violence. In addition, the survey data collected from mid-June to mid-August 2021 by the agency Al Otro Lado and analyzed by Human Rights First, determined that approximately 83% of the migrants and asylum seekers stranded on the Mexican side of the border had been victims of an attack or threat in the last month. In 2021, when Human Rights First was assisting with filing out humanitarian exceptions for the Biden Administration in Tijuana and Piedras Negras it was found that 62% of the 69 asylum seekers had been kidnapped and 19% sexually assaulted in Mexico (Human Rights First 2021).

Violence in Mexico is widespread and does not only affect Central American migrants and asylum seekers, yet for the aim of this thesis, I will provide examples where the victims are from the Northern Triangle. For example, as a result of Title 42 and also the lack of migrant shelters to help in Mexico, a Honduran couple staying in Piedras Negras had to stay in the streets after being kidnapped and beaten to the point that the woman suffered a miscarriage. The couple also claimed the police had robbed them of

their possessions, leaving them in a vulnerable state. Similarly, a Guatemalan man staying at a migrant camp in Reynosa along with his seven-year-old went to purchase medicine for his son and was assaulted, robbed, and briefly kidnapped. He was allegedly freed because his son was sick but suffered from physical abuse. Another case includes a Honduran woman who, while waiting in Mexico for months, was kidnapped and trafficked. She was shown graphic videos of migrants being tortured as intimidation (Human Rights First 2021).

Violence can be attributed to criminal organizations like *narcos* or gangs. A Garifuna couple from Honduras and their two-year-old daughter were threatened while they waited for asylum at the border in Nuevo Laredo. They received messages with racial insults and were told they would be cut into pieces if they or their family in the U.S. did not pay the drug cartel a fee. The family claimed the cartel had photos of them and knew the shelter they were staying at (Human Rights First 2021). Furthermore, cases of death have been reported after the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) expels asylum seekers to Mexico. For instance, a 15-year-old boy who had a mental disability fled Central America after his sister was raped and kidnapped. After being expelled to Reynosa, he was murdered for not paying a fee to the gangs that controlled the area. A transgender woman who sought protection in the U.S. due to her identity was also violently attacked and raped after being expelled by U.S. authorities, which led her to contract HIV (Human Rights First 2021). A dominant issue is that violence in Mexico has become normalized along with criminal groups being dependent on migrant transit, that in communities such as La Arrocera, Chiapas, the citizens have lost solidarity with

Central Americans (Alvarez Velasco 2016). Migrants are frequently victimized but are perceived as the sources of violence.

However, the manifestation of violence does not have to involve murders or kidnappings. Mexican xenophobia can also be reflected in other types of abuse. Violence can take many forms–physical, emotional, and verbal. For example, when a Salvadoran man was expelled at midnight to Mexico when migrant shelters were closed, he and other stranded individuals decided to stay in an abandoned house but were threatened by a man with a bat, forcing them to leave (Human Rights First 2021). Furthermore, drivers operating taxis, buses, and trailers know how to identify migrants and deceive them and charge them high sums of money for their benefit (Alvarez Velasco 2016). Verbal attacks are common as communities receive unprecedented numbers of Central Americans. When a mob of Mexicans protested outside a migrant shelter in Tijuana, they called out for the deportation of Central Americans with slurs and ignited violence by confronting the police force that was established to protect the migrants and asylum seekers (Milenio 2018).

Frequently government authorities participate in violent acts against Central American migrants and asylum seekers. Since the implementation of Plan Frontera Sur, which militarized the southern border, the number of detentions and deportations increased along with acts of xenophobia (Cerón and Wiesner 2018). It is habitual for migratory agents or the military to engage in corruption and mistreatment, as they benefit from the levels of normalized violence towards in-transit migrants (Alvarez Velasco 2016). Police, INM agents, and other authorities that operate among migratory routes extort the migrants and use physical violence to detain them. They “hunt” the migrants

and it is not unusual to abuse them physically and sexually, especially off the beaten tracks (Alvarez Velasco 2016). Nevertheless, physical abuse also takes place in non-remote areas. This was evident with the video of the brutal murder of Victoria Esperanza Salazar Arriaza, a Salvadoran woman on a humanitarian visa who was killed by Mexican police in March 2021 in Tulum, Mexico. She was killed during detention as she was allegedly under the influence of drugs or alcohol. An officer kneeled on her back as she cried for help (Lopez 2021). Her death not only represented negligence but also xenophobia, as migrants and asylum seekers are vulnerable to abuse and death by the authorities. Many more Central American individuals have died brutally at the hands of the authorities in Mexico.

While it can be assumed that violence towards migrants and asylum seekers in Mexico is due to the general levels of insecurity, these examples of abuse demonstrate that xenophobia is not only manifested through news or polls, but also has visible and corporeal effects. To sum up, the normalization of violence and xenophobia is evident through the reports from the media, which present Central American migrants and asylum seekers as threats to the community. Such reports then translate to acts of hostility and reinvigorate widespread discrimination which targets individuals, families, and people in need of humanitarian protection. Hence, it can be concluded that because Mexico is dangerous for in-transit migrants and asylum seekers, the need of traveling by group or as caravans is a solution for their defense. Yet, ironically by doing so, it reinforces Mexican xenophobia because they are portrayed and perceived as problematic.

CHAPTER V:

CONCLUSION

Mexican Solidarity

While Donald Trump is no longer the president of the United States, Juan Villoro stated that in a way, the promise of Mexicans building the wall came true. “Trump didn’t have to get army engineers to do it. The new accord makes Mexico responsible for stopping the flow of immigration. Strictly speaking, we are the wall. And it runs from Chiapas to Chihuahua” (Villoro 2020). Such accord refers to the agreement made in June of 2019 between Trump and AMLO to stop undocumented migrants. Migrants and asylum seekers from the Northern Triangle experience xenophobia from the Mexican state and society.

The Migrant-Gatekeeper Syndrome indicates that despite being a country of emigrants, Mexico is unwelcoming towards Central Americans. As explained throughout this thesis, there are multiple factors that contribute to the change of welcomeness from Mexicans and the growth of xenophobia. Such factors include the migrant caravans, a saturated system of asylum applications, the COVID-19 pandemic, the pressure and involvement of the U.S., the omnipresence of sensational media reports, and the levels of discrimination and violence that are recurrent in Mexico. However, an increase in xenophobia does not mean all Mexicans are xenophobic or unwelcoming. While there is an increasing trend of xenophobia among Mexicans, there are still multiple organizations and groups of individuals that, despite the adversity and lack of resources, are working

hard to meet the necessities of migrants and asylum seekers coming from different parts of the world including Central America. I maintain that support is decreasing, but numerous networks of associations, churches, and humanitarian aid groups have been trying to address the challenges that migrants and asylum seekers are facing (Daria 2019).

Groups have dedicated their lives to aiding Central American migrants such as Las Patronas, from the Mexican state of Veracruz. The creation of Las Patronas was the result of neighborly ties among women from the same community. Their organization has fed and sheltered migrants and asylum seekers since 1995. Due to the large presence of undocumented foreigners using the train known as La Bestia, which travels through Mexico towards the United States, Las Patronas noticed the need to assist those in need. They provide food and shelter to help the migrants and asylum seekers continue with their journey, regardless of nationality. They have been nationally recognized by the Mexican government for their good deeds and continue to aid migrants (Loya García 2017).

Furthermore, another group that not only shares solidarity with migrants and asylum seekers but also informs the public of the human rights violations committed by Mexican authorities against people coming from Central America and beyond is Tzome Ixuk. Located in the town of Las Margaritas, Chiapas, near the Guatemalan border, the indigenous Tojolabal movement of Tzome Ixuk fights to defend migrant and asylum seekers rights. They spread awareness using the hashtag #AlertaFronteraSur, as they actively share and participate in an abundance of immigration advocacy efforts. As Tzome Ixuk reports on the violence and repression happening in Chiapas against the migrants and asylum seekers, they also organize themselves with other immigration

advocacy groups to contest illegal actions by the INM. They cover many important topics related to immigration, including militarization, absence of access to the law, racism, discrimination, and xenophobia (Tzome Ixuk 2021).

Tzome Ixuk aids migrants but their main concern includes calling into question the deployment of military forces to the southern border, which constitutes repression and restrictionist migration flows. The indigenous organization protests against acts of torture and inhumane treatments in detention zones, which include family separation, the targeting and detaining of children, illegal detentions, and murders by the authorities. Such authorities include the Mexican National Guard, the Armed Forces, and the Municipal Police (Tzome Ixuk 2021). As a neighboring territory, Chiapas has received many people from the Northern Triangle and Tzome Ixuk fights so that the corresponding authorities take better measures that comply with human rights. In contrast to many people in Mexico and similar to the Zapatista Army of National Liberation, Tzome Ixuk utilizes its Tojolabal cosmovision to promote community unity and reproduce their lives in new ways that are non-capitalist and without borders, as they want to prevent exploitation through equality and solidarity (Masson 2008 87). They not only identify multiple dimensions of societal oppression including race, class, gender, and citizenship but also exemplify migrant strength and resistance.

In conclusion, as increasing flows of migrants and asylum seekers from Central America, primarily from the Northern Triangle, are entering Mexico, it is important to acknowledge that this migration crisis is a regional challenge. There is an exodus of people leaving the Northern Triangle, and the U.S. is pressuring Mexico to do the dirty work. While I do not offer a solution to what needs to be done to effectively manage the

masses, there are many steps that can be taken to help those that need protection and to reduce xenophobia. Partnerships among countries are fundamental to address the root causes of migration. Yet, doing so poses difficult challenges as the origin countries have high levels of corruption, institutional instability, and violence. Considering that migration dynamics cannot be changed in a short amount of time, asylum seekers should not be denied interviews, regardless of nationality. Ukrainians are currently allowed to cross the U.S.-Mexico border and seek protection, but people from other countries are not given the same right, which demonstrates the disparity in the law (Morrissey 2022).

Joint efforts between governments, along with local and international organizations, should strive to improve regional protection mechanisms for migrants and asylum seekers. The U.S. government should not send asylum seekers back to Mexico while their asylum claim is processed, there is no reason they should be turned away. In parallel, the Mexican government must re-evaluate its immigration and border control measures because their actions do not reflect a humanitarian policy. Institutions such as INM need adequate training and asylum programs such as those run by COMAR need more resources and employees to manage cases. While AMLO and Biden are supporting initiatives that try to address the underlying causes of migration in Central America, the reality is that people will continue to migrate. For that reason, policies that address integration are also needed.

To decrease xenophobic practices in Mexico it is fundamental that more education on diversity and tolerance be given, in addition to paying attention to the needs of the Mexican population so they do not feel left behind. While Mexico has high rates of discrimination, it can improve. Furthermore, the Mexican government cannot expect to

leave the responsibility of helping asylum seekers to civil society, just as the U.S. government cannot expect Mexico to be accountable for the asylum seekers. As the number of asylum seekers increases, the shelters are not enough, especially considering the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, it is necessary to provide enough resources in order to keep people healthy and safe. With strategic planning from different organizations and governments, it is possible to promote a more humanitarian approach towards migrants and asylum seekers that do not discriminate and do not victimize. While Mexican xenophobia has a foundation that may be attributed to a multitude of factors, more solidarity may be attainable.

Further Research

Due to the lack of empirical evidence on this topic, I believe it would be helpful for this research to expand and consider Mexican demographics. A poll that determines what groups from Mexican society are the most unwelcoming towards people from the Northern Triangle would allow for better understanding of this phenomenon. While Mexicans are increasingly adopting xenophobic attitudes, comparing age, class, race, and more, could provide valuable information about Mexican xenophobia and the way it manifests itself. Maybe some groups engage in xenophobia more than others. Additionally, as I mentioned earlier, Haitians had preferential treatment in Tijuana in contrast to Central Americans and the caravans. Due to the recent increases in asylum petitions from this nationality, research on Mexican opinion about Haitians would be useful to explore xenophobia. Are Haitians still preferred over people from the Northern Triangle or has the response from society changed? If the response has changed, why? Overall, this topic has a great deal of room to keep exploring. Learning about xenophobia

hints at the changes that need to be fostered and transformed for the improvement of society.

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BIOGRAPHY

Frida Melgar was born in El Paso, Texas. She grew up in the border community of El Paso and Ciudad Juarez, Mexico during her childhood and adolescence. Frida has a BA in Global Studies with a minor in International Business from St. Edward's University in Austin, Texas. There, she was awarded the Boren Scholarship to pursue language and cultural studies in Shanghai, China. She is also a Fulbright Scholar that participated in the Binational Internship Program in Mexico City. Frida enjoys traveling and has also studied abroad in London and Chiang Mai, Thailand. During her time pursuing the MA at Tulane University, Frida enrolled in Portuguese classes, in addition to being fluent in Spanish and English. She hopes to continue exploring the world and aims to make a difference through her professional career.