

Migrant girls, boys, and adolescents in transit through Mexico, challenges and possibilities a review

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Abstract

Although migration has indeed been a constant in the evolution of groups around the world, global capitalism and neoliberal policies today determine the origin and destination of migrants. What questions the decision to migrate as an independent and voluntary act. In the same way that the feminization of migration has been discussed, the migration of children and adolescents, accompanied or not, appears as an emerging group in the migratory phenomenon. This reflects the Central American migration of children and adolescents in transit through Mexico, as well as the danger they face during this process. It is a social problem that needs to be made visible to identify possible care alternatives, both in places of origin and in transit and destination.

Key words: transit migration, children and adolescent, violence

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I. Introduction

Migration is one of the elements that have accompanied social groups over the course of time; since the origin of our species, human groups have been forced to abandon their place of origin in search of better living conditions. However, it is important to recognize that, today's globalized World, guided by capitalism and global neoliberalism that have modified the economic and labor market, promoting unequal development in different latitudes, determines the origins and destinations of migrants. Therefore, we cannot speak of migration without discussing its "voluntary" condition on the part of those who leave their homeland to face adverse conditions in the hope of a better life for themselves. Just as there has been talk of the feminization of migration, migration of children and adolescents, accompanied or not, has been debated as an emerging group in the migration scene that speaks of the "newly displaced."

By 2020, 272 million international migrants were counted, which comprises 3.5% of the total population of the world; it is estimated that 74% are in a productive age-between 20 and 64 years old-of which 52% are men and 48% are women. Of these, 27.8% were minors from 0 to 19 years old, of which 13.8% are male, and 14% female, which means that 73,440 million of the world's migrants were minors (IOM, 2020). Compared to the 33 million international migrants who were under 20 years of age, in 2010, we noticed an increase in the phenomenon, from 15% of the total population of international migrants (UNICEF, 2011) to 27.8% in just one decade.

Migrations have been characterized by place of destination; length of stay; if it is an internal mobility or crosses borders; and by the condition of the migrants: if they are asylum seekers and if they possess, or not, documents when entering the territory. On the other hand, are those migrations that have been called transit, the peculiarity of which is that they cross one or more national territories to reach their destination. We're thus interested in analyzing the migration of children and adolescents (from now on CA) in transit from Central America, and who seek to reach the United States by land, mainly from Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala.

Transit migration through Mexico has been a phenomenon that despite not being recent, has gained strength since 2014. We talk of an increase in undocumented and unaccompanied CA and caravans that tell us about massive mobilities of central Americans, as of 2018, whose destination was the United States; that evidences a migration crisis, but at same time speaks about changes in migratory patterns.

One of the problems of transit migration has been the difficulties the migrants face in crossing borders, but also of security and, incidentally, discrimination that migrants often receive from authorities and society. I am interested in analyzing and making visible the migration of CA in transit through Mexico and the particularities that such migration has, especially the problems they face and the studies that have been carried out to date.

The present investigation is divided into three sections: The first one is the present introduction, which seeks to contextualize the problem. In the second section, there is a conceptual theoretical review, which begins with the causes of Central America migration; the conceptualization of childhood and adolescence, transit migration, and the role that CA have in it. In the third section, we continue with the contextualization of this

phenomenon in Mexico, the trends, and the difficulties CA face. Finally, as a conclusion, I extend an invitation to expand the research that will allow us to identify the challenges and possibilities of the transit migration of CA.

II. CA in migration and transit migration

Migration has been defined as the movement of population, from one geographic delimitation to another for a considerable or indefinite period, regardless of the cause that originated this mobility (Micolta, 2015). However, it is a social fact that has been modified and adapted to each reality, to time and space in which it takes place and which, moreover, in recent decades, has been permeated by globalization (Canales and Zloliniski, 2001; ILO, 2006). Currently, the geographical movements that imply changes in political-administrative, social and/or cultural environment for the subject, are increasingly diversified and complex.

One of its variables is transit migration, which means a mobility that implies that, those who migrate don't have Mexico as their destination. One of its main characteristics is that it is irregular; irregularity responds to a variety of circumstances, including family reunification, rejected asylum applications, or CA who migrate without it being in their hands; in many cases, the decision to migrate is considered irregular when a person enters, or lives in a country of which he or she is not a citizen, violating its immigration laws and regulations, also defined as undocumented migration (Carrasco, 2013; Castillo, 2018; ILO, 2006).

2.1. Brief overview about causes of Central American migration

As a result of the neoliberal structural reforms of several countries in the global North and South, which began in the 1990s, international migration processes have not only increased steadily, but their intensities, origins and changes have also changed destinations of migrants (Castillo, 2018). Globalization is characterized by the massive migration of marginalized groups, who move from improvised countries to developed or developing countries, not only looking for better economic conditions, but also to escape from the structural and criminal violence that is generated because of the lack of opportunities, and the political inability of governments to maintain order.

Although the economy is interrelated with sociocultural and political elements, it is geographical and historical relationships that define the orientation of migratory flows, thus, for example, just over half of the migrants received by the United States come from Latin America (Durand, cited in Franco and Barojas, 2019). It is the globalization of the economy that impacts developing countries, with the liberalization of capital markets, goods, and services, but not labor markets, because this is managed and controlled by industrialized countries that promote or restrict international migration (Munguía, 2010). The foregoing enables the free transit of goods, but penalizes the mobility of people, considering them an act that is framed in "illegality"¹, and that therefore must be punished and prosecuted, which contributes to the difficulties of transit migration, as we'll see.

According to studies (Casillas, 1991; Izcarra, 2016; Sinisterra, 2005; Varela, 2016, to mention some of them), most of the migrants are labor migrants, which seems to justify the mobility in the supply and demand for employment, which ignores the conditions of violence and inequality that characterize the countries of the Northern Triangle -Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador-, and they are responsible of most of the displacements, especially when we talk about CA, accompanied or not. These studies have found that the main cause of migration from this area become because of poverty, violence, socioeconomic exclusion. This occurs, both in their places of origin, and in those of transit and destination; among other important factors, is family reunification, too. "En Honduras, 74% de los niños y niñas viven en hogares clasificados como pobres, al igual que el 68% de Guatemala y 44% de El Salvador" (UNICEF, 2018, cites in Franco and Barojas, 2019).

However, there is another sector that flees due to threats, natural disasters, political instability, institutional lack of protection and the impossibility of forging a future in their places of origin (Acuña, 2015; Carrasco, 2013; Castillo, 2019; ITAM, 2014; Franco and Barojas, 2019; Rendón and Moreno, 2018), which leads us to question of the will in the decision to migrate.

In the places of origin, the complicated living conditions are related to the lack of socio-economic development and security, in contexts of generalized violence and natural disasters. It highlights lack of [social rights that respond to such basic demands as employment, social security, better wages, integrity, and physical security (Castillo, 2018). In terms of security, it has been found, in the case of Honduras, that "extortion" by maras and gangs of those who own small and medium businesses in their communities has been increasing and allows us to understand the increase in mobility (Cohello, 2020).

Therefore, the structural causes can be added to personal motivations to migrate, where economic, social, cultural, family, and institutional contexts function as determinants to make the decision to migrate (Acuña, 2015).

¹ It's important to note that whoever writes this proposal: "No one migrant is illegal"

Every year, the Mexican National Institute of Migration (INM by Spanish language), registers around 140,000 central Americans, that have been detained and processed, whom in general had the intention of reaching the United States; and this country deports 104,000 central Americans, on average. In practice, the Central American countries—those that make up the Northern Triangle: Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador—together with Mexico and the USA, make up a regional migratory system (Nájera, 2016).

Even though CA share the universal characteristics that have been exposed, it is considered that the increase of their emigration has to do with the expulsion characteristics of their local/national contexts of origin and the attraction factors of the destination society, together with the transformation of US immigration policies, which initially favored family reunification and regularization of migrants. On the other hand, we find studies that relate lack of access to education as one of the triggers of CA's migration, because even though education between 6 and 12 years old seems to be universally accessible in those countries, most migrants appear to be among those who left the classroom from an early age (Acuna, 2015 and 2020; Franco and Barajas, 2019).

Mexico is a country that has historically been built through migrations, initially from the countryside to the city and, later, interurban and international, but it also highlights that the majority of international migrations are and have been to the neighboring country to the north, and that had their origin in the bilateral agreements between our country and the United States at the end of the second World War, which promoted a male, peasant migration, with fixed and temporary wages, which gave way to a subsequent wave of undocumented migrations, which is how it remains today (Alonso, 2012; Canton de Grammont, 2009; Durand y Massey, 2003; Massey, Durand y Pren, 2009). But it is also a country of transit, due to two main characteristics: The recently “open” border between Mexico and Guatemala, characterized by low security and free transit and, on the other hand, it is the obligatory step to reach the United States by land, one of the main destination countries, with which it also shares a border of 3,169 km. One of the elements that has made it difficult to analyze CA in the migratory phenomenon is that interest in this age group in social studies is only recent, as well as its differentiated problematization, as we will see in the next section.

2.2. Childhood and adolescence

While it is true that emigration coming from central America is a general phenomenon, that originated from economic, political, and social problems in the countries of origin, it is important to emphasize the different gender and generation groups that compose them since each of these characteristics will contribute to the difficulties that they face. First, the idea of childhood and adolescence will be problematized as categories that do not emerge until now, which can explain the lack of migratory studies of these groups, to identify the current conditions this phenomenon has.

Childhood, as a stage of life that is socially problematized, is a recent issue. It appears as one of the marks of modernity, because if we come back to the past, we can find that the children were considered invisible if they were not part of productive and reproductive life. In fact, they were not considered as individuals with full rights, but as unfinished subjects, as “miniature adults.” Childhood, as a category, appears in Europe in the 18th century, as a scientific interest in the peculiarities of this stage of life, and in the studies of History, it is not until the middle of the 20th century that childhood appears (Sulk, 2006). According to Szulc:

[...] la niñez ha sido, hasta los años 90, un tema marginal en los estudios antropológicos y de las ciencias sociales en general, que no han dirigido su atención a los niños [niñas] del mismo modo que por mucho tiempo excluyeron a las mujeres (2006,25).

Thus, childhood has a biological and psychological meaning, which determines a state of formation for the development of individuals, but it has also had a social perception, which attributes specific characteristics to this vital cycle of life. But in general terms they have been identified in comparison with the “adult,” so, boys and girls are unfinished beings, who are expected to become adults, capable of acting, deciding, and influencing daily life. But we must affirm that childhood is an important stage in life, whose characteristics cannot be explained exclusively in opposition to the Other, the “adult,” but, as a space that has different ways of thinking and understanding the world, and that deserves to be recognized with its own elements, not only as what the children will become.

So, too, adolescence and “youth” have also been ambiguous concepts. For example, youth:

[...] como estadio de la vida definido, forma parte de nuestras categorías de sentido común [...] pero no es algo tan evidente [por] el hecho de que a la misma edad uno puede ser joven en un ámbito y viejo en otro. EN términos sociológicos una cosa es la edad biológica y otra la edad social (Martin-Criado. 2005, 87).

Youth and adolescence are thus interrelated with the idea of generation, but also with schooling, which means, they are stages that are characterized by changes in lifestyles, but also by access of permanence in an established school system. That is why to talk about adolescence cannot be done in the same way in all socio-cultural, historical, geographical, political, and economic contexts, because each one of these elements will contribute to the meaning and will mark the place that this category has into the group.

Considering that youth in the social sphere is also built through the discourses and the place that we give them in the social space to develop, we find elements that talk about youth as a “problematic stage,” in “construction,” and as having a “lack of responsibilities” (Chaves, 2005). In that sense, we will identify, in this investigation, a distinction between youth, as a subjective element that is contingent to interpretation, in the historical and sociocultural context of each space.

Adolescence, “which is a stage between childhood and adulthood, which chronologically begins with pubertal changes and is characterized by profound biological, psychological and social changes, [...] but essentially positive” (Pineda and Aliño, 2002, pp. 16). It is one of the marks of modernity, because it tells us about changes that are crossed by lifestyles and the role that this group occupies in social space. In age terms, the WHO recognizes adolescence as the stage between 10 and 19 years of age, with two phases: Early adolescence, from 10 to 14 years old, and late adolescence, from 15 to 18 years (Pineda and Aliño, 2002).

One of the elements that both childhood, and adolescence share, and that will become evident in migration processes, is the lack of rights or the limitations they must exercise them, because if they are not accompanied by an adult, it is a difficult process. However, mobilities, especially when we talk about unaccompanied CA, have more complex consequences for this age group, in view of the impossibility to give them a voice in decision-making and full capacity to demand and enforce their rights.

2.2.1. CA in the migration scene from invisibility to statistics

The difficulty in identifying childhood and adolescence as a social problem is reflected in the absence of studies that analyze the problems experienced by these groups in migratory contexts. As Acuña (2015) points out, the interest in migration studies of CA continues to be scarce. Thus, we find that the bibliography that focuses on this age group appears in this century with greater force in the second half of the last decade, which is related to the increase of this age group in migrations, but also to the fact that from 2014 onwards, there has been talk about the presence of unaccompanied CA, in transit and detained in the United States when requesting asylum.

The studies are divided into three general lines. The first one tells us about their presence in migrant groups; in these, are the statistical studies, the characteristics of the places of expulsion, and the case studies, which emphasize the main problems that they face. The second one, which emphasizes the importance of their recognition to guarantee their rights, both in transit as well as at the destination, while also highlighting the violence they face on their journey. The third one analyzes return migration and insertion into the school system.

We will be mentioning some of the most relevant investigations in the first two lines. Ceriani, García and Gómez (2016): “Childhood and adolescence in the context of migration: Principles, advances and challenges in the protection of their rights in Latin America and the Caribbean”; Lorenzen, Frausto and Orozco (2018), “Neoliberalism, violence and migration from Central America to the United States: the case of unaccompanied migrant girls, boys and adolescents, seen from the perspective of mixed migrations”; Minera (w/d), “Open arms on the road”; Franco (2019), “The risk in the formation of migrant Central American girls and boys”; Acuña (2015), “Structure and agency in Central American child migration”; Cohello (2020), “Life and journey of Honduran migrant children: study of five cases”; Gómez (2018), “The rights of unaccompanied girls, boys and adolescents in Migrant Caravans during their passage through Mexico”; Hernández (2017), “The illegal migratory phenomenon of Guatemalan children and adolescents who travel unaccompanied and the process of protection measures”; Rivera (2015), “Regarding migrant children and management in the region: challenges and perspectives”; Sánchez (2021): “Childhood of migratory transit through Mexico. Legal instruments and human rights.”

In these studies, we find that transit migration through Mexico takes importance with the increase in the last two decades, which also responds to a series of changes in the anti-immigration policies of the United States, and the impact that these have on the closure of borders, to which Mexico responds with bilateral agreements. In the 2010-2013 period, Mexico detained 22,764 CA from Central America: 10,000 were from Guatemala, 8,000 from Honduras and 4,000 from El Salvador (UPM, 2015, cited in Nájera, 2016). We found that the number of migrant CA apprehended by the Border Patrol in the United States increased from 22,851 in 2011 to 107,386 in 2014 (including Mexicans). Thus, between 2011 and 2014 there was an increase in detained CA, in which Guatemalans incremented from 1,565 to 17,057 (9.8 to 24.9%), Salvadorans, from 1,394 to 16,404 (8.7 to 23.9%), and Hondurans, from 974 to 18,244 (6.1 to 26.6%). In 2015, 13,589 unaccompanied CA were apprehended, of which 34% were Guatemalans, 23.5% were Salvadorans, and 13.5% were Hondurans (Lorenzen, 2016). “From October 2013 to July 2014, the number of unaccompanied boys and girls from El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala had reached the amount of 48,000” (Camargo, 2014, cited in Acuña, 2016, pp. 53). One of the changes from 2014, is that CA are identified as undocumented migrants, but it also highlights that they are not accompanied by a father, mother, or another adult who has them under their care (Lorenzen, 2016). The mass media then, increased the coverage of the situation of thousands of unaccompanied migrant children, and girls, identified at different points on the border between Mexico and the United States (Acuña, 2015).

The increase in those migrations is analyzed from the conditions of expulsion characteristic of their places of origin, whose education system is deficient, and prospects are limited, together with the increase in criminal activity that recruits children from an early age, limiting even more expectations for the future. Sometimes, this situation makes the parents decide for their children, a lot of times without asking for their opinion on the matter. We'll see some of the main characteristics of this migratory phenomenon.

III. In conclusion: challenges and possibilities for CA in their transit through Mexico

As we have seen, the increase in migration of CA in transit through Mexico is due to expulsion factors, associated with the conditions of economic, political, and social instability in their countries of origin. But it's important to remark on some characteristics that make this phenomenon more problematic, starting with the decision to migrate, even though some authors, as Acuña (2015), have identified the active role of CA in respect to the decision to migrate, CA cannot always participate freely in this decision, because, as we have said, many of them depend on an adult, who is the one who decides to migrate, without allowing them to intervene in that decision. Transit migration presents a series of adversities, among them the crossing of borders without documents, which forces them to travel dangerous roads, and to be subject to robberies, extortion, rapes, and other types of abuses by the criminal organizations, without being able to report them. And sometimes official authorities perpetrate these abuses, whether we are talking about police, immigration agents, or other government employees. One of the main characteristics they face as a defined group is vulnerability, which is understood as:

[...]la mayor susceptibilidad de algunos grupos humanos frente a situaciones de riesgo en la sociedad generada por la concurrencia de determinadas condiciones sociales, económicas que les sitúan en posición de desventaja, en determinados aspectos, frente de la población (Ortega, 2016,11).

CA are considered vulnerable groups, because of the conditions faced in their countries of origin, which restrict, as we have seen, the possibilities of full development due to the inability of the State to provide decent living conditions, but they are also violated by the places of transit where the law does not protect their rights, either by action or omission, in many cases because their rights have to be exercised through others: Adults. "Their rights are indirect and conditional. CA are in a situation of aggravated or multiple vulnerability, resulting from the interaction of the minority with the condition of migrant" (Ortega, 2016, pp. 12-13).

This combination of conditions, conjoined with linguistic and cultural differences (for example, even though the Spanish language is spoken in Mexico, the meanings of the language change) excludes them even further. But, in addition, the characteristics of the context from which they come, considering the generalized violence, and the control exercised by the gangs; the lack of attention from the government, and with that the lack of possibilities for a better future; besides the fact that many of them do not have activate participation in the emigration decision because their parents consider them minors. These conditions can lead them to experience other difficulties in terms of decision-making processes, which can result in adolescent pregnancies, drug use, or affiliation with criminal groups; which then, added to the above, leads them to be discriminated against and misinterpreted by those who should provide care for them: medical, psychological and shelter personnel both governmental and non-governmental, and by civil society in general, which can exacerbate their irregular status, gender, indigenous condition, Afro descent, rural, belonging to the LGBTI or disabled community (Acuña, 2015; Cohello, 2020; Franco and Barojas, 2019; Leyva, Infante and Quintino, 2016; Ortega, 2017). In the migration process, CA are:

[...] además víctimas de la insuficiencia de las políticas de protección de gobiernos de origen, tránsito y destino de la migración. En el proceso experimentan desintegración de sus contextos de origen; los riesgos y amenazas vividos en el tránsito (violencia, asaltos, trata y tráfico de personas) y el desarraigo en el lugar de destino (Acuña, 2015, 50).

This originates from the invisibility of migration and childcare policies, which demerits their rights in countries of transit and destination, moreover:

[...] la indebida o limitada inclusión de las necesidades de NNA migrantes o hijos/as de migrantes en las políticas de infancia, puede conducir a situaciones de desigualdad y discriminación, o incluso a la separación familiar u otros perjuicios como consecuencia de la aplicación de mecanismo de control migratorio (Cerani, García and Gómez, 2014, pp. 12).

That attack the four guiding principles regarding rights: The principle of non-discrimination (art. 2, CDN); the best interests of the child (art. 3, CDN); the right to life and development; and the right to participation and to be heard that makes them vulnerable groups (Ceriani, García and Gómez).

Another specific problem of CA is, when they migrate, they become deserters from the educational system, which automatically cancels their possibility of accessing subsequent educational levels, and because of this, their employment conditions and future projection are limited. Not only in their origin place but also in transit and destination, since most of them do not have the "documents" that prove their education and that allow their entry into those jobs that require it.

The impact that trafficking has on their lives has also been recognized since they are exposed to all kinds of abuses, which push them to live a kind of life with irregularity and uncertainty from an early age (Franco and Barojas, 2019).

As we have reviewed and under the premise that we have not been able to cover each one of the problems faced by CA in their transit through Mexico, the vulnerability they face is recognized due to the impossibility of having their recognized rights. Often, they don't make the decision to migrate, and they encounter prejudice and discrimination due to their gender and generation characteristics, ethnic-racial conditions, but also due to their origin place. It is important to advance in investigation from specific cases to allow us to identify how CA live the migratory process, and what are the urgent actions to recognize the deficiencies they face, and which accompany them across origin, transit, and destination countries, which will determine their future.

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