UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA SAN DIEGO

Seeking Safety, Deciding on Asylum: State Actors and Migrant Decision-Making

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by

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The thesis of Pamela Ortega is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically.

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DEDICATION

To my friend, Daniel Cabrera, a kind, compassionate friend, one of thousands of people we lost too soon to COVID-19.

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Seeking Safety, Deciding on Asylum: State Actors and Migrant Decision-Making

by

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In recent years, more asylum seekers from Honduras, Mexico, El Salvador, and Guatemala have presented themselves at the border. While literature exists on refugee and economic migrations, few scholars have explored the decision-making process of asylum seekers from this region. This thesis explores, particularly, their decision to leave, their transit experiences, and ultimately, their decision at the border. In interviews with female asylum seekers at migrant shelters in Tijuana in 2019, they explained their reasons for migrating, their experiences traveling through Mexico, and how state actors played a pivotal role in their decision-making at the border. This data shows how sociological theories of refugee migration and economic migration can also be utilized to understand the experiences of asylum seekers from this region. In addition, this thesis finds that state actors are pivotal in influencing the decision-making of asylum seekers, encouraging, and discouraging people from seeking asylum. Overall, these explanations yield insight into the interactivity of state border policies —primarily how U.S-Mexico relations on migration directly impact the day-to-day journey of asylum seekers traveling through Mexico to reach the United States.

INTRODUCTION

Scholars have long studied the decision-making process of economic migrants. Most recently, decision-making research has shifted to focus on the decisions of refugees, primarily sparked by the Syrian refugee crisis. When studying the decision-making process in the context of forced migration, the Western Hemisphere has been largely left out, although the recent increase of Central American migrants has shifted the narrative. Central Americans traveling to the United States dominated headlines in 2018 and 2019 (Lind 2018; Fry 2019). In 2020, given the COVID-19 pandemic, migration slowed, but in 2021 interest in migration to the United States has made a resurgence (Alvarez & Sands, 2021) (Daniel & Hesson, 2021).

Few scholars have explored the decision-making process of asylum seekers from Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Mexico (Amuedo-Dorantes and Puttitanun 2016) (Brigden, 2018) (Clemens 2017) (Morrison and May 1994) (Stanley 1987) (Vogt, 2018). Previous research shows increased violence in Guatemala from 1976 to 1981 prompted migration, paired with already deteriorating economic conditions (Morrison and May 1994). While others found political violence was key motivation for Salvadorans to migrate during the country's civil war (Stanley 1987). More recently scholars found unaccompanied minors decide to migrate due to a combination of economic and violent conditions (Amuedo-Dorantes and Puttitanun 2016). In this project, I examine the decision-making processes of women, particularly their decisions to leave and their decisions at the border. I chronicle the experiences of asylum seekers staying at migrant shelters in Tijuana. When considering their initial decision to migrate, I address the following questions: how do asylum seekers decide when to leave? What external and internal factors influence decision-making? How do state actors influence the decision to flee? To what extent do personal issues, such as family instability, influence that

decision? Do most women wait before deciding to leave their home, or do they act immediately? When deciding to leave, do women have a plan, including a destination, in mind? How do these experiences compare to those of refugees and economic migrants? Ultimately, I argue that migration theories that treat the decision-making of economic migrants and refugees also apply to asylum seekers. In addition, I chronicle the experiences of transit and eventual decision-making processes at the border for asylum seekers and explore how these experiences are similar to the challenges economic migrants and refugees endure. I emphasize the active roles state actors play in these experiences and decision-making experiences, particularly when it comes to whether an asylum seeker crosses legally or illegally into the United States.

Economic migrants typically decide to migrate due to deteriorating economic conditions in their region. Their decision to leave is usually planned, with a set fixed destination plan. Refugees' decision to leave is usually instant and due to fear of ongoing violence. They usually lack a set fixed destination plan. Meanwhile, asylum seekers' decision to leave is a combination of ongoing gang or cartel violence and deteriorating economic conditions, in addition to personal issues like being a victim of domestic violence. Similar to refugees, their decision to leave is instant with no fixed destination plan in mind.

This project utilized 39 qualitative interviews conducted in Tijuana migrant shelters to explore the decision-making processes of Honduran, Salvadoran, Guatemalan, and Mexican women seeking asylum. The interviews were conducted through the Mexican Migration Field Research Program at the University of California, San Diego, from January 21, 2019 to June 3, 2019. The Mexican Migration Field Research Program is a year-long research program for undergraduate and graduate students at UCSD, in which students receive training on research methods before beginning fieldwork. The program is funded through the Center for U.S.

Mexican Studies and works in partnership with the Center for Comparative Immigration Studies. In January 2019, 19 students in the forced displacement track spent a week at their respective research sites interacting and conducting interviews with the migrants.

In the spring of 2019, I traveled to Tijuana weekly, interviewing women at two migrant shelters. All interviews were conducted in Spanish and were semi-structured. For years, Tijuana has been the epicenter of migration to the United States. Located south of San Diego, Tijuana is home to the busiest port of entry in the world, San Ysidro Port of Entry (Diaz & Gonzalez, 2020). For over thirty years, migrant advocates have worked to build networks and coalitions of resources for immigrants on both sides of the border. The bilateral effort has facilitated donations. Today, Tijuana's shelters can house up to 700 people (*The Migrant Caravan,* 2019).

The people I interviewed were staying at migrant shelters specifically for women, Ejército de Salvación and Madre Asunta. Ejército de Salvación is a small shelter hosting about 20 women, run by the Salvation Army. Madre Asunta is run by Catholic nuns and lay staff members and has capacity for 45 people, but as of June 2019 served 36 women and 64 children. At the time of the interviews, the shelters housed women from Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Mexico, in addition to Afghani and Haitian women.

Interviews with the women were typically between thirty minutes to two hours. Participants were not screened for migration experiences, country of origin, or intention to apply for asylum. Everyone participating in the study was informed of the nature of the study and the purpose of the interviews and gave consent to the use of a recording device during the interview. Interviews followed a guide that asked questions about subjects' migration journeys, their treatment by the US and Mexican authorities, families, social networks, employment histories, gendered experiences, political identities and involvement, shelter support, and future plans.

While quantitative methods are important in detailing the number of people affected by a policy, for this study I utilized qualitative methods given the nature of the Mexican Migration Field Research Program. Detailed interviews provide an opportunity to better understand complexities and how they directly impact others. Immigration continually changes due to ongoing immigration policies, therefore in-depth interviews assist in detailing the nature of migration. In addition, they provide a detailed glimpse into how the perceptions of asylum change with government actions, particularly those having to do with, how immigration information is disseminated and how it affects women's decision-making when deciding to wait in line for asylum or cross illegally. In addition, longer in-depth interviews allow the interviewer to build rapport with the interviewee, gaining the interviewee's trust. This led to interviewees being more open about their journey and story.

This sample includes interviews with only women from Madre Asunta and Ejército de Salvación in Tijuana, Baja California and only interviews with Honduran, Salvadoran, Guatemalan and Mexican women are used. Thus, it omits and does not account for women asking for asylum not staying in a shelter. These women staying at the shelters arrived in Tijuana with no ties and were in dire need of refuge. For the majority of them, they found various shelters after signing up for the metering list, a list migrants can sign up for if they want to seek asylum. Once it's their turn they are eligible to enter the United States and ask for asylum. In addition, women at Madre Asunta are exposed to various resources and groups, thus more women at that shelter were reluctant to talk since they had already shared their story with someone. Ejército de Salvación is more private and does not allow outside influences, thus the interviews at this shelter were longer in-depth with specific details.

From January 2019 to March 2019, I traveled to Tijuana alongside those in the Mexican

Migration Field Research Program. We spent one week in January living in these shelters and assisting with shelter operations, from cleaning to food distribution. Beginning in March 2019 and continuing to June 2019, I traveled on an individual basis to Tijuana bi-weekly, every Monday and Friday. During this time, I assisted with shelter chores, like cleaning and cooking. In addition, I played games with children and *Loteria* with the women. Staff at Ejército asked my colleague and I to play games, take the women out for walks, or engage in some kind of outside activity. These activities included going to downtown Tijuana for a stroll, spending time at a local park, going to a shopping center, and visiting the Cultural Center in Tijuana. After our daily adventure, we would return to the shelter and interview whoever was willing to chat. I found that engaging with them beforehand helped facilitate the interview. During our field trips, I would casually engage in conversations with the women, that focused on who they were, where they were from, and their interests. This helped build rapport. The women were more likely to be willing to be interviewed and opened up about their feelings and journey once we had casual conversations. Moreover, most of the women stay long-term in the shelters, so I was able to see them often, further strengthening our relationships.

Of the 39 women interviewed, 12 were from Honduras, 5 hailed from El Salvador, 7 were from Guatemala, and 15 called Mexico home. Their ages ranged from 17 to 68 years old. The majority had family in the United States.

My positionality as a Latina vastly affected my access. As a native Spanish speaker, I was able to easily communicate with Spanish-speaking asylum seekers. In addition, my background as a daughter of Mexican immigrants facilitated my ability to connect with Mexican migrants. Speaking about my parents' background, particularly their hometown and migration journey, helped Mexican women connect with me. In addition, migrants from Honduras, El

Salvador, and Guatemala were inclined to share their experiences with me when they learned my parents were immigrants too. These women did not view me as a threat when sharing information; rather, they viewed me as an ally, willing to listen to their stories and answer their questions regarding the United States. Many women were particularly interested in learning what life in the United States was like.

While this project focuses on the decision-making process of asylum seekers, it is imperative I address gender and its role in the decision-making process of asylum seekers. Traditionally there exists the default idea of decision-making from a male perspective and U.S. migration from the south has traditionally focused on migrant men. I focus on women to show that decision-making is not always different based on gender, in addition, decision-making can have a family-logic. Women asylum seekers behave like economic migrants largely because as Lopez, Andrews and Medina say women are burdened with the responsibility of the family when migrating. They are often breadwinners of their families and sole caretakers. In addition, they are also increasingly a large proportion of migrants from Central America and Mexico seeking asylum in the U.S.

Lopez, Andrews and Medina explores how motherhood affects women's experiences with violence and ultimately their decisions to flee. They particularly separate violence into five categories: organized crime, gendered violence, structural violence, political violence, and symbolic violence. Ultimately, these types of violence lead women to decide to migrate. With motherhood at the forefront, these women migrated to protect their children from cartels, family abuse and poverty. Lopez, Andrews and Medina show motherhood serves as a catalyst for driving migration.

The structure of the thesis:

This thesis begins by briefly addressing what asylum is and how it works, then diving into literature relevant to understanding migration decision-making, with particular focus on transnationalism, agency, and migration. I then present historical case studies for the migration experiences common in the particular countries represented in my sample. I specifically emphasize the history of U.S. interference in these countries, ranging from military aid to assistance with combating drug trade and hindering migration.

In the second chapter, I chronicle the experiences of asylum seekers in Tijuana. I emphasize what prompted their initial decision to migrate. I begin by addressing literature related to the decision to migrate in forced migration and economic migration. Throughout the chapter, I introduce new asylum seekers, drawing comparisons and differences between their experience and that in forced migration and economic migration literature. I address the following questions: how do asylum seekers decide when to leave? What external and internal factors influence decision-making? How do state actors influence the decision to flee? To what extent do personal issues, such as family instability, influence that decision? Do most women wait before deciding to leave their home, or do they act immediately? When deciding to leave, do women have a plan, including a destination, in mind? How do these experiences compare to those of refugees and economic migrants? Ultimately, I argue asylum seekers endure a similar decision-making process when leaving their home as refugees and economic migrants.

In Chapter 3: The Influence of State Actors on Decision-Making, I further build on my previous argument, chronicling asylum seekers' experiences of transit and decision-making processes at the border. I explain how asylum seekers endure similar challenges to those faced by

economic migrants and refugees, particularly when it comes to kidnappings and prostitution. In addition, I address how state actors are key in influencing a person's decision at the border, specifically their decision to either cross legally or illegally into the United States. I address the following questions: What challenges, setbacks, or deterrence factors do Mexican, Guatemalan, Honduran, and Salvadoran migrants face during their journeys from their home countries to the United States? What role do state actors play in creating deterrence factors? How do state actors and policies influence migrants' decision-making at the border?

I conclude by addressing the limitations of my study. In addition, I provide updated context in regards to changes in U.S. immigration policy, including the metering list and Migration Protection Protocols, after the inauguration of President Biden in 2021, as well as a detailed update addressing where these 39 women are and how almost 2 years of ambiguous immigration policy affected their ultimate destination. Furthermore, I set the agenda for future studies, particularly when considering increased migration. Ultimately, I reiterate my argument that the decision-making process of asylum seekers is similar to that of economic migrants and refugees and how state actors are pivotal in their decision-making.

CHAPTER 1: SENDING COUNTRIES: HOW DOMESTIC CONDITIONS FACILIATE MIGRATION

In recent years, migrants from Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala and Mexico have made their way to the United States border to ask for asylum. In this chapter, I briefly address what asylum is and how it works, then dive into literature on reasons for migration. In addition, I present four case studies (Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala and Mexico), beginning with a historical overview of the most significant events and their contemporary developments in regard to immigration.

The United States has made immigration policy an integral part of its internal affairs since the beginning. Federal restrictions on immigration went into effect dating back to the Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798, the Page Act of 1875 and the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. After World War II in the face of mass Jewish refugee displacement, the U.S. lawmakers passed the Displaced Persons Act of 1948, which resettled over 400,000 European refugees in the U.S. While this seems like a large number, 400,000 was a fraction of displaced persons, and the act limited who could enter the United States to only those who had entered a refugee camp before December 22, 1945. The act was xenophobic due to omitting certain Jews and Catholics and was described by President Truman as blatant discrimination (*Statement by the President Upon Signing the Displaced Persons Act).* In 1950, an amended version of the Act was passed that permitted more refugees to enter (Walker, 2020).

In 1967, the U.S. signed the United Nations refugee protocol, which was appended to the 1951 Convention established 16 years earlier. Under its auspices, the United States recognizes the right to asylum as established by international law. To qualify for asylum, the parties must

prove they are fleeing persecution from their home countries, based on any of the following five categories: race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or particular social group.

United States domestic politics, particularly immigration policy, is ever-changing in response to external events. Immigrants from Mexico, Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador have for decades sought new homes in the United States. Recently, many from these countries have presented themselves at the United States-Mexico border to ask for asylum. While each country has a unique set of historical developments, asylum seekers from these countries share similarities in their decisions to seek refuge. The region has a long history of U.S. intervention, internal instability, and economic insecurity, often interrelated. In the following paragraphs, I present an overview of the literature on transnationalism, migrant agency, and migration networks. Later, I address the historical backgrounds of each individual country at hand, leading up to how its particular story influenced current migration patterns.

Migrants' transnational networks of contacts are an important historical consideration. Transnationalist thought emphasizes the complicated relationships a migrant maintains with their home country and destination country, especially how they maintain ties with their home country while abroad. Many scholars have examined the political implications of transnational networks of immigrants. Glick Schiller (1999) emphasizes that migrants don't simply move and settle in a new land, but while incorporating their lives in the United States they maintain home ties, developing networks of immigrants across borders. These networks in turn, can lead to increased migration from that country to the United States. In addition, it's important to understand why people migrate. Castles, de Haas, and Miller (2013) suggest that high inequality in home countries contributes to migration. There is not one coherent migration theory, but rather multiple reasons for migration, interpreted through various disciplines. The neoclassical

economic theory of migration is commonly used to analyze migration due to economic reasons (Massey, Arango, Hugo, Kouaouci, Pellegrino, and Taylor 1993) emphasizing differences in wages and employment between countries. It states an individual's decision to migrate is to maximize income and, in general, considers most migrants to be economic migrants.

Stark and Bloom have challenged the neoclassical theory, developing the new economics of migration in response. This theory argues migrant decisions are made by larger units of people -- families, rather than individuals. Families collectively decide to send someone to maximize their income, while others work in local economies. This in turn guarantees the family can rely on remittances, in case the local economy takes a hit (Massey, Arango, Hugo, Kouaouci, Pellegrino, and Taylor 1993) (Stark and Bloom, 1985). While neoclassical and new economic theory consider the decision to migrate to be based on rational calculations, segmented labor market theory emphasizes immigration is demand-driven by the economic structure. Employers seek to recruit immigrants to fill secondary sector positions, with low pay and unstable work conditions (Massey, Arango, Hugo, Kouaouci, Pellegrino, and Taylor 1993). On a yet larger scale, world systems theory emphasizes migration is a result of the globalization of the market economy. When international industries displace large numbers of people, like poor farmers and artisans, they seek opportunities elsewhere (Massey 1989).

Beyond the realm of economics, migrant networks theory explains why destinations remain consistent over generations despite fluctuations in the global economy. It demonstrates that migrants are likely to seek destinations where they have family, neighbors or friends. Migrant networks increase the possibility of migration because migrants know they will arrive somewhere where they know people, reaping benefits and minimizing costs (Gurak and Caces,

1992). Many of the women in my project had access to migrant networks, therefore this facilitated their decision to migrate.

Honduras

Large-scale Honduran immigration to the United States began in the 1950s, during the height of the banana plantation economy. Early migrants were commonly of Afro-Indigenous Garifuna descent; through farm work, they developed business and personal connections with Americans involved in the fruit trade. Thanks to these connections, an early Honduran community developed in New Orleans, an important banana port. By the 1970s, northern Honduras became the hub of industrial development, attracting mostly rural workers migrating internally from the hinterlands. As development continued, the maquila sector became more established and more of a draw for internal migrants *and* external migrants, as by the 1980s, Honduras had become a receiving country for refugees and economic migrants. Many from El Salvador sought refuge from the civil war, while others from Guatemala and Nicaragua migrated to Honduras for job opportunities (Reichman 2013).

The United States played a pivotal role in conditions in Honduras, from the banana trade in the 20th century to more recent military interventions. Since the beginning of the Cold War, the United States has militarized Honduras through aid. The country was under military rule from 1963 to 1982. Therefore, when civil wars began in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua in the 1980s, the United States intensified focus on Honduras through military camps along the Salvadoran and Nicaraguan borders (Molina, 2015). The United States wanted to avoid another civil war in the region. Consequently, Honduras did not experience a civil war (Molina, 2015)

Before the 1990s, Hondurans migrated *within* their country rather than internationally (Reichman 2011). Contrary to the civil wars in El Salvador and Guatemala in the 1980s,

Honduras was largely spared. While the United States witnessed mass migrations from El Salvador and Guatemala in the 1980s, immigration from Honduras to the United States did not take off until the 1990s. Between 1990 and 2000, the Honduran population in the United States rose from 130,000 to 217,000. (Reichman 2011, p. 41). Migration of Hondurans to the United States increased in the 1990s, when the United States granted Hondurans Temporary Protected Status (TPS) in 1999, following Hurricane Mitch in October 1998. Hurricane Mitch left thousands of people dead and displaced close to 1.5 million people in Honduras (Reichman 2013).

The United States military played (and plays) a key role in the politics and economy of Latin America (Williams & Disney 2015). The United States provides military aid, training, and arms to the region. In 2010, Latin America received $1.6 billion in military and police aid (Williams & Disney, 2015). Williams and Disney show many of those involved in human rights abuses received training from the U.S. military through the School of the Americas (SOA). The Honduran coup in 2009 was led by an SOA graduate (Williams & Disney, 2015).

This coup lent Honduras the distinction of being the only Latin American country to experience a successful military coup since the end of the Cold War. On June 28, 2009, due to his left-leaning policies, President Manuel Zelaya was ousted and fled to Costa Rica. Roberto Micheletti rose to power, and his regime enacted human rights violations against Honduran citizens (Williams & Disney, 2015). The Micheletti regime is accused of countless attacks on peaceful protests, students, and journalists. Many television and radio stations were militarized to limit press freedom. Many governments denounced the coup and called for democracy but did not play an active role in reinstating it.

Recent immigration from Honduras is a result of the violence and poverty plaguing the region. At one point, the country had the highest homicide rate in Latin America. Every 74 minutes, someone is killed in Honduras. (Williams & Disney 2015) Many migrants are unaccompanied minors escaping gang violence, particularly recruitment (Reichman 2013).

El Salvador

The United States was not always Salvadorans' top destination country. They first sought opportunities in neighboring countries. In the 1930s, around 25,000 Salvadorans migrated to Honduras to work in banana plantations. The number of Salvadorans living in Honduras grew to 350,000 by 1969. Tensions due to increased Salvadoran migration to Honduras and land reform grew between both countries and culminated in the five-day Football War. Honduras then expelled as many as 300,000 Salvadorans (Menjívar & Gómez Cervantes 2018). Those expelled Salvadorans did not find El Salvador a more equal place than they had left, and a decade later, El Salvador faced a gruesome twelve-year civil war spurred by grotesque economic inequality. Before the war, the notorious Fourteen Families held most of El Salvador's power and resources, controlling about 60 percent of farmland, the banking system, and most of El Salvador's industries (LeoGrande 1998). Of the five million people living in El Salvador, eight percent controlled half of the nation's money (LeoGrande 1998).

Throughout Latin America, including El Salvador, nuns and clergy organized weekly bible readings focused on social justice teachings (Boff, 1987). In essence, they taught the idea that poverty and persecution were not God's will, but rather a result of oppressive institutions and conditions, a viewpoint often called liberation theology. One of the most vocal leaders in the liberation theology movement was Archbishop of San Salvador, Óscar Arnulfo Romero, who

condemned the abuses of El Salvador's military regime and urged President Carter to withdraw military aid during his weekly radio show (Brockman 1982).

Social unrest continued and ultimately caused a 12-year civil war from 1980 to 1992. Many protesters were beaten, arrested, and murdered. Around 75,000 people were killed and more than 1 million Salvadorans were displaced, about one-fifth of the population at the time (Menjívar & Gómez Cervantes 2018).

Similar to Honduras, the United States played a pivotal role in Salvadoran affairs through military aid and training. The United States provided over $6 billion in military aid and economic aid from 1980 to 1992 to fight the guerrillas. In addition to military aid, the U.S. gave El Salvador over $4 billion to reform civil society. When the U.S. faced domestic opposition to its involvement in El Salvador, the U.S. pressured El Salvador into a cease-fire agreement (Quan 2005).

It was not until the 80s and 90s, following the civil war and subsequent political and economic reforms, that massive migration to the United States began. In the 1980s, at the height of the civil war, U.S. immigration policy did not allow Salvadorans to request refugee status, given the U.S. was helping finance the war. During this time, El Salvador relied on military support and remittances. Gang violence in El Salvador increased alongside state violence in the 1980s and accelerated in the 1990s, when the United States increased deportations of Salvadorans. Those deported were mostly young Salvadorans who had formed gangs in the United States in the face of uncertain status, poverty, and discrimination (Menjívar & Gómez Cervantes 2018). Deportations of gang members back to El Salvador accelerated organized crime in an already violence-plagued country.

In the 1990 Immigration Act, the United States included a provision recognizing the situation of Salvadorans following the civil war. The provision, known as Temporary Protected Status (TPS), allowed Salvadorans to live and work in the United States. The program has been extended to other countries, usually ones in conflict or affected by a recent natural disaster. TPS was initially designed to last no more than 18 months. Approximately 187,000 Salvadorans registered for TPS in 1992. That same year, TPS ended for Salvadorans. The program was replaced with Deferred Enforced Departure, which was in effect until September 1995. More than 200,000 Salvadorans received green cards under section 203 of the Nicaraguan Adjustment and Central American Relief Act (NACARA) that provided cancellation of removal that took effect in 1997. In 2001, the United States again granted TPS to El Salvador, following two earthquakes. Around 195,000 people had TPS as of 2016 (Menjívar & Gómez Cervantes 2018).

In 2014, the United States again witnessed an increase in migration from the Central American region. Those migrating were primarily unaccompanied youth. These youth left hoping to escape gang violence, lack of economic opportunities, limited educational opportunities and wanting to reunite with their parents in the United States. About 68,500 unaccompanied immigrant minors were apprehended in fiscal year (FY) 2014. Of those, around 16,400 were Salvadoran (Menjívar & Gómez Cervantes, 2018)

Guatemala

Guatemala experienced the longest civil war in Latin America. The 36-year civil war from 1960 to 1996 is considered one of the most violent in the region. The initial part of the war did not lead to mass migration to the United States. Instead, some Guatemalans sought refuge in Mexico. The second phase of the war, which took place in the western Mayan highlands, led to

migration beginning in the late 1970s. These refugees crossed into Mexico seeking refuge there, while others continued to the United States, where they sought asylum (Jonas 2013). Around 150,000 people were killed or disappeared in the early 1980s. More than 200,000 died between 1954 and 1996. More than 1 million Mayan villagers were displaced; of those, around 200,000 fled to Mexico (Jonas 2013).

There were rampant economic losses throughout Latin America, including Guatemala. At the time countries in the region faced income and import drops, stagnant economic growth, and high unemployment. It became known as the "Lost Decade" of the 1980s. Prior to the migration of the 1980s, Guatemalans in the 1970s migrated back and forth between the Guatemalan/Mexican border. Guatemalan migration to the United States increased from 13,785 in 1977 to 45,917 in 1989 and then decreased to 22,081 in 1996. In 1992, Guatemalans had the highest number of asylum petitions, 43,915, about 42 percent of all applications (Jonas, 2013).

In addition, several environmental disasters affected Guatemala in the 1990s and 2000s. Hurricane Mitch in 1998 left mass destruction, as did Hurricane Stan in 2005, and Tropical Storm Agatha in 2010. In addition, a powerful earthquake hit the country in 2012. Despite these environmental disasters, the United States never granted Guatemalans Temporary Protected Status (TPS) like they did for El Salvador and Honduras (Jonas 2013). Furthermore, Guatemala experienced high levels of violence in the post-war era. Guatemala has experienced high rates of femicide (violence targeting women), which has been intensively studied since the early 2000, prompting women to seek refuge elsewhere.

Some Guatemalan migrants benefited from the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA). Around 50,000 Guatemalan gained legal status. In addition, Guatemalans benefited from the Nicaraguan Adjustment and Central American Relief Act (NICARA) in 1997, which

provided cancellation of removal (Jonas, 2013). More recently, similar to other Central American countries, Guatemalans have migrated north seeking asylum, many unaccompanied minors.

Mexico

The United States and Mexico share a long border, facilitating the migration of Mexicans to the U.S. both legally (through programs like Braceros) and illegally. The Braceros program began in 1942 and ended in 1964. The program brought Mexican men to work temporarily in the agricultural fields of the United States (Cohen 2011). Around 2.3 million Mexicans benefitted from the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act, which legalized most undocumented workers. After the Act, Mexican migration to the United States increased (Massey, Arango, Hugo, Kouaouci, Pellegrino, and Taylor 1993). The Braceros programs and IRCA strengthened and established social networks among Mexican migrants, providing an opportunity or option north of the border. Similar to other countries in Latin America, Mexico also suffered economic losses during the "Lost Decade" in the 1980s, like the devaluation of the Mexican *peso* and reduced investment in education. The Braceros program created a precedent for migrating north and the economic downturn created an incentive for migration to the United States.

Similar to other Latin American countries, the United States has influenced Mexico, particularly through military training. Mexican armed forces received particularly intense military training from the United States after the Zapatista rebellion in 1994. Following the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), guerrillas known as the Zapatista Army of National Liberation rose up in San Cristobal de Las Casas, Chiapas. They protested neoliberal economies and rising poverty (Williams & Disney, 2015).

In the mid-2000s, President Felipe Calderon started a military offense against transnational criminal groups. This became known as the War on Drugs, which the United States played an active role in funding. Between 2007 and 2010, the United States provided $1.6 billion in aid for the war on drugs. Later in 2008, the Bush administration gave $1.4 billion in foreign aid to Mexico, known as the Merida Initiative. The multiyear plan aimed to reduce crime and focus on combating drug trade. The plan focused mostly on military aid, providing funding to buy airplanes, helicopters, scanners, armored vehicles, and specialized training (Williams & Disney, 2015).

The War on Drugs had multiple consequences for Mexicans, including forced migration internally. Mexicans presenting themselves at the U.S Port of Entries for asylum are known as internally displaced people. This group of migrants first emerged in 2013 and are fleeing violence in their native states. In early 2013, shelters in the Tijuana region warned the Mexican government about this group. The Mexican government ignored the warnings, and the shelters were left to handle the influx in Mexican migrants. In order to chronicle this story, various non-governmental organizations develop a report: *Vidas en la Incertidumbre: La Migración Forzada Mexicana hacia la Frontera Norte de México ¿y Nuestra Solidaridad?* The report includes 891 interviews with women at Instituto Madre Asunta, a local shelter in Tijuana, from March 2013 to March 2016, in addition to interviews at various shelters in Tijuana, San Luis Rio Colorado, Sonora, and Reynosa, Tamaulipas. Of those interviewed, 92% indicated they planned to cross into the United States, while 52% planned to ask for asylum. Of those interviewed, only ⅓ indicated they had no information on asylum.

Conclusion:

These case studies of Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala and Mexico provide only a small glimpse into these countries' histories and how their past experiences influence contemporary migration. Particularly, they focus on the influence of the United States in these pivotal historical events. In the next two chapters, I discuss the decision-making process of women from these four countries, from their decision to migrate, through their transit journey, and finally their decision-making at the border. These studies provide a foundation of understanding for why people migrate. They will help understand some of the reasons the women in the next chapters decided to head north.

CHAPTER 2: WHY MIGRATE? HOW VIOLENCE AND ECONOMIC DETERIORATION PROMPT MIGRATION

For decades scholars have researched the decision-making process of economic migrants. Most recently, refugees' decisions from amidst the Syrian refugee crisis, have garnered attention. In the Western Hemisphere, Central Americans traveling to the United States for asylum dominated headlines in 2018 and 2019 (Lind 2018; Fry 2019). But few scholars have explored the decision-making process of asylum seekers from Central America, who in recent years have traveled north by the thousands to present themselves at the United States border and ask for asylum (Brigden, 2018) (Vogt, 2018). In 2017, the United States received 331,700 asylum claims, of which 33,400 were from El Salvador and 33,100 were from Guatemala (*Global Trends - Forced Displacement in 2018 - UNHCR*).

This chapter chronologies the experiences of asylum seekers in Tijuana, waiting for an opportunity to ask for asylum in the United States. Through their experiences I will answer questions about what asylum seekers go through when deciding to leave their home. These include: how do asylum seekers decide when to leave? What external and internal factors influence decision-making? How do state actors influence the decision to flee? To what extent do personal issues, such as family instability, influence that decision? Do most women wait before deciding to leave their home, or do they act immediately? When deciding to leave, do women have a plan, including a destination, in mind? How do these experiences compare to those of refugees and economic migrants?

Economic Migration

Massey, Arango, Hugo, Kouaouci, Pellegrino, and Taylor explains how there is not a single coherent theory of migration. International migration cannot be described through simply one

discipline, but rather a mix of theoretical frameworks from various fields. The neoclassical economic theory of migration is the most commonly used theory and emphasizes migration due to economic factors (Massey, Arango, Hugo, Kouaouci, Pellegrino, and Taylor 1993). Neoclassical economics focuses on the difference in wages and employment conditions between countries. It considers movement to be based on an individual decision to maximize income. In this case, individuals decide to migrate because a cost-benefit calculation yields a positive net return. People move to where they can be more productive and earn higher wages. Migrants under this theoretical framework are categorized as economic migrants.

In addition, scholars have explored the new economics of migration, which challenge many assumptions of neoclassical theory. Specifically, they argue migrant decisions are not made by individuals, but rather by larger units of people--specifically families. Families work collectively to make decisions to maximize income and minimize risks. In this case, some family members would take jobs in local economies, while others would immigrate and work in foreign labor markets. If local economic conditions were to deteriorate, families would rely on migrant remittances (Massey, Arango, Hugo, Kouaouci, Pellegrino, and Taylor 1993). Within the field of economic migration, scholars argue migration needs to be explored considering development and transformation processes. Essentially, the political economy of the sending and receiving country is an integral part of the process. Trade policies, economic inequalities and labor-market structure help determine who moves where. In this understanding, migration plays a larger role in the social and developmental process, rather than simply being a separate variable (deHaas, 2010).

Scholars also utilize cumulative causation theory to underscore the relationship between migration and development (deHaas, 2010) (Lewis, 1986) (Lipton, 1980). Increased migration in

turn causes an increase in the development of "underdevelopment." As Reichert (1981) said more underdevelopment causes a cycle of more migration. de Haas in *Migration and Development Theoretical Perspectives* affirms this idea that an increase in migrations led to underdevelopment, hence an increase in migration. An increase in young people migrating reduces the available workforce, decreasing productivity.

Migrants are subject to dangerous conditions when venturing out on their journey. For many migrants the dangerous condition cancels out the net gains they will obtain, like an income. Hernandez-Carretero and Carling in their fieldwork at the Canary Islands determined migrants from Sub-Saharan to Spain's Canary Islands were determined to "break out of the protracted stagnation." These migrants wanted to escape poverty that the dangers of traveling at sea, canceled out the overall gain. They determined this type of high-risk migration was not due to ignorance, but due to the sacrifices needed to overcome hardship.

Forced Migration

External factors are key in determining asylum seekers' routes, as they are to labor migrants and refugees. Scholars in the forced-migration literature explore what prompts Middle Eastern immigrants to leave their homes (Achilli 2015)(Öner and Genc 2015). In the case of Syrian refugees in Jordan, meager possibilities for integration and feelings of insecurity and instability prompt a secondary migration to Europe (Kvittingen, Valenta, Tabbara, Baslan, & Berg, 2018). Other studies show that migration is not a linear process and a migrant refugee's movement is based on the different stages in their migration journey (Papadopoulou 2004; Collyer 2010; Brekke and Brochmann 2015; Valenta, Zuparic-Iljic and Vidovic 2015). Yet other scholars argue that journeys are made in stages without fixed destination plans and can often take

years (Collyer and de Haas 2010).

Kvittingen, Valenta, Tabbara, Baslan, & Berg's (2018) research on Iraqi and Syrian refugees in Jordan found refugee perceptions, resources, and strategies caused different migratory decisions. Their work challenges the notion that refugees all have Europe as their first-choice destination; rather, socio-economic disparities also contributed to migrants' decision to leave Jordan. In addition, social networks facilitate the migration journey, since Iraqis who left Jordan have relatives abroad who supported them on their ways (Kvittingen, Valenta, Tabbara, Baslan, & Berg, 2018).

Furthermore, scholars have explored how state violence results in international refugees. More specifically, high levels of violence and civil welfare produce internally displaced people (IDPs) (Moore and Shellman 2006). Bohra-Mishra & Massey's (2011) case on out-migration from Nepal during the Maoist insurgency (1996-2006) explores how different levels of violence influence migration. Their work shows that low-to-moderate levels of violence reduce the odds of movement compared to high levels of violence, in which migration movements increase. Their work found incidents of violence with a larger number of casualties more likely to be reported by the media, which influenced immigrants to seek refuge outside their country. Under extreme violence, the threat to safety outweighed the risk of travel. But other scholars find that at a macro level, violence and economic conditions work hand-in-hand in influencing migration (Zolberg, Suhrke and Aguayo 1989).

Peters and Holland (2020) find that those who have friends and family abroad have more access to information on migration. Push factors like violence and poverty lead individuals to seek out information on migration routes, enforcement, smugglers, etc. While potential migrants have access to information, they can be subject to changing political conditions in their

destination country. In addition, changes in external political opportunity structure influence migrant's decision to leave and lead to increased migration.

Push and pull factors also contribute to migrant's decision-making processes. Push factors such as violence, human rights violations, and economic conditions can push people to consider migrating. Increasing violence drives migration choice, but as Davenport, Moore and Poe (2003) find "sometimes you just have to leave." A 2014 survey found Hondurans and Salvadorans were more likely to migrate if they had been victims of crime the previous year. Hondurans who were victims of crime were more likely to say they planned to migrate than non-victims (Hiskey, Cordova, Orces and Malone 2019). Another study of Nicaragua, Honduras, and El Salvador found that between 2011 and 2016, a rise in homicides was associated with an increase of US border apprehensions of unaccompanied minors (Clemens 2017).

Through my interviews I found multiple interviewees whose decisions to migrate were due to a direct threat on their lives and livelihoods. Push factors such as gang violence or cartel violence influenced their decisions. In addition, they knew the United States could offer some kind of protection in the form of asylum, which served as a pull factor. For those seeking economic relief, the lack of well-paid jobs pushed them to emigrate, although they cited ongoing violence as a cause for the lack of economic opportunities. In addition, they were aware of the same United States-based pull factor of asylum.

The experiences of asylum seekers reflect that of economic migrants and refugees. Carling's (2002) work in Cape Verde explored how the ability to migrate and aspiration to migrate influence decision-making. Similarly in my study, this concept encapsulates the decision-making process of some of the women. Carling (2002) also explains how modes of migration such as immigration regulations, influence migrant's realization to migrate. For some

of them, mostly those migrating for economic reasons, migration was an aspiration they long considered but only acted on when their ability to migrate was facilitated, for example through their increased knowledge about asylum. This model of migration was first proposed by Carling (2002) to explain contemporary migration, specifically migration patterns and migration routes. Some women migrating for economic purposes, pointed to the lack of employment opportunities. de Haas in *Migration and Development Theoretical Perspectives* states an increase in migration, causes underdevelopment in sending countries. Some of the women explained how their decision to migrate was influenced by a lack of business development (specifically employment) and government assistance (specifically adequate healthcare).

Hernandez-Carretero and Carling in their fieldwork at the Canary Islands determined Sub-Saharan migrants to Spain's Canary Islands migrate despite the dangers faced; the dangerous conditions cancel out the net gains, like income. Similarly, the women, specifically those migrating for economic purposes expressed that despite the dangers they might face throughout their journey, they knew once they successfully entered the United States their economic situation would significantly improve.

When I interviewed these women, they all intended on migrating to the United States, but that was not always the case. For some of them, settling in Mexico was an option that quickly disappeared with prolonged wait times for legal documents (humanitarian visas and residency) and with increasing violence. Kvittingen, Valenta, Tabbara, Baslan, & Berg's (2018) research on Iraqi and Syrian refugees in Jordan challenged the notion that refugees always have Europe as their first-choice destination. For migrants in their study, socio-economic disparities propelled migrants to leave Jordan. In addition, meager possibilities for integration and feeling unsafe increased the possibility of leaving Jordan. Similarly, some of the women I interviewed

discussed how they were not given jobs due to being Central American, particularly on the Guatemala-Mexico border, in communities like Tapachula. While women in my study left due to state actor influences and violence, the underlying argument that migrants don't all have destination countries like Europe and the United States as their first choice can be applied.

Silvia and her two children

Gang violence is rampant throughout parts of Latin America and in recent years has been a driving force for migrants seeking asylum in the United States. Silvia is 29 years old and fled her native Guatemala alongside her two children, her 12-year-old son Samuel and 5-year-old daughter Vanessa, in February of 2019. For weeks, local gang members tried to recruit her son to sell and distribute drugs.

Silvia says her catalyst for fleeing was instant fear. Samuel told her to stay home because a local gang had threatened to kill Silvia and her daughter if Samuel did not sell drugs. He didn't want Silvia to leave their home; he was afraid she could be killed at any moment. She says the decision to flee was instant: she found out about the threats on a Wednesday, and by Sunday, she was gone. She knew if she stayed she would die, so she decided to immigrate to the United States.

> "I said, I'm going to be here living with the fear that one moment or another they [gang] are going to do something. So my plan to immigrate was suddenly," Silvia said during a 2019 interview in which she shared her story with me.

Psychological abuse also propelled Silvia's decision to flee. She'd suffered psychological abuse at the hand of her daughter's father. She'd been searching for a reason to leave him and

gang threats fit in the puzzle. Even if Silvia did not make it to the United States, she knew she could not stay in Guatemala. Samuel was not so convinced by his mother's immediate action.

When Silvia told Samuel they were going to the United States, he asked her how. He knew they did not have money to pay to be smuggled. She told him, "We'll go by the grace of God."

Samuel: Are you sure?

Silvia: "I'm not sure where we will stay, but we will find a place that is not Guatemala."

Silvia knew firsthand what would happen if Samuel did not obey the gang's orders. Her 13-year-old brother was killed in 2012 after refusing to sell drugs. She said, "When you live a situation like this before, you live in fear, and I know what the [gangs] are capable of." Silvia's experience is similar to that of our migrants in forced migration literature. Silvia's decision to migrate was instant and reflects the work of Davenport, Moore and Poe (2003) that "sometimes you just have to leave." Collyer and de Haas (2010) state, some migrants don't have set plans in mind. Silvia is one of them. Silvia left Guatemala with a destination in mind, but not a straightforward plan for the journey, nor a timeline. For Silvia, high levels on violence influenced her decision to migrate, in her case gang violence. This experience reflects the work of Bohra-Mishra & Massey's (2011), who state high levels of violence influence migration.

Carmen and her five children

Carmen is a 34-year-old recent widow who fled Michoacán with her five children in January of 2019. After her husband's death, she earned a living by selling tamales de elote at a local market. They fled after her son Sebastian was targeted by armed men. Sebastian had just

arrived at a gym when he noticed armed men following him; he entered the gym and fled through a side door. Sebastian called an uncle to explain what happened and his uncle called Carmen to relay the information. She packed clothes for the children, went to the bus station and met Sebastian there. She had been speaking with an attorney via Facebook about asylum for months but had not made plans to travel to the border yet.

> "I just grabbed two changes of clothes for each kid, I left the house intact, as if I'd return tomorrow," she recalled.

Carmen does not know why armed men followed her son. She thinks maybe it was local police officers. Weeks before this, she filed a report against them for killing her husband. She said her husband suffered an epilepsy attack, so she called the police so they could help her take him to the hospital. Instead, she says they shot her husband dead and would not let her enter her home to see him, nor did they call an ambulance for help. After hours of waiting to see her husband, she went to the police station and demanded answers.

> "I filed a police report against them; that's probably why they tried to kill my son. The police are very corrupt; they're in contact with "gente mala" [bad people]," she said.

Similar to Silvia, Carmen's decision to flee her home was instant and happened within a few hours of her son, Sebastian being attacked. Her experience reflects the work of Davenport, Moore and Poe (2003) that decisions to migrate are sudden. While Carmen spent months researching the asylum process and communicating with experts, a single moment (knowing her son faced danger) was her catalyst for fleeing. In addition, Carmen's experience reflects the work of Peters and Holland (2020) that those with friends and relatives abroad have more access to

information on migration. Carmen's mother and siblings reside in Minnesota and continually encouraged her to flee.

Miriam and Andrea

Miriam and her 21-year-old daughter Andrea left their native Acapulco, Guerrero after local cartel members threatened them. Miriam is 48 years old and owned a local abarrotes store, stocked with snacks, groceries, and local produce. Miriam explained how cartel members started asking her to pay 500 pesos a week, which she did. She would pay 500 pesos and would let the men grab snacks and whatever else they would like. One day, they were threatened into paying an extortion fee of 400,000 pesos within 6 days. They left an account number where the money was to be deposited. The next day, cartel members burned a car in front of Miriam's house. Miriam believes the cartel members mistook her neighbor's car for hers. Miriam filed a police report that same day and left for Tijuana a day later.

Miriam's 21-year-old daughter Andrea says the men also left a "narco-manta" -- a cloth poster frequently used by cartels to send messages to potential victims -- if her and her mom did not pay, they would cut her mother into pieces and kill Andrea.

Andrea was a second-year college student studying Business Administration. Living in Acapulco for Andrea was a constant worry in which she wondered, "Am I next?" She said cartels would kidnap students, but only female students. The women would appear days later, raped, and chopped into pieces. She eventually left school out of fear and dedicated her time to

helping her mom run the store.

> "The government doesn't do anything. Instead of defending the citizen, they defend the delinquent. We are not protected" she said.

The experience of Miriam and Andrea reflects that of other migrants in forced migration literature. Following being threatened by cartel members, Miriam and Andrea's decision to migrate was immediate. This reflects the work of Davenport, Moore and Poe (2003) who state decisions are made instantly, specifically in situations where people feel their lives are in danger. Acapulco has been plagued with violence for years. Bohra-Mishra & Massey (2011) work shows migrants leave when there are higher levels of violence. Although Acapulco has been violent for years, Miriam and Andrea decided to flee after that level of violence significantly increased.

Alejandra

Alejandra is a 36-year-old mother of six. She left her native Guerrero after she heard rumors local cartel leaders planned to kill everyone in their town. She is from a mountainous region in the state of Guerrero where only women are allowed to leave the town and head down the mountain. She has five children with her-- her oldest son crossed into the U.S. two months earlier.

She said that on December 1, 2018, rumors spread the local cartel was going to kill everyone. Her husband urged her to "leave because here I can run; take the children." Alejandra left that same day. Months earlier, local organized crime members dropped off a radio with her eldest son and told him he needed to listen to it and keep watch. She told him not to, snuck him down the mountain, and flew him to Tijuana to ask for asylum.

"They're after the young people, they keep recruiting young people," she said.

Alejandra's husband stayed behind, since he is not allowed to leave the mountain like women and children are. She said he spends most of his time in the field with the animals and does not sleep at home. Even making phone calls is difficult, as the local cartels can listen in on conversations.

Alejandra was familiar with how asylum worked when she fled. Her son had migrated months before, so she learned through his experience. Alejandra's experience reflects that of forced migration literature, specifically Peter and Holland's (2020) argument that those who have friends or family abroad have more access to information on the migration process. In addition, Alejandra's decision to migrate due to increased violence supports the arguments of Davenport, Moore and Poe (2003) and Bohra-Mishra & Massey (2011). As violence around her and her family increased and the potential for violence increased (rumor the cartel members were going to kill everyone in town), Alejandra instantly decided to leave.

The interviewees mentioned earlier discussed how violence at the hands of gangs or cartels, influenced their decision to leave their home. As discussed, some of them knew about the opportunity to ask for asylum, while others didn't know what asylum was but knew the United States provided some support for those fleeing violence. The following interviewees discuss how their decision to migrate was for economic purposes. Economic migration literature shows people leave because they want to earn an income. These women discussed leaving for economic opportunities, propelled by the violence in their region. For some, violence in their regions forced businesses out, leaving them with limited economic opportunities. While seeking

economic relief was their goal, they knew leaving would mean a safer environment for them and their children long term.

Claudia and her three children

Claudia is a 28-year-old mother of three, who lost her husband in 2018 to kidney failure. She decided to leave El Salvador with her 12-year-old boy, 11-year-old girl, and 4-year-old boy due to economic reasons. After her husband's death, she was left with unpaid debts; she said she owes over $8,000 from his treatment. She left after a woman she owed money to said she would sue her.

> "I left because after my husband died and I was left alone with three children; the situation was hard, it's expensive to care for them, our government doesn't help" she said during a 2019 interview.

In El Salvador, Claudia made money by driving people around in her small car. She also used it to transport products like maize and milk. She later sold the car and used that money to travel north to ask for asylum.

"I feel hopeless, that my children will grow up and the gangs will recruit them."

She said she does not see a future for her children in El Salvador due to the violence. She said if you watch the local news, they cover death after death after death.

Claudia knew women from her town that had left to ask for asylum in the U.S. She said they made it sound easy, so she decided to leave.

Claudia's decision to migrate encapsulates arguments of economic and forced migration. After her husband's death, money was tight for Claudia so she decided to ask for asylum so she could be allowed in the United States. She knew wages were significantly higher in the United

States. Massey, Arango, Hugo, Kouaouci, Pellegrino, and Taylor explains how economic migrants migrate due to maximize their income. In addition, she knew people who had migrated earlier and asked for asylum. They guided her through the process. This reflects the argument Peters and Holland (2020) make that those with friends abroad have more access to information. In addition, while Claudia was not directly a victim of violence, she feared in the future her children would be. Peters and Holland (2020) also argue, violence and poverty propel immigrants to seek out information on migration. Claudia told me she fled in 2019 because she heard children were not being taken away from their parents anymore. She was referring to the Trump administration's family separation policy, which was implemented in late 2017, but became widely known in 2018 (*Family separation under the Trump administration – a timeline* 2020).

Cesia and her daughter

Cesia is a 31-year-old mother from Acapulco, Guerrero. She said she left because the minimum salary in Acapulco is low and she has three daughters to care for, but only brought her 1-year-old with her to Tijuana. In Acapulco, she worked at a local hotel where she earned 250 pesos a day. Her children's father does not help her financially. She says cartel violence in the region has brought down business. Before she took the job at the hotel, she worked as a cashier at a local nightclub. There she was paid 150 pesos a night, in addition to over 500- 600 pesos in tips. She remembers running to the bathroom to hide once, after gunfire ensued at a bar next door. The nightclub shutdown after a waiter was shot and killed at the club. Armed men, presumed to belong to a cartel, asked the owner for a cuota [protection bribe] of 200,000 pesos. When the owner did not pay the cuota, they went to the club and shot a waiter dead.

She had been thinking about coming to the United States since October of 2018. After two of her cousins asked for asylum, her aunt who lives in Nebraska suggested she do the same. She started watching YouTube videos on asylum in October of 2018 to orient herself on the process. There she learned what asylum was and the process it entails.

After arriving in Tijuana, she learned she could have asked for asylum in Canada as well. She said she would have chosen Canada instead of the United States, since she thinks her chances of being accepted are higher.

> "I'm asking for asylum because of the dire situation in Acapulco, there's too much violence and that's caused less jobs with less pay. So I'm asking for asylum because of violence and honestly because I want to work" she told me in a 2019 interview. Cesia understands her asylum claim might not be considered valid, since she's not directly fleeing from violence. She said she was told cases can last up to 3 years, so she's hoping to work during that time and save up some money.

Cesia's decision to migrate reflects arguments scholars make in both forced migration and economic migration literature. From an economic migration perspective, Massey, Arango, Hugo, Kouaouci, Pellegrino, and Taylor explain how economic migrants migrate to maximize their income. Zolberg, Suhrke and Aguayo (1989) argue that at a macro level, violence and economic conditions influence migration. Although Cesia said she is migrating due to economic reasons, she understands the lack of economic opportunities is due to violence in her region. Similar to Claudia, Cesia's experience reflects arguments Peter and Holland (2020) make about the relationship between violence and poverty. They argue violence and poverty leads migrants to look for information on migration. Cesia had family members who migrated and asked for

asylum first, so she relied on these connections for information on the migratory process.

Evette

Evette is a 21-year-old woman from La Libertad, El Salvador. She left her community in April 2019 and traveled by bus to Tijuana. In El Salvador Evette wasn't employed. She helped her mother care for her 3 younger siblings, who are 8, 10, and 16 years old. Her mother sold pupusas, a Salvadoran dish, for a living. Sometimes Evette helped her cook and take orders. She said she wants to get to the United States to work and would love to be a lawyer one day. Evette said it's hard and expensive to pursue a career in her native country.

> "I immigrated because I want a good future for myself, I'm alone and I want to be independent, what better place to do this than the United States" she said.

In addition, she said violence in her region also influenced her decision to come. Recently one of her neighbors was killed. She told her dad she wanted to immigrate and her father told her it was her decision. Evette said, "In El Salvador, delinquency is advancing more and more, and that intimidates me; El Salvador has always been dangerous."

Similar to Claudia and Cesia, Evette's experience reflects themes in forced and economic migration literature. Evette decided to leave to improve her economic opportunities. This reflects the work of Massey, Arango, Hugo, Kouaouci, Pellegrino, and Taylor (1993) who say migrant decisions to leave are influenced by their desire to maximize their income. While a criminal group never threatened Evette, she was still aware of the violence in her community and wanted an opportunity to escape. As Zolberg, Suhrke and Aguayo (1989) argued, violence and economic conditions together influence migration. Similarly, Peters and Holland (2020) argue violence and poverty influence migrants to seek out information on migration. With a desire to

improve her situation and with the impending violence in El Salvador, Evette sought out information on migration routes to the United States.

Conclusion

While forced migration and economic migration help explain the decision-making processes of refugees and economic migrants, it fails to provide an understanding of the decision-making processes of asylum seekers, particularly those from Mexico, Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala. In this chapter, I argue that forced migration and economic migration literatures should be utilized to explain the decision-making process of asylum seekers. In addition, similar to forced and economic migration, push and pull factors facilitate the process.

Forced migration literature suggests that higher rates of violence cause refugees to seek safety elsewhere. Similarly, gang and cartel violence influenced women in my research to seek refuge in the United States. In their case, their decision-making was more often instantaneous. While migration encapsulates the ability to migrate, aspiration to migrate contributes to ultimate decision. The concept of aspiration and ability was first introduced by Carling (2002) to explain the "involuntary immobility" of people in Cape Verde, people with the aspiration to migrate, but unable to do so. Carling (2002) proposed this model of migration to explain contemporary migration, particular migration routes, number of migrants and the characteristics of migrants. This idea reflects the experiences of some of the women who migrated for economic reasons. Before their decision to migrate, they would wish to migrate. Their wish to migrate became a reality when circumstances allowed them to, particularly modes of migration like asylum. While others living in areas plagued by violence have strong aspirations to leave but less ability, rendering them involuntarily immobile. Furthermore, the large number of migrants is due to the emigration environment, specifically the social, economic and political context within

communities. If a potential migrant knows someone who has migrated from their community, they will be more inclined to do so. It's also important to consider the individual characteristics of those who want to migrate. The majority of the women I interviewed were single mothers with family in the United States, who mostly had no significant educational attainment. In most cases, if their life was threatened or someone close to them was, they would leave their home within a few hours or a few days afterwards. While they didn't have a set plan most did have a set destination: the United States.

Scholars have long researched the decision-making process of economic migrants. Individuals and households make the decision to migrate to improve their individual or household economic conditions. My interviews showed some women from Mexico, Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala left their homes when economic opportunities dried up, due to ongoing gang and cartel violence. In addition, younger women saw the opportunity to immigrate to the United States as an opportunity for a new beginning. All the women who said they were immigrating for economic reasons, said violence in their communities also factored into their decision to leave.

CHAPTER 3: THE INFLUENCE OF STATE ACTORS ON DECISION-MAKING

In Chapter 2: Why Migrate? How violence and economic deterioration prompt migration, I argued that asylum seekers face a similar decision-making process when deciding to leave their home as refugees and economic migrants. This chapter further explores those comparisons through chronicling asylum seekers' experiences of transit and eventual decision-making processes at the border. Specifically, I explore how asylum seekers face similar challenges and hurdles as economic migrants and refugees throughout their transit experience. During the transit experiences, asylum seekers are vulnerable to kidnappings and prostitution, similar to economic migrants. When it comes to decision-making at the border, state actors are fundamental in determining a person's likelihood to cross legally or illegally, which is similar to the experiences refugees encounter.

This chapter chronicles the experiences of asylum seekers from their home country to the border. These migrants are women hailing from Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala and Mexico. I interviewed them from January to June 2019. In addition, I chronicle the decision-making process of asylum seekers at the border, specifically how state actors influence their decisions. Through studying their experiences, I will answer the following questions: What challenges, setbacks, or deterrence factors do Mexican, Guatemalan, Honduran and Salvadoran migrants face during their journey from their home countries to the United States? What role do state actors play in these deterrence factors? How do state actors and policies influence migrant's decision-making at the border?

In the following paragraphs I discuss forced migration and economic migration literature on experiences of transit and decision making at the border. When analyzing literature, I focused on the experiences of transit through Mexico, since more literature on the topic was available. I

utilize forced migration and economic migration literature to draw similarities between economic migrants, refugees and asylum seekers. When analyzing the influence of state actors, I pivot focus to forced migration literature and focus on the role of rich democracies in setting up roadblocks for asylum seekers, in this case buffers. I narrow in on the role state actors play in sustaining these buffer zones.

Forced Migration

In order to limit the number of migrants arriving at borders, states have essentially expanded their borders by having neighboring "transit countries," through which migrants traverse, but in which they do not stay, control who can and cannot enter (Andreas 2003; Rosas 2012). This tactic is widely used throughout the world, by Australia, Canada, the European Union and the United States. Through international cooperation, the control of and responsibility for asylum is given to the neighboring country, rather than the destination country. The neighboring country utilizes state forces to limit migrants from reaching their destination country.

FitzGerald (2019) utilizes medieval architectural metaphors to describe the roadblocks rich democracies use to hinder access to asylum. These include cages, domes, buffers, moats and barbicans. This system of remote control exemplifies the variety of systems destination countries utilize to deter asylum seekers beyond the typical border wall. Destination countries use their neighboring countries as buffers to limit access to migrants. They use military personnel to control the number of migrants entering and ultimately making it to their destination country. In addition, they use legal tools like "safe third country" agreements and agreements to take back rejected asylum seekers. Mexico is considered the most important buffer zone in the western hemisphere. As the only southern land border with the United States, Mexico is integral in

controlling migration flows to the U.S. and Canada.

Countries around the world continually utilize deterrence measures to limit the entrance of migrants. One example is Europe's only land border in Africa with Ceuta, Spain and Melilla, Spain. The European Union has routinely worked to fund border walls, first by increasing the height from three to six meters. This particular border is used to deter Sub-Saharan African migrants. Additionally, beginning in the late 1990s, Spain began investing in border control at sea. They utilize the Integrated System of External Vigilance (SIVE) to detect and intercept small boats carrying migrants (Carling, 2007).

Among the European Union's most active countries in limiting migration, is Spain which has specifically limited access to Moroccan migrants. Spanish authorities have continually pressured Moroccan authorities to improve border control and crack down on human smuggling, in addition to limiting the number of visa holders from Sub-Saharan Africa. Beginning in 1992, Spain signed an agreement with Morocco, in which Morocco agreed to readmit all migrants who entered Spain illegally through Morocco. Initially, the Moroccan government avoided the readmission of non-Moroccans, but in 2003 the government agreed to admit non-Moroccans. As discussed earlier in Chapter 1: Sending countries: how domestic conditions facilitate, Mexico began setting up a series of deterrence factors towards Central American migrants transiting through the country. Most recently, in October of 2007, the United States and Mexico announced the Mérida Initiative, which included collaborative efforts to combat organized crime and drug trafficking. In addition, the plan created a "21st Century Border" that aimed to prevent certain people and goods from making it to the United States. The United States provided millions of dollars to upgrade systems and control migration patterns. Following a wave of Central American children asking for asylum in 2014, the Mexican government increased

policing at the southern border between Guatemala and Mexico (Brigden 2018). On July 7, 2014, the Programa Frontera Sur (South Border Program) was launched under President Enrique Peña Nieto's administration, with the objective of managing ports of entry, improving border crossings, mobile checkpoints and expanding migrant shelter resources.

Mexican authorities routinely deny that they collaborate with the United States. INAMI (National Migration Institute) agents play a pivotal role in the migration enforcement. Human rights organizations have found INAMI agents often violate the human rights of migrants, by arresting them, abusing and extorting them. In addition, they utilize racial profiling to detain certain migrants, including claiming they can tell a migrant apart by their skin color, clothing and smell. This shows how repelling refugees can have racial undertones. As Ian F. Haney-López's White By Law explains, countries racially constitute themselves through immigration. Thus, immigration control is a powerful tool of racial formation. INAMI agents can detain a migrant traveling without the proper documentation, they can also exhort them to let them continue their journey (Prieto, 2016).

Economic Migration

The migration industry is an integral part of the migration process and is made up of individuals and institutions who are interested and/or play a role in migration. This includes travel agents, interpreters, immigration lawyers, border control agencies and smugglers. They essentially either facilitate migration or play a pivotal role in halting migration. Willekens (2018) says migration alone is hard to predict, a better understanding yields the influence of individual institutional actors. Throughout their transit routes, migrants encounter new information on the transit journey, which influences and alters their decision-making. Migrants watch other migrants and mimic what they do. They seek out spontaneous collective actions, finding safety in

a large number of people (Bridgen 2018).

Migrants traveling outside their country are subject to vulnerability. Women can be especially vulnerable to kidnapping and prostitution during their transit experiences. For economic migrants, leaving home is a vital move to improve their well-being. Simkhada (2010) shows that younger women from Nepal who migrate from rural villages to urban areas to work become victims of employment-led trafficking. Simkhada finds how most of the employment-led trafficking happened through a dalal (broker or agent). Thirty-three percent of women in this study were trafficked by people they did not know, while 22 percent of girls said a relative was responsible for their trafficking.

Migrants traveling through Mexico are susceptible to kidnapping and violence. In recent years, migrants from Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala have become increasingly vulnerable. Research shows a person's vulnerability increases when they leave their native home (Bustamante 2002). In August of 2010, seventy-two migrants were murdered in the Mexican municipality of San Fernando, Tamaulipas. The massacre made international headlines. Due to increase in kidnappings and disappearances have deemed Mexico the Bermuda Triangle of Latin America (Vogt 2018). Policy makers, activists, and academics have found that Central Americans heading north and deportees from the United States are taken, tortured, and exploited. Scholars have recorded the experiences of kidnapping victims in firsthand and secondhand accounts (Betancourt and Anderson 2010).

Throughout my interviews, I found asylum seekers are subject to similar experiences of transit as economic migrants and refugees. They can be subject to kidnappings, prostitution, and roadblocks, preventing them from successfully making it to the border. Specifically, I found state actors are fundamental in setting up and enforcing these roadblocks along transit routes. They

often intimidate migrants, forcing them to pay a fee to continue. In essence, Mexico serves as a buffer for the United States.

In the following paragraphs, I share the experiences of multiple migrants, beginning with their initial decision to leave, to chronicling their transit experience and ultimately their decision-making process at the border. I focus on the state actors these women encounter throughout their journey and how they specifically cause them to shift their decision-making. Many women spent months at the Mexican-Guatemalan border waiting for authorization to travel through Mexico, otherwise they risked being deported back to their country. As mentioned above, state actors play a fundamental role in deciding who gets to continue their journey to their destination country. In some cases, what a person looks like is key in their likelihood to continue their journey.

Limay

In 2018, Limay, her four-year-old daughter Abril, and her husband Alberto fled Honduras after gang members forced Alberto to sell drugs. The family was quickly deported back to Honduras after failing to request a humanitarian visa when they crossed into Mexico. The humanitarian visa allows migrants to legally live in and transit through Mexico. After a local government official told them about the option of requesting a visa, they decided to journey back to Mexico, where they settled in Tapachula, Chiapas, to await their humanitarian visa. One year later, Limay found herself making the journey from Tapachula, Chiapas to Tijuana alone in search of her husband. Two months earlier, following a dire economic situation in Tapachula, Alberto headed north to ask for asylum in the United States. Limay and Abril were to join him. Shortly after, the same men that forced Alberto to sell drugs in Honduras appeared in Tapachula searching for Alberto. Limay told them she did not know where he was. But after months of

silence from Alberto and with the impending danger of gang members, Limay asked her mother to take care of Abril while she journeyed north.

When I spoke with her in 2019, she told me her journey north was tranquil. There were pretty views, but things took a turn when she made it to Tijuana. One of her cousins had offered to take her in and help. Instead, her cousin forced her into prostitution.

> "She forced me to sell my body, my own cousin. I was with her for a month, she took my phone away, my identification card, my immigration papers" she told me.

After escaping, Limay made her way to the border fence, near the Pacific Ocean. She was going to jump the border but could hear U.S. Custom and Border Patrol officers arresting people who had jumped earlier. She said she has heard of officers hitting people and was afraid that could happen to her. There she met a man, who was staying at Casa del Migrante, a neighboring shelter, he took her to Madre Asunta, a local women's migrant shelter. She continues living in constant fear that her cousin will find her. She said she spends most days crying, but therapy with the shelter's psychologist is helping. Limay told me she wants to speak to pro-bono attorneys who visit the shelter in the hopes that they can help her find her husband. She smiled when I asked her to describe him for me. "He is kind and has no bad habits, but something inside of me tells me he's not alive," she said.

Throughout her journey Limay faced roadblocks, beginning with her deportation from Mexico back to Honduras after failing to request a humanitarian visa. Although her family intended on migrating to the United States, Mexico fundamentally altered her plans by serving as the United States' southern border. Many scholar's research shows that states expand their borders by having neighboring countries or "transit countries"' control who enters and who

doesn't (Andreas 2003; Rosas 2012). In addition, military personnel are utilized to control migrants (Fitzgerald, 2019). Migrants traveling through transit countries are subject to vulnerability. Limay fell victim to prostitution through her cousin. Simkhada's (2010) research in Nepal showed one-third of women he interviewed were trafficked by someone they knew.

Silvia and her two children

In Chapter 2: Why Migrate? How violence and economic deterioration prompt migration, I discussed how Silvia and her two children fled Guatemala after gang members tried to recruit her son. Shortly after leaving Guatemala and crossing into Mexico, a local police officer in the state of Oaxaca stopped Silvia and her children as they boarded a taxi to the local bus station. The officer stopped the taxi, asked them to get out, and then searched her belongings for money and asked where she was from. She was honest and responded, "Guatemala." She started telling him her story, he quickly cut her off, told her he didn't have the time for her sob story. After the police officer found no money, he told her to leave. She sprinted with her kids to the taxi that was still waiting for her.

Silvia remembers Mexican migration officials entering every convoy she rode. They would pop their heads in and question anyone who did not "look Mexican." Silvia says the drivers, who knew she was Guatemalan, would tell her she was fine. "They will let you pass, you don't look like you're from Guatemala," they would say.

"That's good; that helps me a lot," she would respond.

After taking a long journey by many convoys and buses, Silvia and her children ended up in Cayuca, Veracruz. There she boarded a bus to Tijuana. The bus driver warned the passengers

that “if any federal agent asks where you are going, all of you say Hermosillo, Sonora.” He said that would save them time at the military checkpoints. At one checkpoint, a federal agent boarded the bus and headed towards Silvia, who was sitting in the last row.

Agent: Where are you going?

Silvia: To Hermosillo

Agent: Where are you coming from?

Silvia: From Veracruz

Agent: Where do you live?

Silvia: A block away from the bus terminal

Agent: What street?

Vanessa (Silvia’s daughter): 11 Street

The officer questioned the girl, gently touched the five-year-old’s face, and left. After that, agents stopped them two more times, but only checked the documents of those sitting in the first three rows.

When Silvia arrived in Tijuana, a taxi driver took her from the terminal to El Barretal, a makeshift camp set up weeks earlier for those traveling with the Honduran caravan that arrived in October of 2018. She did not know about asylum until she came in contact with Grupo Beta at the camp. An officer told her that if she wanted to enter the United States, she should do it the legal way, by signing up through the metering list. The metering list is a list at port-of-entries where asylum seekers sign up to enter the United States and ask for asylum. He told her he would sign her up and get her a number.

"They explained to me what asylum was. I said, good, let's do that. They gave me the opportunity to do it legally," she said.

But Alicia was weary. Other migrants warned her, "Be careful with Grupo Beta, they help some people, but they also hand people over to immigration." She later went to El Chaparral, a port of entry in Tijuana, to confirm she was on the metering list, she was on the list.

Fitzgerald's (2019) research shows military personnel are instrumental in controlling the number of immigrants who make it to their destination country. In particular, destination countries like the United States, utilize transit countries like Mexico to prevent migrants from making it to the border. In Alicia's case, she faces military personnel multiple times who asked her about her country of origin and destination. In some cases, simply where she sat on the bus determined whether she'd be questioned or not. In addition, Prieto (2016) finds that INAMI (National Institute of Migration) agents often utilize racial profiling to detain certain migrants. In Alicia's situation, her looking "Mexican" despite being Guatemalan helped her in avoiding being questioned by agents more.

Laura and 6-month-old daughter

Laura is a 34-year-old mother of two from Guatemala. She left Guatemala with her 6-month-old daughter Emily to reunite with her husband, Adolfo, and her 5-year-old daughter, Abigail, in New Jersey. Adolfo and Abigail had left for the United States two months earlier to ask for asylum. In Guatemala, Laura was a teacher and local store owner. She left after a local organized crime group started extorting her.

During her trip from Guatemala to Mexico, Laura remembers being stopped and asked to

pay the Mexican officials money. She remembers the Mexican officials making everyone pay $200 to enter Mexico through Guatemala. Every few stops, officials would get on the bus and ask for money. "I'd pretend I was asleep; if I was awake, they would have left me with no money," she said.

Laura told me she distrusts Mexican immigration officials, since they took her official documents, including her daughter's birth certificate. She says officials violated the migrant's rights. At one point, the officials entered the bus, approached a woman and asked her for money. When she said she did not have any, they told her to open her legs. The officials said they could see a bag was between her legs. The woman told them she was on her menstrual period, one official then put his hand between her legs and pulled out a bag containing $500 from her underwear. The woman was left sobbing. Laura said it was normal for officials to abuse women. "They would touch their breasts, their glutes until they could find money," she told me.

Laura befriended a group of Central American migrants on her bus. They invited her to stay at a house with them, and she assumed they meant a shelter, so she joined them. She was taken to an abandoned home in Mexicali, Baja California. The house was actually where migrants were being held hostage by a group of criminals. The criminals would request a ransom for their release. The small home didn't have a bathroom. She was fed tortillas and eggs only. She spent two days and two nights there. Laura said the kidnappers requested $5000 to release her. She called her sister and asked to borrow $1500 or $200, anything so they would let her go. She was let go after she and the other people kidnapped raised some money to be let out. After she took a taxi to the border wall in Mexicali with the other migrants she escaped with.

A man who was kidnapped with her handed her Emily as she climbed a tree next to the

wall. Once at the top of the tree, she looked down and became scared and frustrated. First, she threw her bag down on the United States side of the wall. “I threw my bag down and realized the wall was too big; I was going to put my baby in danger,” she said. The man she was with told her to drop her daughter to the ground and then throw herself. She thought to herself, “How am I going to throw my daughter; it’s like killing her.” Laura told the men they should throw themselves first. They started crying when Customs and Border Patrol officers approached from the United States side. They begged the officers to let them jump the border. An officer spoke to one of the men:

> CBP Officer: If you jump the border, you’re going to jail. Walk, walk 10 minutes or half an hour; we will give you asylum at the port of entry, I swear to God. But if you jump the border, you will go to jail because you’re going to kill your kid; he could break his bones. You will go to jail. You could break yourself too, how are you going to work, how are you going to help your kid. Go to the port-of-entry, we will give you asylum, I promise. Walk.

Laura first learned about asylum there. She didn’t know she could ask for asylum; she was told she needed to jump the border. Mexican firefighters and police arrived a few minutes later and helped her get down from the tree. She spent the night in jail, away from her daughter. The following morning Grupo Beta transported her and her daughter to a women’s shelter in Tijuana where she signed up for the metering list.

Similar to Limay and Silvia, Laura was witness to tactics employed by Mexican INAMI and military personnel to limit the number of migrants traveling through Mexico to the United States. This reflects the work of Andreas (2003), Rosas (2012) and most recently Fitzgerald

(2019) that states have expanded their borders by having neighboring countries control who can and can't enter. In addition, Laura witnessed agents harassing women on the bus. Her experience reflects the work of Prieto (2016) who explains how human rights organizations have reported INAMI agents often violate rights of migrants. Laura also reported being extorted by these agents, something Prieto (2016) mentions in her work, that agents often exhort migrants in order to let them continue their journey. She also was kidnapped and forced to pay a ransom to be released. In addition, migrants traveling through Mexico are subject to violence and in some cases kidnappings (Bustamante 2002) (Vogt 2018) (Betancourt and Anderson 2010).

Dayana and her family

26-year-old Dayana, her husband Alberto, and their three children left El Salvador in 2018 after her family began receiving threats from local gang members. Prior to that, she had relocated within El Salvador after armed men attempted to kidnap her 10-year-old daughter, Isabel. She told me she did not want to leave her country, so the family moved to another city. Her family then migrated to Guatemala where they lived at a migrant shelter. Shortly after that move, the family migrated to Mexico, entering through Tapachula.

Dayana wanted to stay in Mexico, but said the country is too dangerous. Within a month of arriving, her family was robbed. The robbers beat up her husband and younger daughter. It took Dayana six months to get her Mexican humanitarian visa, a process she said usually only takes two months. She thinks the longer wait was because a caravan of Cuban migrants caused some damage in town.

In late 2018, while waiting on her humanitarian visa, Dayana went back to Guatemala to volunteer at a local shelter helping migrants traveling with the caravan that left Honduras in

October of that year. There she stayed for one month. Throughout living in Guatemala and Mexico, Dayana said she had experienced racism. She proudly showed me a tattoo on her arm that she got April of 2019 that says, 'quiero que ya exista la vacuna contra el racismo' (I want the vaccine against racism to exist now).

Dayana said the problem with El Salvador is not the lack of employment but rather the lack of opportunities to thrive. She told me she has always wanted to stay in her country, but there are too many problems. In 2016, police killed her brother after confusing him for a robber.

She said the United States is a country with rights. The United States should believe what migrants say: "For them we are liars; they're not lies, the murders aren't lies, the femicides aren't lies, the extortions aren't lies, the government corruption isn't a lie, the drug dealers aren't lies, none of it is."

Dayana learned about asylum through online videos. In the videos, she learned she needed to walk to the United States side and present herself to ask for asylum. When she got to Tijuana, she walked to PedWest San Ysidro Port-of-Entry until she got to the United States side. There, an immigration official told her she needed to go back to El Chaparral and sign up on the metering list.

Official: Go back, you don't ask for the number here!

Dayana: With all due respect, I understand you're upset but I haven't crossed through any points I shouldn't have.

Official: If you cross, I'm going to write down you crossed illegally.

Dayana went back to El Chaparral and signed up on for the metering list. When I spoke

to her in spring 2019 she was waiting for her number to be called.

Similar to Limay, Dayana spent months in Tapachula, Mexico waiting for her humanitarian visa to legally transit through Mexico. As Andreas (2003) and Rosas (2012) point out in their research, transit countries like Mexico determine who gets to and doesn't get to transit through to the United States. In Mexico, migrants traveling without proper documentation are subject to deportation. Therefore, many migrants spend months waiting on legal documentation.

Elizabeth

Due to a lack of work in her home country of Honduras, Elizabeth regularly migrated for work. She has been to Belize, where she spent years working on banana plantations. She was planning on moving to Panama for work but decided to follow one of her daughters who went to Mexico to get residency status.

Elizabeth is 50 years old and a mother of five. In addition to the lack of work, Elizabeth said she left Honduras because she wanted to escape her husband's abuse. He was a street singer who showed up drunk most nights and would hit her. She settled in the border community of Tenosique, Tabasco, and requested and received a Mexican humanitarian visa. She then filed for residency. After waiting a year for residency and receiving no updates, she left for Mexico City.

Elizabeth told me she suffered when she lived in Mexico City. She worked long hours cleaning a hospital and the cold weather was too much to handle. She said that the people are not kind and often take advantage of immigrants by having them work long hours for little pay. There, she met with officials for an update on her residency application. After 6 months of

waiting, she decided to leave for Tijuana and ask for asylum in the United States.

She is on the metering list in Tijuana. If she is not let inside the United States, she plans to go back to Honduras to pick up her daughter, then return to Tijuana. She said there are work opportunities in Tijuana. She is also looking at getting a passport and flying to Spain, where one of her daughters' lives.

Elizabeth, similar to other women, spent months in Mexican border towns waiting for proper documentation to travel. As Andreas (2003) and Rosas (2012) point out in their research, destination countries influence transit countries to propose restrictions to limit the number of migrants transiting through. In some cases, particularly in Mexico the time spent waiting for a humanitarian visa has increased. After obtaining her visa, Elizabeth applied for residency, she was determined to stay in Mexico, but after waiting months on her residency she decided to seek legal status elsewhere, the United States.

Ana, her husband and two daughters

Ana lost her three sons within 7 months. Two were kidnapped and murdered, while the youngest was strangled in prison. After his death, she still received extortion calls. The 52-year-old mother left Guatemala with her husband Andres, two daughters, 15-year-old Alexa and 23-year-old Fatima.

Ana's family drove to Tapachula, Mexico, where they waited for a humanitarian visa. Fatima's boyfriend knew some people who gave them the visa within a few weeks. They then flew to Mexico City and boarded a flight from Mexico City to Tijuana. When the family arrived in Tijuana, they crawled under an opening at the border, near Playas de Tijuana. Shortly after

they were apprehended and spent four days in la hielera, a frigid holding cell in Customs and Border Protection facilities. Since Fatima is over the age of 18, she was sent to a detention center in Arizona, while Ana, Alexa, and Andres were sent back to Mexico under the program Migration Protection Protocols, a Trump era program that had certain asylum seekers await their asylum case in Mexico.

> "I wouldn't have crossed illegally had I known [about the metering list]; I wouldn't have exposed my daughter; we'd still be together," she said.

Ana remembers Custom and Border Patrol officers taunting her. She said the CBP officers of Latino descent were more vocal about their frustrations. She said one almost hit Andres because he was mad. She remembers them saying things like, "Why do you come here? Why does everyone come here? You all are beggars!"

As scholars have pointed out, destinations countries increasingly utilize neighboring "transit countries" to limit the number of migrants traveling through (Andreas 2003) (Rosas 2012). Ana and her family were forced to wait in Tapachula for their humanitarian visa. They happened to know someone working with the government, so their documents were quickly issued to them.

Maricela, her husband and son

In October 2018, Maricela, her husband Adrian, and son Mateo left Honduras after a gang threatened them. In November, the family was deported from the Mexican state of Chiapas back to Honduras. Shortly after being deported, they returned to Chiapas, where they requested a Mexican humanitarian visa. They lived there for three months but returned to Honduras when

money dried up. In March of 2019, the family left Honduras for the United States.

The family did not plan on going to the United States, but Mexico was becoming increasingly dangerous. They decided to head to Tijuana, since they knew the caravan that left Honduras in October of 2018 traveled through there. The family crossed into the United States illegally. Maricela told me in May of 2019 that she did not sign up for the metering list because she did not want to wait three to four months for her number to be called. "One wants to get to their destination sooner; we couldn't wait; where we were going to work, find food, sleep?" she asked.

The family was shortly returned to Mexico under Migration Protection Protocols to await their court hearings. She told me she learned about the program while she was in la hielera. Other women who were detained with her told her she would be returned to Mexico and that, at the time, the program was only applicable at ports-of-entry in California. She has been to two immigration courts for MPP. Maricela said that, had she known about MPP, she would have entered through another border town. She is not sure what she will do next. She has considered jumping the border in another state but is afraid her record will appear and she will be returned.

Similar to Limay, Maricela and her family were deported back to Honduras their first time crossing into Mexico. They were unaware they needed to request a humanitarian visa. Andreas (2003) and Rosas (2012) show that destination countries like the United States use transit countries like Mexico, to limit the number of migrants traveling through. One of those roadblocks includes having to request a humanitarian visa to travel through Mexico.

Conclusion

Migrants face increased vulnerability throughout their migration journey. In many cases,

state factors play a pivotal role in the experiences of migrants. The women I interviewed said their migration journey through Mexico was relatively peaceful except for some encounters with state actors, in this case Mexican federal officials, INAMI (National Institute of Migration) officials. The women traveled in late 2018 and early 2019 and said these officials set multiple checkpoints throughout the country, leading to increased abuse of power. Most of the women who traveled after March 2019, said the journey was relatively peaceful, with less checkpoints. They did share that they spent multiple months at border towns between Mexico and Guatemala seeking a humanitarian visa to safely travel through Mexico. State actors actively hindered these women in moving forward in their migrant journey. These experiences are similar to those economic migrants and refugees encounter. Economic migrants traveling through Mexico can also spend months waiting on a humanitarian visa to legally travel. Similarly, refugees spend a considerable amount of time in refugee camps, awaiting an opportunity to resettle. Despite the tactics deployed by state actors, migrants are adamant and determined to make it to the United States. They are willing to continue their journey, even if they don't make it. They are relentless. If they have decided on migrating to the United States, their first choice is the United States, afterwards they consider Mexico or returning home, depending on their background. Part of their choice is circumstantial; can they return home and be safe? Or can they relocate within Mexico? For others, as described by Carling (2002), the desire to migrate is fundamental in a person's decision-making. While many have the desire to migrate, not everyone can, due to circumstances. Thus, when presented with the opportunity to migrate, people opt for that decision.

While my interviews offer a glimpse into understanding the decision-making processes of migrants, they do not provide a comprehensive explanation, given my sample is limited. I

interviewed women at Tijuana shelters between January 2019 and June 2019. Since these women were staying at migrant shelters, resources such as legal advice were more readily available to them than to women outside these organizations. In addition, the sheer number of women in the shelter facilitated the process of discussion among them. Thus, many shared information about asylum and the process, given their experiences. Even within the shelter population, the women all traveled to Tijuana at different stages in their lives and experienced different policies in the countries they traveled through. Those who I interviewed in January and February either traveled with the fall 2018 caravan or shortly after. They did not stop in Tapachula to request a humanitarian visa. Those who I interviewed between March and June traveled after the initial group. They spent weeks to months waiting on their humanitarian visa. Some of them did not intend to migrate to the United States, but opted to after violence increased.

While the women did report abuses towards other migrants, only two women reported direct abuse towards themselves. One woman traveled through Mexico in early 2019 and fell victim to kidnappers. Fortunately, she and the other captives were able to successfully escape. Another woman reported her cousin forcing her into prostitution upon arriving in Tijuana. She too, managed to escape her cousin and find refuge in a migrant shelter. Similarly, scholars have long explored the vulnerability economic migrants face, including kidnapping and prostitution (Simkhada 2010; Vogt 2018).

State actors fundamentally influence the decision-making process of asylum seekers throughout their journey and at the border. Below I categorize three pillars of influence:

Influence at the second country border

- Occurs when a destination country outsources their influence on a second

county border, encouraging them to implement restrictive measures to limit migration

- Examples:
    - Requirement of proper documentation to travel
    - Prolonging wait times for proper documentation to discourage migration
    - The southern Mexican border serving as the United States' southern border essentially.

Influence through transit of second country

- Forced checkpoints throughout the second country that:
    - Request proper documentation to travel
    - Forcing migrants to pay fees to continue travel
    - Physically and emotionally assaulting migrants through intimidation tactics
    - Utilize racial profiling to seeks out specific migrants

Influence at destination country border

- State agencies on both sides of the border utilizing intimidation tactics
    - Customs and Border Protection agents at port-of-entry threatening migrants that if they do not turn back they will mark their file as "illegal entry"
    - Grupo Beta agents asking migrants who paid them to migrate and why

they didn't migrate to another state instead

- State agencies on both sides of the border telling migrants which asylum method to pursue
    - Grupo Beta agents encouraging people to sign up for the metering list rather than crossing illegally
    - Border Patrol agents asking migrants to sign up on the metering list rather than crossing illegally

As discussed earlier, Grupo Beta, Mexican federal authorities, and in some cases, United States Customs and Border Patrol officials played a pivotal role in the journeys, and ultimately, the decisions the women I interviewed made. Other women reported Grupo Beta officials questioning their asylum claims and reasoning. A woman from Guatemala fleeing gang violence was asked, "Why the United States? Can't you go to another state?" Alejandra, the Mexican woman fleeing cartel violence mentioned in the earlier chapter, said a Grupo Beta official who transported her to a local shelter was upset with her. He confronted her, asking, "How much are they paying you to come here? Tell me the truth. How much?" Despite being discouraged, the women I spoke to continued the asylum process.

Forced migration and economic migration literature is key in providing an understanding of the transit experiences and decision-making process at the border, of refugees and economic migrants. This literature can be used to understand what asylum seekers, specifically those from Mexico and Central America experience. This chapter argues state actors are fundamental in influencing migrant's decisions. In the next chapter, I conclude by summarizing these findings and suggesting other realms scholars should consider studying in the future.

CONCLUSION

While research exists on the decision-making process of economic migrants, most recently amidst the Syrian refugee crisis focus shifted to refugees' decision-making process. In the Western Hemisphere, the United States has witnessed an increase in migrants seeking asylum at the southern border (Lind 2018; Fry 2019). However, few scholars examine the decision-making process of asylum seekers from Mexico, Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala (Amuedo-Dorantes and Puttitanun 2016) (Brigden, 2018) (Clemens 2017) (Morrison and May 1994) (Stanley 1987) (Vogt, 2018). Scholars exploring refugee decision-making find that insecurity and instability influence them to migrate (Kvittingen, Valenta, Tabbara, Baslan, & Berg, 2018). In addition, for other's their migration journey is not linear, but rather done in multiple steps (Papadopoulou 2004; Collyer 2010; Brekke and Brochmann 2015; Valenta, Zuparic-Iljic and Vidovic 2015). In addition, push and pull factors influence decision-making. Violence, economic conditions, and human rights push people to consider migration.

In Chapter 2: Why Migrate? How violence and economic deterioration prompt migration I argued forced migration and economic migration literature can be used to understand the decision-making process of asylum seekers, since asylum seekers face similar challenges like poverty, human rights violations, and dire economic conditions. Similar to forced and economic migrants, asylum seekers encounter push and pull factors that may facilitate their migration process. For some women in my project, high rates of violence from organized crime groups served as push factors for them to seek refuge in the United States. Women facing those circumstances decided to migrate more instantaneous, when they ultimately feared staying would yield more violence or death. For other women, who migrated for economic reasons I consider Carling's (2002) work on the aspiration and ability to migrate. These women had a desire to

migrate, but never acted on it due to limited resources and inaccessibility. Their wish became a reality when modes of migration, such as asylum facilitated the process. They migrated when economic opportunities became scarce but did say ongoing violence in their native country further pushed them to leave. In addition, potential migrants are more likely to migrate if someone from their community has migrated before. Furthermore, it is imperative to consider individual characteristics of these women. Most of the women I interviewed were young mothers with no fixed plan, but a fixed destination: the United States.

In Chapter 3: Experiences of Transit and Decisions at the border, I described how migrants are vulnerable throughout their migration journey. State actors are instrumental in the experiences of migrants, whether that be through facilitating their migration process or impeding it. The women I spoke with explained how they encountered Mexican federal officials, INAMI (National Institute of Migration) officials throughout their journey. Those who traveled in late 2018 and early 2019, said officials had multiple checkpoints. Those who traveled through Mexico after March 2019 said there were less checkpoints, but they spent many months on the Mexican-Guatemala border awaiting a humanitarian visa to travel throughout Mexico. Despite these setbacks these asylum seekers were adamant about making it to the United States. Of the women I spoke with, one reported falling victim to kidnappers throughout her journey.

Throughout my interviews, it was clear state actors whether Mexican or American influenced the decision-making process of asylum seekers throughout their journey and at the border. I developed three pillars of influence that I detailed in the previous chapters. It is the following: influence at the second country border (requiring proper documentation to travel, prolonging wait times for the documentation), influence through transit of second country (forced checkpoints with officials asking for proper documentation, charging a fee or bribe to

pass, physically and emotionally assaulting migrants, racial profiling) and influence at destination country border (state agencies on both sides of the border threatening migrants and state agencies giving migrants advice). Forced migration and economic migration literature is instrumental in helping us understand the decision-making process of migrants, including their decision to leave, their transit experiences and their decision-making process at the border.

This project shows there is an interactivity of national border policies between destination countries and countries of transit. Specifically, immigration officials on both sides of the border, in this case Mexican and American officials, utilize similar tactics to hinder migrants from continuing their journey. For example, Grupo Beta and CBP encouraging people to sign up for the metering list, Mexico requiring humanitarian visas to travel and militarized checkpoints throughout Mexico. In addition, there's the interactivity of the economic and violence conditions that prompted an initial decision to leave. For example, economic opportunities depleted due to ongoing violence.

I used interviews with women at Tijuana women shelters from 2019-2020. Their experiences do not reflect that of all asylum seekers and omit those who were in the area but did not stay at a shelter. In addition, the interviews were conducted during a limited period, which consequently affects what information people had access to at that time. In addition, there are multiple POE (ports of entry) on the Mexican border, therefore this sample provides only a glimpse into migrant life in Tijuana. In addition, Tijuana is home to the busiest port of entry in the world and for decades has been a hub for migrants, with established networks advocating for migrants (Diaz & Gonzalez, 2020) (*The Migrant Caravan,* 2019).

Future studies could compare the decision-making experiences of asylum seekers at different port of entries since migrants are exposed to different information and travel through

various migration routes. In addition, I'm particularly interested in the decision-making of migrants once they arrive in the United States, particularly throughout their process in immigration court. At what point do people decide to continue their asylum case or abandon it? Nevertheless, climate change will become a more common decision to leave, therefore more research on this topic would be imperative given the current situation, with the most recent category 4 Hurricanes Iota and Hurricane Eta affecting Honduras and Guatemala and increased migration from that region (Berardelli & Niemczyk, 2021).

This project asked 39 women to share their migration experiences with my colleagues and me. It is imperative I acknowledge their sacrifices, their dedication, and their current status. Of the 39 women I interviewed, I've maintained contact with 19. The other women I was unable to connect with, many changed their phone numbers, never had a fixed contact number, or returned to their home country. Regardless, I hope they found the refuge and stability they longed for.

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