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Las Patronas and their agency about the migration of Central America in transit through Mexico

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Abstract

In a context in which migration policies are increasingly severe, searching to limit the mobility of people, especially those who have non-business or high-income tourism purposes, discrimination, criminalization, and violence emerge towards those who do not have the "established requirements". As a counterbalance, the emergence of civil society collectives that build support or assistance networks for vulnerable migrants is worth noting. With the information obtained through a multi-sited ethnography and taking as analytical reference the agency and experience proposed by Norman Long, this article presents the case of Las Patronas and their actions around Central American transit migration through Mexico. The women, Las Patronas, are transforming the reality of migrants in transit and their community. Their actions on behalf of migrants in transit have gradually become a focus (and a role model) for other groups, volunteers, and even institutions at the national or international levels. Hence, its community has little by little benefited from the actions of Las Patronas and external agents.

Keywords: Las Patronas. Agency. Transit migration. Experience. Multi-sited ethnography.

Las Patronas e sua construção de agência em torno a migração centro-americana em trânsito por México

Resumo

Em um contexto em que as políticas migratórias são cada vez mais restritas visando limitar a mobilidade das pessoas, principalmente daquelas que são realizadas com fins não comerciais ou de turismo de alta renda, as consequências tem sido a discriminação, criminalização e a violência para quem não têm os "requisitos estabelecidos". Como contrapeso, é preciso sinalizar a emergência de coletivos da sociedade civil que constroem redes de apoio para quem migra em situação de vulnerabilidade. Com informação obtida através de uma etnografia multisituada e tendo como referencial analítico a capacidade de agência e a experiência, proposta por Norman Long, este artigo apresenta o caso de "Las Patronas" e suas ações em torno da migração centro-americana em trânsito por México. As mulheres, "Las Patronas", estão transformando a realidade não apenas dos migrantes em trânsito, embora também da sua comunidade. A partir das suas ações em benefício dos migrantes de passagem se tornaram gradualmente o centro das atenções (e um exemplo a seguir) para

outros coletivos, voluntários e até instituições de nível nacional e internacional; assim, sua comunidade tem se beneficiado aos poucos das ações de “Las Patronas” e de agentes externos.

Palavras chaves: Las Patronas. Agência. Migração em trânsito. Experiência. Etnografia multisituada.

Las Patronas y su construcción de agencia en torno a la Migración centroamericana de tránsito por México

Resumen

En un contexto donde las políticas migratorias son cada vez más severas para limitar la movilidad de gente de bajos o nulos recursos que viajan de un país a otro sin documentos de migración “requeridos” para trabajar o escapar de circunstancias de violencia, opera fuertemente la discriminación, criminalización y violencia hacia tales personas; pero, como contrapeso, también surgen colectivos de la sociedad civil que construyen redes de apoyo hacia quienes migran en situación de vulnerabilidad. Con información obtenida a través de una etnografía multisituada y tomando como referencial analítico la capacidad de agencia y la experiencia, propuestas por Norman Long, en este artículo se presenta el caso de Las Patronas y sus acciones en torno a la migración centroamericana de tránsito por México. estas mujeres, están transformando la realidad no solo de los migrantes en tránsito, también de su comunidad. A partir de sus acciones en pro de los migrantes de paso se han convertido poco a poco en centro de atención (y ejemplo a seguir) para otros colectivos, voluntarios e incluso instituciones a nivel nacional e internacional; de ahí que, poco a poco, su comunidad se ha visto beneficiada por acciones de ellas y de agentes externos.

Palabras clave: Las Patronas. Agencia. Migración de tránsito. Experiencia. Etnografía multisituada.

1 Introduction

The mobility of people has become more and more apparent through the improvement of means of transport, but also due to the intensification of natural disasters, climate change and/or political-social conflicts. This mobility, chosen or forced, is accompanied by imaginaries and stereotypes, as well as hopes and dreams that, increasingly, at some point face violent contexts and/or situations of vulnerability, mainly those who mobilize in a non-documented way.

According to the EMIF Sur - data for the first quarter of 2020-, violence and insecurity in Central America have increased their migration. In addition to this, the main reason remains the adverse economic situation in their place of origin given by the lack of employment or, if there exists, the poor quality and the low income (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Causes of Central American migration toward the United States

Causas de la migración



Note: From Boletín de indicadores EMIF Sur 2018-2020.

<https://www.colef.mx/emif/datasets/indicadores/Emif%20Sur%20Indicadores%20Trimestrales%20Enero-Marzo%202020.pdf>

Since its existence, non-documented migration has been difficult to account for due to its nature itself. The Migration Data Portal has made global estimates to identify that the majority of non-documented migrants are located in Europe and the United States of America, "There were an estimated 11.3 million Non-documented migrants in the United States of America in 2016" (IOM's GMDAC, 2020).

Migration of multiple nationalities arrives in the United States of America, among them Mexicans and Central Americans; the latter transit through more than two countries to reach their destination, including, along the way, Mexican territory. Overwhelmed by political and/or socioeconomic conflicts, the governments of Central American countries often seem to omit or ignore the fact that their citizens leave because of their constitutional inability to "guarantee [them] economic and social well-being [...], having to resolve their personal and family survival and improvement" (GARCÍA-ZAMORA, 2007, p. 318).

In addition to these grounds, migration policies are becoming increasingly severe, criminalizing and discriminatory (MADERA; MARÍN, 2020), which has not stopped non-documented migratory flows; by contrast, how borders are crossed are diversifying, becoming more creative and also more complex, thereby increasing the risks and levels of security for the people involved. However, for those who have nothing more than their lives and human dignity to lose, emigration, even in adverse contexts, is a possible way out to a better tomorrow for them and their surroundings, and that is why they take the risk.

In Mexico some collectives seek to reduce the situations of vulnerability experienced by those who transit in a non-documented way through various parts of Mexican territory; most are people "by foot" who come together intending to help in some way to cover needs such as food, clothing or to recover some human rights such as the protection of life.

Since 1995, a collective made up almost entirely of rural women, known as Las Patronas, has worked to ensure that this claim for human rights and the satisfaction of the basic needs of those who transit "without papers" through Mexican territory are covered. These women, most of whom are relatives, began by giving away bread and milk one day when they returned from buying their breakfast at the village store, and 26 years later they continue to work in their refuge and dining room -even during the pandemic situation of COVID 19- so that their "brothers", as they call the migrants, have at least one taco to put in their mouths.

But who are Las Patronas? where do they find the money to feed so many people they don't even know? why do they support migrants passing through Mexico? and how have they constructed knowledge around their actions to support migrants passing through? (For example, the type of food that they give, the ways to deliver it or when the train is coming, etc.). Methodologically supported by a multi-sited ethnography (MARCUS, 2014) that allows us a dynamic look at the occupation and observation of different spaces even in a similar temporality, this article aims to identify how the collective called Las Patronas builds their capacity for the agency (LONG, 2007) to build support networks for Central American migrants in contexts of vulnerability during their transit through Mexican territory.

For Long (2007), agency is the ability to carry out actions based on processing daily experiences to build strategies or modes of action against those acts or omissions of the structures. Thus, the agency is a precept within the actor-centred theories, in which the reflector is on the agent (or subject) with the capacity to know, interpret and reflect on what he/she is living; that is, to recognize the context, in this way, people become social agents by intervening in local spaces. In this text, the leading role is played by the women of Las Patronas who carry out their actions (it should be noted that they do not depend on external financing) in a space where they have an impact and also form networks with other subjects both within their community and with other external actors of different types (institutional, religious, academic, civil society, etc.).

From this perspective, social actors are not seen as apathetic to the realities that surround them. Their actions are the result of the transformation of what they know -or live- and that allows them to build strategies with the elements they have; thus, people are capable of ordering, systematizing, and processing their experiences to act, to build support networks, to influence the transformation of the lived reality, becoming agents.

It is important to emphasize the actors -in this instance, Las Patronas-, who through their reflective processes are recovering the knowledge of the field, the kitchen and care to try to remedy the problems in their social environment in a migratory scenario. For Long (2007), one of the main elements for the actors to recover their experience is the reflective capacity, which implies knowing, interpreting, and reflecting on what they are living at that moment: realities, vulnerabilities, opportunities or problems. In this way, the actors process these elements to change the situations that diminish their quality of life or break their reality.

The agency builds a resistance or protection from that external that breaks with the realities of the actors. Daily experiences and lived experiences are referred to by Long as the small details of everyday life (LONG & LONG, 1992; LONG, 2007) on

which the actors focus their attention to understand their environment and build strategies as situations progress, and therefore require a dynamicity that is refined with experience.

Although agency arises from the vulnerability and rationality of the actors, as well as from their desires, practices or capacities, other capacities such as understanding, interpretation or questioning are constructed to re-act in the face of what happens, since although the circumstances are similar the responses may be different and even the construction of agency may vary; in this case, Las Patronas and the other people living in the same migratory context have different reactions and actions.

But what is experience? This can be understood as that which is lived daily, in this text it is understood as "a cognitive activity, it is a way of constructing the real, it is above all "verify it", experiencing it. Experience constructs phenomena from the categories of understanding and reason" (DUBET, 1994, p. 93). In other words, experience is a set of everything that has been lived, of the habits one has or what has been previously learned, and this will influence people's actions. By converting their experience into strategies, people become social actors who can be said to have agency in their actions.

Can be said that have agency in the sense that they have the capacity to know, judge problem situations and organise "appropriate" responses. Social actors appear in a variety of forms: individuals, informal groups or interpersonal networks, organizations, collective groupings, and what are sometimes identified as "macro" actors (LONG, 2007, p. 442).

An important element for Long (2007), in terms of the construction of agency, is the space in which the routine is broken, and processes are constructed or interact, this is the territory, which, although it has been reconfigured from the processes of globalization, disputes or interactions still need a place to emerge. For Long they are divided into three: social field, domain, and arena: "Social field: the concept notes the heterogeneous character of social action resulting from the intersection of different domains." (LONG, 2007, p. 123).

Domain: to identify areas of social life that are organized by reference to a central core or cluster of values that, even if not perceived in the same way by all those involved, are nevertheless recognized as a site of certain rules, norms and values that imply a degree of social commitment (VILLAREAL, cited in LONG, 2007, p. 124).

In this text the concept of arena is used:

They are social situations where contests over issues, resources, values and representations take place (...); they are social and spatial sites where actors confront each other, mobilize social relations and deploy discursive cultural and other cultural means for the achievement of specific ends, including perhaps just staying in the game (LONG, 2007, p. 125).

Arenas are fundamental for actors to build their capacities, but at the same time they are the spaces where values, norms and experiences are contested; in the

arenas, there are diverse realities and multiple actors, i.e., there are also diverse experiences and multiple actions.

The recovery of the notions of the social field, domain and arenas are fundamental to understanding the actions of Las Patronas, but fundamentally to observe how they have been transformed up to the present time. The text is divided into two parts: the first part contextualizes the situations of vulnerability experienced by Central Americans to understand how and from where the actions of these women arise, and the second part presents Las Patronas, emphasizing the construction of agency and their mobilization to change not only their reality but also that of Central Americans transiting through Mexico.

2 Las Patronas, the transit through Mexico and vulnerability

For Central American migration, the location of Mexican territory places it as a transit zone for most of them, and/or destination for others. For all of them, it is a space where vulnerabilities and the absence of rights converge on one side, but on the other, where an active emergency of individuals and/or collectives that build support networks to address these vulnerabilities converge, as well as for awareness-raising and advocacy to improve the conditions of those who, in their migration, transit through Mexican territory.

This section presents a tour of the migratory situation of Central Americans in transit through Mexico to explain the situations, conjunctures and acts that lead Central Americans to pass through Mexico, as well as the vulnerabilities they face. To begin, it is necessary to understand that the objective of transit migration is only to pass through certain territories to reach their destination; thus,

Irregular or Non-documented transit migration through Mexico is understood as the flow composed of Central Americans -nationals of Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua- who travel without documents proving legal stay or allowing them to move to the United States, using Mexico as a transit route (MARTÍNEZ, COBO & NARVÁEZ, 2015, p. 129).

Non-documented transit migration began to grow in the 1980s due to civil wars, political conflicts, and changes in Latin America. With the imposition of severe migration policies, migration did not diminish, but the risks faced by Central Americans passing through Mexico, who face multiple situations of vulnerability and violence, have increased exponentially. For many, the passage between Mexico and the United States is "the largest migratory corridor", due to the exchange and continuous flow of people, mainly the so-called low-skill workers.

In this regard, Central American migration has transited through Mexico since 1940 and has had different peaks and motives for mobilization that, according to Anguiano & Corona (2009), range from urban and economic growth, through the Central American armed conflict between 1970-1980 and natural disasters. One of the elements that reinforced the migration of Central Americans and Mexicans was the demand for workers from the United States and the United States and the implementation of treaties such as NAFTA or MERCOSUR, which lowered costs in agricultural production -mainly- in the United States or maquiladora companies.

However, from the guerrillas, the flow of Central Americans to Mexico and the United States is constant: due to labour, economic causes or situations of violence and threats that mostly come from gangs and/or criminal groups, paramilitaries, etc. For Narváez (2019), the contemporary migration of Central Americans has transformed since 2001; placing this year as a breakthrough for the hardening of migration policies based on the "foreign-enemy" discourse that, although it was mainly imposed by the United States, had an impact on the securitization of other countries-severe immigration policies, displacement of army or police forces, construction of walls, greater immigration control in airports, train, or bus stations, etc.

Since the economic crisis and the increase in "daily" violence through gangs or maras, Central Americans migrate more frequently and the profile of those who migrate changes; they no longer only migrate men of productive age, they begin to migrate women, children, and adolescents and, at the same time, migrants are creating new strategies for moving and how to do it. One example is that according to figures from the Documentation Network of Migrant Rights Organizations (REDODEM), in 2016 approximately 34,234 people migrated, of which 11% were women and 8% were minors -either accompanied or alone- (REDODEM, 2017). On the other hand, in 2018, before the migrant exodus, 36,190 people were registered, of which almost 20% were women and the number of minors reached 10.7% (REDODEM, 2019).

The diversity of migrants is related to the modification of routes and/or "appearance" of new roads, as a consequence of the implementation of policies by the Mexican State that hindered or criminalized the passage of Central Americans. At the same time, others were created that seek to help them in transit, make them visible and/or, in some cases, the Special Migration Program, the Southern Border Plan or the Beta Groups, contain them. Neither the new difficulties, the resurgence of migration policies, nor the State's containment groups have stopped mobility; on the contrary,

The dispersion of migrants on migratory routes (jungle, border, pacific, mother mountains, maritime); diversification in the use of land transport (rail, passenger bus, cargo trucks, private cars or local public transport) (...); the consolidation of strategic places and spaces in the various sections and routes (meeting points and temporary stays); and the permanent involvement of organized crime actors in trafficking networks, are some of the objective elements that translate into a disruption of trajectories and projects (NARVÁEZ, 2019, p. 20).

These elements influenced the phenomenon that broke with the migratory "routine" in 2018, better known as the migratory exodus, which began with a first wave of almost 10,000 migrants (approximate figures) giving rise to the transit in the Mexican territory of more than 30,000 migrants -only of the exodus- in 2 years. One of the main reasons for observing this way of migrating is to try to minimize the vulnerabilities suffered by Central Americans in Mexico.

The mobility of these migrants is made more difficult by being "non-documented" and by not going through institutions, seeking alternative paths that are often dangerous or contacting people who instead of helping them make them targets of extortion, assaults, beatings, etc. Herrera (cited in REDODEM, 2015, p. 10) mentions that policies that emphasized the criminalization of non-documented

migration, maximized the criminal business of traffickers of subjects and various forms of violence against those Central Americans who want to cross Mexican territory. One of the most marked or mediated examples of this violence is the massacre of 72 migrants in 2010 in San Fernando, Tamaulipas, who were kidnapped, tortured, and killed.

Death and injuries are almost a constant for this type of migration in its passage through Mexican territory. The act against the 72 migrants was not an isolated situation; most Central Americans have suffered direct violence, face beatings, assaults, extortion, kidnappings and even death by criminal groups, the maras or Mexican institutions. According to López (2013) until 2013, 70% of Central Americans had suffered some kind of injury, while for REDODEM (2019, p. 55) the exact number of Central Americans who are victims of a violent act has grown by 10%, taking into account that not all migrants report such acts.

This is related to how they travel, such as the train called "La Bestia" (the beast), or the involvement of criminal groups or organizations that are throughout Mexico; In addition, the factor of gender or membership of a vulnerable group such as women, children, or LGBT persons, who experience violence differently and more intensively.

Most Central American migrants use the railway infrastructure to move because the distances are long and many of them do not have the economic solvency to travel by bus or plane, in addition to immigration controls or the requirements for access to these resources. Faced with this, migrants are vulnerable in spaces such as "La Bestia", wastelands, mountains, etc. For example, the railway infrastructure on the periphery of cities involves very lonely places where non-documented migrants may fall victim to criminal groups; sometimes they cross localities where they are extorted by the authorities themselves.

On top of that, the train in movement brings with it various vulnerabilities, from the impossibility of having spaces to sleep, eat or wash, that is, basic minimum rights for any human being, to injuries or loss of life when falling from the train. The wagons are not adapted for the transport of persons and the migrants must travel on the roof of the wagons or in the spaces between wagons, stopping from the wagon structures, clutching the stairs, or tied to the roof:

"Getting on the train is an extremely risky action, which requires skill and strength since any mistake at the time of climbing involves the loss of some member [of the body] or even life." (CHÁVEZ & GUEVARA, cited in ARANDA, 2016, p. 85).

Central Americans in transit through Mexico interact directly or indirectly with those who live in this territory, from the fact of living temporarily in a space such as the areas close to immigration controls or train crossings, those spaces where migrants walk or consume products, etc., but also more closely with individuals and collectives who try to address these vulnerabilities and support Central Americans in their transit, one of them is the case of the present study, Las Patronas.

It is important to mention that Migrant Assistance Centers, shelters, community kitchens and refugees are located throughout the country and are not always easy to document. Many arise to address emergencies such as the migrant exodus in 2018, Haitian migration in recent years or the health emergency by COVID 19, but several of them disappear soon, for this reason, efforts have been created by various institutes and academies such as El Colegio de la Frontera Norte (COLEF), the

REDODEM, among others. Up to March 2020 (LI NG, 2020), a total of 96 spaces were documented, made up of civil society, NGOs, government institutions and collectives.

Figure 1. Map of the collectives that support migrants in transit



Note: Map based on the information gathered during fieldwork using the Comedor Esperanza del Migrante's mural as a base.

Many of the mappings that have been built to observe Migrant Assistance Centers (MAC), shelters or community kitchens are thanks to the information of those who migrate, as well as the dangerous points where they can be found for example where the criminal groups can attack them or blackmail them (charge the “derecho de paso”) and even where there are migratory checkpoints. This information is reflected in the records of shelters or community kitchens, but also in most of these places - especially in southern Mexico- are represented in map murals such as in the 72 Hogar Refugio or the Community Kitchen and Shelter of Las Patronas (Figure 2).

Figure 2 shows that the various groups carry out their actions in a large part of Mexico and Figure 3 shows one of the main actions of Las Patronas, which is to provide food for migrants who pass on a moving train “La Bestia”, but How did they get to that?

Figure 2. Las Patronas and the food



Note: Personal elaboration, photo taken during fieldwork.

3 Las Patronas, agency, and women

The result of fieldwork is supported by multi-located ethnography, in this section, Las Patronas is presented as a collective, its actions and agency construction.

In 1995, in the town of La Patrona, in the municipality of Amatlán de Los Reyes, Veracruz, Mexico, when returning from shopping for their breakfast, two of the Romero sisters found the railway tracks obstructed by the train, near the family house ... the train and railway tracks are part of the landscape of his small village, however, that day, an event changes its presence in him and the perception of the habitants. Mounted on the wagons of the train several migrants told them "Mother I am hungry, mother gives us your bread"; they said that they took time to react (like most of us if we were in that situation) but in the end, they decided to "throw" their bread and milk to the people who came on the train. After this, they returned to their mother's house and told her the situation, Doña Leo, their mother, instead of getting angry proposed that the next day they prepare some lunches for the people who passed by on the train.

They had seen the train pass several times with people on top of it, they did not know who they were, or where they came from, but in their opinion, they had not eaten for many days, so they start to work. The trigger for the two sisters and the mother at that time was that the migrants asked for food, but; as mentioned by Long (2007), the daily routine, the practices of the subjects or what they experienced around situations of vulnerability have as a result -through internal processes- that people become agents employing rationalities that trigger the questioning of the situation that surrounds them. In other words, the fact these women saw the passage of the freight train with people in it every day and recognize their vulnerability -the lack of food- creates in them a need to transform their environment.

Central American migrants find themselves in situations of vulnerability to such a level that many of them know these situations as "normal" or "what has to happen," this becomes almost day-to-day see it, on the other hand, throughout Mexico, there are different civil organisations, governmental institutions and

collectives that try to reduce the impact of these vulnerabilities and awareness about the situation of migrants passing through Mexico (Figure 2). These groups arise mainly in environments close to migration points, stations, or train passages.

Our humanitarian work began with something so simple, feeding migrants, that we never thought or even imagined we could get to this point. Providing food is an action that seems simple; however, something so daily is a vital necessity for many: it is then that providing a "taco" can save a life (ROMERO, 2013, p. 1).

According to the coordinator of Las Patronas, their fundamental task is to feed the people who are moving on top of La Bestia. However, over time they are modifying their actions to continue doing the same, but they are also creating new strategies to remedy other situations such as the migrant exodus or the pandemic of COVID-19, Las Patronas is one of the many shelters/community kitchens that those who are moving "irregularly" know or have heard of him and know that, if they if "they se ponen truchas¹, they can have a taco" (Interviewee 2, 2018).

After 26 years (Figure 4), Las Patronas are a reference in helping migrants who transit the Mexican territory and although after several documentaries, multiple conferences and interviews, many people know the story of how this family began to share their food after going to the store and staying "on the other side of the tracks", being this first reaction as they say "something that any Christian would do when seeing that there is a brother in trouble". But is that true? Would anyone in that situation act selflessly and share their food with someone they don't know?

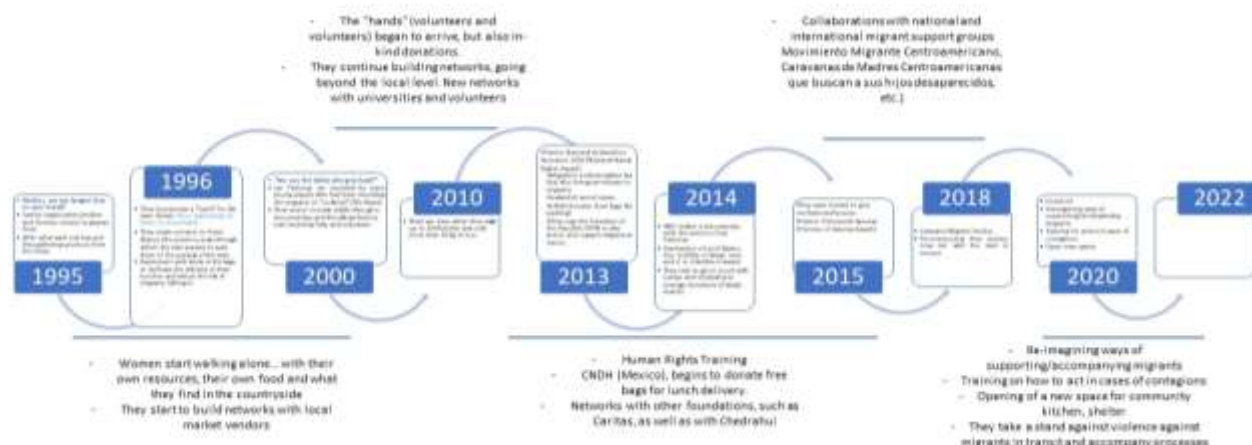
The rationality of the agents, for Long (2007), goes beyond a simple cost-benefit exercise, and is not given mechanically, for these women the "give a taco" did not come from thinking if it suited them economically or if they won something in the act, but neither can it be said how some have qualified their actions as being "good" or "is because they are women". Although their actions began from simple actions such as knowing how to cook, there is a whole process back where the experience, the resources that surround them -moral, physical, economic, social- and everything previously learned becomes actions.

This process of turning what has been lived into agency so that the subjects can transform their reality comes with how they deal with the situations that come up in their reality, as mentioned by Long (2007), under the most extreme forms of coercion even in a situation of uncertainty, people can become social actors as they get the ability to know and the ability to act, in other words, to know what the situation is and what is around and with it to be able to act.

For Las Patronas, their agency begins with the recognition of the situation they were living in and what they had at their fingertips, they comment that at the beginning each one put what they could out of their groceries -rice, bags, beans, tortillas etc.- to put together this food. The recognition of the situation and the resources with which they counted goes with the ability to know and when they first give their food on the train tracks and wait for the passage of the beast begins their ability to act (Figure 4).

¹ Mexican slang to say "wise up"

Figure 4. Las Patronas, 26 years of building agency... and counting



Note: Table compiled based on the work field.

They began their actions from the experience they have, such as cooking, packing food, caring for wounds, and even finding ways to get more food such as going to the countryside to look for what could be cooked or negotiating with people who sold at markets to get what they needed, taking this as an example.

People process their own experiences of "projects" and "intervention"; they build their own experiences and considering the experiences of other groups within their socio-spatial networks; that is, they can learn from differential responses, strategies, and experiences of others outside the designated population or the specific action programme (LONG, 2007, p. 79).

In this sense, the construction of actions by Las Patronas has to do with the context and experiences of each of the members, but also those of the members as a collective, since the interaction with outsiders such as migrants, train drivers and even neighbours will influence the strategies and ways of carrying out their actions. They acted alone, that is to say, only the family was involved in the production of food and the distribution of food, until "some guys" who came on the train filmed them while they were distributing food on the side of the tracks, little by little they became known by several documentaries, films and interviews that they began to do, people wondered who are these ladies who "throw" food when the train passes? And then they began to receive people who wanted to help them with resources or hands, so they started with a system to organize the donations and the stay of the volunteers.

When you arrive at their home, now transformed into a community kitchen and small shelter, Las Patronas welcome you not only with gratitude for the support, but at the same time they begin to explain the basic things you need to know to do the work, for example: what food has to be in the "lunch", how to tie the bag, how to deliver the food or water, and at what height of the tracks to deliver the food. For them it is fundamental to share this information not only so that it is known or to avoid accidents; for them, socializing what they have learned is to integrate people.

In this sense, the socialization of the experience and actions of Las Patronas has an impact on their social environment, so there are a greater number of resources, but at the same time it can be influenced at a higher level,

Agency - which we can recognize when particular actions produce a difference in a pre-existing state of affairs or course of events - is embodied in social relations, and can only be effective through them, it is not only the result of possessing certain persuasive powers or forms of charisma; the ability to influence others or to let an order pass (LONG, 2007, p. 50).

The information they share is the result of processing what they have experienced during these 26 years and that through various situations they have been changing their strategy as they carry out their actions, an example of this is how they deliver the food, at what height and when. The distance at which the food is delivered is necessary for the person coming on the train to reach the bag with food, but at the same time the person delivering the food does not run the risk of being "pulled" by the train, the position of the hands is also important to make the delivery easier; from the experiences and their results, this has been adapted over time, both the content of the bag, the bag itself and the type of knot.

According to Long (2007, p. 53), strategies go with the constructions of individuals and are extracted "from a baggage of available discourses (verbal and non-verbal)" that are shared with other individuals throughout their lives and, of course, from their actions. In this sense, they share how they have been carrying out different strategies for what is happening, an example of this is what Patrona M. commented.

And I would think about it and grab my backpack and go to the field to bring white quelite², and then there were the matotas³ and I would go to cut it and then I would come loaded and I would tell them to help me chop it and they would help me. We would wash it and put it in a pan and put the quelite in it, we would add oil, slices of onion and slices of red snapper and we would steam it and make the white quelite (PATRONA M, 2017).

What she said denotes the search for resources and the creation of strategies to feed people, which, as they say, "is what they know how to do"; for them, cooking is a routine element as for many women in Mexico, and they adapt it to protect external beings, such as migrants. Thus, cooking, an act that was part of their daily life, led them to look for ways to obtain elements from the countryside -which did not imply additional expenses-but also led them to build strategies to transform their daily lives and enhance their knowledge when there was a need to improvise.

At first sight, the experience of this Patrona may seem to be individual, but when she socializes it with her daughters and the other members of the collective, and with practice the experience becomes collective; as well as the ability to know what they have around them and to do what they know is fundamental for the collective of Las Patronas to be formed and established for more than 26 years as defenders of the migrant. This collective is mostly made up of women from a rural

² Green leaf plants of the spinach family.

³ Slang to speak about a big wild plant.

environment, moved by feelings such as empathy or pain - as they refer to them - for seeing that there are some who are left without "food".

Are the women, Las Patronas, who are transforming the reality not only of migrants in transit but also of their community? Through their actions on behalf of migrants in transit, they have gradually become the centre of attention (and an example to follow) for other collectives, volunteers and even institutions at the national and international levels; hence, their community has gradually benefited from the actions of Las Patronas and external agents. In this sense, Sen (2000) mentions the importance of women's agency.

Women have ceased to be passive recipients of aid aimed at improving their welfare and are seen, both by men and by themselves, as agents of change: as dynamic promoters of social transformations that can alter the lives of both women and men (SEN, 2000, p. 233).

Las Patronas are not only transforming the social environment and supporting Central Americans, but they are also transforming themselves internally. An example of this is the participation of one of them in the collective, who, although she knew about the actions of her sisters and her mother, became involved in the collective after her daughters shared with her what they experienced daily.

My daughters would go to help their aunts' collect bottles and I would hear them whining together and I asked them, "What's wrong? (...) And then they said "Oh, mom, the train passed and it was carrying a lot of people", and there were families with children, with children!, very sentimental and to see that on the train there were girls, little boys, I said oh my God, what are those children going to do, to fall off, God forbid they die in when the train brake [sic], it gave me feelings and that's why I want people to come and fall in love and help them. It changed our lives (PATRONA A, 2017).

In other words, what these members have experienced and socialized with their environment has an impact beyond information, it becomes a trigger for this other woman to help, in other words, her transformative actions start. This member of Las Patronas, after that and until this day, goes on with her actions to help those who pass by and she seeks to have a greater impact;

After that and seeing that many families were coming up, I told my sisters, we have to find out how we can help if we learn about the Red Cross or human rights, here they wanted to come and take the boys and we don't let them, so we have to study to know how to defend ourselves (PATRONA B, 2017).

Following this idea, the impact they want to achieve is related to their agency and how this element on the part of a woman has a direct impact on the change in today's society. Women have historically had a different place in the social system compared to men; they have been built in an inequitable system where they are subordinated to roles and structures that prioritize the masculine. For Sen (2000), the agency of this sector is necessary for the construction of social welfare and correlates elements such as education, health, and alphabetization for the construction of opportunities to transform social reality.

The actions of Las Patronas have changed over time, at the beginning they gave food to people on a moving train, and they sought alliances (they continue to do so to date) in various spheres, from the ladies (vendors) of the market who "trusted" or gave away their food, to institutions such as the National Human Rights Commission (CNDH) in order to have elements to support their actions; thus, their impact is given in multiple dimensions (Sen, 2000), economic, political and social level. Figure 5 shows a synthesis of the different actors with whom Las Patronas has been approaching, negotiating/discussing, and building alliances that allow them to diversify their actions on behalf of migrants in transit, while at the same time "professionalizing" their agency.

Figure 5. List of actors and groups with whose Las Patronas has worked with

National organizations	International organizations	Collectives that support and help the migrants	Another people
•Comision Nacional de Derechos Humanos •Figuras estatales (diputados y/o senadores, regidores, etc) •Cruz Roja •Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana •Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México •Universidad Autónoma de Aguascalientes •Fundación Avaaz •Hospital General de Córdoba •Personal del area de salud pública •Instituto Veracruzano de la Mujer •Grupo Industrial Masera, S.A. •Chedraui •Instituto Tecnológico de Monterrey •Universidad ANÁHUAC •Universidad Iberoamericana.	•Caritas •Acnur •Caravana de Madres Centroamericanas •Comité Internacional de la Cruz Roja •Movimiento Migrante Mesoamericano •Grupo NO VIOLENCIA: España. •Grupo de Jóvenes de "El Reino de Dinamarca" •Colectivos religiosos internacionales	•Ordenes de Franciscanos, Dominicos y Jesuitas •Casa del Migrante Saltillo •Hermanos en el camino •Dirección General de Atención a Migrante •Albergue Decanal Guadalupano (Tierra Blanca) •La 72 Hogar Refugio •Scalabrinianas misión para Migrantes y Refugiados. •Casa del migrante San Francisco de Asís •FM4 y los colectivos que conforman la REDODEM	•Directores de cine •Fotografos •Sociedad civil •Voluntarios nacionales e internacionales •Escuelas o centros culturales

Note: Personal elaboration.

Las Patronas sees themselves as rural women, without much academic training, who do "what they have to do", but at the same time they are aware that their actions are not easy, and that they must have their objectives very clearly marked to reach their goals, and this also helps them not to "get lost" when carrying out their actions.

Another example of how their agency is transforming their reality and their actions is their immersion in human rights. Most of the members mentioned that their lack of knowledge of the laws was their main fear, not for fear that something would happen to them personally, on the contrary, the search for training was to help migrants if something was done to them.

By defending the rights of migrants, we firmly believe that we are also defending the rights of everyone, regardless of nationality. Because in the absence of living conditions that allow one to develop in all humanly possible ways, without excessive pretensions or ambitions, all basic rights for everyone are violated or simply do not exist (ROMERO, 2013, p. 4).

In this sense, it is important to mention that just as the actions of Las Patronas are diverse and have been transforming, the spaces in which they act are also diverse. For Long (2007), these spaces of action and interaction are called arenas, since they

are not only the train tracks and the beast in motion, but they are not limited to acting only in those spaces, their actions are diverse from the space destined to the community kitchen, their community or those places where they go to give talks, the virtual platforms where they share their information or interact with other types of community.

Although the actions of this collection began with giving food on a moving train, as they have faced different situations over the past 26 years, their agency has been building not only strategies or networks but also multiplying their actions (Figures 5 and 6), according to the resources they have.

This diversity of actions takes place in multiple arenas, as can be seen in figure 6, and some of these actions are simultaneous, which makes the temporality reconfigure at the same time, this creates an impact beyond the locality where they are located or the territory that configures La Bestia. The actions of this collection also have an impact on their community, from food donations to the creation of workshops for children or women; these actions are important for the development of the community, of the migrants who pass through these spaces and even for international communities. Although Long (2007) speaks of the need for agency in general terms for local development, for Sen (2000) women's agency is fundamental for social change, this is related to the fact that women have long been in a position of subalternity and have been denied tools that were intrinsic for men.

Figure 6. Las Patronas' actions



Note: Personal elaboration, photos recovered in the field work and at <https://www.facebook.com/meraspatronas>

Therefore, the agency in Las Patronas has an impact that could be called historical, because it arises in a context where women were seen with social or cultural stereotypes that are accompanied by a "limitation" in their actions; but on the contrary, these elements became a tool for action. Thus, providing food, which for a long time has been limited to women, for Las Patronas is the fundamental axis for their actions and their construction of agency.

In this type of research, the methodological approach has to be dynamic to be able to observe the actors, but at the same time to have a better observation of the context and the actions, the diversity of arenas, added to the temporality of their actions. Thus, multi-site ethnography allowed us not to be in a single place observing their actions and to "jump" so to speak between these multiple spaces. Multilocal (MARCUS, 2014) or multi-site ethnography allows us to observe diverse narratives and dynamics in spaces that are not always invisible or not always defined in a simple way, such as the mobility of The Beast, the symbolic space of the train tracks or virtual platforms like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube.

When conducting this type of research, it is necessary to consider the diversity of spaces, as already mentioned, but also the diverse social relations or interactions, the different situations that may arise and of course the tools or resources, in these situations where this type of ethnography helps;

Multi-local ethnographies define their objects of study based on different modalities or techniques. These can be understood as construction practices through (in a planned or opportunistic way) the movement and tracing in different scenarios of a given and initial complex cultural phenomenon of a conceptual identity, which turns out to be contingent and malleable at the moment of tracing it (MARCUS, 2014, p. 118).

The actions of Las Patronas are done in different arenas and through multi-site ethnography, it was possible to observe the social interactions and negotiations, cultural values and even the creation of an awareness of the migratory situation and its advocacy work. This methodology accompanied by a theoretical background such as Long's actor-centred theories allows the experiences of the agents - in this case of Las Patronas - to be analyzed, but at the same time, the context, and the networks that the women form so that their actions have a greater impact can be observed.

In these multiple arenas, Las Patronas are building networks, for example, with associations of the same community to respond to the migrant exodus in its passage through Veracruz, spaces were needed where all migrants could sleep, and then some places were made available as the community hall, in addition to the shelter of Las Patronas. These networks were fundamental for their actions during the migrant exodus because there were several days in which approximately 400 migrants were attended, some blocks stayed to sleep and others were fed.

During this season, not only did they continue to feed next to the tracks, but they also approached the various places where the caravans stopped, such as gas stations. During this season, the experience of Las Patronas -and the volunteers who were there- was transformed into actions to "improvise" how to make the food yield, how to cook more than 40 kilos of rice or have enough water so that they could not only drink it at that moment but also so that they could carry it and continue on their way.

The cooking knowledge of Las Patronas and the experience of doing it for many years, even before the collective, helps them to know how to calculate the amount of food needed, to "tantear" (calculate) as they say, and even deduce the approximate time in which the train will pass, taking into consideration the information that people close to the train stops pass on to them. Therefore, for the members of Las Patronas, liaison with people in the community is fundamental.

One of the actions that since their "public" recognition has served them not only to make themselves known or obtain resources, it is also their main platform to carry out their advocacy work to raise awareness about the situation of migrants; they also serve as a reflector to denounce violations and make people aware of the situation of Central Americans.

These talks are related to the agency that has been formed in Las Patronas since they carry with them reflective processes, but they also build signifiers and symbols that end with the identification of the listener and the collective. This reflective capacity, as Long (2007) calls it, implies knowing and interpreting what is being experienced at that moment; that is, the context surrounding the subject and the conflict.

In this sense, Las Patronas become social actors when they intervene in local spaces, with leading roles and through elements such as identity, they seek to form networks with other subjects. Their agency is reflected in the actions and convening power they have, but at the same time in the way, they transmit knowledge and create awareness.

Finally, observing Las Patronas as transforming agents is not only about acts such as feeding or advocacy work; for them, the development of their community - Amatlán de los Reyes, Veracruz- is important for many women and young people to have a dignified life meanwhile they have taken advantage of elements such as resources, volunteers or even "publicity" to make improvements in their community or give food to those who need it.

4 Findings

The current migratory context is ambivalent, on one hand, there are the discourses of open borders and free transit, but on the other, migration policies are increasingly severe (MADERA; MARIN, 2020), but this does not decrease the movement of people, on the contrary, it creates a door for those who want to cross borders to do so in dangerous ways and encounter various vulnerabilities.

In this context, Las Patronas emerged intending to help those who transit through Mexican territory. Although they started "just" giving food, over the years they have transformed their experiences to build strategies that have a greater impact not only in the migratory environment but also in their community and even at an international level. Their actions began with the objective of supporting migrants in "basic" situations related to fundamental rights such as food and life. Their actions lead them to the recognition of society as those who support them, but also as active agents that promote and influence social reality. These collectives that have determined spaces for action create strategies for their actions to have a greater impact, obtain resources and create awareness in society.

Although this collective is mostly made up of women who are part of a family, it is also important to mention that the heterogeneity of its members and the multiplicity of social, cultural, and political or religious universes means that the agency built individually has an impact on the collective and the construction of dynamic strategies to be able to respond to situations that arise, such as the migrant exodus.

The agency of Las Patronas is built primarily on the almost horizontal relationship they have with the migrants, as well as with the volunteers and the institutions and/or collectives that approach them. For the coordinator of the collective, creating a sense of community among those who attend is fundamental for dealing with the Central Americans and for the absorption of knowledge of the new members; this sense of community emphasizes the relationships among themselves and with others. In addition to the above, much of their capacity building is based on elements such as improvisation of actions, which can be prevented, but in some cases, it is not enough.

Las Patronas are part of the actors that seek not only to help in transit, to be promoters of human rights or protectors of migrants, but also to conform spaces of resistance against structural and direct violence against Central American migrants in transit through Mexico.

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