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Transforming Destinations: The Impact of Integration Interventions on the Mobility Decisions of Displaced LGBTIQ+ Persons in Mexico[1]

Transformando destinos: el impacto de las intervenciones de integración en las decisiones de movilidad de personas LGBTIQ+ desplazadas en México

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Abstract

This article explores the lived experiences of LGBTIQ+ forcibly displaced persons in (transit through) Mexico, examining how they decide whether to stay or move on, and how civil society organizations (CSOs) shape those decisions. Based on 15 months of ethnographic fieldwork in Mexico, this article analyzes three intertwined dimensions: the specific vulnerabilities shaping LGBTIQ+ migration; the role of CSOs in reshaping agency and future planning; and Mexico's evolving role in the regional migration landscape. The article critiques deterrence-based migration governance and highlights the emotional and bureaucratic complexities LGBTIQ+ migrants face, caught between transnational border regimes and local systemic violence. Conceptually, it challenges traditional ideas of destination, intention, and agency in migration trajectories, framing Mexico as a site of "forced immobility," where decisions emerge from structural coercion, not choice. The article challenges linear migration models and calls for inclusive, person-centered integration efforts rooted in resilience and belonging rather than deterrence.

Este artículo explora las experiencias vividas de personas LGBTIQ+ desplazadas por la fuerza en (tránsito por) México, analizando cómo deciden quedarse o continuar su camino, y cómo las organizaciones de la sociedad civil (OSC) influyen en esas decisiones. Basado en 15 meses de trabajo de campo etnográfico en México, el artículo analiza tres dimensiones interrelacionadas:

1 **Statement on Data Availability:** Due to confidentiality agreements and the need to protect participant identities, the data analyzed during this study are not publicly accessible.

las vulnerabilidades específicas que moldean la migración LGBTIQ+; el papel de las OSC en la reconfiguración de la agencia y la planificación del futuro; y el papel cambiante de México en el panorama migratorio regional. El artículo critica la gobernanza migratoria basada en la disuasión y pone en evidencia las complejidades emocionales y burocráticas que enfrentan las personas migrantes LGBTIQ+, atrapadas entre regímenes fronterizos transnacionales y la violencia sistémica local. Conceptualmente, cuestiona las nociones tradicionales de destino, intención y agencia en las trayectorias migratorias, enmarcando a México como un espacio de "inmovilidad forzada", donde las decisiones emergen de la coerción estructural y no de la elección. El artículo desafía los modelos migratorios lineales y aboga por esfuerzos de integración inclusivos y centrados en las personas, basados en la resiliencia y el sentido de pertenencia, más que en la disuasión.

LGBTIQ+ displaced persons; transit migration; integration; Mexico; country of forced immobility

Key words

Personas LGBTIQ+ desplazadas; migración en tránsito; integración; México; país de inmovilidad forzada

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1. Introduction

In recent decades, Mexico has witnessed significant transformations in its migratory dynamics, challenging the traditional notion of being merely a country of emigration of Mexican citizens to the United States (U.S.) and their return. The complexity and diversity of displacement[2] in Mexico has been altered by a series of global and regional factors, such as its socioeconomic development, the socioeconomic and political crises in Central and South America or the increasingly restrictive migratory policies in the U.S. For example, the Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP) or "Remain in Mexico" policy required asylum seekers to wait in Mexico for their U.S. court dates, often in unsafe conditions. Title 42, invoked during the COVID-19 pandemic, allowed for the rapid expulsion of migrants without access to asylum procedures. More recently, the U.S. has continued to implement restrictive measures such as increased deportations and the phasing out of the CBP One app as a scheduling mechanism

2 The terms *displacement* and *displaced persons/people* are used deliberately throughout this article to capture the fluid, complex, and often protracted experiences of mobility that do not always align neatly with legal or policy categories such as *migrant, internally displaced person (IDP), asylum seeker*, or *refugee*. These conventional terms tend to reflect institutional classifications that may obscure the overlapping forms of structural violence, exclusion, and precarity that affect people on the move—particularly LGBTIQ+ persons. *Displacement* allows for a broader analytical lens that centers the lived experiences of those forced to move due to intersecting factors including violence, discrimination, and lack of access to rights, rather than focusing solely on their legal status or migration trajectory.

for asylum appointments, which had previously served as one of the few legal access points (U.S. Customs and Border Protection, 2025).[3]

The combination of these factors has led to an increased transit migration through the Mexican territory, which for many ended in uncertain long periods of forced immobility (Stock, 2019) and unwanted settlement. As a border country with the U.S., Mexico plays a surveillance role through the practice of border externalization, both for migrants and for people in need of international protection (Diaz Carnero, 2021). Therefore, although it continues to be a transit country for many, it has also become a place where many people stay, temporarily or permanently. As a result, Mexico has started to be described as a destination country (Johns, Loschmann, & Arekapudi 2023). Yet, as the analysis presented here illustrates, I propose the term "country of forced immobility."

Recent scholarship has begun to shift its focus toward understanding the complex factors that influence migrants' decisions during transit (Kuschminder & Waidler, 2020; Oomen & Townsend, 2015; Wentzel et al., 2022). This growing body of work challenges the traditional emphasis on origin and destination by highlighting how decisions are continuously shaped by the evolving conditions migrants encounter at each stage of their journey (Oomen & Townsend, 2015; Marieke Wissink, Düvell, & Eerdewijk, 2013). A recent strand of literature has looked at the role of civil society organizations (CSOs) and humanitarian organizations in the externalization of migration management in countries such as Turkey, Tunisia or Egypt. In particular, these studies have pointed to the different strategies implemented by these organizations to persuade people to stay in the transit country (Cuttitta, 2020).

However, these discussions often overlook one of the most vulnerable groups within the displaced population: LGBTIQ+ forcibly displaced persons. Most existing research on this population is geographically limited, focusing primarily on experiences in North America and Western Europe. Only recently have a few studies begun to explore the realities of LGBTIQ + refugees in transit or resettled in the Global South, such as in Kenya, Uganda, Lebanon, or Turkey. These contexts are often characterized by a complex system of transnational, national, and local institutions that engage in actions to alleviate suffering and maintain human dignity (Michelis, 2023).

In the case of Mexico, the limited research that exists on LGBTIQ+ persons in transit focuses on the violence and discrimination they encounter, ranging from structural marginalization to targeted attacks by state and non-state actors. Yet, in the current context, where policies and practices increasingly impede onward mobility, many displaced persons—including LGBTIQ+ individuals—are forced to remain in Mexico for uncertain time periods. This raises urgent questions about their prospects for social and economic integration, their access to rights and services, and the capacity of existing institutions to address their specific needs. Addressing this gap is critical, not only because of the extreme vulnerability of this group, but also because their trajectories and decisions often diverge significantly from broader migrant populations due to the compounded risks of displacement, discrimination, and violence.

Against this backdrop, this paper contributes to these bodies of literature by addressing how displaced LGBTQI+ persons in Mexico make decisions about settling in this country and the

3 It is important to mention that even when the CBP One was in place, waiting times went up to eight months or more (Isacson, 2024).

influence of integration programs delivered by CSOs on these decisions. To do so, this paper relies on qualitative data collected in Mexico City and Monterrey between February 2024 and April 2025 with 25 LGBTIQ+ forced displaced persons from Central and South America, and 11 staff from CSOs in Mexico.

Against this backdrop, this study addresses how displaced LGBTQI+ persons in Mexico make decisions about settling in the country and the influence of integration programs delivered by CSOs on these decisions. The analysis focuses on three interrelated dimensions: first, the specific vulnerabilities and considerations that shape the migration journeys of LGBTQI+ individuals, including experiences of discrimination, violence, and legal invisibility; second, the role played by CSOs in offering services, psychosocial support, and spaces of belonging that often reconfigure migrants' sense of agency and future planning; and third, the evolving nature of Mexico as a transit country, where rising enforcement measures and limited access to U.S. asylum increasingly lead people to reassess their original migration goals.

By centering the voices and lived experiences of LGBTQI+ people on the move, the article challenges linear, destination-focused understandings of migration and contributes to debates on integration, protection, and mobility in contexts of forced displacement. It argues that inclusive, person-centered integration efforts have the potential not only to enhance the well-being of marginalized groups, but also to reshape their migration choices in ways that reflect both structural constraints and personal aspirations. The findings underscore the need to rethink border-focused responses and instead prioritize resilience-building strategies rooted in local solidarity networks.

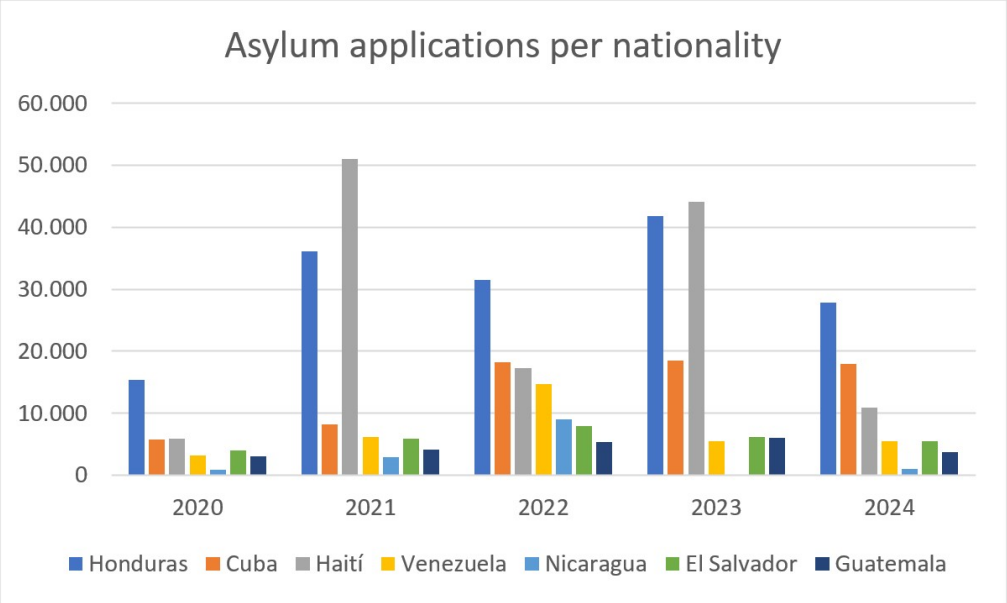
The paper is structured as follows. The first section provides a contextual overview of the displacement of LGBTIQ+ persons in Mexico. Next, there is a conceptual discussion on what integration means in transit countries and how this has been operationalized in the global context. Then the methodology provides an overview of the methods used, the participants, the ethical considerations of the study and the limitations. After presenting the findings and analysis, the last section offers the discussion and conclusion.

2. The displacement of LGBTIQ+ persons in Mexico

The North American migration corridor, connecting Mesoamerica to the U.S. and Canada, is one of the world's largest, driven by underdevelopment, poverty, and violence (Castles et al., 2014). In 2023, migrants from countries beyond Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras made up 51% of U.S. border encounters—many of them coming from Venezuela, Colombia, or Ecuador (Putzel-Kavanaugh & Ruiz Soto, 2023).

Over the past two decades, Mexico has seen a 120% increase in displaced persons (Johns, Loschmann, & Arekapudi, 2023). According to the Mexican Commission for Refugee Assistance (COMAR, in Spanish), the countries from which most applications originate are: Honduras, Haiti, Venezuela, Cuba and El Salvador (Figure 1) (COMAR, 2024).

Figure 1. Main nationalities applying for asylum in Mexico



Source: Graph created by the author based on the open data available at: https://www.gob.mx/comar/archivo/articulos

The arrival of displaced persons asking for asylum and claiming their wish to stay in Mexico, as reported by the UNHCR, has somehow reinforced the idea that Mexico is consolidating its role as a destination country (Johns, Loschmann, & Arekapudi, 2023). Yet, such assertions should be approached with caution, as there is still limited data on how many migrants ultimately remain in Mexico, continue their journey to the U.S. or Canada, or return to their countries of origin—a phenomenon that has also been increasingly observed in the past months. Moreover, many of the asylum-seeking applicants who stay do not do so out of their own decision, but due to the impossibility of reaching the U.S. (Alba, 2024; Serra-Mingot, 2025).

Among those stranded in Mexico are many LGBTIQ+ individuals fleeing violence, discrimination, and hate crimes. Though exact figures are unknown, a 2022 study estimated that 3% of undocumented U.S. migrants (around 300,000 people) identify as LGBTIQ+. Of those, more than 75% were born in just ten Latin American countries, including 136,600 from Mexico and 48,300 from Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras (REDAPM, 2022).

In Mexico, data from Casa Frida Refugio LGBT—a CSO that supports LGBTIQ+ displaced individuals—reported hosting approximately 130 people annually at their shelter in Tapachula (Gómez, 2022). However, this figure only accounts for those who stayed in the shelter. When including all individuals assisted across the country, including those who received other types of support without residing in the shelter, Casa Frida reports having served around 4,000 people since May 2020. Similarly, a recent study found that out of 752 asylum seekers supported by *La 72*, a migrant shelter in Mexico, 43 identified as LGBTIQ+ (Almendra & Quiñones, 2021). The forced displacement of LGBTIQ+ people from Central American and South American countries to Mexico is a phenomenon that reflects the harsh reality of the persecution and violence that these communities face in their places of origin (Almendra & Quiñones, 2021; Martínez, 2022; OIM, 2022).

Compared to other Latin American countries, Mexico has indeed made important legal strides in protecting the rights of the LGBTIQ+ population. Over the past two decades, various laws, decrees, and institutional reforms have been enacted at the federal and state levels to promote equality, non-discrimination, and respect for sexual and gender diversity (CNDH, 2021). Despite progressive legal reforms—such as same-sex marriage, anti-discrimination laws, and gender identity recognition—violence and exclusion persist, especially outside major urban areas like Mexico City. As in Brazil and Colombia, strong laws do not always ensure safety or inclusion (Castañeda Castro, 2024).

In Mexico, the rights of migrants and refugees are protected by the Constitution and various international laws ratified by the country. These rights include access to justice, non-discrimination, freedom of movement, the right to health and education, among others. In addition, Mexico is a signatory to the 1951 Convention on the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol, which means that it has the responsibility to guarantee the protection of refugees and provide them with the necessary services for their integration.

However, despite these legal protections, migrants and refugees in Mexico face numerous challenges. These include discrimination by society, labor exploitation, violence, lack of access to basic services such as health care, education or decent housing (CONAPRED, 2023), and vulnerability to the immigration authorities, who may sometimes criminalize their immigration status instead of providing them with assistance and protection. These obstacles significantly hinder the lives of migrants and refugees in Mexico, perpetuating their situation of vulnerability and precariousness. For LGBTIQ+ individuals, these challenges are worsened by prolonged transit and a humanitarian system often blind to homophobia and transphobia (Marnell & Camminga, 2022; Michelis, 2023)

Against this backdrop, CSOs play a crucial role (Torre Cantalapiedra, 2024). CSOs not only offer protection and humanitarian assistance—such as shelter, food, medical care, and travel advice—but also actively engage in migration management, influencing the scale, speed, and direction of migration flows. They play a socio-political advocacy role in migration issues, becoming increasingly involved in political advocacy to secure migrant rights and pursue legislative changes (Agudo, 2020). Recently, there have been some CSOs in Mexico working to support displaced persons through community-based initiatives. These initiatives often focus on providing legal assistance, psychological support, and integration programs to help displaced persons navigate their new environments and assert their rights (Kuhner, 2011).

3. Integration policies in "transit": A paradigm shift

Traditionally, migration studies classify countries into "sending/origin" and "receiving/host" nations, each implementing distinct policies for those who leave (emigrants) and those who arrive (immigrants) (Massey & Taylor, 2004). However, since the 1990s, a heightened political emphasis on migration control has led to the emergence of a third category: the "transit country" (Düvell, 2012). A transit country is loosely defined as a nation where migrants stay temporarily while *en route* to their final destinations (İçduygu and Yükseker, 2010). Accordingly, transit migrants are defined as foreigners who reside in a country for a limited period of time before moving on to another country, where they are expected to stay permanently (Düvell, 2012, p. 417).

It was in the 90s that the concept of transit migration emerged as a migration management tool in the context of EU expansion and the securitization of migration (Oelgemöller, 2011; Düvell, 2012). Nowadays, the concepts of "transit migration," "transit country," and "transit migration management" have become prominent in the context of the EU's external immigration and asylum policies (Boswell, 2008; Lebon-McGregor et al., 2022), but have also expanded to traditional destination countries like the U.S., Canada, and Australia, making entry more difficult for refugees and migrants (Frelick et al., 2016).

3.1. Externalizing borders through CSOs

The externalization of migration and border controls refers to the process by which destination countries engage in, promote, or outsource migration and border management activities beyond their own territories—typically in transit countries—to prevent the arrival of unwanted migrants at their borders. This strategy heavily depends on the active cooperation of transit and origin countries, which are often encouraged or incentivized to adopt specific legal and policy frameworks (Nicolosi, 2024). For decades, countries in the Global North have implemented remote control migration policies to prevent asylum seekers from reaching their borders, using both pressure on private entities and international agreements (Fitzgerald, 2019). Since the 1990s, the U.S. has militarized its borders and externalized migration control, collaborating with Mexico and Central American countries to curb migration. While often framed as neocolonial, these policies have also benefited peripheral countries like Mexico through political leverage and financial support, particularly for development and militarization (París-Pombo, 2022).

Furthermore, externalization activities may be delegated to non-governmental or civil society organizations (NGOs/CSOs). The growing body of work on the "humanitarian border" (Walters, 2011), analyzing how logics of care and control coexist and support each other in the management of migration, has prompted some authors to also pay specific attention to the role of NGOs/CSOs. However, most of the studies on NGOs/CSOs at the humanitarian border look at the territories of destination countries of the Global North, and—even in the few looking at countries of origin and transit—the relationship between NGOs/CSOs, humanitarian migration management, and externalization remains largely under-researched (Cuttitta, 2020).

Policies aimed at the local integration of refugees are a key component of transit migration management, with most projects designed to curb refugees' aspirations to move onward (Lebon-McGregor et al., 2022). In the European context, Ethiopia, Pakistan, or Turkey are some examples of this practice. For instance, in Ethiopia and the EU, initiatives focus on local integration; however, experts note that creating low-wage jobs in newly established, yet not fully operational industrial zones, does not immediately enhance the country's integration capacity. In Pakistan, much of the EU's refugee integration funding targets the Afghan refugee population, providing services such as healthcare, livelihood opportunities, legal protection, and education only to registered refugees. These efforts aim to keep Afghan refugees in Pakistan or encourage their return to Afghanistan (European External Action Service, 2021). Turkey has received EU aid for its own migration management and refugee integration capacity-building, though officials publicly downplay the significance of EU aid, leveraging migration diplomacy to advance foreign and domestic policy interests. Conversely, Tunisia seeks EU funding primarily for its economic and political development, with its economy heavily reliant on migrant remittances (Üstübici et al., 2023).

Although scholars have primarily viewed externalization as a response by Global North countries to migration pressures, recent developments show that such practices are also increasingly being adopted by countries in the Global South (ibid.). For instance, the "Welcome Operation" (*Operação Acolhida*) in Brazil, which initially presented itself as a humanitarian effort to assist Venezuelan migrants, has also functioned as a mechanism of containment and bureaucratic filtering at the northern border (Riggirozzi et al., 2023).

In Mexico, the government implemented the so-called Migrant Integration Centers (CIMs) in 2019 in three main transit border cities, in an attempt to manage U.S. pressures and keep migrants within the Mexican territory. This strategy, however, illustrates how timid and poorly designed government initiatives aimed at integrating migrants have failed to yield meaningful results. Originally planned as short-term accommodation centers meant to funnel migrants into the local labor market, the CIMs were based on unrealistic assumptions about both labor demand and migrants' willingness to accept extremely low-paid factory jobs. Despite offering over 4,000 positions in the maquiladora sector in Ciudad Juárez, only 5% of registered migrants accepted employment (Martínez-Almanza, 2021).

This failure is largely attributed to a lack of understanding of the migrant population's composition and needs. Many of the residents were women with young children or unaccompanied minors, making participation in industrial work largely unfeasible. The government's approach was shaped by labor market logic rather than a people-centered or rights-based integration model, resulting in inadequate responses to the realities on the ground (Martínez-Almanza, 2021).

Migration-related projects carried out by NGOs and CSOs typically address basic needs (such as healthcare and legal assistance), run awareness campaigns, and support the economic and cultural integration of migrants, refugees, and (sometimes) asylum seekers. Economic integration initiatives might focus on helping these persons enter the local labor market by providing vocational training or microcredits to start small businesses. However, not all projects are successful, with some beneficiaries using financial support to fund onward migration attempts rather than settling in the host country (Cuttitta, 2020). Cultural integration initiatives often aim to build a sense of community among migrants through activities like arts and workshops. Although these projects can be seen as part of efforts to prevent further migration to Europe, many NGOs are motivated by a desire to give migrants the necessary tools and agency to decide their own futures, even if this leads to outcomes contrary to externalization policies. Additionally, healthcare and psychosocial support provided by NGOs help displaced persons meet their basic needs, yet it remains unclear whether these strategies actually curb onward migration. Overall, these efforts contribute to the "humanitarianization" of borders, where human rights protections are used as tools to manage migration (Cuttitta, 2020).

3.2. Why Invest in the Temporary? The Dilemma of Integration in Transit States

For the purpose of this article, integration is understood as "a dynamic and multi-directional process that involves mutual adaptation of migrants and of the host society, based on principles of protection of fundamental rights, respect, tolerance, and non-discrimination. It is a multi-dimensional issue that covers migrant's inclusion in economic, psychological, social, linguistic, navigational, and civic spheres, as well as empowering host communities and other local actors to receive and engage with migrants." (IOM, 2019).

Historically, transit migration countries have not developed robust integration policies because they were not considered destination countries where migrants are expected to settle. Migration through these territories was generally perceived as temporary, with the assumption that displaced persons would move onward quickly to their intended destination—usually wealthier countries with more economic opportunities or stronger asylum systems.

This perception is especially strong in countries like Mexico, Turkey, and Libya, where national migration frameworks are focused primarily on border control, transit facilitation, and, in some cases, deportation (Collyer, 2007; Düvell, 2012; Yıldız & Koser Akcapar, 2021). As a result, migrants' needs beyond immediate humanitarian assistance—such as access to education, employment, housing, or legal status—have not been addressed through long-term integration strategies (Norman, 2020).

The assumption that migrants primarily intend to continue moving toward a final destination, usually in the Global North, has contributed to a scholarly bias in migration research, which has tended to focus more heavily on decision-making processes in countries of origin and destination, while largely overlooking the complex dynamics and decisions that occur in transit (Schapendonk, 2012; Collyer, 2007; Papadopoulou-Kourkoula, 2008). These in-transit experiences, however, often involve shifting decisions, re-evaluations of migration plans, and critical interactions with local institutions and CSOs.

In fact, conditions in countries of forced immobility may determine if migrants stay or go. Factors affecting this decision include: access to employment, education, citizenship, and treatment from locals, together with the risks of onward migration and life in the intended destination country (Kuschminder & Waidler, 2020).

Only recently has there been increasing recognition of the importance of the migration and refugee journeys themselves as key in shaping people's decisions to stay, move on, or return (Schapendonk, 2012; Serra Mingot, 2023; Marieke Wissink, Düvell, & Mazzucato, 2017), particularly in the context of irregular migration, which tends to be fragmented, uncertain, and extended over time (Collyer, 2010). These studies point to a range of factors encountered during the journey that influence migrants' decisions. For example, Schapendonk (2012) shows how migrants often revise their plans due to prolonged immobility, police violence, or lack of resources, leading them to consider settling in a place they initially saw as temporary. Similarly, Wissink et al. (2017) emphasize the role of social ties formed *en route* and how encountering diaspora communities can prompt a re-evaluation of original plans. Health issues, trauma, and exhaustion from repeated deportations or detentions (Collyer, 2010) also play a major role in pushing displaced persons to abandon their goal of reaching a more distant destination and instead remain in the country of transit. Finally, while the decision to migrate is often seen as an outcome of individual decision-making, some scholars have highlighted the importance of family group decision-making that takes place over the course of the family's life cycle (Bryceson, 2019).

Instead of viewing migrants in Mexico as merely "in transit," I argue that analyzing their experiences through the lens of "forced immobility" might be more insightful, both from academic and policy perspectives. This shift in perspective reveals the structural constraints and contradictions in migration policies that often trap people in places they did not choose to stay (Stock, 2019). While traditional migration theory contrasts immobile non-migrants with mobile migrants, this binary fails to recognize that migrants themselves can become stuck, unable to move forward despite their aspirations and intentions. As Stock argues, the term

"forced immobility" better captures the reality that many migrants are immobilized not because they passively accept their situation, but because they lack viable alternatives (2019). I argue, however, that a situation of "forced immobility" might lead to "forced settlement," which implies not only some level of acceptance but also agency.

In Mexico, the shift from transit to a "country of forced immobility" has been especially visible in many border cities and in the capital, where large numbers of displaced persons remain for months or years. While Mexico has not adopted a national integration policy akin to those in traditional destination countries, it has increasingly recognized the need to provide longer-term support, particularly under pressure from international organizations and CSOs. Still, the lack of a coherent integration strategy results in fragmented responses, legal insecurity, and heightened vulnerability for migrants, especially LGBTIQ+ and other marginalized groups.

Researchers have thus recently started to address how integration works in traditional transit countries such as Turkey. In her study on the integration policies and responses to refugee immigration from 2011 to 2019, Rottmann highlights how, despite the absence of an official national integration program in Turkey, there are de facto national policies through various measures in employment, education, health, and citizenship. Her findings show the challenges faced by migrants, such as the relegation to informal, low-paid jobs, bureaucratic barriers to work permits, difficulties in educational recognition, poor housing conditions, or the problems in accessing free healthcare, despite its availability (Rottmann, 2020). While noting improvements, the report points out policy incoherence and service gaps due to the lack of a national policy (Rottmann, 2020).

From a state perspective, the logic of not wanting to invest in the integration of transit migrants stems in part from concerns about the economic costs of integration without perceived long-term returns, as it is assumed that these migrants intend to leave (Barbero & Blanco, 2022). Empirical research has shown that there is a strong association between intention and migratory flows (Massey & Redstone Akresh, 2006). Therefore, knowing intentions can aid host countries in their planning. The problem here is that states see migrants as people with clear-cut and set-in-stone intentions.

Reality, however, shows us a different picture. Migration trajectories are shaped by migrants' evolving aspirations and intentions. While the concepts of migration aspirations and intentions are often used interchangeably, for the purpose of this article, however, I refer to aspirations as a broad desire to migrate, and intentions as the concrete steps made in order to move (Carling & Collins, 2018).

Those who see their stay as temporary focus on work and savings, while those planning to settle long-term engage more in integration. However, these intentions can shift, making the boundaries between temporary and permanent migration fluid. Intended permanent migrants may suddenly decide to go back to their origin country, while transit migrants can get stuck in such a protracted limbo that they turn into long-term settlers, even against their will. Unlike the linear model favored by host states (arrival → integration/return), migrants often experience non-linear, uncertain paths due to personal decisions and external constraints. Temporal approaches to migration challenge these rigid expectations by emphasizing the unpredictable and dynamic nature of migrants' journeys (Cojocaru, 2016).

4. Methodology

This study adopted a constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006), while also drawing on thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2014) as a preliminary analytic step. Thematic analysis was first used to familiarize myself with the data and to identify initial patterns based on commonly recognized dimensions of integration in the migration literature, such as access to employment, legal documentation, healthcare, education, and social life. However, rather than imposing predefined categories, I began each interview by asking participants what *integration* meant to them (later, I incorporated the term *inclusion* after observing that *integration* was often unfamiliar or misunderstood). This open-ended approach allowed for participants' own definitions and priorities to guide the conversations. Following this thematic structuring, I applied grounded theory principles—including constant comparison, memo-writing, and theoretical sampling—to deepen the analysis and allow conceptual categories to emerge inductively. This iterative process led to the development of more complex understandings of integration, and to theoretical insights on forced immobility countries that challenge linear and state-defined migration models.

The findings presented in this article are the result of 15 months of qualitative fieldwork conducted between February 2024 and April 2025 in Mexico City and Monterrey. During this period, semi-structured interviews were carried out with 11 staff members from CSOs supporting LGBTIQ+ persons and 25 LGBTQI+ displaced persons from Venezuela, Cuba, Honduras, and other states in Mexico. For the purpose of this paper, however, data from internally displaced persons was not included, as they were not in transit and none of them had the aspiration or intention to move outside Mexico. See table 1 for a demographics overview.

Table 1. Demographics overview of participants

Name	Age	Sex	Gender Id.	Sexual Orientation	Country of Origin	Reason for displacement	Interview location
Kim*	37	Male	She/Her	Hetero	Colombia	SOGI-related violence Transitioning	Mexico City
Luis*	39	Male	He/him	Gay	Cuba	Political distress	Mexico City
Leoncio*	30	Male	He/him	Gay	Cuba	Health	Mexico City
Karina*	52	Female	She/Her	Lesbian	Cuba	Gender-based violence	Mexico City
Claudia*	41	Female	She/Her	Lesbian	Cuba	Gender-based violence	Mexico City
Jenny*	48	Female	She/Her	Lesbian	Cuba	Gender-based violence	Mexico City
Elsa*	34	Male	She/Her	Hetero	Cuba	Having a better life	Mexico City
Blanca*	62	Male	She/Her	Hetero	Cuba	Poverty	Mexico City
Antonio	40	Male	He/him	Gay	Cuba	Love	Mexico City
Lolo	52	Male	He/him	Bisexual	Cuba	Poverty and health	Mexico City
Irene	58	Female	She/Her	Bisexual	Cuba	Poverty and health	Mexico City
Samuel	30	Male	He/him	Gay	Honduras	Gender-based violence	Mexico City
Omar*	26	Male	El	Gay	Honduras	Having a better life	Mexico City
Natalia	30	Male	She/Her	Hetero	Honduras	Having a better life	Mexico City

Name	Age	Sex	Gender Id.	Sexual Orientation	Country of Origin	Reason for displacement	Interview location
Juan	23	Male	He/him	Gay	Venezuela	Having a better life	Mexico City
Violeta*	23	Male	She/Her	Hetero	Venezuela	SOGI-related violence	Mexico City
Jon	31	Male	He/him	Gay	Venezuela	Health	Mexico City
J.D.	31	Male	He/him	Gay	Venezuela	Having a better life	Mexico City
Tamara	38	Male	She/her	Hetero	Honduras	SOGI-related violence	Monterrey
Kim*	27	Female	She/her	Lesbian	Honduras	Generalised violence	Monterrey
Polina*	29	Female	She/her	Lesbian	Honduras	Generalised violence	Monterrey
Eva	31	Female	She/her	Lesbian	Salvador	Generalised violence	Monterrey
Andrés*	37	Male	He/him	Gay	Honduras	SOGI-related violence	Monterrey
Gabriel	26	Male	He/him	Gay	Colombia	Having a better life	Monterrey
Jim	32	Male	He/him	Gay	Costa Rica	Love	Monterrey

Most of the interviews took place at the premises of one CSO, Casa Frida, both in Mexico City and Monterrey. Casa Frida offered a familiar and safe environment, which facilitated open and honest discussions. In two cases, the respondents preferred to meet at their workplace, while in two other cases, interviews were conducted by phone. Giving respondents the freedom to choose the interview place was crucial for gaining deep insights into their experiences and perspectives regarding displacement, integration, and decision-making processes. In some cases (those with an asterisk [*]), after the first interview and a few interactions at the CSO settings, informal follow-up conversations took place outside the CSO, often in cafés or bars. These follow-ups were crucial to better understand their long-term integration in Mexico or their intentions to further move.

Interviews were conducted in Spanish, and they lasted approximately one hour. Quotes in the following section were translated by the researcher, sticking as much as possible to the original version.

Interview questions covered a range of topics, including life before migrating, the decision to migrate, and life in Mexico. Special emphasis was placed on aspects related to their integration, such as access to accommodation, health services, education, work, and for those coming from outside Mexico, their migration status. Questions also addressed their social networks in Mexico and their sense of community.

The research had the ethical approval from the granting organization, as well as the research hosting institution. However, additional steps were taken to make sure all the ethical aspects were covered. To do this, a detailed overview of the project and interview guides were shared with Casa Frida staff to validate that none of the questions had the potential to emotionally or psychologically harm the respondents.

All respondents were informed about the research's objectives and the implications of their participation. Although they were not asked to sign an informed consent form, they were provided with a document detailing the research objectives, their rights, the risks of participation, and the contact details of the researcher. Upon reading it, they were invited to verbalize

any questions or concerns, and then asked if they agreed to do the interview. They were also asked for permission to record the interview and to be contacted in the future for a follow-up interview.

Regarding the interviews conducted with staff from CSOs, nine of them were conducted with staff of Casa Frida in Mexico City and Monterrey, while the other two were conducted with staff from other CSOs supporting trans persons in Mexico City. While the core mission of the other two was not to support displaced persons *per se*, they all mentioned an increasing trend of displaced persons seeking support at their premises.

4.1. Limitations

The main limitation faced by this study is that all participating respondents were recruited through Casa Frida. While efforts were made to find respondents outside CSOs (for instance, through social media posts or snowballing), they were all unsuccessful. A website for the project was created and advertised in different Facebook groups where LGBTIQ+ displaced persons are active. Yet, nobody responded. Nationality-based migrant groups were also approached, but no response was obtained from this particular subgroup. The only organization open to support me as a researcher in accessing respondents was Casa Frida.

This situation was similar when it came to interviewing representatives of CSOs. Efforts were made to contact other organizations, yet only two answered. These two people requested their identities and the names of the organizations to remain anonymous, as they worked with highly sensitive issues (e.g., trans sex workers and health-related issues, such as HIV).

5. Rethinking integration in forced countries of destination: The imperative of displaced persons' integration amid prolonged stays

In spring 2024, I started my fieldwork at Casa Frida's premises in Mexico City. One of the first people I interviewed was Leoncio, a 30-year-old gay Cuban man. Leoncio was HIV positive and had a severe kidney condition that forced him to spend quite a lot of time at the hospital. In fact, his health condition was the main reason for him to leave Cuba. He arrived in Mexico through the southern border in December 2023, and one month later, he arrived in Mexico City, where he started his asylum application.

Leoncio initially viewed Mexico as merely a transit point towards the U.S. Yet, upon arrival, he started to change his mind, mainly for two reasons. On the one hand, there was the support and the sense of community provided by Casa Frida:

> I am very happy to have arrived in Mexico. At first, it wasn't my destination; I thought of using Mexico as a bridge to reach the U.S., but I've really fallen in love with this city, with the care I've received, and the opportunities I've been given to bring my family here as refugees. So, I think I'll put down roots here [...] With the goal of reaching the U.S., I never knew that Mexico would offer this opportunity. In fact, in Cuba, we have a bad perception of Mexico and Mexicans [...] They say Mexicans are bad, that they're racist, xenophobic, that there's a lot of violence in Mexico, that they'll kill you, that you can't... but in my personal experience, I've found the opposite. Mexico has welcomed me with

> great hospitality, and now that I'm here, my perspective has changed.[4] (Leoncio, 30, cis gay man, Cuba)

On the other hand, there was the information and space provided by the CSO to reflect on his choices. While initially set on reaching the U.S., he reconsidered after learning about the financial and healthcare challenges he could face there due to his condition. This support allowed him to make an informed choice to stay in Mexico, apply for asylum, begin working, and plan to reunite with his mother, recognizing that, above all, he needed constant hands-on care.

Leoncio's experience is an example of changing migration intentions and highlights how community support and access to accurate information can reshape migration decisions. Thanks to the care and guidance provided by the CSO, he not only received legal, medical, and psychosocial assistance but also had the space to reflect on his future.

Something similar happened to Samuel (30) and his partner. They both fled Honduras with the intention to reach the U.S. and apply for asylum there. However, upon arriving in Mexico, Casa Frida supported them to make a free but conscious decision about their ongoing move. As a result, they decided to start their asylum process in Mexico. They were lucky to have their cases processed quite fast, and soon they found a job and a decent place to stay. When I met Samuel, I asked him about his plans to go to the U.S.:

> **Researcher**: So, what happened with the plan of going to the U.S.?
>
> **Samuel:** Well, I don't know, because honestly, José [his partner] and I love this city. We loved Mexico. It's as if this city had everything we wanted. (Samuel, 30, gay cis-man, Honduras)

This shift in their perception was reinforced by the support that the CSO provided, offering a sense of security and inclusion that they had not anticipated.

However, not all migrants have a positive experience. Some, like Elsa (34), who initially planned to stay longer in Mexico, encountered significant barriers to regularizing her migration status, which jeopardized her chances of finding a job or adequate housing. As she explained in a phone conversation already from the U.S.:

> Yes, I did think about it [going to the U.S.], but not so quickly... Look, to be honest, I had so many plans in such a short time... I thought about going to Spain first, for economic reasons. I thought about going to Russia and then reaching Spain, but the journey from Russia to Spain was almost impossible at that time, so I ended up discarding that option. And then I had the opportunity to go to Mexico, and I thought, well, I'll stay in Mexico for a while to settle down and work, and then maybe at some point I'll go to the U.S., which would be like the ultimate goal, right? But when I got to Mexico, things weren't turning out the way I had imagined either. (Elsa, 34, trans woman, Cuba)

4 All names used in this article are pseudonyms to protect the identity of respondents.

When I first met Elsa in Mexico City, the COMAR had been closed down for over three months. This situation delayed the asylum process for many people, which translated into difficulty finding a regularized job and led them to try to leave Mexico whenever they had the chance, even if this involved highly risky situations.

An illustrative case of this is that of Karina, a 52-year-old lesbian woman from Cuba. She and her partner left Cuba due to persistent harassment and initially migrated to Brazil in search of better opportunities. Although they lived and worked there for a year, they were unable to regularize their immigration status, which prompted their subsequent move to Mexico. Their initial intention was to reunite with Karina's daughter in the U.S. However, upon disclosing her sexual orientation, Karina was rejected by her daughter, who explicitly stated she did not want her to come. This familial rupture led Karina to remain in Mexico, where she arrived in Tapachula in November 2023. She only managed to obtain regular documentation by March 2025, a prolonged period during which she experienced significant labor exploitation and economic precarity. Throughout this time, the CSO provided ongoing support, assisting her with job searches, temporary housing, and inviting her to social activities.

The extended waiting period created conditions of acute vulnerability. At one point, Karina considered relocating to Spain after breaking up with her partner and initiating an online relationship with a woman via Facebook. This woman quickly became possessive and proposed marriage as a means for Karina to migrate. Similar patterns were identified among three other participants in this study—cisgender gay men—who became involved in abusive relationships where their partners exerted full control over their migration trajectories and legal status.

A fascinating finding in this study was the role of geopolitical developments in shaping the intentions of displaced persons. This was mostly visible when CBP One was stopped under Trump's administration. Omar, a 26-year-old cis gay man from Honduras, arrived in Mexico through the southern border in November 2023. During his interview, he explained how he wanted to go to the U.S. and work at a construction site with his brother to save money and eventually return to Honduras. Upon arrival in Mexico, he applied for asylum so that he could access work and other basic services until he was given a CBP One appointment. In March 2025, he called me to tell me that, after 16 months of waiting on his asylum case, he had decided to go back to Honduras. Seeing that moving to the U.S. was not possible anymore, he decided to go back home, save money, and try to migrate to Spain, from where his cousin told him, "Here it is easy to get asylum if you tell them you're gay."

As explained by one of the staff members of Casa Frida, currently, eight out of ten individuals decide to continue their asylum process in Mexico despite its lengthy duration. This decision is due because of a combination of factors, such as the fulfillment of their basic needs (through humanitarian assistance and institutional collaboration), and the establishment of safe community spaces where people are given the space to think freely of stress and anxiety:

> And this means that when a person has their needs met [...], when we reduce that risk around the person of suffering an act of abuse or violence, then people decide to continue their procedure to access international protection through refuge for humanitarian reasons, but also their levels of stress and anxiety decrease, and when we manage to reduce the level of stress and anxiety, you and I can think better, we have more creativity and creativity can save our life projects, it can save our futures, our destinies and then we can take the time with the help of our community team to rebuild our life plans and then the idea of reaching the U.S. seems to be further and further away because maybe I didn't want to reach the U.S., I just wanted to survive and if now I am surviving and

> if now I understand the importance of the community itself [...] the desire to reach the U.S. goes away. (CSO staff, Mexico City)

Consequently, the initial desire to reach the U.S. diminishes because of the realization that a decent life in an inclusive community is possible within Mexico. They come to recognize the importance of community support, which leads to a re-evaluation of their migration intentions. This does not imply that the aspiration of reaching the U.S. completely vanishes. While the wish to move to the U.S. might still be there, the intention to actually go there is taken from a much more conscious perspective. In other words, when having their basic needs covered and living in a safe environment, people have the resources to make an informed decision about their migration plans, for example, save money, study the language of the new country, or enhance their education to have better chances abroad.

This was the case of Leoncio. After obtaining his refugee status in Mexico, he was able to bring his mother on the grounds of family reunification because of his health situation. In spite of their wanting to stay in Mexico, Leoncio's health situation worsened day by day. In November 2024, anticipating tighter migration regulations in the U.S. and fearing for his health, they crossed to the U.S. In June 2025, I visited Leoncio and his mum in Miami. While his health had improved and he was receiving medical treatment for his condition, their aspiration and intention were to go back to Mexico. This decision was not only based on the emotional ties they had created with the community there, but also considering the long-term well-being of his mother. In the U.S., they had spent days living in the streets (as no shelter could host them both together), and his mother's health was now suffering from the long working hours in the informal market, which barely covered the rent. Without a support network, Leoncio did not see a future in the U.S. for his 60-year-old mother. In fact, in our conversation, he mentioned how he was "happy" that one of his migration companions, Blanca, had not made it to the U.S.

Blanca, a 55-year-old Cuban transgender woman, arrived in Mexico in November 2023, where she met Leoncio. While she originally intended to continue her journey to the U.S., upon arrival, she was hosted by Casa Frida, where she stabilized her situation and received psychosocial and material support. Despite this, Blanca remained firmly oriented toward the U.S. as her ultimate destination. She applied for an appointment through the CBP One mobile application and, in the meantime, secured refugee status in Mexico, primarily as a precautionary measure rather than with the intention to integrate. Her intention to move to the U.S. led her to refrain from seeking formal employment or investing in long-term plans in Mexico. Instead, she engaged in informal sex work to sustain herself and to send remittances to her mother in Cuba, describing her stay in Mexico as temporary.

In December 2024, still without a CBP One appointment, Blanca travelled to Ciudad Juárez to attempt a border crossing but was unsuccessful. The discontinuation of the CBP One system in 2025 left her in a state of uncertainty, without a clear migration pathway. It was at this point that Blanca reconsidered her position and chose to return to Mexico City with the intention of settling. When I met her again in May 2025, she reflected on this shift: "Before, I didn't live. I was just living in the hope of getting the call and going to the appointment."

Upon returning to Mexico City, Blanca requested support from Casa Frida. While it is not in their rules to host people multiple times, their human-centered approach allowed them to take her back for a few days until she could secure a safe place to live. When I met her, she was

already renting a small place, had created a formal CV that she was distributing to hotels, and she was devising a savings plan to support her mother while also building a life for herself in Mexico. Until she finds a formal job, she's contributing to Casa Frida on a daily basis. As she stated: "Before I was just in transit, but now I realised this is where I have to stay."

Blanca's trajectory illustrates the profound impact of migration governance mechanisms—such as CBP One—on individual decision-making, emotional well-being, and temporal orientation. Her case reveals how the illusion of imminent onward movement can delay integration and perpetuate precarity, even when legal status in the host country is obtained. It also underscores the potential for personal transformation once individuals are forced to confront immobility and reimagine their future in a so-called "transit" space turned *de facto* destination.

Blanca's case illustrates how the perception of Mexico as a transit country can delay or even undermine integration, even when legal status has been secured. Blanca's story demonstrates the emotional and practical toll of prolonged anticipation of onward movement and the transformative potential of shifting one's orientation toward the host country. Her eventual decision to remain and build a life in Mexico suggests that recognizing the country as a place of forced immobility may, paradoxically, open up more realistic pathways for integration and personal stability.

6. Discussion and conclusion

This case study sheds light on the experiences of LGBTIQ+ forcibly displaced individuals in transit through Mexico. In doing so, it reveals how comprehensive and human-centered integration strategies can influence their decisions to stay and how shifting our approach from "transit countries" to "countries of forced immobility" can be useful to integrate displaced persons, regardless of their migration status and future intentions. Rather than viewing countries like Mexico as static waypoints, the findings emphasize the evolving nature of migrants' intentions, shaped by both structural conditions and personal experiences over time. As such, there is a pressing need for longitudinal research to better understand how and why migrants' aspirations and intentions shift, and to ensure that integration policies are designed around what people actually need and want, not simply what governments wish to deter.

LGBTIQ+ displaced persons often arrive in Mexico intending to continue northward. However, these intentions frequently change as they navigate the country's reception context, which includes both structural violence and moments of solidarity. CSOs can become critical actors in providing stability through tailored support, helping people reimagine their futures. Yet, the cases also show the limits of this support when systemic barriers—such as lack of access to documentation, healthcare, housing, or employment—persist.

The journeys of some displaced persons described in this study underscore two central points. First, integration is not a linear process, and migration intentions are dynamic and deeply human—shaped by changing emotional, physical, and social needs. Second, migration governance should focus on providing people in displacement with the necessary tools to make informed decisions rooted in a state of calm, safety, and consciousness. Displaced persons deserve the time and support to consider their options, rather than being pushed into survival-based decision-making. Unfortunately, many current integration initiatives born out of externalization strategies fail in this regard. As the literature shows (e.g., Cuttitta, 2020), such strategies often neglect emotional wellbeing and community belonging, instead offering

minimal, and at times exploitative, employment opportunities designed to prevent onward movement rather than foster real inclusion.

To conceptualize these dynamics, this article proposes the notion of "country of forced immobility" (or "forced destination country" from a more policy-oriented standpoint). This concept builds on critical migration studies and forced migration literature that challenge the assumption of choice in migratory trajectories. While displacement is often recognized as involuntary, destination is still too frequently treated as an unchangeable matter of individual decision-making. In reality, many displaced persons are immobilized or redirected by structural violence, containment strategies, and bureaucratic impositions, leading them to remain in countries they never intended to stay in.

Recognizing Mexico as a country of forced immobility or a forced destination country has important policy implications. When states see themselves primarily as "transit" zones, they avoid investing in integration infrastructure, assuming that migrants will leave. However, when people are unable to continue their journeys, whether due to policy bottlenecks, bureaucratic barriers, or physical containment, they are effectively compelled to stay. In such contexts, the absence of integration policies exacerbates exclusion, precarity, and psychological harm.

In contrast, acknowledging the reality of Mexico as a de facto destination—albeit one shaped by coercion—can shift the policy approach from deterrence to inclusion. The CSOs in this study demonstrate how localized interventions can help migrants not only survive but also begin to thrive. These positive transformations, however, hinge on more than just shelter or counseling. Access to rapid regularization and the labor market is essential, not only to achieve financial autonomy but also to reduce the risks of emotional dependency and exploitation—both of which disproportionately affect LGBTIQ+ migrants, as shown in this study.

From a policy perspective, this study challenges the dominant securitization approach to migration, calling instead for investment in holistic integration strategies in countries that increasingly function as *places of forced immobility*. Success should not be measured by reduced border crossings but by whether people are given the tools, safety, and time to make well-informed and autonomous decisions about their lives. As the cases in this study showed, forced immobility might lead to forced settlement, where people can exercise their agency to stay and build a life in a country they initially did not choose. While returning to their origin countries might be an option for some (see Omar's case), if people decide to stay, it is important to create an environment worth staying for. As Blanca's case shows, changing her mindset (from seeing Mexico as a place of transit to seeing it as the place where she *has to* stay) gave her a whole new perspective and attitude. She is now invested in the country, where she is looking for a regular job, bound by rights and obligations, which will eventually benefit Mexico. Shifting the focus from deterrence to inclusion—through sustained, rights-based integration policies—could make countries like Mexico not only places of passage but true destinations of choice, even when the initial arrival was shaped by coercion rather than intention.

This research underscores the urgent need for policies that recognize migrants as people with evolving dreams, traumas, and resilience. By building systems that are responsive to these complexities and acknowledging when transit becomes a destination, we can move toward more humane and sustainable migration regimes, where integration is not imposed or performative, but agency-driven.

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