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**Migration and Gendered Interactions  
at the U.S.-Mexico Border  
during the Period of the Trump Administration**

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## ABSTRACT

Questa tesi si concentrerà sull'interazione tra le determinanti di migrazione, genere e famiglia nel contesto della frontiera tra Stati Uniti e Messico, in particolare durante il periodo dell'amministrazione di Donald Trump. Lo scopo principale di questo lavoro è capire come la reciprocità esistente tra le dinamiche di migrazione e genere sia influenzata – e allo stesso tempo influenzi – la politica e le politiche del governo di Trump. Questa analisi è possibile attraverso il filo conduttore di un continuo approccio conflittuale tra i soggetti che interagiscono con le varie dinamiche di migrazione, e degli aspetti familiari e di genere. L'intento finale è quello di sfatare i miti che circondano la realtà della migrazione e la vita degli immigrati e dei cittadini latinoamericani, sia al confine che all'interno degli Stati Uniti.

Il punto focale di questo lavoro si restringe poi sulla peculiare relazione tra il contesto geografico principale della frontiera terrestre tra Stati Uniti e Messico, e gli attori chiave di questa analisi. Mantenendo una struttura organizzata su contrasti, si può evidenziare una tendenza di opposizione binaria anche verso i soggetti primari di questo lavoro, che possono essere suddivisi in due grandi raggruppamenti. Il primo gruppo di interesse è quello degli immigrati '*Latinxs*', quei migranti latinoamericani provenienti dalla nazione confinante del Messico e dalla regione del cosiddetto 'Triangolo del Nord', comprendente gli Stati del Guatemala, Honduras ed El Salvador. Questi migranti interagiscono in diversi modi con il territorio degli Stati Uniti: attraverso la loro essenza di soggetti definiti come 'illegali' (*illegal*) o 'senza documenti' (*undocumented*), per esempio, sono capaci di rompere le dinamiche predefinite che costituiscono la frontiera e la separazione tra le due realtà. Questa separazione è da considerarsi non solamente come un 'Stati Uniti vs. Messico' o come 'Paese ricco vs. Paese povero', ma anche come categorica distinzione ideologica tra 'noi' e 'voi', 'cittadini legittimi' e 'soggetti alieni', e così via.

L'altro grande gruppo di individui che intervengono in queste dinamiche, invece, è composto dai vari rappresentanti dell'amministrazione di Donald Trump, e da tutti gli altri soggetti che, in un modo o nell'altro, sono collegati alla sua figura e alle sue politiche.

Il corpo principale di questa tesi viene suddiviso in due parti principali e sette diversi capitoli. La prima parte è incentrata sui concetti chiave della frontiera e della migrazione, sia in termini teorici che pratici. Innanzitutto, il lavoro comincia con una analisi dettagliata del quadro teorico riguardante la nozione di 'confine': non solo attraverso una sua definizione, ma anche guardando alle sue funzioni e le inevitabili trasformazioni. Cercare di proporre un quadro chiaro di cosa sia una frontiera permette di creare una base solida per uno studio più approfondito del contesto geografico di riferimento: la frontiera tra Stati Uniti e Messico. Il capitolo successivo (capitolo terzo) presenta la seguente dimensione di interesse, quella della migrazione, attraverso un'analisi delle tendenze migratorie che hanno caratterizzato la frontiera durante il periodo dell'amministrazione di Donald Trump. L'ultimo capitolo della prima parte (capitolo quarto) è incentrato su una breve valutazione delle politiche e dei cambiamenti introdotti negli scorsi decenni nel contesto del sistema d'immigrazione americano. In particolar modo, in questo capitolo vengono introdotti i processi di 'securitizzazione' (*securitization*) e militarizzazione, che serviranno come lente d'analisi attraverso tutti i capitoli successivi. Le sezioni conclusive presentano i tratti principali delle politiche della presidenza di Trump, con una particolare attenzione ai processi fisici e teorici delle logiche dietro il processo costruzione della barriera di separazione, e agli eventi connessi alla cosiddetta 'guerra agli immigrati'.

La seconda parte di questo lavoro è suddivisa in due capitoli che si basano, rispettivamente, sui fattori chiave delle dinamiche di genere e della famiglia. La particolarità di queste sezioni della tesi è l'abbinamento dei concetti teorici ai casi di studio esemplificativi, che vengono qui definiti come contrasti pratici. Ognuno dei discorsi contrastanti presentati attraverso questa tesi verrà poi



accompagnato da una serie di nozioni di aspetto qualitativo e quantitativo. Il quinto capitolo di questa tesi è concentrato sulle dinamiche di genere, in modo particolare attraverso la lente d'analisi e la connessione con la costante della migrazione. Le prime sezioni si aprono con la presentazione di una panoramica dei modelli di genere esistenti all'interno dell'ambito privato e sociale e, in modo concreto, attraverso una analisi su tre livelli – l'aspetto concettuale, le aspettative e gli stereotipi di genere, e infine i comportamenti reali – di questi soggetti migranti distinti nelle due 'categorie' di uomini/padri e donne/madri. Il primo contrasto mette in opposizione le figure degli uomini latinoamericani, spesso descritti dall'amministrazione Trump come '*bad hombres*' (uomini cattivi), e quel gruppo di patrioti americani che hanno ricevuto una grazia/perdono ufficiale durante il periodo della presidenza di Donald Trump. Il secondo contrasto, invece, contrappone le figure femminili delle cosiddette '*welfare queens*' (regine del benessere) e i loro '*anchor babies*' (bambini ancora) al gruppo delle *Angel moms* (madri angelo). Questi due contrasti mettono in evidenza l'aspetto di intersezionalità a cui vengono quotidianamente esposti quei soggetti che fanno parte di molteplici categorie di discriminazione, tra cui l'appartenenza al gruppo di migranti, di latinoamericani, l'essere donne, l'essere meno abbienti, e molto altro. Il capitolo seguente si focalizza principalmente sulle dinamiche, la realtà e i cambiamenti che caratterizzano le famiglie transnazionali, sia al confine tra Stati Uniti e Messico che all'interno degli Stati Uniti, attraverso altri due contrasti. Il terzo contrasto si basa sull'impatto dei movimenti migratori a livello domestico e, in particolare, sull'opposizione tra i soggetti che emigrano e quelli che rimangono nel luogo d'origine (*los que se van* vs. *los que se quedan*). In secondo luogo, poi, si inserisce un ulteriore livello di analisi a queste dinamiche già esistenti, attraverso l'interazione con le politiche e la politica dell'amministrazione di Trump. A seguire, il quarto contrasto presentato in questo lavoro è collegato agli eventi accaduti nel primo semestre del 2018 negli Stati Uniti con l'introduzione delle politiche dalla 'tolleranza zero' (*zero-tolerance*), e le questioni legate alla separazione e alla detenzione di bambini e famiglie al confine. A livello pratico, questo è reso possibile grazie ad

un'analisi pratica di questi eventi con racconti in prima persona e testimonianze dei fatti realmente accaduti da parte dei soggetti coinvolti.

La finalizzazione di questo lavoro è stata possibile attraverso una serie di tappe progressive. Il punto di partenza per questa tesi è stato il processo di identificazione e scelta dei macro-temi, ossia le dinamiche migratorie, il contesto geografico della frontiera tra Stati Uniti e Messico e le dimensioni di genere e della famiglia transnazionale. In secondo luogo, poi, c'è stata la creazione dei criteri di ricerca necessari per definire la lente di analisi appropriata per questa tesi. Successivamente, da gennaio a luglio 2021 è stato condotto un periodo di ricerca della letteratura e delle fonti di base, con una conseguente selezione dei materiali scelti. Di conseguenza, è stata poi necessaria un'ulteriore riorganizzazione e classificazione dei dati estratti attraverso le lenti specifiche individuate in precedenza. La fase finale del lavoro personale è rappresentata dal processo di scrittura della tesi, che consiste nell'atto di mettere insieme i risultati presentati dalle risorse individuate e la valutazione del loro contenuto, con una valutazione e una prospettiva personale.

Le fonti primarie utilizzate in questo lavoro sono ampie e si diversificano tra le due sezioni principali del testo. Infatti, i primi capitoli si avvalgono prevalentemente di articoli accademici e pubblicazioni istituzionali come materiale di base per presentare i concetti più teorici e di interesse accademico riguardanti i concetti della frontiera e le caratteristiche della migrazione al confine tra gli Stati Uniti e il Messico. La seconda parte di questo lavoro, invece, si basa per la maggior parte su numerosi articoli e testimonianze raccolti da giornali online, blog e siti web. Questa tesi utilizza anche altri tipi di opere, tra cui materiale di ambito legale (per esempio, testi di legge, testimonianze, deposizioni), e altre risorse varie (siti web, videofilmati, trascrizioni, eccetera). La vasta gamma di fonti utilizzate contribuisce al carattere intersezionale e inclusivo di questa tesi, e

permette di raggiungere l'obiettivo finale di questo lavoro tramite approcci tra loro diversi. Lo scopo di questa tesi, infatti, è quella di creare una relazione ordinata tra i vari fattori che interagiscono tra di loro, e in particolar modo l'aspetto della migrazione, delle variabili di genere e della famiglia transnazionale, e la politica dell'amministrazione dell'ex-presidente Donald Trump, attraverso il filo conduttore del contrasto.

Quello che emerge dai punti di vista contrastanti presentati attraverso tutta questa tesi è l'idea che, solamente grazie a questi esempi concreti, è possibile resistere a quelle visioni e argomentazioni nazionaliste, che rappresentano i temi della migrazione con una eccessiva semplificazione e stereotipizzazione. Questo *modus operandi* è un approccio ricorrente che ha caratterizzato la presidenza di Donald Trump, soprattutto verso i soggetti migranti e latinoamericani. Quei discorsi che tendono ad etichettare tutti i migranti come criminali e invasori, per esempio, hanno l'effetto di disumanizzare gli individui coinvolti e creare delle generalizzazioni basate sugli aspetti di genere, di etnia o di classe. Le storie personali rappresentano non solo il mezzo più adatto per resistere e contrastare queste tendenze, ma anche per smantellare le logiche di (neo)colonialismo e razzismo che sono ancora presenti al giorno d'oggi. Inoltre, condividere queste testimonianze attraverso nuove lenti e approcci permette di raggiungere nuovi e molteplici audiences, al di là dell'usuale pubblico di riferimento delle testate giornalistiche o dei blog.



## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

### 1. The Research Focus

The primary focus of this thesis lies in the interaction between the key determinants of migration, gender and family, and the practical actualizations of the immigration regime and governmental politics during the period of the Trump administration. Each of these three elements contains several additional ‘sub-categories’ of interest that inevitably intertwine with the others in various instances, not only in terms of academic research but also in everyday life. The reciprocity between these factors underlines the impossibility to separate real, personal daily occurrences from the distant, objective political scenario. In particular, this is made possible through the central argument, which consists in trying to unveil the mutual and simultaneous impact amongst the three main factors of migration, policies, and gender through the *leitmotif* approach of concrete examples and conflicting views. The contributions and goals of this work are not only to present different testimonies and visions in an organized fashion but also to offer an accurate evaluation of these – often biased – statements and testimonies through the support of qualitative and quantitative data.

For the purpose of limiting the focus of analysis, the dimensions of governmental policies, gendered models, and migratory trends taken into consideration in this work have been deliberately limited in different ways. To better understand the final framework, it is possible to follow the 5Ws model (Where, When, Who, What, and Why). First of all, for the Where question, the predominant geographical areas of interest in this work are the U.S.-Mexico land border and the United States. The focus of this thesis, in fact, is centered around the land border that separates the national territories of the United States and Mexico, and it does not take into consideration the maritime

borders in the Pacific Ocean and the Gulf of Mexico. Moreover, the frontier comes to be conceptualized as a separate and autonomous entity from the two countries involved. Then, the time frame of interest in this thesis (When) is the period of the presidential campaign – 2015 to 2016 – and the first years of presidency – from 2017 to 2019 circa – of Donald Trump. As it can be noted, this research work has purposely avoided the concluding period of the Trump administration, which was affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. As a matter of fact, no reference will be made to the complexities added by the coronavirus disease to the already-problematic reality of the immigration regime, both at the U.S. national level and the international one. When it comes to the ‘Who’ question, meaning the subjects of relevance in this study, it can be noted that, regardless of the numerous subjects involved, the focus can be divided into two big umbrella groupings. The first one is that of the Latinx immigrants from Mexico and the Northern Triangle region (Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador), and mainly those that are generally defined as ‘illegal’ or ‘undocumented’. The other major group of people present in this work is composed of the various representatives of the Trump administration and all the other individuals that are connected to the figure of Trump, in a way or the other. The interest toward the Latinx migrant community in the United States is related to two main reasons: on the one hand, due to practical necessities of reducing the lens of study to a limited number of academic studies, data systems, and articles; on the other hand, migrants coming from the areas mentioned above represent the predominant group moving to reach the United States, whether legally or illegally. Moreover, numerous differences characterize the incoming migrants with the receiving community of the United States based on the gendered and family dynamics.

## 2. The Content and the Structure

The fulcrum of this thesis is divided into two main parts and seven different chapters, and consequent sub-sections which explore in detail all the principal topics that will be presented in this study. The first part is centered around the main spheres of the border and migration, both in theoretical and practical terms. The second chapter of this thesis starts by looking into the specific geographical context focus of this work, the U.S.-Mexico border. Concretely, this is achieved by presenting the existing academic research connected to the border as a general entity and then applying the concept presented (e.g., the idea of border as a method, as means of separation or interaction) to the area of the U.S.-Mexico border. These discourses will also help introduce the aspect of the revision of the spatiality of the frontier with an analysis of its different stages throughout the last centuries and a focus on its various meanings and values. The connection with the following section of migration is achieved through an evaluation of the contrasting representations of a boundary (e.g., fixed *versus* volatile) and their interaction with the macro-theme of migration. The third chapter opens with an introductory analysis of the migratory trends that characterize(d) the border throughout the last decades, which provides the foundations for studying the existing immigration regime of the United States. The conclusive sections of the first part are centered on a brief assessment of the policies and changes introduced during the Presidency of Donald Trump, with a particular focus on the physical and theoretical processes of ‘building the wall’ and the events connected to the so-called ‘War on Immigrants’.

Instead, the second part of this work is based on the key factors of gender and family and is divided into two distinct chapters. The peculiarity of this part is that it juxtaposes the theoretical concepts with exemplifying case studies. The fifth chapter of this thesis introduces the dimension of gendered family dynamics, particularly under the lens and connection with the aspect of migration. This is achieved through an overview of existing gender and family models and the connected

expectations and actual behaviors of both male and female migrants in the United States and at the border. This introductory section is followed by two specific case studies centered around the impacts of migration, politics, and policy enactments of the U.S. government on the subjects of fathers and mothers, respectively. The first contrast juxtaposes the figures of the *bad hombres* vis-à-vis the patriotic figures of the men pardoned by Trump, whereas the other comparison opposes the so-called ‘welfare queens’ and their ‘anchor babies’ to the group of Angel moms. The following chapter describes the dynamics, realities, and changes of transnational families at the U.S.-Mexico border and within the U.S. via two distinct contrasts. The third and fourth contrasts presented in this work are connected to the events that occurred in the first semester of 2018 in the United States (i.e., the introduction of the policy of zero-tolerance and the issues connected to the separation and detention of children and families at the border).

### **3. Material Research and Methodology**

A series of progressive steps were necessary to reach a conclusive and general study. The starting point was the identification of the specific macro-themes and the creation of the research criteria to define the lens of analysis appropriate for this thesis. The second step consisted of the period of literature research (from January to July 2021) and the consequent selection and classification of the chosen materials. Then, the data extracted required an additional re-organization under the specific lenses chosen for this work. The final phase consisted of the process of thesis writing, the act of bringing together the findings from the resources and their evaluation with the personal contribution and perspective.

The primary sources utilized in this work are broad and vary between the two main sections. The first chapters are predominantly referring to academic articles, and institutional publications or



reports, whereas the second part of this work is based on a series of articles of publications from online newspapers, blogs, and websites containing real-life testimonies. Additional types of works are also employed in this work as, for instance, legal reports, law texts, and other miscellaneous online sources. However, they represent a minor percentage of all the works used, and which will be directly or indirectly cited. Nonetheless, the wide range of sources creates the basis for the intersectional and inclusive contained in this thesis.

This thesis offers an in-depth look at the themes of migration and gender through the means of real case studies, statements, and intimate stories. These personal recollections are used as starting point for the contrasts presented in the second part of the thesis, a string of comparisons that focus on some broad categories and themes, which all have in common the geographical context of the U.S.-Mexico border and the variables of gender, family, and migration. These dimensions intertwine with the underlying rhetoric of the Trump administration with the intent of showing that these policies and actions have concrete consequences on the lives of many. This work aims at bringing together the diverging opinions, positions, and experiences of all the subjects involved in these dynamics with these fictional contrasts. Each of the conflicting discourses presented in the second part of the thesis will be followed by concrete data according, with the intent of debunking the myths surrounding the reality of migration and the lives of Latinx immigrants and citizens both at the border within the United States. Apart from providing a series of qualitative and quantitative evidence, this work also aims at moving away from mere statistics and numbers toward a more personal approach to academic research, in which stories and names come first.

#### **4. Why telling these stories is important?**

In many instances, the language and oratory employed by legislators, public figures, and policymakers perpetuate a feeling of power and authority, leading the general public to consider the information shared as bullet-proof accurate, and factually correct. So, when these discourses are proposed in a fashion that resonates with the audience targeted or by showing strong emotions, it appears increasingly difficult to dissociate the concrete facts from the political agenda. This *modus operandi* is a recurrent tactic that characterized the Trump presidency, especially toward the issues connected to immigration. In those instances, in fact, enraged speeches and quickly-typed tweets became synonyms of reliable information, whereas the personal reports and accounts from migrants, voluntary workers, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) started to be perceived as fictionalized narratives. Nativist arguments, and especially those referring to the topics of migration, tend to adopt processes of oversimplification and stereotypization (e.g., labeling all the migrants as criminals and invaders) that dehumanize the individuals involved. Personal stories are the perfect means to withstand this generalizing tendency and dismantle the logics of (neo-)colonialism and racism that are still present nowadays. Moreover, sharing these stories through new lenses and approaches allows to reach new audiences, and thus it appears fundamental to try at least to start shedding light on the often-untold truth of the subjects involved in the peculiar situation of migration at the U.S.-Mexico border. In fact, it seems particularly necessary to give a platform – as well as a voice and a name – to all those faces that appeared in news reports and tabloids as mere components of a category of Otherness belonging to a distant reality. It is, thus, only through the telling of personal stories and recollection of the journeys that it becomes possible to understand how a wall, a “random, stupid line” (Sanchez, 2017: 280), impacts the daily experiences of thousands on multiple levels. Moreover, these testimonies succeed in breaking the social boundary between the private and public spheres. They permit understanding the plentiful effects that the border carries in interaction with the other dimensions. In fact, apart from the direct

impact on transnational migration, the border influences the spheres of family, culture, and economy. According to the model proposed by sociologist expert Jane Lilly López, for instance, there are three specific ways in which this influence become apparent in day-to-day life: “through the physical and symbolic presence of the border; through the disciplining act of crossing the border; and through US immigration laws and their associated punishments imposed at and embodied by the border” (López, 2018: 6). These instances of public domain (i.e., migration and politics) impact the existing models of gender and family at the private level. In practical terms, this work will analyze how the border intrudes the most intimate spaces of the lives of migrants and the subjects close to them. However, it is worth mentioning that, in many instances, stories were told using abbreviations or pseudonyms, thus partially impinging on the just-mentioned purpose of the work.

## **5. Disclaimers**

A series of disclaimers appear necessary before presenting the work that will follow in a way to avoid possible confusion or the perception of a biased approach. First of all, this thesis will utilize the term ‘Latinx’ over ‘Latino’, where the ending ‘-o’ would be used to indicate groups of mixed-gender subjects. This choice represents a small step to subvert the patriarchal character of the Spanish language and the already gendered nature of this thesis. The instances in which the traditional ‘-o/-a’ suffixes are still employed are direct quotations from the original texts.

Generally speaking, the term ‘Latinx’ is employed to describe the group of people coming from – or with ancestry coming from – the area of Latin America. In some particular instances, however, the label ‘Latinx’ is also employed to signify those subjects coming from the Latin America region who are residing in the United States (regardless of their status). ‘Hispanic’, instead, is another term employed with the aim of categorization, but it refers to the people related to the area of Latin

American countries where Spanish is the national language (more than 90% of the population) or dominant language (between 50% and 90% of the population). However, these terms are usually employed as a means of generalization by mass media or politicians, and thus may not necessarily coincide with the current identification and belonging chosen by the subjects involved.

A second disclaimer is connected to the ‘background’ portion of this thesis, meaning the process of research of materials and the compilation of the bibliography. Throughout the work, a feeling of biased representation might emerge toward the subjects connected to the migratory movement and the Trump administration in general. In particular, this could appear more evident in the second part of the thesis with the conflictual examples aimed at presenting the real-life experiences and individual visions that intertwine the determinants of migration, governmental politics, and gender/family structures. However, the biased lens is not a deliberate or unintentional choice, but it is the direct effect of the absence of valuable material connected to the specific issues covered in the following sections. With respect to the anti-immigrant orientations, for instance, it proved particularly difficult to retrieve resources that provided a more personal point of view. There is a lack of articles, blogs, or websites that could provide a suitable bibliography to counterbalance the substantial material available from the migrants’ testimonies or pro-immigration stances. However, understanding the reasons behind this imbalance in the traceability and accessibility of specific documentation goes beyond the purpose and scope of this thesis.

**PART 1: THE THEORETICAL BACKGROUNDS AT THE BASIS  
OF THE GENDERED TRANSNATIONAL MIGRATION AT THE  
U.S.-MEXICO BORDER**

*“Where there is no inequality there is no need for borders.”  
- Thomas Torrans*

**CHAPTER 2: THE BORDER**

**1. Theoretical Background of the U.S.-Mexico Border(land)**

The U.S.-Mexico border represents the underlying focus of this thesis due to its multifaceted character. When referring to ‘the border’, the emphasis is not placed solely on the physical line *per se* but also on all more abstract theoretical concepts. The peculiarity of this frontier is that it groups several research themes as, for instance, immigration, trade and labor, gender and family, immigration law, and militarization or securitization. As recalled by Robert R. Alvarez, “[g]ender, citizenship and other themes reveal the complex engagement of people on both sides of the Mexico–US border and a growing trend to engage the complexity of life and society in the bordered zones of the geopolitical line” (Alvarez, 2012: 551). During the last couple of decades, the U.S.-Mexico frontier has registered a renewed wave of attention at the international level, both in terms of academic interest and widespread media coverage, for a variety of reasons that will be explained throughout this work. However, the sizeable interest displayed around the frontier is not a new trend. In fact, as border experts Guadalupe Correa-Cabrera and Kathleen Staudt stated (2014: 385), the border studies focused on the U.S.-Mexico area originated as a branch of political geography during the first period of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and consolidated as an independent section in the

academic world later in the 1960s. In the first decades, the focus of studies and research was placed predominantly on the topics of the shared geographical borderland, the historical backdrop between the two countries, and the so-called Chicano group. Then, with the passing of decades, scholars have broadened their lenses of analysis toward more and more specific themes surrounding this physical boundary. As reported by professor Venken et al. during the Conference of the Association for Borderlands Studies in Vienna on July 10 and 11, 2018,

[b]order studies, through a cultural studies lens, focuses especially on the symbolic and social dimensions of borders and border regions in a critical perspective, analyzing borders both synchronically and diachronically as a result of complex spatial, temporal, social and cultural phenomena which are not static, but mobile, dynamic and mutable. Borders are thereby unmasked as contingent social and cultural productions and as instruments of power, which determine and often also substantiate our perception of the world (Venken et al., 2020: 64).

Mainly due to the complex nature of this context, it has not proven easy to develop a single, cohesive border theory amongst all the disciplines and perspectives (Adkisson and Pallares, 2018; Paasi, 2016). Nonetheless, border studies at the U.S.-Mexico frontier are in continuous evolution, and their future still has a lot to offer in terms of contributions. Numerous challenges are altering the character of life and migratory experiences at the frontier on a daily basis (e.g., the processes of globalization and militarization, and the erection of a new border wall), and for this reason, “border studies have become a multi- and interdisciplinary field that concerns itself with a wide range of multifarious mechanisms behind these bordering, de-bordering and re-bordering processes, including geopolitical, everyday life and/or artistic” (Venken et al., 2020: 64).

In recent years, scholarly approaches have been trying to dismantle and disrupt the fixed character of border studies, in particular regarding the concepts and practices of bordering, migration, and belonging. One emblematic case is the research approach proposed by the two academics Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson (2012): they have introduced a methodology that perceives borders as a ‘method’ and, under this lens, physical boundaries are not to be conceived as elements of obstruction but, instead, they represent fundamental components of international flows (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2012: 59; 66). This concept will be re-introduced further on in the following sections as theoretical support for the practical examples proposed.

After having taken a brief look at the history of border studies at the U.S.-Mexico frontier, the question about what a border is remains to be answered. Trying to propose a cohesive definition of a ‘border’ broadly accepted by scholars still appears immensely challenging these days, perhaps because the very representation of borders constitutes the precondition of its definition (Balibar, 2002: 76). As noted by Professor Emmanuel Brunet-Jailly, “many single explanations of boundaries, borders, borderlands and frontiers exist, but none is really satisfying; most scholars seem to agree that there are many types of borders and each social science subfield has its own epistemology of borders” (Brunet-Jailly, 2005: 642). What we commonly refer to as a ‘border’ represents the modern conceptualization of nation-states and, consequently, their territory created with the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648. Borders, therefore, are essential elements that help define the limits and the essence of States, so much so that they are also a fundamental part of the definition of states in international law<sup>1</sup>. Physical boundaries between states are the legacy of centuries-old bordering processes, and they are the result of the protracted formations of all the nation-states that constitute the current international scene. Borders are inherently human creations, even when they

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<sup>1</sup> According to Article 1 of the 1933 Montevideo Convention on the Rights and Duties of States, “the State as a person of international law should possess the following qualifications: (1) a permanent population; (2) **a defined territory**; (3) government; and (4) capacity to enter into relations with other states” (emphasis added).

tend to follow the natural connotations of the landscape they are situated in (Hernández, 2020). Then, the label of natural borders refers to how governments can take advantage of the physical environment – such as mountain ranges or rivers – to separate the national areas in question. For instance, we can see how in the case of the U.S.-Mexico physical boundary, the official border coincides with the path of the Rio Grande for most of its extension<sup>2</sup>. Distinguished Professor John Agnew underlined that “[s]tate borders are not, therefore, simply just another example of, albeit more clearly marked, boundaries. They are qualitatively different in their capacity to both redefine other boundaries and to override more locally-based distinctions” (Agnew, 2008: 181). On the contrary, then, they can also be distinctively unnatural, in the sense that they represent geo-political impositions established by power structures for a variety of reasons (Adkisson and Pallares, 2018). These artificial frontiers can be inconveniently placed, not only in practical terms but also according to the aspects of justice, belonging, and equality for the multitude of subjects and groups involved (Alesina et al., 2011).

## **2. The Evolution of the U.S.-Mexico border**

*“The question for the sovereign state, then as now, wasn’t whether or not to have walls —it was where to put them.”*  
– Thomas Nail

The frontier between the United States and Mexico separates the two countries for more than 3,100 kilometers, extending all the way from the Pacific Ocean to the Gulf of Mexico<sup>3</sup>, and crossing four American states (California, Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas) and six Mexican

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<sup>2</sup> For reference see the Boundary Treaty of 1970 between the United States and Mexico, which officially settled the disputes connected to the Rio Grande.

<sup>3</sup> The border also extends as a maritime border in the Pacific Ocean and in the Gulf of Mexico (for almost 30 kilometers and 20 kilometers, respectively).



states (Baja California, Sonora, Chihuahua, Coahuila, Nuevo León, and Tamaulipas). Throughout its extension, the U.S.-Mexico border displays a diverse range of geographies, cities, and populations (Alvarez, 2012: 541). As said by Correa-Cabrera and Staudt, “the lengthy US-Mexico border is a region of multiple contrasts. It can be characterized as an asymmetrical, interdependent border [...]. Enormous demographic, socioeconomic, political, and cultural differences can be found across the nearly 2,000 mile border” (Correa-Cabrera and Staudt, 2014: 385). These characteristics represent the starting point of analysis for a variety of issues and interests in terms of academic research.

As Guillermo Gómez-Peña said, “[b]orders, it has been said, are the “scars of history” because they are outcomes of conflict [and] the U.S.-Mexico border is no exception in this regard” (Gómez-Peña, 2005: 4). This specific frontier was created in the 1850s after the end of the Mexican American War, resulting in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848 and the Gadsden Purchase in 1853. However, the border is not only the outcome of a series of ‘arbitrary’ decisions, but it is the inevitable result of the State formation processes that interested both the United States of America and Mexico over the centuries. Throughout the 1800s, the boundary that divided the two nations represented more a formality and hardly ever an impediment for movements across the border or work-related affairs in general. However, the developments brought on by the new century caused complications at the border and consequent intensification of border enforcements at the U.S.-Mexico frontier. Amongst the numerous variables that triggered these changes, we can recall the growing illegal immigration from Chinese migrants (which were trying to bypass the migratory restrictions imposed in the United States by crossing through Mexican territories), internal revolutions in Mexico that risked threatening U.S. stability, general security worries connected to WWI and the Wall Street Crash of 1929, and the consequent period of the Great Depression.

In recent times, the U.S.-Mexico border's features appear dramatically changed from its original conception. The area became increasingly subject to controls in the course of the late twentieth and the twenty-first centuries, as a direct consequence of the continuous and tendencies of militarization and securitization adopted throughout the globe. As recalled by Alberto Hernández in his 2020 article about the *frontera*, “[i]n the mid-1990s, the first formal installation of a fence took place within the framework of Operation Gatekeeper, implemented by the Bill Clinton administration. [...] A second barrier came to replace the first during the George W. Bush administration” (Hernández, 2020: 67; Author’s translation)<sup>4</sup>. The ‘border wall’ concept is different from the simple frontier, both in practical and theoretical terms. As a matter of fact, Élisabeth Vallet and Charles Philippe David have recognized that walled borders can be referred to as devices for security and separation purposes according to the speaker’s conceptual significance and their political stance or ideology (e.g., apartheid or anti-terror walls), or as obstacles, partitions, and barricades. Concretely, these bordered frontiers are “flanked by boundary roads, topped by barbed wire, laden with sensors, dotted with guard posts, infrared cameras and spotlights, and accompanied by an arsenal of laws and regulations (right of asylum, right of residence, visas)” (Vallet and David, 2012: 112). The ‘securing the border’ discourses increased further after the events of 11 September 2001 – which is commonly known as the ‘9/11’ – and eventually led to harsh restrictive politics and zero-tolerance immigration policies throughout the years, especially from the United States side. A clear example of this protectionist behavior is the project brought on by the former U.S. President Donald Trump of ‘building a border wall’, with the final objective of separating the United States from Mexico, and thus protecting ‘his’ country from the numerous perceived threats. These topics will be resumed and better explained in the subsequent chapters.

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<sup>4</sup> The original excerpt: “A mediados de la década de 1990 se dio la primera instalación formal de un muro en el marco del Operativo Guardián implementado por el gobierno de Bill Clinton. [...] Una segunda barrera vino a reemplazar a la primera durante la gestión de George W. Bush”.

### **3. Border Functions**

A border is to be considered as a ‘defining space’, a physical boundary that separates territories and determines the rights and responsibilities of each nation (Longo, 2016: 189). Borderlines exist for various practical reasons and can be categorized under many different labels according to the purpose they serve, how they are organized, and their characteristics (see amongst others Agnew, 2008: 175-76). Numerous perspectives tend to portray the border, particularly the U.S.-Mexico frontier, based on a binary system of multiple oppositions. In fact, gathering together a variety of academic studies and researches, it has emerged that in most cases the frontier represents a practical device to depict two distinct conflictual realities sharing the same borderland, and their consequent scopes, aims, and specificities. Through their presence and practice, borders represent the primary means to differentiate between the instances of interiority and exteriority, inclusion and exclusion, and they are “meaning-bearing” and “meaning-generative” spaces (Longo, 2017: xi). These frontiers are not only geographic, but also racial, economic, political, and cultural (De Genova, 2005: 95). Thus, the perspective that looks at a boundary as a mere line of physical division is insufficient in today’s complex environment, as intellectual heritage, cultural values, and identities – amongst others – are also bordered, with the particular intent of safeguarding the state’s sovereignty and assets (Venken et al., 2019: 60). Moreover, as underlined by Vallet and David in their 2012 article, borders “must be regarded not only as physical barriers but also as gateways, for they are punctured by official and unofficial openings through which people can cross from one side to the other [...] and apparatus, such as checkpoints, by which states can control their movements” (Vallet and David, 2012: 112).

Apart from the pragmatic character of these interactions, the frontier can represent a place of separation and connection under a more abstract consideration of the boundary. The border can divide nations and groups of people – in particular categorizing criminals, poor people, and

migrants as undesirable or non-worthy – but at the same time, it is a vital device to connect borderlands in terms of identity and belonging trade and services and more. “Furthermore, borders establish the scientific division of labour associated with the sectioning of knowledge into different disciplinary zones. Cognitive borders, in this sense, often intertwine with geographical borders” (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2012: 65-66). The border between Mexico and the United States represents one of the principal examples to express this inherent duality, where the elements of division and exclusion inexorably coexist with those of interdependence and association.

Then, in the words of scholars Cherríe L. Moraga and Gloria E. Anzaldúa (2002: 63), how is *connection* actually *separation*? Under a practical lens, the interdependence between the elements of separation and connection at the U.S.-Mexico frontier can be analyzed through a couple of data statistics. Firstly, the U.S.-Mexico border, especially in the section between Tijuana and San Diego, maintains the record for the most-crossed border at the international level daily. The movements across the U.S.-Mexico boundary are predominantly connected to transnational migration and work and trade reasons. “In terms of border flows and crossings, a 2017 study indicates that on the northern border, according to estimates by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs [Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores] (SRE), more than one million legal crossings of people and around 300,000 of vehicles take place every day, of which more than 70,000 are cargo trucks” (Hernández, 2020: 61-62; Author’s translation)<sup>5</sup>. This leads to more than \$1.5 billion worth of goods crossing the frontier every day (Mazza, 2017: 34). These statistics, however, do not take into consideration the high numbers of illegal entries, of both people and goods, occurring at the border on a daily basis.

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<sup>5</sup> The original excerpt: “En términos de flujos y cruces fronterizos, en un estudio realizado en 2017 se indica que en la frontera norte, según las estimaciones de la Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores (SRE), cada día se realizan más de un millón de cruces legales de personas y alrededor de 300.000 de vehículos, de los cuales más de 70.000 son camiones de carga”.

Secondly, this boundary represents the longest border between a rich and a poorer country in the world (Vogeler)<sup>6</sup>, meaning that there is a significantly sharp divide between the two nations under economic, developmental, and lifestyle terms. The border represents much more than a line or a barrier: it is a conduit of hope, of economic possibilities, and better life expectations. This is particularly true for the neighboring nation of Mexico, but also for the countries of the Northern Triangle and Latin America, and the ‘global South’ more generally (Alvarez, 2012: 543). These contrasting realities started to appear increasingly evident throughout the last decades, when the gap between the United States and Mexico rose exponentially. This inevitably led to an increase in the numbers of migrants, and consequent processes of militarization and securitization on the other side of the physical boundary. In these instances, the discourses of separation and connection can be translated into variables of inclusion and exclusion, as we will see later in this work. Professor Carla Angulo-Pasel stated that:

[i]nternational security discourse plays an important role in securitizing global migration by framing it as a ‘threat’, and the concept of ‘borders’ is significant in this narrative. Scholarly work conceptualizing the ‘border’ has flourished to address the border well beyond simply viewing it as a physical, territorial line where one nation-state meets another (Angulo-Pasel, 2019: 3)<sup>7</sup>.

Another element underlining the discourses of separation and connection is the idea that, in most cases, borders have been created as consequences of wars and conflicts and lengthy negotiation processes. For these reasons, then, borders should – theoretically speaking – decrease

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<sup>6</sup> However, according to the viewpoint of David B. Coplan, the U.S.-Mexico border is not the only frontier in the world that opposes a country of the so-called ‘Third world’ with a richer, more developed country. In fact, “[u]nder the long-standing regimes of White mechanized farming (now agribusiness) and flows of migrant labor, there is another such border: [the] South Africa–Lesotho” border (2010: 57).

<sup>7</sup> See also: Balibar, 2002; Huysmans, 2000; Huysmans, 2006; Walters, 2006; Rumford, 2006; Rumford, 2011; Johnson et al., 2011; Parker and Vaughan-Williams, 2009; Parker and Vaughan-Williams, 2012.

further chances of intra-state tensions and guarantee economic equilibrium and strengthen state power at the interior level (see amongst others Boggs, 1940 and Peattie, 1944, as mentioned in Brunet-Jailly, 2005). Two interesting viewpoints connected to this interpretation are the ideas that borders define and constitute states, and that the relation between the boundary and the nation is co-constitutive (Nail, 2020: S207). In the case of the Mexico-U.S. border, as asserted by Robert R. Jr. Alvarez, the existence of the frontier represents a way to assert “a strong geopolitical separation of the two nation-states. [...] [Creating a] continuing image of the Mexico–US border as both symbol and marker of division, separation, and difference” (Alvarez, 2012: 539). In a historical moment that should be characterized by international cooperation and globalization, the U.S.-Mexico frontier still portrays the heterogeneity of the two countries and the underlying dynamics of power and dominance.

#### **4. Border Transformations**

Over time, boundaries are inevitably subjected to altering and transformations. In fact, due to their geopolitical and physical characteristics, these boundaries can remain unaltered for more extended periods or be subjected to more frequent changes in policies and infrastructures. The objective of these rigid policies is “to have greater administration and control of the mobility of people and goods, as in the case of Mexico’s border with the USA, which has undergone major transformations during the last three decades” (Hernández, 2020: 288-289; Author’s translation)<sup>8</sup>. So, borders are not disappearing, but they are transmuting into new forms and specific nuanced

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<sup>8</sup> The original excerpt: “Debido a su longitud y características geográficas, las fronteras pueden tener diferentes contextos y condiciones de cambio; pueden mantenerse estáticas durante largos periodos, con aspectos o dinámicas disímiles ocasionales, o bien transformarse debido a políticas e infraestructuras más rígidas, cuyo objetivo es tener una mayor administración y control de la movilidad de personas y mercancías, como en el caso de la frontera de México con EEUU, que ha experimentado grandes transformaciones durante las últimas tres décadas”.

versions (Vallet and David, 2012). In an article of 2011, scholars Johnson et al. have underlined how a border, both as a concept and in practical terms, has changed or can change based on three distinct lenses: place, perspective, and performance. Their analysis can be connected to the article of Carla Angulo-Pasel, *'The Categorized and Invisible: The Effects of the 'Border' on Women Migrant Transit Flows in Mexico'*, which utilizes a similar tiered vision. To start with, Angulo-Pasel stated that, historically and “with regards to ‘place’, the border was understood in strictly physical, geographical terms of fixed territorial lines demarcating one sovereign state from another. This fixed line at the geographical edge of a nation-state [...] was to be militarily defended from enemy armies” (Angulo-Pasel, 2019: 3). The second lens of analysis is the one of perspective: “[i]n terms of ‘perspective’, therefore, the principal actor involved with questions of ‘who borders’ or who sustains the border, was the nation-state. This state-centric focus, typical of dominant International Relations (IR) theory, positioned border policy within a national security narrative” (Angulo-Pasel, 2019: 3). Borders, in fact, can alter their typology according to the necessities, interests, and approaches of the nation-states involved. Generally speaking, international boundaries can be conceived as either soft or hard. However, in both cases, there are added nuances to these levels of control: open, regulated, fortified, militarized, and so on. For instance, during the last decades, the U.S.-Mexico boundary has shifted from an open to a fenced militarized border and even to a walled frontier in some areas. This example is one amongst many other similar cases of borders changing patterns and character in the global context (see for instance the increasing process of closure of what has recently been defined as the ‘Fortress Europe’). In one of his articles for *The New Yorker*, Joshua Jelly-Schapiro stated that, “[f]or most of the twentieth century, the “hard boundaries” that did exist were militarized for actually military reasons. Now such scenes are replicated along borders dividing countries whose shared system of government is democracy and whose armies are at peace” (Jelly-Schapiro, 2019). Unfortunately, the physical escalation of borders

is taking place in a time in history where the challenges connected to migration are countless, and the numbers of displaced people worldwide are worryingly high.

Finally, there is the third aspect in the list of changes associated with the border proposed by Johnson et al. (2011), which looks at the transformations connected to the meaning(s) given to frontiers, how they are perceived, and their consequent performance at the regional, national, and global levels. The numerous theoretical interpretations connected to borders can be represented by yet another contrast, and condensed into the two distinct visions symbolized by the diverging image of the wall *versus* the image of flows. One key study that will be mentioned throughout this thesis is Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson's article, '*Between Inclusion and Exclusion: On the Topology of Global Space and Borders*'. In this work, they report that "[t]he image of the wall, for instance, tends to pose a form of invariance that resists the operation of transformations, deformations and modulations" (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2012: 64), and it is perceived as an example of invariance, a fixed opposition in comparison to flows of migration and continuous transformations. This 'traditional' and long-lasting idea constitutes the belief that borders represent a crucial asset for division, granting security and protection to the state. Based on this framework, borders are one of the factors behind the creation of the processes of exclusion-inclusion, not only at the frontier line but also in the internal parts of the country. Physical boundaries construct and reinforce existing politics of belonging that perpetuate Us/Them dichotomies in many different contexts. This structure is also valid in the context of the *frontera* between Mexico and the United States, where the phenomenon of every-day bordering constructs forms of social ordering, division, and practices of Othering. The ambitious project brought on by Trump during his administration is a clear example of this approach. However, designed with the intent to prevent people from entering the United States through illegal channels, the wall between Mexico and the United States "has become a symbol and not a solution to complex problems" (The New York Times YouTube video, 2019).



More recently, scholars have underlined the changing nature of movements and borderlands, which also impact the theoretical configurations of a border. Another excerpt from Mezzadra and Neilson's research article well exemplifies the development of border studies, and their point of view:

the border becomes for us a strategic angle on actually existing global processes. We contend that, rather than organizing a stable map of the world, the processes of proliferation and transformation of borders aim to manage the 'creative destruction' and constant recombination of spaces and times that lie at the heart of contemporary capitalist globalization (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2012: 64).

According to this perspective, the increase in bordering practices does not signify a propensity toward international or regional separation, but rather it highlights the flexible character of modern-day borders. In fact, "rather than organizing a stable map of the world, the processes of proliferation and transformation of borders aim to manage the 'creative destruction' and constant recombination of spaces and times that lie at the heart of contemporary capitalist globalization" (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2012: 64). The numerous re-interpretations that have been proposed in the last years constitute a change in perspective regarding borders and bordering processes. Despite the current proliferation of frontiers and securitization practices, boundaries have become an essential factor for the articulation of international flows in the context of increasing globalization (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2012: 59). This multi- and inter-disciplinary field of studies rejects the idea that frontiers are merely factors of disconnection and separation. Instead, new and old boundaries can be seen as a 'method', an essential device for reshaping global spaces. The inherent flexibility of borders led to what can be defined as 'borderscape' or, as scholars Dell'Agnese and Amilhat Szary said, "an area, shaped and reshaped by transnational flows, that goes beyond the modernist idea of clear-cut national territories" (Dell'Agnese and Amilhat Szary, 2015: 3) via a focus on the dynamicity of

borders. According to this ‘new’ vision, the landscape and the border are fluid concepts that change meaning based on the different perceptions of each individual. As professor Carla Angulo-Pasel underlined,

[a]s a result of this changing perception of migration and border governance, there is a theoretical shift among critical scholars from ‘borders’ to the idea of ‘bordering’. This is significant because borders are no longer conceptualized as fixed lines but rather processes and practices occupying both internal and external spaces (Angulo-Pasel, 2019: 4)<sup>9</sup>.

One of the concrete ways in which the U.S.-Mexico borderland is being altered is that the border is slowly losing its fixity, and it is moving inside the territory of the United States. In fact, those characteristics and practices which were traditionally only connected to the frontier are starting to be reproduced within the nation’s territory. In particular in the context of the United States, border controls have extended well beyond the border, and into workplaces, neighborhoods, and means of transportation. According to Venken et al., these restrictions “manifest as both physical and administrative barriers. The latter may be less tangible and localized, but they nevertheless have a very noticeable impact on the lives of migrants” (Venken et al., 2020: 60). One of the main reasons for the increase of these securitization practices is connected to the more recent waves of migration, which have altered the existing patterns of bordering and provoked the insurgence of stricter immigration law policies and/or the construction of new walls (Venken et al., 2020). The shift of the border(s) within the inland of the United States particularly affects the vulnerable categories of ‘unauthorized’ or women migrants. In fact, “[t]he specifically gendered character of borderlands includes spaces shaped by both constraint and possibility, and demonstrate the restrictions and potential that depend on gender positionality” (Boehm, 2012: 92). These negative impacts will be

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<sup>9</sup> See also: Rumford, 2011; Bigo, 2002; Amoore, 2006.

dealt with in detail in the second part of the thesis, with the specific focus on the figures of the male migrants in the domains of work and family.

The tendency to continuously shift the border in the inlands of the United States creates a series of impacting effects and challenges for many subjects, especially at the personal level. As pointed out by John Agnew in his article '*Borders on the mind: re-framing border thinking*', this alteration "not only makes the whole national territory into a border zone, but also potentially criminalizes the entire population in the face of enforcement of identity checks and so on" (Agnew, 2008: 184). This reality unsettles the existing *modi operandi* and daily lives of migrant families or couples who could be potentially affected by incoming inspections due to their unauthorized and vulnerable status. The constant state of fear alters even the simplest of choices made on a daily basis and tends to impact the existing dynamics at the household level (from grocery shopping and going to the family doctor, to voluntary return migration in the country of origin). This specific group of people is subject to intense policing both internally and along the border. According to Massey,

[f]rom 1988 to 2018 the Border Patrol's budget increased from \$411 million to \$3.6 billion in real terms and the number of officers rose from 3,700 to more than 19,000 to become the largest arms-bearing agency in the U.S. except for the military itself. Over the same period the internal enforcement budget went from \$1.6 billion to \$6.2 billion in real terms, and deportations rose from 26,000–340,000 while average daily detentions grew from 3,600 to nearly 41,000 (Massey, 2020a: 31; see also Massey, 2017).

The continuous transformations at the border are the result of increasing securitization and militarization trends, which shape and reshape the existence of migrants and family patterns.

## CHAPTER 3: MIGRATION AT THE U.S.-MEXICO BORDER

*“Even the freest of free societies is unfree at the edge where things  
and people go out and other people and things come in;  
where only the right things and people must go in and out.”  
- Salman Rushdie*

### 1. The Defining Elements of Migration

An important variable that interacts with the element of the border is that of migration. Professors and researchers Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson have underlined the fact that “[m]ovements and struggles of migration have [...] been central to the production of new transnational social spaces [...], which have greatly contributed to the cultural, economic and political shape of globalization” (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2012: 61; 60). It is undeniable that migration represents one of the fundamental challenges of our time, so much that numerous academics have argued that the current years can be defined as the ‘age of migration’ (see amongst others Castles et al., 2003). Migration is a broad category, an umbrella term that takes into consideration a mixture of variables and realities. In this thesis, the term ‘migration’ is used to denote specifically the process of crossing an international border with the intent to settle into another country (and not all the movements that take place on a national or regional scale). Under this perspective, these movements are not necessarily permanent. In many cases, in fact, migration can represent a temporary solution to specific issues or connected to activities that are not constant in time (e.g., seasonal work).

Then, there are countless drivers to be considered behind the decision to migrate, which can span from safety-related motives (conflicts, personal threats, environmental dangers, and more) to education and employment reasons. In addition to these driving elements, the decision to migrate

results from a series of factors as, for instance, the general social context (cultural beliefs and values; norms and expectations connected to existing gendered systems); the migrant's characteristics and relations in the places of origin and arrival (family ties, societal conventions, legal status, socioeconomic position, sexuality, and gender); historical and structural factors (ethnicity and political reality), and much more (see amongst others Hennebry et al., 2016: 37-38; and Boyd and Greico, 2003). As underlined by Deborah Boehm in her book *'Intimate migrations: gender, family, and illegality among transnational Mexicans'*, these elements are "shaping who migrates; if, when, and how often they do so; and the character of their border crossings and lengths of stay in the United States" (Boehm, 2012: 4). This work focuses on the instances of voluntary migration – despite their length, rationale, or consequent development – but it does not consider the cases of forced migration. Nonetheless, it is worth mentioning that movements amongst international borders can occur voluntarily or involuntarily (and reluctantly, too<sup>10</sup>): forced migration takes place when the subjects are coerced into move involuntary due to instances of persecution or exploitation, whether arising from natural or man-made causes<sup>11</sup>.

According to a schematic approach, migration can be organized and regulated on the basis of three different frameworks, arranged in a pyramidal form: the set of international treaties and agreements, the array of bilateral agreements between specific nations, and finally, the immigration policy regime operating at the national level. These three structures should work in a cohesive and interconnected manner to guarantee the safeguard of migrants and maintain state sovereignty within and at the frontiers. At the international stage, numerous treaties have been drafted and approved

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<sup>10</sup> More on reluctant migration can be found at the following link: <https://www.thoughtco.com/voluntary-migration-definition-1435455#:~:text=Reluctant%20migration%20is%20a%20form,situation%20at%20their%20current%20location.&text=Another%20form%20of%20reluctant%20migration,Louisiana%20residents%20following%20Hurricane%20Katrina.>

<sup>11</sup> See for instance the European Commission's definition of 'forced migration' at the following link: [https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/orphan-pages/glossary/forced-migrant\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/orphan-pages/glossary/forced-migrant_en).

based on exact ‘sub-categories’ of migration, as, for instance, the ILO’s International Legal Framework on Labour Migration or the Special Rapporteur and OHCHR’s pledge for the protection of human rights of migrants within the United Nation’s framework. “In addition to national and international frameworks, bilateral agreements, Memoranda of Understanding (MOU) and other commitments are common instruments employed” (Hennebry et al., 2016: 28) amongst countries to manage mobility on a more confined area. The following chapters will take into analysis the specific approach of the United States toward immigration in the last decades up until the most recent actions of former President Donald Trump.

### ***1.1 The Subjects of Migration***

According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), a migrant is to be understood as a

person who moves away from his or her place of usual residence, whether within a country or across an international border, temporarily or permanently, and for a variety of reasons. The term includes a number of well-defined legal categories of people, such as migrant workers; persons whose particular types of movements are legally-defined, such as smuggled migrants; as well as those whose status or means of movement are not specifically defined under international law, such as international students (IOM).

Nonetheless, numerous nuances characterize the subjects involved in said migratory movements. For instance, asylum seekers are those migrants that can demand a permit to stay in a country by pointing to the risks to which they were exposed in their own country. In the cases in which their applications are successful, asylum seekers become refugees. Then, ‘irregular migration’ is used to

describe the movement of people without documents or with false documents. If apprehended, irregular migrants can be detained and forcefully repatriated. In fact, in most cases, a series of documents or some identifiable grounds are requested as evidence to be granted entrance and stay in a specific country. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that a high percentage of migrants do not possess the set prerequisites to enter the United States and thus travel through illegal and perilous channels to avoid border controls and the risks of apprehension. Moreover, one's immigration status – especially in the context of illegality – can shape the existing gender relations and guide migratory movements, too. In her work, Palacios Valencia underlined the fact that

[i]mmigration in its different manifestations is projected as a global and complex phenomenon, constituting a social trend of primary importance in the contemporary world [...], with different causes and variations. These divergences will depend to a large extent on whether the analysis is made by linking migrants within the framework of legality or “illegality” (Palacios Valencia, 2016: 146; Author's translation)<sup>12</sup>.

The labels as ‘illegal’ or ‘irregular’, ‘unauthorized’, ‘alien’, and ‘foreigner’ are voluntarily created, employed, and perpetuated by the state policymakers with the intent of separating those migrants (Them) from the lawful citizens (the Rest, Us). This work follows the approach proposed by Deborah A. Boehm in her 2012 work by using the terms ““unauthorized” and “undocumented” to describe migrants who are labeled by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security and in public discourse as “illegal,” recognizing that migrants are often “informally and formally authorized” to be in the United States” (Boehm, 2012: 19). This thesis wants to criticize the notions of illegality and the practices of alienation and Othering intrinsic in public speeches and political agendas<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup> The original excerpt: “La inmigración en sus diferentes manifestaciones se proyecta como un fenómeno mundial y complejo, constituye un fenómeno social de primera magnitud en el mundo contemporáneo [...], con diversas causas y variaciones. Dichas divergencias dependerán en buena medida si el análisis se hace vinculando a las personas migrantes en el marco de la legalidad o “ilegalidad”.

<sup>13</sup> See, amongst others, the approaches of De Genova, Peutz, and Boehm.

In fact, the employment of these labels throughout this work is not intended to reify such subjects but merely to reproduce those recurrent discourses with the final intent of commentary and research for academic purposes. Additionally, Angulo-Pasel underlined that “[t]hese state-produced categories place migrants in more dangerous and risky situations and affect their mobility and human rights. The danger facing migrants may be more pronounced during the journey from the country of origin to the country of destination” (Angulo-Pasel, 2019: 1). The process of labeling migrants as ‘illegal’ or ‘unauthorized’ subjects affixes on these subjects a series of stigmas that endure even after they have reached their end destination, and

borders may follow an ‘unauthorized’ migrant into towns and cities. Borders appear essentially wherever an ‘unauthorized’ or ‘undocumented’ migrant is asked to identify himself or herself. Temporally, the border practices that categorize the migrant as ‘illegal’ can last a lifetime, as evidenced by the ‘unauthorized’ youth who were brought to the U.S. as children and are protesting for regular status (Angulo-Pasel, 2019: 4).

Despite the numerous negative connotations surrounding the figures of ‘irregular’ migrants, scholars tend to perceive these subjects as the bearers of change, as central figures in the process of reshaping the world. Thanks to their crossing journeys, these subjects break the static dichotomy amongst insiders and outsiders, and they represent that in-between group of ‘immanent outsiders’ that can affect immigration policies and citizenship and the labor market and culture (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2012: 70-71; McNevin, 2006: 141). Moreover, the so-called ‘irregular’ migrants can shape and reshape the binary opposition of inclusion/exclusion by being neither fully insiders nor outsiders. In fact, regardless of their status of citizenship (outsiders), they take part in dynamics connected to the labor market (insiders), “and indeed contribute to the production and reproduction



of those very spaces, [even if] they do not share the ‘belonging’ (the legal status) to which a whole set of rights correspond” (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2012: 63).

However, it is indisputable that, when it comes to migration, any positive outcome is the consequence of lengthy and costly change processes, especially in terms of death tolls. The U.S.-Mexico border represents one of the most dangerous crossings globally, with high numbers of migrant victims every year. The concept of ‘social deaths’ proposed by Lisa Marie Cacho in 2012, and also cited by Jeremy Slack and Daniel Martínez in their 2019 article (2019: 143), points the finger at the processes of politicization and racialization that attempt to portray the victims as accomplices of their own death due to the illegal character of the border crossing. These practices perpetuate ideologies that directly or indirectly affect the cross-border processes, and prevent positive changes in migration policies. In the framework of the U.S.-Mexico frontier, migration is even more complex than in other contexts, as it intertwines with variables such as drug crime, death, and smuggling.

An interesting article published by journalist Emanuela Campanella on Global News in 2019 underlined the fact that, recently, migration flows at the border between the United States and Mexico are in constant change, not only on a quantitative level but also in terms of demographical characteristics of those migrants. In fact, “before the Obama era, migrants coming to the U.S. from Mexico were predominantly single men and boys looking for work. However, around 2014 [...] a shift happened: children travelling with their families began showing up at unprecedented levels in search of refugee status” (Campanella, 2019; IMUMI, 2019: 4). The nativist groups perceived these new ‘categories’ of migrants in the United States essentially as a threat for the ‘true’ American population, thus enacting a series of protectionist stances to the immigration laws and policies of the United States. This anti-immigration position represented a defining characteristic for the election of former President Donald Trump, as it will be explained in detail during the following chapters.

## 2. The Characteristics of Migration at the U.S.-Mexico border

### 2.1 *The feminization of migration*

The concept of ‘feminization of migration’ was firstly introduced by Mirjana Morokvasic in her work *‘Birds of passage are also women’* (1984)<sup>14</sup>. In that specific context, Morokvasic referred to the fact that for many decades statistics and data on labor or migration were not divided by gender, and thus it appeared challenging to collect migrant women’s stories and understand their reasons for migrating. In recent years, academic research has shown an upsurge in the interest toward the feminization of migration, both at the domestic and international levels, and gender mainstreaming has become a crucial element of public policy. When talking about ‘feminization of migration’, we refer to the increase in the numbers of female migrants worldwide (quantitative aspect) and the alterations that occur to – and thanks to – these subjects through migration (qualitative aspect). Statistics have shown that women migrate internationally as much as men: by the 1960s, women already accounted for 46.8% of all international migrants and reached 49.6% in 2005, but as high as 70 or 80% in some countries (see amongst others Palacios Valencia, 2016: 151). On the qualitative level, instead, the changes occurring to gendered and family structures in connection to migration can be analyzed under a gendered lens to present differentiated data and findings. There are numerous reasons behind the continuous participation of females in (im)migration and the more recent contributions in the labor markets. In fact, poverty, lack of employment in the place of origin, higher living costs, and separation from other family members represent the pushing effects of migration. The interaction between the variables of gender and

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<sup>14</sup> This work was connected to the dual labor market theory, where migrants in labor markets have been defined as ‘birds of passage’. In fact, due to the difficulty of climbing the pyramidal-style structure of the labor market, many of these migrant workers gave up and returned to their country of origin.

migration, that shape the positive outcomes and changes connected to the feminization of migration, still constitutes a ‘work-in-progress’ for specific categories.

Lawyer and Professor Yennesit Palacios Valencia has pointed to the fact that “being an immigrant, a woman, and with dissimilar cultural connotations, entails a series of impacts that affect women depending on the place of origin and destination” (Palacios Valencia, 2016: 152; Author’s translation)<sup>15</sup>. The added variables of gender, ethnicity, and class increase the already complicated dynamics of ‘illegal’ or ‘undocumented’ migration and decrease the chances of embarking on a journey toward the United States with favorable chances of success. In fact, female migrants are more likely to suffer from human abuse during their travel because of the double vulnerability of being a migrant as well as a woman (Acharya, 2010: 20). Critical feminist and feminist border theory illustrate that “marginalized bodies are not only subordinated by categories such as ‘unauthorized’ or ‘illegal’. Race, class, gender and nationality all equally affect (im)mobility” (Angulo-Pasel, 2019: 5). The perpetuation of these systems of immobility increases the barriers of marginalization experienced by women daily, especially for those women who also have an ‘illegal’ status: this is what Ruiz-Aho (2011) presents as ‘intersectional oppressions’.

Especially in the rural areas in Mexico, there is a diffused trend amongst women of ‘staying behind’ or not moving, rather than migrating. The idea of ‘being left behind’ refers to the common practice where the husband has to migrate to be a provider, leaving their spouse and children in their family homes, and only in some cases do these women migrate to reunite with their family (Cornelius, 2018: 8). In fact, “[d]ata from the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) indicate that female immigrants are more likely than male immigrants to come to the United States through the family-based class of admissions, rather than through employment” (American Immigration

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<sup>15</sup> The original excerpt: “[...] el hecho de ser inmigrante, mujer, y con connotaciones culturales disímiles, conlleva una serie de impactos que afectan a las mujeres según el lugar de procedencia y de destino”.

Council, 2020)<sup>16</sup>. Whether through the partner or another member of the household, as the father or a brother, many women gain legal status in the United States thanks to their relationship with male subjects. For this particular reason, it is often argued that the power of “legalization” is intertwined with the privileges of masculinity (Boehm, 2012: 80). These dynamics will be portrayed in detail in the third contrast of this work, with a specific focus on the categories of migrants ‘who leave’ and those ‘who stay’ (*se van/se quedan*).

## **2.2 The Case of Mexico: How it became the ‘Land of Last Resort’**

The status of Mexico within the global context of migration has undergone a series of changes during the last years, especially in connection to the United States. According to the World Migration Report published in 2020 by the International Organization for Migration (IOM), Mexico represents “the second largest migrant origin country in the world after India. Most Mexican emigrants lived in the United States, which continues to be the largest country-to-country migration corridor in the entire world” (IOM, 2020: 97). However, more data from Douglas Massey’s study ‘*The Real Crisis at the Mexico-U.S. Border: A Humanitarian and Not an Immigration Emergency*’ (2020b)<sup>17</sup> underlined that the global crisis that interested the whole world between 2007 and 2008 hugely impacted the migration flows between the U.S. and Mexico border. In fact, the share of Mexican migrants entering the territory of the United States began to fall drastically during that period, and it did not return to the *status quo ante* even after a whole decade. There are various reasons why Mexican migration has not rebounded back to previous numbers: most importantly, there is a revival in internal migration, which is less costly and less dangerous in comparison to the

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<sup>16</sup> More information at: Office of Immigration Statistics, U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2018 Yearbook of Immigration Statistics, Table 9.

<sup>17</sup> The data contained in this section of the study was primarily obtained by the Pew Research Center (Passel and Cohn, 2018), the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (Baker, 2018), and from the Mexican Migration Project (Massey et al., 2015).

journeys toward the U.S.-Mexico (Cornelius, 2018: 8); then, some studies have also highlighted that other impacting elements to the movements toward the United States could be the recent declining demographic and fertility trends in Mexico, the necessity to remain closer to family members and kins ‘back home’, and the processes of securitization and militarization at the border.

In recent years, Mexico shifted from being the primary country of origin of migrants in the United States to a transit country for those traveling northward from the region of the ‘Northern Triangle’ (Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras). As expressed by Wayne Cornelius, “Mexico’s role as a conduit for third-country undocumented migrants seeking to enter the United States was relatively insignificant until 1981, when intensification of the civil war in Guatemala pushed refugees into Mexico” (Cornelius, 2018: 10). These countries experienced a ‘second surge’ of criminalization and crisis between 2014 and 2018, which eventually led to increased migratory movements toward the United States. As a consequence of the perseverance of this status of the humanitarian crisis, undocumented migrants from the Northern Triangle region arrive at the U.S.-Mexico frontier in high numbers daily, looking for asylum and refuge from criminal organizations, unsustainable economic circumstances, and unstable governments that keep threatening their lives (Massey, 2020b: 800). “This movement of people has been used by the Trump administration for election purposes, with a xenophobic rhetoric of a “national emergency” to stop an “invasión”, as well as with policies. Since 2017, the Trump administration sought to create a crisis at the border with Mexico” (IMUMI, 2019: 3; Author’s translation)<sup>18</sup>. In particular,

Mexico’s growing role as a transit state has been highly contested by anti-immigration groups in the United States and by the U.S. government under President Donald Trump, who have been critical of lax

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<sup>18</sup> The original excerpt: “Este movimiento de personas ha sido utilizado por la administración Trump con fines electorales, con una retórica xenófoba de una “emergencia nacional” para frenar una “invasión”, así como con políticas. Desde 2017, la administración Trump buscó crear una crisis en la frontera con México.

enforcement of Mexico's southern border, but also by human rights advocates concerned about violence and other abuses perpetrated against transit migrants by government agents, police, and criminal gangs (Cornelius, 2018: 1).

The deliberate choices of border enforcement led to an increase in the cases of deportability and illegality, both in the frontier and in the inland. The rise in securitization and militarization aimed at contrasting the upsurge of arrivals of migrants at the U.S.-Mexico border upsurge translated into the practical implementation of the policies of zero-tolerance and family separation, which will be analyzed in the second part of this thesis. "In addition, in June 2018 U.S. Attorney General Jeff Sessions issued a ruling that victims of "private" violence – domestic, gang, and drug-related – were no longer eligible to claim asylum in the United States. Henceforth, only victims of "public" violence [...] would be able to file an asylum claim" (Cornelius, 2018: 15). These decisions affected especially the migrants from the Northern Triangle region, who were fleeing in search of asylum, and the majority of the migrant population present in the country. Nonetheless, the restrictive policies enacted by the Trump administration did not obtain the intended effect of permanently stopping the migratory flow toward the United States (Cornelius, 2018: 15). In fact, this situation has only caused a shift in the traffic of migrants from urban crossing spaces to more rural areas in the borderland: migrants are forced to undertake perilous journeys and risk becoming targets of criminal groups. For all these reasons, the numbers of deaths at the frontier are escalating to unprecedented records (Johnson, 2015: 2). These trends can be exemplified through the use of the data from the apprehensions at the U.S.-Mexico border.

The following figure – ‘**Figure 7. National origin of apprehensions by family status 2016-2019**’ – was taken from Massey’s work (2020b: 797).

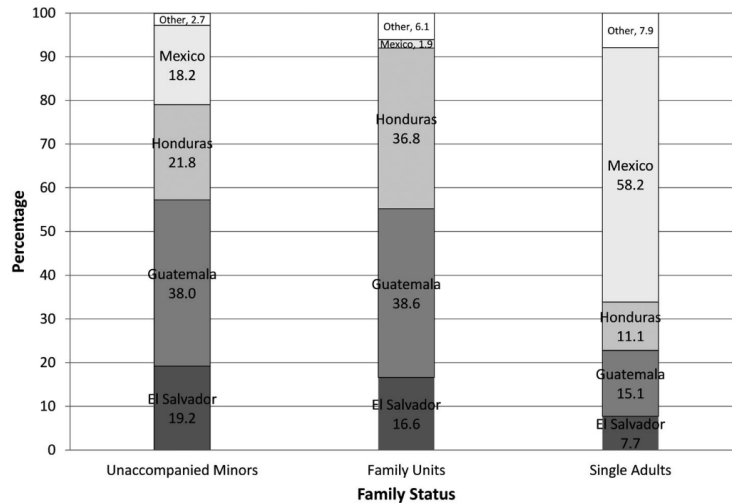


Figure: National origin of apprehensions by family status 2016-2019; from Douglas Massey (2020b).

The figure perfectly portrays the reality of apprehensions at the U.S.-Mexico border, based on the subjects’ family status (unaccompanied minors, family units, and single adults) and country of origin (Mexico, Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador, and others). During the period between 2009 and 2019, the share of apprehensions of Mexican individuals fell from 96% to 19.5%, whereas the apprehensions of migrants from the Northern Triangle countries climbed from 7.2% to 73.7% (Massey, 2020b: 795). During the same reference period, apprehensions of family units “rose from 23,000 to 84,500, while the number of single-adult apprehensions climbed only from 23,000 to 37,000. Over the same period, apprehensions of unaccompanied minors rose from 5,000 to 11,500” (Massey, 2020b: 795).

In his work, Massey proposed a strategy to resolve this global problem, which is based on two pillars: the first one is the creation of “a pathway to legal status for the 11 million undocumented residents of the United States who lack a criminal record, and second, [to] accept

migrants arriving from the Northern Triangle as asylum seekers and refugees that the United States has a clear moral obligation to take in” (Massey, 2020b: 803). The possible solutions to this ‘humanitarian nightmare’ could be found in a much-needed cooperation between the United States and Mexico. However, as we have seen in the previous sections, the numerous clashing qualities between these two countries often represent an impediment to the success of cooperative actions or approaches.

This chapter presented the topic of migration through a general overview of some of its core characteristics, as the subjects involved in said movements, and the connection with the practical case example of migration at the U.S.-Mexico. Another important focus was also placed on the several transformations that have been interesting the phenomenon of migration in this specific geographical context. In particular, the dimension of migration interacts with the other key factors under the lens of the feminization of migration or the increasing trends of securitization and illegality brought on by the politics and policies of the Trump administration, as we will see in the following chapters.



## CHAPTER 4: THE TRUMP ADMINISTRATION

### 1. An Historical Recap of the Immigration System of the United States

In the United States, a country with a long and complex immigration history, public and political debates that started well back into the 18th century about the size and type of immigration, as well as its socioeconomic impacts, show no sign of abating. And as other countries around the world become migrant-sending, receiving, or transit places (or frequently a combination), migration—whether voluntary or forced—has arguably earned a prime and enduring spot on national and international policy agendas (Batalova, et al. 2020: 1).

In his work *‘Creating the exclusionist society: from the War on Poverty to the war on immigrants’*, sociologist and professor Douglas Massey summarized the consistent approach that characterized the immigration regime of the United States during the last administrations through a system of ‘politically-inspired wars’. In fact, “[p]oliticians in the United States display a remarkable fondness for martial metaphors. When they seek to address a social problem, they don’t just promise vigorous efforts to solve it; they declare all-out war on it” (Massey, 2020a: 18). These ‘wars’ represented a series of political, military, and ideological harsh approaches toward and upon a series of subjects, and in particular the minorities of marginalized women, and immigrants from Latin America and the ‘Rest’ of the ‘global South’ (Massey, 2020a: 19). From the ‘War on Poverty’ enacted by Lyndon B. Johnson in the 1960s, to the most recent and formally undeclared ‘War on Immigrants’ of Donald Trump, these aggressive approaches accomplished very little when it came to mitigating the challenges of crime, poverty, and terrorism.

The following paragraphs will provide a short excursus of the U.S.’ immigration policy system of the last century, inspired by two models. First of all, the approach scholars Katharine M. Donato and Catalina Amuedo-Dorantes (2020: 2) proposed in their introductory work of the legal landscape of U.S. immigration. As reported by the table below, the changes in the U.S. immigration system can be divided into different timespans, based on the distinctive trends and policies that characterized those decades.

Period	Inclusion Versus Exclusion Content	How Implemented
Before 1925	From relatively open entry to restrictions	Growing reliance on legislation
1925-1964	Limited entry with some exceptions	Legislation / narrow executive actions
1965-1990	Expansive policies	Legislation / narrow executive actions
1991-2002	Rising restrictions with some exceptions	Legislation / narrow executive actions
2003-present	Rising restrictions	No legislation / broad executive actions

*Source:* Authors’ compilation.

Table: Changes in U.S. Legal Immigration Policy Regime;  
from Amuedo-Dorantes (2020).

The model proposed by Donato and Amuedo-Dorantes will be accompanied by Douglas Massey’s categorization of the U.S. immigration regime into warfare periods and their primary concerns (poverty, crime, drug abuse, terrorism, and immigration).

As we have seen in the previous chapter, for much of the nineteenth century and in the first decades of the twentieth century, the border represented a mere bureaucratic formality between the United States and Mexico. The frontier did not impact the movements amongst the countries, and migrants were able to move in a relatively accessible way from one nation to the other. Moreover, the United States conveyed a climate of relative openness to newcomers within the country. Over time, however, the structural differences of the two realities grew increasingly apart, and the Mexican emphasis on corporatism opposed the U.S. possessive individualism. These *modi operandi*

influenced the way of living in the inland and political decisions and procedures that – directly or indirectly – influenced the life at the frontier, too (Heyman, 2012: 53). Things started to change with the technological progress of the ‘Roaring Twenties’, especially in the States. It was then that the first “U.S. immigration policies emerged to bar from entry certain types of immigrants, such as prostitutes, criminals, and the Chinese born” (Donato and Amuedo-Dorantes, 2020: 2)<sup>19</sup>. For instance, in 1917, Congress passed an Immigration Act which broadly restricted immigrant entries, especially from Asia (China and India) and the Middle East. Protectionist sentiments are highly connected with the economic boom experienced by the United States in that period.

### ***1.1 The decades from the 1920s to the 1960s***

Anti-immigrant sentiments increased during the last years of World War I and profoundly influenced the U.S. immigration system for the following decades. For the first time in history, during the 1920s, Congress issued a series of legislations, including quantitative limitations on migrant entries in the United States (the Emergency Quota Act of 1921 and the National Quotas Act). “In addition, it required that persons entering the United States present visas obtained from embassies and consulates abroad” (Donato and Amuedo-Dorantes, 2020: 3). The trend of restrictive policies continued throughout the 1930s and 1940s as protectionist devices, primarily due to the global crisis of 1929 and World War II.

Nonetheless, the numbers of migrants between the United States and Mexico continued to remain high thanks to bilateral agreements and specific policies. In particular, the movements were characterized by temporary migration of the so-called *braceros*, the agricultural workers that were migrating from Mexico to meet the needs of the North American labor market under the Bracero Program. The Bracero Program comprehended a series of laws and policies initiated in 1942, later

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<sup>19</sup> See amongst others: Ngai, 2014; Zolberg, 2008; P. Martin, 2014.

extended in 1951 with the Labor Migrant Agreement, and terminated in 1964. In 1952, Congress passed the famous Immigration and Nationality Act (INA), which “revised, but largely maintained, the national origin quotas excluding immigrants from countries in Europe and Asia [...] [and] also contained a five-preference admission system to allocate visas to relatives of permanent residents and U.S. citizens” (Donato and Amuedo-Dorantes, 2020: 3).

### ***1.2 The War on Poverty and the End of the Bracero Program***

One major shift in the immigration system of the United States occurred in the 1960s, with what is unofficially defined as the War on Poverty of the Johnson Presidency. The final goal of this new approach was to eliminate racism from the U.S. immigration system and adjust the levels of the disadvantage of the two fronts. However, this ‘aggressive civil rights agenda’ – with the Civil Rights Act and the Economic Opportunity Act – gave rise to a series of undesirable effects, such as an unauthorized circular inflow of migrants at the U.S.-Mexico border and the creation of special federal programs dedicated to transfers of power and resources to the élite society (Massey, 2020a: 19; 30). The period of expansive immigration policies started in 1965 with a series of institutional changes. First of all, the bilateral agreement of the Bracero Program officially expired by the year 1964, and the U.S. Congress decided not to renew it. Then, further amendments to the INA were passed in 1965 and 1976. As Donato and Amuedo-Dorantes noted, “[t]he 1965 provisions opened immigration worldwide by terminating the national origin quotas and issuing visas based on a first-come, first-served hemispheric basis” (Donato and Amuedo-Dorantes, 2020: 4). These comprehensive policies created significant changes in the immigrant flows to the United States. In practical terms, this meant the end of the special treatment toward Mexico and its *braceros*. In fact, “[b]ecause Congress created a global admission policy across both hemispheres, allocating all visas through preference categories except for exempted immediate relatives of U.S. citizens, Mexico

now became subject to numerical limits” (Donato and Amuedo-Dorantes, 2020: 4) on par with all the other countries. The modifications of the immigration regime created a new reality at the U.S.-Mexico border, where legal immigration from Mexico dropped, and it became to be steadily replaced by unauthorized entries during the following decades. In fact, according to the data collected by Massey in his study,

[i]n 1957, legal entries from Mexico totalled 485,000 persons, with 49,000 entering on permanent resident visas and 436,000 arriving on temporary work visas. However, by 1977 after the end of the Bracero Program and the imposition of country quotas, the legal inflow of Mexicans to the United States stood at just 47,000 persons (a figure that exceeded the annual 20,000-visa quota because immediate relatives of U.S. citizens are exempt from the law’s numerical limits) (Massey, 2020a: 20).

Nonetheless, the general trends of legal immigration saw an increase from “approximately 333,000 in the 1960s, to 450,000 in the 1970s, and to 600,000 in the 1980s” (Donato and Amuedo-Dorantes, 2020: 4). This increase can be reconnected to the so-called chain migration process: with more Latin Americans and Asians entering the United States through permanent authorized residency, they ‘brought with them’ close family and relatives through the channels of sponsoring and limited admission preferences. Since the subjects of chain migration were officially exempt from numerical limitations, there was a high contrast between the actual quotas *versus* those planned.

### ***1.3 The War on Drugs of the 1970s and the Changes of the 1980s***

The next phase represented the decades of the 1970s and 1980s. This period was characterized by an increase in detention of ‘illegal’, ‘criminal’ migrants, and the attention toward

refugees and asylum seekers and, for these reasons, is also known as the ‘War on Drugs’ period. Those decades saw – apart from other crucial concerns – an intensification of the governmental policies directed at the immigration sphere, starting specifically during the presidential term of Richard Nixon. In 1971, U.S. President Nixon coined himself the slogan ‘War on Drugs’, which, as the name suggests, represented a series of reforms aimed at discouraging the circulation and consumption of illicit substances. However, this phrase is commonly associated with the political agenda and policies of the Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush presidencies (Yates et al., 2005: 875). In those decades, as scholars Yates et al. have noted, “Congress responded to these concerns by taking unprecedented steps toward revising immigration laws to deal with criminal aliens” (Yates et al., 2005: 876). As a consequence of these shifts in the immigration system, the detention of ‘illegal’ migrants grew at higher rates than ever before. For instance,

in 1979 the detention system was very small, holding only 1,563 persons on an average day. This average rose slowly until 1989 when it suddenly jumped to 6,563 and then rose further to reach 9,011 in 1996. At this point the curve bends sharply upwards to plateau briefly at 21,298 in 2004. It then dips slightly to 19,309 in 2006 but in the following year the daily number of detentions shoots almost straight upward to reach a local maximum 32,098 in 2009. It was [...] in 2012 when the average daily detainee population hit 34,260 persons. Although the average number of detainees dropped to 28,449 in 2015, by 2018 the average had soared to a record 40,520 under the aegis of President Donald Trump (Massey, 2020a: 30).

Moreover, the political portrayal of migrants as a source of crime and a threat to public safety empowered the shift in the treatment of infractions at the immigration law level. In fact, “infractions of immigration law that formerly were treated as civil offenses in the 1970s and 1980s were

criminalized and prosecuted as felonies during the 1990s and 2000s” (Massey, 2020a: 29). These changes will be particularly crucial during the presidency of Donald Trump, as we will see soon.

The second focus of interest for the U.S. immigration regime during the 1970s and 1980s was represented by a reconfiguration of the refugee and asylum systems. In 1978, the Public Law no. 95-412 established the Select Commission on Immigration and Refugee Policy, an advisory group with the final aim of evaluating existing laws and studying the effects of immigration on the territory of the United States. One of the recommendations generated by the Commission was to create and improve a series of policies aimed at reducing undocumented migration. Based on these premises, in 1980, Congress passed the Refugee Act, which contained a definition of ‘refugee’ consistent with the existing definition of the United Nations<sup>20</sup>. This specific act also introduced the system of annual ceilings for the refugee entries, which are to be set by the Presidents, and it recognized the right to asylum. In 1986, then, Congress also passed the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA), which “substantially increased resources for border enforcement, offered amnesty to migrants already residing in the United States, authorized a special legalization program for agricultural workers, and set employer sanctions against those who knowingly hire undocumented migrants for work” (Donato and Amuedo-Dorantes, 2020: 5). The events that characterized the final years of the decade of the 1980s shifted the attention toward other issues of international concern (e.g., the revolutions and consequent collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989).

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<sup>20</sup> Article 1 of the United Nations’ 1951 Refugee Convention defines a refugee as: “a person who is outside his/her country of nationality or habitual residence; has a well-founded fear of persecution because of his/her race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group or political opinion; and is unable or unwilling to avail himself/herself of the protection of that country, or to return there, for fear of persecution”.

#### ***1.4 The War on Terror and the Events of 9/11***

The 1990s and 2000s, particularly under the Presidencies of George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton, saw an escalation of anti-immigrant sentiment as a direct consequence of unauthorized migration and persistent political propaganda. Congress responded to the worried state of the U.S. citizens by issuing a series of new restrictive laws in the realm of immigration. As a result of a consequent recommendation from the Select Commission, in 1990 the Congress issued the Immigration Act, which expanded and modified the existing visa system. In particular, it further regulated those visas connected to family sponsoring, employment, and the so-called diversity program; it enlarged the number of temporary nonimmigrant<sup>21</sup> visas, and it also increased the annual limit to 366,000 immigrants and 140,000 migrant workers (Donato and Amuedo-Dorantes, 2020: 3-6). In 1996, two other crucial policies were inserted in the U.S. immigration system, “the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA) and the Anti-Terrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act. The IIRIRA “allocated more resources to border enforcement and levied harsher costs on unauthorized migrants and their employers than IRCA”, whereas the Anti-Terrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act made possible the deportation of “any non-citizen who had ever committed a crime, no matter when, and to limit judicial review of deportation orders” (Donato and Amuedo-Dorantes, 2020: 6).

Another watershed moment in the history of the U.S. immigration system is connected to the so-called ‘War on Terror’ period, which characterized the approach of the United States after 9/11. The global war on terrorism was declared by President Bush as a consequence of the tragic events of the 9/11 attacks, leading to new record levels of deportations and an upsurge in border enforcement policies. Primarily through the 2001 USA Patriot Act and the 2002 Homeland Security

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<sup>21</sup> In this context, the label of ‘nonimmigrant’ refers to those particular categories of subjects who were excluded by the general visa provisions, as for instance specialty workers, students, exchange visitors, travelers for tourism or business, and crew members in transit (Yale-Loehr, 1991).



Act – which also created the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) –, the average of deportations grew to 229,000 deportations a year. Based on the research conducted by Massey in his studies, “from 1965 to 1995 the annual number of deportations rose slowly, going from 10,572–50,924 over the course of 30 years. Over the next six years removals from the United States jumped by some 138,000 to reach 189,026 in 2001” (Massey, 2020a: 27), and they rose to 338,000 during the most recent span of 2014-2018.

Although the War on Terror campaign was launched to fight Islamic terrorism after 9/11, the vast majority of those caught up in the ‘deportation machine’ were Latinxs, in particular from Mexico and the Central American countries (Massey, 2020a: 31). This trend is the consequence of decades-long ‘Latinx threat’ narratives in public political discourses. In fact, after the changes in policies of the 1960s, the end of the Bracero Program, and the enlargement of migration quota from the ‘global South’, migration became to be portrayed as a “profound threat to the United States, portrayed in the media either as a rising tide of “illegal aliens” that would “flood” American society to “drown” its culture, or as an alien invasion of migrants who would “overrun” border defenses to “conquer” and “occupy” the nation” (Massey, 2020a: 20). The narrative of Latinx threat will emerge again in the course of this thesis, especially in connection to the subjects of the ‘Welfare queens’, and their ‘Anchor babies’.

### ***1.5 The War on Immigrants of the Trump Administration***

The ‘War on Immigrants’ represents the most recent phase of the governmental approach toward immigration in the United States. It is a direct outcome of the policies enacted during Lyndon Johnson’s War on Poverty and Ronald Reagan’s Cold War actions in Central America (Massey, 2020a: 30). Massey has noted that, “[u]nlike the Wars on Poverty, Crime, Drugs, and Terror, and the Cold War, the War on Immigrants remains undeclared by any prominent political

leader or government official, though Donald Trump perhaps came close when announcing his candidacy for President of the United States” (Massey, 2020: 30). Even if no direct reference to this slogan was officially made from the administration side, the ‘War on Immigrants’ label has been copiously used by mass media to describe the actions of the Trump presidency. In fact, Trump’s promises made during the election campaign, particularly regarding the construction of a border wall, and the enhancement of securitization practices were brought to life during the presidential term with particular harshness. The concretization of these promises resulted in increased apprehensions and deportations at the border through numerous executive orders and governmental politics and policies.

In the first years of the presidency of Donald Trump, restrictive actions were also directed toward the flows of humanitarian migrants coming to the Southern border from the Northern Triangle region. Amongst other actions, we can recall that the Trump administration drastically reduced the entry quotas for refugees, closed the refugee resettlement offices, applied asylum bans for specific categories of migrants, and raised the standards of the credible fear interviews<sup>22</sup>. For instance, the Trump administration imposed a series of bans on asylum for individuals trying to enter the United States at the U.S.-Mexico border after leaving their home country and transiting through another country, primarily Mexico (Donato and Amuedo-Dorantes, 2020: 9). Thanks to these actions, such as the Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP, also known as the ‘Remain in Mexico’ program), “[r]efugee admissions dropped to 22,491 in FY 2018, down from 84,994 in FY 2016, reaching the lowest level since the modern U.S. refugee resettlement program began in 1980” (Pierce and Bolter, 2020: 3)<sup>23</sup>. Apart from refugee and asylum cases, the administration’s politics have also impacted other humanitarian pathways, such as the Special Immigrant Juvenile Status and

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<sup>22</sup> More information on Credible Fear and Reasonable Fear Statistics and Nationality Report at the following link: [https://www.uscis.gov/sites/default/files/document/data/PED\\_FY17\\_CFandRFstatsThru09302017.pdf](https://www.uscis.gov/sites/default/files/document/data/PED_FY17_CFandRFstatsThru09302017.pdf).

<sup>23</sup> For further information see the following link: <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-2019-11-29/pdf/2019-26082.pdf>.

the Temporary Protected Status (TPS) (Pierce and Bolter, 2020: 63-64). These specific actions (e.g., the so-called zero-tolerance policy) implemented during the Trump administration will be analyzed in detail in the following chapters as a practical starting point to discuss the connection between the migration flows at the U.S.-Mexico border lenses of gender and family.

## **2. The Securitization and Militarization Practices**

The scholars of the Copenhagen School of Security Studies<sup>24</sup> pioneered an approach that views securitization as an extreme version of politicization, and they proposed to study security practices by drawing on speech act philosophy. Under this lens, studies of securitization theory analyze how speech acts of political elites or governmental representatives can convince the audience that an issue represents an existential threat toward a specific object or subject in need of imminent protection. According to Stritzel, for instance, “[t]he articulation of ‘security’ entails the claim that something is held to pose a threat to a valued referent object that is so existential that it is legitimate to move the issue beyond the established games of ‘normal’ politics to deal with it by exceptional, i.e. security, methods” (Stritzel, 2007: 360). Through this process of ‘truth production’, the securitizing actors shift the issues from the sphere of politics to the realm of security. This process of creating a ‘friend-enemy’ dichotomy, together with the feelings of urgency and inevitability, are the propelling factors that legitimize the implementation of extraordinary measures (Baysal, 2020; see also Robinson, 2017)<sup>25</sup>.

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<sup>24</sup> The concept of securitization was firstly presented by the Copenhagen School of Barry Buzan, Ole Wøever, Jaap de Wilde and others. Its name derives from the fact that most writings emerged at the Conflict and Peace Research Institute (COPRI) in Copenhagen in the 1990s.

<sup>25</sup> In his work, Corey Robinson conceives securitization as a complex approach, which develops through a series of steps: “I do not theorize securitization as a mechanism. Rather, securitization is a process that can be broken down analytically into mechanisms and facilitating conditions” (Robinson, 2017: 508).

The correlated phenomenon to securitization is that of militarization<sup>26</sup>. The militarization of politics represents another major trend that characterized the agendas and actions of the past presidencies in the United States. This term is used to refer to the process through which these military influences impact life at the everyday level: institutions, policies, and behaviors of a militarized society are connected to – and shaped by – war. The primary end goal of militarization practices is to make people accept war and thus perceive military actions as a ‘normal’ component of mundane actions, and desirable. Based on these premises, we can notice that militarization is perceived as an intentional process, as it represents a social process that aims to establish hegemony through the promotion of military values and fear and defense (Bickford, 2015). “Ultimately, militarization is a process that produces ‘in-’ and ‘out-’groups, friends and enemies, the sacred and the profane, those who should be protected and those who should be killed, ‘us’ and ‘them,’ as well as ‘we’ and ‘the other’” (Bickford, 2015). The practices of militarization have had an impact on several aspects, spanning from gender identities, marriage and family, ethics, morals to the more general ways of being and ways of seeing the world.

In the context of the United States, and especially at its Southern border, the practices of securitization and militarization have had a massive impact on diverse realms of day-to-day life. In particular, when it comes to migration practices and migration trends, scholars Ana Luisa Calvillo Vázquez and Guillermo Hernández Orozco have argued that “the system of as migration policy shifted from border security to securitization” during the last decades (Calvillo Vázquez and Hernández Orozco, 2021: 2; Author’s translation)<sup>27</sup>. In fact, as we have also seen in the previous

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<sup>26</sup> More information on the topic of militarization can be found on the Bonn Institute for Conflict Studies (BICC) annual reports. 2019 Report: <https://www.bicc.de/publications/publicationpage/publication/global-militarisation-index-2019-933/>; 2018 Report: <https://www.bicc.de/press/press-releases/press/news/global-militarization-index-2018-europe-trend-of-an-arms-build-up-in-eastern-and-western-countrie/>.

<sup>27</sup> The original excerpt: “Para algunos autores, se trata de un nuevo paradigma migratorio [...] o el fin de una era [...], ya que la política migratoria transitó de la seguridad fronteriza a la securitización”.

sections, the governmental tendencies broadly referred to as militarization or securitization in the United States started back in the 1960s with the War on Poverty of the Johnson administration. Then, these practices intensified in the last years of the 1990s and the 2000s, with the War on Terror, and reached the apex with the Presidential campaign and election of Donald Trump. The most recent security doctrine shaped during the Trump administration was created primarily with the final goal of containing irregular migration from the U.S.-Mexico border (González, 2010: 19). These securitization practices have not only altered the practices of migration at the U.S.-Mexico border but have also profoundly impacted the intimate lives of numerous migrant families in the country's inland regions (Boehm, 2012: 31). This will be particularly evident in the second part of the thesis, with the analysis of the impacts of migration and the governmental policies on the subjects of migration and their families.

Compared to the post-9/11 period, for instance, the securitization and militarization trends of the last years have been successful in blurring the lines amongst the spaces of 'interior' and 'exterior' of the border. In fact, in the words of Carla Angulo-Pasel, "[b]order governance was to be implemented not only at border crossings but also internally, whether through work raids, local-federal immigration enforcement partnerships, and/or increased deportations" (Angulo-Pasel, 2019: 6). Changes occurred in terms of practical implementation of these restrictive policies and how migrants became to be portrayed by the media and in political speeches, and consequently perceived by the citizens in the day-to-day life occurrences. Throughout the decades, the depiction of migrants has shifted from being an essential asset of the labor market to representing a 'security threat' for American families and employees. According to the perception of scholar Alberto Hernández, proposed in his article '*La Frontera México-Estados Unidos: Asimetrías y Transgresiones*' (The frontier Mexico-United States: Asymmetry and Transgressions),

[i]t is important to mention that these constructions are accompanied by propaganda that fuels people's fear and promotes discourses of threat or danger toward what comes from outside. Dangers that many times were encouraged by the U.S. administrations, with the purpose of constructing a discourse in which closing the border with Mexico has become a matter of national security (Hernández, 2020: 67; Author's translation)<sup>28</sup>.

The representation of 'outsiders' as a social menace reinforces the binary opposition of the Us/Them construction, which has already been present within the U.S. society for a long time (Heyer, 2018: 153). In fact, "[t]hese formulations use membership categorizations emphasizing illegality rather than personhood, thus facilitating the use of negative descriptors and characterizations of the people referenced" (Garcia, 2019: 586). Former President Donald Trump was particularly successful in depicting 'illegal', 'undocumented' migrants as a national crisis, which laid the basis for the implementation of transformative and restrictive procedures for managing migration at the Southern border.

Research and data analyses have demonstrated that the increased militarization of the border had "little effect on the likelihood of apprehension along the border, even less effect on the odds of ultimately achieving an unauthorized entry, and no effect whatsoever on the likelihood that Mexicans would decide to head northward with intent of becoming undocumented migrants" (Massey, 2020a: 22-23). Nonetheless, numerous consequences to the process of securitization have been registered toward the stigmatized subjects of the 'illegal', 'unauthorized', and often undesired migrants. First of all, the militarization enacted in the most-crossed regions at the U.S.-Mexico border had the (apparently) unintended effect of altering migration flows. In fact, as mentioned

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<sup>28</sup> The original excerpt: "Es importante mencionar que estas construcciones son acompañadas de propaganda que azuza el miedo de las personas y promueve discursos de riesgo o peligro ante lo que viene de fuera. Peligros que muchas veces las administraciones estadounidenses incentivaron, con el propósito de construir un discurso en el que sellar la frontera con México se ha vuelto un asunto de seguridad nacional".

before, the entries in the United States did not decrease in number but changed in terms of position, costs, and modalities. Undocumented migrants shifted their crossings toward more secluded areas, especially in the Sonoran Desert and the Rio Grande Valley (Massey et al., 2017: 12; 16). The militarization of the border, and the consequent shift to new locations, has increased the risks and the costs of the journeys as it “transformed coyote usage from a common practice that was followed by most migrants into a universal practice adopted by all migrants” (Massey et al., 2017: 13). Statistics have highlighted that it still proves increasingly difficult to deter undocumented migrants from entering the United States, regardless of the numerous militarization policies at the border. In fact, the extensive length of the boundary territory is a practical constraint for the effective targeting of immigration and illegal entries into the country.

Another undesired side effect of the restrictive policies (from both the migrants’ and the government’s sides) is that migrants have started to decrease the number of crossing journeys ‘back home’ and remained in the United States for extended periods of time. This new approach toward migration may have reduced the inflow of unauthorized migrants at the border, but it has increased the time of stay of the undocumented population in the country. “[G]iven longer stays north of the border and more attachments formed to people and places in the United States, permanent settlement is expected to become more likely.” (Massey et al., 2017: 16-17). In the private sphere, this new *modus operandi* of migrating has elongated the periods of separation between migrants in the United States and family, relatives, and kindship ‘back home’ (Arenas et al., 2021: 15).

### **3. The Trump Administration and the Border Wall Rhetoric**

In 2015, Donald Trump announced his first White House run, and his general campaign motto was to ‘Make America Great Again’ through a series of radical reforms and changes. His slogan

was already a huge signifier of an approach that combined elements of nationalism, nativism, and protectionism (McGann, 2016). In an article published in 2016 on the online newspaper Politifact, journalist Linda Qiu proposed a list of ‘*Donald Trump’s top 10 campaign promises*’. Some of these promises had a significant focus on the border and borderland regions as, for instance, the more direct propositions of building a wall and introducing immigration bans on specific categories of migrants but also the indirect goals of returning manufacturing jobs to the U.S. workers and withdrawing from the existing NAFTA agreement (Qui, 2016; Adkisson and Pallares, 2018: 15; Verney, 2019: 137). In fact, as scholar Kevern Verney mentioned in his work, “[i]n December 2017, and in his first State of the Union address in January 2018, the president highlighted ‘building a wall on the Southern border’ as one of the four key ‘pillars’ of his administration’s plans for national security and for immigration reform” (Verney, 2019: 138).

Another specific focus of the presidential campaign and term of Donald Trump was placed on the figures of Latinx ‘unauthorized’ immigrants. On several occasions, he accused Latinx immigrants of exploiting the already-broken immigration and asylum regimes to their advantage, to the detriment of the more deserving American citizens (IMUMI, 2019: 3). For instance, during the presidential announcement speech of 16 June 2015, Donald Trump summarized his opinion and approach through a series of notorious sentences, amongst which “[t]he U.S. has become a dumping ground for everybody else’s problems [...]. When Mexico sends its people, they’re not sending their best. They’re not sending you” (Massey, 2020; Hughey, 2017)<sup>29</sup>. In his article ‘*¡Adiós A La Diplomacia, Bienvenida America First! La Administración De Trump Frente América Latina Y Colombia*’, Lawyer and Professor Jaime Zuluaga Nieto underlined the fact that

the United States are implementing a policy of persecution of Latino migrants, whom it considers the source of insecurity, and they are making progress in the procedures for their repatriation. The decision to

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<sup>29</sup> More can be found at the following link: <https://time.com/4473972/donald-trump-mexico-meeting-insult/>.



protect the territory and control the borders (pillar one of the NSS [the National Security Strategy]) is concretized in the decision of building the border wall to close the crossing points of illegal migrants from the Mexican territory (Zuluaga Nieto, 2018: 250; Author's translation)<sup>30</sup>.

In several testimonies, public speeches, and tweets, Trump underlined his harsh position toward the migrants of the Latinx community under many aspects and lenses, which will be analyzed in detail in the second part of this thesis.

### ***3.1 Border Wall Promises and Border Security***

The promise to build a border wall at the Southern frontier represented a recurring theme in Donald Trump's speeches, from his presidential campaign up to the end of the presidential term. Trump presented this issue as a fundamental prerequisite to resolving various national and international problems. As said by Jacqueline Mazza, "[t]o demonstrate the urgency of building a concrete border wall of 30, 60, or 90 feet (in candidate Trump's estimates), Trump asserted that there was an "unprecedented surge" of foreigners who were bypassing already extensive US border security to enter the United States" (Mazza, 2017: 36). However, as also mentioned in previous sections, numerous sources and data analyses show that in the last years, the movements of unauthorized migrants experienced a decline during the last years (from 12.2 million in 2007 to 11.3 million in 2016), especially from migrants of Mexican origin (Mazza, 2017: 36-37). Donald Trump's presidential campaign was hugely based on the 'build the wall' rhetoric, which presented as the only solution to the existing security emergency situation the construction of a long-bordered frontier throughout the extent of the U.S.-Mexico border. However, this entails a

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<sup>30</sup> The original excerpt: "[...] los Estados Unidos están aplicando una política de persecución a los migrantes latinos, a los que consideran la fuente de inseguridad, y avanzan en los procedimientos para su repatriación. La decisión de proteger el territorio y controlar las fronteras (pilar uno de la ESN), se concreta en la decisión de construir el muro fronterizo para cerrar los pasos de migrantes ilegales desde el territorio mexicano".

series of practical and economic requirements that delayed the actualization of this plan. For this particular reason, other subjects – from border experts to governmental representatives – have argued for the establishment of a partial wall, extending across selected parts of the border, rather than for a complete wall across the entire physical boundary (Garcia, 2019: 581). The ‘partial wall’ or ‘wall plus enhancement’ approach could have represented a more practical approach to solving the problems of unauthorized entries at the U.S.-Mexico border, according to which Trump made extensive reference. Nonetheless, in terms of effectiveness, this proposition would not have been the same effect on the general public as Trump’s campaign slogan of ‘building the wall’ did. It must also be recognized that the partial walls in specific regions would have probably still not solved the unauthorized entries in their entirety.

In Trump’s vision, especially during the first years of campaign and administration, the border issue was conceived as a simple binary choice: for or against, closed or open, border or no border wall. In fact, Trump “presented building the wall as a clear-cut issue involving two opposing choices, rather than as a more complex issue requiring a variety of approaches to meet a wide range of needs” (Garcia, 2019: 578), and pointed the finger toward his opponent Hillary Clinton, by portraying her as a supporter of immigration and in total favor of open borders. In many instances, as occurred during the Campaign Rally that took place in Ohio on 27 October 2016, Trump claimed that: “Hillary also said she wants totally open borders. No one who supports open borders can ever serve as president of the United States. Totally open borders” (Garcia, 2019). Instead, ‘choosing’ his side would mean supporting the process of securitizing the border by creating a new border wall and defending the citizens of the United States toward the dangers of the ‘Outside’. This radical depiction was aimed at discrediting Trump’s opponent Hillary Clinton and favoring his election as ‘rightful’ President of the United States. This extreme attitude caused a series of inevitable ruptures and metaphorical borders, not only between the two candidates and their supporters, but also

amongst the Republican and Democratic parties, and the citizens and the singled-out immigrants (Garcia, 2019: 579).

Donald Trump won the Presidential elections and officially became the 45<sup>th</sup> President of the United States on January 20, 2021. Once in office, President Trump continued to emphasize the necessity of building a border wall, and he also proposed that Mexico should pay for it, one way or another. However, as expected, this last aspect of promise turned out to be impossible to be kept. High amounts of money from the American taxpayers were employed to build a wall between the United States and Mexico. From the data collected by scholars Pierce and Bolter, “[b]etween FY 2017 and FY 2020, Congress appropriated a total of \$4.5 billion for the repair or new construction of physical barriers along the southwest border. The administration also redirected about \$10.5 billion in funds otherwise appropriated” (Pierce and Bolter, 2020: 32). The scandal connected to the 2016-2017 tax return of Donald Trump has emphasized the inconsistencies present in his political speeches, which continuously tried to depict migrants as an economic burden to society, from the unauthorized entries of mothers and children to the associations of Latino men with gang groups and crime. Consequent to the revelations connected to the tax situation of Donald Trump, many low-income Americans and immigrants pay more taxes than the former President<sup>31</sup> and, in the words of journalist Natalie Baptiste,

[w]hile wealthy people dodge paying taxes, they freely cast the blame on our crumbling system as the fault of Other People—whether poor people too lazy to work or immigrants flooding the border—thereby leaving working people busy accusing each other of consuming unearned resources (Baptiste, 2020).

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<sup>31</sup> More info on the original story can be found at: Buettner, Russ, et al. “The President’s Taxes: Long-concealed Records Show Trump’s Chronic Losses and Years of Tax Avoidance”, *The New York Times*, 27 Sep. 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/09/27/us/donald-trump-taxes.html>.

Nonetheless, the campaign promise of ‘building the wall’ was reshaped into a more complex approach in terms of actual policies and decisions to be envisioned during the course of the administration. Throughout the course of the Trump administration, the ‘building the wall’ motto was reformulated into a more extensive border security system: “[t]his alternative formulation of the problem subtly but consequentially changes the nature of the debate from a binary choice (‘build the wall’ vs ‘don’t build the wall’), to a multifaceted debate over what border security is and how it can best be accomplished” (Garcia, 2019: 580). This new approach aimed at tackling immigration not only at the Southern border, through the construction of a physical boundary, but also in the United States. During his Presidency, Trump made extensive use of his executive power through numerous executive orders, presidential proclamations, and adjustments (Pierce and Bolter, 2020: 119)<sup>32</sup>. Nonetheless, the securitization goals of the Trump administration were achieved through a series of essential reforms enacted by the executive, legislative and judicial powers as a united front. Moreover, “[w]hether at the border or in the interior, the Trump administration has aimed to exercise its statutory and administrative authority to enforce immigration laws to the maximum extent possible” (Pierce and Bolter, 2020: 24). This was made possible thanks to the increase in the securitization and militarization practices promoted by President Donald Trump.

### ***3.2 The Securitization of the Immigration Regime***

Throughout the four years of his presidency, Donald Trump and his administration have dismantled and reconstructed the U.S. immigration system, which was last reformed in the 1990s (Pierce and Bolter, 2020: 119). Inspired by the approach proposed by Sarah Pierce and Jessica Bolter (2020: 27), the following section analyzes the most important contributions to the

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<sup>32</sup> During the Trump administration, “Congress, which has been overwhelmingly deadlocked on immigration legislation for years, largely sidelined itself during this period of incredibly dynamic policy change. And the federal judiciary, from individual district courts through the U.S. Supreme Court, at times blocked administration actions and at other times offered a green light” (Pierce and Bolter, 2020).

immigration system according to three main tendencies: the securitization of the U.S.-Mexico border through physical barriers and increase of border controls, the ‘pushing out’ tendency of the border, and the increase in the apprehensions at the frontier. In addition, crucial policies like ‘zero-tolerance’ and family separation shook the U.S. and global citizens throughout 2018 for their harsh approach and the multitude of damaging consequences on ‘undocumented’ immigrants. These two policies, in particular, will be discussed in the following sections as supporting elements for the concretization of specific ‘case studies’ connected to the immigration regime of the period of the Trump presidency.

Furthermore, the Trump administration has also extended its control of immigration flows outside the national borders through regional cooperation with Mexico and numerous Central American countries. For instance, in the second half of 2019 – and especially from July through September – the United States concluded bilateral agreements with countries of the Northern Triangle (Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras) for the repatriation of asylum seekers and ‘illegal’ migrants arriving at the U.S.-Mexico border. This cooperation tactic’s main aim was to reduce the movements of illegal migrants from the ‘starting point’, meaning directly from the countries of origin instead that at the U.S.-Mexico border. This new system has “allowed the Trump administration to develop consequences for migrants apprehended for crossing the border illegally that serve as alternatives to ICE detention or release into the United States” (Pierce and Bolter, 2020: 27). At the end of January 2019, the Trump administration announced the introduction of the Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP, also known as the ‘Remain in Mexico’ policy). This major policy established a ban on U.S. asylum entries, especially from the individuals arriving from their countries of origin to the United States via a third country (i.e., Mexico). Migrants crossing the border illegally, or lacking the documentation requested, can be ‘returned’ to Mexico for the duration of their immigration proceedings; otherwise, they are ‘sent back’ to the partnering Central American countries to request asylum there. Moreover, according to other agreements conducted in

2019, Mexico also pledged to “increase its own immigration enforcement operations, target smuggling networks, and accept more migrants back under MPP” (Pierce and Bolter, 2020: 26) to contrast the increase in the arrivals toward the United States at the frontier.

The other significant fulcrum of changes introduced by the Trump administration to the immigration system is centered around the treatment of migrants at the U.S.-Mexico border and the consequent apprehensions. In the first years in office, the style of the Trump administration highly contrasted with the Obama administration’s priorities for interior enforcement. Pierce and Bolter explained that the previous presidency concerns were “focused on noncitizens convicted of serious crimes, recent arrivals, and those with recent removal orders; instead, [recently] virtually every unauthorized immigrant is to be considered an equal target for removal” (Pierce and Bolter, 2020: 24). The underlying reasons behind the securitization approach of the former Trump administration can be reconnected to the nationalistic and xenophobic beliefs, more than on concrete and reliable statistics of immigration influxes. With the militarization of the border, the upsurge in bordering processes, and the increase of immigrant-related discourses, the most recent data proposes contrasting views regarding the numbers and trends of apprehensions at the U.S.-Mexico border under the Trump administration, particularly in the first couple of years. On the one hand, some data sets are collected and re-proposed by scholars, academics, and journalists with the intent of highlighting an increase in the number of apprehensions and arrests during the Trump presidency. For instance, Pierce and Bolter’s work considers statistics from the earlier years of the administration, aiming to present a confrontation with the previous period of the Obama presidency: “in FY [Fiscal Year] 2017, ICE made 30 percent more arrests than in FY 2016—and 146 percent more arrests of immigrants with no criminal convictions” (2020: 24). On the other hand, other sources repurpose official statistics to emphasize a trend of constant descent in border detentions throughout the last years. Under this lens, Mazza’s work state that, in “August 2017 apprehensions

were 41 percent less than August 2016, and were down 24 percent over the whole year (August 2016–August 2017)” (Mazza, 2017: 39). However, it is irrefutable that, between April 2018 and May 2019, a peak of the surge of immigrant crossings and consequent apprehensions at the border were registered. In fact, data shows that more than 133,000 apprehensions occurred in the single month of May 2019, which is apparently “the highest monthly number since March 2006” (Pierce and Bolter, 2020: 25). Apprehensions in those years were mainly characterized by migrant families with children trying to cross the U.S.-Mexico border illegally, escaping from the numerous dangers in the Central American countries. After the failures of the zero-tolerance and family separation policies in 2018, the U.S. government continued to implement other measures to deter arrivals, both of ‘undocumented’ migrants and asylum seekers, throughout 2019. This strategy – assumedly working together with other variables – successfully decreased the numbers of monthly apprehension throughout 2019 and reached numbers as low as 30,000 in March 2020, before the Covid-19 emergency (Pierce and Bolter, 2020: 24-25). Nonetheless, these results must be analyzed in connection to the additional restrictive measures on immigration and mobility applied both at the national and global levels in connection to the pandemic situation. Over the same period of time,

there was a far more significant drop in the number of arriving families and unaccompanied children (declines of 75 percent and 96 percent from May 2019 to March 2020, respectively) than in the number of single adults (35 percent) as the Trump administration systematically shut off the asylum system at the border (Pierce and Bolter, 2020: 13).

This chapter concludes the first part of the thesis by presenting the third key dimension that is at play in this work, that of the governmental politics and policies introduced during the period of the Trump administration. These actions are the inevitable result of the intersection and the interplay between the other fundamental factors, and especially those already introduced of the border and migration. On the other side, however, the theoretical and practical transformations of

the 'border' and of the migratory movements at the U.S.-Mexico frontier have been caused primarily by the continuous alterations of the immigration system of the United States.



## **PART 2: THE IMPACT OF THE TRUMP ADMINISTRATION ON GENDERED REALITIES AND TRANSNATIONAL MIGRANT FAMILIES**

*“Whether or not they include an explicit focus on gender and family,  
U.S. immigration policies and practices have shaped intimate migrations.”*  
– Deborah A. Boehm

### **CHAPTER 5: GENDER IDENTITIES AND INTERSECTIONALITY**

#### **1. Gendered approaches to Migration at the Border**

Gender is embedded in all aspects of migration, impacting options, decisions and outcomes. Labour migration, labour markets, regimes of work and workplaces are highly gendered. In addition, categories of entry, recruitment practices, housing, interactions with other workers, relationships with employers and interactions with the state are also immensely gendered (Hennebry et al., 2016: 34).

Following the concepts introduced by scholar Ana María Alonso (1995: 76), gender is not to be envisioned as the mere distinction between female and male subjects, as it also comprehends several nuanced meanings, stereotypes, and relative social positions. These gendered divisions are involved in complex structures of power, domination, and subjection. A disclaimer appears necessary before moving further on with this work. In this context, the term ‘gender’ is used essentially to identify the binary opposition between the gender roles of males and females within society. Even if this framework can appear limiting to the considerations of gender as a spectrum more than a simple duality, this restrictive criterion has been applied throughout this work to suit the typology of the material utilized and to simplify the interaction with the other dimensions of

analysis. Nonetheless, it is essential to recognize that gender is made, crafted, and performed, and it is not fixed to predetermined and stereotyped visions or norms. As Deborah A. Boehm underlined, “[l]ike transnational migration itself, gender identities are characterized by flexibility, movement, and transformation” (Boehm, 2012: 90; 72).

In this work, gender is one of the dimensions used as device for analyzing the migratory movements at the U.S.-Mexico border. In this context, then, the gendered constructions, norms, and stereotypes at play represent a valuable lens for understanding the dynamics of this complex reality. The interaction of the dimensions of migration and gender – as well as ethnicity and class – create a complex interplay between men and women at the societal level. This phenomenon is connected to what is generally called as intersectionality. The concept of intersectionality reflects the instances during which the different variables and levels of oppression are at play simultaneously and with a mutual influence (see for instance the numerous works of pioneer scholar and writer Kimberlé Crenshaw). There is a broad range of issues that can be addressed when talking about intersectionality: not only ethnicity, class, and gender, but also ableism, language bias, anti-Semitism, ageism, and more. In the case of migration, intersectionality describes the instances where migrants “are women [or men] but may also be poor, and/or indigenous, and/or from Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras. These multiple oppressions differentiate based on gender, class, race, and nationality and are all constructed in a subordinate manner” (Angulo-Pasel, 2019: 9-10). According to the feminist approach, instead, intersectionality refers to “a series of negotiations through which women are exercising increased power in some circumstances but also facing the reassertion of male dominance. Similarly, men practice new forms of control as they simultaneously experience loss and are subjected to power imbalances in the United States” (Boehm, 2012: 72). In particular, the concept of privilege is one of the critical elements interacting with the theorizing of intersectionality. Privilege is a recurrent element representing a relation of power, and it is generally

understood as referring to unearned advantages granted to specific individuals and groups in society. In practical terms, this translates into a system of benefits, processes of ‘hiding and showing’ of categories, which usually go unnoticed by privileged ones. These imbalances of power do not apply only to the gendered relations between males and females but also to the broader logics of migration, for instance.

The most daunting aspect of this chapter was to decide according to which order or, better said, on the basis of which framework to present the different testimonies, articles, and declarations found during the research period. Nonetheless, what will follow is a recollection of findings presented following the three-level argumentation proposed by academics Adéla Souralová and Hana Fialová (2017), in their feminist approach to the issues connected to transnational parenthood and transnational migrant fatherhood. In their work, the two authors defined that:

[t]he first level concerns the gender expectations, norms, and ideologies that exist in particular sociocultural contexts and that shape the behaviour of male and female migrants. The second level is the actual behaviour of transnational mothers and transnational fathers, which is always influenced by the expectations surrounding the gendered notions of good motherhood and good fatherhood. The interpretations of such behaviour are reported in the research. The third level at which the gender binarity operates is the biased research process itself, in which the gender norms influence the selection of research topics, questions, and strategies (Souralová and Fialová, 2017: 6-7).

The structure utilized to connect the analytical lenses of migration and gender and present the content in the following sections will take inspiration from Souralová and Fialová’s model. The first step will comprehend a brief look at the aspects of research and the theoretical basis, which represent the necessary grounds for moving to the second step. The second portion of this analysis

is centered on the expectations and stereotypes that society upholds to men and women according to the gendered models existing in society, and in particular, the experiences of transnational family and parenthood. Finally, the central portion of this analysis will deal with the actual behaviors perpetrated by the subjects of analysis through the use of big identifying boxes and labels (for instance, those of Welfare queens and Angel moms).

### ***1.1 The Theoretical basis***

Professor of Gender studies Helma Lutz highlighted the fact that “[t]he renewed interest in migrant women is closely linked to the establishment of Women’s Studies [...] in many Western societies and in international institutions” (Lutz, 2010: 1649). The development of women’s/gender studies is closely intertwined with the waves of feminism that shaped the world in the last centuries. According to the different views, scholars recognized the existence of three or four waves of feminism, each with specific focuses and concerns. The first wave of feminism developed predominantly in Western countries from the 1840s to the mid-1900s. In that timespan, the attention was placed primarily on the issues of suffrage (i.e., women’s right to vote), employment, and marriage laws. The second-wave feminism of the 1960s and 1970s shifted the focus toward the personal sphere of rights and shed light on the intersectional character of women’s rights at the international level. In those decades, three types of feminism emerged based on their diverging approaches to the topics of interest (see amongst others Socialist feminism, Radical feminism, Lesbian feminism, and Black feminism). Moreover, from the 1980s onwards, researchers started to introduce the additional element of intersectionality in the discourses of women’s studies (e.g., the ‘race-class-gender’ debate). As a consequence of these changes, in the 1990s, we assist at a momentous shift from women’s to gender studies, which “open[ed] up new ways of theorizing because it makes it possible to distinguish between practices, identity or sex without the urge to

identify this within one single category: a woman is ... ; a man is ...” (Lutz, 2010: 1651). The period from the mid-1990s onward is generally recognized as the third wave of feminism, which brought on drastic changes in terms of the vision of femininity, the perceptions and standards of female bodies, and more individuality. Some authors, then, have argued that the current period represents the fourth wave of feminism, characterized mainly by the increasing emphasis on intersectionality, as well as extensive inclusivity toward the trans and queer communities.

The binary oppositions between the two gender models taken into consideration in this study are inevitably associated with correlated expectations, standards, and even stereotypes from society in the realms of employment, family, and relations, and much more. When these elements further combine with the variable of migration, the outcomes often create situations that are at the same time similar and different throughout the world. Some of the focal points of analysis that intertwine gender and migration at the U.S.-Mexico border are the processes of sending and managing remittances; decision-making when leaving or returning to the country of origin; the performance of family roles, and the social mandates during the period of family separation; and the aspects connected to women migrant workers (Ariza, 2014: 24).

As underlined by Professor Sabrina Marchetti, by “[a]ssuming a context of departure where dominant gender roles are set along the opposition ‘women as dependent wives and sacrificing mothers’ v. ‘men as breadwinner husbands and fathers’” (Marchetti, 2018: 445), international or intranational movements tend to impact the gender dynamics that occur at the macro, meso, and micro levels. These changes in the gender models connected to men and women or mothers and fathers, respectively, can be perceived through the ways in which these phenomena are represented, perceived, and experienced by all the subjects involved. Latinx transnational migrants living in the United States have represented a particular group of interest for researchers of international

movements and gender studies for a long time. In fact, in many of these instances, it is possible to observe the dynamics replicating the gendered distinctions, which establish that “when men come north and leave their families [...], they are fulfilling familial obligations defined as breadwinning for the family. [Whereas, w]hen women do so, they are embarking not only on an immigration journey but on a more radical gender-transformative odyssey” (Souralová and Fialová, 2017: 4). The following paragraphs focus on the contrasting experiences of transnational migrants according to their gender (males *vs.* females) and their role in the household (fathers *vs.* mothers).

## **2. Latino fathers: The Burden of Expectations**

Recent feminist discourses and actions throughout the world have helped eradicate the stigmas around the figures of men and fathers, not only in academic research but also in day-to-day life. Thanks to the more recent theoretical and ideological shifts, the figures of the transnational migrant men and fathers have undergone serious reconsideration throughout the last decades. Many authors have described Latino fathers negatively for decades. For instance,

Latino fathers were depicted as fighting roosters with terms like “*macho*”, “*borracho*” (drunk), and “*bien gallo*” (fighter [...]). Recent studies have instead portrayed Latino and Latin American men as complex individuals with a multiplicity of attitudes that call into question stereotypical roles related to machismo (Taylor and Behnke, 2005: 3; emphasis added).

Numerous of the traits described in Taylor and Behnke’s quotation could be placed under the big umbrella term of *machismo*. This expression is generally used to depict men as strong, leading figures within the family and society, and thus more as heads of the household and economic providers than individual husbands and fathers.

According to Taylor and Behnke,

[a]nother important component of machismo is being a provider for the family, which is indeed influenced by economic factors and work conditions. Latino fathers often work in high-risk conditions that are dangerous and physically demanding, such as meat packing plants, construction, agriculture, and low paying factory labor (Taylor and Behnke, 2005: 3).

However, especially in recent years, the use of the term machismo has been associated with negative connotations due to the high emphasis being placed on physical prowess, recurrent exaggerated and negative masculinity, male chauvinism, and (self-)imposed lack of emotiveness (e.g., Taylor and Behnke, 2005; Baca Zinn, 1994: 74). Based on these aspects, it has frequently been argued that “transnational fatherhood is much more easily accomplished than transnational motherhood [as] authority can be preserved without daily face-to-face contact and it is even achieved through successful breadwinning activity” (Souralová and Fialová, 2017: 8), especially those ‘privileged’ men with documents. For example, “[m]igrant fathers’ relationships to their children in Mexico are typically shaped by their economic success and a desire to maintain some degree of authority, while those of migrant mothers are focused on demonstrating emotional intimacy from a distance” (Souralová and Fialová, 2017: 7). In fact, “[t]heoretical frameworks must account for men who try to keep their families together across great distances, cope with violence and the consequences of trauma in family relationships, and absorb targeted institutional policies that directly disrupt their roles as fathers” (Roy and Yumiseva, 2021: 2).

Once again based on a gendered perspective, scholars William Kandel and Douglas S. Massey (2002) describe the culture of Mexican migration to the U.S. as a sort of rite of passage, which connects male migration – in particular – with societal expectations:

[a]s migratory behavior extends throughout a community, it increasingly enters the calculus of conscious choice and eventually becomes normative. Young people who grow up and come of age increasingly expect to migrate internationally in the course of their lives. For young men, especially, migration becomes a rite of passage, and those who do not attempt it are seen as lazy, unenterprising, and undesirable as potential mates. In communities where international labor becomes fully integrated into the local culture, young men seeking to become adults literally do not consider other options: they assume they will migrate in preparation for marriage and that they will go abroad frequently in the course of their lives as family needs and personal circumstances change (982).

This inevitability that young men and fathers perceive in relation to migration to the ‘other side’ of the border is particularly well represented in Boehm’s work (2012) by a statement taken from a conversation between two men interviewed: “If you do not go to the United States, you are not a man” (Boehm, 2012: 74; more in Souralová and Fialová’s work, 2017). If the act of migrating to the United States was, and it still is, perceived as an inevitable representation of manhood, consequently the act of staying in Mexico – and even that of returning in Mexico – carries negative connotations for men and their gendered societal expectations (Boehm, 2012). However, the current immigration enforcement procedures from the side of the United States (e.g., the ‘zero-tolerance’ or the ‘Remain in Mexico’ policies), the ever-looming presence of the border division, and the increased violence in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands modified this vision and the connected *modus operandi*. In fact, “[o]nce a rite of passage and prerequisite to gaining status in one’s home community [...], border crossings became firmly associated with extreme danger and an unprecedented possibility of failure” (A.E. Lee, 2019: 212). In some instances, then, the journeys to the border and the possible deportation represent even more serious threats than the problematic situation back home. The third contrast, for instance, will present the inevitable effects of the



process of return migration in Mexico, particularly in those instances where families are characterized by a mixed status within the same household.

The actual experiences that (im)migrant Latino men undergo daily, both in the working environment and in the living context, often contrasts with the expectations created before their arrival in the United States. In many instances, Latino men feel the burden of being the primary source of income for their families. In a 2021 study regarding transnational fathering practices of Northern Triangle provenience, scholars Kevin Roy and Martha Yumiseva highlighted that for those men the act of working does not only represent an opportunity for providing for basic subsistence needs, but two additional elements need to be taken into consideration: the necessity of repaying the existing debts to the *coyotes* (or migrant smugglers), and that of sending money back to the home countries, the so-called remittances (Roy and Yumiseva: 2021 8).

The economic expectations connected to the necessity of granting the well-being of the whole household tend to undermine the aspect of caregiving in fatherhood, especially with the further difficulties related to the variable of geographical distance. The long hours and exhausting shifts, in addition to the never-ending worries about deportation raids, unemployment, and family separation, negatively impact the interaction between fathers and children (Guzman & McConnell, 2002; Taylor and Behnke, 2005). For Roy and Yumiseva, “[t]he provider role takes priority over caregiving as low-income Latino fathers in the United States spend more time on paid work and less time with their children engaging in activities such as playing and traveling than their non-Latino White and non-Latino Black counterparts” (Roy and Yumiseva, 2021: 7). The absence of the figure of the father can be related to many different aspects and motifs. The correlated condition of being both ‘together and apart’ (López, 2018) manifests itself in multiple ways: as forced or chosen separation amongst the border of the transnational domestic unit, together with the ever-looming

work commitments that impend on the family, and the self-imposed limitations, that these subjects adopt on the daily even when sharing the same home. One example that disrupts the standardized idea of transnational family across the U.S.-Mexico border is the story of Mateo<sup>33</sup>, which I am taking from López's work. At the moment of the interview, Mateo was living in Tijuana awaiting a 10-year bar before he could be eligible for the application of permanent residency in the United States, while his family was primarily based in the U.S. In his case, the border represented not only a physical but also an emotive barrier, preventing him from being a fully-present figure in the lives and memories of his children and partner (López, 2018: 7). As Mateo said,

[I]ike it or not, [...] we live from our memories. All of our children, my children, are growing up, but there's a part of their lives in which I am not present. I am not a part of those memories, which is half of their life, their life in the United States. I am not there. [...] Daddy is here [in Mexico]. It is half of their lives, and I am present in their memories here, but there? Erased. [...] You want to be with your children and you want to do so many things with your children, and the fact that you cannot be part of something in their lives hurts. It hurts a lot (López, 2018: 7).

This first-person excerpt from an interview could represent the story of one father out of millions living in the same condition. For Mateo and his family, the border is at the same time the physical barrier that separates his family and the ideological emblem of a more complex fight. As we have seen in the first chapters, this specific physical boundary represents both a place of opportunity and separation. The struggle of not being present for many pivotal occurrences or activities, and the constant fear of being 'erased' from the minds of his own family, shapes the daily experience of parents and his children throughout the world.

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<sup>33</sup> In this case, as in the majority of the material utilized in this text, the sources used do not provide much information on the subjects interested in the interviews or testimonies, as a way to safeguard their privacy and safety.

With the intent of further debunking the myths that portray immigrants as violent subjects and the idea that they bring with them violence and crime by moving to the United States, I will present the following excerpt from Roy and Yumisova's study (2021). This first-person testimony of the transnational life between the border is from Manuel, a 37 years-old man and father from Michoacan, Mexico:

I was alone in the U.S. for around eight years. It is hard for anybody, but sometimes there are no resources that will allow you to be together, you know? I entered the U.S. illegally. It usually is like that, the father comes first, and slowly the rest of the family starts coming as you start gathering some money. I brought my daughters and I was the one scared, as a father. I didn't like the life for them here. You have to be worried about them more. In Mexico, there is violence, but not as much as there is here. After six years, I returned them to Mexico, to my mother in law (Roy and Yumisova, 2021: 8-9).

In fact, the intersection between the realities – and lenses – of migration and gender in the context of transnational families has created a set of new ranges of potential masculinities or femininities that may be expressed or enacted. These new gendered subjectivities emerge especially in the context of the United States, where the transnational subjects are faced with new cultural ideologies, new working and living environments, and a redistribution of power in the context of families and couples (Boehm, 2012: 80; 89). In her work, Boehm takes into consideration the experiences of transnational Mexican migrants living in the United States. One of the subjects of this study is Félix, which moved to the States back in the 1980s: “Félix's identity as a man is strikingly distinct when he is in Mexico and when he is in the States, and his experience illustrates the dramatically different positions of men in Mexico and the United States” (Boehm, 2012: 79). These personal recollections highlight the emotional involvement of fathers, especially those who are geographically distant. Transnationality, amongst with many other factors, tends to impact

parenting by reducing the constraining of fathers and mothers to specific spheres of parenting, such as bread-winning or caretaking, and unveiling the similar patterns, experiences, and behaviors. “To uncover these similarities, we must move beyond the conflict” (Souralová and Fialová, 2017: 9) of labeling between parents and create a single, global framework of analysis.

### **3. The Experiences of Latina women: ‘*por mi hijos*’**

In the context of transnational migration, especially in the movements between Mexico and the United States, women’s movements are predominantly dependent on male figures (partners, fathers, brothers, or close relatives), whether on the modalities or the motivations. In fact, “women face a gendered dilemma whether they are in Mexico or the United States and whether they are living with or without male partners, fathers, or brothers. In this female conundrum, women are subjected to existing and emergent masculinities and patriarchies in both places” (Boehm, 2012: 88). However, there are occasions in which women are bounded to undertake the journey North toward the United States autonomously. This occurs in the instances when women have been abandoned by their spouses or partners and are obliged to find employment to provide for their children (Boehm, 2012: 96), but also in the cases of asylum seekers or ‘unauthorized’ migrants escaping dangerous situations in the Northern Triangle region. Once again, Boehm’s on-the-field research proved fundamental to apply the generalized theories of feminism to practical, real-life cases. In fact, one of the subjects interviewed during her stay in Mexico, Susana, explained that she specifically “migrated north [to the United States] “*por mis hijos*”—meaning both “*for my children*” and “*because of my children*”— out of necessity to support her family, a common experience for women abandoned by their partners” (Boehm, 2012: 111). In the case of these women traveling alone, the reality of migration complicates even more. In fact, during these journeys from their home countries (mainly from Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras) through

Mexico, women are compelled to become invisible if they want to reach the U.S., avoiding the risks of detention and deportation. However, the component of invisibility increases the marginalization and vulnerability of migrant women, and it also creates several threats for their safety. ‘Choosing’ not to access public spaces and popular routes and locations further “exposes migrant women to increased danger and risk by virtue of not being seen. The consequences involved with being invisible may include severe exploitation, heightened violence, disappearance and even death” (Angulo-Pasel, 2019: 12).

This section appears way shorter in comparison to the previous one dedicated to the analysis of the Latino men because the particular experiences of women in migration will be dealt in detail in the following chapters. Moreover, these subjects will represent a considerable portion of the focus of the conflicts presented later on in this work.

#### **4. The Gendered Labor System for Transnational Migrants**

When looking at the gender oppositions and expectations, it appears necessary to reference two fundamental aspects that impact these dynamics: the division of reproductive labor and the ‘genderedness’ of the migrant labor market (Lutz, 2010: 1652). First of all, the so-called reproductive labor represents the portion of work performed at the domestic level, which allows the functioning and reproduction of the workforce. In practical terms, this type of work is achieved by giving birth (and thus creating workers of the future) and by taking care of present workers. In the majority of cases, this labor consists of a series of unpaid tasks, which women are expected to carry out. In fact, “the domestic work performed by migrant women is consistently undervalued and underpaid [...]. Missing the mothers, the head and manager of many households, families often seek the help of either another care worker or an unpaid member of the family to assume her

previous roles” (Hennebry et al., 2016: 59). From a theoretical point of view, the expectations connected to women tend to limit these subjects to the private sphere at the household level, while, in contrast, the male figures occupy the public domain of labor by physically going outside the house to work and by gaining a profit. In Lutz’s words,

[t]he key subject of concern is the social construction of masculinity and femininity, the differential meaning of private and public as a workplace, the gender-specific evaluation and the differential consequences of migration experiences for male and female migrants in the context of being couples, parents and families (‘fragmented families’, distant parenting etc.) (Lutz, 2010: 1650-1651).

In recent times, societal shifts have altered the economic status of families, and increased women’s full-time employment. These new patterns have established a commodification of reproductive labor, which was previously associated with gendered, household-led tasks. The commodification of reproductive work creates what is defined as a global care chain (see amongst others Lutz and Palenga-Möllnbeck, 2015). In this new world system, and especially in the wealthier nations, the household chores are delegated to subjects external to the family and generally coming from lower social classes and/or less-affluent countries. In this framework, migration inserts itself by connecting countries through the need for reproductive labor of Western countries and the offer of foreign employment. Hennebry et al. underlined that, “[t]hrough undertaking domestic work, women migrant workers secure the functions of the household, enable individuals to remain in the labour market, and contribute to consumption in their local economies of their countries of origin through sending remittances” (Hennebry et al., 2016: 59; see also ILO, 2014). For these reasons, the global care chain is predominantly composed of women who might be fleeing from rural areas to fill in the lacking positions in the reproductive system of Northern countries. The professions contained under the domestic work label include, for instance,

caregivers, nurses, and cleaners. Hennebry et al. underlined the fact that, “[i]n both sending and receiving countries, the absence of men in care work is bolstered by social constructions around care work and policies that implicitly mark women as the providers of care” (Hennebry et al., 2016: 59). Data obtained from the International Labour Organization (ILO) confirm that, despite the presence of men working in the global care chain (GCC) as gardeners, butlers, drivers, and nurses, the sector of domestic work remain a highly feminized sector, with percentages of females rising up to 80 percent in some countries. Based on these premises, it is possible to talk about this specific sphere of work as a form of social reproduction (e.g., Petersen, 2003)<sup>34</sup>. Social reproductive labor represents another case in which gender expectations intertwine with the dimensions of migration and labor by creating transnationality between the subjects involved. Moreover, the realities of migrant women working in the care system are characterized by even more complex dynamics when – and if – they intersect the dimensions of class and ethnicity (see amongst others Browne and Misra, 2003; Cherubini, Garofalo Geymonat and Marchetti in Evans and Lépinard, 2019).

Another aspect that was presented by Hennebry et al. is that, “[d]espite being well educated and employed in a variety of sectors across the globe, women migrant workers are commonly concentrated in low-skilled, low paid, and informal sectors, and many perform vital, yet insufficiently valued, care services” (Hennebry et al., 2016: 10). During the process of migration, women tend to lose the rights and status they had acquired in their home country, as the fastest way to insert themselves in the labor market of a new country is to devalue their talent and skills (see

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<sup>34</sup> The concepts of social reproduction and global care chains can be connected to the more general social and economic theories of Marxism and Socialism. See for instance the following quotation from Marina Ariza: “It is a well-known fact that the analysis of the process of household reproduction is theoretically linked (whether directly or indirectly) to Marxism. From this perspective, the reproduction of families is merely a further example of the process of general social reproduction, a macro level of analysis largely concerned with the study of the mechanisms for the perpetuation of social systems, their stability (more often) and change (Giddens, 1987). The study of social reproduction tends to adopt a socio-structural approach, emphasizing the aspects involved in the maintenance and change of the system, whether socio-economic, socio-cultural or political” (2014: 22).

amongst others Palacios Valencia, 2016: 152). Syd Lindsley clarifies that “[t]he dichotomy between ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ women allows for the simultaneous exploitation of the wage labor of poor women, immigrant women, and women of color with the privileging of white women’s motherhood and the white middle-class family” (Lindsley, 2002: 189; see also Hiemstra, 2021: 10). However, assuming that migrant women reaching the United States are undertaking those journeys purely for poverty reasons is an oversimplification that does not consider the variety of realities existing (Hennebry et al., 2016: 37).

In opposition to the so-called ‘feminized’ labor markets (Lutz, 2010: 1652), as the aforementioned domestic work and care system, there are also sectors that tend to be predominantly dominated by male workers, mainly from Mexico and the Northern Triangle countries. For instance, high percentages of migrant Latino males can be found working in enduring and endangering occupations as construction and maintenance, farming and forestry, heavy-work factories, and the food industry (see amongst others Lutz, 2010)<sup>35</sup>. These sectors represent the predominant reality for migrant Latino men for the majority of their work experience in the United States. In fact, immigrants are more likely to work in lower-skill and low-paid occupations than U.S.-born workers (Bennett, 2020). According to the official statistics provided by the U.S. Bureau of Labor, in 2020

foreign-born workers continued to be more likely than native-born workers to be employed in service occupations (20.6 percent versus 14.4 percent); natural resources, construction, and maintenance occupations (13.6 percent versus 8.1 percent); and production, transportation, and material moving occupations (15.2 percent versus 11.7 percent). Foreign-born workers were less likely than native-born workers to be employed in

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<sup>35</sup> More data on this topic can be found at: <https://www.indeed.com/lead/how-jobs-immigrants-do-are-changing>; 2020 data divided by ethnic groups and employment type: <https://www.bls.gov/cps/cpsaat11.htm>; <https://data.census.gov/cedsci/table?q=race&d=ACS%201-Year%20Estimates%20Detailed%20Tables&tid=ACSDT1Y2019.B24010F>.



management, professional, and related occupations (36.3 percent versus 44.4 percent) and in sales and office occupations (14.3 percent versus 21.3 percent) (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021)<sup>36</sup>.

However, in the last years, data highlighted a new and contrasting tendency: more than ever before, Latinx migrants with higher levels of education are entering the U.S. and finding employment in highly skilled sectors. In an article published back in 2017, Jed Kolko (Chief Economist at Indeed) stressed that “[r]ecent immigrants are more educated, come from different parts of the world, and are more likely to work in professional and technical occupations than earlier immigrants” (Kolko, 2017)<sup>37</sup>. This new trend can be associated with the protectionist immigration policies applied by the Trump administration to restrict the share of Latinx migrants entering the country and ‘bring jobs back’<sup>38</sup> and grant ‘easy’ entry predominantly to skilled migrants.

## **5. First contrast: Gangster Fathers *versus* American patriots**

The first contrast presented in this work builds on the binary opposition between two distinct groups of men: the first one is represented by the big community of Latino migrant men, especially those who interact with the U.S.-Mexico border by entering the territory of the United States. The contrasting category is that of what can be defined as ‘American patriots’, according to some specific views. More specifically, those men who have committed proper illegal acts (from fraud to murder) in the past, and have been pardoned in the last years by the Trump administration. At first glance, it might appear challenging to find a series of common grounds on which to evaluate those subjects. However, we will see how the dimensions of migration, gender, class, and ethnicity

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<sup>36</sup> Specific employment data per sector can be found at: <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/forbrn.t04.htm>.

<sup>37</sup> More info at: <https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/anthropology-in-practice/what-are-the-jobs-that-immigrants-do/>; and: <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/02/24/the-share-of-immigrant-workers-in-high-skill-jobs-is-rising-in-the-u-s/>.

<sup>38</sup> E.g., <https://www.thetrumparchive.com/?searchbox=%22bring+jobs+back%22&results=1>.

interact in shaping a series of stereotyped categorizations, and how the theoretical framework presented in the previous sections concretizes into the actions of the Trump presidency.

The stereotypizations that have defamed Latino men residing in the United States for decades, if not centuries now, are based on racialized and gendered societal constructions that portray Latinos (and Black men) as intrinsically associated with crime (Powell, 2020). The intersection of these negative visions of masculinity based on the dynamics and intersection of migration, class, and ethnicity creates a toxic environment for those specific groups of men. These assumptions compose pre-configured imageries of Mexican or Latino men as extremely masculine, violent figures, or even as criminals and gang members. For instance, the depiction of Latino men as *bad hombres* (bad men) was at the heart of Trump's campaigns, and the stereotypes of Mexican and Latino men as criminals, gang members, and rapists were perpetrated on many occasions throughout his administration. In fact, as also recalled by scholar Catherine Powell,

Trump notoriously described Mexican immigrants as rapists and drug dealers, saying, "They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists." Trump's reference to rape is hardly accidental. There is a long history of associating men of color with crimes of sexual violence against white women. This trope is both raced and gendered, as it constructs both white women as victim-survivors and men of color as, "predators" (Powell, 2020: 152)<sup>39</sup>.

The end goal of these pessimistic portrayals was to appeal to the middle- and working-class, anti-immigration White individuals, who supported him throughout his campaign election and the consequential presidency. For author and professor Kevern Verney, "Trump's demonization of

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<sup>39</sup> Many of the direct references to Trump discourses in Powell's work are also recurrent topics of the former-President Tweets. Even if the official account has been restricted from the official Twitter platform, they are still available in an archival form at the following link: <https://www.thetrumparchive.com/>.

Mexican immigrants as drug dealers, rapists and criminals echoes nativist sentiments of the past. At a time of painful economic adjustments at home, global political uncertainty and heightened fears of terrorism, such sentiments have popular appeal” (Verney, 2019: 157). These recurrent discourses take reference, for instance, from the principles of the ‘War on Drugs’ perpetrated by the Nixon administration during the 1970s, as we have seen in the previous chapters. During the Trump presidency, instead, the flow of drugs and illegal goods from neighboring Mexico was presented as one of the ‘justifying’ factors at the basis of the restrictive measures introduced both at the border and within the nation itself (Cornelius, 2018: 29). These issues were presented as an urgent threat to the country’s safety, so much so that it appeared fundamental to build a wall at the Southern border to stop these inflows of drugs and people (Powell, 2020; see also Roy and Yumiseva, 2021).

In practical terms, the pessimistic stereotypizations of Latino men and fathers living and working in the United States have negatively impacted their lives in several ways. First, at the public level, only by “avoiding surveillance by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), police, legal authorities, or even gangs can these fathers secure wages for their families” (Roy and Yumiseva, 2021: 8). Then, at the family level, this feeling of fear translates into what has been defined as ‘trapped parenting’ by Cardoso et al. (2016). In fact, the constant risk of deportation – especially for fathers from the Northern Triangle area – tends to restrict their movements and, consequently, the direct involvement in the lives and activities of their children. At the individual level, finally, the *bad hombres* label perpetuated by U.S. society on Latino men tends to affect the mental wellbeing of these subjects. Due to the persistent feeling of stigmatization and isolation, these men feel restricted in their daily actions and are, in a way, compelled to abandon all personal interests and connections if they want to, at least, safeguard their employment.

In the words of Helga Lutz:

some groups of men do not receive a positive but, instead, a negative dividend from the maintenance of a patriarchal capitalist order. Among those men who pay a price in terms of oppression, violence, injuries etc. are certainly homosexuals, but also (groups of) migrant men: those who wish to fulfil their role as male breadwinner through earning remittances, and who endure racism, heavy exploitation and dangerous working conditions, while possibly finding their status as head of household contested during their absence because their wives left behind take up new roles and activities formerly defined as male tasks (Lutz, 2010: 1652).

In opposition to the derogatory rhetoric perpetrated during the last presidency toward immigrants and Latinxs, there is the contrasting tendency of the Trump pardons. Article II, Section 2, Clause 1 (the so-called ‘Pardon Clause’) of the U.S. Constitution states that, amongst the other roles, the President “shall have Power to grant Reprieves and Pardons for Offences against the United States, except in Cases of Impeachment” (U.S. Constitution)<sup>40</sup>. There are different types of clemencies which the U.S. President can issue (full pardon, amnesty, commutation of sentence, remission of fines or forfeitures, and grant a reprieve during a sentencing process); and in general, a pardon is only granted if the petitioner has demonstrated good conduct for a substantial period after the conviction and the service of the connected sentence<sup>41</sup>. During the course of his administration,

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<sup>40</sup> Section 2, Article II: “The President shall be Commander in Chief of the Army and Navy of the United States, and of the Militia of the several States, when called into the actual Service of the United States; he may require the Opinion, in writing, of the principal Officer in each of the executive Departments, upon any Subject relating to the Duties of their respective Offices, and he shall have Power to grant Reprieves and Pardons for Offences against the United States, except in Cases of Impeachment”; link at: <https://constitution.congress.gov/browse/article-2/section-2/>.

<sup>41</sup> According to Bomboy, there are multiple types of pardons: “[a] full pardon relieves a person of wrongdoing and restores any civil rights lost. Amnesty is similar to a full pardon and applies to groups or communities of people. A commutation reduces a sentence from a federal court. A president can also remit

Trump doled out a high number of pardons and commutations<sup>42</sup>, so much so that the abuse of his power caused sharp discontent amongst the American citizens, especially regarding the subjects elected for said clemencies. For the interest of this thesis and to provide a sort of comparison with the figures of gangster fathers, the following paragraphs will present only two specific pardons.

The first example considered here coincidentally represents the first pardon granted by Donald Trump on August 25, 2017. This pardon was issued toward Joseph ‘Joe’ M. Arpaio, even before his conviction (which took place on October 5, 2017). In her article ‘*A Shockingly Long List of Corrupt Officials and Political Allies Pardoned by Trump*’, Becky Z. Dernbach described in detail the case of the Arpaio pardon:

[d]uring his 24 years as the sheriff of Maricopa County, Arizona, Arpaio called himself “America’s toughest sheriff” and became known for his severe treatment of immigrants and the harsh conditions in his county jail. When a judge ordered him to stop detaining people based solely on suspicion of their immigration status, which amounted to racial profiling, he refused. In 2017, he was found guilty of criminal contempt of court for violating that order. [...] At an August 2017 rally in Phoenix, Trump hinted at a pardon. “Was Sheriff Joe convicted for doing his job?” he said. “I’ll make a prediction: I think he’s going to be just fine.” Days later, the president followed through. “Sheriff Joe is a patriot,” he declared. “Sheriff Joe loves our country. Sheriff Joe protected our borders. And Sheriff Joe was very unfairly treated by the Obama administration (Dernbach, 2020)<sup>43</sup>.

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finances and forfeitures and issue a reprieve during a sentencing process” (Bomboy, 2021), link at: <https://constitutioncenter.org/blog/how-the-president-grants-pardons-under-the-constitution>.

More information can be found also at the following link: <https://www.justice.gov/pardon/about-office-0>.

<sup>42</sup> For more information on the pardons granted during the Trump administration see the following link: <https://www.justice.gov/pardon/pardons-granted-president-donald-j-trump-2017-2021>.

<sup>43</sup> More info also at the following link: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/25/us/politics/joe-arpaio-trump-pardon-sheriff-arizona.html>; and <https://www.nytimes.com/article/who-did-trump-pardon.html>.

On the same day of the official pardon (August 25, 2017), Trump wrote a tweet from his official account announcing the Presidential decision about Joe Arpaio's condition and declaring him an American Patriot that "kept Arizona safe!" with his actions<sup>44</sup>. Strong controversies lingered around the timing and reasoning behind this clemency, even within the circle of the same Republican party. In fact, Senator John McCain also criticized the pardon of Mr. Arpaio. As reported in a *The New York Times*' article by Julie Hirschfeld Davis and Maggie Haberman, "'No one is above the law,'" he [Senator McCain] said, "and the individuals entrusted with the privilege of being sworn law officers should always seek to be beyond reproach in their commitment to fairly enforcing the laws they swore to uphold.'" (Hirschfeld Davis and Haberman, 2017). The 'personal' connection between Joe Arpaio and former President Trump himself gave priority motifs for this pardon. In contrast, many have argued that there are still thousands of people in detention centers that did not have the same opportunity (Vogel, 2021)<sup>45</sup>.

The second case analyzed here refers instead to the collective pardons in favor of former Border Patrol agents Ignacio Ramos and Jose Compean for a crime committed in 2005<sup>46</sup>. Officially condemned toward the end of 2006, Ramos and Compean were found guilty of having shot Mexican national Osvaldo Aldrete-Davila, who was fleeing from them along the U.S.-Mexico border, and they received 11-year and 12-year sentences, respectively. In 2009, their sentences had already been commuted by then-president George W. Bush. However, the full pardon issued by Trump on December 22, 2020, "wipes their records clean, making it as though they were never

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<sup>44</sup> Trump Tweet dated August 25, 2018. Recollected from the following link: [https://www.thetrumparchive.com/?searchbox=%22I+have+just+granted+a+full+Pardon+to+85+year+old+American+patriot+Sheriff+Joe+Arpaio.%22&results=1\\_](https://www.thetrumparchive.com/?searchbox=%22I+have+just+granted+a+full+Pardon+to+85+year+old+American+patriot+Sheriff+Joe+Arpaio.%22&results=1_)

<sup>45</sup> On February 27, 2020, the Court ruled in denial of the appeal, affirming Bolton's [the Judge] refusal to vacate the conviction. The whole article at: [https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/apr/08/joe-arpaio-sheriff-arizona-donald-trump\\_](https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/apr/08/joe-arpaio-sheriff-arizona-donald-trump_)

<sup>46</sup> More information at the following link: <https://eu.elpasotimes.com/story/news/2020/12/23/trump-pardons-two-former-border-patrol-agents-convicted-shooting-el-paso/4025071001/>.

guilty” (Nietor, 2020). This represents yet another example that reveals the consistency in the anti-immigration rhetoric of Trump in his presidential campaign and the concrete actions during the actual administration. This story could be compared to one of the few examples that Trump presented during his campaign rally in Phoenix in 2016, with the intent of supporting his anti-immigration, almost racialized views. On that occasion, he particularly contested the behavior and performance of the previous Administrations in terms of immigration and safety. In Trump’s words:

[a]lso among the victims of the Obama-Clinton open borders policy was Grant Ronnebeck, a 21-year-old convenience store clerk and a really good guy from Mesa, Arizona. A lot of you have known about Grant. He was murdered by an illegal immigrant gang member previously convicted of burglary, who had also been released from federal custody, and they knew it was going to happen again (Transcript from the Los Angeles Times Staff, 2016).

The Trump administration’s anti-immigrant rhetoric, and the consequent targeting of immigration through enforcement and restrictive policies, do not match the actual circumstances. As a matter of fact, many reputable studies have been conducted on this topic to analyze a possible relation between the immigrant status of subjects involved and the crimes committed. However, findings show that, in the context of the United States, immigrants are actually less likely to commit crimes in comparison to U.S. citizens: according to Guevara’s article published in UnidoUS (2019), “[...] between 1990 and 2014, undocumented immigration and a concentration of undocumented immigrants were each, in actuality, associated with statistically significant decreases in violent crime” (Guevara, 2019: 33). Another article by Catherine E. Shoichet (2019) groups together a series of statistical studies with the aim of debunking the myths regarding the alleged connection between the dimensions of immigration and crime. Then, Light and Miller (2018) also proposed statistical research for the undocumented immigrant population, proving that unauthorized

immigration results in fewer crimes reported to the police and a general decrease in the prevalence of violence. Finally, statistics still prove that, regardless of the increase in migratory movements in recent years, the situation has not changed from the previous decades. Many advocates have condemned statistics released by the Trump administration by saying that

[t]he [2017 Homeland Security Alien Incarceration] report proves one thing only: “The administration will take any opportunity possible to twist facts to demonize immigrants,” said Tom Jawetz, the vice president for immigration policy at the Center for American Progress, a liberal think tank. “The vast majority of immigrants in federal prison are there for crimes that only immigrants can be charged with — illegal entry and illegal entry after removal” (Yee, 2017)<sup>47</sup>.

Generally speaking, it is the condition of illegality that “dehumanizes individuals, criminalizing their movement outside of the authorized channels established by U.S. immigration policy and subjects them to physical and psychological violence” (Lee, 2018: 215-216). What emerged from this first contrast is that sometimes the stereotypes work harder than the concrete proofs of criminal actions. It appears clear that recurrent political discourses on the topics of immigration and crime are based more on assumptions and xenophobic discourses than on actual proofs of criminality or violent actions. In fact, Latino men have to survive with the stigma of being portrayed as gang members even if the main intent is to survive and provide for the family, as seen in the previous sections of this work.

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<sup>47</sup> More information can be found at the following link:  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/26/us/politics/trump-voice-immigrants-crime.html>.



## 6. Second Contrast: Welfare Queens *versus* Angel Moms

### 6.1 Terminologies and Theoretical framework

The context of inequities and stereotypes described in the previous sections is also the context of analysis for the second contrast. In this case, however, the opposing representations are focused on the dimensions of femininity and motherhood, articulated in the concrete and symbolic value of the U.S. border and the specific historical period of the Trump administration. The focus will be placed particularly on the figures of mothers, and how they are depicted in the public sphere by newspapers, media, and policymakers. As we have already seen, transnational Latina mothers have been the subjects of critiques for decades now. Compared to the portrayal of migrant Latino fathers, these women are exposed to harsher criticisms regarding their actions and behaviors, as far as their mothering choices (Souralová and Fialová, 2017). For example, during recent public speeches and in official declarations or tweets, former President Trump presented the female equivalent of his *bad hombres* label using the denigrative categories of ‘welfare queens’ and ‘anchor babies’. Whereas, in opposition to this standpoint, there is the laudation of the so-called Angel moms, the American women who have lost their children ‘at the hands’ of immigrant-related violence and crime. The following paragraphs will be dedicated to defining these two groups in detail and present the connected positions embraced by the Trump administration.

The phrase ‘welfare queen’ was firstly introduced in public discourses in the late 1970s by President Ronald Reagan (Hayden Foster, 2017). This stereotyped label referred to those subjects who were allegedly misusing welfare payments to support raising their children through fraudulent and manipulative activities (see amongst others Covert, 2019). These worries gave rise to a series of welfare reforms (or better said, welfare reductions) in the Seventies. As underlined by scholar Carly Hayden Foster, “[a]fter welfare as we knew it was gone and the Latina/o population in the United States was growing rapidly, some lawmakers perceived the same threat to taxpayers as now coming

from women crossing the southern U.S. border” (Hayden Foster, 2017: 50). This situation created the conditions for a revival in the usage of this expression in the contemporary political context, as we will see soon. In an article published on the online platform Hemispheric Institute, scholar Gretel H. Vera-Rosas focused her attention specifically on the figure of the mother of the anchor baby, and the negative representation that arose in those findings in 2014 is, unfortunately, still relatable to these days. What emerged was an intersection of injustices that operated on the figures of (undocumented) migrant mothers and women on three distinct levels. This is summarized by Vera-Rosas in the following:

[f]irstly, the notion of female dependency circumscribes all women since it is founded upon the sexual division of labor of work subjects that reduces women to the realm of the natural, therefore, devaluing their labor power as workers, housewives, and mothers [...]. Secondly, through the axis of race and class, poor dark-skinned single mothers—regardless of citizenship status—are branded as liabilities and threats to the national body. Lastly, immigration policy conceives of female refugees, migrants, and exiles as wives and daughters dependent on both the economic and legal status of a male migrant subject, thus, gendering and framing the relocation process in terms of male rather than female agency. (Vera-Rosas, 2014; see amongst others Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1995; Segura and Zavella, 2007).

Of course, “[n]ot all women or mothers can become welfare queens or give birth to anchor babies; a specific positionality is required to fit within this gendered, racial, classed discourse” (Hayden Foster, 2017: 52). Gendered racism represents the intersection of multiple aspects and phenomena that describe negativity surrounding low-income Latina mothers’ lives. These dynamics are essentially the result of the interaction of motherhood with discourses of power and domination that, from the public, move to the private sphere (Jetter, et al., 1997: 5). Under this vision, then, “[t]he maternal figure that bears the “anchor-baby” is deemed a social/moral failure and cultural

threat since she is at once cast as dependent and incapable in numerous mainstream media projections and right wing positionings” (Vera-Rosas, 2014). The concepts of dependency and incapacity create a complex intersection that portrays these subjects as categories of ‘Otherness’ in terms of gender, ethnicity, and geography.

Then, there is the category of the so-called ‘anchor babies’. This label became widely used in the 2000s, and then experienced a considerable increase in usage ‘thanks’ to the 2015-2016 presidential campaigns and public speeches of Donald Trump (Google Books Ngram Viewer)<sup>48</sup>. The appellation of anchor baby is used to describe the children of mainly poor, unauthorized Latina migrant women who were – allegedly – entering the United States to give birth at the ‘expense’ of the American taxpayers, and then ‘anchoring’ themselves in the country by exploiting the benefits of the U.S. welfare system (see amongst others Hancock, 2004; Novoa, 2011). Like welfare queen, the use of the term anchor baby produces a dehumanizing effect on the subjects involved, and it also assumes a position of superiority and preconceived judgment.

The two previous categories combine in another slogan which is used often in political discourses, that of ‘birth tourism’. This term has been employed by media and policymakers to indicate the instances when Latina mothers, in particular, are believed to be entering the country to give birth with the sole purpose of ensuring that their children become U.S. citizens by being born in the territory and exploit the connected advantages for themselves through this fraud. According to this negative vision, birth tourism is strictly connected to the ideas of welfare queens and anchor babies, and it also makes assumptions on the inevitable connection with other criminal activity,

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<sup>48</sup> Google Books Ngram Viewer, Research ‘anchor babies’ in the period 2010-2019: [https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=anchor+babies&year\\_start=2000&year\\_end=2019&corpus=26&smoothing=3&direct\\_url=t1%3B%2Canchor%20babies%3B%2Cc0#t1%3B%2Canchor%20babies%3B%2Cc0](https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=anchor+babies&year_start=2000&year_end=2019&corpus=26&smoothing=3&direct_url=t1%3B%2Canchor%20babies%3B%2Cc0#t1%3B%2Canchor%20babies%3B%2Cc0).

including international criminal schemes. In the words of the Bureau of Consular Affairs, an official Department of the United States:

an entire “birth tourism” industry has evolved to assist pregnant women from other countries to come to the United States to obtain U.S. citizenship for their children by giving birth in the United States, and thereby entitle their children to the benefits of U.S. citizenship. [...] By obtaining a child’s U.S. citizenship through birth tourism, foreign nationals are able to help that child avoid the scrutiny, standards, and procedures that he or she would normally undergo if he or she sought to become a U.S. citizen through naturalization (Department of State, official ref. 85 FR 4219).

In an article published in November 2020 in *The New York Times*, journalist Lynsey Addario presented a number of different stories from pregnant women or recent mothers at the U.S.-Mexico border to provide names and facts against these objective decisions. The main intention was to show that the restrictive policies applied by the Trump administration, as well as those already in place from previous years, do not represent a sufficient deterrent to stop women from entering the United States. The first testimony recalls the adventures of Griselda and her treatment at the Border Patrol facility in Texas. In Addario’s words:

Griselda who was 38 weeks pregnant when she sneaked across the Rio Grande into the United States late one night last year [2019]. She started having contractions in a Border Patrol facility in McAllen, Texas, and was taken to a hospital where the medical staff gave her an injection to calm her pain and stop her from going into early labor. Two days later, she was on a crowded bus back to Mexico, moving into a tent camp with hundreds of other migrants who were waiting for permission to enter the United States. When she finally gave birth 10 days later, her tiny

daughter joined her there until a local shelter made room for them (Addario, 2020).

The second story is the one of Xiomara. She was a pregnant woman, who made the travel from El Salvador to the Texas-Mexico border with her two young children.

Xiomara Quintanilla, 26, was seven months pregnant when she arrived at the border near McAllen, Texas, with her two small children, Brianna, 3, and Dylan, 1. The family had fled El Salvador, crossing the Rio Grande into the United States and asking for asylum. She had spent \$9,000 on the 15-day journey, paying smugglers along the way. Families were often being separated by U.S. immigration authorities at the border at that time, but Ms. Quintanilla decided to endure the risk of traveling while heavily pregnant, and the possibility of being separated from her children. “I came because of the lack of security in El Salvador, and the gangs,” she said. “There is no work there. I have to think about the future of my children” (Addario, 2020).

These stories proposed represents practical concretizations in support of the idea that, “despite rampant speculation about the motivations for unauthorized entry into the United States, there is little evidence that the desire to give birth in this country is a primary motivator for Latina immigrant women” (Hayden Foster, 2017: 56). In fact, these biased points of view do not consider the aspect that, in many cases, the so-called ‘welfare queens’ women do not have the choice to birth children in the United States and ‘anchor’ themselves in the new country or not. In fact, these restrictive visions – perhaps voluntarily – ignore the complex reality of the U.S. immigration system and asylum-seeking procedures, as well as the physical and practical restrictions that are imposed on subjects and families.

## 6.2 *Trump's approach*

The central aspect of the negative connotation behind mother-child's movements along the border is connected to the "gendered racist assumptions about the motivations of the unauthorized immigrant Latina mothers of babies born in the United States" (Hayden Foster, 2017: 52). Following Nancy Hiemstra's position, for instance, it can be argued that "[i]n the U.S. and elsewhere, the targeting of immigrant parents, families, and children can be understood as attempts to control the bodies that literally reproduce the nation, and the products of that fertility" (Hiemstra, 2021: 1-2). In this particular case, the figures of the immigrant 'breeders' and the anchor babies are a representation of the fears of the white supremacist and patriarchal groups toward the possible erosion of the national identity and elitist power (Hiemstra, 2021: 6; 10). In fact, these stereotyped representations are always intertwined with the existing hierarchal structures of ethnicity, class, and gender. Then, the surge in 'unauthorized' migration of families and the negative categorizations of 'welfare queens' and 'anchor children' tend to increase the nationalistic and anti-immigration discourses and ideologies. These changes in vision and action tend to undermine the existing frameworks that recognize the innocence of children in migration, and instead justify those policies that are not protecting children, or even harm them (Hiemstra, 2021: 8; 11; see also Jill Williams and Vanessa Massaro, 2016: 92). The biased perspectives that characterize U.S. political discourses from the 1960s are still echoed in the statements of contemporary lawmakers. However, the subject cause of the perceived threat has shifted from poor Black women to poor, primarily 'illegal' migrant Latinas. These stereotypizations are modern-day adaptations of the unending discourses which have been present in political propaganda and official approaches of the U.S. administrations for decades. The 'Latinx threat' and the so-called '*reconquista*' (reconquest) narratives have also resurfaced during Donald Trump's presidential campaign in connection to the increase of the migrant figures of 'welfare queens' and 'anchor babies'.

The revival in the use of the terms of welfare queen and anchor baby by former President Donald Trump is part of the anti-immigration discourses that characterized his administration in general. As a parallel representation of Mexican and Latino men as *bad hombres* and gangsters bringing violence in the country, Trump utilized the power connected to his position to perpetuate fear and distrust toward female migrants. Catherine Powell states that, “[b]y using race and gender tropes to dehumanize Latina mothers and their children, Trump laid the groundwork for the separation and detention of immigrant families who cross the Southern Border” (Powell, 2020: 150).

Anti-immigration discourses and Latinx threat narratives are, in fact, not new trends in the United States. Although short-lived, the group of Mothers Against Illegal Aliens (MAIA) existing in the period between 2006 and 2007 highly reflects the discourse proposed ten years later by the Trump administration in portraying Mexican immigrant women and their ‘anchor’ children as a threat to the economy and the security of the United States and the citizens (Romero, 2011: 50). Four major recurrent themes have been highlighted in the approach of the MAIA group toward the subjects of immigrant Latina mothers and their children:

- (1) they are not like mothers who are U.S. citizens and are incapable of raising go U.S. citizens;
- (2) they are opportunists using their children for their own gain;
- (3) their children are taking services away from the children of U.S. citizens; and
- (4) the presence of their U.S. born children threatens the political dominance of true citizens parented by U.S. citizens (Romero, 2011: 58).

A parallel to the discourses proposed by the MAIA organization can be found in numerous of the speeches delivered by Donald Trump. For instance, during the debate which took place on September 14, 2015, in Dallas between the Republican candidates for the 2016 U.S. presidential

election, Donald Trump addressed “the whole subject of anchor babies” with the following statement:

when a man has a problem, and he’s got his wife or his girlfriend, and they move her over the border for one day, has the baby on the other side of the border—our side—now that baby is a citizen of our country for however long the baby lives. Hopefully, a long time. It’s wrong. It’s wrong. And by the way, by the way, the law doesn’t call it that. That’s not what the law says. And people are finding out now that I’m right. We didn’t say that someone could be pregnant for nine months, come across the border, have the baby, and now it’s ours and we have to take care of that baby forever. It doesn’t say that. It does not say that” (Hayden Foster, 2017: 67)<sup>49</sup>.

The negative depiction of immigrant mothers contributed to the empowerment and enabling of increasingly pessimistic images also from the general public. In practical actions, these feelings progressively endorsed the application, by the Trump administration, of harsh and restrictive policies toward subjects that are and were, in the majority of cases, passive victims of more considerable dynamics operating at the international level. Particularly in the years 2018 and 2019, border patrol agents have performed in a way that targeted “in large numbers, individuals for whom public-safety justifications for removal don’t apply. This includes a considerable number of women who have no criminal records and who are either the primary caretakers of young children, or the primary family breadwinners, or both” (Stillman, 2017). During the course of the presidency then, the topics of the anchor babies and birth migration have been subjects of restrictive policies from the Trump administration. The main concern was connected to the fact that these women were entering the United States with the intent of trying to exploit the U.S. welfare system by giving birth

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<sup>49</sup> Further information can be found at: Davidson Sorkin, Amy. “The Anchor-Baby Question at the G.O.P. Debate”, *The New Yorker*, 15 Sep. 2015, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/amy-davidson/the-anchor-baby-question-at-the-g-o-p-debate>.



on national soil. The anchor babies, who automatically became legal citizens based on birthright citizenship, represented a threat for those promoting restrictive policies and protectionist visions and became an emblem of the intersection of injustices and gendered racism<sup>50</sup>.

More recently, and with concrete effect from January 24, 2020, the Trump administration endorsed, once again, a policy aimed at restricting women – and in particular pregnant women – from entering into the U.S. soil. In this case, the decision added on the Federal Register (Vol. 85, No. 16) revised State Department temporary guidelines for pregnant subjects in terms of the issuance of a B nonimmigrant visa. The only ground necessary to stop pregnant women suspected of entering the country to give birth to their anchor children is the principle of ‘Presumption of Intent’, to be exercised by the Consular Officer. This new decision refers to the phenomenon of so-called ‘birth tourism’ mentioned in the previous paragraphs. On the occasion of an official statement connected to this order, the former White House press secretary Stephanie Grisham expressed that the decision taken by the administration was aimed at protecting the integrity of American citizens and citizenship. Moreover, “[i]t will also defend American taxpayers from having their hard-earned dollars siphoned away to finance the direct and downstream costs associated with birth tourism” (Vera-Rosas, 2014). However, as reported by Atwood et al., “Tom Jawetz, vice president of Immigration Policy at the Center for American Progress said [that] the rule “encourages” officials to use their authority to discriminate on the basis of gender and age by denying a visa based on the possibility that a person might give birth in the United States” (Atwood et al., 2020).

In general terms, the Trump administration’s numerous controls and limitations on the Southern border made it hard for all types of migrants and refugees to enter the country. However,

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<sup>50</sup> More information at the following link: <https://sites.tufts.edu/gender/the-gendered-impact-of-us-border-militarization/>.

the reality for Latina migrant women, and especially pregnant women, appears as even more dangerous and impeding, considering their condition. Numerous “immigration advocates say that gang violence and political strife in Central America are largely responsible for the influx of asylum seekers and that by law, those fleeing persecution abroad have the right to seek asylum in the United States” (Hennessy-Fiske, 2019).

Even before having assumed office, during the 2015 presidential debate in Dallas, Trump treated the question of ‘anchor babies’ as an objectifiable and impersonal problem. During the course of his mandate, this issue appeared to be resolvable through generalized policy restrictions. This tendency was endorsed by other high-ranking political subjects and influential policymakers at the national level, predominately within the Republic party. “[L]egislators such as Pearce, along with republican senators Nathan Deal and Steve King, have sponsored bills that would deny *jus soli* to the children of undocumented immigrants” (Vera-Rosas, 2014). By trying to modify active citizenship arrangements (i.e., The Birthright Citizenship Act of 2009 and 2013, and further amendments), the focus actively and voluntarily shifted from the borderlands to the inward areas of the country (Powell, 2020). Moreover, this targeting is aimed both at the mothers, as a broader category of national threat, and toward their babies, as potential starters of chain migration. In 2010, in what later became a high-contested sentence, former U.S. State Senator Russell Pearce said that: “[i]f we are going to have an effect on the anchor baby racket, we need to target the mother. Call it sexist, but that’s the way nature made it. Men don’t drop anchor babies, illegal alien mothers do” (Vera-Rosas, 2014). The worries connected to the ‘drop and leave’ behavior<sup>51</sup> - as former South Carolina Senator Lindsey Graham have called it – are related predominantly to the burden of high numbers of new entries on the American citizenship and welfare system. For Carlos Guevara, Senior Policy Advisor for the UnidosUS Immigration Policy Project, “the mere fact that a child is

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<sup>51</sup> See amongst others: Barr, Andy. “Graham eyes ‘birthright citizenship’.” *Politico*, July 29, 2010, <https://www.politico.com/story/2010/07/graham-eyes-birthright-citizenship-040395>.

born in the United States, for example, does not alter the parents' immigration status, and usually does not have any impact on the parents' immigration options.” (Guevara, 2019: 6). Similar to the process of circular migration, the procedure for applying for legal residency in the United States is quite complex and, even if it “may eventually lead to citizenship for the person being sponsored (in this case, the parent) [, it] often takes more than an additional 10 years” (Hayden Foster, 2017: 57). The result of these lengthy and intricate processes is the fact that many Latino migrants tend to remain stuck in a situation of mixed citizenship or mixed status within the same family household (see amongst others Romero, 2011; López, 2018).

### **6.3 *The Angel Moms***

Since the beginning of his presidential run, Donald Trump chose an anti-immigration, nationalistic approach through the ‘Make America Great Again’ slogan (Powell, 2020). His stance was based on a series of focal points aimed at instilling in the general public a feeling of hostility toward migrants, particularly the Latinx community. This mantra then shifted to more practical actions as, for instance, with the whole ‘building the wall’ campaign. In addition, Trump inserted himself in the private realm of parenthood by putting distrust in the *bad hombres* and the welfare queens and aligning instead with the pious figures of the Angel moms. During the rally that took place in Phoenix on August 31, 2016, Trump said:

[t]hen there is the issue of security. Countless innocent American lives have been stolen because our politicians have failed in their duty to secure our borders and enforce our laws like they have to be enforced. I have met with many of the great parents who lost their children to sanctuary cities and open borders. So many people, so many, many people. So sad. [...] Countless

Americans who have died in recent years would be alive today if not for the open border policies<sup>52</sup>.

On that occasion, Trump addressed immigration and national security issues through direct references to numerous past crimes committed at the hands of immigrants<sup>53</sup>, as a way to allow more parents – regardless of the fact that they were themselves parents of victims – to sympathize with Trump’s ideas and political agenda. Moreover, as reported by journalist Tara Golsham, “[b]y bringing these people up on stage, Trump’s messaging was clear: Look at all the Americans undocumented immigrants have hurt, he was saying, look at what “illegal aliens” have taken away. Be afraid of the danger these immigrants pose to your community and to your children” (Golsham, 2016). A massive influence behind Trump’s actions focused on the interaction of the dimensions of parenthood and immigration can be placed on two key figures of the ‘Angel moms’ movement: Sabine Durden and Maria Espinoza.

In general terms, the Angel Moms movement – which also called Angel Families, to be more inclusive toward the victims’ fathers – had a remarkable impact on some actions undertaken by the Trump administration. The first movement bringing together the so-called angel moms was created in the early 2000s as a nonprofit group with the aim of remembering all the children lost, regardless of the cause or culprit.<sup>54</sup> Instead, the angel moms connected to Donald Trump are part of

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<sup>52</sup> The whole transcript is available at the following link: <https://www.politico.com/story/2016/08/donald-trump-immigration-address-transcript-227614>.

<sup>53</sup> E.g., the cases of Sarah Root, Grant Ronnebeck, and Kate Steinle. More information can be found at the following links:

<https://allen.house.gov/news/documentsingle.aspx?DocumentID=779>;

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/25/us/trump-undocumented-victims.html>;

<https://eu.azcentral.com/story/news/local/mesa/2019/07/22/grant-ronnebeck-killing-death-penalty-sought-mexican-immigrant-apolinar-altamirano/1801101001/>.

<sup>54</sup> The Angel Moms website: <https://web.archive.org/web/20010924063249/http://angelmoms.com/>.

another association: the Remembrance Project, founded by Maria Espinoza in 2009<sup>55</sup>. Even if Espinoza is not herself an angel mom, she decided to take action after some accidents that took place in Houston, which involved four law enforcement officers and undocumented immigrants. For Texas Observer journalist Justin Miller, the “goal [of this Project] was to find people hurt by crime and amplify their stories, casting so-called illegal invaders as uniquely prone to murder, rape and drunk driving (although statistics show the opposite)” (Miller, 2019). She is the woman responsible for elevating ‘proper’ angel moms like Sabine Durden to the national stage through participation in conventions, rallies, and public speeches. Espinoza’s cause highly resonated with the anti-immigration rhetoric of Donald Trump, and it conveyed an exemplar opportunity to showcase the narrative that many immigrants are criminals and gang members, entering the United States to kill innocent Americans. Trump quickly became a ‘supporter’ of these angel moms’ movement, and featured them in numerous public occasions and even campaign rallies. On April 27, 2017, Maria Espinoza even participated at an official hearing of the House Oversight and Government Reform Subcommittee regarding border wall security, and in particular to discuss about Trump’s proposition of the construction of building a border wall along the U.S.-Mexico frontier. Maria Espinoza – as National Director of the Remembrance Project – based her five-minutes speech in favor of ‘building the wall’ and highlighted the significance that this increased separation would have for the American citizens<sup>56</sup>. She even said: “I ask you to do all you can to stop these preventable killings and murders that permanently separate families from their loved ones. Please not one more stolen lives”. At the same hearing, Representative of the Trump administration Ron DeSantis was one of the spokespersons in support of the border wall with Mexico, and he also made reference to the aspect of criminalization by saying that “[t]oo many Americans have been robbed of loved ones through crimes committed by criminal aliens who should not have been allowed in

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<sup>55</sup> The Remembrance Project website: <https://theremembranceproject.org/>.

<sup>56</sup> The transcript of the speech is available on the C-Span website, as follows: <https://www.c-span.org/video/?427638-1/members-urged-action-border-security-tackle-crime>.

this country to begin with”. In 2019, Angela Cora Garcia published an academic article in which she proposed a commentary of this same Subcommittee Hearing and analyzed the discourses of Maria Espinoza and Representative DeSantis under the lenses of the border security and bordering approach. According to her perspective, neither of the subjects directly referenced the connection between ‘illegal’ immigrants as criminals or the fact that they are the only culprits of deaths on the United States’ soil. However, the implicit intent is for the audience to reach that precise conclusion. For author and professor Angela Cora Garcia, biased speakers like Espinoza and DeSantis tend to “use these provocative labels and terms and speak only about those who have committed violent crimes, while completely omitting references to the vast majority of undocumented people who are law abiding” (Garcia, 2019: 587).

The power of these Angel figures was so effective that, after his election and his entering office, Trump signed an Executive Order that gave birth to a new section of the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) office called VOICE (Victims Of Immigration Crime Engagement). On April 26, 2017, the former Homeland Security Secretary John F. Kelly announced the official launch of this office:

“[all crime is terrible, but these victims are unique – and too often ignored,” said Secretary Kelly. “They are casualties of crimes that should never have taken place – because the people who victimized them often times should not have been in the country in the first place. (ICE Newsroom, April 26, 2017).

To the critics of Trump, the creation of this new office (and the group of people it aimed at representing) appeared as just another attempt to “make monsters out of a largely law-abiding population — one that research has shown to commit crimes at a lower rate than native-born Americans” (Yee, 2017). Nonetheless, some angel parents have argued that Espinoza has used the publicity of the Remembrance Project and of Trump’s support to increase her public presence,

obtain money, and as a base for a possible future political run (Vogel, 2017). In a New York Times article, journalists Kennet Vogel and Katie Rogers stated that, “[a]fter Mr. Trump’s election, the Remembrance Project opened a Washington office to support the work of the Voice office, and also formed a more politically oriented arm, the Remembrance Project Advocacy Incorporated, to spend money in elections and on lobbying” (Vogel and Rogers, 2018).

Sabine Durden is yet another crucial figure in the context of the Angel Moms movement. She experienced in first person the loss of her son Dominic in 2012 at the hands of an ‘illegal alien’. Since then, Durden became a forthright critic of immigrants and a promoter of restrictive policies, so much so that she portrayed Trump as her hero and lifesaver. Thanks to Trump’s support of the cause, she later became one of the spokespersons to represent the whole group of Angel Moms in several public occasions and events. During his presidential campaign, Trump gave voice to many mothers such as Durden, who suffered in similar ways and wanted to fight vicariously through his words. Using these parents’ feelings, he inserted himself in the circle of Angel families, intending to bring on his anti-immigration campaign with a more personal touch:

“[y]ou never hear this side,” Mr. Trump said. “These are the American citizens permanently separated from their loved ones — the word ‘permanently’ being the word that you have to think about — ‘permanently.’ They’re not separated for a day or two days. These are permanently separated because they were killed by criminal illegal aliens” (Vogel and Rogers, 2018).

However, as the word suggests, this ‘side’ should also be balanced with the other contrasting reality of the parents or relatives of the migrants detained at the border, or those who died at the ends of the ‘American patriots’. As noted by Taylor and Bloch, the “[i]deologies that privilege some mothers while marginalizing others are supported by institutions of the State [...] through policy-making (or

the lack of [...]) and policy implementation, including surveillance and the policing of “good” versus “bad” mothering” (Taylor and Bloch, 2018: 2-3). The notion of good mothering is closely connected to the recurring imageries of the patriarchal system that identify the nuclear, heterosexual, and territorially fixed model as the perfect example of parental relation. Whereas “[w]hen lawmakers use pejorative phrases like welfare queen and anchor baby, the targets of this rhetoric are being politically marginalized” (Hayden Foster, 2017: 54). These instances of gendered have characterized the experience of women in migration for decades, as we have seen in these sections. The following chapter will present the last key dimension, that looks into the dynamics of the transnational family and household in relation to the existing patterns of gendered roles.



## CHAPTER 6: GENDERED MIGRATION LENSES APPLIED TO THE TRANSNATIONAL FAMILY AND HOUSEHOLD

*“Actions of the U.S. state can impact, construct, define, (re)produce, reunite, and/or divide families.”*  
– Deborah A. Boehm

### 1. The Reality of Transnational Families and Households in the United States

Transnational migration has shaped and re-shaped the family and household structure, creating new realities of asymmetries, compromises, and contradictions (Ariza and Oliveira, 2001). Migration and movements also increase the fluidity and diversity of families, challenging the existing gender models and expectations. The U.S.-border, in particular, has an essential impact on transnational migrants and their families, with the longstanding movements that have characterized this borderland for centuries. As Boehm underlined, “[i]n a transnational context, “family” may include partners, parents, children, siblings, grandparents and grandchildren, (great) aunts/uncles and (grand) nieces/nephews, cousins, *compadres* and *comadres*, and godparents and godchildren, among others” (Boehm, 2012: 33; 41). In terms of household, then, migration has created new living patterns, such as predominantly male households in the United States and largely female households ‘back home’, especially in the most rural parts of Mexico. The family lens is particularly crucial in connection to transnational migration as it represents one of the foundational aspects behind the decisions of leaving, staying, and returning.

According to the perspective of scholar Marina Ariza, the family “constitutes an axis in the basic organization of migrants’ lives in the places of reception, provides the major social networks for making the migration project viable and permitting its reproduction over time and is a basic point of reference in the allocation [...] of the immigrant experience” (Ariza, 2002). Especially in

the context of Mexico, the family – or more generally, the household – is a factor ‘pulling the ties’ in both directions, whether anchoring in the home community or providing as an incentive to migrate (Cornelius, 2018: 8).

## **2. Parenthood and Gender(ed) Models within the Domestic Realm**

The studies surrounding the questions of transnational migration and gender issues, as we have also seen in the context of feminism, have developed in different waves throughout the decades. It could be argued that, even up to the first years of the 2000s, research intertwining international migration with parenthood in the geographical area of interest of the U.S.-Mexico border has been scarce compared to other dimensions of investigation, such as ethnicity or gender. Many studies that took place during the Presidencies of Bush and Obama were predominantly focused on the connection existing between transnational migration and the experiences of transnational workers of migrant women. In particular, the issues of circular and seasonal migration represented the central topics for the majority of the academic research, due to the diffused economic concerns that spread all over the United States with the 2008 financial crisis. In those instances, academic attention shifted to the figures of Latino fathers leaving their country of origin to find employment on the other side of the border. In addition, the extensively feminist-oriented approach that characterized the 1990s and the early years of the 2000s– for instance, the works of Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila (1997; 2006) – stressed primarily on the aspects related to female migration and, in particular, on the figure of the transnational mother.

Thus, whether intentionally or not, scarce attention was placed on the issues of male worker migrants, especially in the arena of transnational fatherhood (Souralová and Fialová, 2017: 4). The outcome of this focus, together with other variables, caused what Souralová and Fialová called the ‘taken for granted syndrome’ (2017: 4) regarding men’s gendered perspective in academic

investigations of international mobility<sup>57</sup>. The ‘taken for granted’ aspect is due to the fact that the attention tends to be placed on the men’s breadwinning responsibilities in migration, and less on their roles, obligations, and actions as partners and fathers (Souralová and Fialová, 2017: 4). The following quotation from Souralová and Fialová’s article expresses the consequences that are connected to this tendency:

[t]he fact that only the mothering role is addressed when the researchers talk about transnational parenthood has two outcomes. The first outcome is that male breadwinning is rarely or never seen as part of the performance of parenthood – if men are included in research on migration, they are discussed almost exclusively in terms of work and economy, and often in gender-neutral terms. The second outcome is that the female migration experience is almost always linked with motherhood. This strategy is understandable because the gendered norms in most societies subject women and men to distinct expectations regarding their roles (2017: 4-5).

The gendered conflict generated through societal standards and oppositions comes to be reflected again in the approach toward labor between female and male counterparts, as we have seen in the previous sections dedicated to the gendered division of the labor market. This binary perspective has inevitable spillovers in the realm of parenthood and at the household level (Souralová and Fialová, 2017). In the context of transnational migration, the gendered stereotypes of mothers as caregivers and fathers as breadwinners reproduce a series of expectations toward and from children. Essentially,

[t]he basic dilemma of transnational mothers is how to manage caregiving at distance; the main topic in transnational fatherhood research is connected with men’s breadwinning role. [...] Migration

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<sup>57</sup> For further information on this topic see also Gilmore, 1990; and Pribilsky, 2004; 2012.

allows a father to better provide for his family, as far as he has access to potentially higher incomes in Western countries. This enables him to successfully meet expectations as a father breadwinner [...]. While migration is a way to fulfil the ideal of good fatherhood, it is a barrier to accomplishing the ideal of good motherhood (Souralová and Fialová, 2017: 7).

Nevertheless, as we will see soon in this Chapter, recent scholarly investigations have made some progress in this field, especially during the last decade. In fact, by listening to the actual experiences of migrant men and fathers and by analyzing their accounts compared to those of their female counterparts, new studies have underlined the multifaceted reality of these figures, thus going beyond the mere associations with machomen and providers.

In many ways, gender expectations are valuable in understanding the migration patterns that interest transnational families across the U.S.-Mexico border (Boehm, 2012). In the last decades, the distinct *modi operandi* that characterized migration from the 1980s to the 2000s started to change, and more women are an active part of the labor market with the aim of providing for their families and sending remittances ‘back home’ to parents and children.

A second feature worth mentioning when looking at the theoretical frameworks and research standpoint is the one connected to the relationship between parents and their children at the transnational context. The act of migrating – notwithstanding if it happens within or amongst nation borders – inevitably produces a permanent or temporary shift in the familiar dynamics. In practical terms, these alterations translate into countless different new realities, spanning from cases of absence of one or both parents to situations of intergenerational caregiving and sometimes even instances of permanent separation (Yarris, 2014; Roy and Yumiseva, 2021). On the other side of the coin, then, only in the last decades has research started to look into the transnational bond between older parents and their adult migrant children (e.g., Treas, 2008; Şenyürekli and Detzner, 2008;

Baldassar, 2008). As described by Heather R. Fuller in her work *'The Emotional Toll of Out-Migration on Mothers and Fathers Left behind in Mexico'*, “[i]t is important to note that this research on transnational parenthood focuses almost entirely on the impact of transnational parenting on young children [...] but does not yet adequately address the parent-child relationship across adulthood” (Fuller, 2017: 157). The lack of valuable investigation and consequent findings regarding the relationship between adult migrant (children) and their parents can be associated with the fact that, more often than not, the focus of mass media and researchers tends to be placed on younger subjects, as it happened with the extensive news coverage concerning family separation during the Trump administration. This inclination could result from the fact that stories involving young children tend to attract more attention from the media and the general public.

One of the reasons behind the surge in the interest toward adult child-parent relationships can be connected to the recent downfall in the fertility rates, especially when looking at the reality of the two countries directly involved in the border: the United States and Mexico. In fact, “[b]etween 1960 and 2020, fertility rates in Mexico decreased from 6.8 to 2.1 [...]. Consequently, parents who remain in Mexico likely have fewer offspring to rely on for support compared to the past” (Arenas et al., 2021: 3; data from INEGI, 2020). Moreover, transnational migration can reconfigure the patterns of care provision within a family by altering traditional gender roles and hierarchies and existing family obligations (Brandhorst et al., 2020: 268). In these instances, the focus lies primarily on the dynamics connected to the economic support coming from adult children, especially those that have relocated themselves from rural to urban contexts, and the emotive sphere connected to economic dependency from the children in another country or area, the toll-out of geographical distance, and age-related concerns by parents (Yarris, 2014; Roy and Yumiseva, 2021). Hence, specific interest is placed on the numerous developmental effects of remittances in receiving countries (e.g., Conway and Cohen, 1998; DeWind and Holdaway, 2018; Lee, 2019).

### **3. The Impact of the U.S. Policies on Migrants and Transnational Families**

The restrictive migration policies introduced during the recent period of securitization are also part of the many elements that, directly or indirectly, impact transnational families' lives at the U.S.-Mexico border. In fact, the long waiting times at the border, the bureaucratic constraints, and high fees for the visa application, together with the low success rates, all influence the decision to stay or return, as well as prolong the distance of families across borders. "In this way, temporary labor migrants, refugees and undocumented migrants and their family lives are impacted by 'permanent temporariness' or a state of immobility (Brandhorst et al., 2020: 271), which have been proposed and dealt in the previous chapters.

Another fundamental way in which the U.S. government inserts itself in the sphere(s) of family and household is through the creation of the so-called mixed-status families. This labeling refers to the cases in which 'illegal', 'undocumented' members of a family coexist with parents, children, or relatives who are officially U.S. citizens through birthright or naturalization. In some of these instances, the relationship between the private and public spheres can shift into more complex and dynamic formations of families. The triangular relationship amongst the State, the family, and the minor child (which may have a different status) often occurs in mixed-status families. In these specific cases, U.S. citizen children or family members become impacted by the same logic of illegality that shape the existence of 'illegal' migrants. According to Boehm, "[t]his is 'alienation' [...] [a practice] that results in the categorization of children as 'alien' by association. In other words, the unauthorized status of individual family members is extended to others" (Boehm, 2012: 131), and transform them into what are defined as 'citizen aliens' or 'alien citizens' (Ngai, 2004: 2). In fact, the increased securitization and shifting of the border inside the country impact the existence of the whole family from simple tasks to involvement at the societal level. Mixed-status families' dynamics resemble those of 'undocumented' and 'illegal' migrants in the way they

approach daily life. These undesired effects of the complex dynamics of transnational families can be associated, for instance, with the daily experiences of transnational Latino men presented in the previous chapters.

Unfortunately, the U.S. state policies differ from the perceptions and understanding of the family logics and dynamics of Latinx migrants. The ongoing tension between the Trump administration and migrants, for instance, is based on the fact that the state, through its legal actions, attempts at defining – and in a way confining – the realm of family to prescribed categorizations. Frequently, these norms do not take into consideration the fluid living arrangements created at the family and household level within the migrants’ communities but, instead, they tend to focus on migrants as individual subjects, detached from the domestic framework (Heidbrink, 2014: 63-64). A focus on migrants as individual actors perpetuates the logic of ‘visibility of illegal immigrants’ and supports instead the ‘invisibility of the law’ (De Genova 2002: 431), and “[i]t is through definitions of who constitutes a legitimate migrant in the first place [...] that state power is particularly strong in disrupting family life” (Boehm, 2012: 62). The power of the state is particularly present in the lives of ‘undocumented’ and ‘illegal’ migrants, although the state’s reach also extends to particular categories of documented migrants, including those who have naturalized or were born as U.S. citizens in the context of mixed-status families. As underlined once again by Boehm’s work, there are numerous contradictions amongst state policies and practices. In theory, the current U.S. immigration law aims at privileging the family, and the subsequent (re)unification of family members; “[a]t the same time, however, directly because of state policies and practices, migration to and from the United States actually divides families and undermines family structures” (Boehm, 2012: 56). This is particularly evident with the increased securitization and militarization practices at the U.S.-Mexico border, which have limited the flows of circular migration and have separated families for longer periods of time.

#### 4. Third contrast: *Los que se van vs. Los que se quedan*

In the context of the U.S.-Mexico border, data analyses throughout the decades have highlighted the existence of a series of trends connected to the characteristics of the subjects involved in said movements. As also mentioned before, recently, the flows of migration have been shaped predominantly by single men or family groups. These two distinct tendencies are connected to consequent changes in the structures at the household level presented before (whether in the United States, in the home countries or both). Nonetheless, migratory experiences are always influenced by the ever-looming presence of gender stereotypes, roles, and expectations. This lens is particularly important as it shapes the dynamics of transnational migrants and their families. In fact, the disparities in the power relations within society (men *vs.* women) and within the couple (husband *vs.* wife) inevitably impact the subjects involved in transnational migratory movements. As one of the women interviewed in Mexico for Boehm's research paper said,

[i]t is different for men and women. In the case of men, if they have papers or if they don't have papers, they go [*se van*]. It doesn't matter, either way they migrate. For women, on the other hand, if they have papers—and very few do—they go, but if they don't have papers, they don't go . . . they stay [*se quedan*]" (Boehm, 2012: 97).

Studies and data research have underlined that, generally speaking, men tend to have more flexibility and more options in the context of migration, as well as how and when to migrate. In particular, "[t]he gendered divides— "*se van*"/"*se quedan*" and "*por la tierra*"/"*por la línea*"—express how men have more flexibility vis-à-vis the U.S. state" (Boehm, 2012: 98-99). Instead, women have more difficulty obtaining the correct documentation needed to move to the United States legally, and the unauthorized journeys toward the United States carry too many risks to be worthy sometimes. The end result of these dynamics is that, in the majority of cases, men leave



while women stay: “[i]n a recent study of Mexican-born men living in Durham, North Carolina, 23% of men reported having a wife and child(ren) living in Mexico [...]. Yet women in this sample were less likely to have left behind family members, with only 2% of married women reporting being separated from a partner” (Arenas et al., 2021: 2). Moreover, these examples represent the practical explanations of the theoretical visions of gendered stereotypes and expectations introduced in the previous sections. For men, migration represents an enhanced opportunity to fulfill their role of primary breadwinners, and thus separation is perceived as a necessary component of their experience. These men are thus less subject to scrutiny, and the emotional and psychological toll of being away from children and partners may be perceived as less severe than women migrants (Arenas et al., 2021: 4). However, we have seen in the previous sections that this appearance might not always be valid to the faceted realities of Latino men migrating to the United States for employment purposes. Women, instead, are essential assets within the household and the community, especially in relation to the other family members and their parents. In this specific context, transnational migration represents a practical obstacle to the existing support network of relatives and close friends, which contribute to helping to raise and taking care of the children or senior relatives (Arenas et al., 2021: 4). Thus, separation from children and parents may have markedly more negative consequences for migrant women compared to migrant men and fathers.

In the instances in which men migrate in the United States, regardless of their status, married women are increasingly likely to stay at home in the home country to take care of the house and the land and attend to family responsibilities if children are involved. In some cases, women may even return to their parents’ home, or they move in with other female relatives while the husbands are away. According to this view, migration – even if temporary – tends to perpetuate the stereotyped mechanisms that allow gender biases and expectations to protract over time.

In their article '*Las que se quedan/Those left behind*', authors Garcia Oramas, Ruiz Pimentel, and Ruiz Vallejo (2011) analyzed how, under the lens of migration, women can be further perceived (and portrayed) as 'servants of globalization', and thus drastically emphasizing the aspects of domesticity and submission of women. For instance, this can occur in some of the occasions in which the women 'left behind' by migrant partners remain alone, stuck within the private sphere of the household. These women are

in charge of the care of their children or under the guardianship of their relatives, generally their own parents or in-laws. This is intended to protect their family, but above all to maintain social control over their partner. [...] The mechanisms of control over women are reinforced during the migratory process to ensure the maintenance of established gender roles, among which the role of the woman as guarantor of the family unit stands out (Garcia Oramas et al., 2011: 4-5; Author's translation)<sup>58</sup>.

Even in the cases in which women – whether their role is that of partners, wives or mothers – are 'left behind' in the countries of origin, they are overpowered to 'new' forms of male control. In fact, "[h]usbands maintain a type of long-distance or transnational male dominance through male family members, budget management, phone calls, threats, and "*chismes* [gossip]" (Boehm, 2012: 82). The fixedness that characterizes the partners 'left behind' creates conditions in which: autonomy is exceedingly restricted or non-existent (Bojorquez, et al., 2009), and the power of decision-making is limited to the domain of the home and highly dependent on the breadwinner's life beyond the border (see for instance Rosas Mujica, 2006; Suárez Sarmiento, 2021).

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<sup>58</sup> The original excerpts: "Al irse, los migrantes dejan a sus mujeres a cargo del cuidado de los hijos o bajo la tutela de sus parientes, generalmente de sus propios padres o sus suegros. Ello con la intención de proteger a su familia, pero sobre todo de mantener el control social sobre su pareja. [...] Los mecanismos de control sobre las mujeres se refuerzan durante el proceso migratorio para asegurar el mantenimiento de los roles de género establecidos, entre los que destaca el papel de la mujer como garante de la unidad familiar".

In the specific context of transnational families, the process of decision-making spans from everyday mundane tasks to crucial choice, as those of planning to leave the country of origin and stay or return home.

Nonetheless, the (re)assertion of male control on female figures does not imply that women's situation is not undergoing a series of changes. With direct immigration, but also through close contact with partners or family members who are migrating, gender roles and models are being shifted toward new realities for women. This shift in the position of women, both as a collective group as well as singular individuals, is the result of a complex negotiation. This entails the erosion and the reconstitution of male power both at the societal and domestic levels (Boehm: 2012, 82; 85-86). This current of thought recognizes migration as a powerful tool through which monumental transformations of gender roles can be achieved in the context of couple and family dynamics. In fact, it can represent an essential vehicle for women's emancipation and empowerment, both at the household and societal levels. In particular, scholar Arcela Isbet Suárez Sarmiento has underlined that "referring to them as "those who stay behind" implies a passive role on their behalf, reinforcing the active role of the migrant" (Suárez Sarmiento, 2021:20; Author's translation)<sup>59</sup>. However, by looking at the experiences and strategies adopted during their time alone, those who stayed made their presence visible and impactful, not only at the household level but also within society, thus bringing about fundamental changes for future generations. Constructed around this understanding, Suárez Sarmiento highlights three different macro-roles experienced by female subjects within the household context during the period of migration of their partners.

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<sup>59</sup> The original excerpt: "[...] referirse a ellas como "las que se quedan" presupone un papel pasivo de su parte, reforzando el papel activo del migrante".

First of all,

[...] the role that all women play before, during and after their spouse's migration is the one traditionally referred to as "housewife". The role of provider refers to the occasions when, thanks to their business or extra-domestic work, they are totally or partially responsible for household expenses. Whereas, the role of head of household refers to the responsibility of providing for and exercising authority over the children, and caring for them. For them [the women], with the income generated, they supported their spouse in the task of providing for the household (Suárez Sarmiento, 2021: 16-17; Author's translation)<sup>60</sup>.

In practical terms, we can see how even the women labeled as 'left behind' by men migrant in the United States "are increasingly taking on roles that were previously performed by men, such as attending school meetings, managing household finances, supervising labor in the family farm, and overseeing home construction and renovation projects" (Boehm, 2012: 81). These new tasks, however, do not imply the reduction or disposal of the previous domestic tasks assigned to female subjects. In fact, these acquired responsibilities add up to the existing work at the household level, producing an increased burden for those women who 'remain behind' (Fernández-Sánchez, 2020: 2). In the case study of Boehm, for instance, this phenomenon was recognized in the first person from the women interviewed, and they said that "[t]hroughout the year, women are expected to prepare food and deliver it to men while they are working in the fields, but they also join men to plant and harvest" (Boehm, 2012: 44). Migration creates the opportunity for women's voluntary or obligatory reallocation from the private to the public space. In this way, females become part of the

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<sup>60</sup> The original excerpts: "[...] el rol que todas las mujeres desempeñan antes, durante y después de la migración de su cónyuge es el que corresponde al tradicionalmente denominado "ama de casa". El rol de proveedora hace referencia a las ocasiones en las que gracias a sus negocios o al trabajo extra doméstico, se hacen cargo total o parcialmente de los gastos del hogar. Mientras que el rol de jefa de familia se refiere a la responsabilidad de proveer y de ejercer autoridad sobre los hijos e hijas y el cuidado de los mismos. Para ellas, con el ingreso generado apoyaban a su cónyuge en la tarea de proveer al hogar".

employment world, whether it be legalized or not. Under this positivistic lens, “male migration [also] becomes a resource that allows women to participate in decision making” (Suárez Sarmiento, 2021: 5; Author’s translation)<sup>61</sup>. In addition, migration has also changed the way in which fatherhood is generally perceived, consequently producing what could be perceived as a crisis of values and a reconfiguration of gender expectations. Finally, return migration, mainly those movements occurring between the United States and Mexico, is another phenomenon that also altered the existing patterns of gender and family dynamics.

#### ***4.1 ‘Los que regresan’: The phenomenon of Return Migration***

Return [migration] is conventionally understood as the end of a migration-cycle, and is associated with a return to normalcy or ‘home’ [...]. However, return as both a process and a discursive tool is contested, with ambiguous meanings and implications for migrants that vary across spectrums of race, gender, class, skill-level and citizenship (Hennebry et al., 2016: 80).

Return migration is a phenomenon that became increasingly recurrent during the last years of the Trump presidency amongst Latinxs, and particularly Mexicans. This trend can be connected to the relentless increase in apprehensions and deportations at the border, other forms of forced return, as well as the deterioration of migrants’ living conditions due to the U.S. economic recession, as we have also seen before (Suárez Sarmiento, 2021: 3). In those instances, return migration represents a re-configuration of the existing dynamics between the state(s), the migrants, and their family. The process of returning to the home country appears especially common among Mexican migrants living in the United States under ‘undocumented’ status or a temporary permit.

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<sup>61</sup> The original excerpt: “La migración masculina se convierte [también] en un recurso que permite a las mujeres participar en la toma de decisiones”.

In fact,

[w]hile undocumented migrants may choose to remain in host countries longer to avoid difficulties around re-entry, they also face uncertainty and the omnipresent threat of deportation arising from their legal status [...]. Indeed, the status of these migrants forces them to live with the reality that they may one day be sent back to their country of origin by state authorities (Hennebry et al., 2016: 81).

Many studies have analyzed the phenomenon of return migration, especially in the case of Mexican leaving the United States (see amongst others Gandini, et al., 2015; Suárez Sarmiento, 2021). However, there is still a shortage of first-person testimonies connected to the return of the (male) migrant within the couple and the family in more recent years. What has emerged from existing research and testimonies is that, at the return in the country of origin and in the household, all the subjects involved in what were previous transnational relations have to come to terms with a new and changed reality. Suárez Sarmiento proposes a qualitative analysis of first-person interviews of a group of couples in the town of Teocelo, Veracruz, Mexico. The primary intent of her fieldwork was to look at the changes or continuities in the gender relations of women partners of returned migrants. She observes that,

[o]n the one hand, in the United States, men had to take on for themselves the caregiving tasks that their female partners used to perform: cooking, cleaning, washing, grocery shopping. On the other hand, women took on the role of providers and, in some cases, heads of household. In the case of women, one of the main changes was their departure from the domestic sphere. [...] With the return, a certain tension arose in the readjustment of roles, as the men tried to resume their role as leaders within the family. [...] They [the women] tried to maintain the new tasks, roles and responsibilities they had acquired, even when this meant more work. By exercising their autonomy, understood

as their freedom to choose and participate, they were able to expand the margins of their roles and agency within the couple (Suárez Sarmiento, 2021: 14-15; Author's translation)<sup>62</sup>.

In the transitional period from the Obama to the Trump administration, academic Jane Lilly López conducted a series of interviews of couples living in Mexican communities near the U.S.-Mexico border. The main focus of interest was the transnational character of these partners living across a physical and ideological boundary. What emerged in relation to the father and male figures in this context is that the resettlement in the United States produced countless, inevitable, and critical changes in their daily life. Sebastian and Sonia were two of the subjects interviewed for López's work and represent an ideal case to analyze the impact of return migration, especially in the first instances, on the gendered dynamics within the couple. At that time, Sebastian had been recently deported back to Mexico, and he was living close to the border with his wife Sonia and their daughter. Due to Sebastian's situation and Sonia's work arrangements in the United States, they lived in a precarious situation of continuous crossings and constant powerless waiting (Auyero 2011: 26; López, 2018). While 'stuck' at home waiting for his wife, Sebastian reported: "[...] I clean the house, make breakfast – everything a stay-at-home mom has to do, but I do it. Wash clothes, wash the dishes, make the beds, clean everything in the house" (López, 2018: 13).

Return migration obtains another nuanced meaning in the instances in which U.S. citizen children and 'illegal' migrant parents – a mixed-status family – leave the United States to return to

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<sup>62</sup> The original excerpts: "Por un lado, en Estados Unidos los hombres tuvieron que asumir por ellos mismos las labores de cuidado que sus compañeras realizaban: cocinar, limpiar, lavar, comprar la despensa. Mientras tanto, las mujeres tomaron el papel de proveedoras y, en algunos casos, de jefas de familia. En el caso de las mujeres, uno de los principales cambios fue la salida del ámbito doméstico. [...] Con el retorno surgió cierta tensión en el reajuste de roles, pues los varones intentaban retomar su papel como autoridad dentro de la familia. [...] Ellas [las mujeres] trataron de mantener las nuevas tareas, roles y responsabilidades que adquirieron, aun cuando esto les significara más trabajo. Con el ejercicio de su autonomía, entendida como su libertad de elegir y participar, lograron ampliar los márgenes de sus roles y mandatos en la pareja".

the country of origin (which may not coincide with the ‘home country’). This can be a voluntary choice made by the parents, or it can be compulsory if connected to forced deportation. These experiences of return migration produce various and varying feelings, according to the subject taken into consideration. The process of returning ‘home’ is especially tough for the children of transnational migrations. In fact, “[b]ecause of their parents’ undocumented status in the United States, the majority of these children have never actually been to Mexico, and the experience of being what is essentially a “deported U.S. citizen”—itself a curious concept—brings significant challenges” (Boehm, 2012: 134). As it was seen in previous sections, the forced relocation of these U.S. citizen children converts them into ‘alien citizens’ as if they were not even rightful members of the United States (Boehm, 2012: 136). On the other side of the coin, the former migrants returning to their country of origin may encounter obstacles in the process of reintegration in the homeland, as they have been transformed by the condition of (im)migration. In particular, the connection that these subjects have with the United States, the former host country, are “personified by the U.S. citizen minors who are new to Mexico, [and who] are a reminder of the enduring connections returnees have to another national society” (Hernández-León et al., 2020: 83). Under this lens, then, there are numerous negative connotations connected with the return process.

Recent trends have also highlighted a contrasting approach to return migration: the increase of migrants remaining ‘stuck’ in the United States. In fact, data has underlined a consistent decrease in temporary return migration and circular migration flows, and a consequent expansion of the length of migrants’ stay in the United States<sup>63</sup>. This might be a direct consequence of the border enforcements and the connected risks of crossings but, “[e]ven before tougher U.S. border

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<sup>63</sup> As recalled by Wayne Cornelius, “[t]he percentage of migrants returning to Mexico after three years in the United States dropped from 55 percent in the 1987-1992 period to 46 percent between 1997 and 2002 (Lowell et al., 2008: 13) and declined even more sharply in the remainder of the decade. The likelihood of returning to Mexico declined in tandem with intensification of U.S. border enforcement in the 1990s and 2000s” (Cornelius, 2018: 23; see also National Research Council, 2011: 34-3).



enforcement began encouraging migrants to settle permanently in the United States, changes in the U.S. labor market were transforming Mexican migrants from sojourners into settlers” (Cornelius, 2018: 24). This new ‘system’ has restructured family dynamics so much as to become an object of transnational family studies (Fernández-Sánchez, 2020: 2; Brandhorst et al., 2020: 262). In this situation, because of the increased costs and risks, migrants avoid making frequent visits back home to their families, especially in the context of Mexican transnational migrants. This is connected to what is called ‘caging effect’ or immobility. As suggested by Brandhorst et al., “[i]mmobility regimes tend to primarily impact migrants, but they can also impact the stay-behinds in the country of origin, who might not obtain a visiting visa, experience the absence of their migrated relatives and who care for their relatives abroad across distance” (Brandhorst et al., 2020: 267).

What has emerged from this contrast is that, according to the nuances of the interaction between the factors of migration, gender and family, with the policies of the various immigration regimes, the experiences of the subjects involved may vary. In particular, the feminization of migration remains obscured by the logics of masculinity and male control that interest the realities of the United States and Mexico, for instance. Moreover, the intertwining of the dimensions of migration and family at the border are constantly subjected to the risks and impositions of the trends of securitization that have been enacted during the last decades.

## **5. Fourth Contrast: zero-tolerance or zero humanity?**

### ***5.1 The Recent U.S. Immigration Regime***

The fourth contrast aims at bringing together the stereotyped visions and the actual experiences of both Latinx fathers and mothers in the struggle of family separation, deportation, and detention in the context of the U.S.-Mexico border and in the specific period of the Trump

administration. The terms of ‘apprehension’ and ‘deportability’ refer to a variety of situations and nuanced realities. Officially, “[t]he government uses two terms when it talks about deportations: removal and return. A “removal” refers to someone who has been issued a court order or directed by a border patrol agent to leave the country, while a “return” refers to someone who is released back across the border of Mexico or Canada”, without formal order of removal from a court (The Editorial Board of NYTimes, 2019). Moreover, these instances of removal or return are subject to alterations in the levels of legality through time. Reasons for these shifts include not only the policies enacted by the various administrations but also the time of the year, the economic conditions, and the characteristics of the subjects involved.

Every one of the elected Presidents of the United States also assumes the – official or unofficial – title of ‘Deporter-in-Chief’. However,

[u]nlike his predecessors, President Trump — whose campaign was built on a foundation of outrage and exaggeration over the threat posed by immigrants — has embraced the role of chief deporter, with an apparent disregard for the human cost of his tough-strut policies. While his government hasn’t yet forcibly removed many more people per year than did those of his predecessors, Mr. Trump has made everything that precedes an Immigration and Customs Enforcement knock at the door more frustrating and even dehumanizing (The Editorial Board of NYTimes, 2019).

In fact, data obtained from the Yearbook of Immigration Statistics 2019 published by the Homeland Security Department in 2019 shows a constancy in the removal and returns, with numbers slowly increasing from 331,717 removals and 106,458 returns in 2016 up to 359,885 removals and 171,445 returns in 2019.

As it has been said many times so far, former President Donald Trump approached his presidential run with a solid anti-immigration campaign, which later became concretized through many different policies. Since January 2017, with the entry into office of Trump, these approaches have shaped the faith and well-being of families, predominantly those from the Northern Triangle countries and Mexico. Four specific policies have stood out in the years of Presidency for their impacting effects:

- (1) planned elimination of Temporary Protected Status (TPS) for Central American refugees (Salvadoran families, November 2021);
- (2) separation of children from parents upon border entry, “zero tolerance” and charging parents with criminal activity, and confinement of unaccompanied adolescents held by U.S. authorities at the border;
- (3) expanded eligibility for deportation, including long-term residents without criminal records; and
- (4) threats to terminate the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, which allows youth to reside in the United States without fear of deportation (Roy and Yumiseva, 2021: 5).

In particular, the zero-tolerance policy created colossal backlash after the extensive news coverage that followed the nearly 3,000 cases of family separation throughout the period in question alone (2,575 children separated from their families, according to a DHS statement dated June 23, 2018<sup>64</sup>). From those days, the phrase ‘family separation’ has become closely associated with the political propaganda and the policy enactments of the Trump administration, which (directly or indirectly) aimed to separate migrant children from their parents at the U.S.-Mexico border. However, as mentioned in the previous parts, ‘unauthorized’ immigration towards the United States has been framed as an issue of criminality and a threat to national security well before the Trump administration (Ojeda et al., 2020: 5-7).

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<sup>64</sup> Data obtained from: Isacson, Adam, et al. “A NATIONAL SHAME: The Trump Administration’s Separation and Detention of Migrant Families.” *WOLA*, 2018, p. 4.

Under this perspective, Deborah A. Boehm states that “[t]he U.S. state focuses on individual family members, extracting them from the context of family and community. This further isolates individuals from their family, especially from the perspective of the state, and continues to divide families” (Boehm, 2012: 62-63). The ever-looming possibility of separation and deportation creates unstable living conditions for families living under ‘illegal’ or mixed-status conditions. Moreover, the construction of an immigration regime focused on individuality, and the threat and ability to carry out deportation is an uncomfortable representation of an attack toward specific categories of migrants. The constant terror of deportability can lead parents to alter the existing dynamics within the family and the household to protect the children or avoid possible situations of danger (Boehm, 2012: 63).

### ***6.2 Zero-tolerance: Who is really crossing the line?***

The specific policy aimed at reducing illegal entries at the Southern border with ‘zero tolerance’ was announced on April 6, 2018, by US Attorney General Jeff Sessions. It officially terminated on June 20, 2018, with Trump’s Executive Order 13841<sup>65</sup>. However, even before announcing the zero-tolerance policy, the government issued a series of policies imposing increased protocols during the control procure of those subjects asking to recover minors from governmental custody structures, regardless of their relationship with the child (parents, relatives, or others). As recalled by Dickerson, “[a]mong other things, the memo said that the Department of Health and Human Services, which is responsible for the minors, must collect the name, date of birth, address, fingerprint and identification of a potential sponsor” (Dickerson, 2018). These measures, in fact, were directly aimed at protecting children from the risks of trafficking. In fact, the generalized concern that many immigrants who were trying to enter the country traveled with children for a

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<sup>65</sup> Full text of the Executive Order at the following link: <https://www.businessinsider.com/executive-order-trump-ends-family-separations-keeps-zero-tolerance-2018-6>.

better chance of succeeding in their purpose was another factor contributing to the implementation of the zero-tolerance policy. According to the position of the Department of Justice, the zero-tolerance policy was implemented because “the Department of Homeland Security reported a 203 percent increase in illegal border crossings from March 2017 to March 2018, and a 37 percent increase from February 2018 to March 2018—the largest month-to-month increase since 2011” (Office of Public Affairs, April 6, 2018). The message from the Administration officials has been unapologetic, and especially the position of Sessions was especially harsh. He even said that “[i]f you cross this border unlawfully, then we will prosecute you. It’s that simple” (Lee, 2019). In one of his tweets from his official account, Donald Trump said that

[c]hildren are being used by some of the worst criminals on earth as a means to enter our country. Has anyone been looking at the Crime taking place south of the border. It is historic, with some countries the most dangerous places in the world. Not going to happen in the U.S. — Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump) June 18, 2018 (Colvin and Lucey, 2018)<sup>66</sup>.

The increase in crossing, coupled with the preoccupation that surrounded children’s safety and the enforcement of more controls at the border, inevitably caused the situation of family separation. “On June 15, 2018, the DHS reported 1995 children were separated between April and May of 2018”, however it was later revealed that nearly 3,000 children had been removed from their families, more than previously disclosed (Powell, 2020). “The children were removed from their parents, with whom they had crossed the border, and placed in dozens of government-licensed

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<sup>66</sup> Original tweet of Donald J. Trump, dated June 18, 2018, in the Trump Twitter Archive at the following link:

<https://www.thetrumparchive.com/?searchbox=%22Children+are+being+used+by+some+of+the+worst+criminals+on+earth+as+a+means+to+enter+our+country.+Has+anyone+been+looking+at+the+Crime+taking+place+south+of+the+border.+It+is+historic%2C+with+some+countries+the+most+dangerous+places+in+the+world.+Not+going+to+happen+in+the+U.S.%22>.

shelters and foster care homes while their parents remained in detention” (Dickerson, 2018). During that period, many parents have been separated for indefinite amounts of time from their children, experiencing uncertainty about when and if they will ever be reunited with their children, fear of deportation, and inhuman treatment in the facilities (Fuller, 2017).

The public response towards the zero-tolerance policy was conspicuous and impactful. Condemnations came from all fronts, spanning from the general public to nonprofit and religious organizations and even from some of the administration’s front and supporters. U.S. Representative Joseph Crowley said that “What this administration is doing is inhumane”; Republican Senator Susan Collins defined the policy as “inconsistent with our American values.”, and Democratic leader Nancy Pelosi as “barbaric” (Upadhye, 2018)<sup>67</sup>. Protests and marches exploded around the nation, and claiming that ““zero tolerance” amounts to “zero humanity”” (Thompson, 2018). As reported by Stephen Lee in his 2019 work,

[a] part of what makes family separation at the border so noteworthy, and therefore capable, of generating momentum for social change, is the palpable nature of the anguish created by the image of losing track of one’s child. Losing a child to government separation feels like losing a child to death, which can adversely affect one’s health (Lee, 2019).

Near the end of June 2018, the backlash toward the zero-tolerance policy became unsustainable for the administration, and justifications and excuses started to arise, blaming the Democrats for the inefficiencies of the nation’s immigration system. ““We do not want to separate parents from their children,” Sessions said. “If we build the wall, if we pass legislation to end the lawlessness, we won’t face these terrible choices”” (Colvin and Lucey, 2018). During the National Sheriff’s Association conference that took place in New Orleans in June 2018 (June 15, 2018 – June 19,

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<sup>67</sup> See more at the following link: <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/watch-trump-defends-family-separation-falsely-blames-democrats-for-policy>.

2018), Attorney General Jeff Sessions and Homeland Security Secretary Kirstjen Nielsen spoke about the law enforcement of family separation, the so-called zero-tolerance policy<sup>68</sup>. In his article about this conference, Joshua Barajas reported that “[h]e [General Sessions] says enforcing immigration laws that result in the separation of children from parents is necessary. There is no law that mandates the separation of children from parents at the U.S border” (Barajas, 2018), but separations are ‘merely’ the result of the zero-tolerance policy introduced in the previous months. Whereas “Nielsen says officials will not apologize for enforcing immigration laws that result in the separation of children from their parents” (Barajas, 2018).

After having defended its position for some time, the Administration succumbed to the pressure from public opinion and officially ended the zero-tolerance policy via Executive Order 13841. This decision put a stop to the legal process of family separation at the border. However, the new order has not stopped the criminal prosecution of unauthorized entries at the U.S.-Mexico border. Still, it will seek to hold families together in the same facility, rather than separating them in different locations, in the process of assessing their legal status (Shear et al., 2018). In other words, the White House replaced family separation with family detention (Isacson et al., 2018; Suarez, 2018).

### ***6.3 Children separation and the Flores Agreement: The Administration’s missteps***

Even though the policy dividing families at the border was officially halted at the end of June 2018, family separations never entirely stopped. According to Lee Gelernt – the deputy director of the A.C.L.U.’s National Immigrants’ Rights Project – around 700 families have been separated through loopholes in the court order from the ‘end’ of the zero-tolerance policy until June

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<sup>68</sup> For the discourses of Sessions and Nielsen at the National Sheriff’s Association conference, see the following link: <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/watch-jeff-sessions-says-no-one-wants-to-split-families>.

2019 (Goldberg, 2019). However, “aside from the loopholes and the legal disputes, plain old bureaucracy also appears to be a problem” (BBC News, July 2, 2019).

The Flores Settlement is a Court’s decision of 1997 that sets the standards for the treatment of migrant children in detention in the context of the United States jurisprudence. It contains, for instance, the limits of time and the supposed necessary conditions for children’s detention (Powell, 2020: 148). Unaccompanied children are by law supposed to be detained in U.S. facilities only for up to 72 hours. Nonetheless, many articles and insights have argued that, especially during the ‘month of zero-tolerance’ in 2018, children were kept in detention centers for much longer periods. Considered the vast number of people being held at the Southern border, “the Department of Justice has sought to amend the agreement to allow it to hold children for longer, and has disputed interpretations of the 1997 court decision”, the Flores Settlement (BBC News, July 2, 2019). Moreover, the conditions in which they were held were way below the expected levels of decency. Numerous children were forcibly separated from their parents soon after their arrival, without notice before the reallocation and with no contact in the waiting period.

As a consequence of this out-of-the-ordinary situation, numerous actions were taken to reduce the time of separation, quicken the reunification process of families, and seek moral and financial compensation for the distraught caused by the Trump administration. In particular, the case of Beata Mariana de Jesus Mejia-Mejia and the complaint undertaken by the American Immigration Lawyers Association (AILA) gained publicity through news coverage. Beata Mariana de Jesus Mejia-Mejia was one of many mothers who fled from the Northern Triangle countries seeking asylum and safety in the United States. She left Guatemala after having faced personal violence and death threats from her husband towards her and her son. She crossed the border with her son Darwin around May 19, 2018, near San Luis, Arizona, and she surrendered to U.S. Border Patrol agents. From there, the two were located in a holding cell together – which is known as *la*



*hielera*, the cooler, for the remarkably low temperatures – and, two days later, her son was taken away from her (Rosenberg, 2018). Mejia-Mejia decided to file a lawsuit in the Federal District Court in Washington D.C. against six federal agencies and ten senior officials, in which she is asking

a federal judge to declare separating her from her son was ‘unlawful,’ order the boy’s return to her and forbid the government from deporting her without him. She is also seeking financial damages for the ‘pain and suffering arising from the separation,’ and ‘punitive damages for the conscious disregard for [her] rights’ (Martosko, 2018)<sup>69</sup>.

As also reported in the official lawsuit, Mejia-Mejia passed her credible fear interview, which is a process necessary to assess the asylum requirements and eligibility. Mejia-Mejia was later released from custody on June 15, 2018, thanks to the help of the immigration legal aid Libre by Nexus, who also paid her \$12,500 bond (Shoichet, 2018). During the time of separation, her son Darwin was placed in the custody of the Department of Health and Human Services Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR). After the necessary checks for statutory mandate had been conducted (Gerstein, 2018), Mejia-Mejia and her son have been reunited on June 22, after more than a month apart. As described by journalist Bill Chappell,

[t]he tearful reunion is one of several stories that have put a human face to the broad and deeply felt effects of the Trump administration’s zero tolerance policy that has split more than 2,300 children from adults at the

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<sup>69</sup> According to the *Mejia-Mejia v. U.S. Immigration & Customs Enft*, Civil Action. No. 18-1445 (PLF), at \*1 (D.D.C. Sep. 26, 2019), “Ms. Mejia-Mejia filed an Amended Complaint [Dkt. No. 14] on July 13, 2018, and a motion for declaratory relief and a permanent injunction [Dkt. No. 16] on August 27, 2018.” The final decision of the Court can be found at the following link: [https://casetext.com/case/mejia-mejia-v-us-immigration-customs-enft?utm\\_source=Iterable&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=PDF-emails&PHONE\\_NUMBER\\_GROUP=C&sort=relevance&q=mejia-mejia&p=1&tab=keyword&jxs=&type=case](https://casetext.com/case/mejia-mejia-v-us-immigration-customs-enft?utm_source=Iterable&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=PDF-emails&PHONE_NUMBER_GROUP=C&sort=relevance&q=mejia-mejia&p=1&tab=keyword&jxs=&type=case).

U.S. southern border, in cases where they had crossed into the country illegally (Chappell, 2018).

However, reporter Catherine E. Shoichet underlined that “Mejia’s lawsuit isn’t the only one challenging the Trump administration’s months-long practice of separating kids and parents at the border, but it appears to be the first filed by an individual since officials announced their controversial “zero tolerance” policy” (Shoichet, 2018). In fact, the American Immigration Lawyers Association (AILA) and the American Immigration Council filed a complaint with the Department of Homeland Security’s (DHS) Office of the Inspector General (OIG) and Office for Civil Rights and Civil Liberties (CRCL) regarding “the pervasive and illegal practice by DHS officials of coercing separated mothers and fathers into signing documents they may not have understood” (AILA Doc. No. 18082235, 2018). The complaint includes a series of first-person declarations by those parents who experienced the consequences of family separation in the period in which the zero-tolerance policy was in action. These testimonies document the physical and emotional distraught caused by the detention and the DHS officials’ treatment; the illegal practice of coercion into signing documents, and the “waiving their legal rights, including their right to be reunified with their children” (AILA Doc. No. 18082236, 2018).

Nonetheless, it appears clear that not every single family detained at the border could file a complaint or to start a lawsuit, whether during the detention period or after. Then, many of the parents detained at the border facilities were even tricked into signing the papers for voluntary deportation, as it often appeared as a last resort for reunification with their children. For instance, Root and Najmabadi’s article (2018) reported the words of Carlos, one of many fathers who were kept in a detention center in Houston after appraisal at the border.

He [Carlos] said the majority of those detainees had received the same offer of reunification in exchange for voluntary deportation. [...] “I was told I would not be deported without my daughter,” said Carlos, adding that

he's now hoping to revoke the voluntary deportation order he signed and get legal help to fight his case. "I signed it out of desperation... but the truth is I can't go back to Honduras; I need help" (Root and Najmabadi, 2018).

The sketchy behaviors of border officers through the coercion of signing specific papers or in the handling of the credible fear interviews, as well as the government's poor record-keeping and lack of planning, in some instances, reunification has proved quite challenging, and not always possible for the families. The impossibility or difficulty of reunification is even more notable in the cases in which parents or children were deported to their home countries without notice or with scarce information (Muñiz de la Peña et al., 2019: 156). The *modus operandi* at the U.S.-Mexico border consisted in a series of rapid and emotionless decisions, which is well described by Muñiz de la Peña et al. in their article '*Working with Parents and Children Separated at the Border: Examining the Impact of the Zero Tolerance Policy and Beyond*' (2019). They say that,

[a]s soon as it was decided that a parent would be sent for criminal prosecution for immigration-related offenses, their child was rendered unaccompanied (as if they had arrived without a parent or legal guardian, and transferred from the jurisdiction of DHS to that of the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), and placed in shelters run by the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR, a branch of DHHS) [...]. The decisions of what to do with the parent and whether to separate the family or not, were made arbitrarily and did not involve any kind of welfare specialist [...]. The way the separations were conducted left a lot to be desired as well. Usually neither parents nor children were told about the separation beforehand, so when it happened, it came as a surprise; they were not told where either of them were being taken to, and they were often lied to about how long they would be separated from each other" (Muñiz de la Peña et al., 2019: 154).

In practical terms, this entailed that those parents would go for days, weeks, or even an entire month sometimes without being together with their child(ren) or even knowing their whereabouts and conditions – and vice versa (Muñiz de la Peña et al., 2019). Scholars and academics, together with the civil society, have also argued that in the instances of apprehension, detention and consequent at the U.S.-Mexico border, the rights of the family unity were not adequately considered by border officials and courts during the decision processes (Jones et al. 2017). The violation of basic principles of human rights and international law – to which the United States are bounded – have been evident. In particular, in the instances of “the prohibition of penalizing refugees for unlawful entry or presence, and the prohibition of returning refugees, whether directly or indirectly, to the territories where their life or freedom would be threatened” (Muñiz de la Peña et al., 2019: 155), also known as the principle of non-refoulement.

Furthermore, persisting effects of the policies of zero-tolerance and family separation have been noted on children and parents. In particular, the traumatic experiences of detention and separation in facilities have created outcomes of anxiety, depression, and stress on children (i.e., the adverse childhood experiences, ACEs)<sup>70</sup>. In their study, Muñiz de la Peña et al. have underlined that “[f]or the children separated at the border, the adverse effects are exacerbated by the frightening, sudden, chaotic, or prolonged character of the separation, as well as by the uncertainty and ambiguity of what happened to their parents” (Muñiz de la Peña et al., 2019: 156). Moreover, family separation during migration and detention has negatively impacted the educational success of Latinx children, led to greater levels of psychotic disorders (Paksarian et al. 2015), and also increased emotional and behavioral distress among children.

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<sup>70</sup> See amongst others Bowlby 1973; Bryant et al. 2017; Miller et al. 2018.

The second and concluding part of this thesis has presented the dimensions of family and gender through the means of four contrasts. The theoretical background proposed for both concepts has proven useful to understand the actual experiences of migrants and transnational families within the countries of the United States and Mexico (predominantly) and at their intersection at the physical boundary. The first two contrasts have been defined according to the basic gendered models of males vs. females to present the concrete expectations and experiences of different categories or groups. It can be argued that these two contrasts represent the foundation for the more complex dynamics that shape the existence of transnational families. In fact, the opposition of those ‘who leave’ and those ‘who stay’ (*se van/se quedan*) is based on the prevailing gendered models of the patriarchal society. The final contrast complicates the picture of reference even more, by intertwining the dimension of the immigration laws of the Trump administration to the subjects of migrating families at the border. In particular through the ‘zero-tolerance’ policy, the lives of transnational parents and their children are shaped by instances of separation, detention and even deportation.



## CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

This thesis has focused on the interplay between the determinants of migration, gender, and family in the context of the U.S.-Mexico border during the particular period of Donald Trump's administration. The main purpose of this work was to understand how the reciprocity that exists between the dynamics of migration and gender, in particular, is affected - and at the same time affects - the politics and policies of the Trump government. This analysis was concretely made possible through a continuous conflictual approach, especially between the subjects that interact with the various dynamics of migration and the family and gender aspects. This thesis offers an in-depth look at issues of migration and gender through the means of real case studies, statements, and intimate stories.

The core of this work is divided into five chapters, which correspond to the five essential themes of analysis: the border, the aspect of migration, the dimensions of gender and family, and the governmental policies of the Trump administration. The last two chapters contain the four contrasts that epitomize the common thread of this thesis, which is based on a system of opposing visions, approaches, and realities. Chapter two of the thesis offers a theoretical examination of the concept of 'border' and the correlation with the concrete case of the geographical borderland between the United States and Mexico. This chapter introduces the first out of the five determinants which, by the end of the thesis, will be intertwined in a complex system of constant interaction and influence. In practical terms, the first sections of this chapter try to delineate what a 'border' actually is, which appears as a precondition to understanding the reality of the U.S.-Mexico frontier. The concept of border assumes a variety of nuanced meanings according to the interpretations, the context, and the dimensions that interact with it. Moreover, a frontier is subjected to numerous transformations through time, both in terms of ideological perception and in its physical aspect.

Then, the chapter moves forward onto the analysis of the U.S.-Mexico border, which tries to apply the notions proposed in the previous sections to this specific physical and social boundary. This specific chapter introduces and makes reference to some of the recurrent aspects that will be presented in detail throughout the rest of the thesis as, for instance, the impact of the border on individuals and families and the concepts of securitization and militarization.

The third chapter represents an overview of some of the aspects that characterize the complex realm of the dimension of migration, with a particular focus on the context of the U.S. Southern border. This work is centered especially on the ‘voluntary’ (or at least not forced) movements of what are classified as ‘illegal’ or ‘undocumented’ migrants, trying to enter into the United States from the nearby areas of the Northern Triangle countries and Mexico. These subjects represent the perfect figures to introduce some of the notions that distinguish this particular framework. Under the leitmotif lens of oppositions, the ‘illegal aliens’ are perceived as the bearers of change, the only subjects which are able to alter the existing patterns of intersectionality (such as racism and colonialism, amongst others) due to their position of ‘immanent outsiders’ (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2012). Nonetheless, they have to bear the consequences of the ever-looming burden of illegality, especially when they become subject to the system of immigration laws of the United States. The other crucial piece of this chapter aims at presenting the most recent trends and transformations that shape migration at the border and within the United States: the feminization of migration and the shift of Mexico from an origin to a transit country of migrants, in particular.

The fourth chapter of this thesis proposes a historical recollection of the immigration regime of the United States throughout the last century. This is achieved through the combination of two methods that divide the selected period into smaller sections according to a system of ‘politically-inspired wars’ (Massey, 2020 and Amuedo-Dorantes, 2020). These different military approaches (e.g., War on Poverty and War on Terror) creating the foundations for the most recent ‘War on Immigrants’ promoted by President Donald Trump. This – officially undeclared – label was often used by/in



mass media to portray and describe the politics, policies, and actions of this administration, due to its harsh stand toward immigrant subjects. The practices of securitization and militarization that characterized the former administration, in fact, contributed to shaping a pessimistic representation of the Latino migrant community and perpetrated the discourses encouraging the behaviors of separation and otherness. In practical terms, these Us vs. Them oppositions saw concrete actualization in the discourses of building a border wall at the U.S.-Mexico frontier.

The fifth chapter falls under the second part of this thesis, and it is centered on the gendered lens that is applied to the migrant subjects or those which surround them. In this context, gender stands for the stereotypes, models, and experiences that distinguish the existence of female and male subjects. This peculiar dimension interacts with the other elements analysis of this thesis under the conceptualization of intersectionality, which portrays the five specific factors as levels of oppressions that are mutually influenced and at play at the same time (amongst others: ethnicity, gender, social class, language bias). This chapter is organized under a framework that analyses the concrete cases that will be presented under three specific steps. This structure lies on a theoretical basis comprehending various crucial concepts and then contraposes the expectations and stereotypes of the subjects involved with their actual experiences and behaviors. In particular, this form is visible in the analysis of the Latino men and fathers presented in these sections and the first contrast. These figures are exposed to the stereotyped visions that portray Latino men either as drunken *machos* or as rapists and drug dealers, with a consequent impact on their lives in various ways (from the public to the intimate level). However, these general depictions do not coincide with the experiences that encumber these men or with the expectations of being providers and breadwinners for their families. This abstract overview is applied to the concrete cases that oppose the figure of Latino men to the American patriots who have obtained an official pardon the course of the Trump administration for crimes they have actually committed. The other main focus of

attention is placed on the figures of the women and mothers that interact with the dynamics of migration at the U.S.-Mexico border. In particular, the second contrast presents the conflictual categories of the so-called ‘welfare queens’ and their ‘anchor babies’ with the ‘Angel moms’. The group of women denoted as welfare queens represents the Latina migrants who are trying to enter the United States in seek of safety (for them and their children). The intersection of negative stereotypizations and gendered racism toward these subjects is contrasted by the tendency of elevating the figures of angel parents: those who have lost their children due to instances connected to ‘illegal’ and ‘undocumented’ migrants, precisely.

The last chapter of the core part of this thesis (chapter six) introduces the last dimension of analysis for this work: the transnational family. In relation to the dynamics of migration, the family loses its ‘traditional’ character, and it may be modified by numerous variables. One emblematic example of this situation is that of the so-called mixed-status families, whereas ‘illegal’ and ‘undocumented’ members coexist with U.S. citizens. Through the process of alienation by association, the logic of illegality impact also those who have the right to reside in the United States, thus becoming ‘alien citizens’ (Ngai, 2004). The third contrast presented in this thesis proposes another alteration of the logics of family and gender through the interaction with the migratory movements and, specifically, the instances where subjects remain in the country of origin (*se quedan*) while others move (*se van*). In most of these cases, women are ‘left behind’ in the countries of origin to attend to the household and care for the family (children, old parents or relatives). They are overpowered by the continuous oppressions of male control. Instead, Latino men are leaving their homes in search of employment in the United States to fulfill their breadwinning expectations. To conclude, the final contrast analyzes the situation of national emergency that characterized the United States in the years 2018 and 2019, especially in relation to the policies of zero-tolerance that caused high numbers of family separation and detention. According to the statements from the Trump administration, these actions were undertaken with the intent to protect children who were often exploited in the crossings at the

U.S.-Mexico border. However, the underlying reasons were connected to the xenophobic and anti-immigration stances that characterized the approach throughout the extent of the Trump presidency. Moreover, these policies provoked a series of negative effects which hugely affected the lives of these families and children.

What emerged from the contrasting viewpoints presented throughout this thesis is the idea that only through these concrete examples is it possible to resist those nationalist views and arguments that portray migration issues in an oversimplified and stereotyped manner. Those discourses that tend to label all migrants as criminals and invaders, for example, have the effect of dehumanizing the individuals involved and creating generalizations based on aspects of gender, ethnicity, or class. Therefore, personal stories represent the most suitable means to resist and counter these tendencies and to dismantle the logics of (neo)colonialism and racism that are still present nowadays. Moreover, sharing these testimonies through new lenses and approaches allows reaching new and multiple audiences.



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