

Immigration Detention, the Patriarchal State and the Politics of Disgust in the Hands of Street-level Bureaucrats

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ABSTRACT

This article presents the results of ethnographic research conducted in the southern border of Mexico from 2017 to 2019, specifically at the *Estación Migratoria Siglo XXI* [XXI Century Immigration Station], which is one of the biggest and most important detention centres in the country. It analyses the functioning of an immigration detention centre as a 'total institution' where street-level bureaucrats enforce practices of biopolitics through daily deprivation of access to vital resources and the protection of the law. The article depicts how women are treated within a detention centre and provides an explanation focusing on observing gendered power relations and practices of disgust and contempt by the *Instituto Nacional de Migración*, a State-organised institution in the hands of street-level local bureaucrats who work in precarious conditions. Finally, the article demonstrates the dehumanisation practices in immigration detention that are deployed as a deterrence policy through operational strategies in *Estación Migratoria Siglo XXI*, located in Tapachula, Chiapas.

Keywords: disgust, migrant women, immigration detention, patriarchal state, total institution

INTRODUCTION

Due to increasingly restrictive policies for seeking asylum in the United States, especially since the Migration Protection Protocols or 'Remain in Mexico Program'¹ was inaugurated by the Trump administration, Mexico has increasingly become a containment state for transit forced migration (París Pombo, 2017).

At the borders of rich countries, migrants and deprived populations are not merely left to die; they have to face deadly scenarios from which they must escape to survive; necropower pushes migrants and the poor towards harmful sites where life is precarious or even impossible (Estevez, 2022: 1).

As a result, Mexico is currently an obligatory destination for thousands of people seeking to reach the United States from Central America and various countries in the Latin American region, who are stranded in Mexican territory, exposed to detention and deportation.

Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala, Nicaragua, and Haiti are the leading countries of origin. In addition, asylum petitions in Mexico have exponentially increased between 2013 and 2021 from 1,524 to 123,187 cases.² (nearly 39% are women) (COMAR, 2018; 2021). In 2019, Mexico's current administration under Andrés Manuel López Obrador announced a policy of 'regular, orderly and safe migration' parallel to the Global Compact for Migration and the alleged human rights and gender approach of the Law on Migration³ and the Law on Refugees,

¹ This programme started in January 2019. It requires migrants seeking asylum in the USA to remain in Mexico until their US immigration court date. Between March 2019 and January 2021, a total of 71,071 cases of people participating in this program were reported (Syracuse University, 2021).

² Total of cases reported between January and November 2021.

³ Article 2 of the Migration Law includes the gender perspective within the principles of migration policy, and Article 30 of the Law provides for the coordination of inter-institutional actions with *INMUJERES* [National Institute for Women], especially in the area of gender equality training. Furthermore, articles 225 and 226 of the Regulations of the Migration Law stipulate that the human rights of all persons shall be respected in migration stations and that no discrimination based on gender shall be allowed. Furthermore, article 230 of the Regulations stipulates the adoption of protective measures for migrant women, especially pregnant women, such as, for example, giving priority to their stay in specialised institutions; and Article

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Complementary Protection, and Political Asylum, both framed in the 2011 Constitutional reform on human rights. However, criminalisation of migration and immigration controls along national territory and particularly at the southern border, implemented more than ten years ago, have recently been reinforced with the increasing participation of the National Guard in migratory control operations, resulting in further violations of migrants' human rights. Between January and October 2021, the *Instituto Nacional de Migración* [National Institute of Migration] (INM) reported 228,115 detentions and 82,627 deportations (84.4% and 96.4% from Central American countries, respectively). In this period, 54,344 women from Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, and Nicaragua were taken to immigration detention centres.

Based on an ethnographic approach, this article presents the results of a study conducted at Mexico's southern border from 2017 to 2019, specifically at the *Estación Migratoria Siglo XXI* [XXI Century Immigration Station], one of the biggest and most important detention centres in the country with a capacity of nearly 960 irregular immigrants. The project included participant observation and in-depth interviews with (active and former) immigration agents and officers, immigrants, governmental officials, staff from international organisations, and NGOs.⁴ As the researcher, I paid intermittent visits to the *Estación Migratoria Siglo XXI* in Tapachula, Chiapas, and I interviewed immigrants at this place who had been previously detained and at the time of the interview were asylum seekers assisted by NGOs. I could not interview senior officers of the *Instituto Nacional de Migración*, and the active agents I talked to were cautious with the information they shared. The most thorough interviews were with former immigration agents. I present testimonies obtained in fieldwork with migrants in detention and retired and active immigration agents throughout the text. My focus was to understand the scope of immigration agents' subjectivities in the enforcement of immigration policy within the management of a detention centre.

In this article, I will analyse the functioning of an immigration detention centre as a *total institution* where street-level bureaucrats enforce practices of biopolitics through daily deprivation of access to vital resources and the protection of the law. Furthermore, I depict how women are treated within a detention centre and provide an explanation focusing on gendered power relations and practices of disgust and contempt by the *Instituto Nacional de Migración*, a State-organised institution in the hands of street-level local bureaucrats who work in precarious conditions. Finally, I am interested in demonstrating the dehumanisation practices in immigration detention that are deployed as a deterrence policy through the case of the operation of the immigration detention centre called *Estación Migratoria Siglo XXI*.

The study took place in the context of a humanitarian border (Dijstelbloem and van der Veer, 2019), a concept that describes an increasingly common border area that is characterised by the presence of a diversity of state actors, international organisations, civil society organisations, and local actors that simultaneously exercise a policy of control or security actions and humanitarian aid. It is a phenomenon observed in many countries receiving forced migration. It illustrates the constant tension between deterrent and restrictive migration policies versus the mandatory principles of governments to comply with international protection measures. The American-Canadian scholar of international refugee law James Hathaway explains that:

[...] restricting the mobility of refugees by detention or similar practices (often accompanied by other harsh treatment post-arrival) is seen as a second-best means for a State to send a signal that they are not open to the arrival of refugees (2016: 95).

Such is the case for Mexico, a nation state that employs detention and deportation of refugees and asylum seekers as a strategy to avoid international protection compliance.

The article is divided into four parts. First, is presented the context of forced migration and particular risks experienced by Central American women arriving in Mexico; second, will be discussed detention as a biopolitical practice (Foucault, 2009) embedded in immigration regimes, particularly in a migration prison that functions as a *total institution* (Goffman, 2011) with the aim of dehumanising and criminalising female immigrants who experience unhealthy and repugnant conditions during detention. Later, based on Wendy Brown's feminist critique of the State (2019), is presented some critical findings on power, gender relations, and daily practices of mistreatment among agents and between agents and immigrant women at the *Estación Migratoria Siglo XXI*. Finally, the article concludes with remarks on the patriarchal State and its masculine forms of power and biopolitics.

144 stipulates the regularisation of the migration status of pregnant women when their degree of vulnerability does not allow them to be deported. Moreover, Article 2 of the Planning Law stipulates that the federal public administration must be carried out with an intercultural and gender perspective.

⁴ I carried out 14 interviews and participant observations at the offices of the National Immigration Institute in Tapachula, Mexico City, and Tijuana; more than 30 interviews with migrants in detention, three interviews with former public officials, six interviews with staff from different agencies, such as *Comisión Mexicana de Ayuda a Refugiados* [Mexican Commission for Refugees], *Comisión Nacional de Derechos Humanos* [National Commission for Human Rights], *Comisión Estatal de Derechos Humanos de Chiapas* [Chiapas State Commission of Human Rights], and Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

MEXICO: AN UNDESIREDESTINATION COUNTRY FOR MIGRANT WOMEN

Displaced people and asylum seekers from Central America flee from poverty, criminal violence, climate change, and natural disasters. In addition, nation state-based violence and gender-based violence encountered in domestic and community settings, including femicides (Varela, 2017), make Central American women seek asylum in Mexico or the United States. The *Encuesta Nacional de Personas Migrantes en Tránsito por México* [National Survey of Migrants in Transit Through Mexico] (UNAM, 2017) shows that in 2016, the main reasons for migrating to Mexico provided by women coming from Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala were lack of safety and violence (46%), followed by financial reasons (32%); the figures are reversed for men. Because they are more exposed to sexual violence, eight of ten women reported having left their country accompanied. In addition, it is pretty standard for women to hire the services of a *coyote* or smuggler and then be abandoned on the route, which poses more significant risks, such as becoming victims of human trafficking.

Consequently, women use different strategies for safer travel; generally, they opt to hire the services of a smuggler, obtain false documents, travel by highways instead of by train ('La Bestia'), and stay in hotels rather than shelters (Díaz Prieto and Kuhner, 2015). The strategy of traveling by highway usually means the women being subject to extortion by Mexican authorities and sexual violence. 'If the aim is to avoid checkpoints along the highways, women must use even more sub rosa travel strategies which imply other risks, such as sexual violence, kidnapping, issues associated with human smuggling and trafficking' (Díaz Prieto and Kuhner, 2015: 25). In turn, the fact that women decide not to board the train, considering the proximity of the shelters to the railroad, results in few women visiting the migrant shelters. In southern Mexico, the percentage of female shelter users in 2011 oscillated between 10 and 15%, which decreased in central and northern regions. The situation generates an underrepresentation of data about migrant women because most of the surveys are carried out along traditional migrant routes, which are riskier spaces for women.

The 2018 and 2019 migrant caravans were used as strategies predominantly by the most vulnerable groups, such as women traveling alone or with their children, unaccompanied children and adolescents, people with disabilities, seniors, and individuals living in such extreme poverty that, despite urgently needing to leave their points of origin, they lacked the resources to pay transportation costs. Their power focused on giving a mass protection (the biggest caravans were 3,000 to 13,000 people) to the high risks (kidnapping, sexual violence, extortion, and murder) experienced by migrants in transit through Mexico (Gandini, Fernández de la Reguera, and Narváez, 2020).

Migrants, especially women, encounter different obstacles when reporting and denouncing the violence they experienced before leaving their country and in Mexico as a transit or destination point (Human Rights Center, UC Berkeley School of Law, UNHCR, and Regional Safe Spaces Network, 2018). The main issues expressed when reporting violence are cultural norms and social stigmatisation, normalisation of violence at both the point of origin and the southern Mexican border, violence-associated trauma, not enough time to file a report because they need to keep on traveling, lack of awareness of their rights and services available, fear, especially when the perpetrators are police officers, the National Guard or immigration agents, or if they believe filing the report might affect their asylum petition, and perceived low capacity response of assistance providers to victims of violence.

In 2018, the Committee of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) issued specific recommendations to the Mexican Government concerning the violence experienced by female migrants in Mexico. The CEDAW Committee was concerned mainly about: the risks faced by female migrants because of the automatic detention policy outlined in the Migration Law; barriers for requesting asylum; partial implementation of the Detention Alternative Program; obstacles for accessing health services, housing, and employment by female asylum seekers and refugees; and the effective investigation of the forced disappearance of female migrants (CEDAW, 2018).

IMMIGRATION DETENTION: A TOTAL INSTITUTION RUN BY STREET-LEVEL BUREAUCRATS

Judith Butler (2016) reflects on the existence of grievable lives compared to other lives lost that do not matter. She asks which lives are worth saving and defending and which are not. Taking the vulnerability of all bodies as the starting point and their relationship and dependence on existing social and institutional conditions to persist, some bodies are more injured than others. There are bodies for which we feel responsible and other bodies utterly alien to us, whose rejection and oversight are reinforced through interpretative acts and affective responses: 'the interpretation does not arise as a spontaneous act of the mind but as a consequence of certain intelligibility field that helps shape and frame our capacity to respond to the world [...]' (Butler, 2016: 59). Migrants, and asylum seekers in particular, from hazardous environments co-opted by criminal violence and poverty, such as Central

Americans going to Mexico, represent the bodies that do not matter and the lives that neither the State of origin nor the receptor deems worthy of saving or defending.

According to the Global Detention Project⁵, Mexico has one of the largest immigration detention systems in the world, with some 60 immigration detention centres (30 immigration stations and 24 temporary detention facilities) (Global Detention, 2021), most were installed between 2000 and 2010. Following Article 3 of the 2011 Mexican Migration Law, an immigration station⁶ is a physical facility established by the *Instituto Nacional de Migración* to ‘temporarily host foreigners that fail to prove regular migratory status, until their migratory situation is resolved’. These centres operate in a very similar way to prisons and refugee camps. A typical situation observed during fieldwork was the enforcement of Article 111 of the Mexican Migration Law, which states that when migrating individuals file an administrative or legal recourse claiming issues inherent to their immigration status on national territory, the 15-day immigration detention limit can be exceeded, which in practice can result in detentions of up to ten months. It means that individuals who file a legal or administrative petition (usually represented by attorneys) must accept indefinite detention⁷ which leaves them highly vulnerable to human rights violations.

In the so-called immigration stations, migrants who have entered Mexico irregularly are detained, which under Mexican law is not a crime but an administrative offense. There are two main groups in these prisons: irregular migrants waiting for deportation and asylum seekers, and even documented cases of refugees who have been taken to detention centres. Moreover, until December 2020, an essential legal reform was put in place to prohibit the detention of minors. Still, before that, the arrest of children and adolescents with or without their families was a common practice.

The testimonials collected during the fieldwork show that on many occasions the temporary detention⁸ of foreigners at the *Estación Migratoria Siglo XXI* implies violent punishment and, in some cases, even torture (GICDMT, 2018). This place is representative because it receives detained migrants from all over the country to be deported through the southern border of Mexico and functions as the articulating axis of the extended detention practices in the entire State of Chiapas, where about 44% of all detentions in Mexico take place. It operates according to what Erving Goffman (2001), an American sociologist, calls a *total institution*: a social space that absorbs individuals not just in terms of time and rules but to create a world of their own for the detainees. It is a type of institution that intends to protect a community from a group that represents potential danger, in this case, irregular migrants stigmatised as criminals and sick people (Fernández de la Reguera, 2020). This theory prioritises the micro-social approach to analyse the functioning of the state-organised institutions that reproduce street-level bureaucrats’ precarious working conditions and hire unqualified people as first respondents. Two antagonistic groups organise a *total institution*: the detainees and the custodians, and each group holds strong stereotypes of, and is often hostile to, the other. He studies the systematic management of populations in everyday interactions so that subjectivities are shaped and subjected to institutional regimes that function through the antagonism of divided and classified spaces.

In parallel to Goffman’s theory of *total institutions*, French philosopher Michel Foucault’s analysis of architectural devices, disciplinary regulations, and internal organisation of liberty-deprivation spaces is the basis for studying the micro-power relationships taking place in daily interactions between immigration agents and detainees. Immigration detention serves, according to Foucault’s concept of *dispositif* or a network of discursive and non-discursive elements, including laws, institutions, and infrastructure to maintain power (Estevez, 2022). In these places,

... all who held a measure of authority are placed in a state of perpetual alert, which the dispositions, the precautions taken, the interplay of punishments and responsibilities never ceased to reiterate (Foucault, 2000: 38).

The disciplined subjects in a *total institution* are classified as normal or deviants. This classification (agents/national security safeguards vs. migrants/criminals) creates a dichotomic normative structure that works under exceptionality so that street-level bureaucrats can discretionally violate the human rights of the deviants through practices of exclusion, discrimination, racism, and social injustice (Fernández de la Reguera, 2020).

⁵ The Global Detention Project is a non-profit organisation based in Geneva that promotes the human rights of people who have been detained for reasons related to their non-citizen status. For more information visit <http://www.globaldetentionproject.org>.

⁶ In this article, I use the terms immigration station, detention centre, and migrant prison interchangeably because immigration stations function as prisons in practical terms.

⁷ Indefinite detention is strictly forbidden by both international and national law. Art. 111 indicates that Mexican immigration laws seem to be based on international human rights standards but not entirely. In second paragraphs or provisions regulating procedural operations, the fundamental norms and principles of the rule of law are infringed upon.

⁸ Under the Mexican Immigration Law, immigration detention should not last more than 15 days, except in some instances where it may be extended to 60 days. However, I have documented cases of individuals detained for ten months.

Once the inmate is admitted to these institutions, she faces '[...] a series of depressions, degradations, humiliations, and profanations of the self' (Goffman, 2001: 27). During the detention process, it is common for immigration authorities to omit actions that ensure that the detained migrant individuals, particularly women, can exercise their right to due process by receiving timely information, petitioning for asylum, and contacting civil society organisations that offer psycho-legal assistance. For Goffman (2001), admission to a *total institution* definitively breaks with the social roles of the subjects since the separation between the inmate and the world lasts all day long. It is common to prohibit the privilege of receiving visits or contact with the outside world, ensuring isolation and stripping the inmate's social role.

A former female immigration officer explained the following:

I saw abuse from immigration agents, as they'd said: "Today, you will not sleep, I will not give you a blanket" Why? Just because; "You are not having breakfast today because breakfast was at 9:30 and it's now 9:35, so you can't come in"; "You don't watch T.V. today"; "You don't speak with your family today"; "You don't have the right to a phone call today"; "You can't see your family today". Migrants are the most vulnerable (former female INM officer, 37 years old).

Upon entering a *total institution*, the person is stripped of her usual appearance, thus suffering a personal deconfiguration. 'Clothes, combs, thread and needle, cosmetics, towels, soap, shaving razors, toiletries, all of these can be taken away or denied' (Goffman, 2011: 32). Women in detention tend to suffer more psychological than physical violence, especially as they are caregivers of their children and endure the lack of medicines, healthy food, clean toilets, access to diapers and sanitary pads (Abji and Larios, 2021). The *Estación Migratoria Siglo XXI* is generally overcrowded, in unsanitary conditions and substandard nutrition, all of which are elements that sustain a *total institution*.

They give us – women – almost nothing for personal care, for shaving, things like that; they don't allow any of that. So, for example, I never combed my hair in the 17 days I was there; they don't even let in a comb (Honduran woman in immigration detention, 23 years old).

Moreover, one of the essential characteristics for the functioning of a *total institution* is the lack of access to information on individuals' most fundamental rights and the facilities' rules. For example, the Mexican National Human Rights Commission published a Special Report about immigration stations in Mexico, stating that inside the facilities:

[...] In common areas, where migrants can talk and reflect on their immigration status, there is no visible information about their rights during detention, no telephone numbers of institutions that could help them, they are not aware of the requirements to regularize their immigration status, neither the requirements for applying for refugee status or asylum in Mexico, because that information is available exclusively in areas leading to the offices, therefore, migrants can only see it as they enter the Immigration Station or Provisional Stay Facility (2019: 227).

To understand immigration detention as a biopolitical *dispositif* of the State to decide on the life and death of subjects, it is necessary to analyse the functioning of the *Estación Migratoria Siglo XXI* within an institutional culture of military order in coexistence with precarious working conditions of street-level bureaucrats. Three profiles of people work in this place. On the one hand, there are the agents of the *Instituto Nacional de Migración* who are in charge of the enforcement of immigration policies and the administration of detention centres, in addition, there is the Federal Police, and finally, the custodians from private companies hired for the close and permanent surveillance of immigrants. All of them usually have low salaries and poor-quality training. On the other hand, the immigration detention system is structured in hierarchies and procedures. It disciplines bureaucratic personnel. In turn, street-level bureaucrats punish migrants; at times, they may infantilise or humiliate to dehumanise them. Just as in a military hierarchy, immigration bureaucracy depersonalises, depoliticises, and wears down its members in a vertical structure where there is always someone lower down to mistreat.

When I was trying to do my job, my boss would come to me and say: "You're an asshole. Why are you getting involved in things that don't concern you?" (Former immigration female agent).

In turn, labour precariousness and the depersonalisation of bureaucracies impact daily work and the implementation of the migration policy of dissuasion and criminalisation of migrants. Moreover, immigration detention procedures usually function under the rule of exception where immigration bureaucrats, using ambiguity and discretionary power, suspend or apply the norm based on whether or not it suits the dehumanisation intention. In other words, law enforcement is produced by the non-application of the norm through a legal loophole.

As public servants, they have an obligation and have to comply with that obligation. There have been several cases where federal migration agents are in judicial proceedings because they extrapolated in their functions. After all, another public servant in higher command told them, “You sign here”. (National Human Rights Commission official).

It is tough for us, and that is what the Government does not see. They say: “There is a lot of corruption”. It is true, there is corruption, but people have to eat, they have families, and it is not enough (immigration female agent, 37 years old).

A report published by the *Consejo Ciudadano del Instituto Nacional de Migración* [National Citizen Council of the National Migration Institute], confirms, after reviewing more than one hundred records at different Immigration Stations, that despite differences in the volume of cases managed at INM delegations, the average review time of the cases is 55 minutes from their filing to their final resolution. The speed proves that detained migrants would find it difficult to access accurate information and file any legal recourse to avoid deportation.

In the files reviewed, we did not find, neither content nor justification, of any assessment that makes it possible to find out, at the time of repatriation, why the return or deportation was applied (Consejo Ciudadano del Instituto Nacional de Migración, 2017: 82).

Indifference, negligence, and mistreatment are everyday practices at different management levels in immigration detention places. Bureaucracy works under particular rules; most common is technical language, division of tasks, and responsibilities, so there is no comprehensive knowledge of processes. Only when the offices are understaffed a single immigration agent oversees detentions, records, interviews, and deportations. Usually, tasks are assigned using a vertical organisational structure, where each bureaucrat follows the orders of their immediate superior. Power relations among INM personnel are established by the position of individuals within the organisation, by gender, age, social class, and ethnicity.

The *Instituto Nacional de Migración* functions as a social space that, following a hetero-patriarchal logic, generates regulated, subordinated, and disciplined subjects which reproduces hetero-patriarchal relations with migrants as part of the bureaucratic machinery (Fernández de la Reguera, 2020). This order is not reflected merely in relations with migrants but in the development of the INM’s work itself, the procedures, infrastructure, and relationships among bureaucrats (Ferguson, 1984). Individuals at lower organisational levels are usually subordinated and even mistreated by their superiors. The following testimonials come from former INM agents who shared their experiences of mistreatment at work and burnout.

Shortly before leaving the INM, I felt that my hands were tied. My boss would say: “You’re a moron/asshole”, “Keep your nose out of it; it’s none of your business”. So, it wreaked havoc on me, too (former female INM agent, 27 years old).

Many of those stories about inequality were repeated inside because these are people with very little education, not much understanding of which was their actual job. At the instant, they get a taste of power when a person is detained and under their care; they abuse them in any way possible (former female INM officer, 37 years old).

During my research, I observed that INM female agents work in conditions unequal to those of their male counterparts because, as migrant women, they are also caregivers, many of them single mothers. The work hours and type of work are also strenuous and stressful. Just as I documented cases of migrant women who stopped menstruating throughout their detention because of stress, I also met a former immigration agent whose menstruation stopped for three months due to work-related stress.

It would never compare with what I lived in INM, I mean, the emotional pain. I got gastritis, and my body was affected; I stopped menstruating for 3 or 4 months (former female INM agent, 27 years old).

At the *Iztapalapa* station, there was a woman whose shift ended at 3 in the afternoon, and she would run home to make food for her three children because her husband was useless (former female INM officer, 37 years old).

It’s tough because I’m not from here; I moved to Mexico City. My job gets very complicated because of the schedules with my daughters; I don’t have anyone to help me care for them. I want to change my plan; supposedly, my shift is until six in the afternoon, but I never get out at that time. My girls come in the afternoons when there is no one here. Sometimes, it is midnight, and they are just finishing their homework, then going to sleep, and then getting up early again (female INM agent, 42 years old).

Women security guards are being moved to other stations; one guard had been there for more than two months. One time, my child fell and hit his forehead. She (the guard) started crying because he reminded her of her children. She hadn't seen her children for more than two months; she lived four hours away from that place and couldn't see her children; she didn't have enough time. And with such low salary they were paying, she couldn't make it (woman from Honduras in immigration detention, 23 years old).

IMMIGRATION DETENTION AND PRACTICES OF DISGUST AND CONTEMPT

'Dirt offends against order' is a well-known quote by Mary Douglas (1973), a British anthropologist, to point out the instrumental effects of the ideas of pollution; that is, how they affect people's behaviour and, in turn, the symbolic power of the relationship between the object or polluting object and the risk of being polluted in a specific social order. The immigration deterrence, control, and detention policy at the Mexico-Guatemala border reveal how the criminalisation and stigmatisation of migrants as criminals, sick, and dirty individuals offend the alleged immigration-control order. The discursive and symbolic associations between pollution and immigrants subject them to a system of exclusion and human rights violations.

As shown, the exclusionary and racist practices that occur daily between a local agent and a migrant person reveal body disciplining techniques and dehumanising aspects of institutional control such as the imposition of non-privacy unsanitary conditions that dehumanise the subjects. Based on Cameroonian philosopher Achille Mbembe's concept of necropolitics as the sovereign capacity to dictate who can live and who can die, the Mexican State enforces necropolitical practices by maintaining State-organised immigration detention centres. 'To exercise sovereignty is to exercise control over mortality and to define life as the deployment and manifestation of power' (Mbembe, 2003: 11). One of the questions posed by Mbembe is: How are life, death, and the human body inscribed in the order of power? There is an instrumental use of power to determine human existence and the material destruction of those bodies, for which Butler (2016) calls for dignity and shared responsibilities. According to Mbembe, 'Letting die' means restricting access to healthcare, safety, justice, and due process.

Adam Ramadan, a British geographer, describes refugee camps as places that are:

[...] under-protected, vilified and hated by some, always at risk of attack and erasure. They are marginalized, poor, overcrowded, often filthy and unhealthy places to live (2013: 67).

While there are some generalised hostile practices during detention for both men and women, such as the impossibility of making a phone call, lack of information, and access to legal counsel, women suffer even more from the material conditions of housing and access to health services. Lack of privacy and deprivation of essential services mainly affect women.

A specific finding of this research is the practices of contempt and humiliation toward migrants extending the social distance between immigration agents and migrants through disgust; that is, immigration detention generates unhealthy conditions, and individuals are punished by limiting their access to water, bathrooms, ventilation, privacy, forcing them to sleep in overcrowded conditions on dirty and bug-ridden mats. Migrants, in turn, experience unhealthy conditions and disgust as a form of punishment. They feel punished as they cannot wash, shave, and have to sleep, urinate and defecate in such filthy places.

The *Estación Migratoria Siglo XXI* deploys a technological infrastructure for immigration control and good facilities. However, according to Goffman (2001), in *total institutions* there is a clear difference between the spaces occupied by detainees and guards. In this case, there is an excellent contrast between the material and hygienic conditions in both spaces. The official argument for some of the material deprivations and low maintenance of the facilities are underfunding, lack of personnel, and in the case of poor-quality food, the hiring of private companies to provide this service. However, I observed some intentional forms of mistreatment practices, such as the case of a urinating bucket in the entrance hall of the men's area. Moreover, the place is on the coast of Chiapas, a scorching location where it is necessary to fumigate the facilities regularly. Unfortunately, in 2019 fumigation was temporarily suspended due to a budget cutback, generating a plague of insects inside the facilities.

The people there half wash themselves, splash some water on, and then put on the same clothes (Honduran woman in immigration detention, 27 years old).

Disgust is an emotion that, from a moral, cultural, social, and subjective standpoint, justifies contempt (Nussbaum, 2004), as it can become internalised as a survival emotion, which hinders the process of reflection, generating instead an immediate and visceral reaction to the object and subject considered polluting. Immigration Stations generate:

[...] a necessary form of social prophylaxis; that is, interventions fundamentally concerning the health, the security/safety and in some cases even the ‘improvement’ of the social and political body of the nation (Minca, 2015: 76).

Migrants are conceived by the State as threats to security, economy, and health. Furthermore, disgust creates social and political distance; it makes people/observers believe that they are morally superior to those considered pollutants (Miller, 1998). ‘It legitimizes the ‘affective’ rejection of the lower classes for carrying dirt, ugliness, and evil under a biologist racist-naturalist logic’ (Asselborn, 2012: 26). Migrants are considered health risks to the destination countries because of the widespread belief that they come from unhealthy places and perform tasks that put their health at risk (Round and Kuznetsova, 2016), a situation that the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated.

Reports from civil society organisations, CNDH [National Human Rights Commission], and the INM’s *Consejo Ciudadano* [Citizen Council] show that unsanitary conditions at immigration stations cause constant suffering and deprivation. They report lack of water, overcrowding, infestations, limited access to cleaning kits; women are provided with one sanitary pad a day, and one diaper a day for babies (Comisión Nacional de los Derechos Humanos, 2019; Consejo Ciudadano del Instituto Nacional de Migración, 2017; Fernández de la Reguera, 2020; Macías Delgadillo *et al.*, 2013). Most of the migrant women interviewed while in immigration detention have had some ailment, especially gastrointestinal illnesses, skin conditions, or respiratory problems. It is common for them to become ill while in custody, whether because of high daytime temperature and low night-time temperature, lack of enough blankets, food quality, and unsanitary conditions of the spaces they inhabit in detention centres.

We just looked at the pile of mats, and as we grabbed one mat, they stank so badly. They were full of lice, urine, everything! I mean, it stank, and the foul smell was noticeable because they were all piled up. Later, we saw that there were rats there. There were giant rats on top of the mats, and well, we couldn’t sleep at all that night (woman from El Salvador in immigration detention, 23 years old).

My daughter got diarrhoea, and I kept asking for diapers. The agent answered: “Didn’t I just give you one? I already gave you one”. I said: “Yes, I have a sick child” (Guatemalan woman in immigration detention, 21 years old).

When I saw the officer coming with gloves and a mask, I was like [...] What do these people have? Why do they come, like this, with disgust? When she opened the cell, she brought the food with disgust looking at these people (woman from Honduras, 25 years old).

What is the function of disgust in this place? It is an emotion that triggers the power device that despises and humiliates migrants viewed as polluting beings, thus, facilitating discrimination and dehumanisation. According to Martha Nussbaum,

[...] most societies teach the avoidance of certain groups of people as physically disgusting, bearers of a contamination that the healthy element of society must keep away (2004: 72).

The State, through public discourse and practices, conveys messages regarding who should be considered carriers of contamination, which includes migrants.

GENDER INEQUALITIES IN IMMIGRATION DETENTION AND THE PATRIARCHAL STATE

The nation state, naturally, is a geo-political institution permeated by gender (state elites are normally comprised mainly by men) and performs activities associated with regulating gender relations, such as maintaining a gender division of labour, control over sexuality, reproduction technologies, and holding the life cycle at different levels and institutions of social life and public life. ‘The patriarchal state can be seen, then, not as the manifestation of a patriarchal essence, but as the center of a reverberating set of power relations and political processes in which patriarchy is both constructed and contested’ (Connell, 1987: 130). Critical feminist perspectives are essential to map intimacy and everyday practices of exclusion in state institutions; its analytical focus includes geography and historicisation to understand struggles and structural injustices (Mountz, 2011).

In this case study, I studied gender-regime functioning in street-level bureaucracies, especially in *Estación Migratoria Siglo XXI* which revealed a profound intersectional discriminatory system based on gender, ethnicity, age, and nationality. Upon arrival to immigration stations, women usually need specialised services and trained personnel to help them. It generally does not happen, for one reason due to the lack of training of INM personnel,

negligence, and the lack of budget. All of these deprivations are reinforced by the enormous social and moral distance between migratory agents and migrants. Women migrate with far fewer resources (of all types) than men: less money, less information, less access to a Smartphone, support networks, and scant or no documents to prove well-founded fear in asylum processes. Further, they are more exposed to sexual violence during the migratory transit; moreover, they migrate as caregivers for their children, nephews, nieces, or other dependents. Gender-based risks and the sexual division of labour lead to vast differences in detention processing and adequate access to international protection (Esposito *et al.*, 2019):

If they (female guards) see a woman alone who will not defend herself, they attack you and humiliate you. This is because they know which person will stand up for herself, which person will file a complaint with Human Rights, and which people will not (woman from El Salvador in immigration detention, 27 years old).

I met underage girls alone; there were many of them. When I interviewed them, they would say: "It's just that I don't know, officer, I just don't know". I would ask: "But, when did you leave your country of origin?" They answered: "I don't know; I don't remember. "To which city in the United States were you going?" They answered: "I don't know; my dad knows" or "My boyfriend knows". They knew nothing else (former INM female agent, 27 years old)

The feminist critical theory of the liberal, capitalist, and bureaucratic nation state identifies the masculinist elements of the State as power devices and forms of privilege rooted in male domination, not only exercised by men (Brown, 2019). The U.S. philosopher and political scientist Wendy Brown argues that women are justified to mistrust State protection policies. As a starting point of the notion that women need male protection, which has functioned as a basis for excluding women from public life, there is also a symbolic relationship that associates femininity with privileged classes, such as white women's 'daintiness'. Brown shows that state protection policies reinforce a division and classification of women by setting apart those who are constructed as vulnerable and needing protection (the good and feminine women) from those that supposedly generate their own helpless condition (the sex workers, the non-feminine women); that is, they are invulnerable because of their sexual availability. According to Brown:

Protection codes are therefore key technologies in regulating privileged women, as well as intensifying the vulnerability and degradation of those on the unprotected side of the constructed divide between light and dark, the wives from the prostitutes, good girls from bad ones (2019: 305).

Protection from the state is not available for black, poor, migrant women. Immigration agents or guards are not the only ones engaging in human rights violations. There is a strong connection between the power wielded by security forces and immigration bureaucrats and the power exercised by medical staff who care for migrant women inside and outside the *Estación Migratoria Siglo XXI*. It is not related to underfunding but to structural and cultural violence (Galtung, 1969; 1996) in providing medical services. There is an explicit and implicit collaboration of many sorts. Rodrigo Parrini (2015), Chilean anthropologist, explains complex forms of governability that exercise power over migrant populations through scientific-technical devices and interventions at the southern Mexican border. In Tenosique, Tabasco, a scenario quite similar to that of Tapachula, Chiapas, Parrini analysed the role of medical devices in migration governance in what he calls zones of abandonment, characterised by legal regulations mixed with biopolitical rules. "The policeman, let's say, is the shadow of the physician and vice-versa" (Parrini, 2015: 115). These zones are shown in the testimonies of migrant women who require medical services, both in and out of detention. During the interviews, a former INM female agent explained that in immigration detention centres, there is usually no proper medical follow-up, gynaecological check-ups, pregnancy tests, - not even for raped women who arrived at the station already pregnant. The following are testimonies of detained women at *Estación Migratoria Siglo XXI*:

When we went in to see the doctor, from the moment one goes in, well, one has the right to be examined by the doctor. But the doctor didn't check me at all, nor my children; he didn't check them at all; he asked me only: "Were you raped?" "Have you had surgery?" "How did you give birth?" (woman from El Salvador in immigration detention, 25 years old).

The only thing the doctor said was: "You will be deported; you are going back to Honduras". And I said to him: "Why if we are refugees? I will fight, so UNHCR hears my case". But he said: "You are going to Honduras again". So a pedantic doctor made us afraid (migrant woman from Honduras in immigration detention, 23 years old).

I had an emergency with my babies, and it was terrible! They would only latch the door the first few days but didn't use a lock. At night, they fill the place with people, with women, mats, and we were left locked in the cells. Just before they released us, my baby became very ill. I don't know if it was congestion; I don't know what happened; he started vomiting all night, vomiting and vomiting, and high fever. I started yelling for the officers. You can hear everything in there; impossible for them not to listen to me. No one came. I was scared. After all, I didn't know what to do because I wanted to take my child to the doctor. My baby was throwing up, and with fever, he had a fever all night long (woman from El Salvador in immigration detention, 28 years old).

Usually, the women who reach immigration detention centres lack access to any kind of psychological care. Further, their mental health often deteriorates because of several factors, such as uncertainty and misinformation about why they were detained, lack of supporting documents for their asylum petition, insufficient control over their records; as, regularly, when they migrate as a family, the authorities themselves prioritise dealing with and interviewing their partners. Another common issue is the precarious shelter conditions and problems they face to meet their children's basic needs (good nutrition, rest, clean water, and requirements to maintain minimal hygiene). As a result, the research documented many cases of women with mental health problems, evidently displaying symptoms of mainly anxiety and post-traumatic stress.

The abuse from authorities experienced by women in detention is closely related to their caregiver role. Unlike men, who share other forms of institutional violence stemming from their interaction with other migrants (threats or physical violence), and indifference from authorities; or, for example, as a result of being forced to sell cigarettes or lack of access to information—the women face psychological violence by not having assistance to care for their children and limited material conditions in detention. Women commonly migrate as caregivers, whether traveling with their children, nephews, nieces, or dependent individuals, or have left their children and parents behind in their places of origin. As single mothers, they migrate as providers and often and foremost flee domestic and community violence in their countries of origin. Yet, once in Mexico, they face a *continuum* of violence perpetrated by the State:

I had an incident with an officer who got angry because of my children. She told me that she would lock me up day and night and would keep me locked up in my cell, my children, and me because, she said, they were hyperactive (Honduran migrant woman in immigration detention, 23 years old).

When we got here, everything was very different; we were imprisoned. When they moved us, they took everything away. They only left me with a few of my baby's things. I have two babies! I needed their bottles, milk, clothes. I changed their clothes in the day and at night, and if they got dirty during the day, then I changed them again (woman from Honduras in immigration detention, 23 years old)

Such testimonies can demonstrate that cross-cutting gender perspectives through public policies are inadequate, especially in institutions that, in theory, should serve vulnerable populations, such as migrant women, LGBT+ migrants, accompanied or unaccompanied migrant children and adolescents. The *Instituto Nacional de Migración* has adopted the inclusion of gender perspectives through two main mechanisms: by primarily online training for a maximum of 40 hours, and hiring female agents to do immigration verification and regulation when dealing with any female and infant subjects. The lack of professional training in gender awareness results in the re-victimisation of migrants, poor handling of cases, and the impossibility of identifying additional risks and activating protection mechanisms.

Women are re-victimized every time they speak with them. They are asked: "Were you raped? Oh hon, but why?" Many immigration agents are older women who have no clue what their job is, what it's like to be there, and what migrants are going through (former female INM officer).

To be an OPI agent [Childhood Protection Officer], they just train you; you aren't a college grad with pedagogical skills or some knowledge of psychology or something to do with children. Instead, you are a random guy who finished high school and, by sheer luck, work in an immigration station because there was an opening position (former female INM officer).

Most, if not all, field agents are men. So, I had to go in deportations that included a woman or a gay person on the bus. I remember a man who classified himself as a woman; he said he was a girl. They sent me along because homosexuals couldn't ride with only men, so a woman has to go because this person is classified as a woman and must be treated accordingly (former female INM agent).

The lack of awareness of gender perspectives reinforces inequalities within the institution's bureaucracy and directly degrades the care provided to migrant women and the LGBT+ population. Even though the Migration Law and its regulations establish the obligation of the INM to apply NOM 046, which is the Official Mexican Norm to address family and sexual violence and violence against women, the protocols to implement it are not adequately carried out. The protocols are not properly applied within the migratory stations, and as in other cases, NOM 046 enforcement is limited to the discretion of the bureaucrat on duty.

One of the interviews documents the testimonial of a former INM officer who described the case of a 24-year-old Japanese woman married to a Mexican man who used to lock her in their house, would not let her get a job, beat her, and forced her to have sex. She arrived at the Mexico City immigration station because her mother-in-law had reported a 'Japanese woman working illegally'. The woman spoke a little Spanish but could communicate very well, as she also spoke some English. However, INM agents argued that they did not understand her, which was why they had not provided the necessary services.

There are many other similar cases of women without access to translation services who are left exposed to greater violence or life-threatening deportation. It is common for immigration authorities not to ask migrant women in detention if they have been victims of gender-based violence or of any crime in Mexican territory. If they were, it generates an obligation on the Mexican Government to grant them a visa for humanitarian reasons, a form of immigration regulation. Throughout my research, I have documented many cases of women who have been physically and sexually assaulted by various actors in national territory who are not identified as victims of the crime.

Gender inequality permeates the entire institution from the top levels of management to the migrants. In addition, the labour burnout resulting from the poor working conditions, endless overtime, inadequate training in gender and human rights, and mistreatment by superiors, facilitates INM personnel to replicate forms of abuse, contempt, and humiliation towards migrants. All of this adds up to an increasingly present context of xenophobia.

CONCLUSION

In a migratory scenario characterised by forced displacements and increasing barriers to access the right to asylum in receiving countries, disgust functions as a mechanism that dehumanises migrants, further widening the social, moral, and political gap between the State and its obligations to guarantee the protection of the human rights of migrants and asylum seekers. This ethnographic research demonstrates that despite the existence of a Migration Law that stipulates non-discrimination and special measures to protect vulnerable groups, especially pregnant women, detention processes regularly dehumanise and break people physically and psychically as an effective form of deterrence.

Through different complex and heterogeneous mechanisms and devices of masculinised power, the hetero-patriarchal nation state ranks populations, defines the bodies worthy of living and bodies it lets die; defines sick and contaminating bodies, bodies predestined to sexual violence and abuse of power. These are the bodies of migrants, women, children, adolescents, transgender women and men, seniors, disabled individuals, infants born in transit or immigration detention. Mexico is one of the countries with the most immigration detention centres in Latin America; in 2019, there are 60 centres, plus those added on a temporary or provisional basis as part of a strategy for the militarisation of immigration controls enforced in 2019.

Immigration bureaucracy works within a global system that depersonalises and depoliticizes its personnel. Women and men are subordinated to their superiors, are themselves excluded and racialised. In turn, they are able to mistreat and abuse migrants because they work in isolated locations, in conditions of exceptionality, with rules that allow them to use the law as they please with negligence. A precarious organisational culture prioritises expedited hiring and training over the urgent need for trained federal agents to serve the most vulnerable. A nation state that considers that gender perspective is limited to hiring women employees, without considering how serious the human rights violations to which migrant women and their families are exposed every day, cannot comply with its obligations on international protection of women. The oppressive, hetero-patriarchal State abandons and repudiates the filthy presence of ungrievable bodies in its territory.

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