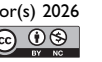
Theme Issue Article

Politics and Space

EPC: Politics and Space
2026, Vol. 44(6) 1030–1046
© The Author(s) 2026

Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: 10.1177/23996544261471290
journals.sagepub.com/home/epc
Sage

Re-bordering during COVID-19: Women and children as tools for immigration control at the USA-Mexico border

Valentina Glockner[1] **and Elaine Chase**[2]

Abstract

Through qualitative ethnographic work at the US-Mexican border, this article analyzes three main impacts of 'crisis' migration governance on migrant women with children during the COVID-19 pandemic. It illustrates how a combination of migration and public health-related policies employed during this time, and presented as measures for the public good and the wellbeing of migrant communities, generated chaos and resulted in additional forms of mistreatment and violence. These included summary deportations of women and children; the denial of fundamental rights to asylum and to privacy; the threat of removal of children in order to control, restrict and undermine women's agency and autonomy; and direct harms to unaccompanied migrant children. The paper argues that while the invocation of migration policies during the pandemic were shrouded in euphemisms of child protection and humanitarianism, the ensuing chaos of these measures imposed by US immigration authorities with the compliance of INM (Instituto Nacional de Migración) in Mexico and child-protection authorities, enabled the subjectification of women and children to further control and punishment as irregularized migrants through processes of re-bordering (Aradau and Tazzioli 2021).

Keywords

re-bordering, Covid-19, immigration reform, women with children, unaccompanied children, Title 42, euphemisms, control and punishment

Introduction

Prior to the declaration of the Covid-19 pandemic in March 2020, Mexico had witnessed the introduction of increasingly severe borderization mechanisms involving the detention, punishment

[1]Departamento de Investigaciones Educativas, CINVESTAV, Ciudad de Mexico, Mexico
[2]Institute of Education, University College London, London, UK

Corresponding author:
Elaine Chase, Institute of Education, University College London, Facutly of Education and Society, 20 Bedford Way, London WC1H 0AL, UK.
Email: e.chase@ucl.ac.uk

and deportation of migrant children. The epitome of these measures was the Zero Tolerance policy introduced in 2018 by US President Donald Trump, during his first term of office, which led to the separation of thousands of children and young people from their mothers, fathers, and other family members responsible for their care. Although this was not the first time that family separation had been used by governments to punish and dissuade irregular migration, under the Trump administration it became a major tool of border control.

This paper reveals how during the pandemic, there was an intensification of policies which made women and children the central focus of migration governance. These included the bi-lateral arrangements between the Mexican and US governments designed to manage and block the right to asylum for thousands of people arriving at the Mexican-US border through programmes such as metering; the Migration Protection Protocols (MPP) – commonly referred to as the "Remain in Mexico program", and the creation of waiting lists (Torres et al., 2022). At the start of the pandemic, in March 2020, the government invoked Title 42, a section of the US Code dating back to 1944 which allows federal health authorities to prohibit migrants from entering the USA for the purposes of preventing the spread of contagious diseases. Its introduction gave border patrol agents powers to swiftly expel migrants trying to enter the USA, instead of allowing them to seek asylum within the country.

Through in-depth insights and observations of how these policies were employed by child protection and state officials in real time during the pandemic at one shelter for women and children on the northwest Mexico-USA border, we seek to contribute towards a better understanding of how such policies were directly experienced by women and children. We illustrate how different levels of the migration control industry subordinated the rights and best interests of women and children to the maintenance of the migration governance machinery and how euphemisms of humanitarianism and child protection were manipulated to further securitise borders and control and manage migrant women and children (Fagetti, 2021). This is not to say that that immigration authorities or governments created unique or distinct forms of border control for mothers and children. Instead, we argue that the chaos created by border closures and poorly considered pandemic-related immigration policies generated a situation in which the institutions and protocols intended to protect migrant women and children in effect generated harmful effects including limiting the right to asylum for mothers travelling with children as well as unaccompanied children and young people.

More specifically, we analyse the situation of a group of nine mothers from Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador who fled their countries of origin with their young children during the pandemic and ended up being accommodated in the shelter. This is combined with an analysis of practices relating to unaccompanied children arriving at the shelter during the same period (mid 2020 to late 2021). Our analysis reveals how: (i) the chaos and mismatch of different policies (such as Title 42) and illegal/contingent measures (such as *deportaciones en caliente* – express deportations without registration), instigated and applied during the pandemic created commotion, opacity and arbitrariness in the application of protection policies which undermined the fundamental rights of migrant women and children; (ii) these confused and interacting control measures negatively impacted the lives and wellbeing of unaccompanied children and young people arriving at the shelter; (iii) control mechanisms perpetrated diverse forms of violence against women as mothers including forced separation from male partners, constant surveillance and real or threatened erasure of motherhood, as women were threatened with having their children removed if they did not comply with immigration control procedures; (iv) euphemisms of, 'best interests', and 'care and protection' were employed by the system and those working within the government's migrant children protection services at the border as means of controlling mothers, impinging their right to asylum, and denying their agency to mother their children. We end by briefly considering some of the implications for policy and practice emerging from these ethnographic insights and discuss some ways forward.

Bordering and re-bordering regimes

Processes of (re)bordering increasingly permeate all aspects of modern life and society, often creating sites of exclusion in the absence of any physical wall or point of demarcation (Mezzandra and Nielsen, 2013). Beyond denoting the boundaries of national sovereignty, whether physical or symbolic, borders are integral to the structures of global capitalism, have evolved from processes of imperialism and colonisation and utilise global technologies of division to determine people's differential access to movement, opportunities and resources (Walia, 2021). Within national boundaries, complex processes of (re)bordering impose profound changes to labour markets, legal systems and policing, societal relationships, power dynamics as well as to modes of citizenship and differential inclusion and exclusion across time and space. These 'deep transformations of the social, economic, juridical, and political relations of our planet' (Mezzandra and Nielsen 2013: p. 7) simultaneously evoke borders as spaces of struggle and resistance for many, and of privilege for the few.

At the same time, (re) bordering involves the devolvement of immigration controls to public services, rendering their actors – wittingly or otherwise – central protagonists in the daily practices of migration governance. This is done in ways which often appear to strip individuals of their powers of reflectivity and resistance (Rodriguez and Paredes 2014), reducing them to cogs in the wheels of border machinery. As such, services typically aligned with care, protection and humanitarianism are co-opted into everyday bordering practices (Yuval Davis et al., 2018) which insidiously become embedded within diverse professional roles in healthcare, education, welfare services and housing and result in practitioners often becoming uncritically and unquestioningly compliant with enacting policies and procedures which in the abstract would not align with their professional codes of practice or value systems. This diffusion of the business of border control and its accompanying violence within territories and across public and private domains, renders the physical border just one small part of the invasive machinery of migration control. This (re) bordering (Aradau and Tazzioli 2021), that is the repurposing of existing practices and processes to produce different bordering techniques, creates differential access to mobility and resources. People on the move do not just contend with the immigration official at the international border but are subjected to a proliferation of borders determined by language, economic, social and political status, gender, ethnicity and multiple other aspects of their lives and identities (Mezzadra and Nielsen, 2013).

Bordering, as part of the machinery of governmentality, fundamentally relies on the creation of discursive frames which justify policies and practices of exclusion. Through the construction, and amplification, via political, public and media discourses, of dominant narratives which associate the securitisation of borders with the greater 'public good', immigration enforcement becomes a hegemonic ideology which permeates all aspects of society. Characteristic of (re)bordering is the use of language, phraseology or rhetoric which chimes with the zeitgeist of modern societies. In this way the sinister and violent aspects of (re) bordering become masked by euphemisms which draw on universal values of care, protection and social justice.

In the context of the Mexico-USA border, terms such as '*rescate*' (rescue) have been used to justify the detention of children and young people in forced mobility (CNDH 2018; Sin Fronteras 2009). The term '*estaciones migratorias*' (migration centres) is used instead of 'detention centres', even though sometimes conditions are worse than within prisons and where there have been allegations in some cases of torture (GICDMyT 2018; Sin Fronteras 2009; Ureste y Pradilla 2021). Similarly, notions such as '*protección'* (protection) are used to justify the detention of migrant children who are often separated from their parents in the process of migration (Rosas Rábago 2021). Terms such as '*retorno asistido*' (assisted return) and '*retorno voluntario*' (voluntary return) are used widely to suggest processes through which there is an element of choice, agency

and negotiation on the part of migrant women and children to decide to return to their countries of origin, when in effect agreement to return is made under great pressure and even threats from INM agents (Fagetti 2019) and/or the most desperate of conditions where migrants have little or no other option than to accept. In the same vein, '*reunificación familiar*', (family reunion) is presented as a legitimate form of deportation for children, allegedly because it is in their 'best interests'.

The so-called 'humanitarian crisis' relating to migrant children on the Southern US border, declared in 2014 during Barack Obama's administration, is another clear example of euphemising border regimes. The 'crisis' was not just about recognising the number of unaccompanied children and families being detained by border control agencies, it also justified the allocation of further resources by the US administration to extend border control mechanisms, especially along the border with Mexico, which included the Southern Border Programme (*Programa Frontera Sur* or PFS). Under this arrangement, Mexico promised to assume a significant role in global migration governance, including through prioritising the strengthening of its borders with Central America (Araiza et al., 2019)[1]. The introduction of the PFS consolidated the externalisation of the southern border between the USA and Mexico, transforming Mexico into what has come to be known as the 'vertical border', due to the degree of militarisation, the surveillance of migratory routes and the increased use of detention operations (REDODEM 2015 y 2017). This discourse of a 'humanitarian crisis' for children, combined with language conjuring the principles of morality, humanitarianism, and safety and security of children, legitimised and normalised the externalisation of borders and the violent policies of the PFS. Between 2014 and 2015, immediately following the signing of the PFS, the number of detentions of Central Americans in the south-east border of the USA fell by almost 45%; whilst the number of detentions in Mexico increased by almost 70% over the same period (Araiza et al., 2019), reflecting an average arrest rate of 94% between 2014 and 2016 (REDODEM, 2017).

Building on these examples, we explore how these mechanisms of (re)bordering were operationalised during the pandemic and their impacts on mothers (and indirectly fathers) travelling with children as well as unaccompanied children and young people.

Methodology

The paper draws on data gathered during the pandemic from Central American migrant women with children who were attempting to cross the Mexico-US border to claim asylum in the USA. It took place within a single migrant shelter run by state government authorities at Mexico's northwest border for migrant child protection services. Research involved insights from nine women from Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras between the ages of 21 and 30 years, each of them travelling with one or two children ranging from 1.5 to 12 years old. Data was collected through focus groups and in-depth interviews with the mothers, as well as observations of practices in the shelter. In addition, interviews and discussions were held with four members of shelter staff (either in person or online) to discuss their experiences of implementing policies during the pandemic as they relate to women and children and to unaccompanied migrant children arriving at and being cared for within the shelter. For ethical reasons, no interviews were conducted directly with unaccompanied children and young people. The research was conducted as part of the UKRI-funded *Life Facing Deportation* Project based at University College London (UCL), in collaboration, among others, with colleagues at Sonora University, Mexico. Ethical approval for the research was granted by UCL as the lead research organisation, and ethical processes were carefully renegotiated on the ground in Mexico as necessary, taking account of the shifting rules and regulations of the COVID-19 pandemic, and centring the needs, wellbeing and circumstances of research participants.

Findings

Three key themes emerged from the research in relation to the impacts of these measures during the pandemic on mothers with children and unaccompanied children and youth: a sense of chaos, creating a situation in which it was almost impossible for women and children to understand or access due processes to asylum, leaving them subject to summary deportations; the reduction and arbitrary provision of support to unaccompanied children and young people who were supposedly eligible to 'care' and 'protection' during these times; and violent policies and procedures which sought to exert total control over and repression of migrant women, erasing their motherhood and prioritising institutional protocols and shelter operations over their needs and those of their children. Euphemisms of protection care and best interests emerge as a cross-cutting theme throughout, employed to justify harmful practices by different actors engaging with women and children at the border.

Policy chaos

Our analysis revealed that a sense of chaos emerged from, the complex mix of national and bilateral immigration control procedures between the US and Mexico – such as the MPP, express deportations, Title 42 and waiting lists; combined with a distinct lack of any systematisation in how such policies should be enacted on the ground. Interviews with shelter personnel revealed how the sharing of information between shelters providing protection to unaccompanied migrant children, Mexican Immigration authorities (INM) and the US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) was informal, discretionary, and non-transparent. This was perceived by some managing the shelter as a way of INM maintaining control and dominance over the shelter activities and limiting the capacity of staff within the shelter to decide what should happen in the best interests of women and children. The result was often total confusion or ignorance about the role and capacity of the shelter in supporting women and children fleeing extreme forms of violence in their countries of origin.

In addition to these pandemic-related immigration policies was the entry into force, at the beginning of 2021, of a reform of Mexico's Migration Law and the Law on Refugees, Complementary Protection and Political Asylum which had been agreed in November 2020. This prohibited the detention of children and privileged the right to family unity. It meant that mothers and fathers could not be separated from their minor children when they were detained and that whole families should be directed to shelters and care centres (DOF, 2020). At this point, government shelters within the child and family protection system (DIF), primarily designed to accommodate unaccompanied children, were asked to start receiving family groups even though many of the shelters in the country resisted this move, arguing that they did not have the infrastructure, resources or personnel to accommodate families.

In the case of the shelter where we conducted field work, they had agreed to receive only mothers with their minor children, but not fathers. The reasons given for this decision were a combination of lack of resources and personnel and insufficient space. However, the decision also reflected other moral and gender biases and prejudices which were not necessarily articulated. The same stance was taken by shelters in other parts of the country, causing fathers to be separated from their partners and children, or to remain locked up in detention centers along with their children when fathers were the only adult caregiver.

Interviewees in the shelter spoke about how from the start of the pandemic until June 2021, staff saw constant fluctuations in the profile of people arriving at the shelter in terms of number, country of origin, where they had previously been detained, and their demographic profiles, such as whether they were unaccompanied children or family units. The staff reported having no information or clarity about what measures CBP were adopting at the US border or what deportation and

registration arrangements were being applied by INM on the Mexican side. While at the start of the pandemic, INM had continued deporting people, towards the middle end of 2020 and until early 2021 operations to detain and deport people in transit were suspended due to lack of funds. During that time, many people allegedly managed to cross the border into the USA and the shelter, which had been created for accommodating unaccompanied children, was constantly empty.

By April 2021, however, virtually all unaccompanied children and mothers with children who arrived at the shelter had been deported from the US through Title 42 (see also Blue et al., 2021). The only exceptions to this were reportedly 10 unaccompanied children who had been heading for the border and were detained en route in Mexico; and two mothers with children who had been detained just over the US border by Mexican authorities. A crucial change that the shelter staff became alerted to was that more and more unaccompanied children and mothers with children began to arrive without any registration from INM, indicating that they had been summarily deported from the USA without any opportunity to claim asylum. All of them verbally reported to shelter staff that they had already managed to cross the border when they were detained, or had surrendered themselves to the CBP, and that they had been deported within a few hours, often without having any contact with the US Immigration Customs Enforcement (ICE) facilities, including registration and screening to determine whether they were eligible to claim asylum.

The operational director of the shelter began to suspect that although the CBP was returning people from the US to Mexico, they were not registering them in accordance with the required procedures. Whether this was a failure – or an intended strategy – on the part of CBP in the USA or INM in Mexico, or both, is unclear. One shelter staff member commented,

> It is possible that INM is not registering them. I would like to know how the American immigration control (CPB) brings them to INM here, whether there is any documentation or anything […] because as I say there is none.

She went on,

> Even the Consul (Consulate General) noticed this because he said, "This state is not notifying me about families arriving, but its neighbouring states are…I know from unofficial sources that there are many families at the border that we don't know about". (For me), it's not about telling them, 'I need to know so as to return them'. No, I want to know how many people this involves to be able to accommodate them in the shelter.

This trend in express deportations, *deportaciones en caliente*, in which a person is detained by US immigration authorities and deported without even passing through Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) was confirmed by Amnesty International (2021) and the New York Times (2020). Practices such as these, observed at a single shelter and highlighted by civil society organisations elsewhere, suggest that the number of people registered as having been deported under Title 42 could be far lower than the actual number of deportees.

During the time of the pandemic therefore, there is evidence not only of the normalisation of Title 42 as a form of deportation including the expulsion of unaccompanied children as if it was public policy in Mexico, but also a seemingly orchestrated confusion vis a vis the roles and responsibilities of the CBP, the INM and the shelter personnel. This was the result of a barrage of poorly designed and implemented policies and procedures. From the accounts of interviewees, neither the authorities at the shelter or the Consulate General really understood what was going on. The chaos was typified by a lack of transparency, lack of accountability, measures which were totally discretionary, and a failure to share information between different agencies. Even the Child Protection Procurator was unaware of the decisions or possible agreements being made between

CBP and INM to facilitate deportations, making it impossible to develop any clear care plan for children and young people.

Treatment of unaccompanied children and young people

Through observations and discussion with shelter staff, it was possible to see how the various immigration measures and reforms during the pandemic directly impacted unaccompanied children and young people arriving at the shelter. According to staff, before the pandemic the government shelter had never received unaccompanied children from Central America who had been returned from the USA. The shelter had in fact been created to accommodate detained unaccompanied children and young people in transit through Mexico. As the shelter's operational director commented,

> It was rare for a young person to say that they had already been detained on the US side of the border.

However, the introduction of Title 42 saw the arrival of unaccompanied children being returned from the USA. It became clear through discussions with shelter staff that there was a sense of total confusion in relation to what constituted appropriate procedures in relation to unaccompanied migrant children during this time. For example, one of the unintended negative consequences of the migration reforms introduced in November 2020 was that there was a misconception by shelter staff and other agencies that the detention of unaccompanied children for their own protection could now be carried out by any authority, not only the INM. The reform actually specifies that any authority can help unaccompanied children access welfare assistance even without them being detained and processed by the INM. The result of this misinterpretation of the reform in practice was a noticeable increase in the surveillance and detention of unaccompanied children by more diverse types of authority, indicative of how responsibility for immigration controls were gradually dispersed across services. The shelter's operational director commented, for example, how the municipal police had started bringing unaccompanied children to the shelter, whereas before it was only INM that had done so.

One intended benefit of the reform was that it would become easier and quicker for both accompanied and unaccompanied children and young people to access governmental welfare assistance. INM is obliged to immediately issue a stay permit for unaccompanied children for humanitarian reasons. In practice, however, shelter staff reported observing how INM officials only provided this documentation to a few unaccompanied children and young people who managed to resist the deportation procedures and who actively requested asylum. Shelter staff felt that INM wanted to avoid processing the paperwork for other children and young people since they knew that most of them would end up being deported anyway. This is contrary to the requirements of the published Immigration Reform (DOF, 2020), which stipulates that unconditional assistance should be granted to every unaccompanied child on humanitarian grounds and that documentation is not a pre-requisite for this entitlement. Where children are accompanied by adults, the latter can also benefit from the temporary permit, unless this would be contrary to the best interests of the child.

Early in 2020, shelter staff began to realise that none of the unaccompanied children from Central America arrived with paperwork proving that they had been detained in the USA. Yet many of the children spoke about how they had been apprehended, detained for some hours and then were taken back across the border. This was, the staff recognised, not the standard procedures they had seen previously, as one of shelter staff members explained,

> For example, with the Mexican children that arrived before, they brought with them what was like a copy of what they had supposedly signed there… (while in USA custody). But with the foreign children we asked

> them, "did they give you anything? A document?" "No, they didn't give me anything" they replied. So, I am also inclined to believe this theory that they were not processed there.

The operational director cited the example of two young Guatemalans who were allegedly deported from the USA at 3:00 am, even though no Mexican authority was at the border to receive them. One of them waited for the centre to open to seek help, while the other had decided to try his chances again at crossing the border. The operational director explained:

> 'They threw him out (deported him from the US) at dawn and there was nobody within INM to receive him. He said, "I should wait here", they had told him, "and tomorrow knock on the door". The consul was aware of this case, and he said he was going to put in a complaint because it should not happen… He (the boy) had already explained to the consul, "I didn't leave, they threw me and the other boy out". He went on to explain how the other boy's family had told him to try again and so he was going to return to the border. He went on, "I stayed here, very close to the sentry box so as not to go too far and not to get lost because it was night-time". As soon as it was dawn, he came and said, "I am from Guatemala and I want to go back". And that's when they brought him here (to the shelter). That's why I am assuming that they weren't even registering, all the more so if they were families.

Moreover, the shelter staff had heard of other examples of INM not registering unaccompanied children who were being deported under Title 42. The operational director went on,

> We have heard of other unaccompanied children from adjacent border towns that had tried at least 10 times to cross and were told, "Now I'll catch you", "you go back", "Mexico is over there, so go and do what you can there". Once again they would come back to regain strength, they ate I don't know what, and they went back to try again – many times over a very short period, until they (the children) finally said to them (US immigration authorities), "well now you better help me". So INM said, "allright, you've been through here over 10 times. So now I have to register you".

Another important change that happened during the pandemic affecting unaccompanied children, young people and families in general was that INM was no longer able to coordinate the deportation flights. With the closure of borders, consulates in each country decided on the dates on which they could return to their countries, even though Mexico continued to pay for the flights. The knock-on effect was that instead of waiting for weeks, unaccompanied children were kept for two or 3 months detained in the shelters. This had a detrimental impact on their health and wellbeing and was contrary to the 2021 Migration Reform.

Paradoxically, shelter staff participants reported that since April 2020 there had been no applications for asylum made by accompanied or unaccompanied children, and that all of them had been eventually returned to their countries. They spoke as though it was 'natural' that, in the midst of a global crisis, nobody had claimed asylum and as if nobody needed to. The field work suggests that in fact facilitating children's asylum applications went against the shelter's institutional logic and its processing mechanisms. Instead of guaranteeing the best interests of unaccompanied children, including their right to asylum, the shelter had been converted into an INM-alternative processing unit, a place where children simply waited to be deported, while having access to hours of television and games, and relatively better food and facilities.

Insights from this research illustrate how throughout the pandemic the USA was adopting illegal measures such as summary deportations of Central American unaccompanied children back to Mexico. There is no third country agreement with Mexico for the reception of these unaccompanied children and, if returned at all, they should have been taken back directly to their countries of origin. In many cases, no due process or registration of children was happening to record such

deportations, and there was evidence that shelters were making highly arbitrary decisions over which children they were willing to support and uphold the rights of. Throughout the pandemic extraordinary measures and practices which undermined children's rights and increased their risk of harm, quickly became the norm.

Denial of motherhood, agency and rights

Migrant women taking part in focus group discussions and interviews spoke about the direct impacts on them of immigration control measures and how they were implemented by INM and the shelter staff. These ranged from feelings of others trying to control how they could parent their children; threats of having their children taken away; being forcibly separated from husbands and other family members; violations to their rights to privacy and to asylum; and degrading maltreatment by shelter personnel and immigration officers. It is important to note that the shelter in question was created under a supposed "open door" model, but in fact functioned as a closed guardianship institution, in which no child, whether accompanied or unaccompanied, could leave of their own free will. The vast majority of children remained there until they were deported back to their country of origin.

As noted earlier, when the immigration law reform came into effect in early 2021, the shelter directors decided that they would only accept mothers with children and not fathers. Once they started to receive very young mothers between 20 and 30 years old, it became apparent that staff were not used to engaging with young women who were vocal in what they wanted and stood up for themselves. One of the staff members commented,

> Of course they (the mothers) don't need as much supervision as an unaccompanied, but they are inside the building, and they are adults who are going to raise their voices, and they do come and ask for things. They are more demanding.

Some difficult dynamics were observed by the research team in the shelter between the staff who soon became exasperated by the young mothers and their resistance to the strict schedules and regulations imposed on them. Staff were only used to working with unaccompanied girls and boys who, although they could be rebellious sometimes, tended to end up following the rules. The mothers on the other hand didn't want to be told what to do. Moreover, many of those working in the shelter were the same age or even younger than the mothers so the women didn't see them as figures of authority.

Most women arriving at the shelter were raising young children under the age of 12. They didn't want the shelter workers to tell them how to bring up their children, but wanted the freedom to parent in the way they felt was best in terms of what food to give them and when, when to bath them, to be able to wash their own and their children's clothes, and send them to bed when they wanted. However, they had no freedom or autonomy or decision-making power over these simple every-day tasks. Instead, they had to stick to the rules and timetable that the shelter had established for unaccompanied children.

Surveillance and invasion of privacy

There were several incidents recounted by the women whereby they felt their privacy had been totally violated. On one occasion shelter staff searched the rooms as part of what the director described as a routine procedure, which was in the interests of the women's own security. However, the search did not only involve the shelter workers but also someone from INM known by the women for their violence, maltreatment and harassment (Fagetti 2019). The research team arrived

soon after the inspection when several of the women were in tears. They reported how all their things had been taken by shelter staff and their rucksacks emptied. Apparently, staff, claiming that this was a routine check, were looking for a cell phone that one of the women had allegedly hidden.

All the while, the operative director at the shelter was saying,

> It's part of the service, we are checking the dormitories… It's a question of talking to them and saying, this is normal in the shelter, it's what we do and how we work. It's not that we think you are bringing in anything or that you are hiding anything from me, it's done as part of the routine.

The women described how when they arrived at the shelter, their phones were taken away (a measure used with unaccompanied children supposedly to protect them and prevent them from communicating with the coyotes and traffickers). This totally restricted any communication they could have with their families and special permission to call family was granted at the discretion of the two shelter coordinators. The women found this arrangement extremely distressing. When they were allowed to make calls, they reported that often the call was cut off after just 10 to 15 minutes. Moreover, many described how their calls were listened into, and they had to constantly be on guard about what they communicated. The following extract from one focus group discussion captures how the women experienced these forms of surveillance and constraints on their ability to stay in touch with families.

M5: They don't let us have many calls, but just one call… so if I have to speak with my husband that's the only call and the next one only with my aunt, the other week, it was like this… only 15 minutes.

M1: And I need to call Guatemala to see how my family is, but they only let me call my aunt who is in the United States and my husband who is in X (a city in Mexico) nothing else.

M5: The worst thing with them is that if you are talking on the phone, they are listening to hear what you are saying. They listen to what you say.

M6: Like yesterday, I said something to my family and the social worker quickly went to ask what it was about, and I said it very low to my aunt, so that she couldn't hear.

M1: The same thing happened to me as well. I was talking to my husband in my dialect (indigenous language). But she asked me, 'what are you saying?'

M5: They want to know if anyone is complaining about how the worker is treating us.

M1: They say that they check the phone because there are already cases where, by telephone, they (people in the shelter) talk to the guides and the guide comes to pick them up, that's why.

Separation of families

Although the reform of the immigration law in Mexico has been a crucial step towards the eradication of the immigration detention of children and families, its weak, discretionary and partial implementation has produced other negative effects. In the study shelter (among others), one such effect was the separation of mothers and their children from their husbands/fathers because the shelter refused to accept men under any circumstances. Several women spoke about how they were separated from their husbands at the point when they were taken to the shelter. Two of the mothers described how, after several weeks of waiting and uncertainly, the fathers of their children became fed up of being in the nearest city, lodged in precarious conditions in non-governmental shelters,

and decided to continue on their own towards the USA. When this happened, women and their children were deported and were forced to start the whole dangerous journey again with their small children – in some cases for the second or third time – while their husbands managed to cross the border into the USA. In essence, therefore, measures within the reform to prevent families from being detained actually led, in some instances, to breaking up and dispersing families. This was partly the result of discretionary decisions by shelter management who were adamantly opposed to allowing fathers to stay. This outcome also stemmed from the fact that there was no federal allocation of funds that would allow the adaptation and expansion of shelter services to comply with the reforms.

According to staff, during this period, only groups of families that were apprehended and returned from the USA en masse – 50 people or more – were able to avoid being separated and were sent to non-governmental shelters. These were typically run by religious institutions and, unlike the government shelters, families were not prevented from moving on. Referring to one of such groups, a worker in the government shelter explained

> The families did not want to separate, and the government (DIF) shelters didn't have the capacity nor wanted to take on their care, so they sent most of them to religious shelters. But in these shelters, the families are not restrained, they are sheltered but they can decide to leave.

Denial of asylum

Government shelters are supposed to facilitate access to the right to asylum, but the reality observed was that, in most cases, they ended up ignoring or dissuading women and children from lodging their asylum claims. During interviews with the shelter authorities, we were told that all mothers had been consulted as to whether they wanted to file a claim for asylum and they had all said no. However, through interviews and conversations with the women it transpired that in most cases they were either unaware that they had the right to claim asylum, or had no idea what constituted an appropriate basis for seeking asylum. Some of them had arrived at the shelter already having signed a deportation order at the border under the guise of 'voluntary return'.

The women explained how they had already crossed the border, been detained in the USA and then returned immediately to Mexico without being given the opportunity to claim asylum in either country. One of the mothers commented,

> We just arrived in N (at the border) and they asked us where we were from and ' Now you can go', that was all.

They then decided to hand themselves over to INM so that they could return to their countries but soon became frustrated by the amount of time it was taking to be sent back and were exasperated by the lack of clarity about when they would be returned. Another mother said,

> We approached the lawyer and we asked more or less when (would they be deported), they said, "tomorrow you are going", but it's been like this for two months now… And he (the lawyer) never comes, and we are desperate, above all with the phone… they don't even give us the phone once or twice a week. We would accept that (the wait) but they don't even give us the phone. (M1, Guatemala)

Once the women realised that they could claim asylum and requested this, the authorities at the shelter made them look like they were indecisive and could not make up their minds. Such apparent inconsistencies are typically used to undermine the credibility of a claim to asylum, or are construed as signs that mothers were manipulating the options available to them.

Moreover, there was evidence that INM, together with the State's General Attorney for Child Protection, were influencing shelter staff to not facilitate the women's access to asylum by enforcing the idea that if the women wanted to claim it, this would involve waiting for long periods of time locked up in the shelter. At the time of the research, the women seemed resigned to being deported and wanted it to happen as soon as possible. They had all been told that to get a decision on their application for asylum they would have to wait 6-10 months, and this completely discouraged them. They said it would be easier and faster if they were flown home to their countries so that they could set off again and try their chances at crossing the border to the US by an alternative route. In the case of one of the women, this meant being returned to Guatemala to the people that had previously gang raped her. For her, staying to claim asylum would have meant wasting time she simply could not afford, as one of her children, affected by a severe disability, was already waiting for her in the USA having left months before with her husband. Another woman explained,

> They told me that if I wanted refuge I would have to wait. But why would I ask for refuge to have to wait so long […] I'll end up back in Guatemala and I am going to come back again and travel again.

From communication we had with some of the women following their deportation, at least four mothers did exactly this, just a few days after arriving in their country, and at least three managed to cross into the USA by an alternative route.

Indefinite detention, humiliation and hostility

Some of the most difficult testimonies to listen to related how women were forced into a state of limbo (Menjivar, 2006) and that if they complained about the length of their wait in detention, pending deportation, they were told that they were free to go but that the children would have to stay. One of the INM Child Protection Officers in particular repeatedly asserted that if the women wanted to leave the shelter to stay in Mexico, they would have to leave their children behind. The women spoke of how the INM officer made it clear to them that they were unimportant and that if it were not for their children, they would be locked up in a detention centre, in far worse conditions.

The women recounted one visit from the INM agent and how they asked her for more information about when they would be deported. Instead of answering them, she threatened and insulted them. The following focus group discussion excerpt captures the hostility of the exchange that ensued between the women and the INM agent and the impact it had on the women:

M6: A girl came here from immigration control (the OPI) but she was really angry. She told us that we have to behave. Because we are in her country, that we were invading her country…that we had come into her house.

M1: Yes, "remember: you are here for your children, not for yourselves', she told us.

M6: "If you were not here, you would be suffering in prison, while here you are living in glory".

M3: That we have to put up with it, that we put ourselves in this situation, so we have to just live with it.

M1: That we had to put up with it because we had asked for it.

M3: That next time we should think, "because you came to get into my house". That's what she said, she basically humiliated us.

One of the mothers explained further,

> That is what they told us, …'If you want to go, you can go, but the children cannot go', and, how can anyone leave their children?! So we are resigned to spend who knows how long here, but as far as our children are concerned we are going with them, we don't want to leave them.

Aside from the hostility they encountered, the women spoke repeatedly about poor quality and inadequate food, and how they were treated like children in the dining room. They described how the food tasted bad, how they were sometimes given old waste food and had experienced stomach upsets as a result – including diarrhoea and vomiting, and how the food was so insufficient that sometimes they went to bed hungry.

The impacts of the degrading treatment on the women were obvious, they felt distressed, fearful and that they had been completely forgotten by anyone in authority. While they broadly understood that the government shelters had a duty of care for themselves and their children, and that they should be treated well, they equally understood that there were no checks and balances in place and that they had no voice to contest the treatment they were experiencing, as illustrated by the following testimonies:

M1: I tell myself not to worry. That's how it is and if I think about it I start to cry, but then I think its not worth just crying and crying. They are right, we are in their country. I need to put up with it, but no way.

M2: It's like they don't value us, because they rule us as though they have a great authority, but they treat us like little girls.

Discussion and conclusion

By design, a functioning border regime requires joint action and collaboration on both sides of the border, working with cross-national protocols and agreements for the purposes of migration governance, while adhering to due process and the protection of the rights of people on the move. Evident from this work was a situation of chaos (Mountz and Hiemstra 2014), where on the US side of the border people were detained, summarily deported and denied their right to asylum, while on the Mexico side officials watched and unquestioningly accepted the deportees, were complicit in further denying the right to asylum among other rights, and failed to even keep accurate records of the numbers of people being subjected to deportation from the USA.

It was clear that government authorities in Mexico charged with protecting migrant women and children struggled to keep up with constant policy changes including the start and end of the Migration Protection Protocol (MPP), and the US enforcement during the COVID-19 pandemic of Title 42 – a policy restricting cross border movement of people on the grounds of public health protection. These policies resulted in the mass deportation of families from the US without proper registration by the Mexican Immigration authority (INM); and lack of adherence to the legal reform to Mexican migration policy in November 2020 (and introduced in 2021) banning the detention of children in immigration centres.

At the start of the pandemic, a time politically constructed as a 'crisis', shelter staff were forced to work in total obscurity and ignorance of what was really happening at the border and because they found themselves caught up in the policy chaos created by national authorities with much greater power and influence. They were left trying to respond with the limited tools and resources available, and established ways of working which appeared at odds with the changing dynamics at the border. Yet the situation of uncertainty and contingency within the shelter at the start of the

pandemic had, by the end of 2021, become the norm. What first appeared as extraordinary immigration measures imposed during the pandemic had by then become accepted by multiple different actors working in and through the shelters including shelter staff, immigration authorities and child Protection services, as 'regular', unquestioned public policy, even though such measures meant denying migrant women and unaccompanied children their right to due process in terms of applications for asylum and resulted in the humiliation and maltreatment of women and children. Observations were made of violations of human rights and border agreements, such as summary deportations of women and unaccompanied children, including in the middle of the night, and no registration of those being deported as should be the case under Title 42.

We have shown how women and children were not provided with accurate information about their right to asylum; how women were humiliated and treated badly in shelters and were subjected to forms of coercive control including limited access to communication with partners and family members and being threatened with having their children removed from them if they questioned procedures or attempted to leave the shelter. Unaccompanied children were arriving at the shelter, having been summarily deported time and again from the US border, without any real questioning or contestation of these procedures by shelter staff or immigration or child protection authorities on the Mexican side of the border. The research has illuminated the normalising of crisis measures during COVID-19 which subverted the human rights of migrant mothers and children at every level, from complicit arrangements between bodies such as the CBP and INM, to wilful ignorance and the apolitical, non-critical stance of some frontline workers within organisations and institutions in charge of day-to-day governance of migration procedures, as well as those charged with providing care, resources and support to women and children.

While the migration governance policies invoked during the pandemic were framed by a rhetoric of the 'public good', of 'best interests' and of 'child protection', shelter staff demonstrated a lack of any critical appraisal of how these measures were in fact oppressing and harming families and children. They limited themselves to following orders and carrying out so-called "protection tasks" that were totally detached from the context and reality of the lives of women and children. In a context of exacerbated migratory violence, such 'caring practices' became violent, as they normalised the denial of asylum and created a depoliticised body of actors who failed to actively advocate for and defend this right in the first place.

To some extent, at the institutional and political level, it was convenient for the shelters to not have all the information and knowledge since they could not then be held responsible for the forms of violence enacted throughout the crisis, including the rapid deportations taking place without any proper registration or record of these events. Willingly or unwillingly, there was evidence for example of officials from INM cajoling and bullying staff into acting in ways which did not necessarily align with their own values, shelter staff becoming complicit in these actions and effectively an extension of INM. The mechanisms used to coerce and control migrant women, the forms of bullying, harassment and humiliation described are all evidence of this. In the end, all of the women in this small study 'agreed' to be sent back to their countries via the euphemistic measure of 'retorno volontario' (voluntary return)– although in reality they had no choice in the matter.

This work further illustrates the insidious proliferation and diffusion of bordering practices (De Genova et al., 2015; Mezzadra and Nielson 2013; Yuval-Davis et al., 2018) and how they shaped migrant women and children's interactions with, and experiences of different services and structures encountered at the US-Mexico border. The findings typify how borders become complex spaces of social encounters, struggles, tensions and resistance which are not organised around a single logic or authority, nor do they create a coherent apparatus or a homogenous reality. They are spaces of complex and constantly shifting power dynamics, discretionary decision-making, and serendipity. At the same time, we see how at a macro level, (re)bordering as a phenomenon creates

certain hegemonic discourses and practices which favour border securitisation over protecting the rights of migrant people and which in doing so entangle a broad range of associated services and structures in the implementation of migration governance practices which are intrinsically harmful, typifying the devolution of immigration controls and epitomising (re)bordering (Yuval Davis et al., 2018). One of the key insights from this analysis is how such embroilment is done under the euphemisms of care, protection and best interests of children, when in practice children were either denied their rights to asylum and appropriate protection as unaccompanied children or manipulated to further coerce and repress migrant women including through erasing their power and agency as mothers and threatening forced removal of their children.

The Covid 19 pandemic created a veil of confusion under which migration reforms invoked at a time of 'crisis' soon became normalised and manipulated for the purposes of total control and punishment of migrant women and children and to undermine their basic human rights including the right to asylum. While the threat of the pandemic may have waned, arguably these emergent re-bordering norms and practices largely have endured. There was no accountability for the procedures adopted, no systemic record of these practices made, and no space for those being subjected to these measures to protest. The policy implications of these findings suggest far greater scrutiny of the enactment of policy changes and of their unintended as well as intended consequences. The research also raises questions about professional values and codes of practice of those working with women and children at the border. It suggests the need for greater critical engagement and reflection on the impact of policies metered out by authorities, collective resistance and questioning of their co-option into bordering practices and advocating primarily for the rights and wellbeing of migrant and women and children at the border, rather than helping to perpetuate a regime of violence and control.

These insights are particularly pertinent in the current climate in which a series of executive orders by the Trump administration (since January 2025) have further eroded the rights to asylum and due process for migrants arriving at the USA border. Measures such as mandatory detention, the devolution of immigration controls to police and armed forces, nationwide expedited removals and the re-instating of the Remain in Mexico protocols are all examples of policies evoked under what has been presented as a new crisis of 'alien invasion' (Human Rights Watch 2025). These measures closely mirror those adopted during the COVID-19 pandemic and are further testament to the systemic corrosion of migrant people's access to appropriate care, protection and the right to asylum.

ORCID iDs

Valentina Glockner https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3587-087X
Elaine Chase https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4840-2810

Funding

The authors disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by an UK Research and Innovation; EP/T027401/1 through University College London.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

References

Amnesty International (2021) Pushed into harm's way: forced returns of unaccompanied migrant children to danger by the USA and Mexico. https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/amr51/4200/2021/en/:

Aradau C and Tazzioli M (2021) Covid-19 and re-bordering the world. *Radical Philosophy* 2: 3.

Araiza O, Buttrey H, Rossi V and Spalding S (2019) *La implementación y el legado del Programa Frontera Sur de México*. Available at: https://www.strausscenter.org/wp-content/uploads/prp_208-LA-IMPLEMENTACIO%CC%81N-Y-EL-LEGADO-DEL-PROGRAMA-FRONTERA-SUR-DE-ME%CC%81XICO.pdf.

Blue SA, Devine JA, Ruiz MP, McDaniel K, Hartsell AR, Pierce C.J., Johnson M, Tinglov AK, Yang M, Wu X and Moya S (2021) Im/Mobility at the US–Mexico border during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Social Sciences* 10(2): 47. Available at: https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci10020047

Comisión Nacional de Derechos Humanos, CNDH (2018) Informe Especial. La problemática de niñas, niños y adolescentes centroamericanos en contexto de migración internacional no acompañados en su tránsito por México, y con necesidades de protección internacional. https://www.cndh.org.mx/sites/default/files/documentos/2019-04/Informe-Ninez-Adolescentes-Centroamericanos-Migracion.pdf

De Genova N, Mezzadra S and Pickles J (2015) New keywords: migration and borders. *Cultural Studies* 29(1): 55–87.

Diario Oficial de la Federación DOF (2020) Decreto por el que se reforman diversos artículos de la Ley de Migración y de la Ley sobre Refugiados. In: *Protección Complementaria y Asilo Político, en materia de Infancia Migrante*. https://www.diputados.gob.mx/LeyesBiblio/ref/lmigra/LMigra_ref11_11nov20.pdf

Fagetti VG (2019) Las caravanas migrantes como estrategia de movilidad y espacio de protección, autonomía y solidaridad para los adolescentes centroamericanos. *Iberoforum. Revista de Ciencias Sociales* 14(27): 145–174.

Fagetti VG (2021). Régimen de frontera y la política de separación de familias: racialización y castigo de la migración forzada a través de los cuerpos infantiles. *#Jóvenesymigración. El reto de converger: agendas de investigación, políticas y participación*.

Grupo Impulsor Contra la Detención Migratoria y la Tortura, GICDMyT (2018) *Detención migratoria y tortura: Del estado de excepción al estado de derecho*. https://gtpm.mx/biblioteca/detencion-migratoria-y-tortura-del-estado-de-derecho-al-estado-de-excepcion/

Human Rights Watch (2025) Ten harmful Trump administration immigration and refugee policies. https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/02/20/ten-harmful-trump-administration-immigration-and-refugee-policies

Menjívar C (2006) Liminal legality: Salvadoran and Guatemalan immigrants' lives in the United States. *American Journal of Sociology* 111(4): 999–1037. https://doi.org/10.1086/499509

Mezzadra S and Neilson B (2013) *Border as Method, or, the Multiplication of Labor/Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson*. Duke University Press.

Mountz A and Hiemstra N (2014) Chaos and crisis: dissecting the spatiotemporal logics of contemporary migrations and state practices. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 104(2): 382–390. https://doi.org/10.1080/00045608.2013.857547

New York Times (2020). Migrant Children From Other Countries Are Being Expelled Into Mexico. New York Times.

Red de Documentación de las Organizaciones Defensoras de Migrantes, Redodem (2017) *Migrantes en México: Recorriendo un camino de violencia. Informe 2016*. https://redodem.org/informes/

Red de Documentación de las Organizaciones Defensoras de Migrantes, Redodem (2015) Migración en tránsito por México: rostro de una crisis humanitaria internacional. https://redodem.org/informes/

Rodriguez N and Parades C (2014) Coercive immigration enforcement and bureaucratic ideology. In: Menjivar C and Kanstroom D (eds) *Constructing Immigration 'Illegality': Critiques, Experiences and Responses*. Cambridge University Press.

Rosas Rábago EN (2021) Between four walls: the detention of children and adolescents in Mexico. *Nexo* 21. Available at: https://migracion.nexos.com.mx/2021/04/entre-cuatro-paredes-la-detencion-de-ninas-ninos-y-adolescentes-migrantes-en-mexico/.

Sin Fronteras (2009) Situación de los derechos humanos de las personas migrantes y solicitantes de asilo detenidas en las Estaciones Migratorias de México, 2007-2009. https://sinfronteras.org.mx/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Situaci%C3%B3n-de-los-derechos-humanos-de-las-personas-migrantes-y-solicitantes-de-asilo-detenidas-en-las-Estaciones-Migratorias-de-M%C3%A9xico.-1.pdf

Torres RM, Glockner V, Niño-Vega N, García-Figueroa G, Faria C, Danze A, Borzacchiello E and Slack J, (2022) Lockdown and the list: Mexican refugees, asylum denial, and the feminist geopolitics of esperar (waiting/hoping). *Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space* 0(0). https://doi.org/10.1177/23996544221118906

Ureste M and Pradilla A (2021) Tortura, asesinatos, violaciones: lo que CNDH ha ocultado sobre secuestros a migrantes en 2019 y 2020. *Animal Político*. https://www.animalpolitico.com/2021/02/migrantes-cndh-informe-oculto-secuestros-tortura-asesinato-violaciones/

Walia H (2021) *Border and Rule: Global Migration, Capitalism, and the Rise of Racist Nationalism*. Haymarket.

Yuval-Davis N, Wemyss G and Cassidy K (2018) Everyday bordering, belonging and the reorientation of British immigration legislation. *Sociology* 52(2): 228–244. https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038517702599

Author biographies

Valentina Glockner was full time professor until her death in December 2023 and researcher at Departamento de Investigaciones Educativas (DIE) at CINVESTAV, Mexico. Her research is rooted in the anthropology of migration and the State, as well as on the new childhood studies. Her work documents child migration and its encounters with border and humanitarian regimes from an ethnographic and participative perspective.

Elaine Chase is full time professor of Education, Wellbeing and International Development. Her work focuses on the sociological dimensions of health, wellbeing and rights of individuals and communities, particularly those most likely to experience marginalisation and exclusion.