

**Challenges Humanitarian Aid Professionals Face
Working with Unaccompanied Minors in Mexico****Desafíos que enfrentan los profesionales de ayuda humanitaria
al trabajar con menores no acompañados en México**

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the experiences of humanitarian aid professionals working with unaccompanied migrant minors in Mexico. Using a qualitative research design, the authors conducted semi-structured interviews with eight of these professionals (three men and five women), ages 30 to 45. Reflexive thematic analysis was employed to decipher the rich narratives from the interviews. The findings of this study reveal the significant stress experienced by humanitarian aid workers in this context, shedding light on the coping strategies adopted to manage the psychological strain inherent to their roles. In addition to these insights, this study reveals key thematic elements encompassing these professionals' perspectives on the migrant crisis and the challenges faced in their work.

Keywords: 1. transit migration, 2. unaccompanied minors/children, 3. humanitarian aid professionals, 4. United States, 5. Mexico.

RESUMEN

En este estudio se exploran las experiencias de los profesionales de ayuda humanitaria que trabajan con menores migrantes no acompañados en México. Utilizando un diseño de investigación cualitativa, los autores realizan entrevistas semiestructuradas con ocho de estos profesionales (tres hombres y cinco mujeres), cuyas edades oscilan entre los 30 y los 45 años. Se empleó un análisis temático reflexivo para descifrar la riqueza narrativa obtenida de las entrevistas. Los hallazgos de este estudio revelan el estrés significativo experimentado por los trabajadores de ayuda humanitaria en este contexto, lo que pone de manifiesto las estrategias de afrontamiento adoptadas para gestionar la tensión psicológica inherente a sus funciones. Además de estas perspectivas, el estudio revela elementos temáticos clave que abarcan la visión de estos profesionales sobre la crisis migratoria y los desafíos que enfrentan en su labor.

Palabras clave: 1. migración en tránsito, 2. menores/niños no acompañados, 3. profesionales de ayuda humanitaria, 4. Estados Unidos, 5. México.

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INTRODUCTION

Due to variable migration cycles, the mobility of the Central American and Mexican population to the United States has displayed inconsistent trends over the last three decades. Notably, the period from 2012 to 2019 witnessed a substantial upswing, with peaks in 2014 and 2016. From early October 2018 to late September 2019, the United States witnessed a significant influx of migrants seeking refuge: more than 264 000 Guatemalans, 253 000 Hondurans, 81 000 Salvadorans, and 166 000 Mexicans (Selee, 2020). These data underscore the scale of the migratory movement. Migration through the U.S.-Mexico border has continued to rise and recently reached unprecedented levels (Gramlich, 2023). For instance, according to the U.S. Customs and Border Protection, in May 2023 alone, there were 273 141 encounters at the border with migrants attempting to enter the country, with approximately 6% of those making the attempt being unaccompanied minors (Gramlich, 2023). According to the United Nations Human Rights Council:

An unaccompanied child is a person who is under the age of eighteen, unless, under the law applicable to the child, majority is, attained earlier and who is separated from both parents and is not being cared for by an adult who by law or custom has responsibility to do so (United Nations Human Rights Council [UNHCR], 1997, p. 1).

In 2019, the Red de Documentación de las Organizaciones Defensoras de Migrantes (REDODEM) (Documentation Network of Migrant Advocacy Organizations) recorded the entry of 3 857 children and adolescents from Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador, 1 930 of whom were unaccompanied by adults (REDODEM, 2019). These young migrants often hail from regions plagued by violence, inequality, substandard living conditions, rampant crime, political unrest, and food insecurity (Ataiants et al., 2018; Capps et al., 2019; Castillo Ramírez, 2020).

Economic instability, climate change, insecurity, widespread violence, and political factors are some of the driving forces that compel children, particularly those from the Northern Triangle region of Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras, to embark on perilous journeys in search of a better life (Capps et al., 2019; Padilla, 2021). People starting these journeys often use the services of human smugglers, often known as *coyotes*. Parents or relatives living in the United States often hire these smugglers to escort their children to the border (Ataiants et al., 2018; Padilla, 2021).

Unfortunately, many of these children have either directly experienced or witnessed harrowing incidents, including sexual violence, torture, murder, kidnapping, extortion, and death (Lusk & Terrazas, 2015; Padilla, 2021). Their ordeals are further compounded as they journey to the U.S. border, only to face additional trauma at the hands of immigration officials (Ataiants et al., 2018; Coulter et al., 2020). Most unaccompanied minors fall within the age range of 13 to 17 and are particularly vulnerable to exploitation by smugglers, who often subject them to forced labor or prostitution on reaching the United States (Kandel et al., 2015; Krogstad et al., 2014). This situation at the U.S.-Mexico border represents one of the most pressing and complex issues in U.S. immigration policy, creating a burgeoning human rights crisis that demands urgent attention.

The situation further evolved in 2020 as the World Health Organization declared the COVID-19 pandemic a state of emergency, leading both the Mexican government and U.S. Customs and Border Protection to enforce stringent measures. CBP's Title 8 Enforcement Actions and Title 42 Expulsion, which remain in effect, prohibit the entry of individuals posing a health risk, returning them to their last transit or origin country (U.S. CBP, 2020; Sultanić, 2021). There were also reports of overcrowding in shelters for unaccompanied minors at the height of the pandemic (Padilla, 2021). The wave of migration, which started in 2013, increased demand for services, particularly pro bono legal representation and interpreters, during the asylum process (Sultanić, 2021).

In recent years, the surge in migration through Central America has resulted in a substantial number of unaccompanied minors. The Mexican Migration Law (Decree of 2011) requires that the Instituto Nacional de Migración (INM) (Migration National Institute) assign unaccompanied minors to shelters operated by the Sistema Nacional para el Desarrollo Integral de la Familia (SNDIF) (National System for Integral Family Development), responsible for providing essential services to these minors (Padilla, 2021). The INM turned to non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to provide services for the migrant population, particularly unaccompanied minors. Collaboration between civil organizations, government departments, and other NGOs, such as Médicos Sin Fronteras, the Coalición Pro Defensa del Migrante, and Cáritas de la Diócesis de Mexicali, have played a pivotal role in addressing migrant crises on the border (Moreno Mena & Niño Contreras, 2013). Furthermore, organizations are currently having to cope with the challenge of inadequate resources to cater to the growing refugee population (Averbuch, 2018; Human Rights Watch, 2022; Moreno Mena & Niño Contreras, 2013).

Human Rights Watch (2022) underscores the shortcomings of outsourcing U.S. immigration enforcement and services to Mexico, as programs by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the Mexican government, civil organizations, and NGOs have proven insufficient. The Mexican Commission for Refugee Assistance (Spanish acronym COMAR) is overwhelmed by a growing backlog of refugee applicants and suffers from inadequate funding and staffing, while mounting pressure is being exerted on the Mexican government to restrict asylum access at the southern U.S. border.

Humanitarian aid professionals face numerous challenges in securing asylum or legal status for unaccompanied minors, including navigating a complex legal landscape and dealing with limited resources such as mental health services, education, and housing (Cardoso et al., 2021; Greenberg et al., 2021; Padilla, 2021). Unaccompanied minors often lack legal representation, which can significantly impact their immigration proceedings and overall well-being. Integrating into new communities can be a challenging experience for both minors and their parents or sponsors, as they contend with financial constraints, language obstacles, and cultural differences (Cardoso et al., 2021; Greenberg et al., 2021). Unaccompanied minors frequently have distinct mental health requirements arising from their experiences before and during migration, including trauma, familial separation, and educational disruption (Cardoso et al., 2021; Greenberg et al., 2021). Moreover, humanitarian aid workers themselves are at risk of experiencing secondary traumatic stress due to the emotional

and physical demands of their work, highlighting the need for adequate support systems for these professionals as well (Lusk & Terrazas, 2015; Stanković, 2018; Tynewydd, et al., 2020; Rondon-Pari, 2022; Tessitore et al., 2023).

This study aims to explore the challenges faced by humanitarian aid professionals in their work with unaccompanied minors in Mexico. By delving into the experiences of these professionals in the context of the migrant crisis, this study seeks to shed light on this crucial issue.

METHOD

To address the study's objectives, the challenges that humanitarian aid professionals encounter in their daily work with unaccompanied minors were investigated. A qualitative research design was employed and semi-structured interviews were conducted using reflexive thematic analysis (RTA), following the framework of Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019, 2021, 2022). The RTA approach allowed participants to articulate their experiences and the significance they attributed to their reality.

The authors of this paper comprise three researchers with experience in the Mexico-United States immigration crisis and two who specialize in qualitative and critical health psychology research. The first author, whose Ph.D. research forms the basis of this study, provides first-hand experience of working with immigrants, refugees, and children in vulnerable situations.

Theoretical Framework

This qualitative research is rooted in a social constructivist epistemological viewpoint, which asserts that knowledge and understanding are not simply obtained, but rather jointly formed through the connections between people and their surroundings, facilitated by language (Burr, 2015). This viewpoint supports the notion that reality is an interpretation rather than a fixed external reality. Reflexive thematic analysis is an inherently interpretive research methodology that emphasizes the researcher's role as an active participant in the meaning-making process, going beyond their function as an observer. Through this methodology, the researcher reflects on their influence on meaning by considering their biases, viewpoints, and connections with data. It also promotes a more profound, intricate comprehension of the themes, acknowledging that these themes are not merely discovered within the data but are molded by the continuous dialogue between the researcher and the data. Narrative and discourse play a crucial role in constructing reality, reflecting the connection between individual perspectives and shared experiences in shaping our understanding of the world and co-creating knowledge (Bruner, 1991).

Participants

Purposive, convenience sampling was used to select participants working with unaccompanied minors in Mexico. For this study, unaccompanied minors were defined as children who had attempted or at some point intended to transit through the United States and Mexico border but reside in Mexico. Participants were required to have experience working with immigrants and the border

crisis at the national level in Mexican NGOs. No specific length of experience in the field was mandated, although most participants had worked in the field for several years to over a decade.

Participants reported that they had worked at various locations throughout Mexico, with the majority having had experience working on the Mexico-U.S. border. Individuals who met these criteria were contacted via email between May and July 2021 and interviews were scheduled once their consent had been obtained. The sample comprised eight participants, including three men and five women ages 30 to 45, encompassing roles such as mobile advisors, project coordinators, psychologists, integration and liaison officers, deputy mobility coordinators, volunteer coordinators, lawyers, and mental health specialists. All participants were cisgender men and women during the study period.

The Interviews

After informed consent had been obtained, interviews were conducted via Zoom over three months from May to July 2021, in keeping with the health guidelines established by the Mexican government on March 11, 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic (Secretaría de Salud, 2020). Participants were given the choice of recording the interviews or appearing on camera. No incentives were provided, participation was entirely voluntary, and participants were informed they could terminate the interview at any point. Conducted in Spanish, the interviews comprised 21 open-ended, semi-structured questions exploring participants' experiences as humanitarian aid professionals, their training, perceptions of the migratory phenomenon involving unaccompanied minors, personal experience, and the challenges inherent to their work. Adhering to the epistemological framework of RTA, the lead researcher actively observed her reactions and emotions during the interviews, took structured notes on her experience, and maintained reflexive notes throughout the data collection process. The lead researcher personally transcribed all interviews, thereby fostering a closer connection between the research team and the interview texts.

DATA ANALYSIS

Interview transcripts were analyzed using RTA, following Braun and Clarke's framework (2006, 2019, 2021, 2022). This method has evolved since its inception in 2006, emphasizing the creation of themes from patterns of meaning and incorporating the researcher's subjectivity and reflective engagement with the interview texts (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Unlike interpretive thematic analysis, RTA regards researcher subjectivity as a valuable source and integrates reflexivity and recursive engagement with texts, contextualizing meaning within its specific circumstance (Finlay, 2021). The six steps in RTA involved familiarization with transcripts and research notes, manual coding of transcripts (without the use of qualitative software), organization of interview texts into themes and sub-themes, exploration of relationships and patterns between themes, naming themes, and reviewing results in conjunction with the existing literature (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021, 2022). Peer-review checks ensured the credibility of the analysis process, with the research team comparing the reflexive notes.

It is important to note that some parts were translated from Spanish to English during the preparation of this research article, preserving the sociocultural meaning embedded in the original Spanish work. One of the co-authors, proficient in both languages, was responsible for the translation. To preserve the meaning within the participants' texts, results and quotes were provided in both Spanish and English, in keeping with the perspective suggested by Younas et al. (2022). According to these authors, to enhance transparency in qualitative research and promote cross-cultural understanding, it is essential to reflect the social and cultural contextual experiences of participants by including quotes from participants in their original language and the language in which the article is to be published, in this case, Spanish and English. This approach is especially critical for ensuring the credibility of translated qualitative research (Abfalter et al., 2020; Younas et al., 2022), and the authors believe it enhances the quality of their analysis.

Ethical Considerations

The research committee of the Universidad Iberoamericana in Mexico City granted ethical approval for this study prior to its implementation, and the reference was filed under the name of the first author. The interviews adhered to the principles outlined in the Universal Declaration of Ethical Principles for Psychologists (International Union of Psychological Science, 2008), emphasizing respect for participants' dignity, integrity, and confidentiality. Additionally, the study adhered to the Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct established by the American Psychological Association (2017). The study objectives were verbally communicated to participants before they were given consent forms to read and sign. Emphasis was placed on the fact that the study was voluntary and participants were told that they could withdraw from the study at any time. They were also asked to notify the researchers if they felt distressed and needed counselling at any point. Although none of the participants reached out, the researchers were mindful of the emotionally sensitive nature of their work and the fact that some participants may have found it difficult to discuss their work. The researchers were sensitive to this and did not pressure them, letting them share as much as they felt comfortable.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the RTA, transcripts of interviews with eight humanitarian aid professionals were reviewed, unpacking their nuanced understanding of the migrant crisis on the U.S.-Mexico border and their experience assisting unaccompanied minors and migrants in Mexico.

Interconnected Views on Violence and Migration

"Participant 5", a 39-year-old Mexican man serving as a mobility deputy coordinator, made the following statement: "*El país siempre ha sido un corredor migratorio*/The country has always been a migratory corridor [own translation]". This statement emphasizes Mexico's historical role as a "migratory corridor", highlighting its ongoing challenge in managing this migration phenomenon. The humanitarian aid professionals interviewed in this study empathized with the migrant children they looked after and engaged in discussions regarding the broader migrant crisis. "Participant 1", a

42-year-old Mexican woman and project coordinator, elaborated on her perception that the migrant crisis and the increasing number of children fleeing their home countries to reach the United States are driven by uncontrollable violence and crime in their places of origin:

Yo digo que es la violencia, cada vez más los menores están siendo reclutados por el crimen organizado, por las maras, por las pandillas, lo mismo, por ejemplo, en el caso de las niñas es “dame a tu hija para que ande con uno de los míos de la pandilla,” entonces cuál es la reacción inmediata: “me lo dijiste a medio día y para la noche mi hija ya está en camino a la frontera.”

I say it's violence. More and more minors are being recruited by organized crime, by the *maras*, by the *pandillas* (gangs). For example, in the case of girls, it's like, “give me your daughter so she can be with one of mine from the gang.” So, the immediate reaction is: “you told me at noon, and by the evening, my daughter is already on her way to the border” [own translation].

Participant 1 revealed the distressing recruitment ploys by gangs, particularly targeting young girls in Central America. She mentioned *maras*, a criminal gang with origins in El Salvador, which has extended its influence to Mexico according to recent reports (Gómez Hernández, 2023). These gangs have transnational roots, resulting from the deportation of young Central Americans incarcerated in the United States and returned to their countries of origin (Collombon, 2021) gaining prominence in El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala in the 1990s, they are notorious for their extreme violence and involvement in drug and human trafficking. It is a matter for concern that 40% of *maras* now consist of young women (Collombon, 2021), placing girls and women living in *mara*-controlled territories at particular risk of forced recruitment. The term “*pandillas*” refers to the gang phenomenon in Central America that is exacerbating the challenges faced by individuals in the region.

In the following excerpt, “Participant 8”, a 34-year-old male Mexican psychologist working with unaccompanied minors, also sheds light on the circumstances that drive these children to flee:

La violencia y la economía, por otra parte, el abuso que sufren los niños, niñas y adolescentes por parte de familiares directos o externos, abuso sexual, físico, la falta de trabajo, la violencia ocasionada [...] por los mareros.

Violence and the economy, on the other hand, the abuse suffered by children and adolescents from immediate family or external family members, sexual and physical abuse, lack of work, and the violence caused [...] by gang members [own translation].

The recurring themes in the excerpts highlight concerns regarding the power of the gang members or *maras* in Central America and the violence to which children are exposed before embarking on their journeys to Mexico. Study participants demonstrated considerable real-world

⁶ The original quote in Spanish is followed by the translation in English to provide a window into the sociocultural experiences of the participants, who undertake their work in Spanish.

knowledge about the migrant crisis and were well-informed about this complex phenomenon. Participant 1's insightful understanding of the migrant crisis further underscores her deep understanding of this issue:

El crimen organizado, a los traficantes de personas, o sea, es muy redituable la migración indocumentada es un negocio multimillonario [...] Después del tráfico de drogas [...] es el segundo negocio ilegal más redituable del mundo.

Organized crime, for human traffickers, that is, undocumented migration is very profitable, it is a multimillion-dollar business [...] After drug trafficking, it [...] is the second most profitable illegal business in the world [own translation].

Participant 1 described undocumented migration as a “multimillion-dollar business,” drawing parallels with drug trafficking. Recent reports have suggested that undocumented migration is now primarily orchestrated by cartels, yielding substantial profits (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2023). Criminal enterprises generate over 6.75 billion USD annually through their principal smuggling routes, spanning South America to North America and East, North, and West Africa to Europe (UNODC, 2023). Investigations have revealed the interconnected nature of undocumented migration with international criminal gang activities, rendering it a complex geopolitical issue.

According to Participant 5, stating that Mexico “has always been a migratory corridor” provides the context for understanding the migration crisis as a multifaceted phenomenon, with historical migration patterns intersecting with contemporary violence. Participant 1 further expanded on this connection by linking the recruitment of minors by gangs to systemic issues such as organized crime profitability, resonating with other participants' perspectives. This perspective integrates financial motivation with human trafficking and the resulting societal repercussions. Participant 8's reflections on violence and economic hardship depict a bleak reality, in which minors are ensnared in a cycle of poverty and gang threats, compelling them to undertake perilous journeys northward. The collective insights of the participants point to a crisis embedded in transnational organized crime, underscoring the convergence of various factors influencing migration trajectories.

Government Inaction and Psychological Stress

The narratives provided by participants shed light on the challenges faced by humanitarian aid professionals in their efforts to support migrant populations. Participants consistently voiced concerns about their work being under-resourced, understaffed, and disregarded by the government. Participant 2, a 34-year-old Mexican woman and integration and liaison officer, described the limited economic resources available, often resulting in her having to resort to buying supplies and bringing items from home to support children at the shelter where she works:

Definitivamente. No hay recursos económicos. No hay incluso un apoyo por parte de las instituciones por querer darnos un apoyo monetario y es difícil porque hay muchas cosas donde sí se necesita ese recurso y lo que hemos hecho es buscar proyectos, donativos,

voluntariado y eso es lo que nos ha permitido salir. Incluso ha habido momentos en los que tengo que traer cosas de mi casa o comprar mis propias cosas.

Definitely. There are no financial resources, and there is not even support from the institutions wanting to give us monetary support. It is difficult because there are many things for which we need money and what we have done is look for projects, donations, and volunteering, which is what has allowed us to stay afloat. There have even been times when I have had to bring things from home or buy my own stuff [own translation].

“Participant 4,” a 45-year-old Mexican woman who worked as a Coordinator of Area, Projects, and Information, also expressed the lack of government support for reintegrating asylum seekers into society:

No siento que haya políticas públicas realmente enfocadas a satisfacer las necesidades de las personas que están solicitando refugio como para insertarlas realmente a la sociedad por esta parte de los empleos. Si hay empleos informales, mal pagados, sin prestaciones para las personas migrantes; hay algunos programas como de inserción local en algunos estados como Aguascalientes y en el norte, pero fuera de eso no hay las condiciones.

I do not feel that there are public policies really focused on satisfying the needs of the people who are requesting refuge in order to really insert them into society through employment. There are informal jobs, poorly paid, without benefits for migrants; there are some programs for local insertion in some states such as Aguascalientes and in the north, but beyond that there are no conditions [own translation].

“Participant 6”, a 30-year-old Mexican woman who worked as a mobile officer, echoed concerns about insufficient government funding, particularly under the current administration.⁷ She stressed the fact that while the government offers some support to shelters and civil organizations, it falls short of addressing the needs of unaccompanied minors and the migrant crisis:

El gobierno tiene apoyos para albergues, organizaciones civiles para niños migrantes, pero creo que no es suficiente y con esta administración creo que hubo muchos más recortes a organizaciones que apoyan con este acompañamiento a personas en movilidad y principalmente a niños entonces no, no creo que sea suficiente.

The government has support for shelters, and civil organizations for migrant children, but I think that is not enough and with this administration, I think there have been many more cuts to organizations that support people on the move, mainly children, so no, I don’t think it is enough [own translation].

⁷ When the research was conducted in 2021, the government was led by President Andrés Manuel López Obrador.

Participant 1 elaborated on this point, stating that she believes the government has abdicated its responsibility for the migrant crisis, relying instead on the NGO sector, particularly civil society organizations, to address the issue:

Además, es lamentable porque al final del día esto es chamba que le toca al gobierno y entonces el gobierno agarra y se lava las manos con las organizaciones de la sociedad civil, a mí siempre me ha parecido inaudito... yo lo voy a hacer pero lo hacemos de manera precaria, lo hacemos con muy pocos recursos y pues les quedamos también a deber a la gente que estamos tratando de atender por esto mismo, porque aquí la clave siempre van a ser los recursos.

And it's a pity because at the end of the day, this is the government's job and then the government turns around and washes its hands of the matter, handing over to civil society organizations. I have always found that incredible... but we do it precariously, with very few resources, and we fail to deliver to the people we are trying to look after for that very reason, because the underlying issue is always going to be money [own translation].

Moreover, Participant 1 expressed frustration at the government's lack of direct involvement in supporting migrant populations, citing instances where the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) provided essential supplies that should be the government's responsibility:

ACNUR es quien les está comprando el papel de baño, jabón, gel antibacterial, cuando es el gobierno quien debería hacer esto. No creo que no haya recursos, no se están enfocando como debe de ser para lo que tienen que enfocarse. [...] Para mí, el desafío principal es que el gobierno que debería hacerse cargo, no se hace cargo.

UNHCR is the one buying them toilet paper, soap, and sanitizer gel when it is the government that should be doing this. I do not think there is a of lack of funds; they are just not focusing on what they should be focusing on. [...] For me, the main challenge is that the government, which should take charge, is not taking charge [own translation].

Participants expressed frustration and anger regarding the government's role or lack thereof in their work, expressing feelings of abandonment by the Mexican government. These emotions of helplessness and anger may be linked to the work-related psychological distress reported by the eight participants. Stanković (2018) argues that feelings of "helplessness of helpers" are a common phenomenon among humanitarian aid professionals experiencing vicarious trauma.

As researchers practicing RTA, the authors needed to engage thoughtfully with the data and research processes (Finlay, 2021). The recurrent themes of hopelessness and frustration with government inaction resonated with them, as they often grapple with these emotions in their work with migrants in Mexico. In the following excerpt, participant 2 highlights how government institutions often fail to directly engage with the migrant population, resulting in policy decisions that lack awareness of on the ground realities and may inadvertently cause harm:

Otro problema es que las instituciones gubernamentales no tienen un trabajo directo con la población migrante y a veces toman decisiones, generan políticas públicas, leyes y reformas desde su visión, a lo que ellos suponen y creen, como el caso de la reforma de ley de no tener a los niños en detención, lo cual está bien pero... ¿A dónde van a mandar a los niños?, eso no lo ven porque no tienen el acercamiento con los niños y tampoco preguntan a los albergues que tienen trato directo con la población migrante, lo cual se vuelve un problema grave porque hacen suposiciones desde lo que ven o lo que saben y de ahí con ese poder que tienen actúan pero perjudican más que ayudar.

Another problem is that government institutions do not work directly with the migrant population and sometimes make decisions and create public policies, laws and reforms according to their point of view, and what they assume and believe, as in the case of reforming the law to ensure that children are not held in detention facilities, which is fine, but... where are they going to send the children? They don't see that because they have no contact with the children and they don't ask the shelters that do have direct contact with the migrant population, which becomes a serious problem because they make their assumptions based on what they see or know and so, with the power they have, they act but they do more harm than good [own translation].

The lived experiences of migrant children are often overlooked, with participants declaring that these policies only harm children. Participant 7, a 36-year-old Mexican male lawyer, expressed frustration with the legal reforms prohibiting the National Institute of Migration (INM) from holding accompanied or unaccompanied minors at immigration detention facilities, thereby shifting the responsibility of supporting these minors to civil society organizations. His frustration stems from the inability of civil organizations and NGOs to serve these children adequately:

La mayor dificultad que se ha vivido es con la reforma de ley en la que exigen al INM no tener a menores de edad acompañados o no acompañados en estaciones migratorias, entonces con estas limitaciones de no tener a los niños ahí, nos piden auxilio a las organizaciones de la sociedad civil para atender ese tema porque ellos no tienen la infraestructura, no tienen recursos humanos ni materiales para atender la migración infantil con esta nueva ley que fue muy improvisada.

The greatest difficulty encountered is with the reform of the law that prohibits the National Institute of Migration (INM) from having unaccompanied or accompanied minors at immigration detention facilities. Due to these limitations, civil society organizations are being asked to assist in addressing this issue because the INM lacks the infrastructure, human resources, and materials to deal with child migration under this improvised new law [own translation].

Participants also conveyed feelings of anger and hopelessness when discussing the challenges of their work, suggesting that they experienced medium-to-high levels of stress. They mentioned insufficient staff training, low wages, government processing delays, and excessive bureaucratic hurdles hindering daily operations at shelters, reception centers, and civil organizations. As

Participant 2 highlighted the lack of resources and Participant 6 criticized the government's inadequate funding, a picture began to emerge of humanitarian aid professionals grappling with logistical nightmares, moral dilemmas, and emotional burdens.

The thematic link between the government's abdication of responsibility, as argued by Participant 1, and the psychological toll on workers became evident. They find themselves caught in the crosshairs of managing the human fallout from policy failures and the brutal reality of the influence of organized crime on migration. Their frustration and disillusionment are therefore not merely reactions to isolated incidents, but a cumulative response to the intertwined challenges of inadequate resources, government indifference, and the enormity of the migrant crisis. Collectively, these narratives depict a system in which government inaction and inadequate support exacerbate the challenges faced by humanitarian aid workers, thereby contributing to their psychological stress and emotional burden. As researchers, the authors acknowledge their shared frustration with the government's role in addressing the migrant crisis, which may have influenced the thematic analysis.

The Psychological Strain of Working with Unaccompanied Minors

Participants also grappled with work-life balance and the emotional demands of their jobs, as illustrated by the excerpt from Participant 1:

Mucho tiempo para mí el trabajo era todo entonces a mí me costó mucho trabajo empezar a poner más límites de horarios, todos han sido procesos de aprendizaje.

For a long time, work was everything to me, so it was challenging for me to start setting boundaries regarding working hours. These have all been learning processes [own translation].

This quote highlights the emotional strain many humanitarian aid workers endure when assisting unaccompanied minors. Participant 1 is unusual in that she mentioned the emotional coping strategy of establishing boundaries to manage job-related stress, demonstrating an open, proactive approach to addressing the psychological challenges of her work. Stanković (2018) argues that it is essential for humanitarian aid professionals to set boundaries to prevent burnout, to which they are more prone because of their ongoing exposure to trauma narratives. Tessitore et al. (2023) also found that such professionals are at risk of burnout because of the secondary traumatic stress associated with their work. Furthermore, Tessitore et al. (2023) suggest that interventions that focus on teaching humanitarian aid professionals' emotional regulation skills are helpful for combatting potential burnout.

In the following excerpt, Participant 7 reveals his emotional distress when reflecting on his work, describing how the stories of the children deeply affected him:

...me golpeó mucho emocionalmente primero el ver tantas historias dolorosas [...] pero debemos superar esos golpes emocionales para poder atenderlos, no vincularnos sino acompañarlos. Para mí, estos niños son muy valientes.

...it hit me emotionally a lot first to see so many painful stories [...] but we have to overcome these emotional blows to be able to attend them, not bond with them but accompany them. For me, these children are very brave [own translation].

In the above excerpt, Participant 7 used the word “*golpe*” two times underscoring the profound emotional strain he experienced when working with unaccompanied minors. *Golpe* means “hit” in English and conveys a sense of violence, emphasizing the toll of his work on his emotional well-being. Likewise, this participant refers to overcoming these emotional challenges, yet unlike Participant 1 and other women in the study, he does not elaborate on his coping strategies.

In the following excerpt, Participant 7 described a challenging case and acknowledged the impact of work-related stress on his sleep. However, he chose not to delve further into this issue but candidly expressed his need for therapy. Additionally, he mentioned being distant from his family, which suggests a lack of social support:

...en Chiapas tuve un caso que me afectó mucho al grado de no poder dormir, así que soy consciente de que debo tomar terapia porque no solo me afectan los casos de aquí sino la lejanía de mi familia.

...in Chiapas, I had a case that affected me so much that I was unable to sleep, so I realize I should get therapy not only because the cases here affect me, but also because I am a long way from my family [own translation].

These excerpts highlight the psychological stress faced by professionals working with unaccompanied minors and the migrant crisis as they commonly experience emotional difficulties. The research coincides with existing studies stating that humanitarian aid workers often suffer from trauma and psychological distress (Lusk & Terrazas, 2015; Stanković, 2018; Tynewydd et al., 2020; Greene-Cramer et al., 2021; Sultanić, 2021). For instance, Lusk and Terrazas (2015) discovered that over 50% of professionals in the U.S.-Mexico border region reported psychological distress while 84% had sleep disorders. Previous studies have also identified the vicarious trauma and long-term psychological strain experienced by professionals working with migrants in the following regions: the U.S.-Mexico border area (Sultanić, 2021; Rondon-Pari, 2022), Germany (Wirth et al., 2019), Italy (Tessitore et al., 2023), and the United Kingdom (Davey, 2011; Apostolidou, 2016).

The systematic review of 7 934 qualitative studies on this topic by Tynewydd et al. (2020) found that humanitarian aid professionals were vulnerable and required tailored mental health support to cope with their work. This study is consistent with the findings presented here, highlighting the need for research specifically focused on professionals working with unaccompanied minors on the U.S.-Mexico border. Likewise, Sultanić’s (2021) study on

interpreters working with unaccompanied minors yielded similar results, highlighting the vicarious trauma and psychological strain felt by these professionals.

Coping Strategies of Humanitarian Aid Workers

All participants referred to the psychological stress they felt because of their work, which the authors assume was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, participants quickly followed any discussion of their work-related stress with a lengthy explanation of how they were combatting psychological distress. This constituted a coping mechanism, as it enabled them to avoid dwelling on the emotional pain. Their reluctance to discuss unpleasant emotions with a person (the lead researcher) they had only spoken to once before was both obvious and understandable. In the excerpts below, Participants 2 and 3, both women who work with unaccompanied minors, discuss how they cope with the psychological stress caused by their jobs:

Principalmente terapia porque son tus cosas personales, pero cuando ya empiezas a trabajar en este tipo de espacios no puedes ser ajena a lo que está pasando porque estás viendo personas, escuchas historias y las sientes; otra también es darme mis espacios para hacer mis actividades y desconectarme totalmente; también por un tiempo nos dieron terapia por parte de ACNUR; también es tratar de dormir bien, llorar cuando es necesario, hacer actividades como bailar, leer, salir con amigas, con mi pareja.

Mainly therapy because it involves your personal stuff, but when you start working in these types of spaces, you cannot be oblivious to what is happening because you are seeing people, listening to stories and feeling them. Another thing is to give myself space to do my activities and totally disconnect; UNHCR also gave us therapy for a while. It's also about trying to sleep well, crying when necessary, doing activities like dancing and reading, and going out with friends and my partner [own translation].

Tengo un libro donde escribo mucho y saco todo lo que sufro, siento, pienso, mis análisis, todo lo pongo sobre papel y eso me ayuda mucho además de ser un recuerdo para el futuro porque escribo anécdotas, historias y otra forma es poder desconectarme y descansar mentalmente, no pensar en el trabajo y hacer ejercicio, descansar.

I have a book where I write a lot and I put down everything I'm suffering, feeling, thinking, my analyses. I put everything down on paper and that helps me a lot as well as serving as a memory for the future because I write anecdotes, stories. Another way is to be able to disconnect and rest mentally, not think about work and exercise and rest [own translation].

Participants 2 and 3 employed various effective coping strategies, including therapy, engaging in pleasurable activities, disconnection, socialization, and journaling about their feelings and experiences. "Participant 3," a 45-year-old Mexican woman who worked as a mental health specialist, eloquently expressed using writing to alleviate the suffering related to her job. In the original Spanish, she says she has to remove the pain stemming from her job. Sultanić (2021) also identified coping strategies in interpreters working with unaccompanied minors on the U.S.-Mexico border to manage psychological strain and maintain professional boundaries. However,

Participant 5 emphasized that physical exercise, such as walking, running, and cycling, are coping mechanisms:

He buscado espacios de liberación a partir de la parte física, caminar, correr, hacer ejercicio, bicicleta, cosas así que me agotan, me liberan, me desestresan. Creo que sí es muy importante trabajar la parte emocional, que he intentado, pero me cuesta mucho, lo sigo trabajando, ya lo trabajo distinto.

I have looked for spaces of release based on the physical aspect, such as walking, running, exercising, cycling, things like that, that tire me out, give me a sense of release and destress me. I think that it is very important to work on the emotional part, which I have tried but it is very difficult for me, I am still working on it [own translation].

The excerpt from Participant 5 highlights how men in the study tended to prefer physical coping strategies, whereas women often mentioned therapy or journaling. This divergence reflects societal norms around masculinity, where men are expected to appear strong and avoid discussing emotional struggles, a phenomenon well-documented in research (Addis y Mahalik, 2003; Mansfield *et al.*, 2003; Addis & Cohane, 2005; Kupers, 2005). This resistance to seeking treatment can be linked to the construction of hegemonic masculinity prevalent in Mexico and Latin culture (Connell, 1987, 2005; Brittan, 1989; Andrade, 1992; Arciniega *et al.*, 2008; Aragón García, 2017). In these gendered responses to stress, the psychological strain on humanitarian aid workers becomes evident. Participant 1's attempts to set boundaries and Participant 7's encounters with the emotional burden of the children's accounts illustrate the personal costs of their profession. This emotional burden, coupled with societal influence, underscores the importance of nuanced, culturally sensitive structural support for mental health.

Imagining a Better Future

The study participants shared hopeful visions for a better future for migrants, despite grappling with significant challenges. Their recommendations, which were drawn from real-life experiences, underscored the need for systemic changes. Participant 6 stressed the importance of training first contact staff, emphasizing the potential for improved interactions with migrants:

...capacitar al personal que tiene el primer contacto con los migrantes, que son los agentes migratorios y después tratar de establecer lugares donde los migrantes puedan llegar sin tener que depender económicamente de organizaciones civiles.

...train the staff who have the first contact with migrants, who are the migration agents, and then try to establish places where the migrants can arrive without having to depend financially on civil organizations [own translation].

Participant 7 called for reducing bureaucracy in migrant procedures and suggested the need for resolutions for asylum seekers within two or three days rather than six months:

En cuanto a migrantes, quitar la burocratización de trámites, todo lo que se tiene que gastar en tiempo y dinero para poder conseguir una tarjeta verde, y en cuanto a solicitantes de refugio debería de cambiar a un sistema más humanizado [...] que en dos o tres días se resuelva y que no tarden seis meses y ahora en la pandemia hasta 1 año se llevan.

Regarding migrants, it is important to get rid of the red tape in procedures, everything that needs to be spent in terms of time and money to obtain a green card. As for asylum seekers, the system should change to a more humane one [...] to have resolutions in two or three days instead of taking six months, and now during the pandemic, it takes up to a year [own translation].

Participant 8 suggested the need for external psychologists and psychiatrists to supervise cases once a month:

Contratar a un psicólogo o psiquiatra que supervise de manera externa los casos que se llevan aquí por lo menos una vez al mes, ya que al no estar en contacto directo con los chicos pueda supervisar la forma de trabajo libre de prejuicios.

Hire an external psychologist or psychiatrist to supervise cases at least once a month. Since they would not have direct contact with the children, they would be able to supervise the way the work is done in an unbiased way [own translation].

Participant 1 argued that the children needed to be reunited with their families rather than detained. She also suggested that more personnel should be trained in basic legal issues related to migrants:

Los niños no deben estar en detención y deben ser reunificados con sus familias a menos de que haya algún caso de abuso sexual o de violencia. También es importante la capacitación en temas legales básicos a las personas que se encuentran en albergues.

Children should not be held in migrant detention facilities and should be reunited with their families unless there is a case of sexual abuse or violence. It is also important to train people working in shelters in basic legal issues [own translation].

Participant 2's plea for infrastructure improvements at migrant shelters and higher salaries for humanitarian aid professionals underscores the need for tangible improvements in working conditions:

Crear infraestructura, principalmente cubrir los servicios dentro de los albergues como el Internet, incluso hemos tenido casos en los que ya no tenemos agua, luz, gas. Incluso hay albergues donde necesitan el dinero para comprar comida, cobijas, insumos. Es responsabilidad del gobierno proveer el recurso a cada albergue para su mejor funcionamiento. Mejorar la remuneración de las personas dedicadas al servicio de personas en situación de migración y ese apoyo correspondería al gobierno.

Create infrastructure, particularly cover the services within the shelters such as the internet, we have even had cases in which we no longer have water, electricity, or gas. There are even

shelters where they need money to buy food, blankets, and supplies. It is the government's responsibility to provide the funds for each shelter to ensure their optimal functioning. They should improve the pay of those dedicated to serving people in a situation of migration and that support corresponds to the government [own translation].

Participant 2 spoke about how migrant children's basic needs were not being met, and how they required support for their physical, emotional, and psychological well-being. For example, improvements such as enhanced training, better shelter infrastructure, improved psychological services, increased collaboration between institutions and shelters, and higher salaries for humanitarian aid workers are needed. Other participants, including Participant 6, envisaged a future with improved training and infrastructure that could resolve some of the current difficulties. Participant 7 called for streamlined bureaucracy in migrant procedures. At the same time, Participant 8 advocated external mental health supervision, emphasizing systemic changes that would recognize the interplay between policy, practice, and psychological well-being. Envisioning a brighter future enabled participants to find positive aspects in the psychological stress associated with their work and imagine favorable outcomes, which served as a constructive outlet and coping mechanism for the participants.

Limitations

Although the small sample size (eight participants) could be a limitation, this is not a concern in qualitative research, since the authors were more concerned with the deep meanings co-constructed during the interview process. As Huysamen (2022) states when discussing the perceived limitations of qualitative research,

When a peer reviewer critiques qualitative research design for its inability to be replicated precisely by another researcher, or questions its relatively smaller sample size or lack of generalizability, it is akin to judging the quality of an apple on its ability to fly (p. 23).

However, future research in this area could benefit from a larger sample size and more in-depth interviews to gain more insight. For example, conducting only one interview per participant may have limited their willingness to share their experiences, especially when discussing sensitive topics, such as psychological stress. To obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the psychological trauma associated with working with unaccompanied minors, future studies should incorporate multiple unstructured interviews with each participant.

In hindsight, the semi-structured interview schedule may have inadvertently prevented participants from sharing in-depth insights into their experiences. In addition, conducting Zoom interviews, while practical, alters the nature of interviews and co-constructs meaning, potentially affecting rapport and participant engagement. The way research is conducted is changing, as it is now involves virtually co-constructing meaning, and trying to insert into participants' lives in a virtual sense, a method not seen in research before the pandemic (Howlett, 2022).

CONCLUSION

This research examines the challenges faced by humanitarian aid workers assisting unaccompanied minors in Mexico, documenting eight professional accounts in Spanish and English and preserving linguistic integrity. The analysis revealed that the themes of violence, economic hardship, government policy, psychological stress, and coping strategies are not siloed experiences, but are deeply interwoven. They combined to create a situation where these professionals are simultaneously navigators of a broken system, witnesses to profound human suffering, and under psychological strain. Their coping strategies and hopes for the future are therefore not just individual responses but collective reflections on a multifaceted crisis. This research also emphasizes the need for specialized psychological assistance and sheds light on the emotional stress experienced by humanitarian aid workers in this complex situation. This study revealed the necessity for training in the legal aspects of migration and unaccompanied minors.

Additionally, humanitarian aid professionals emphasized the importance of improving shelter infrastructure, enhancing service access, and strengthening partnerships with government agencies. Establishing joint strategies and support agreements is vital for effective aid. This research can inform social programs and legislative proposals to address the migrant crisis, while the potential for more comprehensive comparisons in future research could be enhanced by interviewing professionals from Mexico's northern and southern borders.

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