

A DIALOGUE TO UNDERSTAND VIOLENCE AGAINST IMMIGRANTS

Country: Mexico

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NARRATIVE

From the start, our projects' primary goal was to create awareness in the process of integration of migrant communities into Mexican society in order to understand the manifestations of violence that target these groups. Through a narrative structure, we aimed to present not only the political and legal circumstances of migrants who undergo the process of asylum but also to humanize their struggle and give a voice to their stories.

We then created a strategy on how we would approach different groups that worked specific areas of migration and the legal procedures that were involved. As many of the experts that we interviewed mentioned: *Asylum in Mexico is an administrative and not judicial process*, which meant that almost in its integrity, the regularization depended on filling out the correct paperwork in the appropriate time and manner. For most of the migrants we encountered, this was not nearly as easy as it appeared, given the language barriers and common absence of personal identification documents.

In the Mexican state Chiapas, border with Guatemala, the Institute of Refugees (COMAR) has estimated that more than 40,000 people have applied for asylum in 2019¹, nearly twice as many as the year before. The main condition for applicants is that they remain in their federal entity and district, until they are notified by COMAR regarding their resolution. With this in mind, we targeted the three main states in which this institution was operating: Chiapas, Mexico City and Veracruz. And even though their offices were incredibly saturated and overworked, many of their administrative staff offered a space in their schedule to talk to our team.

Through emails or phone calls, we also contacted the organizations that sheltered refugees while they waited for their paperwork to be processed. Many of these shelters are run by the Catholic Church, a branch created by the Archbishop during the 1990's, according to Sergio Luna who's the director of *La Sagrada Familia* in Apizaco Tlaxcala. In addition to taking our calls, they allowed us to interview their staff so that we would understand the abrupt changes in their infrastructure.

Sergio Luna, had been running the shelter for nearly eight years. Yet after the Caravans of 2018 the migration route changed drastically. As new government policies were implemented to halt the flow of people moving north, more migrants would stop in key cities to wait for Humanitarian Visas or Safe Passage documents. As a result, several shelters including that of Tlaxcala, were adapting their once "transit" infrastructure to that of temporal residency.

It was in this initial visit that we also encountered some manifestations of the hostility that some of these travelers faced while passing through Mexico. Sergio explained to us that some of the residents in Tlaxcala were unhappy with the growing number of migrants in the area and had organized civil protests to request the Shelter be moved out of the city. This would later become a recurring reaction that neighbors exhibited in areas where migrants would gather.

Our second step was engaging with lawyers who offered free legal advice to refugees presenting their case to COMAR. Among these groups were: *Clinica Juridica de la Ibero*, *Programa Casa Refugiados*, *Sin*

Fronteras and Servicio Jesuita para Refugiados.³ Through these legal associations we were able to interview migrants who were currently seeking Asylum and others who had obtained their residency several years ago. We focused on building trust with these individuals and families so that they would feel comfortable enough to share their experiences; many of them would narrate the persecution they had faced in their home country.

The team Producer and myself, were able to visit the INM center in Iztapalapa and speak to several of the individuals that had been detained by migration officials. Photography, video and audio are strictly prohibited, but the experience itself gave us a glimpse as to the conditions and the reality of being in these government institutions. As of August 2019, the Legal Clinic of Ibero has managed to secure the release of dozens of refugees and consistently visits the detention center to give workshops on the procedure of seeking asylum.

After developing the project for several weeks in Mexico City, we decided to move south towards the border states and the Northern Triangle. We spent two weeks in Tapachula and the surrounding area meeting activists and talking to government authorities that specialized on the topic. We also visited three of the major crossing points into the country: Talisman, Ciudad Hidalgo and Tacana. Our plan was to document the migration path and also to get interviews of the residents who lived in the area.

Unintentionally, the timing of our trip coincided with the militarization of the Mexican borders and thousands of National Guard elements were sent to patrol highways, bus stations and the major train route known as *The Beast* or "*La Bestia*". This complicated our activities, given that most migrants were in a state of fear and the main crossing points were deserted. However, after a few days we managed to reconnect with several organizations and also obtain testimonies of protesters outside of the Mexican Detainment center, who had gathered at this site to petition Safe Passage documentation for all African migrants living in Chiapas.

A key point in the project was talking to Servicio Jesuita para Refugiados (Jesuit Service for Refugees), and discussing future plans to encourage integration in Tapachula. Not only have they been motivating local business to offer jobs to incoming migrants but they also conduct training workshops in carpentry, ceramics and construction that anyone living in the area can attend. SJR allowed us to observe these sessions so that we could document and spread the activity to other shelters and institutions. We believe that these types of practices can be adapted to different areas in the country, depending on the needs and resources that are available.

Before heading back to the capital, we traveled several miles north to interview a renown poet and activist named Balam Rodrigo, whose work was recently awarded the "Aguascalientes and Bellas Artes prize 2019"⁴. For many years, his family aided refugees and immigrants who crossed Mexico through the river Suschiate. Nowadays, he presents his poems to communities where immigration has strongly affected their way of life. By establishing a contact with him, he allowed us to conduct an interview and use some of his work in the final assembly of the documentary.

Back in Mexico City, we reached out to a few more shelters, one in Hidalgo called "El Samaritano" and another in the outskirts of the city called "Fundacion Rey". Both had experienced different interaction with the residence of the area and we wanted to document the contrast of the environment. On one hand, "El Samaritano", which is a food bank for traveling migrants, has constantly received help from the citizens in the area. However, Fundacion Rey has struggled more in its interaction with the neighbors. Without a doubt, both have radically different contexts, yet we aimed to document and later present the outstanding differences in social reaction when introduced to a large number of migrants.

As a conclusion to this section, I truly believe we managed to film and document the initial process of integration. For many refugees that we encountered, establishing themselves in this new country has become another giant step in their already extensive journey. The aid that they obtain through different civil groups serves as encouragement but is not always a guarantee that a better life is ahead of them. Much of their integration will also depend on the response that society manifests. Whether it be to welcome with open arms or to keep them at distance.

Before coming to New York, I was a volunteer in a nonprofit organization called DREAMS A.C. To this day, they continue to provide workshops and psychological aid to migrants who are detained during their transit through Mexico. It was during this time that I came into contact with people who were processing Refugee Status in order to avoid deportation and stay in the country. Through their experiences I understood the importance of shedding light on a matter that is often ignored or set aside due to its political and controversial nature.

THE REFUGEE CRISIS:

For decades, Mexico has served as a country of transit for migrants heading to the United States. However, as the migration roads become more dangerous (due to organized crime) or government policies grow stricter, these populations turn to humanitarian organizations or international aid to obtain legal passage through the country. It's in this environment that the refugee crisis in Mexico was born, leading to the overwhelming number of applicants which are currently being processed.

Here is where our project began: These thousands of individuals waiting for their Refugee status to be approved live under very difficult circumstances. Many of them, unable to work given their illegal status, seek aid from shelters and religious or humanitarian groups who offer food and supplies. In the long run, if they receive a positive resolution, they will have to choose between continuing their journey or staying in Mexico.

And yet, for many Mexicans, the constant flow of migrants has created a certain level of hostility. The establishment of neighborhood fences, signs and patrols or only some of the manifestations of a society that struggles with integrating these migrants into their communities. This is why the project is more relevant than ever.

In order to document these events first hand, we traveled to the southern border cities in Chiapas and Guatemala to interview with Shelters, ONGs and Humanitarian organizations. We spent over two weeks recording lawyers, advocates and migrants who are in constant contact with Refugee processes. After returning from the border, we continued our work by conducting more interviews with migrants who had traveled further north into Mexico. The contrast of experiences proved to us that the longer the wait the more desperate these populations became and would sometimes lead to desperate actions.

Because of the subject matter, a lot of the difficulties in execution were related to establishing trust and gaining people's confidence. Most of the migrants had experienced different kinds of abuse which we addressed as sensibly as possible. Personally, this was the more challenging aspect, given that we did our best to empathize with people who had gone through events we could not even imagine. Yet, I believe that the simple act of listening would often be rewarding both to them and to our team.

Communication was also a factor, given that several migrants spoke languages that none of the team knew. We would often resort to nonverbal language or images to explain simple things like direction, addresses and activities. For me, peace would be defined as understanding. Its foundation is empathy, but without a proper perspective on the relevance of another person (or communities) needs we could not create the proper steps towards harmony.

PROJECT IMPACT

In short term, the project served as a way for us to establish networks with those organizations that are striving to find peace in the integration of migrants into Mexican society. We offered help, in any form, to every organization we talked to, encouraging them to reach out to other institutions or individuals that could support their work. Long term, we hope that when the narrative is complete it will give a new depth to the notion of what it means to be a migrant. We believe there's a new chapter that needs to be written and questions that should be addressed, such as: now that Mexico has become a country of residence for thousands of Refugees, how will we obtain integration? Will we become a place that rejects their very existence?

In terms of personal impact, the project served to expand my views on the future of Mexican immigration policies and what changes are necessary to obtain peace in regions where these communities have a stronger presence. I believe that until now, the refugee process could be described as a reactionary strategy, by this I mean that governmental institutions have struggled to adapt only as a result of new circumstances or alarming numbers. Because of this, many aspects of basic needs have been overlooked. As a Mexican, I would like to contribute to creating a more humane and understanding environment for migrants who seek refuge in my country.

In my own opinion, peace needed in Latin American countries, and in particular Mexico, is integration. We need to find a way to shift the dialogue about migration, so that we focus on addressing the actual problematic which is giving these groups of people resources and training so they may make a better life for themselves whether it be in our country or in their final point of destination.



Shelter, “El Buen Samaritano” in the state of Hidalgo.



Refugee applicants in Chiapas outside Tapachula.



Migrant protest outside of INM Offices in Chiapas.