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Latin American migrants' transit/ions and sexual agency reconfigurations

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This paper explores how gender-diverse migrants negotiate their sexual agency as they navigate migration structures, transiting sexual and geographical states of *nepantla* (in-betweenness). Following a transnational life-course approach, this paper situates gender-diverse migrants' sexual agency within the broader context of their lives, across origin and changing spaces of transit and destination. Employing qualitative data from photovoice workshops and individual interviews conducted in Tapachula, and Tijuana, Mexico, the research reveals intricate intersections between migration, sexuality, and identity change. Migrants' narratives highlight early experiences of non-conforming gender expressions that often led to rejection and violence, driving individuals toward survival migration. The findings illustrate how migration impacts identity transitions and affirmations, with new environments presenting both opportunities and obstacles in asserting sexual agency. Migrants' agential negotiations within restrictive migration structures revealed strategic compliance, as well as the active deployment of agency maximizing strategies including alliances with other migrants and organizations. As migrants transit *nepantla*, navigating geographical and gendered mobility, migration governance structures and restrictions, they also build solidarity networks and find innovative ways to negotiate and assert their agency. This paper contributes to ongoing scholarly debates around sexual migration and the sexuality of migration research angles offering a nuanced understanding of sexual agency and identity change in migration, while emphasizing the need for further research into the intersectional experiences of gender-diverse migrants.

KEYWORDS

sexual agency, *nepantla*, sexuality of migration, Latin America, gender diversity

1 Introduction

M. underwent multiple phases of her gender transition as she migrated through Latin America (Figure 1). Similar to other gender-diverse migrants, she embarked on a geographical journey in search of a place where she could safely complete her transition and embody her real self. Her body became the first territory of migration where she transited from a gender to another (Zarco and Chacón, 2020). As she walked through Latin America, her legs became instruments for her geographical and gendered transit/ion. The notion of *nepantla*, a Nahuatl language word that means "in-between space", is highly relevant for M.'s transits and transitions. Gloria Anzaldúa invites us to think about *nepantla* as "the threshold of transformation", as the experience of being in a liminal and transitional space, "that uncertain terrain one crosses when moving from one place to another, when changing from one class, race, or sexual position to another, when traveling from the present identity into a new identity" (Anzaldúa, 2015, p. 56). New ways of negotiating



FIGURE 1

"De [...] a M." by M., Ecuadorian transgender woman seeking asylum. Created during a photovoice workshop held in Tapachula, Mexico. December 2022. Photo prompt: 'My past achievements' (User rights granted to author). Note: The ellipsis [...] represent M.'s name assigned at birth.

agency while crossing borders and territories, represent states of *nepantla*. This paper explores how Latin American gender-diverse migrants transit *nepantla*, negotiating sexual agency as they navigate migration structures.

Migration brings new opportunities and constraints that can initiate, accelerate, or impede sexual and identity changes, deeply influencing individuals' experiences, self-perceptions and wellbeing. For gender-diverse migrants, identity change, affirmation and bodily transformations can be a struggle. This struggle often involves the interplay between internal psychological processes and cultural, religious, and sociopolitical structures that enforce rigid gendered social norms and limit sexual agency. Sexual agency involves individuals' capacity to negotiate strategic choices about their sexual lives including their gendered sexual identity, behavior, and expression (Cense, 2019). When gendered social norms are challenged, discrimination can escalate to severe forms of violence and exclusion, which, when compounded with structural violence, poverty and inequality, can lead gender-diverse people to migrate. Such a form of mobility has been referred to as sexual migration (Carrillo, 2004, p. 58). Exploring how gender-diverse migrants negotiate their sexual agency and gendered sexual identity shifts as they navigate migration and its governance structures, is critical to expand scholarly understandings of sexual change in migration. This is an area of study that has been under-explored especially in Global South contexts (Cvajner and Sciortino, 2021).

Migration not only transports practices across borders but also exposes individuals to new contexts, structures and sexual

From [...] to M.

One of my most important past achievements is becoming who I am today. I am M. My entire family was against it.

M.

ideologies that significantly impact sexual agency and shape identity change (Carrillo, 2004; Stambolis-Ruhstorfer, 2013). Migration implicates "in-betweenness" or *nepantla* states where boundaries associated with (actual or perceived) sexual differences are crossed (Cvajner and Sciortino, 2021). These boundary crossings lead to encounters between strangers, often resulting in new gender performances and unexpected sexual meanings that can create a novel social self (Brigden, 2018; Cvajner and Sciortino, 2021). Concurrently, structures of migration governance and humanitarian systems can also influence how migrants negotiate agency and their gendered sexual identity and expression (Balaguera, 2023a).

Gender and sexual identity and expression relate to how we experience and express our understanding of ourselves as gendered and sexual beings. The notion of gendered sexual identity emphasizes the interdependence of sexuality, identity, and gendered norms shaping individuals' performative articulation of their sexual orientation (i.e., emotional, romantic or sexual attraction), gender identity (i.e., sense of self in relation to gender/s) and expression (i.e., external manifestation of gendered identity) (Butler, 2006; Paredes, 2012; Tasker and Wren, 2002). The body is central to this self-articulation, being the site where gendered sexual identity is performed, inscribed, and transformed (Lemma, 2023). Gendered sexual identity and expression are materialized in bodies based on schemes of perception and the reiteration of social norms and practices transforming bodies into structuring social categories. In this sense, sex and gender, may be thought of as symbolic borders

where different precepts mark the sociocultural guidelines for sexual behaviors defined by genitalia (Zarco and Chacón, 2020).

Gender diversity refers to the ways individuals embrace and express gendered sexual identities that differ from the gender norm within a given specific context. The more specific term “trans” is used to describe persons whose gender identity is different from the sex they were assigned at birth (OHCHR, 2023). “Queer” is often used as an inclusive anti-heteronormative term that refers not only to homosexual and trans people, but also others whose sexuality is deemed “peripheral” (Yue, 2009, p. 69). This term broadens the focus beyond lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) identities, recognizing the fluidity of gender diversity beyond binary frameworks. However, these terms –LGBT with additions like intersex, asexual, and “plus”, and especially queer – tend to be regarded as constructs that may not fully represent the experiences of gender and sexual minorities globally (Mole, 2021). Therefore, influenced by my research collaborators’ recommendations, I use the term gender diversity and gender-diverse people as umbrella terms encompassing heterogeneous expressions, orientations, and identities.

Embodying a gender or genders entails a fluid *nepantla* process of gendered sexual identity re-formation. It involves periods of accelerated transit/ion, as well as moments of pause, settlement, immobility and return. This process is never fully completed, solidified, or made permanent. Instead, it is a performative endeavor, continuously articulated, affirmed and adjusted through sexual agency negotiations across time and space (Butler, 2006). This approach challenges the idea of a “supposedly stable relationship of sex, gender, sexual practice, and sexual desire” (Cammenga, 2019, p. 7), disrupting rigid notions of heterosexuality and homosexuality (Brown et al., 2007). For trans individuals, embodying their gender entails aligning their bodies with their desired gender. This pursuit of identity congruence, or the alignment between external behavior and internal self-perception, is often understood as “gender transition”, encompassing social, psychological, legal, physical, and medical aspects (Fein et al., 2017; Soenens and Vansteenkiste, 2011). The process of embodying gender is not an individual, isolated or autonomous endeavor, but rather a process that is situated within specific sociocultural and geopolitical contexts.

In the context of migration, governance systems, asylum laws, and humanitarian regimes influence gender-diverse migrants’ body projects, and their gendered sexual identities. “Gender labels are associated with different rights regimes” based on a legal hierarchy of vulnerability indicators that prescribe certain forms of embodying genders and sexualities as worthy of protection (Balaguera, 2023a). This “legal violence” is sustained through laws, legal systems and daily practices, that often compel gender-diverse migrants to express their identity in codified ways to meet humanitarian suffering thresholds (Balaguera, 2023a; Galli, 2019; Menjívar and Abrego, 2012). As my analysis demonstrates, in navigating migration structures, gender-diverse migrants face “legal violence” that restricts their mobility, induces poverty, causes gender-based discrimination, and limits their access to housing, jobs, healthcare, and gender-affirming care. This violence intersects with other forms of oppression at the household, community

and state level, manifesting as a continuum across migrants’ lives, from childhood to adulthood, and from origin through transit-destinations, fundamentally constraining their sexual agency.

Migrants’ sexual agency, including their ability to embody their desired gender/s is, thus, influenced by both psychological processes of self-perception and behavioral change, as well as social structures of restriction and opportunity. These structures not only shape how migrants exercise their sexual agency but serve as the basis through which it is enacted. Despite facing structural barriers that constrain their sexual agency, gender-diverse migrants actively develop psychological, relational, and material resources to navigate these challenges, negotiate and expand their sexual agency.

Research on migrants’ sexual agency is scant but evolving. A central theme pertains to the heightened vulnerability faced by gender-diverse migrants, namely, discrimination and greater exposure to abuse by state authorities and criminal organizations (Valenzuela and Anguiano-Téllez, 2022). This vulnerability is compounded by homomisic and transmisic attitudes in areas of origin, transit and destination, alongside weak protection systems in the region, severely limiting migrants’ ability to negotiate sexual agency (Malta et al., 2019). Research also suggests that humanitarian systems play a key role in shaping migrants’ gendered sexual identity and expression, often leading them to adopt rigid gendered expressions that fit vulnerability criteria within restrictive protection frameworks (Balaguera, 2023a). Furthermore, scholars note that humanitarian spaces including shelters and organizations are crucial for migrants’ body and mobility projects. These spaces can support migrants’ goals, but can also constrain them, affecting their ability to negotiate migratory and sexual agency (Balaguera, 2023b; Valenzuela and Anguiano-Téllez, 2022).

Studies further indicate that migration can serve as a catalyst for enhanced sexual agency, through the creation of solidarity networks and expanded opportunities to explore new ways of living gender and sexuality (Carrillo, 2004; Cortez et al., 2023). Moreover, gender transitions among gender-diverse migrants can act as identity congruence strategies, enhance their attractiveness in sexual markets and expand migration pathways, but also pose risks, especially when using risky body modification practices within precarious job markets and weak protection mechanisms (Garbett et al., 2023; Lenti and López, 2024).

While research is illuminating, gaps remain, including a disproportionate focus on transgender women compared to men, and a limited geographical lens centered on South-North mobility, leaving South-South migration underexplored. Little analysis exists regarding how gender-diverse migrants experience the transformation and reconfiguration of their gendered sexual identities and how they expand sexual agency, beyond violence-centric perspectives (Cvajner and Sciortino, 2021; Valenzuela and Anguiano-Téllez, 2022). Additionally, the transnational life course approach has been scarcely used despite its potential to enhance our understanding of how sexual agency is negotiated in migration and influenced by migrants’ past experiences, including before migration. This approach views migrants’ lives as a series of interconnected transitions that are situated in specific social, cultural and geographical contexts, recognizing that life experiences, including migration, are influenced by past decisions and future aspirations (Erlinghagen, 2021; Kōu et al., 2015).

Sexuality and migration scholars have also called for innovative research techniques and participatory arts-based research (PABR) methods to better understand gender-diverse migrants' lived experiences (Blidon, 2016; Marnell et al., 2021; Moralli, 2024).

In face of these research gaps and calls for scholarly attention, this research paper draws on the sexual migration and sexuality of migration research angles, and employs PABR to explore how gender-diverse migrants negotiate and assert their sexual agency as they navigate migration within Latin American, and specifically in Mexico (Carrillo, 2004; Cvajner and Sciortino, 2021). In order to understand gender-diverse migrants' sexual agential negotiations, it is essential to situate their agency within the broader context of their lives including before migration, interweaving identity and migration aspirations across spaces of origin and transit-destination.

1.1 Latin America's vertical border: Mexico

In recent years, the landscape of migration in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) has experienced rapid shifts in mobility patterns, migrant demographics, and migration governance policies (Smith and Masferrer, 2023). While outmigration from LAC to the US, Canada, or Europe persists, intraregional migration has become increasingly prominent (Selee et al., 2023). Despite this trend, migration studies have largely maintained their focus on South-North mobility. While the terms Global South and North are subject to debate and lack precision, they remain valuable as analytical and policymaking tools. The South and North are not merely geographical areas, but rather dynamic territorial, relational, structural and political constructs concerned with power distribution in the global order (Sud and Sánchez-Ancochea, 2022).

Mexico, in the geographical north but economically in the South, has emerged as a key migration hub where thousands of LAC and extracontinental migrants (temporarily) settle, and (permanently) transit. Although Mexico's role as a sending and transit country has been extensively examined, its function as a settlement area has received less attention (Wiltberger, 2022). Furthermore, issues of gender and sexuality remain particularly underexplored, often limited to the production of sex-disaggregated data. Considering these absences and growing South-South migration trends, my research focuses on Mexico as a site of both transitory and more permanent settlement for LAC survival migrants. The notion of survival migration is particularly relevant to the situation of LAC migrants transiting and settling in Mexico. Survival migrants include individuals who have been compelled to migrate due to existential threats without domestic remedies, but who fall outside the dominant definition of a "refugee" (Betts, 2010). This migratory condition combined with their gender identity, expression and sexual orientation, along with race and class, create social conditions of vulnerability that expose them to heightened marginalization and risks.

For some survival migrants, Mexico represents the last country before reaching the north, it symbolizes the anteroom to the "the American dream". However, its restrictive migration policies and geography create a vertical border, marked by obstacles that limit migrants' agency, leading to "confinement in motion", insecurity,

and lack of protection (Balaguera, 2023b; Varela, 2018). While some survival migrants see Mexico as a destination from the onset of their journeys, for many, it has become an unexpected destination. Since 2021, the country has witnessed a significant increase in both regular and irregular migration, alongside a staggering surge in the number of asylum claims, a majority of which remain unprocessed.

Mexico's approach to migration and asylum governance is complex and often contradictory, oscillating between humanitarian and containment strategies. These ambivalent positions are driven by both external pressures and internal political dynamics. Despite the existence of progressive legal frameworks for migration and a rhetoric that suggests a benevolent government committed to protecting migrants, the Mexican state, in practice, employs various control measures to identify, contain, and deport migrants. This is, in part, a consequence of Mexico's role as a buffer for US immigration control, leading to the implementation of strategies that externalize border control responsibilities, effectively shifting them from the US to Mexico (Casas-Cortes et al., 2015; Sarlak, 2025).

The instrumentalization of refugee status and complementary protection, coupled with the intensification of migration control and border securitization, aided by Mexico's accelerated militarization of public security, supports migrant containment efforts. This approach uses the overwhelmed asylum system as the primary means for survival migrants to obtain migratory documentation, even if many do not want to stay in the country. Consequently, the asylum system's capacity is strained, functioning as a means of migration containment. The Mexican Commission for Refugee Assistance (COMAR) has repeatedly reported that their capacity and budget is not enough to process all applications, and the case backlog is high. Between 2018 and 2022, more than 610,000 asylum applications were registered, with COMAR having been able to assess only 30 percent of them (COMAR, 2024). Asylum applicants face long waiting periods for resolutions in cities where they initiated their cases, often in insecure locations with scarce support networks. While the asylum system presumably aims to fulfill its mandate by processing, analyzing, and adjudicating asylum claims, its overuse inadvertently reinforces containment strategies and diminishes its ability to effectively execute its primary function. This leads to the system failing both asylum seekers who intend to stay in Mexico and other survival migrants who are simply looking for safe passage (Masferrer, 2023). This situation is supported by infrastructures of containment, encompassing a range of spatio-material tactics including policies and services aimed at restricting and controlling migratory agency, strengthening US border externalization practices through physical and digital mechanisms (Casas-Cortes et al., 2015; Sarlak, 2025; Torre-Cantalapiedra et al., 2021).

These complex dynamics occur within one of the most dangerous countries in the world (ACLED, 2024). Violence and insecurity in Mexico confluence with high levels of multidimensional poverty, inequality, widespread corruption, impunity, the war on drugs, arms and human trafficking, with migrants fleeing to and through Mexico from similar circumstances (ONC, 2021; Rodriguez, 2016; CFR, 2025; Crisis Group, 2025). Violence against gender-diverse people is a key part of the country's security crisis. Mexico is the second most violent

country for gender-diverse people in the Americas (TvT, 2024). Organizations have repeatedly reported significant human rights issues involving violence, discrimination and authority abuse against these groups (Advocates for Human Rights, 2022; Beer, 2024). Despite progressive laws that protect gender-diverse people's rights, the rule of law is weak, with corruption, state neglect and impunity sustaining violent pluralities.¹

Within this context, Tapachula in Chiapas (south) and Tijuana in Baja California (northwest) have become significant mixed migration hubs, functioning as transit and settlement zones along heavily traversed migratory routes (Figure 2). As a primary entry point, the southern town of Tapachula has the largest asylum application rates in the country (COMAR, 2024). Many migrants get stuck there due to complex migration and asylum governance practices that slow down documentation processes, creating a bottleneck that contains migrants in the southern region. Tijuana is home to the busiest border crossing in the world. It serves as a gateway to the US and an area of settlement. Due to restrictive immigration policies, many migrants have had to wait in Tijuana for procedures to enter the US. These three cities, Tapachula as an entry point and bottleneck area, and Tijuana as an exit, border enforcement and settlement area, are key to understanding gender-diverse migrants' experiences and the factors shaping their sexual agency negotiations within structures of containment.

¹ Mexico ranks 118 out of 142 countries in the World Justice Project's Rule of Law Index, scoring worse than El Salvador and Guatemala (WJP, 2024).

2 Methodology and analytical strategy²

My methodological approach was shaped by my experiences and background, including my identity as a *mestiza* cisgender woman with a personal and familial history of migration.³ I conducted in-person research in Tapachula, Mexico City, and Tijuana from October 2022 to July 2023, supplemented by online research from May 2023 to January 2024. I collaborated with ten civil society organizations (see Acknowledgments) to conduct observations, volunteer my support, facilitate nine group photovoice workshops (three per city) for refugees and other migrants, and conduct life-story interviews with workshop participants. This paper draws from my work in Tapachula and Tijuana, focusing on my collaborations with gender-diverse migrants. A detailed account of my collaborations with gender-diverse organizations is beyond the scope of this paper. The analysis centers on the lived experiences of gender-diverse migrants from a gender-informed lens that recognizes the complex intersections of various identity markers and their impacts on migrants' experiences.

Guided by a transfeminist and phenomenological approach, I employed a QUAL + quan mixed-methods (MM) and multi-sited

² This research project is part of my doctoral project in Migration Studies at the University of Oxford and was ethically cleared by the Social Sciences and Humanities Interdivisional Research Ethics Committee.

³ The term *mestiza*-o is generally used in Latin America to describe people of mixed ancestry with a European and an indigenous background (Gonzalez-Barrera, 2015).

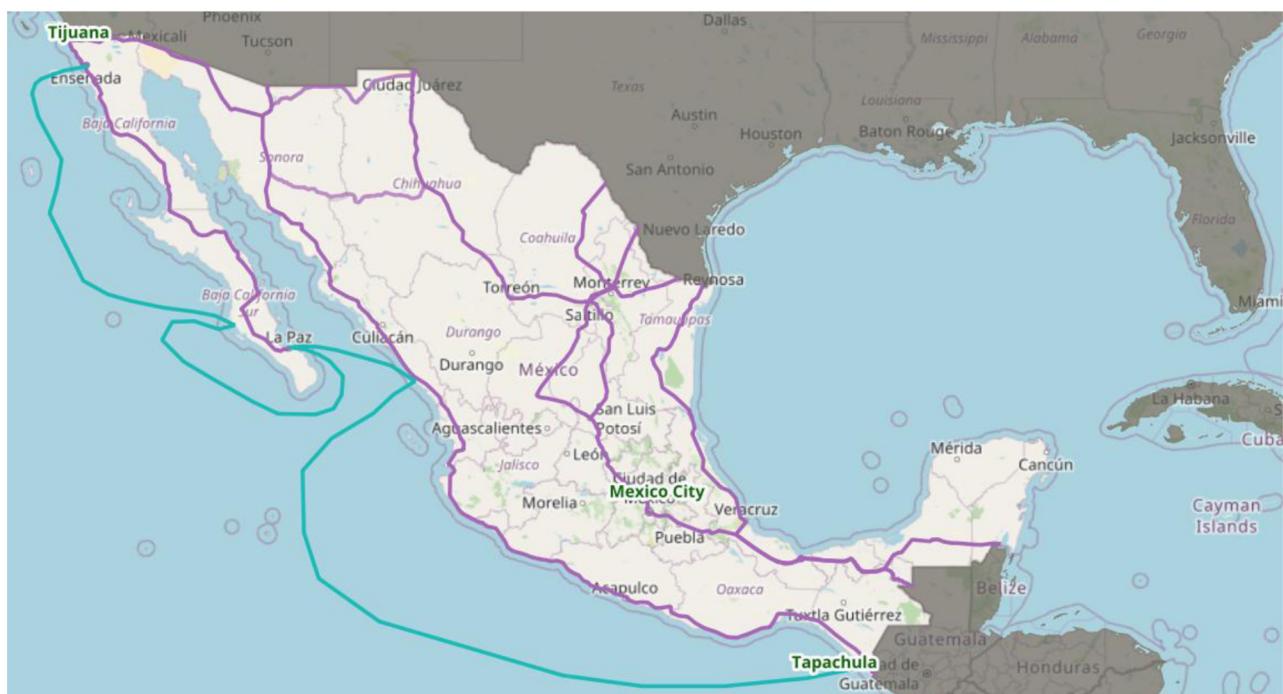


FIGURE 2
Locations of Tapachula, Mexico City and Tijuana along major migration routes through Mexico. Created by the author.

research framework, and integrated participatory arts-based elements (Schoonenboom and Johnson, 2017).⁴ Within this methodological framework, and leveraging my expertise in psychology, I adopted a “radical listening” stance, fostering an interest in understanding others’ “standpoints and axiological positions” without trying to change them, while remaining open to being changed (Kincheloe, 2004; Tobin, 2009, p. 505). This stance acknowledges ongoing power relations, trying to reduce asymmetries, fostering researchers’ self-awareness, active listening, relational and participatory exchange. This methodological approach is grounded in my theoretical framework, enabling me to co-create a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of migrants’ processes of sexual agency negotiations within restrictive migration structures. Furthermore, it opened spaces where research collaborators expressed their interpretations of their lived experiences not only orally but through more creative means.⁵

Based on my experience collaborating with migrants in Mexico and East Africa, I chose to integrate participatory arts-based research methods (PABR). I recognized that relying solely on more traditional methods such as interviews, has limitations in generating an in-depth and nuanced understanding of lived experiences, thereby affecting the profundity of academic and policy-relevant contributions. As recommended by preceding migration research, I combined PABR with more traditional techniques, namely, interviews and observations (Bagnoli, 2009; Carlson et al., 2012; Moskal, 2010; Saksena and McMorrow, 2021). This combination of methods was crucial to truly engage in the radical listening of my collaborators’ experiences, enabling multidimensional understandings of their processes of agency negotiations and transformation in contexts of migration. I specifically used the photovoice method, alongside photo-elicited group discussions, interviews and surveys. Survey data analysis falls outside the scope of this paper.

Photovoice mixes participatory photography and narrative creation, fostering a conducive environment for research collaborators to articulate their experiences through images they capture and accompanying “voices” or narratives they create for their images. These creations are then collectively discussed among research collaborators, promoting critical dialogue (Schenker et al., 2014). In my research context, this method offered unique advantages over other arts-based approaches. Photovoice centered collaborators’ voices by putting the lens in their hands, fostering expressions of agency through self-representation and visual storytelling. It helped redistribute power in the research process, allowing collaborators to decide what they wanted to share (Budig et al., 2018; Valiquette-Tessier et al., 2015). Life-course interviews were employed to situate collaborators’ visual narratives within the wider context of their lives, recognizing agency’s dynamic nature, being influenced by past experiences, future aspirations, and present circumstances (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998). The

combination of visual data, with the depth of the interviews, enabled the generation of nuanced understandings regarding the complex experiences of collaborators.

I conducted research activities in Spanish by collaborating with shelters serving gender-diverse migrants in Tapachula and Tijuana. I initiated contact with the LGBT + shelters, Casa Frida in Tapachula, and Casa Arcoíris in Tijuana, presenting my project and offering volunteer support in exchange for their participation. Shelter staff appreciated this mutual support approach. I offered one workshop in each city. Collaborators were openly invited by shelter staff by distributing invitation flyers I designed. Participation was voluntary and migrants were informed of their right to decline participation in the workshop or interviews without negative consequences. The workshops were held at the shelters’ facilities in private spaces. 11 gender-diverse individuals took part of the workshops – six in Tapachula and five in Tijuana. Participants ranged in age from 21 to 29, and were from Ecuador, El Salvador, and Honduras. Each workshop comprised two 4-hours sessions and focus group discussions, scheduled at a time convenient for the participants. No monetary compensation was offered, refreshments were provided at all interactions, and collaborators were given an SD card with the photographs they created. Collaborators expressed their satisfaction with the workshop and individual conversations, noting that these interactions provided a valuable space for connection, sharing concerns, and feeling heard.

Through the workshops my collaborators and I co-created spaces where we explored creative and participatory techniques while engaging in group conversations about identity and self-perceptions, values, past achievements, aspirations, and about how migration can transform one’s life externally and internally. After the photovoice sessions I invited my collaborators to an individual life-story interview which lasted 1 to 2 h. All photovoice workshop participants completed the interviews. Offering the workshop before the interview helped us “break the ice”, facilitating deeper, more open discussions during the interviews. As a trained psychologist, I was equipped to manage potential situations of emotional distress, while preventing vicarious trauma. After the interviews, my collaborators and I maintained contact over social media and had an individual interviews 6 months later. I maintained social media contact with 10 participants and conducted follow up interviews with five of them. Coupled with that, I carried out interviews with experts, activists, practitioners, government agents and local community members.

The ensuing analysis is grounded in the narratives shared by my collaborators during the workshops, group discussions and individual interviews. I conducted the data analysis in Spanish, developing coding frameworks in English using NVivo 14. My analysis uses an arts-informed eclectic approach, combining thematic analysis (TA) and interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) (Capous-Desyllas and Bromfield, 2018; Kaplan, 2004; Knowles and Cole, 2008; Wang and Hannes, 2020). I employed a staged methodology where TA was conducted first to identify themes, specific cases, experiences, and interpretations, which were then further explored using IPA. I subsequently refined the TA and IPA analysis iteratively. I applied a double hermeneutic approach to analyse photovoice data. I analyzed photographs first as visual data, and integrating verbal data at a subsequent stage. This double hermeneutic involved understanding

⁴ The QUAL+quan label indicates a design where the core component was qualitative and the supplemental component was quantitative, both implemented concurrently (Schoonenboom and Johnson, 2017).

⁵ I use the term ‘research collaborators’ to refer to the individuals who took part of my research project, acknowledging their active role in co-producing knowledge.

the meaning that collaborators ascribed to their photo-stories within the broader contexts of their experiences and adding my own interpretations while corroborating my interpretations with them over social media. Furthermore, this analysis was contextualized within the social circumstances in which the creations were produced. This approach entailed an intra-case and inter-case analysis, combining IPA and TA, and integrating a constant comparative method (Thompson et al., 2021). I contrasted the photo-narratives with the comments my collaborators made about their creations during the focus group discussions and life-story interviews, shaping coding frameworks that I iteratively refined.

3 Sexual agency negotiations in transit/ion

This analytical part uses primary data to explore how gender-diverse Latin American migrants negotiate sexual agency as they navigate migration structures in Mexico. The analysis is divided into two sections. The first uses a transnational life-course lens to situate gender-diverse migrants' sexual agency within the broader context of their lives, including before migration. This part identifies the enabling and constraining factors that shaped migrants' sexual agency throughout their life trajectories, and which represented major factors shaping their aspirations to migrate. The second section concentrates on how geographical mobility shapes gendered mobility processes and sexual agency, concentrating on how migrants navigate containment structures that "confine them in motion" (Balaguera, 2023b) and how they access resources, create networks, negotiate and expand their sexual agency.

3.1 Becoming genders in lands of origin

Becoming an embodied gender is a fluid *nepantla* process, a journey of gendered sexual identity formation that often begins early in life within national and "home" borders. Vargas, a 29-year-old Salvadoran woman in masculine transition, learnt from a young age that expressing a non-heteronormative identity could result in serious harm. She recalled how, when she was exploring lesbianism, her father beat her with a machete after learning from a friend that she had been seen kissing the friend's daughter and punished her with not going to school anymore. These punishment fundamentally shaped Vargas' sexual agency as she learnt to hide her sexual orientation to preserve physical wellbeing.

Among transgender migrants, crossdressing was often mentioned as a common transition practice, typically occurring in childhood and early adolescence. These early explorations were also met with misunderstanding and rejection from family and community members. Jenifer, a 23-year-old Honduran trans woman seeking asylum, knew she was a girl since childhood. By the age of seven, she agentically expressed this by wearing feminized clothing, adapting her clothes to be tighter. Many of my collaborators shared similar experiences, modifying their clothing as they grew up to make them appear more stereotypically masculine or feminine. Jenifer also preferred playing stereotypically

feminine games with other girls, which led to reprimands from her parents, cousins, siblings, and grandparents. As she recounted, "everyone rejects you, and you feel like you do not know what to do. They talk among themselves and start destroying you".

Vargas, and Jenifer's narratives illustrate how sexual agency, enacted through nonconforming sexuality and gender, is sanctioned through the body, language and personhood (Canninga, 2019). These disruptive agentic behaviors signal a recognized "visible strangeness", a "figure that is painfully familiar in that very strange(r)ness", a figure that must be "corrected" or excluded and marginalized (Ahmed, 2020, p. 21). These sanctions deeply influence individuals' sexual agency, shaping how they make choices about their sexual identity, behavior, and expression (Cense, 2019), pushing them to the margins and forcing them to hide.

Experiences of domestic violence due to non-conforming gendered sexual identity, orientation and expression were common. This included physical violence by household members, psychological aggression, and attempts to force them into heterosexuality and conform to gender norms. As my collaborators grew older, violence became unbearable, forcing them to relocate, seeking refuge with friends, relatives, on the streets and eventually abroad. For example, El SV, a 29-year-old gay man with refugee status, escaped domestic violence at age 13 after disclosing his sexual orientation to his father who responded violently by forcing him out of the house. EL SV had to sleep in a park until a friend offered him a place to stay. SV's experience denotes how he transited *nepantla*, inhabiting a liminal and transitional space not only in sexuality but in being forced to move from one place to another. His extended family's rejection further increased his vulnerability and isolation, exposing him to heightened risks. This highlights how gender-diverse youth face overlapping forms of marginalization in homomisic and transmisic contexts.

Domestic violence compounds with community and state violence. Ale, a 29-year-old trans man from El Salvador, was accepted by his family after initially facing rejection. Nevertheless, transmisic attitudes in his country of origin, combined with generalized violence, precarity, and political oppression, eventually forced him to flee. As a teenager, Ale was detained multiple times by the police because of how he expressed his gender. The police even called his mother to tell her that he was attracted to women, and that this could lead him to become a criminal. This harassment reflects the negative social perceptions of gender diversity in El Salvador and how these prejudices can lead to their criminalization.

As an adult, Ale used to work as a taxi driver and bought a house and a car on credit. Due to his masculinized gendered appearance, he was able to "pass as a man". Like many other Salvadorans, he had to pay gangs a fee to ensure his safety while working. For a time, he managed to earn enough to support himself and his daughter, as well as cover the gang fees. However, when the state of exception was established by President Bukele's administration, "the situation became a nightmare", he recounted. Multiple organizations have reported widespread human rights violations against prisoners and local communities under the state of exception in El Salvador, which has serious gendered, racialised and classed implications (Amnesty International, 2024).

Nationwide mass searches are regularly conducted to identify gang members and their associates. These searches demonstrate

the state's biopower, as officials scrutinize bodies, classifying those with tattoos as dangerous gang members, and those without as potentially safe.⁶ This control over life condemns those "linked with gangs" based on tattoos to a life in prison. "They check your body to see if you have tattoos like the ones gang members have". Ale was stopped by police on several occasions. He was once stopped while driving his car with his cisgender female partner and wearing a gender diversity flag t-shirt. Police officers forced him to remove his clothing to check for gang-related tattoos and, upon noticing his breasts they bullied him and his partner, and violently threatened with showing them "what real men are". Ale was detained multiple times, facing questions about gang members and sexual threats. Ale sought the support of an LGBT+ organization to flee El Salvador, leaving his daughter with family and giving up his car and house. Ale and his partner were relocated to Guatemala, and from there to Mexico where they encountered members of the gang who were persecuting them, leading them to seek refuge in the US.

Ale's experience shows how the intersections of transmisic attitudes, socioeconomic vulnerability, gendered violence perpetrated by both state actors and gangs, influence sexual agency. These factors manifest differently depending on how "strange bodies" are gendered and accordingly treated (Ahmed, 2020). Despite facing challenges, Ale negotiated his ability to embody his gendered sexual identity, wearing masculinised clothes, and achieving financial independence in male-dominated sectors. "Passing" as a cisgender man provided a degree of protection but involved life risks, especially when being subject to police checks. When his body was recognized as a "strange", feminized and sexually abuseable figure, his masculinity was denied, leading to sexual abuse threats to regulate his behavior, and "teach" him what it is to be a "real man".

This "necropower" sustains the right to dispose of "strange bodies" that fall outside normalized gender scripts (Ahmed, 2020; Mbembe, 2003).⁷ For most of my gender-diverse collaborators, the risk of death in their countries of origin due to compounding factors like gang violence, state abuse, trans- and homomisia at the household, community and state level, was a tangible and ever-present threat. This risk was not only a physical possibility, but also a social, political, and civil threat stemming from "prolonged exposure to violence, neglect, deprivation, and suffering" (Cammenga, 2019, p. 243). Even in these highly oppressive circumstances, ambivalent forms of agency and resilience are still possible, though restricted.

⁶ "Biopower refers to a power that exerts a positive influence on life, that endeavors to administer, optimize, and multiply it, subjecting it to precise controls and comprehensive regulations" (Foucault, 1990, 137).

⁷ "[N]ecropolitics and necropower account for the various ways in which, in our contemporary world, weapons are deployed in the interest of maximum destruction of persons and the creation of *death-worlds*, new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of *living dead*" (Mbembe, 2003, 40). Necropolitics highlights the political instrumentalisation of death, subjugating "life to the power of dead" (Mbembe, 2003, 39).

3.2 Agentic transit/ions

Migration, a state of in-betweenness or *nepantla*, can shape gendered mobility processes and sexual agency. Entering new environments, and accessing new social, material, psychological, and informational resources, as often occurs through migration, can propel gender-diverse migrants' sexual agency. Conversely, migration, and specifically survival migration, can restrict resources, exacerbate marginalization and limit the availability of support networks. However, even when survival migration involves extreme forms of violence that limit migrants' agency, migrants negotiate and take control of areas of their lives and decision-making processes. Sexual agency in survival migration manifests in various ways that reflect migrants' limited but real ability to define valuable goals and act upon them within the confines of power structures, migration governance and humanitarian systems (Alkire, 2008; Emirbayer and Mische, 1998). In this part, I explore how gender-diverse migrants navigate restrictive migration structures, negotiating their sexual agency as they geographically and sexually migrate, transiting multidimensional forms of *nepantla*.

3.2.1 Navigating mobility and containment

Before reaching Mexico, Vargas relocated within El Salvador several times, mostly in childhood due to lack of housing and parental negligence. As an adult, she emigrated through Mexico to the US, where she requested asylum, fleeing gang violence and life threats. In the US, Vargas found a supportive environment with her sister, who accepted her sexual orientation, allowing her to feel safer and freer to express her gender. This perceived freedom was embodied by her decision to cut her hair. Vargas' perception of safety was framed by her aspiration of not returning to El Salvador and her sister's acceptance which was a key source of support and validation, helping her to perceive herself as able and entitled to exercise sexual agency and express her gender.

However, Vargas faced challenges in the US. She was unable to obtain a social security number, which prevented her from accessing regular employment with better working hours, "from 8 am to 5 pm instead of 6 am to 6 pm", as she stated, reflecting the conditions of exploitation that many migrants face in the US. Legal information was in English, and she was unclear about the steps to get work authorization. As she recounted her experience, I realized that she never attended her asylum hearings which can result in removal *in absentia* or deportation (CLINIC, 2019). Many asylum seekers miss their hearings due to lack of information, fear of authorities, and language barriers. Confused, without migration documents, and in need for employment, she decided to get a fake social security number, which led to her arrest, 1-year incarceration, and deportation back to El Salvador.

Upon returning to El Salvador, Vargas faced criticism from her family and community due to her new gender expression, her short hair. She was warned about the unwanted attention she would receive from gangs due to her gender nonconforming appearance, exemplifying another manifestation of biopower exercised by families, communities, formal and informal authorities (Foucault, 1990). Terrified about the gangs, she remained confined to her

family's house. After several months, she began a relationship with a woman. However, a local gang member, who was attracted to Vargas' girlfriend, threatened them with death after witnessing them kissing, giving them just 20 min to leave the neighborhood. This was the second time in her life that she was seen by a man kissing a woman and severely punished, reflecting the life-long oppression faced by gender non-conforming people. Fearing for their lives, they fled to a distant village. After a few years working in agriculture and in fear of returning to their previous residence, they decided to migrate to the US through Mexico.

Like many migrants, Vargas and her girlfriend entered Mexico via Tapachula and applied for Mexican asylum to unlock mobility throughout the country. They had to wait several months in Tapachula before receiving migratory documentation. This is a form of "confinement in motion" – where migrants face restrictions and unfreedom while migrating (Balaguera, 2023b). This confinement is a result of Mexico's "infrastructural containment" approach which uses the legal figure of asylum as the only viable means for survival migrants to secure legal migratory documentation to enable safer mobility across the country. This forces migrants to wait for extended periods of time in unknown cities and with minimal support. Experiences of confinement in motion, are shaped by the intersection of gender, sexuality, class and other social markers. For gender-diverse migrants, the consequences of confinement impact their sexual agency in ways that vary widely across individuals.

Gender-diverse migrants often adjust or conceal their gendered sexual identity and expression to avoid discrimination and protect their wellbeing during confinement. Vargas and her girlfriend maintained a low profile and avoided displays of affection in humanitarian spaces like shelters and organizations, and at public places. Vargas' gender expression, involving more stereotypically masculine clothing and short hair, went generally unnoticed except at migrant family shelters where, "people don't feel comfortable, they don't like seeing people like us", referring to other migrants. Other gender-diverse collaborators narrated similar experiences of discrimination mainly from other migrants. Trans women often opted for a more masculine gender expression, especially during transit and when sleeping on the streets. Gay migrant men also minimized behaviors that could have signaled their homosexuality. Nevertheless, their male bodies led to exclusion, as family shelters, which are the majority, often deny access to single men, prioritizing single women, women with children and family units. These forms of discrimination in conditions of survival migration are manifestations of necropower, exposing gender-diverse people to heightened life risks, subjecting them to invisibilisation, and limiting their ability to exercise sexual agency and embody their gender (Caravaca-Morera and Padilha, 2018).

Even if shelters and organizations provide critically needed assistance, they are part of Mexico's "waiting infrastructure", which inadvertently aids confinement logics, while introducing a further layer of control through restrictive rules to be followed. While these rules enable order and control over shelter functioning and residents, migrants often experience them as additional unfreedoms limiting their autonomy and ability to negotiate their sexual agency. For instance, some shelters prohibit the introduction

of make up into their facilities, requiring migrants to leave it in a staff-monitored area. Similarly, access to gender-affirming care (GAC) may be restricted, as in the case of Eny, a trans woman who was denied GAC by shelter staff claiming medical reasons, even without a medical examination. "I felt violated because a right was being limited", she explained. Eny's power to negotiate her sexual agency was undermined by her dependence on the shelter's assistance. She was not able to afford her own GAC and could not leave the shelter due to lack of financial resources, a situation that patronized her and fundamentally limited her sexual agency.

Experiences of confinement in motion also involved socioeconomic challenges that migrants navigated by generating income through strategies shaped by gendered identity markers, and migratory status. Trans women who tend to adopt a more visible gendered expression, face compounding challenges, pushing them to take on precarious jobs that intersect with their gendered transitions. Despite her qualifications, Eny faced transmisic discrimination, being denied work at beauty salons due to employers' concerns about customer discomfort. This discrimination led her to re-engage in sex work. After confinement in southern Mexico, Eny relocated to central Mexico where she found work at a hair salon. However, her income was insufficient, forcing her to supplement it through sex work to afford GAC and support her family. After struggling to establish herself in central Mexico, she decided to leave for Tijuana, where she accessed an LGBT+ shelter that provided free GAT. Similar to other transgender migrants, her experience demonstrates the complex intersection of gendered identity, discrimination, poverty and confinement in motion (Balaguera, 2023b). This confinement undermined her autonomy, fostered aid reliance, exacerbated poverty and the risk of sexually transmitted diseases, and limited her sexual agency.

Transgender migrants' transition processes are impacted by their geographical transit, and their navigation of Mexico's containment infrastructure, which provides Mexican asylum that does not recognize their gender identity. Despite this legal violence that misgenders and disregards transgender identities, accessing documentation to unlock mobility, is nonetheless a crucial achievement for many. For instance, Jenifer created a photo-story (Figure 3), representing her humanitarian visa, which allows asylum seekers to leave Tapachula, where her sex is marked as *hombre* (man) and her past name is used. Despite this misrecognition, this represented a multilayered achievement as it enabled her to travel, and help her loved ones, demonstrating her worth to those who disbelieved her.

Processes of gender exploration, reconfiguration and affirmation in migration, were not only influenced by structural factors but also by transnational familial dynamics. Sabel, a Honduran trans woman, had been in Mexico for about two and a half years when we met, and she did not take GAC during all that time. She navigates between masculine and feminine gender expressions. Out of fear of rejection from her family, she embodies a masculine performance when speaking to them on video calls and confirmed that if she were to live near her family, she would likely leave her Sabel identity behind. However, without them, she would rather maintain her feminine identity. Her

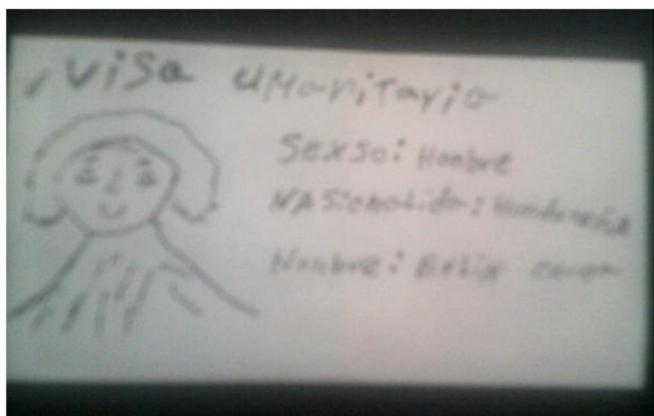


FIGURE 3

"Cumpliendo siempre mis metas" by Jenifer, Honduran transgender woman seeking asylum. Created during a photovoice workshop held in Tapachula, Mexico. December 2022. Photo prompt: 'My past achievements' (User rights granted to author).

Always achieving my goals

My fulfilled goal is to have my visa to travel to achieve my dreams, to be a better person for my family and to be able to help them. And so that many mouths are shut when they told me that I was not going to be someone in life just for being trans.

Jenifer.



FIGURE 4

Photo-story by Sabel, Honduran transgender woman with refugee status. Created during a photovoice workshop held in Tijuana, Mexico. June 2023. Photo prompt: 'My past achievements' (User rights granted to author).

The journey has been long and difficult, but I've turned my weaknesses into strengths and learned what it truly means to express my gender freely. Most of the struggle has been to be recognised by my family as I am now. I've broken through barriers, thanks to God who has opened doors for me. Trust and have faith, for God will always be by your side. Never doubt who you are or what you want. Always remember that where there's a will, there's a way.

This is my true self.

Sabel.

experience highlights complex states of *nepantla*, in-betweenness, exemplifying challenging negotiations between individual identity and familial expectations (Bingham and Smith-Morris, 2020). As she expressed in her photo-story, even if she considers her trans womanhood as part of her "true self", she felt compelled to leave it behind to prioritize her family's preference and avoid rejection (Figure 4). After crossing into the US, where some of her family members live, Sabel shifted to a masculine gay identity. This shift underscores the influence of familial gendered norms, even in a new context, and the ways in which trans individuals may adapt their identities based on their social environments (Boehm, 2008).

3.2.2 Resources, support, and solidarity

Violence and exclusion are not the only experiences endured by gender-diverse migrants. As they transition, they also find ways to access resources, create networks, negotiate and expand their sexual agency. Humanitarian spaces and their coordination among themselves to support migrants, solidarity networks, and the arts, arose as critical resources that supported migrants' agentic journeys and their ability to express, explore, reconfigure and affirm their genders.

Humanitarian spaces like shelters and organizations play a complex role. They are part of Mexico's "waiting infrastructure",

but they also provide essential assistance, offering spaces for migrants to endure forced immobility as they await asylum decisions. Though scarce, LGBT+ humanitarian spaces exit and shape the routes chosen by gender-diverse migrants through word-of-mouth recommendations. A Honduran trans woman seeking asylum, recounted how she and her boyfriend accessed an LGBT+ shelter in Tapachula through recommendations. "First, we went to an [LGBT+] organization in Guatemala, and they paid for our tickets to the border here, and we entered the LGBT shelter [in Tapachula]". Her experience reveals a transnational humanitarian corridor between LGBT+ humanitarian spaces which are crucial for migrants' mobility and protection. These spaces provide immediate support, facilitating migration strategies and access to safe "waiting zones" where migrants connect with each other, form solidarity networks, explore and negotiate their sexual agency.

LGBT+ shelters can serve as spaces for sexual identity exploration and affirmation. Some provide free GAT, helping residents to expand their ability to embody their gender and encouraging some to begin a medical transition. Lex, a Salvadoran gay man started hormone therapy to support his transfeminine transition through the assistance of an LGBT+ shelter that referred him to a gender affirming clinic for free GAC. He explained that he had never felt as interested in transitioning before, but at the LGBT+ shelter, "I've been wearing heels more often, putting on makeup and everything. But it wasn't until I got here...", he recounted. While he had been curious about how trans women in El Salvador transformed their bodies, he lacked the confidence to pursue it himself. However, the connections and friendships that Lex built with other trans women at the shelter, combined with the availability of free GAT, encouraged him to transition. He emphasized how important it has been to "feel connected with some of them [trans women] whom I perhaps trust", and who have guided him in the process. Lex interpreted his transition as an ongoing process, emphasizing that he wanted to "be different, not just a gay guy, but trans... I know that's a lifelong change. If I'm going to be trans, it will be for life". He clarified that at the time, he identified as a man but aspired to become a trans woman in the future, as his body changed.

Lex also revealed a state of *nepantla*. His gendered mobility intersected with his geographical transition where he wanted to "close a cycle" that marked the end of his life in El Salvador and a new beginning in Mexico and eventually in the US. Within a month of using GAT, he noticed both psychological and physical changes, describing how he felt increasingly feminine, though he struggled to articulate exactly how. Lex relocated to the US a few weeks after our first interaction, he continued his transition there, embracing a transfeminine identity.

Shelters can be resources for migrants to negotiate their sexual agency and how they embody their gender, while fostering a sense of community and togetherness in the process of migrating genders and geographies. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that the provision of free GAT, while potentially empowering, can also result in adverse effects in the context of migration. Considering that migrants in Mexico are mainly seeking to move and relocate, GAC can be discontinued, leading to reverse effects, and generating distress and other affectations. Exploring the effects of free GAC by humanitarian spaces remains a critical research area for further exploration.

LGBT+ humanitarian spaces also served as platforms for migrants to collectively express their gendered identities. The arts, such as dance and music, were important tools for migrants to explore, reconfigure, affirm, and represent their identities. These artistic expressions also contribute to advocacy efforts for policy change and foster environments where migrants feel represented and valued (Marnell et al., 2021). For instance, at an LGBT+ shelter in Tapachula, a group of gender-diverse migrants organized a dance performance in a public plaza. This plaza had been a site of conflict between local communities, the government, and migrants, as it has been often occupied by migrants who, in waiting for migratory documentation, had fallen in a situation of homelessness and been repeatedly evicted from the area. Gender-diverse migrants' use of the public space to dance and embody both unauthorized genders and migratory statuses represent an intersection of marginalized identities. Embodying a marginalized identity in public can be seen as a radical act of resistance through collective existence and joyful representation of that very identity, profoundly impacting



FIGURE 5

Photo-story by Eny, Salvadoran transgender woman with refugee status. Created during a photovoice workshop held in Tapachula, Mexico. December 2022. Photo prompt: 'My future goals' (User rights granted to author).

There are many goals to achieve, but I have one in particular: to create an organisation that provides support and safe spaces for people of sexual dissidence, while also having a venue to showcase art in its different branches and expressions.

Eny, trans woman, 24 years old.

migrants' sense of self and strengthening their belonging to an identity group. At the end of the performance, migrants engaged with the audience, mainly locals, fostering empathy and generating spaces for connection and mutual learning.

Inspired by the importance of safe spaces for gender-diverse people and the transformative power of the arts, Eny created a photo-story (Figure 5), that encapsulates her aspiration to establish an organization dedicated to supporting gender-diverse people and fostering artistic expression as a means of empowerment. Her creation, featuring the gender-diversity flag in the background and an LGBT+ organization building, depicts her hand and the hand of a lesbian woman reaching out to touch each other. This, as she explained, represents connection and unity between people of diverse orientations and backgrounds, showcasing how such safe spaces can have a profound impact on migrants' aspirations and interpersonal relationships.

4 Conclusion

This paper contributes to ongoing scholarly debates around sexual migration and the sexuality of migration research angles. It explored how gender-diverse migrants negotiate their sexual agency as they navigate migration structures, transiting sexual and geographical states of *nepantla* (in-betweenness). Talking about gender-diverse identities, entails acknowledging their unique and heterogeneous experiences (Platero, 2014). Therefore, I did not attempt to provide a rigid interpretation of the gender-diverse experience, but rather to provide a nuanced analysis of the ways in which gender-diverse migrants face conditions of precarity rooted in cisheteronormative structures, and how they strategically negotiate their agency as they navigate the challenges of migration.

Changes in gendered sexual identities are enacted through the exercise of sexual agency. Social contexts, including norms, policies, social expectations, power dynamics, and relationships are integral to how sexual agency is expressed and negotiated. This includes "strategic compliance" to preserve wellbeing and achieve desired outcomes (Agarwal, 1997; Cense, 2019). In the context of migration, sexual agency manifests through complex negotiations of desires, relationships, gendered sexual identities and expressions which go beyond individual interpretations and are shaped by violent structures in lands of origin and transit-destination, as well as the constraints imposed by migration governance, and humanitarian systems (Cortés, 2023).

Following a transnational life-course approach, this paper situated gender-diverse migrants' sexual agency within the broader context of their lives. It examined how sexual agency relates to changes in gendered sexual identity and migrants' ability to embody their gender/s. This analysis exposed migrants' early strategies to negotiate their sexual agency. This revealed their strategies to navigate *nepantla*, embodying non-conforming genders and sexualities that were violently sanctioned, fundamentally shaping their sexual agency. Familial rejection due to non-conforming gendered expressions compounded with community and state oppression that escalated to unbearable forms of violence, deeply influencing gender-diverse individuals' migratory agency. In line with Ahmed's work (2020), this analysis questions the idea of home and "homeland" as a clearly defined space that was once

secure and nurtured wellbeing, and which is left behind in search of a new "home". This imagination of "home" may not exist for gender-diverse migrants whose sense of belonging to land and body, has been constantly threatened in their lands of origin. Home, nonetheless, is created in relation to communities, locations and embodied identities that become "home".

Migration emerged as a material possibility, a resource to escape the threat of death, and a way to negotiate and assert sexual agency, embodying gender in new and agentic ways. However, migration governance and humanitarian systems, generate conditions of "confinement in motion", constructing situations of violence that reinforce the very structures of oppression that migrants escaped from in their lands of origin (Balaguera, 2023b) and which constrain their sexual agency.

Migrants navigate these restrictive structures, negotiating sexual agency in various ways. Concealing their gendered sexual identity and expression to avoid discrimination during confinement was a crucial strategy to protect their wellbeing. Access to gender-affirming care (GAC) was essential for transgender migrants, as they navigated the obstacles and facilitators imposed by humanitarian spaces, illuminating how humanitarian systems shape sexual agency and identity. Sex-work also emerged as a critical survival strategy that enabled sexual agency, gender affirmation and economic self-reliance, but which entail tremendous life-risks including the risk of sexually transmitted diseases – an issue that is out of the scope of this paper. Seen by some as the only alternative for economic independence, sex-work enabled transgender migrants to afford GAC, with GAC enhancing their clientele and work opportunities. Importantly, research gaps remain, concerning the impact of lack of access to GAC on migrants' lives.

Transnational familial dynamics also emerged as critical in shaping the negotiation of sexual agency, demonstrating the intricacy of transitions in transit, and migrants' linked lives. Negative opinions, and attitudes of family members regarding gendered sexual identity and expression significantly impacted migrants' capacity to embody their gender, with familial geographical proximity often acting as a deterrent to authentic gender expression. Conversely, the emergence of support from "chosen families" and newly formed social networks demonstrated to be instrumental in facilitating migrants' gender transitions.

As gender-diverse migrants navigated violent structures of confinement, they also accessed resources and created networks that critically supported their agentic journeys and their ability to express, explore, reconfigure and affirm their genders. LGBT+ shelters were crucial resources in migrants' journeys of gender exploration and affirmation, not only by enabling mobility, protection and providing GAT, but also by enabling spaces for connection, where migrants were able to talk, learn and move genders together guiding one another in the process. These learning communities of practice are key for gender-diverse individuals' gender becomings, where they create "home" in migration. The arts emerged as key elements in these communities, serving as important tools to represent their identities in public, enabling spaces for connection and mutual learning with local communities. The dance performance in Tapachula exemplified how migrants can reclaim public spaces, challenge marginalization, and foster empathy through artistic expression.

Even if migration severely limits agency, it can, at the same time, also be a catalyst for agency empowerment. As migrants transit *nepantla*, navigating geographical and gendered mobility, migration governance structures and restrictions, they also build solidarity networks and find innovative ways to negotiate and assert their agency.

Data availability statement

The datasets presented in this article are not readily available because I would only share the de-identified excerpts on reasonable request. Requests to access the datasets should be directed to abrilriosrivera@outlook.com.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by Social Sciences and Humanities Interdivisional Research Ethics Committee of the University of Oxford. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. Written informed consent for participation in this study was provided by the participants. Written informed consent was obtained from the individual(s) for the publication of any potentially identifiable images or data included in this article.

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