



Notes on Mexican trans* women's vulnerability

Trans* women's rights in Mexico have experienced significant progress in recent years. However, as Andrés Álvarez Elizalde points out in a paper published in 2019, health and symbolic vulnerabilities of trans* women remain as pending tasks. These vulnerabilities can result in commodification and sexualization/exoticization. More recently, journalist Jessica Xantomila exposed, in a newspaper story published in 2022, the poverty and social exclusion suffered by trans* women due to relevant structural barriers that undermine them. Broadly speaking, feminist theory has advocated for the recognition of women's vulnerability not only as a particular situation, but also as a critical and political category. Such an ap-

proach belies neoliberal notions of an autonomous subject, which itself presupposed the resolution of structural problems by individuals themselves. This has been particularly significant to Mexican trans* women who have found participation in collective actions to be a powerful mechanism to make their demands visible.

Researchers such as Judith Butler have highlighted the need to define vulnerability as intrinsic in human relationships. Such consideration not only identifies deficits and inequalities, but also incorporates resistance movements. It is therefore relevant to consider the intricate ways that vulnerability is reproduced in Mexico; as a result, Mexican trans*

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ISSN: 2013-2956



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Grup de Recerca

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women appear not only as undocumented or invisible, but also as activist fighters able to demand recognition of their rights.

Because Trans* women's vulnerability remains invisible in most Latin American countries, Mexico included, we will begin our exploration here considering the most frequent vulnerabilities experienced by them. Next, we will present some recent advances in the relationship between vulnerability and precariousness, in order to emphasise the political dimension of a process that shapes trans* women's vulnerability. Having Judith Butler in mind, we will not only look at lack of social and economic support, but also at lack of recognition. Consequently, we will demonstrate how the vulnerability of trans* women must not be defined as a passive one, but as a set of practices activated through resistances (namely the *right to exist* and the *right to appear*) and designed to overcome socio-culturally imposed conditions.

A brief note about language: Throughout this piece, we use the styling trans* as a broad and inclusive term that includes multiple identities and gender expressions. The use of an asterisk was devised by Mauro Cabral, an Argentinian scholar

and trans* activist, to develop linguistic practices that emphasize transgression of cis-normativity.

Transphobia, violence and forces activated from vulnerability

Far from being isolated phenomena, transphobia and cis-sexism are central to the hegemonic practices that impose masculine and feminine norms as a consequence of our sex. They also produce violence that renders gender identity invisible, a major underlying factor in trans* feminicides. As mentioned in the introduction, violence is a dynamic experienced by Mexican trans* women in everyday life. In fact, Mexico is the country with second-highest number of trans* feminicides. As a consequence, it is imperative to face how violence and vulnerabilities promote the normalization of practices materialized through specific codes, and the way those practices strengthen and reactivate cis-sexism.

Reports such as the one published by Transgender Europe (TGEU) confirm that a significant number of violent experiences faced by trans* communities go unregistered. The document has been helpful to assess the way vulnerabilities interact with



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structural inequalities, and are mainly experienced by racialized people, migrants and/or sex workers. The report concludes that the violence experienced by trans* communities occurs in a broader exclusionary context, in which transphobia interacts with other vulnerabilities such as race, anti-immigrant sentiment, social class and clandestine working conditions, especially when considering sex workers. In addition, *Letra S, Sida, Cultura y Vida Cotidiana A.C.* (2018) reports that trans* women in Mexico are the most vulnerable LGBT community, and that the violence they experience is particularly cruel: more



Enma & Colacho.

than 50% of reports show that torture and sexual violence involve trans* women victims.

Systemic vulnerability and trans* femicism

Since 2008, Transgender Europe (TGEU) and Trans Murder Monitoring (TMM) have been reporting on worldwide homicides of trans* and gender-diverse people. Their Trans Murder Monitoring (part of the research project Transrespect versus Transphobia Worldwide) highlights an increase (6%) in trans* femicide, for a total of 350 persons from October 1, 2019 to September 30, 2020. Most of the murders took place in Brazil (152), Mexico (57), and the US (28). The project has reported a total of 3,664 trans* femicides in 75 countries since its launch in 2008. It has always been emphasized that data is still insufficient to measure the impact of violence against trans* and gender-diverse people.

Thus, a highly valuable initiative to bring visibility to the violence against Mexican trans* women is "Visible", a digital platform launched by Amicus de Guanajuato and designed to gather evidence

of incidents of violence and discrimination experienced by LGBTI communities. The initiative has reported 280 incidents experienced by trans* women during the last 4 years, and 97 trans* femicides. Legal vulnerability interacts with violence because 1] data generated by most countries are not systematised, resulting in a lack of trans* gender data, 2] authorities and the media continue to refer to trans* women using an incorrect gender identity, and 3] there is an underestimation of murders. Impunity, which is well rooted in Mexico, also contributes to undermining trans* women. One of the most paradigmatic cases in recent history is Paola Ledezma's trans* femicide. She was murdered on September 30th, 2016, while engaged in sex-work in Mexico City. The murderer, a former military officer, shot Paola twice; during police questioning he confessed, but later retracted his confession. As a consequence of his claim of innocence and a reported lack of sufficient evidence established by the authorities, he was released. Authorities did not consider various important pieces of evidence, including the testimony of witnesses (seven of Paola's co-workers were not allowed to

testify), the existence of a video recording of the murder, a person detained *in fraganti* minutes after the shots were heard, and evidence of the physical presence of the victim and the murderer inside the latter's vehicle. The summary dismissal of all of these types of evidence illustrates just some of the dynamics that impinge on trans* women.

To overcome these omissions, women and trans* women groups have organised demonstrations to confront the systemic vulnerability they experience. Some of the initiatives are regarded as coping mechanisms, especially for trans* women. For instance, *Casa Hogar "Paola Buenrostro"* (named by Kenia Cuevas to honour her friend Paola) is an effort to provide shelter for trans* migrant women, and to face intersectional vulnerability, among others. Their comprehensive work includes education, health, leisure and labour empowerment of migrants. *Casa Hogar "Paola Buenrostro"* is regarded as a valuable initiative especially after considering that, according to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, Latin American trans* women have an average lifespan of just 35 years.

Lack of legal recognition of Trans* identity

The right to gender identity is granted by the Yogyakarta Principles, a set of international principles relating to sexual orientation and gender identity. The Principles were established by the United Nations (UN) after a meeting in 2006. Sexual orientation and gender expression were also included as categories protected by the guarantees of equality and non-discrimination provided by Inter-American Commission on Human Rights in 2017.

These specific rights are relevant to stop the reproduction of societal norms imposed by the State, and other forms of organisation that shape laws, and socio-cultural norms; norms that impose a control over the ways we emotionally interact and define ourselves. Trans* people rely on the formal recognition of gender identity to face legal and socio-cultural vulnerabilities; their acknowledgment is a key element in overcoming control mechanisms, rooted in gender and sexuality, that reproduce gender-based violence.

Legal recognition of gender identity started in Mexico until 2015, when the Article 9, Section B: *Derecho a la Iden-*



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Isma, Santi & Enma.

idad y Seguridad Jurídica of the *Constitución Política de la Ciudad de México* was amended to include the right to gender identity. Following this, other Mexican States such as Coahuila, Colima, Hidalgo, Michoacán, Nayarit, Oaxaca, San Luis Potosí, Sonora y Tlaxcala, Quintana Roo, Puebla, Estado de México, Baja California Sur, Morelos, Baja California, and Sinaloa, have approved the gender change of legal identity. Regarding Baja California State, the changes in the *Código Civil* that took place on January 27, 2022 recognised trans* people's right to change their birth certificates in the *Registro Civil* to obtain

legal recognition of their gender. To initiate the process trans* people need to show a certified copy of the birth certificate, one ID, and a proof of residency.

Unfortunately, these advances have been negatively impacted by new requirements including psychological diagnostics and body interventions requirements in San Luis Potosí State, as well as by the lack of legal provisions and tools ensuring the right to gender identity if Constitutional changes do not take place nationally. On the contrary, there is a modification of the *Reglamento del Registro Civil* in the State of Jalisco and a judiciary Resolution in the State of Chihuahua that establish as discriminatory going to court to change trans* people's legal documents. Since some decisions stay in the hands of State Governments, legal and symbolic vulnerability are experienced by trans* gender people when they attempt to access legal recognition of their gender identity. If this legal vulnerability is high in the case of Mexican trans* women, the situation is exacerbated for undocumented trans* migrants. Plus, economic vulnerability can be also a barrier on the path to legal recognition. Some trans* women are

residents of States where the right has not been yet granted, so they need to travel to other Mexican States to obtain such recognition. In order to do this, they have to pay for transportation, accommodation and other expenses.

Economic vulnerability and labour discrimination also starts in school

Economic vulnerability for trans* women is closely related to historical and ongoing discrimination that appears during childhood; that inequality shapes their access to education, labour and housing opportunities, among others. The *Diagnóstico Nacional sobre la discriminación hacia personas LGBT: Derecho al trabajo* (2018) shows that 23% of trans* women are self-employed, 25% are sex-workers; 48% of participants also report experiencing unemployment and/or precarious jobs. In the opinion of the report *La situación de acceso a derechos de las personas trans en México* (2018), one of the most important barriers experienced by trans* people is the stigma and discrimination faced in the labour environments, even in those organizations that supposedly support the LGBT community.

According to *Encuesta Mexicana de Vivencias LGBT+ ante la COVID-19* (2021), the pandemic has also increased economic inequality among trans* women. While *Impacto Diferenciado de la COVID-19 en la comunidad LGBTI+ en México* (2021) estimates that 70% of trans* women reported economic losses during 2020 and increased structural vulnerability, the *Encuesta* stresses an increase in precariousness, focusing on informality, loss of income, home and livelihood, as well as lack of access to health services. Thus, continuing discrimination restricts their job possibilities to precarious and stereotyped opportunities, such as hairdressers, sex-workers, or other jobs with limited contact with co-workers. Those reports emphasise gender *passability*, a concept coined by the trans* scholar and activist Julia Serrano, to point out how a predominantly cis-sexist physical appearance is considered above qualifications as the main criterion in hiring trans* women. Discrimination experienced in the job market increases economic vulnerability while also having an impact on health, socio-cultural or the symbolic vulnerabilities as well. In light of this systemic discrimination, it is not

uncommon for trans* women to interrupt their education. The report *Diversidad sexual y educación en México: impacto de la no conformidad con expresiones de género y atracciones sexuales en la inclusión y bienestar escolar, el caso particular de las infancias y adolescencias trans en México* (2020), stresses the high levels of hostility faced by trans* people. The effects of such hostility on school dropout rates, mainly during the first years of high school, is well established in the *Diagnóstico nacional sobre la discriminación hacia personas LGBTI en México* (2018). One trans* woman interviewed by journalist Xantomila on this topic emphasises the importance of support from family and friends to continue studying regardless of the violence faced. In the same line, Brahim Zamora Salazar (activist and *Director de Comunicación, Planeación y Capacitación del Observatorio Ciudadano de Derechos Sexuales y Reproductivos, Odesyr*) interviewed by Notimex, referred to the high levels of systematic discrimination experienced by trans* women, and how trans* women are often pressured by institutions to stop their complaints and claims. Constant questioning, mockery,



Maxy.

grievance, bullying or harassment faced in school lead to dropping-out, limiting their future career options.

All of this must provoke a reflection about the interwoven dynamics that reduce opportunities for trans* women. Discrimination experienced in school, the lack of legal recognition of gender identity and transphobia all interact to promote situations of rejection. As a consequence, job opportunities are limited, and this in turn creates other future vulnerabilities such as a lack of or limited retirement assets. In this example, we would like to emphasise the interconnections between socio-cultural vulnerability and symbolic vulnerability (during the school years);



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between symbolic vulnerability and legal vulnerability (the lack of ID to guarantee the right to gender identity); and between economic vulnerability (stereotyped jobs) and health vulnerability (jobs without social insurance and security). The above leads to negative effects on trans* women's overall social well-being.

Final remarks

The right to gender identity is a result of previous actions generated by collective trans* organisations that support their politicisation. These organisations demand and argue the right to identity and to disrupt trans* regulatory frameworks; in so doing, the collective organisations

also mobilise the necessary political will, and make visible the deconstruction of sex/gender categories that have been historically validated. As a consequence, we recognize the need to make visible the diverse contexts that (re)produce Mexican trans* women's vulnerabilities. We also want to highlight the need for scholars to deepen the study of transphobia and cissexism, because both appear as core elements in the reproduction of systemic and historic violence and vulnerability faced by trans* women in Mexico. We also consider relevant the work of trans* feminist scholars and the use of intersectionality as a tool to explore trans* women's vulnerability from different perspectives. The reproduction of inequalities, categories and differentiations are interwoven and interact among each other. As a result, complex dynamics are generated, and gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, social class, immigration status, age, job opportunities, and scholarship, among others, (re)produce inequalities in access to health care, professional opportunities, social well-being, housing and the right to a life free from violence. In spite of the horrendous vulnerabilities faced by Mexican trans*

women, we insist on highlighting the role of activism and their important actions, which we regard as pivotal to promoting small victories that will eventually overcome trans* women's vulnerability.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Andrea Soledad González Vera

She has a BCSoc in Social Work and a Master in Social Work with mention in Communities and Territories from the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Valparaíso, a Master in Gender Studies from El Colegio de México and a PhD in Cultural Studies from El Colegio de la Frontera Norte. Andrea has worked as a research assistant for the “Reducing Organizational Vulnerability of Women: Applying Organizational Research in Mexican-us Borderlands” project, and currently holds the position of Operations Director for Casa Arcoíris, a non-profit organization for LGBTQ+ migrant community in Tijuana, Baja California, Mexico. She is also a lecturer at IBERO University, Tijuana and an associate consultant at NosCatalyst on gender, human rights, violence and disappearances.

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She is Associate Professor at Facultad de Turismo y Mercadotecnia, Universidad Autónoma de Baja California (Mexico). She holds a PhD in Human Geography from the Universidad Complutense de Madrid (Spain). Her research focuses on gender as well as tourism and the impact of the sustainability agenda on tourism. With Hugo Gaggiotti, she is principal responsible for the “Reducing Organisational Vulnerability of Women: Applying Organisational Research in Mexican-us Borderlands” project (Newton Fund-British Council-Conacyt Mexico). Her recent work is “Sisterhood to promote the rhizomatic bodies of Mexican-mestiza women mountaineers” in *Gender, Place & Culture* (2022), and “Determinantes socioeconómicos del empoderamiento de emprendedoras en Tijuana, México”, in *Región y Sociedad*, in co-authorship with Kido Cruz and Ceyca Lugo. As hobbies she practises mountaineering, hiking and mountain biking.

Hugo Gaggiotti

He is Professor at the University of the West of England, UK. He has a PhD in Anthropology and a PhD in Management. He was a foreigner at birth and has remained displaced all his life. The focus of his writing is on the intersections between rhetoric, rituals, liminality and the symbolic construction of the meaning of work in mobile transnational workers. He conducted his fieldwork for many years in the borderlands industrial regions of Pindamonhangaba (Brazil), Ciudad Juárez (Mexico), Almaty (Kazakhstan) and currently in the US-Mexican borderlands of Baja California (British Council-Newton Fund Grant-Conacyt) and in the UK (British Academy-Leverhulme). His work has appeared in a range of interdisciplinary journals including *Culture and Organization*, *International Journal of Management Reviews*, *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, *Journal of Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management*, *Leadership and Scripta Nova*. Among his recent publications are (2022) *Unleading during a pandemic: Scrutinising leadership and its impact in a state of exception*; *Leadership*, Vol. 18, No. 2, pp. 277-297 and (2022) *Organizational Ethnography: An Experiential and Practical Guide*; London: Routledge (with Pandeli and Sutherland). His own passions are the application of abductive reasoning (Peirce) to DIY and cooking.

FURTHER READING



Veloz, A. (2019) *Las retóricas de la moralidad en la frontera: un análisis histórico de la sexualidad en Tijuana* Tijuana: Secretaría de Cultura/ Centro Cultural Tijuana



Stryker, S. (2017) *Historia de lo trans* Madrid: Continta Me Tienes



Butler, J. (2018) *Resistencias: Repensar la vulnerabilidad y repetición* México: Paradiso Editores

Alvarez Elizalde, A. (2019). [El sentido del lugar de uno en mujeres trans adultas de la Ciudad de México: riesgos corporales e identitarios](#). Artigos. *Sociologías*, 21(52).

Velázquez, K. (29 August 2021). [La lucha de las mujeres trans en México para dejar de ser invisibles](#). *Ojo Público*.

Xantomila, J. (10 January 2022). [Viven personas transgénero en una condición de vulnerabilidad exacerbada](#). *La Jornada*.

Brooks, D. (31 March 2022). ["Me mandaban coronas florales de muerto": ser trans en México, el segundo país del mundo con más agresiones al colectivo](#). *BBC News Mundo*.

A sociological study on conceptualizations of sexuality at the borderland based on religious and conservative discourse in the city of Tijuana. Based on the analysis of conservative tabloid press, the author introduces the history of how, since the first few decades of the last century, the city has been signified as a space associated with immorality, and at the same time as a place for progress and development.

A critical and decolonial historization of the moments that have shaped a controversial political and cultural movement capable of questioning some of the foundations of feminist and LGTB thinking. Through the recognition of the biographies of those who have led the trans movements, this history reviews their relationship to the history of gender theory, laws, medicine, as well as in the streets, with episodes such as the Stonewall riots or the Compton's cafeteria riots, and how all of this has contributed to the production of trans issues as a common political enunciation.

This text suggests thinking of vulnerability as a condition that doesn't necessarily oppose agency, but rather as a mobilizer of resistance. This book compiles two interventions by Judith Butler, one of the most prominent American philosophers of recent decades, on political philosophy and psychoanalysis. This is an essential reading for those interested in rethinking the philosophical categories as well as the approaches to psychoanalysis in a contemporary world seeking real social change.

FURTHER VIEWING



Lelio, S. (Director)
(2017)
Una mujer fantástica
Chile 104 min

Marina, a young waitress and aspiring singer, and Orlando, twenty years older, plan a future together. After a night out, Marina takes him to the emergency room, but he dies upon arrival at the hospital. She then has to face suspicions about his death. Her status as a trans woman is a complete aberration for Orlando's family. She will have to fight to become what she is: a strong, passionate... fantastic woman. (FILMAFFINITY).



Moya, M. (Directora) (2011)
¿Putas o peluqueras? Más allá del estigma [Documentary]
Colombia, 52 min

They worked as prostitutes or hairdressers, but are now lawyers, human rights activists, models, university students and even public servants. Despite stigmas, transgender women continue to progress in their fight for workplace and social inclusion in Colombia.



Irigoyen, A. (Director) (2017)
Historias debidas VIII: Susy Shock [Documentary]
Argentina, 58 min

Biographies not to forget and make collective memory. The history of those who, from spaces with greater or lesser visibility, work to build bonds in which solidarity, cultural resistance, social commitment or diversity make them participants in a common cause. Hosted and interviewed by journalist Ana Cacopardo.

AFIN NEWS

Nursing and social challenges

Paola Galbany, AFIN member and current President of the Col·legi Oficial d'Infermeres i Infermers of Barcelona, has recently been invited to participate in the International Multidisciplinary Symposium *Beyond the shoulders of apprentices: an approach to the nursing profession and the social challenges revealed by a health crisis*, which took place in Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium, on February 9th and 10th. At the Symposium, organized by the Laboratory of Prospective Anthropology of the UCLouvain, Paola reported on the situation of nurses in Spain and in Catalonia, specifically regarding the shortage of nursing professionals and the need for them. She also outlined the professional and working conditions of nurses. Paola took part in the round table "The sustainability of the nursing profession. A European issue", together with Sorbonne sociologist Eliane Rothier Bautzer, nurse and federal secretary of the non-commercial sector of the Belgian SETCA union, Nathalie Lionnet, and Julie Hermesse, anthropologist at UCLouvain. The overall idea presented throughout the two days of the event is how professionals are trapped in a logic of economics promoted, even enforced, by the European Union, based on profitability and efficiency, which disregards human and social factors as well as the meaning of healthcare occupations, i.e., a European Union without a project for a social Europe.

**On solidarity within the scope of family, kinship and adoption**

Diana Marre and Jessaca Leinaweaver published their 2022 paper: "Solidarity Exclusion: The Problem of *Solidaridad* in Spanish Transnational Adoption" in the journal *American Anthropologist*, a result of their extensive fieldwork in those realms in Spain.

The authors reflect on the role solidarity plays, or should play, in transnational adoptive families. This question is raised in a context where solidarity is a valuable principle in Spanish family life, political organizations, humanitarian action, organ and blood donation and daily life in general, but at the same time has often been dismissed - or not accepted - as a motivation for transnational adoption.

This article provides a genealogy of the concept of solidarity, an analysis of its strong presence in kinship discourses in Spain and a critical analysis of some case studies from fieldwork.

The article is available at: [this link](#).

Transactional sex among men of the recent past: Exploitation or labor?

Last December, Santiago Joaquín Insausti, AFIN member, published his article "Neither exploitation nor work. Rethinking the status of prostitution in light of the history of transactional sex among men in Latin America" in the *Confluente* magazine by the University of Bologna. This article, based on extensive archival work conducted in Argentina, Peru and Mexico, explores the history of transactional sex among men in order to highlight its differences from female prostitution and test the sex work/exploitation dichotomy. The article is available at [this link](#).



Source: Archivo de la Memoria Trans. Fondo Malva Solís (Argentina, 1956).

Theoretical discussion on sexuality and childhood

Last December 28, a theoretical discussion on sexuality and childhood was held within the project "SexAFIN, sexual-affective and reproductive education in primary schools".

Firstly, Lola Palma introduced the text "Pregnancy and babies versus penises and intercourse: gender differences in 'how babies are made' according to children at two Spanish primary schools" (available in press) by Estel Malgosa, Diana Marre and Bruna Alvarez.

Lola pointed out how adults talk to children in terms of reproduction and not sexuality, suggesting that language plays a major role in the construction of sexuality. She rounded off her presentation by highlighting that pregnancy frequently comes up in girls' references while bodily pleasure often appears for boys.

Next, Adriana Prexigueiro and Isabel Domingo presented two texts: "El proceso autoreflexivo como herramienta pedagógica para la coeducación: adquisición de consciencia en la reproducción de desigualdades de género" by Estel Malgosa and Bruna Alvarez (working title) and "Sexualitat i infància a Catalunya, Espanya: significacions governades", by both of the authors together with Diana Marre (2022). They emphasized sexuality as a sensitive topic in Spain and in Catalonia, since it implies privacy and intimacy. They also highlighted the invisibilization of children's agency and the infringement of their rights regarding access to information on sexuality, probably because access to information on sexuality is often equated with the exercise of it.

Lastly, Ares Cela presented: "Strategies for ethnography about sensitive topics: a children's sexuality education program in Spain" by Bruna Alvarez, Estel Malgosa and Diana Marre (2022) and "La diversitat i la sexualitat en les famílies: la perspectiva antropològica per a la transformació social", by Estel Malgosa and Bruna Alvarez (2020). A main objective of both studies is to learn how families who have had infants by different methods of reproduction talk about their origins. To achieve this, Ares stressed the importance of engaging in research to encourage the acquisition and exchange of knowledge. She concluded by pointing out that there is little research that includes the participation of infants and how transformative doing so can be.

By the end of the seminar, each participant gave their final thoughts on the issues that were raised during the presentations.

Paola Galbany granted an associate professorship

This past January 10th Paola Galbany, AFIN member and current President of the Col·legi Oficial d'Infermeres i Infermers of Barcelona, earned her position as an associate professor for the subject "Historical, Theoretical and Methodological Foundations" at the Department of Fundamental and Medical-Surgical Nursing in the Nursing School of Universidad de Barcelona.